

12-2019

The Social Construction of Black Fatherhood in Responsible Fatherhood Policies

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The Social Construction of Black Fatherhood in Responsible Fatherhood Policies:
An Interpretive Policy Analysis

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy

by

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Abstract

Responsible fatherhood legislation bridges the gap between two explicit family policies in order to serve fathers: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and the Child Support Enforcement Act of 1975. Historically, these two policies have been racialized and discourse surrounding them may contribute to negative cultural formula stories about the primary targets of responsible fatherhood programs: low-income Black fathers.

The first article addresses the question of whether and how congressional discourse disrupts or legitimizes negative cultural formula stories about Black fatherhood. This study examines congressional discourse during hearings on fatherhood legislation. Members of congress legitimized cultural formula stories by constructing welfare fathers as *deadbeats*. Primary themes included serial illegitimacy and parental abandonment. Members of congress also disrupted cultural formula stories by constructing welfare fathers as *dead broke*.

The second article addresses the same question, but it is asked of the first Black President of the United States, Barack Obama. Presidential statements surrounding the *unconcerned Black father* served to reproduce negative cultural formula stories of Black fatherhood by depicting this kind of father as lazy, prone to fathering children with multiple women (serial illegitimacy), and disinterested in fatherhood overall. The *institutionalized Black father* embodies negative characteristics but his absence and instability stems from historical oppression and socio-economic disadvantages. In addition, it changes the single story often found in negative cultural formula stories of Black fatherhood. Lastly, the self-sacrificing Black father embodies Obama's ideal characteristics of Black fatherhood by working tirelessly and sacrificing his own well-being for the betterment of his family.

The third article compares congressional and presidential discourse to better understand interpretive conflicts in the meanings of responsible fatherhood. Both members of congress and President Obama presented some negative cultural codes in their discourse on fathers. For members of congress, a large-scale demonstration project conducted with low-income, non-residential, non-custodial fathers helped to shift their cultural formula stories. On the other hand, President Obama's in-group status allowed him to construct a more diverse spectrum of Black fatherhood.

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this dissertation has been the most laborious, cumbersome, and dramatic task that I have ever undertaken. It is one that will likely only be surpassed by the birth of my first child (whenever that is). As my forefather David exclaims, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes (Psalms 119:71). All praises to the Most High God for proving me and finding me worthy of the title “Dr. Israel”. All praises for the Saviour whose sacrifice has strengthened me a thousand times over during this journey.

An abundance of gratitude to the sons of God who have restored my faith in Black manhood and have given me a reason to hope.

Every thanks imaginable to my enduring sisterhood. The books are being written. Know that you have a place in my story. Azarayah, Abygail, Ahavah, Judith, Anat, Iscah, Elizabeth, Kaniyah, Yahara, JoAnna, Zara, Semira, Aviyah, Anaiah, Zion, Zipporah, Keziyah, Ramiah, Yocheved, Neziyah, Reu, Anavah, Odiyah, Vannah, Akiva, Gemariah, Gabby, Amina, Amaziyah, *Jaazah, Kyra, Leah, Alliyz, Candace, Esther, Zibiyah, Ada, Atara, Shiphrah, Faiza, Jessica, Shiphrah, Ohanna, Yofee, Roni, Jael, Monica, Zaharah, Aliza Raya, Brittany, Melissa, Kathryn, and Cresha. I have had so much support that I have undoubtedly missed some names. The angels have a better memory than me. Your works are recorded sis.

Shout out to the Panera Bread franchise and the Metro Northwest Oklahoma City public library that provided the tranquility I needed while living away from my home institution during the completion of this project. These two physical spaces more than any others contributed to my mental clarity while writing. Monday motivation from Dr. Eric Thomas and green tea Frappuccinos from Stella Nova are two things I couldn't go without.

To my committee chair, Dr. Anna Zajicek, thank you for your mentorship and for having high expectations for me and my work. You have witnessed the very best times of my life and some of the worst. I will not forget that you remained supportive throughout it all. To my committee members, Dr. Yvette Murphy-Erby and Dr. Ed Bengtson, thank you for valuable feedback and your patience throughout this process. The greatest fear of a Doctoral candidate is an adversarial and difficult committee. I experienced the exact opposite of that. My interactions with you have helped to transform me into an independent scholar.

Dedication

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

Romans 8:19

To my fathers and brothers scattered throughout the four corners

The World waits on you

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The public's interest in Black fatherhood has largely revolved around Black fathers' perceived absence from the Black family. In the public policy arena, political pundits, commentators, and legislative actors have associated the "breakdown" of the Black family structure with various deficiencies and issues, from poor work ethic (Blow, 2014) to the 1992 Los Angeles riots (Jehl, 1992), stemming primarily from Black fathers' behaviors. It is accurate that father absence has been identified as one of the most prominent issues affecting Black families. The purpose is not to deny this is an issue; rather, it is to better understand the social constructions of Black fatherhood at the intersection of cultural narratives, or "formula stories," i.e. "the imagined characteristics of disembodied types" of Black fathers, and institutional narratives, i.e., the "formula stories" that are produced in the public policy arena. These narratives are consequential in a sense that in these narratives "the imagined characteristics of the targets of policy or law [are used to] justify policy decisions" (Loseke, 2007; 661-662).

Presidential speeches, congressional debates surrounding the passage of a particular policy, and the policy texts contribute to the construction of institutional identities. Whether these institutional narratives "repair" the identities of "troubled" policy targets and/or whether they do or do not disrupt the cultural formula stories, is a critical question because the changes of how a social group is symbolically coded is a powerful force in policy, and, more broadly, social change (Loseke, 2007). And, as the narratives expressed by the movements surrounding the predicament of Black men in the U.S. (e.g., "Million Man March" and "Black Lives Matter") suggest, there is a dire need to disrupt the cultural formula stories defining Black men, and especially Black fathers, as irresponsible and largely absent from Black families (Johnson & Young, 2016).

Specifically, in the 1950's single parent homes accounted for only 9 percent of Black families. By 1970, this number had sharply increased to 33.3 percent; by 1980, the number skyrocketed to a staggering 45.8 percent (Gibbs, 1988). Instead of careful consideration of these figures and the factors behind them, these statistics have been explained and accompanied by cultural narratives of Black fatherhood that depict Black men as lazy and unwilling to support their families (Blow, 2014). These cultural narratives oversimplify the complexity of Black family life in America and shift attention away from the fact that low-income Black men experience inequalities at the intersection of gendered racism and social class.

As a racial minority, Black men are collectively constructed as “dead beat” fathers despite the fact a certain number of unresponsive fathers exist in every racial group. In addition, the socioeconomic status of low-income fathers makes it difficult for them to achieve the normative ideas associated with dominant masculinity and “responsible fatherhood,” which are heavily associated with the ability to provide financially (Randles, 2013). Given the normative expectation of being a breadwinner regardless of one’s economic status and the exclusion of Black men’s voices from the public policy discourse, it is not surprising that low-income Black fathers have been historically constructed as undeserving of public assistance (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). In this context, the election of the first Black man as U.S. president in 2008 and the continued policy debates related to the responsible fatherhood legislation underlie the need to understand whether this election disrupted the dominant cultural and institutional, i.e., public policy, narratives regarding Black fathers and responsible fatherhood.

Limitations in Responsible Fatherhood Research

Since the early 2000's, responsible fatherhood has become the premier legislation designed to address the complex challenges faced by Black fathers. The practitioner side of this

initiative has evolved through multiple funding cycles; the research arm of this field has grown as well, but important elements are still missing. A review of academic literature within the responsible fatherhood field indicates the dominance of traditional policy analyses that focus on whether the policies and programs have been effective by testing whether the benefits of a policy outweigh the costs of its implementation. For example, Avellar et. al 2018 assessed the improvement of parenting skills, Huntington and Vetere (2016) evaluated the effectiveness of co-parenting programs, Threlfall and Kohl (2015) examined the effectiveness of addressing child support in fatherhood programs, and Camble (2014) assessed the implementation of programs with a home visiting component.

While these studies are important they do not address the formative stages of the public policy cycle, i.e., how the issue became of interest to policy makers (*agenda setting*), how the issue was situated and explained (*problem definition*), and which aspects of problem definition were emphasized when Congress debated and wrote the policy (*policy formulation*). These formative stages are important primarily because they are consequential, i.e., they influence how policy target populations, in this case low-income fathers, will experience the policy. The formative policy stages are even more salient for low-income Black fathers, a population subject to negative formula stories regarding their willingness to participate in fatherhood and assume culturally-defined responsibilities associated with fatherhood.

Theoretical Framework

To address these limitations, we utilize two analytical tools in service of exploring how Black fatherhood has been socially constructed in public policy narratives of the first Black President and congressional debates surrounding the passage of responsible fatherhood policies. First, the Narrative Identify Framework proposed by Loseke (2007) strengthens this exploration

by providing clear and distinct differences between cultural and institutional narratives along with the appropriate terminology that constructs such narratives. In this article, we use the term “cultural formula stories” to denote dominant narratives that have become embedded in U.S. culture. Cultural formula stories are composed of “cultural codes” that the “formula story authors” used to invoke images in the mind of their audience to reinforce the story. For example, many scholars use the cultural formula story of welfare queens to describe single Black mothers who utilize public assistance. The formula story author may use the word “illegitimacy” to speak of single motherhood as a reproachful characteristic.

Second, the Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) created by Yanow (2000), provides the interconnected tissues that tie all three articles together. The interpretive policy analysis emphasizes the importance of “interpretive communities,” the various issue experts who are positioned to view the issues from different perspectives and levels. An exhaustive list of interpretive communities in responsible fatherhood policy would include previous U.S. Presidents, policy makers, administrators, lobbyists, researchers, policy analysts, fatherhood advocates, technical assistance experts, program directors, front-line staff, and Black fathers, their co-parents, and their children. Loseke’s (2007: 678) narrative identity framework also emphasizes the importance of examining different types of narratives contributed by different “interpretive communities,” especially by those organizations, groups, and individuals that engage to “repair identities defined as troubled.” In this study, I focus on the formative stages of the policy process and I combine these analytical tools to examine the intersection of cultural and institutional narratives of two interpretive communities that are most influential during those stages: the President and Congress. As I explain next, I assume that President Obama’s narratives will include statements geared toward repairing/disrupting the negative codes

associated with Black fathers; I also assume that Congressional debates surrounding the passage of responsible fatherhood legislation and the text of this legislation will tend to reproduce the negative codes associated with Black fathers.

What's to Come?

Article 1 explores Congressional narratives regarding responsible fatherhood policies and Black fatherhood. The Republican majority dominates U.S. Congress, which, in recent history, has not included many members of the African-American communities. Hence, I assume that this interpretive community and the policies they enact represent an “etic” perspective, i.e., they observe the African-American communities from the outside and are more prone to espouse the cultural formula stories about Black men. I ask, “As the authors of responsible fatherhood policy, have the members of Congress disrupted the cultural formula stories related to Black fathers and Black fatherhood in their written and oral responsible fatherhood policy pronouncements?”

In Article 2 I continue to build upon the IPA and the narrative identities frameworks in Article 1, by focusing on the next interpretive community: President Barack Obama. In a recent New Yorker article Doreen St. Felix (February 28, 2018) notes that “The modern American President, a role that has traditionally relied on a public ethnography of sorts, has often appeared to steer emically: when he extends such appeals as “we, the American people,” he means to include himself within the crowd.” St. Felix refers to the methodological perspectives used in ethnographic research wherein the emic perspective represents an insider perspective and the etic perspective represents the standpoint of an outsider. She compares President Obama’s many expressions of empathy to the expressions of “Presidential indifference.” Importantly, President

Obama has not only been a symbolically emic president, just like many of his predecessors, but also the first emic President in relation to Black men.

Given the marginalization of Black men in the policy process, a broader goal of this article is to analyze whether the first Black president disrupted the cultural formula stories about Black men, and Black fathers more specifically. President Obama's pronouncements are very significant not only because he is a Black man but also because he is Black father. In addition, scholars have noted that President Obama was well aware of the social constructions of Black manhood (Cooper, 2008). Many thought that Obama's presidency would actually do the work of changing the social construction of Black men (Cooper, 2008). I ask, "Does President Obama's narratives disrupt the cultural narratives/social constructions of Black fathers and Black fatherhood?"

Article 3 is a comparison of Presidential and congressional narratives identifying potential convergence and divergence among these two interpretive communities. Building upon Battle (2018), I ask whether the pronouncements of the Black President and the pronouncements of predominantly white members of Congress have diverged or converged in their legitimization and/or repair/disruption of the negative constructions of Black fathers as policy targets.

Significance of Three Articles

This study aims to expand the research arm of the responsible fatherhood field by filling an important gap in our understanding of the social construction of policy target populations. The policy narratives have gone largely unexplored in the responsible fatherhood field. Although there have been some qualitative studies of responsible parenthood (e.g., Randles, 2016; Randles, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2010), responsible fatherhood has largely been a mono-method field in favor of quantitative methodology, i.e. evaluation studies that assess the effectiveness of

these programs. This is not surprising since the responsible fatherhood field is policy oriented and quantitative methodology yields “quick” data that are preferred by policy makers in the decision-making process (Loseke, 1989). However, this orientation towards policy outcomes means that the other stages of the policy process, agenda settings and policy formulations, are ignored. While the responsible fatherhood field has focused on programmatic outcomes that happen at the organizational level, this study seeks to catapult a new discussion on those institutional factors that may influencing outcomes from the very top. In doing so, this investigation allows us to slow down and re-think what responsible fatherhood means for Black fathers. This study allows an opportunity to extend upon findings from previous scholars and contribute to a growing body of literature on the importance of cultural and institutional narratives.

The second article builds on Battle’s (2018) study on understanding how cultural narratives of low-income fathers end up being writing into policies, making them institutional narratives that are consequential for the target population. My study of Presidential narratives regarding Black fathers and fatherhood advances Battle’s study in two ways. First, Battle (2018) analyzed presidential rhetoric during policy formulation of child support, welfare, and responsible fatherhood policy. In essence, her investigation included the discourse of just one interpretive community – the president. Second, Battle’s (2018) analysis does not include a distinction of race, whether that of institutional actors or policy targets.

The first article in this dissertation examines the discourse of another interpretive community, the U.S. Congress. This is an added benefit considering the addition of the IPA framework as it allows for a comparison of two interpretive communities. The study’s analysis

provides an opportunity to understand whether cultural narratives are disrupted on different levels and by different interpretive policy communities.

In the context of the first Black president and a predominately white Congress, it is important to assess whether the convergence of the narratives coming from various interpretive communities disrupt or legitimize cultural formula stories in public policies. As it pertains to the target population, Battle (2018) limits her analysis on the broad category of low-income fathers, and not necessarily Black fathers. By focusing solely on Black fatherhood, this study centralizes a sub-group within the low-income father population.

Taken together, all three articles converge to contribute a missing link in responsible fatherhood research and provides an opportunity to extend findings from previous scholars and contribute to a growing body of literature on the importance of cultural and institutional narratives in the policy process. The exploration of presidential statements by the first Black man as U.S. President helps to identify how discursive practices may serve as tools to disrupt cultural narratives of Black fatherhood when the author of those narratives is a member of the group being discussed (see Chapter 2). The examination of discursive tools by a majority White Congress help to further understand disruption and/or legitimization of cultural narratives as they are transferred to institutional narratives (see Chapter 3). The comparison of these two narratives allow for an examination of conflicts between two interpretive communities based on how they are situated in regard to the target population. Combined, these three analyses provide a more comprehensive look at cultural narratives of Black fatherhood from the top down, beginning with emic (or inside) perspectives of President Barack Obama, to etic (or outside) perspectives of Congress members, and the convergence and/or divergence of cultural narratives when viewed through a racial lens.

Organization of the Dissertation

This work includes five chapters organized around the steps presented in the interpretive policy analysis (IPA) framework. The manuscript in chapter two focuses on policy language utilized in presidential narratives, and chapter three focuses on policy language in congressional narratives. In chapter four, we work to identify interpretive conflicts between these two communities based on findings from chapters two and three. Below, I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the limitations and delimitations of the proposed project. Subsequently, in chapters two through four of this proposal, I outline the purpose, theoretical frameworks, research design, and analytical methods guiding the construction of each article.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. Although there are multiple presidencies that have participated in reproducing cultural narratives of low-income Black fathers, I focus solely on the participation of Barack Obama for this analysis. In this sense, Article 1 serves as a case study and the results cannot be generalized to fit any other past president or the current president. In Articles 1 and 2, I explore institutional narratives articulated by members of political elites. The IPA framework relies heavily on an insider perspective to ensure the validity of interpretation and interviews are one suggested method of ensuring this. As the president and members of Congress are supremely inaccessible groups for the researcher, follow-up interviews are nearly impossible. However, the exclusion of interviews should not inhibit studies such as this one from taking place. The methodological tools provided by the IPA framework work to ensure interpretive validity as much as possible.

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CHAPTER TWO: ARTICLE 1 – “DEADBEATS VS. DEADBROKE”: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WELFARE FATHERS IN CONGRESSIONAL DEBATES ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD POLICIES AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION

Although Black families only represent 13% of the U.S. population, historical oppression of the Black family unit has led to a disproportionate representation in the welfare system. At the inception of the first government welfare program (Aid for Families and Children), the primary recipients were made up of divorced and/or widowed women. Importantly, they were also predominantly White and only 3% of recipients were Black (Roberts, 1999). It was not until the civil rights movements that Black families became eligible for welfare programs. Retitled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the explicit racialization of AFC ensued when more Black families began to meet the eligibility requirements for government assistance. In terms of cultural narratives, while under AFC, the narrative of a welfare mother was a white widow who was deserving of assistance, under AFDC, the narrative changed to that of a “welfare queen,” a Black woman who was lazy and sexually unrestrained (Collins, 2002; Roberts, 1999; West, 1995).

As the number of women led households increased in the 1970s, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), was established in 1974 as a cost recovery system to collect payments from noncustodial parents on behalf of children (Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2011; Crowley, 2003). Importantly, when it first began, enforcement did not apply to parents of non-welfare recipients. From the beginning, the target population has been that of parents, mostly

fathers, whose children receive public assistance. Parallel to the racialized welfare system that targeted low-income Black mothers, the responsible fatherhood programs, whose infrastructure has been made up of child support policies, sought to collect money from fathers whose children were eligible for welfare assistance (Miller & Knox, 2001). Consequently, while absent fatherhood exists among diverse racial groups, based on dominant cultural myths about an irresponsible Black father, responsible fatherhood policies have become associated with Black men.

In 1996, President Clinton signed public law 104-193, otherwise known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The new regulations included time-limited cash assistance and work requirements that emphasized the individual's personal responsibility to lift themselves out of poverty. This was partly in response to the dominant public perception of welfare policy documented by Gilens (1999), who shows that the opposition to welfare assistance programs is primarily due to the public's perception that the population that benefits the most from this assistance is the least deserving group: Black Americans. In essence, what Americans think about welfare really comes down to what Americans think about Black Americans. In this context, one element that subsequently tied welfare assistance to child support policy was the 1996 mandate to establish paternity, including the requirement that mothers report fathers as a criterion of eligibility (Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2011). If the biological fathers could not be identified, mothers on welfare assistance faced dangers of losing their benefits (NCSL, 2017).

Historical Origins of Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives

Responsible fatherhood first showed up through community grassroots efforts as early as 1968. The first account is recorded in West Philadelphia when a community center worker, Tom

Henry, began working with low-income fathers. In 1976, Charles Ballard, a child and family social worker in Cleveland, Ohio began working with unmarried men in a hospital setting to help reduce infant mortality rates. This emerged into the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization. In an effort to organize resources for family-based community centers, the *Fatherhood Project* was established in 1981 (Sylvester & Reich, 2002). Three years later, a national fatherhood conference was held which produced *Fatherhood USA: The First National Guide to Programs, Services, and Resources for and about Fathers*. On the federal level, responsible fatherhood became a major topic of concern in 1984 under the Ronald Reagan Administration when Gary Bauer, a presidential staffer, hosted a meeting on Fatherhood at the White House. The meeting attendees, primarily conservatives, discussed the importance of fathers to become engaged with their children by way of a commitment to marriage and religious standards. The following year, the National Urban League drew attention to Black fatherhood in launching the Male Responsibility Project, the first of its kind to target fathers in teen pregnancy programs.

Another prolific federal effort involved the National Commission on Children. In 1987, the members of this commission prioritized the need for policy change to support responsible fatherhood. Child support policies were the very first place they chose to start. Responsible fatherhood was further enforced in the policy arena, largely advocated through the work of philanthropic organizations, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation, beginning 1980s. While the life span of responsible fatherhood initiatives crosses over multiple years, and therefore has been influenced by multiple Congressional bodies, it was the 100th Congress, in session from 1987-1989, that formalized responsible fatherhood as a part of the national policy by passing the *Family Support Act of 1988*. The Family Support Act led to the

emergence of various national demonstration projects aimed at increasing child support payments, employment and earnings, and parental involvement of noncustodial fathers with children receiving welfare (Miller & Knox, 2001).

In 1994, Vice President Al Gore held a Family Reunion Conference in Nashville, Tennessee to bolster support behind the responsible fatherhood initiative, and President Bill Clinton established the Task Force on Non-Custodial Parents (Bane, Ellwood, & Mincy, 1994) to ensure this subpopulation of fathers was prioritized. In addition, President Clinton wrote a 1995 memorandum to federal agencies to encourage them to prioritize the inclusion of fathers in servicing families. Dr. Wade Horn, former Secretary for Children and Families connected the concept of responsible fatherhood to the broader U.S. culture:

“We realized that the growing absence of fathers was the most consequential trend in the culture for families and for civil society. But public policy is a weak instrument for reversing the trend; the answer is in the broader culture” (Annie E. Case Foundation, 2010).

This sentiment led to the creation of the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), which focused on elevating fatherhood more broadly in society. In the early 2000s, demonstration projects undertaken by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) contributed to the definition of “responsible fatherhood.” In essence, this responsibility centered around the ability to comply with child support orders. The impetus of creating a new definition was spearheaded by the Federal Commissioner of Child Support Services, Judge David Gray Ross, who publicly announced that “child support should be more than a collections agency, it should be about children.” Since its inception in the 1980’s, Congress has appropriated federal funding for fatherhood demonstration projects almost every 5 years (Mincy & Pouncy, 2002), while the data collection and analyses efforts have grown in larger part to other federal agencies such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Early actors of the responsible fatherhood field note that the original intent of this phrase was to put emphasis on mutual responsibility (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). That is, the government was responsible for addressing social and racial inequalities that prohibited fathers from staying engaged and fathers would utilize resources. The phrase “responsibility” was formalized in a policy setting under the 1996 welfare reform, which re-shaped the delivery of public assistance. The culmination of these efforts has led to current status of responsible fatherhood initiatives which have grown to consist of a variety of policies and programs designed to promote healthy relationships, responsible parenting, and economic stability for low-income fathers. Although these initiatives are designed to address father absence as endemic to the entire nation (Obama, 2012), policies surrounding responsible fatherhood in relation to low-income Black fathers, the primary policy targets for responsible fatherhood, are of particular interest.

The identification of father absence as one of the most prominent issues affecting Black families has been reproduced via various formula stories, including the cultural formula stories that construct “the imagined characteristics of disembodied types” of Black fathers, and the institutional narratives that are produced in the policy arena. While both types of narratives are consequential, the institutional narratives are of special concern because in these narratives “the imagined characteristics of the targets of policy or law [are used to] justify policy decisions” (Loseke, 2007; 661-662). However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Kim 2013, Battle, 2018) not much is known about the institutional narratives concerning Black fathers and “responsible fatherhood” policies.

Congressional debates and presidential statements surrounding the passage of a particular policy, and the policy texts contribute to the construction of institutional identities. Whether these institutional narratives “repair” the identities of “troubled” policy targets and/or whether

they do or do not disrupt the dominant cultural formula stories, is a critical question because the changes of how a social group is symbolically coded is a powerful force in policy, and, more broadly, social change (Loseke 2007). And, as the public pronouncements of the movements surrounding the predicament of Black men (e.g., “Million Man March” and “Black Lives Matter”) suggest, there is a dire need to disrupt the dominant negative formula stories that continue to define Black men, and especially Black fathers, as irresponsible and largely absent from Black families (Johnson & Young, 2016).

Yet, a review of public policy literature focused on Black fathers, including analyses of responsible fatherhood policies, indicates the dominance of traditional policy analyses that focus on whether the policies and programs have been effective by testing whether the benefits of a policy outweigh the costs of its implementation (see Avellar et. al 2018; Huntington and Vetere 2016; Threlfall and Kohl 2015; Camble 2014). While such studies are important, they do not address the formative stages of the policy cycle that are of particular importance because they influence how policy target populations, in this case low-income fathers, experience the policy. The formative policy stages are even more salient for low-income Black fathers, a population subject to negative formula stories and relatively voiceless in the policy arena.

Importantly, due to their social location, individuals who are most likely to participate in federal policy formation, the U.S. Congress, assume an etic (outsider) perspective that makes them more prone to espouse the stereotypical/cultural formula stories about other populations. In relation to Black communities, the etic perspective and formula story is illustrated by House Speaker Paul Ryan’s comment about high poverty rates in inner cities:

“We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with” (Blow, 2014, para 2).

However, more recently, Congress has become both racially and ethnically diverse. The 116th Congress is the most diverse body in U.S. history with racial and ethnic minorities making up 22% of its voting members (Pew Research Center, 2019). And increase in racial representation also means that there are some members of Congress who have both an emic and an etic lens. For example, Congressman Johnson from Georgia uses his own personal narratives as a Black man to explain to his peers the significance of police brutality in Black communities:

We had the case of Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, yesterday, pulled over for a busted taillight. Here is a working man in the car with his girlfriend and her 4-year-old daughter, and he is armed, as everyone else in America is. But he is a Black man riding in the streets of a city in America, and so he must not be allowed to have that gun or, at least, if he has one, everybody is in such fear that they develop a trigger finger. And when he reaches for his license, then he gets blasted four times and his life is snuffed out. That is what happens to Black folks in America (House of Representatives, 2010).

Although Congressman Johnson has achieved the status of political elite, his race, gender, and perhaps previous economic status lends to a more emic perspective to Black men and Black fathers.

This study contributes to the responsible fatherhood field by examining how responsible fatherhood, especially as it pertains to Black fathers, is defined and interpreted by policy stakeholders engaged in the passage of responsible fatherhood policies. According to the interpretive policy framework, various policy stakeholders represent different “interpretive communities” that are often positioned to view the issues from different perspectives and levels (Yanow, 2000). In this study, we combine an interpretive policy analysis (IPA) by Yanow (2000) and the narrative identity framework proposed by Loseke (2007) to examine how Black

fatherhood has been constructed in the policy narratives articulated during a formative stage of the policy process: in the congressional debates surrounding the passage of responsible fatherhood policies and in the policies themselves. We ask, “As the authors of responsible fatherhood policy, have the members of Congress disrupted or reproduced the cultural formula stories related to Black fathers and Black fatherhood in their written and oral responsible fatherhood policy pronouncements? Since the U.S. Congress has for a long time been dominated by the Republican majority with an etic perspective, we expect that this interpretive community and the statements they make will be prone to reproducing the dominant formula stories about Black men and Black fathers.

Problem Definition and Policy Formation

In the public policy process, problem definition phase is critical. During this stage, stakeholders try to “explain, to describe, to recommend, and, above all, to persuade” (Rochefort & Cobb: p. 15) the public about the importance of a given policy problem. Moreover, the way a problem is defined has been linked to the social construction of policy targets (Gilens, 1999), including whether they deserve to receive public resources (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). Just as it is tremendously difficult to change the social construction of target populations (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014), the way a problem is defined becomes a “long-term fixture of the policymaking landscape” (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994: p.4). Policy changes are often related to the emergence of a new perspective on an old issue. As the problem definition begins to shift, new solutions are required (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

Policy formation, including problem definition, has gone largely unexplored in the responsible fatherhood field. Although there have been some qualitative studies of responsible parenthood (Randles, 2016; Randles, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2010), the field has largely been

shaped by quantitative evaluation research studies that assess the effectiveness of these programs. Yet, since problem definition influences the construction of target populations (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014), which, in turn, reaffirms problem definition by repeating it, hence, giving it more power. The *Social Construction Framework* presents a typology of groups guided by the intersection of their perceived stereotypes (positive or negative) and the level of power they hold in the political process (Schneider, Ingram, & Deleon, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). These stereotypes determine the allocation of benefits by deciding which groups are “deserving” or “underserving” of assistance (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). Importantly, this social construction of “deservedness” has influenced key social policies (Ingram & Schneider, 2005).

At the lowest end of the spectrum, the deviant group is comprised of individuals who have the least amount of power in the political arena and are seen as underserving of assistance. Young Black men and “dead beat dads” have been identified as members of this group (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). Coincidentally, young Black men are the primary target for responsible fatherhood programs and are inextricably linked to this deviant group. Given this inequality, the logical question is whether these social constructions can be changed and what would that deconstruction process look like? The primary contributors of the social construction theory are confident that they can be, and that the catalyst for this change is the process by which public policies are designed (Schneider, Ingram, & Deleon, 2014), which includes how public policy issues are defined.

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD: FORMULA STORIES AND INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES OF BLACK MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD

While cultural narratives of identity must be deemed valid by the listener and/or the reader in order to have any power, institutional narratives of identity are automatically “consequential” (Loseke, 2007; p. 667). That is, cultural narratives by themselves can be essentially harmless, but once they show up in an institutional setting with institutional support, i.e., when they enter policy agenda, they have profound implications.

Controlling images of Black manhood have not been studied as extensively as the images of Black women but some images are easily recognizable in the media (Belle, 2014). Film historians note two roles that have readily been available to Black actors in film, two of which pertain to Black manhood. “*Tom*,” short for “*Uncle Tom*,” is a reference to a servile, docile, and simplistic Black man suffering from a cowardly disposition (Bogle, 2001). Quite the opposite of this role, “*Buck*” refers to a Black man who is largely built. He has an insatiable sexual appetite and is most dangerous to White women (Bogle, 2001). Other cultural narratives of Black manhood include “suspicious,” “irresponsible” and “unlawful” (Gary, 1981). Although the cultural narratives of Black manhood fatherhood are easily identifiable, it is still unclear whether and how they are embedded in institutional policy narratives and impact the decision-making process of institutional actors.

These cultural formula stories about Black men are also visible in the narratives about Black fathers, whose assumed unrestrained sexuality is associated with the concept of “serial illegitimacy,” the act of fathering children with multiple women. To compliment this narrative, some social science research has also depicted Black fathers as being careless and irresponsible, both before and after the conception of a child (Steven, Junhan, & Assaf 2016). The notion that

Black men are animalistic implies an inability to function in a civilized manner. The implication of being animalistic is that Black men who fit this stereotype are unable to be “tamed.” Any institutional attempt that seeks to instill discipline will be met with resistance and rebellion (Kim, 2014). If Black men lack discipline, self-control, and restraint, they are inherently unfit for the institution of marriage, which based on monogamy and requires commitment to family (Randles, 2013).

With regard to fatherhood, these formula stories have been primarily perpetuated by way of daytime television that often focuses on the instances when Black fathers deny paternity (e.g., Maury, the Jerry Springer Show, and Ricki Lake). Although extant research has shown that fatherhood is a source of pride for low income Black fathers (Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013), media images have often supported the cultural formula story of a deadbeat Black dad (Battle 2018). Although policy actors cannot be held accountable for cultural narratives that were not created by them, policies are not created in a vacuum. This cultural narrative has invaded public perception since these shows aired in 1991 and 1993, roughly around the time that President Clinton vowed to “end welfare as we know it.”

In this context, there are a few elements of fatherhood policy initiatives that should be highlighted. First, although institutional narratives of Black manhood have been explored by various scholars (O’Brien, 2017; Staples, 1982; Persson, 2017), of special interest are Cooper’s (2012) and Kim’s (2014) analyses. Cooper (2012) provides an important insight into conceptualizations of “good Black men.” She identifies three dominant narratives about Black men: animalistic, sexually unrestrained, and prone to criminal activity. Cooper notes that these perceived characteristics of Black masculinity are often extended to Black fatherhood as these

institutional narratives of Black men do not change much when applied to Black men who have fathered children.

Second, drawing from Cooper's (2012) multidimensional masculinity theory, Kim contends that similar to the stereotypes of "Tom" and Buck" in film representation studies (Bogle, 2001), Black masculinity is dichotomized into two categories: good or bad. These constructions of "good" and "bad" play out on the institutional level in child custody proceedings affecting family court decisions of whether or not Black fathers should be granted custody. When Black men are described as "bad," some other symbolic codes of Black manhood come into play: sexually unrestrained, animalistic, and inherently criminal (Kim, 2014). Kim also noted that in family courts a "good Black man" is viewed as someone who provides financially for their children.

Third, other studies of fatherhood-related policies have also noted that the cultural concept of masculinity is embedded in these policies via statements concerning gender expectations and ideas about men's gender roles. Randles (2013) gives insight to how these policies have potentially framed ideal fatherhood and masculinity for low-income fathers. In one program funded through these policies, the concept of "marital masculinity" emerged as organizational leaders and staff often homed in on masculine identity narratives that heavily criticized fathers who were only breadwinners and conceptualized paternal caregiving as a substitute.

These studies indicate that cultural and institutional narratives about Black manhood and fatherhood intersect. They also suggest that the images of Black men as sexually unrestrained and animalistic are especially relevant to welfare debates. Finally, they suggest that the perceived

characteristics of Black masculinity have been extended to Black fathers as these representations do not change much when Black men who have fathered children are discussed.

METHODS

The focus of this study is to explore congressional discourse as a legitimizer or disruptor of cultural formula stories by conducting an interpretive policy analysis (IPA). IPA provides an opportunity to critically engage with policy artifacts and identify policy meanings that have been subscribed by multiple stakeholder communities. For this study, we focus on the analysis of policy language, i.e. congressional hearings and debates identified in the online *Congressional Record* database.

Congressional Hearings

A brief summary of the operational function of congressional hearings is beneficial here. In essence, legislative hearings are utilized by committee members to gather both factual and opinionated information through testimonies from expert witnesses. The platforms are held ahead of policy decisions and can be best framed as educational opportunities for Congress rather than a public stage for Congressional members to express their own opinions on certain issues. Congressional staff rarely presented themselves as experts on the topics. Most often, they used the hearing to clear up their own misunderstandings and perceptions. Hearings are utilized by US congressional committees with the primary purpose of collecting and analyzing information that might eventually inform policy decisions. Many of the congressional hearings in this database included discourse by expert witnesses in addition to Congress. However, to remain true to the IPA framework, we limited our analysis to discourse spoken by members of Congress.

Data Collection

We began our search of the *Congressional Record* database using the keyword “responsible fatherhood.” Since the purpose of this study is to understand how legislative bodies have disrupted or reproduced cultural formula stories about Black fathers and Black fatherhood in responsible fatherhood policy discourse, we filtered these results by a time frame relevant to the study. Using Google Ngram, we found the term “responsible fatherhood” to be practically nonexistent until 1986. In 2000, the usage of this term reached its peak. This time frame is in alignment with the Family Support Act of 1988 when fatherhood formally entered the national policy agenda. As stated earlier, responsible fatherhood policies are a bi-product of welfare policies. Thus, we extended the analysis to include the time frame of welfare policy debates (1992 – 1995), policy adoption (1996), and its reauthorization (2006). Consequently, we searched the congressional hearings that occurred from 1988 – 2006. This search yielded 89 documents from congressional hearings that included a mention of “responsible fatherhood.” After examining each document in more detail to determine whether they contained data that would assist in our analysis, we eliminated those hearings that did not include extensive discussion on responsible fatherhood. The final database included 10 congressional hearings held by the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.

Data Analysis

To analyze what was being communicated through policy language, the first stage of the analysis included identifying cultural codes associated with Black fathers based on extant research: responsible/irresponsible, lazy/unemployed/ employment/ welfare, criminal/delinquent, illegitimacy/single-parents, fathers/mothers/children/family. The second stage of the analysis included examining the presence of these codes in congressional hearings regarding the

responsible fatherhood policies. Drawing upon findings from Kim (2014) on how Black fathers are constructed in lower courts, we focused on the dichotomous moral evaluations of Black fathers as either “good” or “bad, referred to as bipolar masculinity. Kim (2014) describes this as harmful as it adversely influences the decision-making process of family court judges by validating and reproducing myths about Black men and fathers. While judicial moral evaluations fall into the categories of good or bad for decision making, congressional moral evaluations have to do with allocation of resources. In this study, we replace the good/bad dichotomy with deserving/undeserving. Rejecting the dichotomy of good/bad fathers, Kim (2014) argues for multidimensional masculinity which creates space for Black fathers to viewed along a spectrum. Thus, any congressional statements that are one-dimensional are characterized as reproducing cultural formula stories, while narratives that depict Black fathers as multidimensional are seen as disrupting cultural formula stories.

FINDINGS

We examined congressional statements from 1988 – 2005 to understand whether congressional discourse either reproduced or disrupted dominant formula stories about Black fathers and Black fatherhood. Several themes appeared in congressional hearings, including serial illegitimacy, unreasonable debt, father absence, heroic motherhood, and marriageability. Along with each theme came some moral evaluation that described fathers as either deserving or undeserving, with deserving fathers described as *dead broke* and undeserving fathers described as *deadbeat*. During the selected time frame (1988 – 2006), the *deadbeat* father appears less frequently throughout the years. This may be attributed to federally funded projects, namely the Parent’s Fair Share Demonstration Project, which may have influenced congressional understandings and interpretations of the target population. The deadbeat father is one-

dimensional and associated with the subthemes of serial illegitimacy, parenting absence, and heroic motherhood. On the other hand, *dead broke fathers* are multi-dimensional and associated with the sub themes of unreasonable debt and decreased marriageability. While the references to *deadbeat fathers* and the associated sub-themes reproduce dominant formula stories, the references to *dead broke fathers* appear to disrupt the dominant formula stories about Black fathers.

Dead Beat Narratives of Welfare Fathers

In July 2000, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy held a hearing on fatherhood initiatives. This hearing is of particular interest as reauthorization of welfare reform would occur in the next congress. In his opening statement, Senator Evan Bayh (D) from Indiana, who had made significant contributions to the Child Support Reform Act of 2000 scrutinized men who were deemed undeserving of government assistance: “What about the men who bring children into the world and then just walk away leaving the women to deal with the consequences of that and the taxpayers to deal with the costs of that as well? What about those men?” (Senator Evan Bayh (D) Indiana, Senate Committee on Finance, 2000). The men that Senator Bayh refers to are undeserving of assistance as they have sought to selfishly evade the personal responsibilities that come with fatherhood. If it is unclear which specific group of men is being mentioned, he adds for clarification: “We call upon all African-American leaders to bring to this movement the same energy and dedication, the same passion and fearlessness, and the same creativity and courage that was summoned to wage the struggle for basic civil rights” (Senator Evan Bayh (D) Indiana, Senate Committee on Finance, 2000). This statement constructs African-American fathers as the undeserving poor and could be easily used to implement

punitive measures in the child support system. There are some cases where the child support system has provided unintended benefits to fathers.

These unintended benefits are elaborated on in a 2001 hearing on Child Support and Fatherhood Proposals held by the House Committee on Ways and Means. The goal of the hearing set forth by the committee chairman (Senator Wally Herger CA-R) was to bring Congress up to speed on performance in the child support system based on changes made in the 1996 welfare reform. In addition, congress set aside time to hear about other proposals to encourage and facilitate healthy father-child relationships. Senator Mike Castle of Delaware mentions how deadbeat fathers manage to trick the system while evading responsibilities: “The unintended effect of the program is that it rewards noncustodial parents who are successful in avoiding their child support obligations while their children are still minors and *believe me many do that*” (Senator Mike Castle (R – Delaware), House Committee on Ways and Means, 2001). Based on these statements that evaluate *dead beat fathers* as undeserving, one characteristic readily attributed to this kind of father is his propensity to father multiple children with multiple women (i.e. serial illegitimacy).

Serial Illegitimacy

Serial illegitimacy is an important sub-theme in the formula story of *deadbeat fathers*. In 1998, two years after the implementation of the new welfare system, the House Committee on Ways and Means held a hearing on how fatherhood intersected with the original plan of the 1996 welfare reform. As the committee chairman, Congressman E. Clay Shaw, JR., (R-FL) stated that the purpose was to “examine the social, economic, and legal difficulties faced by unmarried fathers of children on welfare” (House Committee on Ways and Means, 1998). In his conceptualization of the problem with poor families, North Carolina Representative John

Faircloth (R) attributes instability to men and women who have children in the absence of marriage:

I feel that the root cause of the welfare problem is out of wedlock births which is fueling the expansion of the welfare problem. Most children on AFDC, the main welfare program, are in single parent families. The vast majority of single parent families are headed by women and more than half of the new welfare case are due to mothers having children out of wedlock. This is the continuing root cause of the problem (House Committee on Ways and Means, 1998).

In the 2001 hearing on Child Support and Fatherhood Proposals, five years after the new welfare reform, Representative Wes Watkins adds that it is the actual welfare policy itself that has facilitated this undesirable behavior and calls for an increase in punitive measures to combat it; “I think too many times, we have said to people you can go out and have a fling and all these kind of things, and they think that is serious – not out one night, but it is not. They waltz away without paying anything, and I think they need to try to be responsible. I think we need to at least step there first and say what do we put the teeth of responsibility in (House Committee on Ways and Means, 2001).

His statement was interrupted in a rebuttal from Connecticut Representative Nancy Johnson (R) to bring attention back to policy implications of the former welfare system, AFDC: “If I may comment, I agree with you absolutely. In the end, this is about personal responsibility. Do not bring children into the world unless you are going to be responsible for them, but remember we have had out there for many, many years before 1994 when we reformed welfare a system that said it is all right to have kids out of wedlock, do not worry, the government will support you” (House Committee on Ways and Means, 2001). By bringing the conversation back to how policies have influenced family formation and the decisions of fathers, it disrupts cultural formula stories that often ignore the socio-political spaces fathers behave in.

Absence in Parenting/Heroic Motherhood

Although illegitimacy was frowned upon by most members of Congress, the greater issue involved the harmful effects experienced by children in these fragile families. Thus, legislators turned their attention to another characteristic of *dead beat fathers*: their tendency to be absent, and therefore useless, in the child rearing process. Although mothers on welfare were also criticized in regard to single motherhood, Congress often painted mothers as “heroic” in their efforts. In 1997, the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families held a hearing one year after the 1996 welfare reform to address fatherhood initiatives as a solution to the negative impact of fatherless homes. The committee chairman, Representative Frank Riggs (D) of California, prefaced his introductions by stating: “I want to just make clear today, ladies and gentlemen, in a brief aside that, while the focus of our hearing is on the importance of fatherhood, today’s hearing is not intended in any way to denigrate the importance of that single parent who remains in the home, and we recognized as a committee, collectively, that single mothers many times heroically struggle against great odds to raise their children” (Senate Committee on Finance, 1997). In this statement, he addresses a common misinterpretation of the purpose of the fatherhood initiatives that they seek to harshly criticize the child rearing practices of poor single mothers. This shows up again during a 1999 hearing on Father Legislation. The purpose of this hearing was to examine the Fathers Count Act of 1999, which sought to fund government based and nongovernment agencies through the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to provide relationship and parenting services along with resources for economic stability to unmarried fathers. An important mandate for these programs is the coordination and collaboration with three other agencies that intersect with serving welfare fathers: child support, TANF, and workforce investment agencies. In this hearing, Senator Evan Bayh (IN-D) provides

further justification for concept of heroic motherhood: “America’s mothers, including single moms, are heroic in their efforts to make ends meet financially while raising good, responsible children. Many dads are too. But an increasing number of men simply not doing their part or are absent altogether”. He continues this thought a year later during a fatherhood hearing by Senate Committee on Finance, again highlighting that single welfare mothers have been disproportionately scrutinized: “We need to create a stigma against irresponsible childbearing. Society as a whole has to take the stigma off women who bear a child out of wedlock because they didn’t do it alone. There was a guy there that is equally responsible for that child, and he should be equally to blame if you’re going to blame anybody, but more than that, you have to find a way to make them responsible” (Senator Evan Bayh (D) Indiana, Senate Committee on Finance, 2000). This quote speaks to the need of creating a balance of responsibility between mothers and fathers. The consequence of this, however, is that fathers are now painted as villainous. Since there are no other plausible explanations brought to the table about the reasoning behind his absence, the deadbeat father is constructed as someone who is absent because he wants to be. In 2005, responsible fatherhood programs were authorized under the Deficit Reduction Act. During the same time, the Senate Appropriations Committee held a special hearing to discuss marriage development accounts (MDA) as a potential solution for the increase in illegitimate pregnancies and decrease in marriage occurring in the District of Columbia. In a rather personal account, Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC) uses an emic lens to express her reality of fathers in her community: Our men will provide for themselves and take care of themselves. They do not necessarily take care of their children and they do not necessarily marry our women. This statement reinforces serial illegitimacy as a

standard for the *deadbeat father* as well and irresponsibility. In addition, it alludes to the self-preserving nature of these fathers, as they prioritize their own needs above their families.

As hearings proceed through this time period, a different formula starts to slowly emerge. Although it includes some of the same symbolic codes (serial illegitimacy, parenting absence), legislators become more thoughtful about explaining the “why” behind the behavior of welfare fathers, allowing them to construct a different narrative.

“Dead Broke” Narratives of Welfare Fathers

“Noncustodial fathers want to help their families, but many lack regular employment and have significant problems that need to be addressed. As the Chair pointed out, they are not deadbeat, they are dead broke, and we need to do something about that”
(Representative Ben Cardin MD-D, House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999).

When Congress members did not speak of welfare fathers in terms of irresponsibility and willful non-participation, the alternative was a less punitive, more understanding narrative. To make this case, they cited findings from a prominent research study, Parent’s Fair Share Demonstration Project (PFS). The Parent’s Fair Share Demonstration Project was implemented under the former welfare system, Aid for Families and Dependent Children and was authorized by the Family Support Act of 1988. The primary goal of this program was to increase child support payments by unemployed welfare fathers by providing supportive services, such as parenting and relationships classes as well as job preparation and employment training. Participants in this program were primarily low-income Black fathers who were unemployed and had child support arrears. Undoubtedly, it provided a more intimate exploration of the lives of welfare fathers that helped legislators consider a different formula story. Committee chairman Nancy Johnson (R-CT) opens up the 1999 hearing by stating:

“Based on the Parent’s Fair Share research and on testimony before this Subcommittee, I think we have learned a very important thing about young fathers. Even those with

criminal records, and those who have never held a steady job, want to help their children and do what is best for them. Many of these young men say they don't want their children to grow up without a father the way they did. This finding that poor young fathers have a great desire to do what is best for their children, **like everyone else**, provides us with an anchor around which we can build good programs and provide the help so desperately needed" (House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999).

In unpacking the details of this statement, it is clear that the results helped to disrupt negative perceptions of Black fathers. For instance, it can be implied from this statement that fathers with criminal records and those who are unemployed have a strong disinterest in fatherhood. Two prominent constructions of Black fathers are that they are inherently criminal and lazy. When the congresswoman says, "like everyone else" it humanizes Black fathers, thereby disrupting those narratives.

In addition, Congresswoman Johnson explains to her peers how findings from this study revealed that "poor young fathers have a great desire to do what is best for their children". This statement has incredible significance since it was not completely understood in previous years as the *deadbeat* narrative ran rampant. That single story was incredibly damaging, and was not inclusive of the socio-economic barriers that low-income fathers faces. On the contrary, the *dead broke* narrative is multidimensional in its explanation of the behaviors of welfare fathers.

Pass-through laws

In their discourse of these fathers, Congressmen often spoke of federal policies that have actually hindered their participation and involvement with their children. First, pass-through laws under child support policy require that a certain percentage of payments be reimbursement to the state when the children have received welfare. When welfare fathers were constructed as *dead broke*, members of Congress possessed greater understanding of the reluctance and inability of poor fathers to comply with child support payments that did not go directly to their child. In the

2001 hearing on Child Support and Fatherhood Proposals that provided congress with an update of how child support performed in lieu of the 1996 welfare reform, Maryland Senator Ben Cardin (D) conceptualized the issues around child support payments being reimbursements to the state,

“Child support should go to the children. I guess that is why we call it “child support”, but, today the arrearages in many cases go to the government, not to the families. We just recently had a debate on the floor of this Congress about what marginal tax rates should be, and I heard many of my colleagues talk about in-the-thirties percent being too high of a marginal tax rate. Well, we have 100-percent tax rate on child support collections today, 100-percent rate for the poorest people in our country, and that makes absolutely no sense at all (House Committee on Ways and Mean, 2001)

Throughout multiple hearings, pass-through laws are understood to be barriers for father involvement. During the 1999 hearing on Fatherhood Legislation, Representative Ben Cardin (D-MD) proclaims that, “If it [child support payments] goes to the families, it is much more likely that the noncustodial parent will, in fact, pay child support. It helps the family unit to work together. The noncustodial parent feels that he is a part or she is a part of the family” (House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999). This statement points to how the method for allocating payments contributes the family dynamics and father’s sense of belonging. Members acknowledged how the reimbursement strategies reflected in child support policy isolates the father from the family although he is in fact contributing and doing so willingly. This led to statements that would influence supportive policies. For instance, in acknowledging that 93 percent of all child support orders were in arrears in 2001, Representative Christopher Cox suggested tax reliefs on behalf of the father, recognizing that fathers who are in debt to child support arrears have a substantially more difficult time fulfilling their roles as fathers. This stance implies that fathers are in fact committed to the well-being of their families and disrupts the narrative of welfare fathers who are pre-disposed to abandoning their families who are

already vulnerable. Since child support policy is controlled by the state, members of Congress brainstormed how to incentivize support policies and relayed that the consequences of nonpayment, such as revocation of driver's licenses, was an unproductive aspect of the policy (Representative Julia Carson (D) Indiana, House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999). In the 1999 hearing, Chairman Nancy Johnson (R) of Connecticut suggested that fathers who could not meet their required obligations were filled with fear, frustration, and paralysis. Finally, members of congress harnessed the power of high expectations and humanized these fathers in stating that "These people are just as good as we are, but they just come from different backgrounds and different levels of learning and this is where the breakthroughs have to be made, but we have got to make them" (Representative Ben Cardin (D) Maryland, House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999).

Marriageability and Parenting Behaviors of Black Fathers

As it pertains to man-in-the-house policies, members acknowledged how it was in direct opposition to facilitating strong families. During the House Committee on Ways and Means (2001) one expert witness told a story of a mother in Baltimore who applied for TANF benefits. In the initial assessment, the TANF case manager advised the father not to marry her because it would be considered welfare fraud. Connecticut Representative Nancy L. Johnson (R) prioritized compatibility of welfare fathers with welfare mothers who were advancing economically and educationally as a result of work participation while receiving TANF.

"The goal is to give the men the same support we are giving the women, so that not only can they grow economically in parallel, but so that they can grow emotionally in parallel. One of the reasons the men are gone in 2 years is because during that time, the woman has had job service, some career counseling. She has gone through a process which helps her see what her capabilities are. She often has started her first job, and she has begun to see herself as a mother and as an earner and as a competent adult. Meanwhile her male friend down here is still on the streets unemployed, or with a very low level or very sporadic pattern of employment" (House Committee on Ways and Mean, 2001).

Noting that the “male friend” is still on the streets speaks to close proximity of Black men to Black women. In her discourse, the prioritization of compatibility is “common sense”. (House Committee on Ways and Mean, 2001). This discourse insinuates that these fathers can be developed into marriage material and have the ability and desire to actively participate in their families. The issue of young black men’s desirability as husbands was magnified when an invited fatherhood participant asked the Committee Chair “Would you want your daughter to marry me?” (House Committee on Ways and Mean, 2001).

In other congressional discourse, marriageability was associated with employment. District of Columbia Delegate and Representative Eleanor Holmes brings forth concerns that unemployment will eventually lead to criminal behavior among Black men and would further disrupt family formation: “In a country that has always associated manhood with money, men without legitimate resources and decent ways to achieve them in an ordinary way, will not form a stable family (Senate Committee on Appropriations, 2005). Representative Norton goes on to say that: “Too often, it is a criminal economy that just moved into our African-American communities to replace the legitimate job economy of the fathers and grandfathers of these young men. In this statement, the construction of Black men as inherently criminal shows up, not to condemn, but to provide another plausible explanation for the inactivity of low-income Black fathers.

While policies designed to penalize deadbeat fathers were not harsh enough, a great deal of empathy was granted to fathers characterized as dead broke: “I am increasingly uncomfortable with how harsh our rhetoric has become about fathers who do not pay child support. Yes, fathers must pay child support, but when young men have trouble finding and holding employment, we should blame less and help more. Our harsh rhetoric should be reserved for those who could pay

and don't or those who refuse to work and so can't pay. For them, no rhetoric is too harsh." The latter end of this statement is meant for "dead beat dads" (Chairman Samuel Johnson (R) Texas, House Committee on Ways and Means (1999). In this hearing, Chairman Johnson focused in on black fathers and recited data that "80 percent of the fathers of the babies born out of marriage are actually there and part of the relationship for a year or two, at least, I mean, statistically about a year or two, and this is particularly important in terms of black young people. They are there. They lose interest, they become disheartened, they become discouraged". Representative Nancy Johnson of Connecticut (2001) extends the discussion on how the father's willingness and participation changes over time citing that those fathers become disengaged after the first 2 years of life for the child. These statements disrupt cultural formula stories by providing other explanations of father absence, which are not steeped in the father's unwillingness but circumstance outside of his control.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined whether members of congress disrupted or reproduced negative cultural formula stories about Black fathers and Black fatherhood during congressional hearings. Based on the results, we found that members of congress participated in both the legitimization and disruption cultural formula stories. In constructing welfare fathers as *dead beat*, members of congress repeatedly spoke to serial illegitimacy. Fatherhood researchers generally refer to this as "multiple partner fertility" (Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008; Burton, 2014) to describe a procreation trend commonly seen among fathers to parent multiple children with multiple women.

In accordance with the narrative identify framework, the term serial illegitimacy is more appropriate because it is a cultural code used in welfare discourse. In confirming the reproachful context of this word, one expert witness well versed in the history of welfare policy pointed out that “at one time, illegitimate was about the worst thing you could be” (Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families, 1996). This response was in reference to a comment about the changing trends in family formations that led to the need for new legislation. Parallel to this, members of congress spoke about absent fatherhood combined with heroic motherhood to continue the legitimization of this negative cultural formula story. In these formula stories, mothers were consistently constructed as victims of the father’s abandonment of their family. Although mothers were not necessarily dissolved of their participation in having an out of wedlock birth, they were applauded for parenting alone, thus reinforcing their heroism. Fathers, on the other hand, received the greater condemnation in this scenario.

Narratives of deadbeat fathers have been long standing in the policy arena. Certain components of this construction can be traced back to the infamous Moynihan Report of 1963, formerly called *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In his analysis of Black families, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) credited low marriage rates, illegitimate pregnancies, and matriarchy to be a few causes of instability. Whether accurate or not, his report provided a formula story that could be used to describe what was happening among low-income Black families and why. His “tangle of pathology” showed up in the statements that constructed the deadbeat father. The Moynihan report also offered a critical analysis of single Black mothers as the source of instability for Black families. This may explain why we observed legislators over justifying their focus on fathers and often prefacing their comments about absent fathers by praising the hard work of single mothers.

What would have helped to disrupt this formula story is the mentioning of barriers that fathers face when they attempt to become involved. In many cases, their efforts are thwarted by the mothers themselves. Holcomb et al. (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with low-income fathers who participated in responsible fatherhood as a part of large-scale evaluation of these programs. The sample in the study was representative of the typical responsible fatherhood participant in that 85% were African American, 73% had criminal records, 47% had children with multiple women, and almost 60% had child support obligations. During in life history interviews, over half of fathers described facing opposition by the mothers of the children in their attempts to be involved. Some fathers described direct measures of opposition, like not providing vital information about the location of their child:

“I been contacting her mama ever since she was born, you know, fighting to see her [his daughter], [to] be in her life, do what I got to do for her. And her mama. . . it’s like what I say go in one ear and out the other. She don’t want nothing to do with me neither. . . . I saw my daughter one day at the Walmart. I bought her a little coloring book. That was the last time I saw [her]” (Holcomb et al. 2015; p. 49).

In their construction of *dead broke* fathers, members of congress disrupted cultural formula stories by mentioning the importance of addressing relationship conflicts between parents. Rather than just relying on co-parenting strategies, their discourse revolved around making welfare fathers more marriageable. One congresswoman spoke to how fathers were incredibly disadvantaged when it came to being a potential mate to women who had been given more opportunities in the areas of workforce and education. Randles (2016) speaks to insensitivity of healthy marriage policy advocates who painted marriage as the ultimate panacea for the complex issues seen amongst low-income couples participating in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs. Instead of focusing solely on the institution of marriage, she suggests focusing on the socio-economic circumstance that caused the instability to begin with it.

On this point, members of Congress did ultimately address the financial strains faced by low-income fathers. Namely, they expressed discontentment and at times disgust with pass through laws that left fathers feeling as though they had not done anything to contribute to their children because the funds were used to reimburse the state. Since child support policies are a state-based policy, Congress discussed ways to incentive states at the federal level to eliminate pass through laws.

Research on problem definition and agenda setting is scarce in the responsible fatherhood field, as much of what we know lies in the implementation and evaluation stages of the policy process. The results of this study give us a better understanding of whether and how cultural narratives become embedded in institutional narratives, which, unlike narratives produced on a cultural level, have consequences for the allocation of resources to the target population. Battle (2018) explains how institutional narratives can influence policy pronouncements. In this case, narratives that challenge or disrupt those narratives help to construct a different problem definition, which in turn changes whether policies regarding fathers are supportive or punitive. In their statements related to welfare and Black fathers, members of congress disrupted cultural formula stories by constructing them as *dead broke* more often than *deadbeat*.

Although this study did not draw comparison based on the racial backgrounds of congress, we assumed that legislators with an internal lens to Black fathers (i.e. a member of the Black community, and more specifically a Black father themselves) would be more disruptive of cultural formula stories since they're situated close more closely to Black fathers either due to their own family background or based on the constituencies they serve. Black members of congress disrupted cultural formula stories by telling personal stories about how father absence played out in their own lives. In some cases, they used personal pronouns such as "us" and "our"

when discussing issues related to Black families. On the other hand, it was assumed that members of congress with an etic lens would practice rhetoric that reinforced stereotypical narratives. Members of congress who did not share the racial identity of the target population shared in both the reproduction and disruption of those cultural narratives.

While members of congress did reproduce negative cultural formula stories about welfare fathers, they also acknowledged the ways that these fathers had been misunderstood and mislabeled. The primary impetus for this was the Parent Fair Share Demonstration Project. In their arguments, members of congress referenced the fathers in the study as examples of how low-income fathers did indeed desire to be good fathers. The study provided the language they needed to speak on behalf of fathers they may have previously labeled as undeserving. Although this study did not examine congressional actions, the steps that were laid out in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 helps to explain the disruption of negative formula stories.

First, in 2005, Congress authorized a media campaign for responsible fatherhood in hopes of overturning negative stereotypes of fathers. There were two primary goals for this: 1) “to encourage the appropriate involvement of fathers in the life of their child(ren), and 2) to show the importance of fathers in their communities and society”. The campaign includes a number of platforms like social media, print advertising, and radio public service announcements. The most recent funding announcements states that the “Office of Family Assistance and the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse has worked to develop and produce the campaign’s strategy and main message – to show that even the smallest moments can have the biggest impact on a child’s life.” The campaign slogan “Take time to be a Dad Today” is meant to acknowledge the difficulties of fatherhood and encourages dads to avoid being overwhelmed by taking small steps each day. With respect to imagery of Black fatherhood, however, there are a

few discrepancies. For instance, the television commercials that have been developed often depict middle-class Black fathers in prosperous neighborhoods more often than what are the actual environments for low-income fathers, the primary recipients of responsible fatherhood programming.

Limitations

While congressional hearings are an excellent source to examine how items on the policy agenda evolve, the makeup of these sessions did not always offer the greatest opportunity to hear commentary from legislators on the topic of interest. First, congressional hearings include prepared statements by committee members that are read verbatim along with the testimonies of expert witnesses. In all speeches, the majority of the discourse is taken up by expert witnesses invited to give testimony. When congressional statements are read, they more often than not took a passive position. One explanation of this is that members of congress use this platform as an educational opportunity to hear from constituents who are highly experienced on the given topic. Hearings are designed and witnesses are selected to “educate lawmakers and the attentive public on complex issues” (Davidson et al. p.223). As such, legislators take passive positions and refrain from offering their own opinions in many instances.

Future Research

Since the current studies were primarily concerned with problem definition and agenda settings, policy pronouncements went unexamined since it goes beyond policy formulation in congressional hearings. The current study was an interpretive policy analysis of policy language, thus future studies could examine other policy artifacts (policy actions and policy objects). For example, the examination of policy actions that were laid out in three explicit responsible fatherhood legislations could be of interest. Namely, these are the *Deficit Reduction of 2005*, the

Claims Resolution Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-291), and *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193)*. In addition, the construction of Black men and fathers being prone to criminal behavior might be explored implicit family policy discourse such as the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (P.L. 103 – 322)*, also known as the “Crime bill.”

Lastly, future studies may highlight the interpretations of other stakeholder communities, such as organizations steeped in delivering fatherhood services, researchers and experts in the field, and of course low income Black fathers themselves. Ironically, all three of these communities enter the institutional space by testifying at congressional hearings. Program directors and participants are often invited to provide testimony to congress. While program directors represent another emic/etic community, program participants speak from a pure emic perspective.

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APPENDIX
LIST OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS AND DEBATES

1. Barriers and Opportunities for America's Young Black Men: Hearing before Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, House, 101st Congress (1989).
2. Plight of African-American Men in Urban America: Hearing before Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Senate, 102nd Congress (1991).
3. Downey-Hyde Child Support Enforcement and Assurance Proposal: Hearing before Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House, 102nd Congress (1992).
4. Fatherhood and Welfare Reform: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House, 105th Congress (1998).
5. Fatherhood Legislation: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House, 106th Congress (1999).
6. Fatherhood Initiatives: Hearing Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, Committee on Finance, Senate, 106th Congress (2000).
7. Child Support Enforcement: Hearing before Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House, 106th Congress (2000).
8. Child Support and Fatherhood Proposals: Hearings from Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House, 107th Congress (2001).
9. Black Men and Boys in D.C. and Their Impact on the Future of the Black Family: Hearing before the Committee on Government Reform, House, 108th Congress (2003).
10. Potential for Marriage Development Accounts in D.C., Special Hearing: Hearing before the Subcommittee on D.C. Appropriations, Senate, 109th Congress (2005).

CHAPTER THREE: ARTICLE 2 – “IN THE WORDS OF DR. KING, IT IS NOT EITHER-OR, IT IS BOTH-AND”: OBAMA’S SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK FATHERHOOD AT THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES IN RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD POLICY

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, fatherhood made its appearance on the national policy stage by way of congressional debates, presidential speeches, and significant coverage from media outlets (Sylvester & Reich, 2001). Given the trends in family formation patterns at that time, new discussions arose around how to lift families out of poverty, and fatherhood was identified to be the missing piece of the puzzle. Two issues, however, complicated fatherhood’s entrance onto the national policy agenda. First, fathers, especially low-income fathers, who for a variety of reasons did not share their domicile with their children had already been branded as the “underserving poor.” This occurred through punitive child support policies that designed a system of payment collection that has disproportionately affected low-income fathers (Miller & Mincy, 2010; Battle, 2018). Second, differences in political ideologies led to conflicting policy approaches to the fragile system of fatherhood initiatives (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Policy debates revolved around whether fatherhood policies should help fathers to adapt to the changes in family formation, i.e. focus on helping fathers co-parent with single mothers, or should they place emphasis on helping fathers fulfill more traditional roles of fatherhood, i.e. promote the formation of two-parent households and marriage.

Following the impasse of conflicting approaches, during the Obama Administration (2008 – 2016), the infrastructure of responsible fatherhood initiatives was strengthened in several ways. First, the 44th President “started a National Conversation on Responsible Fatherhood and

Strong Communities and made the issue of fatherhood and at-risk youth one of the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships' four key priorities.” Second, in June 2010, President Obama launched “the Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative.” Third, in 2012, he implemented the Responsible Fatherhood Working Group dedicated to advancing the field using interagency collaboration strategies (White House Report, 2012). These initiatives were preceded by a statement the 44th President made on June 19, 2009, the eve of Father's Day weekend, at a White House Town Hall on the topic of fatherhood:

“I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference” (Obama, 2009).

This powerful statement combines the President's personal experience and elucidates his policy perspective on fatherhood. Such statements are part of cultural and institutional narratives, the narratives that constitute “formula stories” or “collective representations” of types of experiences of Black fathers, in cultural and institutional arenas, respectively. Cultural narratives are the macro-level stories that produce “the imagined characteristics of disembodied types” of Black fathers; institutional narratives produce identities of policy targets.

The institutional location of a president makes these institutional narratives particularly consequential as they inform the course of action the president as well as the legislative bodies decide to take and how they govern (Loseke, 2009; Ivie, 1986; McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014; Battle, 2018). In a recent New Yorker article, Doreen St. Felix (February 28, 2018) notes that “The modern American President, a role that has traditionally relied on a public ethnography of sorts, has often appeared to steer emically: when he extends such appeals as “we, the American people,” he means to include himself within the crowd.”

In this study, we focus on the formative stages of the policy process and explore the presence of cultural narratives in Presidential speeches that focus on Black fatherhood. In this regard, President Obama's pronouncements are especially significant and worthy exploration not only because he is a Black man but also because he is Black father, a President that is well aware of the social constructions of Black manhood (Cooper, 2008). Accordingly, many Americans expected that Obama's presidency would actually do the work of changing the cultural formula stories of Black men, including Black fathers (Cooper, 2008). Hence, we ask: "How does President Obama's narratives disrupt the cultural formula stories of Black fathers and Black fatherhood?"

Cultural and Institutional Formula Stories and Black Fathers

Cultural formula stories about Black fathers have historically been intertwined with the controlling images of Black womanhood, including those of *Mammy*, *Jezebel*, and *Sapphire* (West 1995; Collins 2002), and more recently those of *Matriarch*, *Welfare Queen*, and *Urban Teen Mother* (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Although scholars have deconstructed these images in favor of more accurate representation of Black women (Chrisler, 2012), they are still pervasive and their presence is seen in the policy formulation process (Jordan-Zachery, 2009).

Moreover, although research shows that fatherhood is a source of pride for low-income Black fathers (Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013), pervasive negative cultural formula stories about young Black men and Black fathers continue to be widespread, perpetuated, and delivered to the public by way powerful cultural vehicles, including the media. For example, the dead-beat dad narrative has been perpetuated in daytime television that emphasizes Black father's resistance to fatherhood (Herman, 2009; Moyers, 1985; Dines, 2003). The popularized television show "Maury," among others, has contributed to this cultural narrative by consistently depicting Black

men who emphatically deny fathering a child in question, although most admit to sexual intercourse with the child's mother. The climax of this show occurs when DNA tests are administered to settle the dispute. Such a public display reinforces the idea that Black men not only resist fatherhood, but they also participate in serial illegitimacy without remorse.

In response to such cultural imagery of Black men and fathers, advocate organizations attempt to refute these images by infusing counter narratives into the cultural formula stories through media campaigns such as “Black men smile” and “Black male re-imagined.” These counter narratives emphasize empowering impressions of Black men as loving, socially conscious, community and family focused, and committed to educational and occupational achievement. However, negative stereotypes continuously invade the public sphere and continue to construct an unbecoming image of Black fatherhood. Importantly, with a few notable exceptions of research exploring organizational counter narratives of the responsible fatherhood programs (e.g., Curran & Abrams, 2000; Roy & Dyson, 2010; Randles, 2013), or the importance of infusing alternative views into the institutional narratives concerning Black fatherhood (e.g. Kim, 2014) studies of the alternative narratives of “responsible fatherhood” from the emic perspective of Black fathers, (e.g., Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013) have been lacking.

With regard to institutional narratives, two noteworthy exceptions include Kim's (2014) research that examines concepts of Black manhood and how it is applied to Black fathers in an institutional setting – family courts. Specifically, Kim (2014) utilizes Cooper's (2012) “bi-polarity of Black men” theory that sheds light on the dichotomous construction of Black manhood as “the Bad Black Man” and “the Good Black Man.” Kim explores how these cultural formula stories are applied to Black fathers by family court judges in court case proceedings, i.e., institutional settings, to detriment of Black men. In examining those institutional narratives, Kim

(2014) notes that the “bad” Black father embodies stereotypical characteristics, including animalistic, inherently criminal, and sexually unrestrained. Consequently, the “bad” Black father implies the inability of Black men to be responsible, to function in a civilized manner, and to provide for their families and/or children. Kim argues that the adoption of a multidimensional view of masculinity would help judges decide whether or not Black fathers should be given custody.

Because the cultural narratives intersect with institutional narratives, their potency makes it harder to deconstruct them. The deconstruction process involves re-defining the problem in a way that illuminates unseen aspects (Schneider, Ingram, deLeon, 2014). However, scholars have noted that it is extremely difficult to change the social construction of any group, positive or negative, as it often embedded in the fabric of the nation’s memory (Schneider, Ingram, deLeon, 2014). Also, because low-income Black men possess very little power in the political arena, this deconstruction process requires a champion who 1) can claim membership in the target population and speak from an insider’s perspective, and 2) is socially located in a way that grants them power and influence in the political process. In this context, in the case of Black fathers, the nation’s first Black President, Barak Obama, is an excellent candidate to be a change agent.

Formula Stories and Responsible Fatherhood Policy

While the “crisis of Black fatherhood” has received widespread attention (Johnson and Young 2016), the institutional narratives related to the responsible fatherhood policy initiatives have not been widely explored. The field of responsible fatherhood policy is dominated by traditional policy analyses that focus on whether the policies and programs have been effective. These studies assess participation in parenting programs and the improvement of parenting skills (Avellar et. al 2018), evaluate co-parenting programs (Huntington and Vetere, 2017), examine

the effectiveness of addressing child support in fatherhood programs (Threlfall and Kohl, 2015), and assess the implementation of programs with a home visiting component (Camble, 2014).

Two prominent qualitative studies in the responsible fatherhood field include Roy & Dyson's (2010) exploration of how Black fathers built their understanding of successful manhood in two community-based programs and Randles' (2013) examination of organizational and staff perspectives on the conceptualization of responsible fatherhood. Roy and Dyson (2010) interviewed 75 African American fathers who participated in responsible fatherhood programs. While these fathers tried to achieve the traditional markings of responsible fatherhood as defined by breadwinner status, the staff of these programs tried to challenge the assumption that the breadwinner status is necessary to model responsible fatherhood. Through their advocacy, the staff shifted the emphasis on engagement rather than the possession of resources that the fathers did not have.

Randles' (2013) ethnographic research of a federally funded healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood program explored how the macro-level healthy marriage policy has narrowly shaped the definition of "responsible fatherhood" in terms of "martial masculinity." Randles also offers an insight into how welfare policies and programs link masculine identities to breadwinner status/financial success and traditionally gendered view of care-giving and fatherhood. Similar to Roy and Dyson, she argues that program staff offers alternative understanding of paternal identity of low-income fathers; the understanding that does not make the breadwinner status the precursor for a successful parenthood and/marriage. These studies were followed by Randles' (2016) exploration of whether legislative intent of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) policies accurately reflected the social and economic realities of low-income couples. Randles' concludes that these policies have an inherent middle-

class bias and instead of targeting individual behavior they should focus on a broader issue of economic opportunities.

While these studies are important they do not address the formative stages of the public policy cycle: problem definition and policy formulation. Since these formative stages influence how target populations, in this case low-income fathers, experience the policy, they are both consequential and salient for low-income Black fathers, a population for whose willingness to participate in fatherhood and assume culturally-defined responsibilities associated with fatherhood has long been questioned (Johnson and Young, 2016).

Emic and Etic Perspective of the 44th President of the United States

According to the interpretive policy framework, various policy stakeholders can be thought of as representing different “interpretive communities” that are often positioned to view issues from different perspectives and levels (Yanow, 2000). Presidents are one of such stakeholders and the public discourse of our nation’s president is one vehicle through which cultural narratives are reproduced and validated (Battle, 2018). Battle (2018) provides a compelling argument on how the discourse of presidents have actually shaped and legitimized policies at the intersections of child support and welfare. It is true that a number of other presidents have also contributed to how Black fatherhood has been socially constructed, and their narratives may help explain how Black fathers are currently perceived (St. Felix, 2018). However, with regard to Black men and fathers and the responsible fatherhood, as the nation’s first and only Black President, President Obama represents a unique perspective (St. Felix, 2018; White House, 2012).

President Obama’s self-proclaimed identity as a Black man and his status as a Black father make his perspective significant to Black fatherhood. Hence, and despite his social class

status, the public discourse of the 44th President Barack Obama regarding the standards and expectations for Black fatherhood makes him a credible emic observer. That is, although his status has elevated him above what the average Black man may experience in America, his racial ancestry and self-identification as a Black man (Obama, 2013) grants him special access to the construction process. Hence, for the purpose of this study, we classify him as an emic observer based on his tendency to use “we” and “us” when addressing predominately African American audiences. As it pertains to the narrative identify framework, Loseke (2007: 678) suggests that President Obama might be uniquely positioned to engage the narratives that “repair identities defined as troubled,” disrupting the dominant cultural about Black men and Black fathers (Cooper, 2015).

METHODS

This study explores how former President Barack Obama describes Black fatherhood in select Presidential speeches. The analysis of policy language artifacts allows us to understand what meanings are being communicated through them (Yanow, 2000). To answer the research question, “How does President Obama’s narratives disrupt and/or legitimize the cultural narratives/social constructions of Black fathers and Black fatherhood?”, relevant statements made by President Barack Obama from 2006 -2016 were analyzed. This timeframe represents the time he spent in the presidential office (2008 – 2016) and two years prior to his election (2006 – 2008). Although part of this timeframe represents the last two years of the Bush administration (2006-2008), the reason for including it in the data collection time frame is that, in 2006, responsible fatherhood was formalized in the policy arena by way of the Deficit Reduction Act. In addition, this time period captures the campaign trail of then Senator Barack Obama, and helps to situate fatherhood as one of his most significant family policies.

Policy Language: Presidential Statements

A total of nine speeches were included in the analysis. Three of these speeches were included based on being identified in the literature on two studies by scholars who have explored similar topics in relation to Obama's speeches about fatherhood (Carter, 2010; McPhail & McPhail, 2011). In addition to those three speeches, we utilized the *American Presidency Project* database to conduct a comprehensive scan of other speeches delivered within the time frame. This database includes over 130,000 documents containing speeches, papers, and correspondences (Peters & Woolley, 2014). Combinations of the following key words were used to identify speeches that focused specifically on the target population – black fathers, black men, urban/inner-city men, African-American men, African-American fathers, and responsible fatherhood. In each search, speeches were reviewed for context and relevance. For example, some speeches mention fatherhood as a general topic, but they included little to no mentions of the population of interest. Any speeches that did not contribute to the conceptualization of black fatherhood were discarded. The six remaining documents were identified through this search.

Of all speeches, fatherhood was the primary topic of three (*Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting on Fatherhood, 2009, Father's Day Remarks, 2008, and Remarks at a Father's Day Event, 2010*). The topics of one speech seemed unrelated to fatherhood, but included reflections on Black fatherhood (*A More Perfect Union, 2008*). Other speeches of interest addressed the Black community in general (*Changing the Odds for Urban America, 2007*) and the American public as a whole. Although the transcripts did not include a description of the audience, we assume that a large majority of attendees were members of the Black community based on the topic and location, i.e. his 2013 commencement speech at a Historically Black College in

Atlanta, Georgia, his remarks at the commemoration of the Selma Voting Rights March in Selma, Alabama, and his 2008 speech before a predominately Black Church in Chicago, Illinois.

Analysis

For the coding process, multiple readings of each document were conducted. The first stage of the analysis entailed examining the data for the presence of cultural formula stories by identifying the characteristics, motives, and goals attributed to them in President Obama's speeches (Loseke, 2007). A priori-codes were used to highlight statements that were very explicit. Specifically, in the initial coding stage, cultural codes related to Black men, Black manhood, and Black fatherhood that were mentioned in extant literature (i.e., a priori-codes) such as irresponsible, unemployed, lazy, illegitimacy criminality/criminal, incarceration, delinquent, single-parents, were identified. Although the priori codes were used to begin the analysis, other codes also emerged during the coding process. Second, we examined whether presidential statements either refuted or legitimized popular stereotypes identified in literature (inherently criminal, sexually deviant, animalistic, and lazy). Drawing on the theoretical framework, we paid close attention to the composition of narratives and how particular stories were constructed, i.e. identifying protagonists and antagonists, their motivations in the stories, potential solutions, etc.

The documents varied greatly in length and useful content. For instance, one document was ten pages long and generated over fifty codes and over fifty sub-codes. Another document of similar length only generated ten codes. During the coding process, short memos were recorded when a particular statement matched what was presented in extant research. After coding each statement, a spreadsheet was generated that allowed a view of all codes and sub codes in one snapshot. Next, the codes were categorized in a systematic way to generate themes. This process

included referring back to the original quote to assure the best categorization of a group of similar codes. For example, the two codes “racial disparities” and “slavery” were combined by creating a theme called “racial history.”

To assist with defining themes, analytic memos about the codes were used. These memos provided an opportunity for the first author to reflect on operational definitions of certain codes, connections and links between codes, contradictions in speech, etc. In the IPA framework, “the tension between expectation and present experience is a potential source of insight, and should be dwelled on, even cherished” (Yanow, 200; p.8). These memos often led to changing the name of a code to better capture the meaning behind a group of codes.

FINDINGS

In analyzing the ways President Obama spoke about Black fathers in the thirteen speeches that were collected, we come across three formula stories: *unconcerned*, *self-sacrificing*, and *institutionalized*. While narratives of the *unconcerned* Black father legitimizes the cultural formula stories, the narrative of the *self-sacrificing* Black father disrupts them. The narrative of the *institutionalized* Black father appears to both disrupt and a legitimize these formula stories. We discuss each of these in turn.

The Unconcerned Black Father

The *unconcerned* Black father has characteristics that are distinct from the *institutionalized* and *self-sacrificing* Black father. He is the antithesis of the *self-sacrificing* Black father in that he is not deserving of assistance. And while the *institutionalized* Black father’s deservingness is up for debate, the *unconcerned* Black father is decidedly undeserving as he has no desire to participate in fatherhood and forgoes any opportunity to do so.

More than any other construction, Obama highlights the ineffective parenting practices of the *unconcerned* Black father across multiple speeches. In looking at his narratives, we paid

close attention to the use of protagonist and antagonist labels in his speeches to further understand the motives of Black fathers and others close to them. His statements on fatherhood only incorporated the role of mothers in a few instances, but in each one mothers were painted as heroes who were overcoming what seemed to be insurmountable conditions as result of the father's abandonment and lack of courage. In a June 2008 speech, Obama delivered *A More Perfect Union* to an audience in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania amid his presidential nomination for the Democratic party. Although the major subjects addressed in this speech included very sensitive topics, such as white privilege and Black rage, he incorporated his assessment of the unconcerned father's contribution to the denigration of Black households:

We need to help all the mothers out there who are raising these kids by themselves; the mothers who drop them off at school, go to work, pick them up in the afternoon, work another shift, get dinner, make lunches, pay the bills, fix the house, and all the other things it takes both parents to do. So many of these women are doing a heroic job, but they need support. They need another parent. Their children need another parent. That's what keeps their foundation strong. It's what keeps the foundation of our country strong (Obama, June 2008).

In his remarks on fatherhood, in half of these speeches, Obama mentions motherhood. Each time, mothers are one dimensional and inherently good. Much of his understanding in this area comes from his own experience. He regularly spoke about the disappointment of not growing up with his father but credits his "heroic mom and wonderful grandparents" for raising him. Heroic motherhood is a common theme in narratives about the irresponsible Black father as he is comfortable allowing the mother to do all the work for the family. These fathers are in part responsible for the moral issues of the country for not fulfilling their parenting roles. Among other important parenting duties, they are unable to set high expectations for their children to close the educational gap for their children.

Like the *institutionalized* Black father, in a majority of speeches, President Obama speaks of the *unconcerned* father as lacking courage. This lack of courage perpetuates intergenerational poverty because the *unconcerned* father does not accept the challenge of breaking the cycle. Instead they make excuses particularly if they did not have their fathers themselves. They use their own father's absence as excuses as to why they are not involved (2009_June). In addition, they have not successfully completed vital stages of manhood and are therefore underdeveloped.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing – missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundation of our families are weaker because of it (Obama, June 2008).

The above quote explains the stagnation that has occurred between boyhood and manhood.

While the *institutionalized* father's lack of courage is somewhat permissible given the socioeconomic barriers he faces, there is very little sympathy for lack of courage in the *unconcerned* father despite the fact that he faces those same barriers.

In a June 2009 *Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting on Fatherhood*, which he gave during a barbeque at the White House for young men from local schools, President Obama talked about personal responsibility and fatherhood. In this speech, he reminded the audience of continued commitment to promoting responsible fatherhood during his presidency. In this case, many of his remarks were aimed at assisting Black male youth. He continues to mention the ineffective parenting that is being fueled by men's adherence to the tenets of toxic masculinity. President Obama frames this as an "empathy" problem, and much of it is in relation to what the *unconcerned father* teaches his children by way of how he treats their mother: "There's a culture in our society that says remembering those obligations is somehow soft – that we can't show weakness, and so therefore we can't show kindness. But our young boys and girls see that. They see when you are ignoring or mistreating your wife" (Obama, June 2009).

He further explains that children do not measure fathers on their wealth but rather “they will judge you if you are abusive to their mother.” (Obama, June 2009). This subtle jab at intimate partner violence among Black couples only occurred once in the speeches examined in this study. Obama surmised that children who witness abusive behaviors are more likely to imitate it in their schools and communities. As it relates to intimate relationships, Obama speaks about Black men’s relationships with the mothers of their children in a coded manner. For instance, one theme indicative of the *unconcerned* father is the belief that sexual escapades are a rite of passage into manhood and view their relationships with women through the lens of a sexual conquest. In this context, the President emphasizes an alternative expectation: “But we also need families to raise our children. We need fathers to realize that responsibility does not end at conception. We need them to realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child – it’s the courage to raise one” (Obama, June 2008).

An iteration of this same quote was mentioned at least one time in three different speeches. It infers that father accept responsibility for the work that is required prior to their child’s conceptions. The “work” he refers to are the necessary steps it takes to entice women to become pregnant. It alludes to a culture of serial illegitimacy where fathers will do work if the results materialize in self-pleasure. However, the work they are willing to do for sexual gratification does not translate into the work that needs to be done or provide for and support their families. For this father, children are a social currency that empowers and legitimizes his importance as a man. In fact, it is thought that even when this father does become involved, albeit for short spurts of time, it is more of a performance than a sincere desire to be a father: “And we need fathers to be involved in their kids’ lives not just when it’s easy – not just during the afternoons in the park or at the zoo” (Obama, June 2008)

The *unconcerned* father lacks the endurance of the *self-sacrificing* father and is unable to “show up and stick with it and go back at it when they mess up” (Obama, June 2009). This part-time participation dilutes his ability to be an effective parent and break generational cycles, a task which Obama proclaims as a vital function of Black fathers.

Switching from the toxic behaviors of the irresponsible father, presidential statements also include a belief that this kind of father has been empowered by those in legislative communities who refused to acknowledge there was a real problem. He acknowledges the government’s participation in about half of the speeches we examined. In a 2007 speech, “Changing the Odds for Urban America,” Obama relayed his priorities for influencing inner-city communities by drawing from his experiences as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois:

It’s true that there were many effective programs that emerged from Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. But there were also some ineffective programs that were defended anyway, as well as an inability of some on the left to acknowledge that the problem of absent fathers or persistent crime were indeed problems that needed to be addressed.” (Obama, July 2007).

The Self-Sacrificing Black Father

In his speeches, President Obama’s conceptualization of the *self-sacrificing* Black father is easily identified as this kind of father is the subject of his undying praise and approval.

Undoubtedly, this formula story appears less often than the two other stories. He elaborates on it heavily in one speech, and provides subtle hints about it in others. In the times that the *self-sacrificing father* is mentioned, he has been an older father. His experiences and past mistakes equip him and in fact obligate him to serve as a mentor. This father has used his own trials, including experiencing father absence, as an intrinsic motivation to succeed as a parent. Having surpassed impossible odds, they are not only responsible for their children, they are responsible for mentoring the next generation of fathers to help them avoid making similar mistakes. As a

part of his “My Brother’s Keeper Initiative” Obama prioritized the needs of young boys and men of color. In delivering a 2014 speech on the initiative, President Obama eluded to what the ideal father and mentor looks like from his perspective:

My presence is a testimony to progress. Across this country, in government, in business, in our military, in communities in every state, we see extraordinary examples of African American and Latino men who are standing tall and leading and building businesses and making our country strong. Some of those role models who have **defied the odds** are here with us today: The Magic Johnsons or the Colin Powells, who are doing extraordinary things; the Anthony Foxes (Obama, February 2014).

The *self-sacrificing* responsible father was also painted vividly in presidential speeches made about the *My Brother’s Keeper* initiative, a mentorship program design to combat systemic challenges for young men and boys of color. In presidential statements, the *self-sacrificing* responsible father is described as “helping more young people stay on track and provide the support they need to think more broadly about the future.” In addition to providing guidance, mentorship, and compassion, these fathers also provide protection to younger men: “And if it’s the wrong person who’s putting that hand on them, if it’s the gang banger that’s putting that hand on them, then they’ll respond to that.” (Obama, June 2009)

As valiant as he is painted to be, the responsible father also has some detrimental attributes. For instance, he forgoes his own mental health in pursuit of responsibility. President Obama’s most prolific conceptualization of the self-sacrificing father is that of his own father-in-law:

And one good example is Michelle’s father, Frasier Robinson, who was a shining example of loving, responsible fatherhood. Here is a man who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when he was 30 years old, but he still got up every day, went to a blue-collar job. By the time I knew him, he was using two crutches to get around, but he was always able to get to every dance recital, every ballgame of Michelle’s brother. He was there constantly and helped to shape extraordinary success for his children” (Obama, June 2009)

The *self-sacrificing* Black father is deserving of assistance, and thus is the rightful beneficiary of all supportive fatherhood policies. His existence is separate from undeserving fathers, who are the targets of punitive family policies.

The Institutionalized Black Father

Obama's presidential speeches readily acknowledged how systemic barriers influence black men's ability to actively participate in fatherhood. This acknowledgment often led to the construction of a father who was deserving of assistance but also possessed negative qualities because of his environment. The *institutionalized* Black father was described as a victim of incarceration, poor education, and lack of economic opportunities. We found that Obama regularly spoke of socio-historical influences that helped to shape circumstances for black families and fathers as well as the vestiges of racial oppression that still exist in America. As a result of these, the institutionalized Black father had been displaced and was somewhat helpless to lift himself up. Obama explains it in this way:

There are some Americans who, in the aggregate, are consistently doing worse in our society: groups that have had the odds stacked against them in unique ways that require unique solutions, groups who've seen fewer opportunities that have spanned generations. And by almost every measure, the group that is facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color (Obama, February 2014).

Rather than shift directly to personal responsibility narratives, President Obama acknowledged the lack of political power this father possessed and enforced what some might condemn as "conspiratorial speech" based on the ideology that political elites control the lives of the poor in a systematic way. In 2007, Obama delivered a speech at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, Alabama before a predominately Black audience of church goers. The historic church was the starting point for the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965. During his commemoration speech he remarks, "Folks are complaining about the quality of our government,

I understand there's something to be complaining about. I'm in Washington. I see what's going on. I see those powers and principalities have snuck back there, they're writing the energy bills and the drug laws" (Obama, March 2007).

Here he alludes to having a front row seat to this kind of behavior. His reference to drug laws are distinctive towards the Black community, but Black men in particular as this group has received the harshest drug sentencing than any other. Because of these of inequities, the institutionalized father is owed something by the system that institutionalized him. However, assistance to him is described as being one piece of a much comprehensive and systemic issue. To help the institutionalized father, you have to help the community that bred him: "If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence; failing schools and broken homes then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community" (Obama, July 2007).

The institutionalized father is chronically unemployed. When he does find work, he faces multiple barriers like transportation and child support arrears. He lacks the capital and resources to move himself ahead, and so it is the responsibility of government to remedy this. On the other hand, although his barriers are acknowledged, he is still not exempt from his own personal duty to help himself. This theme of government responsibility combined with the personal responsibility of the father is what we refer to as "mutual responsibility," and it was pervasive in presidential discourse. In a dyadic fashion, whenever one category was mentioned, it was most often proceeded or prefaced by the other. The following quote illustrates his both-and argument:

Yes, we need to train our workers, invest in our schools, make college more affordable, and government has a role to play. And yes, we need to encourage fathers to stick around and remove the barriers to marriage and talk openly about things like responsibility and faith and community. In the words of Dr. King, it is not either-or, it is both-and (Obama, February 2014).

This quote from a 2014 speech on the *My Brother's Keeper Initiative* is almost exactly the same as a statement made in 2007, *Changing the Odds for Urban America*, when Obama laid out his plans for changing the landscape of urban America. His both-and argument was a permanent fixture in his speeches, and he went back and forth between personal responsibility and government responsibility in speaking about institutionalized fathers. The aforementioned 2007 speech included planned policy actions, in which he admonished the Reagan administration for constructing and “launching an assault on welfare queens,” referring to single Black mothers. He praised community-based organizations in the South Side of Chicago for “standing up to a government that wasn’t standing up for them.” However, and without fail, he typically shifted his focus back to the personal responsibility of fathers. This is another element of the *institutionalized* Black father statements. That is, President’s sympathy for his plight is limited, and there are no excuses that justify him in not putting forth the effort to improve his situation. The President offers this advice to the institutionalized father:

“You will have to reject the cynicism that says the circumstance of your birth or society’s lingering injustices necessarily define you and your future. It will take courage, but you will have to tune out the naysayers who say that the deck is stacked against you, you might as well just give up or settle into the stereotype” (Obama, February 2014).

This quote illustrates an important moral evaluation embedded in the narrative about the *institutionalized* Black father: lack of courage. In his speeches, President Obama relates the lack of courage to the nation’s racial history that emasculated the image of Black men for themselves and their families. At times, Obama diagnoses abandonment by Black men to be symptomatic of the root disease: fear.

Courage and its lack were a major subject during President’s 2013 Commencement Speech at Morehouse College, a historic Black men’s college located in Atlanta, Georgia. Notable alumni of this institution include U.S. attorney generals, congressman, activists, and

entertainers. Most notably, it is the alma mater of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who becomes the ultimate protagonist of courage. In touching on fear, President Obama states that courage is a necessary component of fatherhood, and expounds upon why Black men struggle with it:

“For black men in the ‘40s and the ‘50s, the threat of violence, the constant humiliations, large and small, the uncertainty that you could support a family, the gnawing doubts born of the Jim Crow culture that told you every day that somehow you were inferior, the temptation to shrink from the world, to accept your place, to avoid risks, to be afraid -- that temptation was necessarily strong” (Obama, May 2013).

To combat this, Black men must “learn to be unafraid” and teach others how to do the same. Obama expounds upon how Dr. Martin Luther King’s transformation into a leader instilled courage in the men of this time. Acknowledging that that fear may have been inherited by the present generation, he reminded them that “you have within you that same courage and that same strength, the same resolve as the men who came before you” (Obama, May 2013). His presidential statements show a sincere belief that there is indeed a cure for their perceived fear.

When fear is not the dominant culprit of the institutionalized fathers’ unproductivity, another diagnosis is rage. Shifting from negative cultural narratives, President Obama proclaims it is a justified rage. In many ways, his speeches conceptualize the emotions of Black men with the goal of eliciting understanding from the audience. The very best example of this is his 2008 address, *A More Perfect Union*, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. This speech occurred at the height of a controversy involving Obama’s former pastor, mentor, and friend, Jeremiah Wright. As a result of Wright’s statements, which the American public deemed “unpatriotic,” many questioned Obama’s commitment to help close the racial divide in the nation. As expected, he gave a verbal lashing of Wright’s statements and made sure those watching him very closely knew how disappointed he was with that kind of speech.

However, at the same time that he harshly reprimanded Wright for his speech, he refused to disown him outright. Instead, he did the work of trying to conceptualize “black rage” for the audience. The speech began with a short monologue of the Declaration of Independence that was “stained by the nation’s original sin of slavery” to set the tone. After acknowledging Wright’s statements, he proceeds to list Wright’s accomplishments, including serving in the U.S. marines, gaining higher education, and decades of leadership in the black community. This served to contrast the single story that had been used by political commenters to villainize his entire life as a result of his statement.

In defense of Wright, Obama went on to explain the multidimensional nature of black men and black Americans in general: “He contains within him the contradictions – the good and the bad – of the community that he served diligently for so many years. I can no more disown him than I can disown the Black community.” He goes on to justify the rage of this group by saying that these things don’t happen in a vacuum but can be traced to American’s historical treatment of Black families and policies that eroded black men’s ability to provide for their families. He whole-heartedly rejects a one-dimensional reading of the Black community and Black fathers: “But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.” Thus, the institutionalized father who is enraged by his situation, is justified. He cannot, however, use that as an excuse to be stagnant. He is deserving of assistance as long as he takes responsibility.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Long standing social constructions of policy target populations become “permanent fixtures” in the policy arena (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014), affecting problem definition,

legislative intents, and the conceptualization of policy approaches that should be implemented. Extant research in the responsible fatherhood field largely focuses on policy implementation and program evaluation (e.g., see Avellar et. al 2018; Huntington and Vetere 2016; Threlfall and Kohl 2015; Camble 2014). As such, the responsible fatherhood has bolstered numerous implementation and evaluation reports that speak to the success and challenges of these programs. However, this study fills an important gap by building the research base for how the topic of responsible fatherhood move through the formative stages of the policy cycle: agenda settings and policy formulation. Our study contributes to this field by exploring whether the nation's first Black president disrupted the cultural narratives about Black fathers and Black fatherhood, the main policy target of responsible fatherhood policies. Building on the assumption that a President with an emic, or insider, perspective is likely to alter narratives about Black fathers, we examined select presidential speeches of President Obama, a Black man and a Black father, who, as other scholars have noted, is well aware of the social constructions of Black men (Cooper, 2008). Hence, we have asked, "Does President Obama's narratives disrupt the cultural narratives/social constructions of Black fathers and Black fatherhood?"

This exploration is critical for two reasons. First, historically, low-income Black fathers have been classified as the undeserving poor by the general public and policy actors and have had a very little power or influence to challenge this construction (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). Second, changes in the policy-making process occur as new understandings of old issues emerge, requiring new solutions (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). The election of the first Black President, an emic/etic positioned leader, created a powerful opportunity to infuse an alternative definition of policy target-population into responsible fatherhood policies.

Before we discuss the findings, three caveats need to be made. First, we note that President Obama's narratives are not mutually exclusive and should not be thought of as a hierarchy but a spectrum. For instance, the *unconcerned* Black father can also be the *institutionalized* Black father. The moral evaluation of whether the narrative implies he is deserving or undeserving was primarily based on how President Obama interpreted the actions of fathers represented by each narrative. Second, as stated earlier, President Obama is indeed the only U.S. President in history who possesses an emic perspective in relation to Black fathers. This is based on his own self-identification as a Black man as well as how he presents racially to the general public. However, since the target population for this study is low-income Black men, we acknowledge that his socio-economic status precludes him from possessing a purely emic perspective. Hence, he can be considered to be a combination of an emic and etic observer.

Third, it is important not to view these constructions as fixed. For example, the *unconcerned* Black father may possess the attributed negative characteristics in his youth but wisdom as a result of time may help him develop into those characteristics attributed to the *self-sacrificing* father at a later age. For instance, the *unconcerned* Black father may develop a commitment to mentor and prioritize the needs of others, which are characteristics of a self-sacrificing father. In turn, the *self-sacrificing* father may have overcome institutional barriers in his youth, hence he could personally relate to the circumstances of the *unconcerned* father. These caveats are important because as it pertains to marginalized individuals, there is a tendency to cast them in cultural narratives with a single story that inevitably leads to stereotypes. That is not what we seek to do here. Black fathers, like all people, are multidimensional and should be granted the opportunity to show up in multiple ways at different stages of their lives.

With regard to our findings, based on themes that emerged in our study, we conclude that President Obama's speeches both legitimized or disrupted negative cultural stereotypes of Black fathers. While the narrative of the *self-sacrificing* Black father disrupts the negative stereotypes, narrative of the *unconcerned* Black father legitimizes them. The narrative of the *institutionalized* Black father appears to both disrupt and a legitimize these stereotypes.

Specifically, in presidential speeches, the *self-sacrificing* father is heroic, epitomizing what a responsible father looks like. Having grown up in the absence of his own father, President Obama builds on his father-in-law as the quintessential image of what a responsible Black father is. Consequently, this heroism is related to the father's denial of his own physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Specifically, President Obama describes how his father-in-law's commitment to the family led to the development of a physical debilitating disease. He applauds his father for working just as hard even after this diagnosis. Extant studies refer to this as "John Henryism," referring to Black men's strenuous efforts to cope with adversity (Subramanayam et al. 2013; Mujahid, et al. 2017). Researchers note that these coping strategies tend to lead to negative health outcomes in Black men, including depressive symptoms, high blood pressure, and heart attacks (Ellis et al. 2015). This formula story disrupts the cultural narrative of an inherently lazy, hence, underserving Black father. The *self-sacrificing* Black father is deserving of supportive (versus punitive) fatherhood policies. His existence is separate from the *unconcerned* Black father, who is irresponsible, hence, undeserving.

In President Obama's speeches, the *unconcerned* Black father is the epitome of an irresponsible father. In his narratives, Obama casts him as a man who has abandoned his children, shifting the parenting responsibility on Black mothers. The *unconcerned* father lacks

courage to assume the breadwinning role that has the potential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty prevalent amongst low-income Black families.

The *unconcerned* father comes up with excuses to justify why he continues to “act like a boy.” And, in some instances the *unconcerned* father may be employed but he is still “a lazy father”:

“It’s great if you have a job; it’s even better if you have a college degree. It’s a wonderful thing if you are married and living in a home with your children, but don’t just sit in the house and watch “Sports Center” all weekend long. That’s why so many children are growing up in front of the television” (Obama, June 2008).

He further proclaimed that this created a culture of low standards in the Black community that could be cured by parents setting high expectations for their children by modeling that behavior.

While such depictions of Black fathers in this formula story legitimize negative stereotypes about Black fathers, the *unconcerned* father is not one dimensional. For instance, occasionally, President Obama spoke about fathers who will feign their interest in children for short periods of time, perhaps because children are seen as a social currency that empowers and legitimizes their masculinity or importance as a man. Importantly, presidential statements also note that this kind of undeserving father has been empowered by those in legislative communities who refuse to acknowledge that absent fatherhood is a real problem. In all, since he refuses to engage in his fathering duties, the narrative of the *unconcerned* father defines the problem in a way that calls for punitive policies, such as child support.

It would be incomplete to talk about President Obama’s criticisms of black fathers without mentioning his unyielding praise of black mothers. Nowhere in speech does he mention the mother’s participation in the current state of black families, which he describes as “broken.” Moreover, Obama’s speeches condemn fathers for being inconsistent when they do decide to become involved. However, he seems to take for granted that mothers are sometimes the most

formidable opponents for fathers in their efforts to stay involved. “Maternal gatekeeping” has arisen in literature on father involvement and has been institutionalized in such a way that mothers can serve as barriers for fathers (Abdill, 2018). In all, casting Black mothers as heroic is a very powerful tool legitimizing negative stereotypes of Black fathers.

Finally, President Obama’s speeches also include the *institutionalized* Black father’s narrative. This narrative is disruptive not because President Obama portrays Black men as flawless. Instead, he adds a layer of complexity to this narrative by associating their undesirable behaviors with justifiable anger/rage. Given the treatment of Black men by the criminal justice system, the rage of the institutionalized father is justified. He cannot, however, use the incarceration, poor education, or lack of economic opportunities as excuses to be irresponsible. This acknowledgment often leads to the construction of a father who was deserving of assistance but also possessed negative qualities because of his environment.

In all, we have found that President Obama’s speeches disrupt the cultural narrative by painting the picture of “multidimensional masculinity.” Specifically, while President Obama’s speeches tend to acknowledge a negative characteristic about Black men’s masculinity, he also uses his own experiences to package it in a way that invokes empathy and greater understanding. Black men are pictured as characters with complex emotions that provide context for what seems to be inappropriate behavior. For example, he may speak of reckless abandonment early in a speech, and then shift his focus to helping the audience see through the lens of the father by adding: “And there are a lot of men who are out of work and wrestling with the shame and frustration that comes when you feel like you can’t be the kind of provider you want to be for the people that you love” (Obama, June 2010). A statement like this helps to contextualize the earlier statement that “too many fathers were missing from too many homes” and how their

“abandonment” harms their own children. That is, their absence is not necessarily the unwillingness to be a father but it is a by-product of a sense of shame and possible feelings of inadequacy.

Multidimensional masculinity is supported in extant literature on responsible fatherhood programs. Findings from Roy and Dyson (2010) reaffirms this since men in those programs were more successful when organizational staff recognized “multiple realities” for fathers. In addition, instructors of healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs taught low-income men that breadwinning was not the only way to contribute as a father (Randles, 2013).

While cultural narratives, especially those related to *institutionalized* Black men, have painted them as depraved “super predators” who incite fear (Alexander, 2016; Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005), Obama’s conceptualization of Black men as experiencing their own fears offers a reprieve from this single story. Although such fear is not considered to be an honorable attribute, the topic of fear exhibited by Black men is an unexplored topic in literature on Black fatherhood.

As discussed earlier, Obama is both an emic and etic observer as it pertains to Black fatherhood. While his speeches introduce complexity into the narratives about Black men, his discourse related to black parenting tends to be more one dimensional and filled with negative stereotypes. For instance, in a notable speech he made on his 2008 campaign trail, he admonished Black parents for feeding their children “cold Popeye’s chicken” for breakfast and proceeded to educate them about proper nutrition and properly checking homework when children return home from school instead of sitting in front of the television (Frank-Ruta, 2010). The reproachful proverb of Black Americans having an affinity for fried chicken is likely not lost on the former President, who seems to have high level of cultural awareness. His statement is especially interesting because it may be a criticism for black mothers. Since he regularly

criticized men for being absent from the home and non-participants in the day to day activities, we can infer that it is single black mothers who are the perpetrators of this behavior.

Deserving vs. Undeserving

Consistent with the social construction framework, low-income Black men and fathers are characterized as the undeserving poor based on predetermined criteria of low political power and negative public perceptions. We utilized this concept in classifying whether presidential statements reproduced beliefs about Black fathers being undeserving of assistance or challenged those beliefs by framing them as deserving of government assistance. When the *institutionalized father* is categorized as deserving in these presidential statements, the goal is to rehabilitate him by providing him with opportunities that Obama is optimistic he will take advantage of.

We're also launching a new transitional jobs initiative for ex-offenders and low-income, noncustodial fathers, because these are men who often face serious barriers to finding work and keeping work. We'll help them develop the skills and experience they need to move into full-time, long-term employment, so they can meet their child support obligations and help provide for their families (Obama, June 2010).

The most important provision to this father is economic and employment opportunities, the panacea for most of their problems. These fathers are deserving of assistance and only need the opportunity to improve their conditions. In this narrative, they have inherited the burdens of their forefathers and a racist history in America and are unfairly judged as being unproductive.

One way the *institutionalized* Black father legitimizes cultural narratives is that there is hesitation on the part of Obama to allow this father to make excuses for his condition. The father who makes excuses is categorized as undeserving. Many have noted that this lack of sympathy was problematic and insensitive. However, despite criticisms of political commentators who say that he was too harsh on the Black community and didn't focus enough on the social factors that influenced undesirable behaviors (Dyson, 2008), I find that his speech was highly critical of

policies that had failed Black families. However, the unequal balance of the two can certainly be argued. In this article, I interpret much of his criticism to be his method for setting high expectations for Black men, especially those who had suffered greatly. Indeed, his speech was often times colored with cultural narratives that cast Black fathers as antagonists, but this speech is not unlike what we may hear from individuals with “true” emic lenses.

Obama’s Prioritization of Black Fatherhood

In general, race is incredibly coded in the presidential statements that we examined in this study. However, there is evidence that Obama sought to create initiatives that would directly benefit Black fathers. While the responsible fatherhood program is marketed to all fathers, there are small nuances that point to Black fathers as a priority for him. First, Obama’s interest in Black fatherhood is evident in him recruiting in physical spaces that Black men occupy. Barbershops, for instance, are primary recruitment target for *Fatherhood Buzz*. The initiative was born out of responsible fatherhood work. This significance of this location is explained on fatherhood.gov, the central hub for federal responsible fatherhood initiatives:

“Neighborhood barbershops are a trusted space to discuss personal and public issues, ranging from family to politics, health, money, and other life issues. Fatherhood Buzz is an effort to increase awareness around responsible fatherhood and parenting issues, and increase families access to support through local barbershops throughout the country” (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2019).

Extant literature describes barbershops as “cultural forums” for Black men specifically (Shabazz, 2016). In addition, the primary cities that first piloted this initiative were those that have a famously large population of Black Americans, such as Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, Chicago, IL, and Milwaukee, WI. Secondly, Obama cited mentorships as a potential solution for father absence in the Black community. *My Brother’s Keeper* is a mentorship program designed for low income boys and men of color that was established shortly after the death of Trayvon Martin.

Limitations

Although every attempt was made to reach saturation, it is possible that some speeches delivered by Obama were missed in the data collection process. However, it is most likely that this is inconsequential as evidenced by the high level of consistency and repetitive expression of his views across time. For example, we can link direct quotes first said in 2008 to a more paraphrased version of the same statement in 2014. In analyzing how he spoke about black fathers, there did not seem to be a change of heart in his speeches. In fact, they were quite often repetitive.

In analyzing Obama's legitimization and/or disruption of stereotypes, this article only explored one policy artifact: language. A very valid argument can be made that executive orders signed or not signed by Obama while in office may have unveiled a different story about his social construction of black fathers. The disruption or legitimization of social construction will show up in how certain policy targets are viewed and how policies are justified based on this. However, these represent policy actions, which were not examined in this study. As such, this is the next logical step in regard to future research in this area. In addition, policy objects, i.e. fatherhood programs and media campaigns, are of interest as they can also help to disrupt or legitimize.

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APPENDIX
LIST OF OBAMA’S PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENTS

1. Obama, Barack. “Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration in Selma, Alabama.” March 2007
2. Obama, Barack. “Father’s Day speech by Sen. Barack Obama to Apostolic Church of God in Chicago.” June 2007
3. Obama, Barack. “Remarks in Washington, DC: Changing the Odds for Urban America.” July 2007
4. Obama, Barack. “Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: A More Perfect Union.” March 2008
5. Obama, Barack. “Remarks at a Town Hall Meeting on Fatherhood and a Question-and-Answer Session.” June 2009
6. Obama, Barack. “Statement by the Press Secretary: President Obama Launches Next Phase in Fatherhood Efforts with the President’s Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative.” June 2010
7. Obama, Barack. “Remarks at a Father’s Day Event”. June 2010
8. Obama, Barack. “President Obama deliver Morehouse College Commencement Address.” May 2013
9. Obama, Barack. “Remarks on the My Brother’s Keeper Initiative.”. February 2014

CHAPTER FOUR: ARTICLE 3 – CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF CONGRESSIONAL AND PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE ON BLACK FATHERHOOD

INTRODUCTION

Responsible fatherhood is the first federal initiative designed to address issues facing low-income minority fathers. In 2008, two years after the implementation of responsible fatherhood programs, newly elected President Obama stood in front one of Chicago's largest Black churches and reaffirmed the societal image of Black fatherhood saying, "We need fathers to realize that responsibility does not end at conception" and further exclaiming that "They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it" (Bosman, 2008, para 2). Congressman Paul Ryan makes a similar statement in his assessment of how Black men's work ethic is a source of poverty in Black families: "We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with" (Blow, 2014, para 2).

Both of these statements include stereotypes about Black men and how they operate within their families. Although these stereotypes are widespread, when they are spoken by policy actors, especially prominent policy actors such as President and members of congress, they become part of institutional narratives, and thus come with institutional consequences for the policy target populations. Ironically, these statements cannot be completely dismissed. President Obama is speaking to a subpopulation of Black fathers who have indeed abdicated their roles in the lives of their children. His statement, however, exacerbates the issue by not mentioning the Black men who defy this stereotype. Congressman Paul Ryan is correct in that a large

proportion of Black men living in cities is unemployed, but he commits a fallacy by linking unemployment to the inadequate cultural value systems and fails to mention structural discrimination that shaped the socio-historical and economic context of high unemployment.

In contrast, Black sociologists have argued that family instability among low-income black families is not a personal responsibility issue, but an economic issue (Billingsley, 1970). Historically, the decline in marriage rates among Black couples run parallel with unemployment rates (Gibbs, 1988). The rate of single-mother homes skyrocketed from 9% in the early 1950's to 45.8% in the late 1980's (Gibbs, 1988). Black family scholars attribute this to the lack of educational and employment opportunities for Black men (Billingsley, 1970; Gibbs, 1988).

New Understandings Emerge in the Age of Responsible Fatherhood

The advent of responsible fatherhood policies and programs, which included several rounds of federal funding to community organizations, researchers, and program evaluators have increased our understanding of the many barriers low-income Black men experience in their fathering efforts (Miller & Knox, 2001; Fagan & Kaufman (2015); Edin & Nelson, 2013; Abdill, 2018). In a more general sense, a shift has taken place in the way low-income fathers are considered in the policy process. Battle (2018) depicts this change by showing the shifts in cultural narratives that originally regarded this population as undeserving of assistance in the 1970's but have now elicited more empathy in the age of responsible fatherhood policies. Given the power of institutional narratives, it is important to understand not only their power as “long term fixtures” in the policy process (Schneider, Ingram, deLeon, 2014), but also the possibility of the counter narratives that create internal contradictions, inconsistencies, and paradoxes in institutional narratives.

Interpretive Communities: Barack Obama and Congress

The campaign and election of Barack Obama as the first Black president created a possibility for a counter narrative in the policy process and a possible challenge to the long standing negative stereotypes of Black men and Black fathers. Shortly after his election, a body of literature emerged that noted the influence that Barack Obama had on the American public's perceptions of race. Named "the Obama effect" by social cognition researchers, this research showed how his presence exposed many to a positive counter narrative about Black Americans (Plant et al. 2009; Columb & Plant, 2016). On the other hand, the same body of literature showed that framing Obama as a "racial pioneer" may have actually increased the threat response of White Americans (Skinner & Cheadle, 2016). While these studies explore the effects of Obama's election on racial attitudes and perceptions of the American public, no study to date has explored the meaning of his election for institutional narratives, especially the convergence and divergence of his statements and the statements Congressional members.

Although congress has become more diverse in recent years, it is still controlled and dominated by majority white members. This study explores the similarities and differences between presidential statements made by Barack Obama during his campaign trail and while in office (2006 – 2016), and congressional statements made by congress members during the formation of responsible fatherhood legislation (1988 – 2005). Both of these groups represent significant communities in responsible fatherhood legislation. Although this study is not grounded in political science theories, a short discussion on the relationship between the President and Congress is relevant in understanding how their narratives may work together and/or detract from one another.

The Relationship between Congress and the President

The interactions between elected presidents and members of the legislative body can be described as conflictual, but necessary. The conflict partly stems from the fact that each one has performs different duties for the betterment of the American public. As members of congress, Representatives and Senators must serve two purposes simultaneously. To fulfill their institutional responsibility, they serve in a national capacity to make policies the American public can benefit from. From an individual perspective, they also serve in a more local role to represent and advocate for the constituents who elected them. In this effort, Congress members are described as “leading double lives” (Herrnson, 2008).

For elected presidents, the entire American public is their constituency. And although they are not officially law makers, presidents are still closely connected to legislative decisions. The power of persuasion is one tactic used by the President with the main goal of setting the congressional agenda and determining which policies are given attention (Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, & Schickler, 2013). In many ways, the public becomes the mediator between the two, as Presidents are likely to shift their persuasion to the general public about a particular topic, namely through their public speeches. A “rhetorical presidency is described as one that utilizes mass media to gather support for their policies (Davidson, et al. 2013). It is assumed that Presidents go to the public when they do not have the support of Congress on a particular issue (Pious, 1979). Former president Obama is especially noted for his talents and “oratory gifts” in using rhetoric to persuade his audience. His commitment to gaining viewership is most evident in the fact that he is recognized as the first president to make an appearance on Jay Leno, a popular late-night television show that boasts five million viewers (Davidson, et al. 2013). While

his public speeches were related to various policies of importance to the administration, we focus solely on his statements related to Black men, Black fathers, and responsible fatherhood.

METHODS

This study is the final article in a three-article series that explores how Black fatherhood was socially constructed in congressional statements (Article 1) and presidential statements made by President Barack Obama (Article 2). To uncover presidential narratives, we conducted a discourse analysis of nine presidential statements made from 2007 – 2016, in which we examined cultural formula stories and cultural codes related to Black fatherhood. We conducted a similar analysis of congressional statements made from 1989 – 2016 with the goal of examining whether narratives legitimized or refuted dominant narratives of Black fatherhood. This study fulfills the fourth and final step of the interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000). After understanding how each interpretive community speaks about a policy issue, we draw our attention to comparing the “values, beliefs, and feelings” of each community (Yanow, 2000). Since it is expected that President Barack Obama and members of congress will be found to have varying interpretations of the same issue, the purpose of this article is to identify conflicts between groups in regard to how they conceptualize the issue at hand, either through affective, cognitive, or moral reasoning (Yanow, 2000).

FINDINGS

Presidential Narratives

To recap, President Barack Obama’s statements from 2006 - 2016 constructed three different formula stories for Black fathers: *unconcerned*, *institutionalized*, and *self-sacrificing*. Unconcerned fathers embodied most of the cultural formula stories identified in extant literature (i.e. animalistic, sexually unrestrained, and inherently lazy), and therefore served to reproduce

dominant formula stories. In an infamous 2008 Father's Day speech at one of Chicago's largest Black churches, Obama admonished this father before all:

“But if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing – missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it” (Obama, 2008).

The *self-sacrificing* Black father was conceptualized as the ideal father based primarily on his ability to put the needs of his family before his own. This kind of father disrupted dominant formula stories by being a hard worker and not complaining even in the face of adversity. During a town hall Father's Day in 2009, Obama uses his father-in-law to give voice to this kind of father:

“And one good example is Michelle's father, Frasier Robinson, who was a shining example of loving, responsible fatherhood. Here is a man who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when he was 30 years old, but he still got up every day, went to a blue-collar job. By the time I knew him, he was using two crutches to get around, but he was always able to get to every dance recital, every ballgame of Michelle's brother. He was there constantly and helped to shape extraordinary success for his children” (Obama, June 2009)

Lastly, the *institutionalized* Black father disrupted dominant formula stories by 1) depicting Black fathers as multidimensional, and 2) speaking to the socio-economic circumstances that have impeded their ability to perform their roles. In 2008, he pointed out historical and modern barriers for Black fathers during a speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia:

“A lack of economic opportunity among Black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of Black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years have worsened” (Obama, June 2008).

Congressional Narratives

On the other hand, members of congress from 1988 – 2005 constructed two formula stories of welfare fathers: *deadbeat* and *dead broke*. The deadbeat father formula reproduced dominant formula stories by depicting them as shiftless and seeking to evade responsibility. In the 2001 hearing on Child Support and Fatherhood Proposals, five years after the new welfare reform, Representative Wes Watkins adds that it is the actual welfare policy itself that has facilitated this undesirable behavior and calls for an increase in punitive measures to combat it; “I think too many times, we have said to people you can go out and have a fling and all these kind of things, and they think that is serious – not out one night, but it is not. They waltz away without paying anything, and I think they need to try to be responsible. I think we need to at least step there first and say what do we put the teeth of responsibility in” (House Committee on Ways and Means, 2001).

In later speeches, members of congress constructed a more multidimensional father who did in fact seek to be a good father but lacked the ability to do so. The Paren’ts Fair Share Demonstration Project provided the appropriate language for them to disrupt negative formula stories. Representative Ben Cardin (MD-D) spoke briefly but poignantly in a 1999 Fatherhood hearing on this matter:

“Noncustodial fathers want to help their families, but many lack regular employment and have significant problems that need to be addressed. As the Chair pointed out, they are not deadbeat, they are dead broke, and we need to do something about that (Representative Ben Cardin (D) Maryland, House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999).

Interpretive Conflicts Between Presidential and Congressional Narratives

Figure 1 shows the major themes (column 1) found across presidential statements (column 2) and congressional statements (column 3).

Major Themes	Presence in Interpretive Community Discourse	
	President	Congress
<i>Fear/Lack of courage</i>	Consistently described as a barrier for <i>institutional/unconcerned Black fathers</i> ; U.S. racial history is the source	Mentioned once to describe the inability of <i>dead broke fathers</i> to comply with child support payments
<i>Serial illegitimacy</i>	Characteristic of the <i>unconcerned Black father</i>	Characteristic of <i>deadbeat fathers</i>
<i>Anger/Animalistic/Violence</i>	Mentioned in one speech of <i>institutional fathers</i>	<i>Not addressed</i>
<i>Work ethic/Laziness</i>	Laziness is inferred in several speeches as a characteristic of the <i>unconcerned Black father</i>	Work ethic of <i>deadbeat fathers</i> is questioned
<i>Absent fatherhood/heroic motherhood</i>	Mentioned in several speeches. <i>Unconcerned fathers</i> relinquish responsibility to mothers	Mentioned in several hearings and used to construct <i>deadbeat fathers</i>
<i>Pass through laws</i>	<i>Not addressed</i>	Greatest barrier for <i>dead broke fathers</i>
<i>Marriageability</i>	Focused on establishing healthy relationships as opposed to advocating for marriage	Prioritized making low-income men marriageable through marriage education

Figure 1. Interpretive Conflicts in Presidential and Congressional Statements

In this section, we spend little time exploring the similarities found between each interpretive community. Instead, we perform the fourth and final step of the IPA framework by examining conflicts between presidential and congressional statements. Second, we explore the

conceptual sources of those conflicts. The shaded areas in Figure 1 represent where there were conflicts in how each interpretive community conceptualized a particular theme.

Four themes were consistent across both presidential and congressional statements: serial illegitimacy, work ethic/laziness, absent fatherhood/heroic mother, and mutual responsibility. President Obama used these characteristics to construct the *unconcerned Black father*, who embodies the worst cultural stereotypes. In a very similar fashion, members of Congress constructed this type of father and labeled them *deadbeats*. Both interpretive communities spoke about these topics along the same terms. The themes that were in conflict between presidential and congressional statements include: *fear/lack of courage* and *marriageability*. In addition, there were two themes mentioned by one community and not mentioned by the other. *Anger* was mentioned by President Obama to describe institutional fathers was absent in congressional discourse. On the other hand, *pass through laws* were mentioned by Congress but was absent in presidential discourse

Fear/Lack of Courage of the Institutionalized Father

The concept of fear has gone unexplored in the cultural formula stories related to Black fatherhood and father absence. As it pertains to congressional discourse, it was mentioned just once during a 2000 hearing on Fatherhood Legislation by the House Committee on Ways and Means. Members of congress discussed the financial burdens of low-income fathers who had been ordered to pay child support payments that far exceeded their individual means. In discussing the very large number of noncustodial fathers who were in debt with child support arrears, Representative Nancy Johnson (R-CT) insisted that these fathers must be “filled with fear, frustration, and paralysis (House Committee on Ways and Means, 1999). This comment came during a discussion in which another committee member compared the plight of a

noncustodial fathers to a recent college graduate. Although both were in debt, the college graduate possessed a college degree as a ticket for upward mobility. This analogy was useful in helping other members of congress see the issue in a different light as educational debt is often viewed as necessary while child support debt might be seen as self-inflicting. While Congressman Johnson illuminated how fear operates when fathers are unable to provide for themselves, Obama's conceptualization of fear was more related to how racial practices in the U.S. have impeded father's participation in their families. He readily referred to fear and lack of courage as one explanation as to why Black men in particular struggled to meet the expectations of manhood and fatherhood. This was supported by the racial history of the U.S. and how fathers had been disempowered to perform their fathering roles. He attributed their undesirable behaviors to a deep seeded sense of cowardice felt by Black men in American due to historical racism and a more modern version of racism in the age of mass incarceration. Obama's statements were coded with references to Jim Crow Laws and the discriminatory practices of the U.S. that left generations of Black men chronically poor and unemployed. His statements as it relates to historical racism speak to the plight of the *institutionalized* father and how his stagnation is understandable under these circumstances.

Marriageability. For this theme, President Obama and members of congress conceptualized the institution of marriage very differently for low-income fathers. One on hand, distancing herself from her peers, Representative Holmes (DC) vehemently argues that father absence in the Black community has never been a moral issue but an economic one:

“Put my way, in a country that has always associated manhood with money, men without legitimate resources and decent ways to achieve them in the ordinary way will not form stable families today. Black family deterioration began with problems that directly affected Black men in particular. The rapid flight of decent paying, manufacturing jobs beginning in the late 1950s correlates almost exactly with the beginning of steep Black family decline. It was then that men without jobs began to resist forming families as their

fathers had always done. They did find access to money and to their sense of manhood through the drug economy, the underground economy and the gun economy, all of which moved into African American communities to replace the legitimate jobs of the traditional economy that had disappeared. (Senate Committee on Appropriations, 2005).

To support her statements in regard to the lack of economic opportunities, a different congressional hearing held by the House Committee on Children, Youth, and Families in 1989 provided findings that almost half a million lower-skill jobs left six cities with very high populations of Black men: Boston, Chicago, Cleveland Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia. At the same time, suburban areas saw an increase of almost two million jobs (Kasarda, 1989). In addition, a study of almost 2,500 Chicago residents, employed fathers were more likely to marry the mother of their first child than were unemployed fathers (Testa, 1989).

In taking this stance, Representative Holmes (DC) disrupts cultural formula stories by insisting that irresponsibility and neglect are not natural dispositions held by Black men. This is important because policy solutions derived from this conceptualization will be very different than conceptualizations that describe Black men as morally poor. In those cases, the policy solution has been to rehabilitate Black fathers through teaching the importance of parenting and marriage. This position, however, prioritizes training and economic advancements that Black fathers can take advantage of. By simply having high expectations for Black fathers, it changes the way the issue is perceived, thus influencing policy options.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As it pertains to conflicts, Yanow (1999) speaks of three conceptual sources that may explain why interpretations can be conflictual: affective, cognitive, or moral. Affective conflicts are defined as those which result from the feelings, beliefs and, attitudes held by each interpretive community members. Cognitive conflicts represent differences in intellectual

understandings of the social issue. Lastly, moral conflicts are represented by the values held by each community member either based on political affiliation and/or personal background.

Affective Conflicts in the Construction of Fear/Lack of Courage

While the congressional dataset for this study did not include explanations on how the history of slavery in the U.S. has influenced the fathering behaviors of Black men today, Obama mentioned it several times in his speeches. It has implications for two components of responsible fatherhood programs/policies: parenting education, and economic stability. From a parenting standpoint, Obama spoke from a historical context to remind his audience of time in U.S. history that Black men lacked personal agency and were disempowered in their fathering roles. We borrow a passage from Jacobs (2009) to describe this disempowerment in *Incidences in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The author tells a story involving a father's futile attempt at maintaining authority to rear his own child:

“Dr. Flint, a physician in the neighborhood, had married the sister of my mistress, and I was now the property of their little daughter. It was not without murmuring that I prepared for my new home; and what added to my unhappiness, was the fact that my brother William was purchased by the same family. My father, but his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skillful mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, “You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.

You are my child,” replied our father, “and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water”

This passage of the book possibly explains Obama's decision to include the history of slavery when discussing Black fathers. To be involved and engaged fathers, they would need to possess a great deal of courage. Although clearly explaining that Black fathers are not under the same

constraints as chattel slaves from the 18th century, he explains that this fear was learned behavior and experienced by men who grew up during the Jim Crow era.

Affective and Moral Conflicts in the Concept Marriageability

Both Congress and President Obama addressed the importance of healthy relationships between fathers and their mothers of their children. Congress prioritized making low-income men marriageable through marriage education as well as increased economic opportunities. This is somewhat of a dissent from Randles (2016) study which asserts that healthy marriage policy proponents may sometimes disregard the socioeconomic circumstances that influences the level of stability for low-income couples. In support of Randles (2016), while some members of congress admitted the socio-political influences on the behaviors of Black fathers, they were not always convinced that Black men hadn't exacerbated this issue due to their own moral deficits. The cognitive conceptual source of this kind of reasoning has its origins in Black family research. Historically, Black families have been studied in the social sciences using two distinct research approaches. The first approach was most prevalent pre-welfare reform and is still used today. It is a deficit model that encompasses a social pathology that defines Black families as dysfunctional in relation others i.e. White families (Gibbs 1988; Hill 1993). The most popular example of this kind of research is *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In this report, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan proclaimed generational matriarchy to be the primary reason Black families had not obtained a higher social status in American society (Moynihan, 1965). This was backed by the justification that American society operated within a patriarchal system, which meant that Black families would always be at a disadvantage when it came to obtaining and securing resources because matriarchy undermined the role of Black men. Unsurprisingly, the deficit model has most often been used by those who are situated externally

to the Black community. The second approach to research on the Black family was used less often but has been shown to be more effective. It is a holistic model of exploration which focuses on the strengths of Black families as opposed to the ways they deviate from the traditional family model (Hill, 1993). For example, under the deficit model, matriarchy is seen as the ultimate weakness in Black families because it is seen as intentionally excluding Black fathers from having a structured and defined role in the family unit (Moynihan, 1965). Under the holistic approach, however, matriarchy is celebrated as evidence of the strength of Black womanhood (Chrisler, 2012). With very little empirical evidence, the Moynihan report became the prominent source of explaining the plight of Black families in this area. Undoubtedly, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's findings have been reproduced in institutional narratives and cited by his congressional peers.

In his presidential statements, Obama rarely spoke directly about the institution of marriage. Instead, he advocated for healthy relationships among couples. In this policy arena, his deviation from pro-marriage messages was quite noticeable given that healthy marriage and abstinence was a major family priority of his predecessor, George W. Bush. There is a noticeable shift in priorities as new Presidential administrations emerged. Under the Bush Administration (2001-2005), much attention was given to healthy marriage initiatives combined with teen abstinence programs. Very few federal programs focused on addressing the plight of low-income fathers. The focus shifted dramatically under the Obama Administration when funding was granted to those organizations that could address parenting education, increasing economic opportunity, and relationship education for low-income fathers. In 2006, \$50 million was allocated towards responsible fatherhood programs. The next phase of the responsible fatherhood initiatives began in 2011 when the grant funding for responsible fatherhood programs increased

to \$75 million for the next three years. In 2015, the Obama Administration provided funding in the form of 5-year grants to various organizations to implement Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs (HMRF), bringing us to present time.

Limitations

Congressional statements were analyzed from 1988 – 2005 and preceded statements of President Obama (2006 -2016). Given the sequence of data collection, there is a possibility that congressional statements had some influence on Obama’s statements which proceeded them. However, this study did not examine the confluence of statements. Battle (2018) provides evidence for the reverse scenario of presidential rhetoric influencing congressional discourse and policy design. However, the results of this study help us to identify distinct differences in understanding between legislators and the President. This is important primarily because social constructions of target populations are modified based on how problems are re-defined in the policy arena (Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). The consequential nature of institutional narratives means that institutional actors “shape the social world and its habitants’ life chances” (Loseke, 2007). To conclude this article, we consider what these results do in helping to achieve social change as it pertains to the perceptions of Black men and Black fathers.

Communication between various interpretive communities is important because this exchange cannot happen in silos. In this article, we treated congress as a single unit. However, political debate is operationalized as a natural and necessary function of the U.S. Congress. When dissent occurred, we made mention of those when relevant. More often than not, new conceptualizations entered the conversations by Congressman with an emic perspective. In fact, on the congressional level, responsible fatherhood policies are heavily championed by Black congressmen and women. For example, members of the Congressional Black Caucus including

Representatives Danny Davis, and Eleanor Holmes Norton have created collaborations such as the Congressional Caucus on Black Men and Boys (CCBMB) to address the social determinants influencing the national status of this group. On Father's Day 2019, the CCBMB held a public forum entitled: "Black Fatherhood: Understanding the Effect of Fathers Who Care". Members were charged with inviting Black fathers who were making an impact in their communities as fathers. This study did not group congressional discourse by racial background but treated congress as a single unit.

Implications for Future Studies

The results of this study provide some context to social problem narratives (i.e. narratives about Black father absence) can "challenge and/or modify socially circulating symbolic codes" (Loseke, 2007; p. 678). More than any other finding, Obama's construction of *institutional Black fathers* offers a reprieve to cultural formula stories. The multi-dimensional nature of this story disrupts the dichotomous moral evaluations of the "good Black man" and the "bad Black man" described by Kim (2014). In his construction of this kind of father, Obama educates this audience on racial injustices as the cause of how Black men function or don't function within their families. On the other hand, congressional discourse was somewhat ahistorical and excluded a racial lens in explaining the behaviors of fathers. One delegate from the District of Columbia was the exception to this.

Although Loseke (2007) describes narratives of identity as a hierarchy, the reflexivity between cultural and institutional narratives is enrich because it shows how discourse about Black fatherhood can create new culture by changing how the public views symbolic codes. One characteristic attributed to the institutional Black father is fear and cowardice. Although these are not admirable qualities, it is a disruption of the cultural depictions of Black men who

are menacing, dangerous, and super predators (Alexander, 2016). Moreover, it creates the image of Black men as victims of inequality and not perpetrators. Loseke (2007) uses a similar example in explaining how the symbolic codes associated with women who experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) changed from “victims” to “survivors” showing that symbolic codes can be modified through the use of narratives.

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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This three-article dissertation explores how Black fatherhood has been constructed by two prominent interpretive stakeholder communities: 1) 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, and 2) the 100th – 110th congressional bodies. The first two articles examine each community individually, and the third article offers a comparative analysis that explains and describes similarities and differences between each community. Combined, the articles speak to the functionality of cultural and institutional narratives in the early stages of the public policy process (i.e. agenda settings and policy formation). We established early on that low-income fathers possess very little political power in the policy process and their negative social constructions are difficult if not impossible to change (Schneider, Ingram, and deLeon, 2014). This dissertation is meant to contribute to those efforts by understanding how cultural narratives are empowered and operationalized by institutional actors. We examine how these narratives reinforce myths and stereotypes of Black fatherhood, but we paid close attention to themes that disrupted and challenged those narratives as they offer the best opportunity for reframing responsible fatherhood policies. This focuses on the reformulation and reframing process that can lead to the negotiation, mediation, and intervention of new understandings of addressing Black fathers in responsible fatherhood policies.

In Articles 1 and 2, we asked how members of Congress and President Barack Obama disrupted or legitimized cultural formula stories about Black fatherhood in their statements. In Article 2, the earliest speech we considered was delivered in 2007, during which time Barack Obama served as a U.S. Senator and Presidential nominee. The last speech we collected was delivered in 2014 at a Fatherhood convening. As stated earlier, Barack Obama serves as both an inside and outside observer in relation to this topic. He is a self-proclaimed Black father, and he

is also the 44th President of the United States, a unique position that no one else in the nation is privy to. Thus, we expected that his lens would provide an interesting and unexplored outlook on Black fatherhood as it relates to responsible fatherhood policy.

One noticeable difference between his interpretations and that of congress is the number of distinctions we found. While congressional discourse was categorized into two kinds of fathers, President Obama extended this by offering three categories: institutionalized, self-sacrificing, and unconcerned. The *unconcerned Black father* described by President Obama is an equal companion to the *deadbeat father* described by congress. Undoubtedly, this profile is the one used in political commentary that justifies low-income fathers as the undeserving poor thus justifying very little allocation of resources to assist them. For deviant groups in the social construction framework, punitive policies are more likely to be accepted as opposed to treatment polices. In fact, providing benefits to an “undeserving” population is likely to receive pushback from political actors, media, and lobbyists (Schneider, Ingram, deLeon, 2014). The turning point is in shifting the identity of a population that over rides excessive punishment and warrants additional attention.

In Articles 1 and 2, both interpretive communities constructed a father who was more deserving of assistance and provide us with a more multidimensional reading of this population. Members of congress described *dead broke* fathers as having multiple barriers to fathering that were mainly economic in nature. Essentially the *dead broke* father was identical to the *deadbeat* father, except that this father had a sincere desire to be a parent. The catalyst in congressional discourse was the Parent’s Fair Share Demonstration (PFS) Project, which ran roughly from 1992 – 1994. The results of this study were heavily cited by certain members of congress as evidence that low-income fathers desired to be active and engaged parents but lacked the

necessary support. There was also a higher credibility and relevance associated with this study because in participants were required to have a child or children who received welfare assistance, titled AFDC at the time. In addition, they had to have an established child support order. Welfare assistance and child support orders are two cultural codes in those cultural formula stories that painted fathers as undeserving, so it's inclusion in the study served to disrupt narratives although it was not the study's original purpose. The outcome is that the results disarmed the authors of those cultural formula stories by providing an intimate look at the lives of the men people spoke about but didn't quite understand.

Similarly, Obama constructed the *institutionalized* father who desired to be engaged but was hindered by institutional barriers. His catalyst may have very well been his own social location as a Black man. His statements were often colored with a both-and argument that was highly critical of the behaviors of low-income Black fathers but equally condemned the systems that should have served them better. Again, welfare policy and child support policy is at the center of this. Both Obama and members of Congress alluded to man-in-the-house or substitute parent policies under AFDC that prohibited male occupants from residing in the home.

Limitations of Presidential and Congressional Interpretations

In this study, we utilized the Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) framework to better understand the meaning of responsible fatherhood policies as it pertains to Black fathers. At the outset of this study, there were three policy tools at our disposal: language, objects, and actions. First, this study is limited in that we only utilized policy language in our analysis. The exclusion of objects (i.e. physical spaces that relay the meaning of responsible fatherhood policy), and policy actions (i.e. the decision from congress to hold a fatherhood hearing or the decision from President Obama to speak on the issue of fatherhood). Thus, there may be elements missing from

this analysis that might further explain the themes that emerged for the study. Second, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the former stages of the policy cycle (agenda settings and policy formulation) that have not received as much attention as the latter stages (implementation and evaluation). However, because the policy cycle is an iterative process, the agenda setting and policy formulation process we analyzed may have been a continuation from a former cycle that this study did not include. Similarly, we used the narrative identity framework to draw distinctions between cultural and institutional narratives. Loseke (2007) speaks to the iterative process of cultural, institutional, organization, and personal narratives. In our study, we explain that Obama and congress are authors of both cultural and institutional narratives. Although cultural narratives appear first in our study, it is not accurate to assume that all narratives flow from cultural narratives of identity.

The two unexplored narratives of identity for this study were organization narratives and personal narratives. There is a strong reason to believe that social change is most likely to occur at the implementation stage of the policy process which is where organizational narratives of identity show up (Loseke, 2007). While institutional narratives of identity are created at the policy level, they are re-distributed and re-enforced at the organizational level (Loseke, 2007). Members of Congress often design federal policies with very distinct, measurable objectives and goals and policy outcomes must be interpreted on the ground level. At times, Congress administers broad and vague policy directions, which in some ways may be indicative of their self-awareness that they lack the local understanding necessary during implementation. Thus, the responsibility of interpretation is left to agencies who must then utilize their discretionary power to interpret what these policies meant at their respective jurisdictional levels (Lipsky, 2010; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Although our findings contribute to our understanding of how cultural

and institutional narratives operates in the policy cycle, it remains to be seen how this is transferred to organizational narratives of identity most likely discovered at the implementation stage of the policy cycle.

How Institutional Narratives of Black Fatherhood Influence Responsible Fatherhood Policy.

Between Articles 1 and 2, our study examined institutional discourse from 1988 – 2016. Since our study was meant to understand this process as it pertains to Black fatherhood, it does not include every statement and/or hearing on responsible fatherhood. However, the time frame does cover the life cycle of responsible fatherhood policies. In this case, it may help us draw connections between how institutional actors spoke about issues related to fathering and how it shows up in the way responsible fatherhood programs operate today. For both presidents and congress, their influence is incredibly high first three stages of the policy cycle, and it slowly dwindles as we move into the third stage: implementation. Undoubtedly, members of congress yield the most power during the policy formulation stage. As it pertains to responsible fatherhood policy, they proposed and finalized the three mandated responsible fatherhood activities into legislation: marriage/relationship education, parenting education, and economic stability. Based on their interpretations of what low-income fathers needed, they have required that every federally funded responsible fatherhood program across the nation includes these elements. Here, we offer some interpretations on how the study themes might have influenced the three components of RF programs. Figure 1. Depicts the major themes found across both articles, how it was interpreted by each community, and which responsible fatherhood programming component it informs.

Major Themes	Presence in Interpretive Community Discourse		Responsible Fatherhood Component
	President	Congress	
<i>Fear/Lack of courage</i>	Consistently described as a barrier for <i>institutional/unconcerned Black fathers</i> ; U.S. racial history is the source	Mentioned once to describe the inability of <i>dead broke fathers</i> to comply with child support payments	Parenting Economic Stability
<i>Serial illegitimacy</i>	Characteristic of the <i>unconcerned Black father</i>	Characteristic of <i>deadbeat fathers</i>	Marriage Parenting
<i>Anger/Animalistic/Violence</i>	Mentioned in one speech of <i>institutional fathers</i>	<i>Not addressed</i>	Marriage
<i>Work ethic/Laziness</i>	Laziness is inferred in several speeches as a characteristic of the <i>unconcerned Black father</i>	Work ethic of <i>deadbeat fathers</i> is questioned	Economic Stability
<i>Absent fatherhood/heroic motherhood</i>	Mentioned in several speeches. <i>Unconcerned fathers</i> relinquish responsibility to mothers	Mentioned in several hearings and used to construct <i>deadbeat fathers</i>	Parenting
<i>Pass through laws</i>	<i>Not addressed</i>	Greatest barrier for <i>dead broke fathers</i>	Parenting Economic Stability
<i>Marriageability</i>	Focused on establishing healthy relationships as opposed to advocating for marriage	Prioritized making low-income men marriageable through marriage education	Marriage

Figure 1.

1

Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

Marriageability emerged in congressional discourse when it was mentioned that welfare mothers fare better in the workforce than the fathers of their children. Members of congress spoke of the necessity to make sure mothers had a pool of eligible men who had similar opportunities as them. Although marriageability was mentioned, the actual institution of marriage was not a major topic of discussion. The current study did not draw any differences between Democratic and Republican members of congress, but marriage policy proponents have historically come from the Republican party. As a Democratic President, Barack Obama makes mention of Black fathers having wives, but it is not characterized as an essential component of fatherhood. Instead he alludes to the healthy relationship dynamics and warns fathers that their children are watching the interactions between their parents. This helps to explain the distinction between Healthy Marriage (HM) programs and Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs. The basis for HM programming is that marriage is the foundation of effective parenting and economic stability (Randles 2016). On the other hand, RF programs acknowledges the relative instability of low-income fathers. In their case, establishing healthy co-parenting is prioritized over marriage.

Another theme that fits into the marriage component is serial illegitimacy, referred to in some literature as “multiple partner fertility” (MFP) and denotes the pattern of both fathers and mothers having children with more than one partner (Burton, 2014; Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2008). In this study, we prefer to use the term serial illegitimacy because of its relevance to the narrative identity framework. “Illegitimacy” is a cultural code in welfare policy narratives that denotes less fortunate children on two counts. First, it indicates an absence of financial capital as welfare policies are designed to address the needs of populations

experiencing chronic poverty. Second, it denotes a lack of cultural capital on a broad spectrum that ranges from not carrying their father's last name or never having even met him. In essence, MFP might be considered a stain on the parent, but serial illegitimacy denotes a stain on both the parent and the child. As one expert witness pointed out in a 1996 congressional hearing on Fatherhood Initiatives, "at one time, illegitimate was about the worst thing you could be" (Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families, 1996). This response was in reference to a comment about the changing trends in family formation that led to the need for new legislation. Integrated into the discussion on serial illegitimacy on behalf of fathers is questioning whether they have the ability to remain monogamous, an expectation of traditional marriage. Randles 2013 describes marriage as a civilizing mechanism for men. In agreeance with this sentiment, one expert witness remarked during a congressional hearing that "left culturally unregulated men's sexual behavior can be promiscuous, their paternity casual, their commitment to families weak" (Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families, 1996). Kim (2014) highlights that Black fathers are perceived as animalistic which has relevance to the domestic violence component of responsible fatherhood programs. In a 2000 hearing on Fatherhood Initiatives, Senator Evan Bayh (IN – D) remarked "I want to point out that domestic violence prevention is a vitally important component of our bill and others that are going to be successful in reconnecting men to their children and their mothers (Senate Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, 2000). Although domestic violence prevention is necessary in the provision of services to families, the phrasing of this statement might inadvertently paint all fathers in negative light.

Parenting and Economic Stability

In congressional hearings on child support, members of congress often spoke of non-custodial fathers who may or may not be meeting their child support obligations. Both

interpretive communities admonished fathers for not owning their fair share of parenting and for casting all responsibility on struggling mothers. In many cases, this reinforced cultural formula stories about Black fathers. Non-residential status, a primary marker of responsible fatherhood participants, was alluded to but not directly mentioned by Obama and congress. For example, Obama's conceptualization of good parenting often included activities that were indicative of in-home parenting, like monitoring what children watched on television and making sure breakfast options were adequate in nutritional value. Since there is no specific directive to design programs to fit non-residential fathers, responsible fatherhood grantees must use their local knowledge to ensure the parenting techniques they teach can be incorporated by non-residential fathers. Interestingly, compliance with child support payments is categorized as a desired outcome under responsible parenting, not economic stability. The prioritization of child support payments as a barrier for non-residential parents is clearly laid out by members of congress in their discussions on pass through laws. In accordance with TANF policy, states are mandated to inquire about the status of fathers and establish paternity through DNA tests if necessary. If a father is ordered to pay child support, recipients of welfare assistance do not directly receive this payment. It is "passed through" to the state as reimbursement for TANF benefits. The proposed policy solution of incentivizing states to eliminate pass through laws was an acknowledge of congress that the fathers lose a sense of persona agency in this process. That is, fathers are more inclined to contribute financially if they know the funds are directly benefit the child and not indirectly. Under the economic stability component, RF grantees to are asked to design activities that foster an improvement in the economic status of fathers. The use of the IPA framework allowed us to find hidden meanings in responsible fatherhood policies (i.e. welfare and child support policy). For instance, descriptive comments about the characteristics welfare fathers led us to conclude

that the primary population of interest would be low-income minority men living in urban communities. Again, the Parent's Fair Share Project brought new insight to the barriers welfare fathers faced, including a complicated and unresponsive child support system as well as few economic opportunities. As results go, employment strategies were largely ineffective in this study. Employment was minimally increased for men who already had some history of employment before entering the program. However, fathers who were unemployed at enrollment did not experience much changes as a result of participating in the program.

Policy Recommendations: What do Cultural and Initiatives Narratives Reveal about Services Needed by Black Fathers?

The ultimate goal of studying narratives of identity is to initiate the process of social change (Loseke (2007). On the cultural level, social change involves transforming the collective conscious to view a population differently. On the institutional level, social change synonymous to policy change (Loseke, 2007). In 2015, the federal government awarded \$150 to Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grantees for a 5-year period. Although findings have not shown the greatest impact in the past (Randles, 2016), a recent PACT study revealed that parenting behaviors improved and employment stability increased for program participants (Avellar, Covington, Moore, Patnaik, & Wu, 2018). In addition, the qualitative component of this evaluation is designed to negate the public perception of low-income fathers who have no appetite for parenting. In regard to this article, the continuation of these programs is incredibly important for the deconstruction process we describe. We conclude this study by offering specific policy recommendations and future research studies. These recommendations are based on the belief that bottom-up implementation strategies will be most effective for this population.

First, Obama's conceptualizations of the *institutionalized Black father* and the *self-sacrificing Black father* offer some insight into what may be missing in these federally funded programs. In his description of these fathers, Obama brings to light the traumatic events that may have interrupted their childhood and transformation into adulthood. Although the first article in this series only explored the narratives of one President and should not be generalized to other institutional actors, there is research evidence that supports that these are accurate realities for many Black fathers participating in responsible fatherhood programs. Avellar, et al. 2018 confirmed that early exposure to family instability (father absence) and early interactions with the criminal justice system shifted their perspectives on fathering as well as their individual agency.

Similarly, mental health research on Black men supports the high prevalence of depression seen among Black men (Lincoln, Taylor, Watkins, & Chatters, 2011). The *self-sacrificing Black father's* in particular lacks natural self-preservation tactics which seems likely to cause physical and psychological damage. One solution for this is the modification of service provision using a trauma-informed lens to increase the capacity of front-line staff to address such issues as they come up in regular program activities (parenting, relationships, and economic stability). To this end, case managers and coaches within responsible fatherhood programs would benefit from knowing the father's history of services. This brings up another enhancement to service provisions supported by the findings, which is the need for integrated and coordinated services among various social service agencies. Obama's conceptualization of the *institutionalized Black father* magnifies the high number of interactions this father has with multiple agencies at the same time. For example, he may be participating in a responsible fatherhood program (funded by the Office of Family Assistance) and have arrears for his child

support payments (enforced by the Office of Child Support Enforcement), which he will have to appear before a lower court judge (seated within the Criminal justice system) in order to reconcile. More than likely paternity was established when the mother of his child(ren) applied for public assistance at the local TANF agency. Finally, as a non-custodial parent, he may have been given provisions to escort his young children to pre-school (administered by the Office of Early Head Start). This example represents the level of saturation within and among institutions and indicates multiple touchpoints that can be used to integrate services for Black fathers. Gaps in services or lack of communication between any of these agencies will likely make it difficult for him to consistently father his children. Cultural formula stories are still incredibly relevant here as most social service agencies were designed with women and dependent children in mind. Future grant funding might include additional training to orient partnering agencies to better serve fathers by understanding the nuances of Black fatherhood. As described earlier, some agencies originally drive a mission that does not explicitly include fathers. For the purposes of a federal funding opportunity, fatherhood services may be added onto a list of other populations they serve. However, this may indicate a gap in understanding in how to best serve fathers. To this end, “pure” fatherhood program should be prioritized and incentivized in the next round of federal funding for responsible fatherhood programs.

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