

# 1 Contradictions and Complications

DAVID: I was a bad father though; we've got to include that. At that time, I mean. I thought I was bad because—

MARY: He didn't do— He was not a participant father.

WE HEAR a great deal about fathers. Dead-beat dads, absent fathers, distant fathers, participant fathers, new fathers, and changing fathers feature in academic and popular discussions. The impact of fathers on children, their influence for good or bad, their central importance, or their insignificance are investigated, assumed, argued over, and mobilized in highly politicized debates. But very few of the participants in these debates have examined what men themselves say about being fathers, about what fatherhood means to them, about what they do and do not do, and about how they explain the place of fatherhood in their lives. What is so often said of mothers is that they were “there” for their children. What is said almost as often of fathers is that they were “not there” physically, financially, or emotionally. The questions that arise are, Where were they? What were they doing? What did they think they were doing?

This book is about the meanings of fatherhood in the lives of a group of American men. Most readers will think they are familiar with the lives of American men. Many of them will themselves be American men or will be their children, wives, mothers, or girlfriends. All readers will have images of them from personal acquaintance or from books, films, and television programs. Given this personal familiarity with the subject, much of the behavior and many of the opinions expressed by the men in this book may seem obvious, natural, and inevitable—hardly worth noticing. When we think we know what we are seeing, however, we often stop looking carefully and stop noticing what is extraordinary. My account examines aspects of the familiar and the taken-for-granted from the perspective of a comparative social anthropologist.

*The Package Deal* is neither a manual for change nor a polemic. What I hope it contributes to the contemporary debate about fatherhood is a careful, sympathetic description and analysis of the cultural image of fatherhood that is held by many fathers in the United States. This image has internal contradictions and frequently ignores social realities, but it reflects deeply held values, informs a great deal of social policy, and guides the lives of many men. Documenting this cultural image is both an end in itself and a necessary precursor to effective action.

As I listened to the men with whom I talked and studied my notes and transcripts, I came to realize that they saw their lives, and measured their success, in terms of a *package deal* in which having children, being married, holding a steady job, and owning a home were four interconnected *elements*. No single element could be evaluated alone, and success in any one element alone did not guarantee success overall. The four elements of the package deal are in many respects mutually reinforcing, but they are also in tension with one another, so that the package deal incorporates internal contradictions. Being a father is one of the four elements of the package deal. My analysis of the meaning of fatherhood reveals that fatherhood itself is composite. I describe fatherhood, as an element of the package deal, in terms of four facets: emotional closeness, provision, protection, and endowment. Throughout this book, I discuss the complex interconnections of the four elements of the package deal and the contributions that these elements make to each of the four facets of fatherhood.

Research on men as gendered, anthropological research on masculinity, and this book in particular owe a great deal to feminist analyses and formulations of the meaning of gender and of the applicability of gender as a category of analysis. Feminist theory and analysis have opened the possibility of a gendered approach to the study of men and fatherhood. Such an approach sees gender not as an attribute of individuals, but as an organizing principle of social and cultural institutions. Research interest in fatherhood is relatively recent. Motherhood has been a subject of serious social science attention for a longer time, and research on motherhood has opened the way for studies of fatherhood as a set of gendered meanings and activities. The bibliographic essay in Appendix 2 puts my work in the context of some of the important literature in these areas. *The Package Deal* contributes to the popular and scholarly debates about fatherhood by examining closely the

life stories of a group of men as they talk about the place and meaning of fatherhood in their lives.

My analysis is directed at understanding a framework of cultural meanings through which men make sense of their actions, circumstances, and relationships as sons, husbands, and fathers. This enterprise is very different from an attempt to discover the underlying motives or internal causes of human action. The anthropologists Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart made this distinction in their analysis of the role of cultural models in the education of college women and their socialization as adult women. They stressed that the cultural model "is first and foremost an interpretive structure, a meaning system, not a set of prescriptive rules. Actual relationships are not dictated or determined by the model, but rather experience is anticipated, interpreted, and evaluated in light of it" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 95). Holland and Eisenhart went on to explore the many ways that behavior can depart from the model, and the ways in which people then deploy other cultural models to make sense of these departures.

This book is not a work of theory, but a theoretically informed study of particular lives in their contexts. The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) has influenced my research and my analyses, providing a coherent conceptual framework for thinking about life courses. Bourdieu's theory describes the processes whereby people become imbued with sets of enduring dispositions and obtain access to differential selections of resources. They confront existing situations, with established rules of procedure and patterns of practice, and negotiate outcomes in light of their own dispositions, the expectations of others, and the resources they have available to them. What I find most useful about Bourdieu's formulation is that he depicts the human condition as one in which people have contradictory goals and face conflicting pressures. He presents a theory of culture that is structured and external but is not totally unified and does not determine action. In this endeavor, Bourdieu is reacting against mechanical and directive models of culture, and is building on a tradition of anthropological theorizing that has examined the contradictions and conflicts within cultural settings and situations (Fortes 1949; Gluckman 1940).

I discuss some of the implications of my research in the concluding chapter. To develop either illuminating theory or effective policy, it is crucial to have a clear vision of the lived reality and cultural situation of

actual people, so I emphasize what men have to say about their lives and their families, the complexities of their attitudes and the details of their lives, the dominant cultural values they express, and the cultural contradictions with which they deal.

## DOMINANT CULTURAL VALUES

Anthropologists have argued about the usefulness and definition of the idea of culture, but at its most straightforward the concept means those beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors that people learn and share by virtue of living in a particular society. Comparative cultural anthropology has documented real cultural difference and explored the human capacity to make sense of the world and human life in diverse ways. Central to anthropological debates has been a tension or oscillation in anthropologists' emphases on variation and homogeneity. At one extreme has been Ruth Benedict's essential identification of personality and culture and her remark that in "primitive" cultures, people are as alike as "peas in a pod" (1934) and at the other has been Edward Sapir's argument that all culture is individual (1956: 151). There has also been disagreement about the extent to which variation should be attributed to structural factors or to individual strategizing and performance.

In any large society such as the United States there is cultural variation, and several sets of cultural values compete or coexist. Some of these values are dominant or "hegemonic" in the sense that difference or departure from them is expected to be justified or explained. The concept of dominant or hegemonic values has a long history and has been applied in many areas besides gender studies.<sup>1</sup> Dominant cultural values are not simply those of a dominant group, forced onto unwilling inferiors, but are those values that shape the cultural landscape for the members of a society. Identifying dominant cultural values is not a way of denying cultural difference but rather of exploring the terrain in which difference can be expressed.

Audre Lorde's invocations of differences among women were decisive contributions to the development of feminist theory because they demolished assumptions of the universality of white, western women's experience. Lorde wrote and spoke passionately about the ways that difference is used to divide and exclude. Differences are used to set one group against another, and differences from a dominant value are used

to exclude. Lorde was adamant that feminists, and all who want “to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (1984: 112) must recognize our differences and see them as a source of strength, not of division. What all oppressed groups have in common, Lorde said, was that they were excluded and made to feel inferior. The oppressed groups in American society “Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women” (1984: 114) “stand outside the circle of this society’s definition” (1984: 112). They depart from what Lorde called a “mythical norm” “defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure” (1984: 116). Lorde’s emphasis on difference was part of a program to build a better world on the basis of our real differences rather than to compare ourselves with the “mythical norm.” Lorde’s point, of course, was that the norm had enormous impact on the living situations and inner consciousness of all of us, even though it is “mythical,” precisely because it is not a description of the majority but a standard by which all are judged.

Within the study of gender and masculinity, “hegemonic masculinity” is used to describe the way that a certain definition of masculinity is the standard with which other definitions are compared and by which they are judged (Connell 1987: 183–185; Ortner 1990). The particular definition of masculinity that is hegemonic changes over time and varies from society to society. In any particular situation, however, the dominant model of masculinity provides the basic cultural patterns of expectation and outlook that all men and women must confront, whether they accept these expectations, rebel against them, or espouse alternatives.

Erving Goffman argued, “In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America,” and described this norm in terms very similar to Lorde’s: “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports” (1963: 128). Goffman’s norm is no more common or representative than Lorde’s. Indeed, Goffman argued, “The general identity-values of a society may be fully entrenched nowhere,” but he clearly described the impact of this norm on men’s interactions and self-image: “Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective. . . . Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and in-

ferior" (1963: 128). The notions of masculinity and fatherhood, as articulated by the men I talked to, are hegemonic in the sense that all these men have experienced their coercive power and, whatever the differences and divergences of their own lives, have had to take them into account as they tell their life stories.

To talk about cultural hegemony is to talk about power. Dominant cultural values do not become dominant in a vacuum, but because they serve the needs of economically and politically dominant groups. The goals and values of the dominant culture cannot be achieved by everyone and are used to exclude some people from full participation and to judge them as failures. Dorothy Smith, a sociologist whose theoretical work on the sociology of knowledge has its empirical roots in her research on single motherhood, has described the impact of a norm of family life, which she describes as the "Standard North American Family":

A legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children. The adult male and female may be parents . . . of children also resident in the household. (1999: 159)

Smith does not, it should be clear, make any claim that such a family form is either morally desirable or statistically dominant. Indeed, her analysis of this norm is an element of her research on single mothers. She does claim that this picture of the family operates as an "ideological code" that informs a great deal of research and policy in such a way as to denigrate or distort any other ways of organizing family life. Smith argues, for example, that the behavior of children is judged and treated very differently according to the kind of family from which they come. The great diversity of mothers who do not fit the cultural norm, and the condemnation they face as a result, is documented in the collection *Mothering against the Odds* (Garcia Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten 1998). These authors describe both the many ways of being a mother and how these ways are judged against dominant cultural values.

Analysis of a cultural norm is something very different from a description of majority experience. To describe a hegemonic cultural model does not exclude the experience of men who cannot achieve success in its terms or who do not share its values. Quite the contrary, this description illuminates how dominant cultural models are used to judge

and exclude them and thereby contribute to the material and political oppression so many men also experience. Frequently, men who are found wanting by their culture also judge themselves as failures. Men who cannot find jobs, for instance, may share the social judgment that their situation is a result of their personal inadequacy (Dudley 1994; Liebow 1967; Newman 1988; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Wilson 1996). To see the dominant values of society is to understand what the members of that society must confront in their daily lives. In this book I describe the lives of a particular group of men and analyze them as variations on a dominant cultural theme or hegemonic pattern.

The men I describe were all in their late thirties when we spoke. They varied in educational level, occupation, income, marital status, and number of children, but they all graduated from the same high school in the early 1970s. The school had been in a lower-middle-and working-class area of a San Francisco Bay Area town, in a neighborhood of small single-family homes and modest apartment buildings constructed to house the flood of workers and their families who had moved to the area in the post-World War II boom. These men reflected the racial-ethnic composition of the town when they were in high school: about 70 percent non-Hispanic White, 25 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian American. The racial-ethnic categories are those used by the Census Bureau, which I follow for the sake of comparability. I use the term “racial-ethnic” as it is used by sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn (1991)—to emphasize both that race and ethnicity are intertwined and that membership in racial-ethnic groups is the result of being assigned to socially constructed categories. Assignment to these categories is inevitably arbitrary and the categories themselves do not necessarily reflect either social reality or personal identity. I will return to a more detailed description of these men and their circumstances later in the chapter, but first I will describe a conversation I had with a man and his wife to illustrate the way these men talked about their lives and the way that they expressed dominant values as they constructed culturally appropriate narratives and explanations.

## DAVID AND MARY: MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS

David Brown graduated from high school in 1972. His father, a blue-collar worker, had encouraged David in his enthusiasm for athletic

competition. After high school David found a job in the plumbing section of the hardware store where he had worked when he was in school and started to date Mary, who was a senior in his former high school. When I met David and Mary in 1990, they had been married for sixteen years. David had risen to a middle-management position for the same chain of hardware stores, and Mary worked part time as a secretary for the local school district. They had one child, a twelve-year-old son.

David and Mary had not planned to have only one child, but circumstances and their own actions and reactions had intervened. During my interview, they advanced four explanations for why they were the parents of an only child. As they talked about their lives, they gave accounts that were sometimes internally inconsistent and sometimes different from each other. In their inconsistency they expressed the real and potential contradictions of their various dreams and goals and of the cultural expectations that helped shape these goals. They were expressing the differences that always exist between “his marriage” and “her marriage” (Bernard 1972). This is a point that should always be kept in mind when reading these men’s accounts and that leaps out of conversations between husband and wife, even when they are presenting a joint account of their lives. The contradictions, compromises, and constructions internal to marriage are part of men’s daily lives. Any one of their interpretations might seem straightforward and adequate, but the juxtaposition of them to explain the same set of circumstances and results brings us face to face with the complexity of their lives, their stories about their lives, and the meanings they bring to parenthood and particularly to fatherhood.

The number of children they had wanted first came up when I asked, “Did you always want to have kids?”<sup>2</sup>

DAVID: Yes I did. Yes. She scared me when we were first going around because she was from a big family. In fact all her family’s big and she was saying: “Yeah, I’d like to have nine kids” or something. I’m only [one of] two. I’m like, “Nine kids!” I always thought a couple kids was plenty but even with the one— I mean I’m real happy. I thought a couple of kids would be fine.

MARY: I always said I *wasn’t* just going to have one. And that’s what I did. I never wanted him to grow up alone. I didn’t know what it was like to grow up alone, but because I had so much family around me I figured, “God, how can a kid feel lonely?” I mean, here he is growing up alone— I mean with no brothers and sisters.



At this point in the conversation, David was proposing a two-child family form that matched his own experience and the widely expressed cultural norm. Mary's position was less precise, but neither of them had intended to have only one child. As our conversation continued, I learned about the pattern of events in their lives, and about David and Mary's moves toward a shared story—or at least toward a shared group of stories—about their lives as parents.

They began by telling me that as a young couple they had known what they wanted, believed they could get it, and worked hard to achieve their goals. David told me with pride:

[Mary] went to work, I remember, when we first started dating and thought about getting married. She got out of [high] school on a Friday and that following Monday she had a job. I thought that was pretty incredible, you know, she didn't even enjoy two days of vacation or anything. She went right to work and worked full time for many years.

From her high school graduation until two months before the birth, Mary worked ten-hour shifts in an assembly plant. A year after her son was born she returned to work and subsequently worked full time until three years before our conversation, when the family had moved and she had taken a part-time job with the local school district.

David gave accounts of his wife's work that were, in their ambivalence, typical of the men with whom I talked. David was pleased that Mary had worked very hard to get them established, but he emphasized that they could now "get by fine" on his income. "She doesn't have to work right now," he said. A few months previously, however, he had been threatened with "downsizing" and had encouraged her to look for full-time work. He was the provider, but her income allowed them to live the lifestyle they wanted. Clearly, to an outside observer, Mary's paid work was an essential part of their family strategy, although both of them spoke of David's job as more important. In the first years of their marriage they had both worked long hours in order to establish themselves so that they could have children.

MARY: We didn't just have kids because "we're married and we're supposed to have kids" you know.

DAVID: We didn't want kids for at least three years. We kind of put our heads down and worked for a couple of years before we thought about—

MARY: We had our lives when we first got married. We knew what we wanted. Where we wanted to be like ten years down. We were setting goals basically. We knew we wanted—

DAVID: A car. We knew we wanted a few material things and we just didn't go out and always buy 'em. We kind of set a goal like: "Well, we'll save a couple thousand here, put a couple thousand there, and we'll try to get these things."

MARY: Because we always said we wouldn't have kids unless we owned our house.

DAVID: Yeah, I thought the timing was right. This was our second house, mind you, we were moving to when we decided it was time for a kid. We wanted a bigger house. We could afford— We had the new car and everything was right. And she was pregnant at the time too, but we knew a couple of months later. But everything was perfect, I mean things were just perfect timing. But that's the way we wanted it. That's the way we got married. We didn't want kids at the beginning. We wanted to get some things, and things went fine. And we bought our first house, and things were fine. And I got promoted, things got better. And we just— And the time was right, and we could afford everything we wanted, and comfortable, and give our kid— We thought we could give him the best.

For David and Mary the basic structure of their story at this point was one of couple self-sufficiency and hard work to provide the suitable material conditions for the children they both regarded as inevitable. The sequence of their lives did not depend on a particular length of time between marriage and birth, but on achieving a particular set of circumstances. Changing circumstances, not the simple passage of time, dictated the pace of their lives.

While they reported strong agreement on what they had wanted to achieve before they had children, David agreed with Mary that control over the timing had been hers. I asked David what would happen in a relationship in which one person did not want children. Mary leapt in:

MARY: Who doesn't want children? If I really wanted to have a child earlier than we did, I would have had a child earlier.

DAVID: She could have stopped the birth control.

MARY: I always felt, "The guy doesn't want the baby, then that's not the time to have a child." Because I saw it as, "He was the breadwinner, he's the one that's going to be working, it's up to him to say:

'OK. Now I'm ready to be a parent.'" But if I wanted to I would have done it. I would have just stopped taking the Pill. I wouldn't have even asked him.

Mary and David agreed about the appropriate pattern for their lives and about the gendered division of labor and of decision making because they shared basic cultural notions. They agreed, specifically, that the timing of children and the responsibility for birth control was up to women in general, and to Mary in particular. Their ideas about how parenthood should be gendered extended beyond birth control and provided, as we shall see, the context for their reaction to an unexpected turn of events. Gendered parenthood was also an important element in their further explanations of why they had only one child.

Although it has become more common in the United States for married couples to have only one child, such couples often feel they need to explain their situation. The more closely behaviors and situations conform to cultural norms, the less people feel the need to explain, account for, or elaborate on those behaviors. Male corporate executives, for instance, do not talk much about why they wear suits, but there is considerable discussion about "casual Fridays." The cultural norm in the United States is for a married couple to have two children.<sup>3</sup> This norm is not, of course, a description of actual family size: Norms and behaviors are not the same. Some departures from this norm are within a normative range and need little explanation; others require more elaborate accounts. Having an only child, or having more than four, requires more cultural explanation than having two or three. The amount of scholarly and popular attention applied to the only child is itself an index of departure from a cultural norm. David and Mary's need to account for and normalize their having only one child is not a response to overt criticism and does not indicate that they think there is anything wrong with this. Their attention to the issue is, however, a recognition that the outcome of having an only child needs to be situated in terms of cultural values and cannot be so easily taken for granted as can the normative outcome of having two children.

At first, David attempted to normalize the fact that he and Mary had only one child by referring to his own childhood:

The way I grew up in my childhood there with my father, I was almost like a single— It was always me and my dad, me and my dad,

me and my dad. So I could almost look at my son and think, you know, "He's growing up the way I did," which I have no regrets over. I think it was fine.

David actually had a sister five years older, but she never featured in David's accounts of his childhood, and he remembered himself as being the focus of his father's attention. While David and Mary said they were content to have only one child, they acknowledged that they had not planned to do so, and they moved on from David's memories of his own childhood to recounting the story of their son's birth and infancy.

Their son was born with an undiagnosed digestive obstruction, which is how they explained having only one child. When David's son's medical condition came up in our talk, David assured me, "It's minor, it's minor," but Mary immediately contradicted him, which reflects the very different impact their son's medical condition had on their lives. It was Mary, with the help of respite care from her mother and sister-in-law, who had borne the brunt of daily caretaking, and it was Mary who told me about her son's surgery:

Prior to him having the surgery, for weeks I'm dealing with this. I'm not sleeping at night and getting up in the middle of the night because I hear him and then see his face in just a puddle of milk. He could choke had I not gotten up. I was doing that. Well, the weekend prior to taking him in on a Monday, my Mom had him that weekend, because I needed the sleep. I needed to rest and she took care of him. She brought him home and he's still acting up and that's when I took him in [to the doctor]. So right then they knew: "Well we're going to have to do surgery tonight." I'm a new mother and I'm thinking, "I don't want this. I can't go for this," and then they tell me they have to do surgery tonight. Ten thirty. So it's like: "Oooh." New mother. Crying. Call my parents: "This is what's happening." They rush to the hospital, and here we are. Little baby that— They have him in intensive care, in a little room where you could see— And they're taking blood out of him and he's looking at me, and I'm thinking he must be looking at me saying, "Why are you letting them do this?" You know, all of these things, and you remember— I thought it was colic, and all that whole time it was because he was starving to death. Until we finally had the surgery. Then he was fine. He ate good after that. But that was scary. And to know that if I had another child I would go through that same thing. I thought, "I don't know if I'll go

through that right away.” So we figured— three years go by, four years go by, well twelve years have gone by. [laughs] I don’t want to go through diapers again. But no— we were thinking about it about a year ago.

There was more to this story than a wrenching tale of medical complication and maternal distress. After he and Mary had agreed that their son’s medical problem was the reason they did not have more children, David raised the issue of his own participation. Even as he tried to explain his behavior, David acknowledged his own failures as a father and provided another reason for having only one child. In his acknowledgment, however, he still presented himself as dedicated to one of the facets of fatherhood, that of being a good provider:

DAVID: I was a bad father though; we’ve got to include that. At that time, I mean. I thought I was bad because—

MARY: He didn’t do— He was not a participant father.

DAVID: And even the first couple years I was so wrapped up in—

MARY: *Five* years [with emphasis].

DAVID: —in my being promoted and managing. I had to go in at four, five o’clock in the morning. Those were my hours. So I’d be getting up at three, four in the morning and then I’d be in bed at nine. And that was it. That’s all I did is I went to bed at eight, nine o’clock. And if anybody called, I was mad: “Don’t bother me,” you know. I had to get a few hours sleep before I go to work, and I just let that too seriously take over. And I regret that I didn’t really help her a lot or do little things that I should’ve done as a father in the younger years.

David’s acknowledgment that he could have done “little things” as a father is very far from questioning what he and Mary both saw as the basic division of labor in parenting or saying that he should have done half the childcare. David did recognize his own shortcomings, but he went on to explain and minimize them in terms of his own father’s behavior and the cultural norm of the father as breadwinner:

But then again I look at the way I grew up and I didn’t know my dad until I was like five or six years old, until I was able to play ball and get in with the go-cart. Then my dad just took me and we were two buddies. But you know until then I guess he was always working. I found out where I didn’t know much about him. I guess I went in with that too. I was just trying to make sure I had the extra income

coming, and that things were all settled, you know, things for the kid and the bills were— things we were going to need. And put too much emphasis on the work and not enough into what she needed. And that caused problems between us, down the road. And maybe she thought if she had another kid, that I'd be the same way, not really participating until he was five years old, where she's got to do it all.

Mary confirmed David's suggestion that his lack of participation in childcare contributed to their decision not to have more children: "I didn't think I could want it. I didn't want to raise another child by myself." And David went on with regret, knowing that there was no going back to do it again: "And I didn't see it. Now I do. Now I know if it was going to happen over it would be totally different. Now it's awakened me. Now I could see it, but it didn't happen at the time."

Mary was sure she also would do things differently. She saw herself as a different person than the new mother of twelve years ago:

As strong willed a person as I am, now I wouldn't put up with it. . . . But then I know he wanted to move up in the business. I knew that's just the type of person he was. Plus he didn't understand his part. I felt badly. I had to sleep in the back room because he had to get up so early that when the baby woke up in the morning I had to— But (and I've told David) I can see where a parent, a new mother, can abuse. Because I remember several nights being in that back room and— because I could not be in the same bed as David because the baby would cry—and when that baby would wake up it was like you know you almost wanted to put a pillow over the head. And then there's where reality sets in and you get the baby and, "God, how could I think like that." Then I'm crying, you know, because. . . .

"Wow!" she said, wiping away her tears, "I didn't want to go into that. But that's probably why those years went by without— I told him so many years later, 'I don't want to have another child with you.' Because he didn't participate."

In responding, a subdued David gave a glimpse of his part in daily life when his son was an infant and of the way he had avoided his wife's distress. Although he said he understood Mary's position about not having more children, it seemed to me that David was still minimizing the impact of his wife's experience in a way that was not so different than it had been twelve years before. David's perspective on the

gendered division of labor went beyond the division of domestic and childcare tasks to a gendered division of attentiveness to the activities and lives of others that contributes to the invisibility of women's work.<sup>4</sup>

DAVID: Well, she kept a lot into herself, you know, crying by herself in the room with the baby, and stuff. And like she said, she slept in the other room a lot not to bother me, and I'd get up and go to work and I'm working. I don't know that there's anything wrong, and come home, and she'd have dinner ready, and I'd eat and fall asleep on the chair, and go to bed, and she'd be there with the baby. And I didn't really participate in doing a lot when he was real young, those first couple years. So I think that put a big damper on her thinking of having another child. Knowing another one would have the same thing and then thinking, well, I was in the same job—in the same rut at work. So she kind of figured I'd be the same way.

MARY: [laugh] You *would* have. [with emphasis]

In their joint narrative, David and Mary elaborated their reasons for having only one child by appealing to David's own childhood, explaining it in terms of their son's medical condition, and blaming it on the physical and emotional burdens placed on Mary by David's failure to be a participant father. But their story did not end there. They had agreed that it was the husband who was to be the primary breadwinner, and the wife who was primarily responsible for caring for the children and for domestic work. They also agreed that the wife was responsible for birth control and thus for the timing and number of children. They agreed, in other words, on the gendered division of labor in parenting of children in general. Children, however, are born with particular physical characteristics, and those characteristics lead them to be placed in a specific sex category and to face certain gendered expectations (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987). Immediately after he and Mary told me that she would not have had another child with him because he was not a participant father, David raised the issue of his child's sex, and their previously clear-cut certainty that they would not have another child was called into question:

DAVID: But I was content with the one myself. It was fine with me. Because he was a boy, too. Maybe if it was a girl, I think I would've really wanted a boy right away. Just something inside me. I wanted a son. I think—I don't know—some, a lot of, guys say, "No." Whatever. But I think most men would really honestly say—

MARY: Had we had a girl we probably would have had a second child.

DAVID: Yeah. Most, most men I think always want to have a boy, always want to have a son.

MARY: I didn't want to have girls, I wanted boys. So I was glad.

AUTHOR: So, you were OK with one? In terms of having a girl would you have wanted to try again?

MARY: Probably.

DAVID: I think we would have. I would have enforced it more than probably.

MARY: [laughing] He would have, yeah.

DAVID: Probably, yeah, yeah.

MARY: Yeah, most, most likely.

David and Mary gave, between them, four explanations for why they had an only child when their original plan had been to have at least two children: (1) it just happened, but it was alright because David's childhood had been like that of an only child; (2) their son was born with a medical condition and they did not want to go through that experience with another child; (3) David did not participate as a father of a young child and because of this Mary refused to have another child with him; and (4) their first child was a son and they would have had another if their first child had been a daughter. From one perspective these four stories may appear to contradict one another or to be successive approximations to the truth, but I see them rather as linked elements of a complex whole, as stories that David and Mary told me, told each other, and told themselves in order to make sense of their lives. Berger and Kellner (1970) described how couples work together to construct a story of "our marriage," a construction that feminist scholars have further examined in terms of gendered relations of power (Hackstaff 1999: 11–12). The carefully crafted shared story is often shattered by divorce and by the reassertion of the individual experiences of the spouses. Both David and Mary were trying to bring together sets of contradictory expectations in one life, in one marriage, and in one account of that marriage.

Their stories are not simply presentations of fact, but are cultural productions that make several points about the meaning of fatherhood in the United States: A man's experience of his own father is crucial for



his sense of what it is to be a father, sons and daughters mean different things to fathers, women are the default caregivers, home ownership is a material condition for and expression of family life, and work and breadwinning are central to fatherhood. The generalizability of David and Mary's images of appropriate parenting comes not only from the similarity of their circumstances to those of many other Americans, but also because they are deploying the images, ideas, and terms of the dominant culture. The dominance and uniformity of basic cultural notions about gender relations and parenthood has been reported by writers about motherhood, who describe variations in emphasis and deployment rather than differences in norms (Garey 1999; Hays 1996; McMahon 1995; Walzer 1998). Mary did not invent the term "participant father," and David is not the only man to justify his absence from home with the importance of his work.

### THE STUDY: A PARTICULAR TIME AND PLACE

It is a basic tenet of ethnography that in important ways the universal is expressed in the particular—the generality of human experience is illuminated by examining the particular lives of particular people in particular places. The core group of men I describe in this book were born in the mid-1950s and graduated from the same northern California high school in the early 1970s. In my descriptions of these men I have used pseudonyms and have described their work and family situations in terms that protect their anonymity. I have changed the name of the town and high school to Meadowview and have left the county unnamed. The descriptions and statistics of high school, town, and county are, however, accurate representations of real places.

By the end of the twentieth century, Meadowview was a city of about one hundred and twenty-five thousand people in the global center of computer development and manufacturing known as the Silicon Valley, but in previous decades Meadowview was typical of the suburbs and suburban communities that were developed after World War II, matching baby boom with housing boom. Originally an agricultural town and canning center, Meadowview had a population of fewer than ten thousand in 1950. In the next ten years, during which the men in this study were born, the population grew to five times that number, and by 1970 it had doubled again to almost one hundred thousand.

I lived in the same metropolitan area as Meadowview from 1980 to 1992. Between 1989 and 1992, I visited Meadowview many times, studied the history of the high school, the town, and the surrounding area, traced men who had graduated from the high school, and conducted a series of in-depth interviews. Like any ethnographer, I learned a great deal from informal conversation, observation, and interaction. The quotations in this book are all drawn from tape-recorded conversations I had with thirty-nine men who had graduated from Meadowview High School in the early 1970s. I also interviewed eighteen men from other schools in the area who were their contemporaries, some of their female classmates, and some of the men's wives, parents, and former teachers. Most of the interviews were conducted in people's homes, but about a quarter took place in restaurants, parks, and offices. Of the thirty-nine men from Meadowview High School with whom I had extensive conversations, six were Hispanic and three were Asian American. Thirty were non-Hispanic White of various European ancestries. I describe the men I quote most extensively when they first appear and in Appendix 1. Three of them were Hispanic and two were Asian American. All spoke English as their primary language and all who had children spoke English in the home.

In 1970, when the men I describe were in high school, the population of Meadowview was almost 95 percent white and less than 1 percent black. In terms of the great bifurcation between black and white that dominates discussions of race in the United States, the town was overwhelmingly white, but in terms of racial-ethnic category, ancestry, country of origin, and ethnic identification, it was certainly not homogeneous.<sup>5</sup> More than one quarter of the population was either foreign born or had at least one foreign-born parent, and 23 percent of the population of the Meadowview High School enrollment area was either Spanish speaking or had a Spanish surname (United States Bureau of the Census 1972).

The heterogeneity of the community was reflected in the graduates of its high school. Of the two hundred and forty-seven young men who graduated from Meadowview High School in 1972, one hundred and seventy-five (71 percent) could be categorized as non-Hispanic White, fifty-six (23 percent) as Hispanic, thirteen (5 percent) as Asian American, and three (1 percent) as African American. The non-Hispanic White students included young men who had been born in Europe as

well as the children, grandchildren, or more remote descendants of immigrants from a dozen European countries, as well as men whose parents had moved from various regions of the United States and North America. Similarly, the Hispanic students included young men whose immediate families came from Spain, from several countries in South and Central America, and from Mexico, as well as some whose ancestors had lived in California for generations. The thirteen Asian American students were descendants of immigrants from at least four countries.

Mary Waters (1990) combined analysis of responses to the 1980 census questions on ethnicity with interviews conducted in Pennsylvania and in the California county that includes Meadowview. Waters examined the ethnic identification of people whose parents were from different ethnic or national backgrounds. She described ethnicity as “optional” in two senses: as a supplement to identities based on other characteristics, not a core identity, and as a choice for people with several possible ancestral identities who can select between them or combine elements of several. So a family may eat corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick’s Day to mark their Irish heritage and celebrate Columbus Day to show that they are Italian American. Waters’s analysis of the census data showed that this type of ethnic optionality is not only a local, but also a national phenomenon.

In describing their own ethnicity, the men I talked to spoke in the same terms as Waters’s informants and frequently described strategic and situational choices. One man told me that until recently he had always listed “White” for his children’s ethnicity. The elementary school district in which his children were enrolled was implementing a program of busing the children from his neighborhood in order to achieve desegregation of enrollment. However, minority children from his neighborhood would not be bused, since they were living in a “good, white neighborhood” and attending a “good, white school” already.<sup>6</sup> As a result of a conversation with his neighbor, a school counselor, the man recalled his wife’s mother’s Hispanic heritage and reregistered his children as Hispanic so that they would not have to be bused. I heard an almost identical story from a man who had always described himself as white, but had just discovered the category “Pacific Islander” and now used that.

In my interviews, the racial–ethnic category was not associated with different fundamental values about the place of fatherhood and family

in men's lives, although some men did invoke their particular ethnic or cultural background to explain adherence to values that were in fact widely shared. I was struck by the way that men whose ancestry was Italian, Chinese, Irish, Portuguese, Filipino, or Mexican (none of whom spoke their ancestral language to their children) invoked, in almost identical terms, the "old country values" of their fathers as a support for the importance of family life, loyalty, and respect for the older generation. I found a remarkable degree of uniformity in men's depictions of the central elements of fatherhood, a discovery that mirrors the similar findings of a dominant image of motherhood by researchers who have studied diverse groups of mothers (Garey 1999; Hays 1996; Segura 1994; Walker 1990).

My study is not one of the racial-ethnic patterning of difference but is an investigation of the composition of, and internal contradiction within, a cultural model of successful male adulthood and fatherhood. While labels such as "Hispanic" and "Asian American" certainly point to important aspects of discrimination in the United States, they also accept a particular racializing division of people and obscure other crucial dimensions of difference. Denise Segura (1994), for instance, discovered that Latinas did not share a uniform orientation to motherhood, but rather that there were important distinctions between mothers who had immigrated from Mexico and Mexican American women who were themselves born and raised in the United States. To use the categories Hispanic or Latino to include Californians of Mexican descent whose families have been in the United States for several generations as well as immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina, and other countries in Central or South America; or to classify as Asian American third-generation Chinese Americans as well as people who have themselves immigrated or whose parents immigrated from China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and the Philippines is not so much to recognize cultural difference as it is to impose dominant American patterns of discrimination and difference.

My interviews, which I quote in detail, revealed a basic pattern of goals and tensions that was shared by the men with whom I talked. I did not find that the Asian American or Hispanic men I talked to, or the men whose parents, grandparents, or more remote ancestors had come from various parts of Europe, had different visions of what it means to be a successful man and a successful father in the contemporary United