Q: How would you characterize your research?

I studied with feminists in an era in the ’80s when feminist scholarship was coming of age and being accepted in the academy. I was lucky to be a man interested in gender issues when it was a relatively new thing to do. The theoretical and methodological tools were there. So it was not a hard transition, to be able to apply that lens and these informed theories and methods to the examination of men’s lives. That was a fruitful coincidence of timing. I had worked as a city planner and a community organizer doing work with women’s groups and historical preservation of houses. I was familiar with applied sociology. But what happened in between doing those professional jobs and coming back to graduate school was I had kids. And I was frustrated by the fact that popular books on how to father were quite limited. They were either poking fun at men for being incompetent or were very scholarly and not that accessible or practical for how to do it.

When I had a part-time planning job I went back to community college and got certified to be a child development specialist in a daycare center. I already had a B.A. in community studies. I took a few courses in child development at night and realized I knew very little about it. When I went back to graduate school I was able to put together that experience of some training in child development and family studies with a sociologist’s view of the world in terms of power, inequality, and access.

As a sociologist I began to ask questions: Why would men be involved in raising children? Or why would they not be involved? I’ve used different lenses to address these questions. Sometimes it has to do with politics or warfare, or the control and distribution of resources, or the organization of family, kinship. Those different lenses for looking at the world introduced me to scholarship across different disciplines. Certainly history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and, fairly centrally, women’s studies and family studies have informed that scholarship. You can’t understand with reference to one lens what’s going on in the world. Cross-cultural research played very heavily because cultures organize the raising of infants differently, and cultures change depending on their circumstances.

My personal interest in having children, and feeling that there was not a cultural template and not a personal model for me to emulate on how to be a father, all led me on a wonderful journey.

Q: Part of what I hear you saying is that you wanted to father your children more than the culture had taught you, or showed you, or maybe even rewarded you?

Yes, absolutely. For whatever reason, I was motivated to have a personal relationship with my kids that was more nurturing than I’d experienced from my own father, and than most people my age experienced with their fathers.
a wonderful journey

And the funny thing is, once I embarked on that, I realized that I got more credit for doing a small amount, certainly than my wife, who was expected to do it all [laughing] and who was taken for granted. That alerted me to the ways in which our cultural understandings and our expectations for men’s involvements in families have been so low. That’s probably a product of the 1950s and 1960s environment in which I was raised, where mothers were expected to do virtually all of the child care and housework and men were expected to be breadwinners and have a life and identity outside of the home.

Q: What are you working on now? Are you still doing research?

I am, just not as much. The dean job has expanded to fill the available space. But some of the papers that I’ve been working on in the last decade have been related somewhat to policy. So, what would policy that promotes father involvement look like? I have colleagues at various places who are doing research on parental leave, some of the programs for child care and flex time—many are workplace centered, but some are more social-welfare policies. Things like equal pay for equal wages, and universal health care, have a huge impact on how children develop, so looking at what governments and societies can do for the benefit of children, and how that relates to gender equity. You have different models. Some societies are very much committed to doing child-supported policies, but they have a breadwinner model where women stay at home and take care of the kids.

And then you have other societies like Norwegian, Swedish, and Scandanavian models, with more of an embrace of gender equality. They have daddy days, where there’s a certain amount of parental leave, which is quite generous by our standards. You can take multiple weeks off at the time of a birth or adoption of a child. And if you want to use that, you have to use that for the father—it’s an extra. I’ve been looking at some policies like that to see what difference it makes, and whether we should be doing those kinds of things. Workplaces are not particularly friendly to parents in general, whether they be men or women. One prospect of elevating the issues of men as parents, in the public sphere, is it has the potential to increase the value of child development and parenting and mothering at the same time by making more visible some of those dilemmas. We have assumed as social scientists, certainly during the ’60s and ’70s and most of the ’80s and ’90s, that children need mothers and mothers are good at parenting, and men need jobs and industry needs men. And somehow we haven’t put those two things together. Both are needed for both.

Q: How did you work it out in your own home?

[Laughing] Well, my wife was employed, and so we had lots of meetings and lots of negotiation and lists.

I find in my research that most people don’t like to make explicit who does what, particularly about the housework. So one of the techniques I adopted in my studies was not to make it too explicit, but to have questions that did an internal counting, interviewing people separately, sometimes simultaneously.

There’s a way in which my attention to the details of running houses kind of pushed me into a much more thoroughly feminist investigation of the inequality of housework. And why our assumptions about housework were [that] only women can do it, when in fact the skills required are not gendered in the least.

Q: What do the data show?

I spent a good long time learning about the kind of research. Many of these researchers came out of a home economic tradition. They were really good at collecting data about the efficiency with which you run a home, and how you do this and that. [Researchers] started tracking this in the ’60s, and from then until now men have more than doubled their contribution to housework—on average, and regardless of their family situation. So even if you have a so-called traditional looking family where the man has a job and the woman doesn’t, and she’s a stay-at-home mom, they’re doing twice as much housework. The child care varies more than that; there’s also been a doubling there.

Much of my early career was spent documenting that and trying to learn what are the conditions under which men would do more . . . and it mostly has to do with money and power. Did they have more time because they were working less, and did their wives make more money? Did their wives have less time? And so it was a pressed-into-service, kind of practical solution that broke down the barriers of attitudes such as, “Well, I can’t do that because that’s not a man’s job.” In past decades there were a lot of assumptions that maybe there are biologically hard-wired dispositions that we can’t go against. In fact, my work has found that our assumptions about the dispositions flow from how we organize our daily lives, and how we organize our daily lives is largely determined by the material circumstances that we find ourselves in. In looking at how couples have adjusted to doing family...
work, we find that they do it out of necessity, and they have to adjust their attitudes to make it okay. They can have attitudes that are wildly different from their practices and are able to somehow justify that. I think the bar is being raised. We’re expecting men to be more active parents and do more housework, but we don’t expect them to do half of it. So what’s interesting to me is that things we didn’t used to expect men and women to share are now at least open for negotiation—cooking, shopping, meal preparation and meal clean up, washing the dishes and that sort of thing. That’s now pretty much up for grabs. Transportation of kids is frequently done by men these days, and shared. Certain things like laundry and

THERE’S A WAY IN WHICH PARENTING OPENS MEN UP TO THE FULL EXPERIENCE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN.

some of the planning, especially emotional planning, are still primarily done by women. But even with those, there are a subset of men who are doing more of it. We have an economic environment in which men’s jobs are being cut much more quickly than women’s jobs, and that’s been true now for over a decade. And so, I think we’ll have more and more pressure for people to share more. The kids who are raised in those families where at least some sharing is going on expect to share in their own relationships. We’re in kind of a self-perpetuating cycle. We’ll have more of a convergence of gender roles.

Q: Could you touch a little on some of your other papers and research?

In the last decade I’ve done quite a bit of research with working-class families. In southern California a large proportion of those families are Latino. I thought it was important to understand the interplay of economic and cultural factors, particularly because we have images of men as being masculine, a masculinity defined by culture—so, looking at machismo. But in doing research with those families we found that men are very involved in an emotional way, and more expressive on average than Anglo families. That tended to dispel the stereotypes of Mexican American men as being uninvolved, unemotional, and distancing themselves. They do on average a little bit less on the housework side. Certainly in the emotional involvement with children they’re quite high. But some real tensions emerge, as they do in all families, when girls reach puberty and the father changes. So then, how to be an effective father in a culture that tends to stereotype women and women’s sexuality in certain ways?

It’s important to see how generalizable these different patterns are; so I’ve gone to different cultures, different historical eras, different ethnic groups, different social classes, or different professions in order to ask the question: What would make men involved? When does it help children’s development, or their own personal development, or their relationship? I’ve done some research on marital-satisfaction or child-development outcomes and asked that question over and over in different contexts:

When does it matter if fathers are involved? By and large it matters considerably. Particularly because mothering is usually good enough, and the bedrock upon which children have healthy development. So, when fathers are also involved—you could say the same thing about another parent; it could be another lesbian mom, could be another gay dad. Some of my colleagues studying fathers think it’s all about male role models. I think it’s just about having two loving, involved people who care about you—the net worth to the child is better social development, better academic performance. And it’s always net on what would have happened otherwise, because we’re all defined by our own limitations. But given what someone can accomplish, if you have two active people loving you and setting limits and being consistent, it’s better for the kid.

One thing I’ve been studying for the last five years is different family forms—looking at stepfather families, and comparing them to birth-father families. And the birth-father families generally look better, because this is a couple that got married, had children, stayed together, and was on that kind of successful trajectory. Whereas about half, more than half of children don’t follow that simple one-family-for-their-whole-upbringing. Then, looking at the subset where oftentimes the mother has kids, the father is out of the picture, and another man comes in and there is a stepfather or boyfriend. Those families don’t look the same as each other. There are more challenges in blended families, and it’s harder to assume the blended role.

But when you ask the question—“Is the kid better off having a better relationship with his biological father who doesn’t live there anymore or with the stepfather who does live there?”—the answer by and large is, either one. If the child has a positive relationship with either father figure, statistically it does not matter which one for predicting risky behaviors (not to say it doesn’t matter—certainly it matters to the individual child). But for delinquency type stuff—getting in trouble with the law, being dishonest, doing drugs, or having early sexuality, things like that that are big risk factors—having a man to relate to and feel loved by is really important.

And so, thirty years later after studying this stuff, I can answer the question and say, yes. Fathers do matter. They matter to the kids, and the type of fathering matters to them. And certainly, now as I’m getting older, I’m looking at the literature on aging and men who retire or become less defined by their jobs, and they usually lament the fact that they didn’t have stronger personal relationships with their children.

There’s a way in which parenting opens men up to the full experience of what it means to be human, in the way that women have experienced this traditionally. And I think that’s good for men, good for society, and good for gender equality, because it balances things.

—Alice Evans interviewed Scott Coltrane in June.