This book is about low-income black fathers in America who, for one reason or another, live separate and away from their children. These men are a notorious group. They are often publicly portrayed as unemployed, uneducated, and unwilling to provide or take responsibility for the children they are thought to needlessly produce. As Hall suggests, “they are considered somewhat like phantoms or villains and alleged to have demonstrated little or no real feelings for their families’ well-being” (Hall 1981:159). Yet, much of what the public assumes about the attitudes and behaviors of black fathers is predicated on a tangle of myth and nonempirical lore. Furthermore, this common wisdom tends to be grounded on the perceptions of social workers, custodial mothers, and social scientific interpretations of the words and experiences they offer.

The past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in manhood and fatherhood studies. Additionally, recent dramatic changes in welfare policy require noncustodial fathers to be more accountable for the children they produce. Yet despite these emphases, the parenthood experiences of adult black, never-married fathers who do not live with their children remain a neglected area of study in family research. What It Means to Be Daddy fills this void. This is a book constructed on the words of black fathers. Chapters and categories emanate from the rich descriptions men generously provided about their fatherhood. It is their thoughts about parenthood, work, relationships, and everyday life that are the foundation of all discussion. Resolute and poignant, they tell us that African American live-away fathers are not as paternally callous as popular notions insinuate. Nor is their manhood and fatherhood as unidimensional as it may publicly appear. Indeed, learning about these men’s lives is somewhat analogous to a journey through a Walter Mosley novel. The black male characters are complex and the life decisions they make are compounded by the range of human emotions they demonstrate. These fathers experience feelings of anger and love. They exhibit parental steadiness and devotion. They feel excitement and frustra-
tion. They are sensitive to pain and rejection. They express feelings of sorrow and joy. And most possess a desire to be good fathers to their children.¹

Still, there is more to this story. The emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of black men can be understood and described only in relation to the broader meaning of fatherhood they mediate for themselves within their respective circumstances. This negotiation occurs as they interact with their children, others, and institutions in often hostile, hazy, and uncertain social and economic realms. Relative to other groups, African American men experience some of the nation’s highest rates of physical illness, homicide, suicide, substance abuse, incarceration, unemployment, and underemployment. Meanwhile, over 40 percent of black children live below official poverty levels, a figure that has changed little in the past three decades. In essence, then, the obstacles and weighty dilemmas of life for black men are produced and sustained primarily by the structure of American society itself.²

It is this cognition that provides a general guideline for subsequent chapters of my book on African American live-away fatherhood. Each element of the story is an attempt to clarify and elucidate low-income black men’s experiences, to place them in context of the world that surrounds them, and to provide a means by which family researchers, policy makers, and the general public can listen and learn from black fathers themselves. In turning the pages of this narrative one is likely to discover that the account of black live-away fatherhood is less a study of black men and poor families than a disquisition on the relationships between the economy, social relationships, and conjoining cultural ideals that make up the very fabric of our daily world.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIAL EXPERIENCES

What do black live-away fathers “do” as fathers and how do we explain their behavior? This question and our concerns about African American families are not new. Since the turn of the century, black live-away fathers have often been crudely linked to and blamed for the disproportionate level of poverty and relative poor quality of life for African American women and their children. Indeed, statistics seem to confirm this assumption. Currently, 70.4 percent of all African American births are out of wedlock—the highest proportion ever recorded. Relative to other demographic groups, African American children in fatherless homes are currently the poorest of all. Since the mid 1970s approximately 50 percent of African American fatherless fam-
families have been poor. The well-being of African American children and their relation to fathers creates more alarm when we consider that if current trends continue, over 85 percent of African American children will spend some portion of their childhood “fatherless.”

Researchers, policy makers, and the general public commonly assume that the full-time presence of the fathers in the lives of black children will break the cycle of poverty and mediate the detrimental effects of single-parent households. Thus, for decades upon decades many have attempted to explain poverty by showing its relation to “fatherlessness.” Social scientists have traditionally poked and prodded in black communities in an attempt to understand and explain the psyches and behaviors of men and women in live-away father, custodial mother family forms.

Sites of study, sample population sizes, race and gender of the researchers, among other variables, have all varied over time. However, queries and studies of the values, attitudes, behaviors, and familial forms of black American family life have tended to take one of three perspectives. One of the earliest developed perspectives assumes that black family experiences are due to customs and behaviors that can be directly linked to their African cultural heritage. In other words, to explain contemporary familial attitudes and familial behaviors one must look to past and present West African societies. The work of W. E. B. DuBois, Melville Herskovitz, Niara Sudarkasa, Wade Nobles, and Andrew Billingsley, among others, provide support for this interpretation of African American family life. From their perspective, black family structure, customs, attitudes, and values are unique from other demographic groups. Moreover, they are vestiges of an African past adapted to historical racial hostility and discrimination experienced in the United States. In recent years, Antonio McDaniel has carried on this traditional approach by examining the historical living arrangements of children and concluding that while it and family structure are influenced by the socioeconomic past, black Americans, due to a culture rooted in Africa, are predisposed to certain familial forms over others.

As a counter to this perspective, other researchers argue that familial Africanisms were destroyed in slavery. Thus, no direct link exists between African familial patterns and those born and raised on American soil. With emancipation, black family life underwent further destruction as ex-slaves no longer had the paternalistic structure and stability slavery afforded them. According to E. Franklin Frazier (1939), racial discrimination placed them at a severe economic disadvantage following slavery. Consequently, most of them ill-adapted to life after slavery. Black men were unable to meet...
the economic needs of their families. Relatively high rates of single-mother headed households, out-of-wedlock births, and absent fatherhood were outcomes. These characteristics resulted in the self-perpetuating pathological, dysfunctional, disorganized, and deviant black familial systems. Frazier’s analysis suggested that families would become more stable with economic improvement. Following the Race Relations Model developed by his mentor, Robert E. Park, Frazier concluded that lower-income African American families must assimilate into the dominant middle-class, European-American lifestyle if they hope to produce well-functioning, success-oriented children and adults. For Frazier, low-income black familial disorganization and pathology was a transition that with economic improvement would eventually bring black families to emulate the middle-class lifestyles, values, and behaviors of European-Americans and the small black middle-class of the period. Though he linked experiences of poor black families with racial oppression he implicitly attributed their economic deprivation to cultural characteristics. His conclusions buttressed the 1965 report on the Negro family authored by Daniel P. Moynihan. Here an even more negative interpretation of black family structure was put forth. The report argued that, rather than experiencing a class transition, black families lived within a never-ending “tangle of pathology.” Moynihan argues that female-dominated, matriarchal households were inherently dysfunctional, disorganized, unstable family structures that were the source of economic deprivation among low-income black Americans rather than the contrary position presented by Frazier. This cycle inhibited their ability to think and act in ways that would lead to strong familial systems and economic success, and led to a steady decline in the black family system.5

Still additional social scientists offered a third view. In the 1970s Furstenberg, Hershberg, and Modell, and Engerman and others, argued that the experiences of black families were primarily due to their socioeconomic position, rather than a primacy of cultural components. Their explanations suggested that if black families were not disproportionately poor, their familial values, attitudes, behaviors, and structures would be similar to those of mainstream middle-class European-Americans. John Scanzoni (1971), Joyce Ladner (1971), and others theorize that the form and content of black families are adaptations to poor social and economic circumstances. Both the form and the content of low-income black families are rational alternatives to these conditions.6

Are contemporary paternal attitudes and behaviors of black men vestiges of their African heritage adapted to racism and other forms of dis-
crimination? Are they a reflection of black men’s and families’ inability to escape the remnants of slavery, adapt and transition into middle-class normative familial values and customs? Are they simply a direct response to consistent economic inequities that historically place black men, women, and children on the economy’s lowest hierarchical rungs? The answers remain a matter of debate and are not intended to be answered in the scope of this book. What we do know however, is that fatherhood and family do not exist in a vacuum. A complete and holistic study must include an assessment of the role of culture, history, and economics. Sociologist C. Wright Mills explained, “Neither the life of an individual, nor the history of a society, can be understood without understanding both” (1959:3). In the end, the task is to examine how black families and fathers themselves interpret their past and present, particularly as it relates to their parenting options and decisions. The overriding purpose of What It Means to Be Daddy is to do just that. Here, how black live-away fathers define and act within their paternal role; and how significant others, communities, institutions, and the general public enhance or inhibit the part they play in their children’s lives are explored. The roles of intimate others, work conditions, education, as well as the choices of men themselves, play a part in the development and maintenance of contemporary paternal behavior.

CONSIDERING THE PAST AND PRESENT: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Thus, our investigation of black live-away fatherhood requires us to use an ecological framework to understand family life, obligations, and decisions in terms of the dynamic social, cultural, political, and economic environments within which they were developed and are presently embedded. The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner provides a theoretical framework for understanding the role each of these elements play in the everyday lives of black families. He theorized that these multiple environments are best conceptualized as four spheres, or “four concentric circles, each contained within the next” (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The smallest of these structures and the smallest setting in which men engaged as live-away fathers is the microsystem—for example, the dyadic relationship between fathers and their children. Interaction between microsystems, father-child relationship—child’s household, or father’s work—child’s household form the mesosystem. These elements are housed within the boundaries of the exosystem; large entities such as
economic and political institutions in which the father may not actively participate but nevertheless may affect or be affected. Finally, each of these smaller bodies occur within what may be called the macrosystem, the largest ecological sphere. In this study, these are historical and contemporary Western ideals of family and public popular images of fatherhood that are consistently demonstrated through varying media and other institutional outlets (Bronfenbrenner 1979). They also undergird the content and form of family life for never-married, black, low-income parents and their children.

FATHERS AND CHILDREN: MICROSYSTEMS
In technical terminology, a microsystem is the pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the individual in a given setting. It is an environment in which fathers directly participate, and it consists of persons with whom he interacts on a face-to-face basis (e.g., children, close relatives and friends, and coworkers), their connection with other persons in the setting, the nature of these links, and their indirect influence on the individual. Ecological theory assumes that individual behavior and motivations cannot be understood solely from the objective properties of one particular setting without reference to its meaning for the people in the setting.

For our purposes, the relationship between live-away fathers and their children is the primary microsystem of concern in this study. It also explores their experiences in other microsettings, such as their places of employment and their own households. This study is concerned not only with the objective element of a father’s fatherhood in the father-child and other microsystems, but also with the way in which their respective properties, such as functions, roles, and meaning are each perceived by the fathers themselves. However, we cannot understand what occurs in this small setting without first exploring the elements that surround it. Thus prior to studying how men define their fatherhood and analyzing their descriptions of paternal behavior we must understand the external contexts within which they mediate their parenthood.

FRIENDS AND OTHER FAMILY: THE MESOSYSTEM
The world of live-away fathers goes beyond the primary links that exists between themselves and their children. The links between this and other microsystems may affect what men do as parent. For example, fathers have varying types of relationships with their children’s mothers that may serve
to hinder or encourage their parental involvement. Additionally, their environment is extended whenever they move into a new setting, such as a marriage, remarriage, or intimate relationship, a new place of work, or enrollments in classes to improve their skills and education. Interconnections and interactions between the father/child and other settings may assume various forms. Fathers also interact with their own parents, siblings, and other kin internal or external to their household. Additionally, formal and informal communication may occur among settings, and knowledge and attitudes may exist in one setting about another. Like the microsystem, the mesosystem too exists within a surrounding body. These elements make up a father’s “exosystem” and influence his daily life on both the micro- and mesosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

**SURROUNDING INSTITUTIONS: THE EXOSYSTEM**

An exosystem is comprised of one or more settings that live-away fathers may never enter but in which events occur that affect what happens in their immediate environment. It extends beyond the immediate setting directly affecting live-away fathers. More specifically, it is the character and content of surrounding activities occurring in past and present economic, political, and social institutions (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

The pressures of the economy influence men’s experiences in the labor market, the educational system, and ultimately the familial arrangements and activities of working family members. Live-away black fatherhood as a familial form has been developed, sustained, and established within our economic, social, and cultural institutions. That is, what fathers do is in part a consequence of live-away fatherhood as it has been abetted by the state through law and social policy. Their paternal activities have also become convention in communities as men and women have mediated the paternal role in context of their socioeconomic and political environments.

**IDEAL FATHERHOOD AND AMERICAN CULTURE: THE MACROSYSTEM**

Micro-, meso-, and exosystems all interact with one another to influence fathers’ paternal attitudes and behavior. Intimate relationships, family systems, work and friendship networks (microsystems); the interaction between them (mesosystems), economic, educational, and political institutions (exosystems)—all interlink to create a complex interplay between fathers and their environments. A macrosystem “refers to consistencies, in
the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (Bronfenbrenner 1979:26). Put simply, there exists laws, policies, dominant customs and values that encourage or discourage certain family forms over others. Belief systems, ideology, and culture mostly justify and perpetuate the conditions of each environment. It helps institutionalize notions and ideals about fatherhood and family that exist. In practice, these may vary for demographic groups by race or ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and various other social and economic factors. For example, poor and working-class African Americans experience work conditions that are often qualitatively different from those holding white-collar occupations earning middle and upper-middle class incomes. Consequently, their recreational environments and activities may also differ, as well as their attitudes, concerns, and behaviors with regard to family and households. Regardless of racial or economic differences, however, all groups are expected to assimilate and adapt the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the dominant, European-American middle-class group. They are considered deviant if they do not appear to live up to this standard.

Overall, ecological theory allows for the observation of African American live-away fatherhood in the historical and cultural environment in which it occurs. It also allows for the analysis of their paternal ideals and attitudes according to the value system of their indigenous culture or subculture—thus providing a more balanced picture of the perceptions, roles, functions, and behaviors of this category of men than found in past research. Ecological theory is intended to provide a general framework for my study. Other than this, alternative theories were not explicitly used to guide the research. In effect, the result was essentially a grounded theory—generated through the use of original categories and relationships that were derived from the collected data.  

THE FATHERS: WHERE THEY ARE FROM, WHO THEY ARE, AND HOW TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THEM

Inevitably, when people inquire about a work on live-away African American fathers, one of the first questions asked is: “Where did you find them?”—almost as if they were an invisible group. True, black men in general are a notoriously difficult group to access. Qualitative research con-
ducted by Cannon and others (1988) suggest that recruiting black respondents generally requires labor-intensive strategies involving personal contact—usually verbal, face-to-face contact with an African American researcher. The findings of these and other researchers also suggest that when recruiting noncustodial fathers, word of mouth or a snowball technique is a more sufficient technique than traditional social science recruitment strategies, such as letters to those known to fit the study criteria and announcements in the public media. I utilized as many of these strategies as possible—particularly local newspapers, appropriate newsletters and bulletin boards, African American radio stations, word-of-mouth, and face-to-face contact with prospective respondents. Public and posted announcements in various media, organizations, and church bulletin boards in towns and cities met with little to virtually no success. Reliance was placed most heavily on those strategies and settings in which a prospective respondent and myself had face-to-face contact. Visits were made to local malls, auto part stores, government housing developments, local African American events, and major retail stores such as Walmart, Target, and others. Consequently, the respondents in the study tended to be drawn from areas in my proximity—the south and midwest regions of the United States. They primarily resided in one of five states—Texas, Oklahoma, Illinois, Missouri, and Michigan. A few fathers lived in southern states such as North Carolina and Arkansas. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. Fifty-three fathers participated in multiple interviews; data was collected at varying periods from 1994 to 1997.

TRUST AND COMMUNICATION
Establishing trust and communicating the importance of their help in a study of black men, children, and families was the basis of all recruitment strategies and communication with respondents. I made an effort to be honest with potential respondents regarding my identity as a researcher as well as describing the purpose of the study. However, I experienced very little difficulty in locating men interested in participating in the study. I chose to go where black families and men tended to visit, which fortunately were places that were often part of my everyday or weekly activities. These were, for example, major discount retail stores, low-income neighborhoods and communities, and the various gymnasiums, recreational centers, and auto parts stores within them. Bus stops, popular public walkways, and the parking lots of various mom-and-pop type stores in predominantly African American com-
communities were also frequent hangouts. In the end, many fathers expressed
gratitude for being afforded the opportunity to talk about their parenting and
their children. They also explained that the interviews encouraged them to
reflect, according to one father, “on my good and bad habits of being a father.”

THE FATHERS: WHO THEY ARE
The eighty-eight men who participated in this study ranged in age from 19
to 54. Similar to the 19- to 54-year-old African American population as a
whole, the highest percentage of men in the study were under the age of 35.
About half (48 percent) were age 25 to 34; 23 percent were age 35 to 44 and
19 percent were age 19 to 24. They had become fathers at various stages of
their lives. However the majority (56 percent) had done so prior to age 23.
In total, fathers reported living separate from 153 children. Nine percent (8
fathers) reported court-set visitation arrangements with children. Twenty-
five percent had fathered children with multiple mothers.

Their levels of education, too, were reflective of national averages. While
half of the men had completed high school, 15 percent had less than a
twelfth-grade education; 31 percent had some level of college or technical
training in such areas as computer skills, truck driving, restaurant manage-
ment, and business administration. Regardless of training and education,
most fathers (86 percent) earned annual incomes of less than $20,000. Over
38 percent of all fathers earned less than $10,000 in the twelve months prior
to their participation in the study. Those reporting incomes higher than
$20,000 (14 percent) generally did not do so through a single employer.
Rather they tended to work at more than one job and/or participated in the
underground economy. However, regardless of income level, several men
earned some money through underground activity, such as selling goods
(electronics, drugs, and clothing) and services (haircuts, lawn care, home
repair, automobile repair, and vendor food items). In terms of legal employ-
ment, the highest percentage of fathers (38 percent) were employed in var-
ious types of service work. They worked as physical and mental rehabilita-
tion technicians, sales clerks, retail store and supermarket stockers, and as
food service helpers. A large percentage (16) were also employed in the pro-
tective service field as security guards, drivers, and/or nightclub bouncers.
An equal percentage were employed in the construction trade as laborers
for roofers, carpenters, and other building fields. Ten percent of these men
worked in transportation, and 16 percent were officially unemployed. At the
time of their participation in the study, none of these men had ever legally
married the mothers of their noncustodial children.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES
It was my general intent to focus on the perceptions and voice of black, never-married, noncustodial fathers. However, the voices of other African Americans are also included. Thirty-three of the mothers of these fathers’ children also participated in the study. They too were low-income, and all had received some form of welfare assistance since the birth of their children. Interviews with adult children of noncustodial fathers \((n=21)\) of generations past were also collected. Both the mothers of children and adult children were asked to describe their expectations and ideals of fatherhood. They were also asked to describe their experiences with the fathers of their children and their fathers, respectively. The information they shared simultaneously enriched and confounded that presented by the fathers I interviewed. Some of their experiences supported those offered by fathers. Others were quite contradictory. Nonetheless, utilizing the perspectives of these other black demographic groups certainly enhanced the quality and validity of the data collected solely from fathers.\(^8\)

DEFINING LIVE-AWAY FATHERS

Men experience fatherhood in various forms. Some fathers visit their children often, some not at all. Many provide consistent economic support, others have little to offer in this regard. Still, many provide care and nurturance to their children, while others show little if any affection. Various terms have been utilized to define specific types of fatherhood. Noncustodial fathers, absent fathers, deadbeat dads, visiting fathers, sperm fathers—none seemed to capture a true description of the reality of all fathers who, for whatever reason, do not reside with their children on a full-time basis. Each is fairly specific and none encompass the scope and varying forms of fatherhood that exists in black America.

“Noncustodial” or “nonresident” fathers appear to be the preferred terms among contemporary social scientists. It is generally defined as those who do not provide daily emotional support or care to their children. Generally, these children reside with their mother on a full-time basis.

“Absent fathers” is another popular term used to describe the fathers of children who live in single-parent mother-headed households. Generally,
the definition implies that the father has no formal or informal presence in the home. Its use is, perhaps, slightly more popular among media agents than the villainous “deadbeat dad”—a very specific description of “bad” fathers who fail to pay child support. Both the absent father and the deadbeat dad may have, at one time, resided in the home with their children as full-time fathers, contrary to the “sperm father” who, with the biological act of ejaculation, completed his fatherhood prior to the birth of child.

Visiting fathers are those that remember birthdays, holidays, pay child support, and come by to visit on a regular basis. As David Blankenhorn suggests, “a reformed Deadbeat Dad can aspire to become a Visiting Father” (1994:148). Regardless of how many presents he brings or visits, the visiting father remains somewhat distant and separate from that which is the origin of his fatherhood.

The point of origin for a “father”—that is, the basis for his existence as a father—is that point in time at which his child is born. At this point he becomes a father and their exists some attachment between himself and the child—whether it is an emotional bond or simple genetics. The fathers of this study are all situated, in some form or manner, away from their point of origin—their child—the single essence of their fatherhood. They are, in essence, distal fathers. Webster’s Dictionary (1993) defines the term: “distal”: situated away from the point of origin or attachment . . .

Noncustodial fathers, absent fathers, deadbeat dads—none of these terms reflect the general reality of African American fatherhood for those who do not live with their children. A father’s existence precludes his total absence. Moreover, no father lives without some attachment to his child—whether he is present physically, emotionally, part-time, full-time, or at no time. And, regardless of the form of fatherhood, no child is “fatherless”—each and every child has, at least, a biological father. Although the term “distal” comes closest to capturing the essence of fatherhood, its appropriateness for describing the parental attitudes and behaviors for African American fathers is problematic. It is commonly utilized as a medical term and does not fully capture the positive emotional and social aspects of parenting. Equally important, it does not fully describe the range of experiences fathers reported in this study.9

The search for the defining term remains elusive and reflects the ambiguity of the parental role men seem to play in their children’s lives. However, each of these fathers reported that they lived away from their children. They did not use terms such as deadbeat, absent, or noncustodial to describe their status in their children’s lives. Rather, many of these fathers reported that
their formal “live-away” status was the only element that separated them from other fatherhood forms. Needless to say, fathers who do not reside with their children on a full-time basis are different than those that do. Their position is somewhat remote, separate—regardless of how much money or time and attention they do or do not provide to their children. As a group, they are not necessarily noncustodial—because many do provide consistent care and nurturance to their children. They are not necessarily absent—because many are consistently present in the daily lives of their children. They are not necessarily “deadbeats”—because, as we shall see, many fathers provide some form of economic or subsistence support to their children on an informal and often inconsistent basis. Live-away fathers, though, may or may not be noncustodial, may or may not be absent, may or may not be deadbeat dads, visiting fathers, or sperm fathers. The term encompasses a multitude of father-child relationships and provides a general and more accurate description of such a father’s place in the lives of his children. Terminology aside, this study is concerned with black fathers who, for one reason or another, are not full-time, live-in dads. Formally, they are “live-away” fathers, leading and living lives separate and away from their children.

TELLING THE STORY

We actually begin our story of black live-away fatherhood by examining the macro or cultural elements that encompass men’s daily lives. The images and ideals of fatherhood are interconnected with, and enshroud, the exo-, meso-, and microsystems. Thus, part 1 examines the larger forces that define the social world of fathers. Chapter 1 explores Western notions of fatherhood and masculinity that have historically set standards by which to judge the parental attitudes and behaviors of black men. The apparent behaviors and attitudes of black men have traditionally been viewed as opposite to those of good family men. More importantly, we find that the noncustodial father family form lacks the formal institutional support that may serve to sustain strong paternal bonds with children and healthy relationships with custodial mothers, although, as is explored in chapter 2, African American men have historically found it difficult to live up to Western notions of good fatherhood. Moreover, the noncustodial father/custodial mother family form was created and sustained by past economic, political, and social institutions. Chapter 3 moves us closer to a more intimate understanding of
contemporary fathers’ daily lives. The world of work is examined. For low-income men in particular, the realm of employment, earnings, and sustenance is a harsh and nebulous environment. Their experiences here have consequences for the other elements that make up their daily lives, including their fatherhood.

Part 2 examines what fathers feel significant others expect of them as fathers and how they behave under these circumstances (Chapter Four). In chapter 5, the mothers of their children provide perspectives on what fathers actually do in their parental role, a view that sometimes contrasts with those of fathers and further illustrates the ambiguity of norms that govern interaction between mothers, fathers, and children.

In part 3 fathers’ parenting roles and functions are examined more thoroughly. In chapter 6, they describe what they do for their children. However, not all fathers “do” for their offspring. Chapter 7 explores the parenting decisions and experiences of men who are quite literally “absent” from their children’s lives. These are men who rarely if ever visit or have contact with their live-away offspring. Chapter 8 examines the various elements that present barriers to most fathers who live away from their children. In part 4, chapter 9 examines the implications of this study for improving the lives of black fathers, custodial mothers, and their children.

Overall, each chapter brings us closer to understanding how paternal behaviors evolve as a function of interplay between black fathers and their surrounding environments. Black men modify and impact the world in which they reside, while the spheres and the environment as a whole exert their influence on their fatherhood. Concretely, this all means that we must examine live-away fathers’ attitudes and behaviors in the context of their relationships with significant others, their work conditions and experiences, and past and present contemporary cultural and ideological prescriptions for paternal behavior and involvement. We consider how each of these elements impact upon what fathers do and say as fathers.

Simultaneously, we consider how fathers act to direct and control their everyday paternal circumstances in the context of these surrounding factors. Ultimately, African American men and women create their maternal and paternal roles and functions. However, they do so within ever-evolving present conditions. In the following pages, contemporary black live-away fathers talk about their goals, walk us through their workplaces, allow us to meet their families and children, and enable us to view the world of parenthood through their eyes (Bronfenbrenner 1979; McAdoo 1993).