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## Bringing Mothers and Fathers Together: Undergraduate Studies in Anthropology and Sociology

Angela Castañeda

Matthew Oware  
moware@richmond.edu

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**Bringing Mothers and Fathers Together:  
Undergraduate Studies in Anthropology and Sociology**

**Matthew Oware & Angela Castañeda**

**Introduction**

As social scientists in a combined Sociology and Anthropology department at a small liberal arts institution, we approach research questions on mothering and fathering from our respective disciplines. In the summer of 2014 we made plans to experiment with a first year seminar that would bring our distinct courses together: Oware's *Man Up: Unpacking Manhood and Masculinity*, and Castañeda's *Global Perspectives on Reproduction and Childbirth*. In the fall of 2014, we combined our courses over two-weeks to discuss the roles of fathering and mothering in our research agendas. As we suspected, our courses were unevenly represented on their own with Oware's class enrolling mostly men and Castañeda's mostly women. We utilized a multidisciplinary approach to ask students to unpack the use of the phrase "man up" when applied to fathering and to discuss what it means to "mother," among many other topics. Ultimately the decision to bridge our courses opened the door to many more questions that have only enriched our research, department, and class content on mother and father studies.

In the remainder of this essay we discuss our individual research to illustrate two of the ways we introduce mother and father studies to our students. We begin with an assessment of fatherhood in rap music and progress to discussing doulas and mothering. Specifically, Oware focuses on the constructions of fathering in rap music and Castañeda's work examines how doulas force us to rethink how we understanding mothering through their work. This is followed

by an analysis of a case study on how students in our departmental proseminar course responded to questions on mothering and fathering. Finally, we include a reflection on how bridging mother and father studies impacts our department, students, and our own personal lives.

### **Case Study: Proseminar**

One way we take our research and introduce mother and father studies in more formal ways within the classroom is through the creation of a unique proseminar required course for all majors in our department. This is a quarter credit course that brings sociology and anthropology majors and faculty together to present and discuss recent research.

#### *Fathering*

During one class for the proseminar course Oware presented his research on fathering. Oware's research examines constructions of masculinity, gender, and racial identity in popular culture. Specifically, having grown up listening to, but not critically engaging, rap music, he examined how both male and female rap artists discuss gender and race in their songs. Of course, researchers find that rap music is saturated with misogynistic,<sup>2</sup> hyperviolent,<sup>3</sup> and homophobic lyrics<sup>4</sup> and that some artists themselves may live the lifestyles that they rhyme about—all of these contributing to a type of hegemonic masculinity. Clearly, there are negative aspects to the music. Yet, there remains a dearth of research that examines how artists think about and articulate notions of fatherhood, motherhood, parenting, and so forth. We witness a glimpse of this with the reality television show *Snoop Dogg's Father Hood*, which ran from 2007 to 2009 on the E! network. Several years later Snoop Dogg starred in a reality show on ESPN that

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<sup>2</sup> See Rose 2008 and Kitwana 2002

<sup>3</sup> See Dyson and Hurt 2012

<sup>4</sup> See Hill 2009

chronicled his son's experiences playing high school football. In both series, Snoop, an artist well known for his sexist and violent songs, is presented as a caring, stern, and loving father and husband to his wife and children.

Taken by this alternative understanding of this artist, Oware analyzed the ways high profile rap artists discussed fatherhood and parenting in their music. Previous research finds that some artists speak highly of their biological mothers—think Tupac's "Dear Mama."<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, many of these individuals speak ill of their biological fathers with some deliberately abdicating their familial responsibilities—or stating it as such.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this extant research is not systematic; that is, artists were haphazardly chosen for analysis. Using findings from previous work analyzing Platinum selling rap albums from 2004-2009, Oware's performed a content analysis on 391 songs, revealing that artists made references to their families in 13% of their lyrics, mentioned their biological mothers and fathers 9% and 8% respectively, and talked about aspects related to fatherhood in 7% of their lyrics (2011a; 2011b). Although these percentages are small, what each aspect reveals is intriguing.

One of the findings included the idea that artists place an emphasis on their families well being, what Oware calls "families first" (2011a). An example of this theme comes from the rapper T.I.'s song, "Collect Call," from the compact disc *Paper Trail*. In one verse, he rhymes: "All I got is the family, friends come and go/And with that understandin', I put none befo'/My folk, y'know enough to do the same I hope." Not only does he stress the importance of his family in his life, T.I. also encourages the listener to emphasize this dynamic in their own lives--if we

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<sup>5</sup> See Tyree 2009 and Dyson 2001

<sup>6</sup> See Tyree 2009

know better than we should also put our families first. Similarly, in the song “Mouths to Feed,” from *Release Therapy*, Ludacris raps, “Listen, look I gotta feed my family by any means necessary.” Here, the rapper draws on the famous words of civil rights leader Malcolm X, “by any means necessary,” insinuating that he will go to great lengths to make sure his family members are fed.

Still articulating the importance of family in their lives, some rappers engage in hyperbole; for example, Kanye West in his song “Run This Town,” from the compact disc *Blueprint 3*, states “I bought my whole family whips, no Volvos.” Those who follow West know of his proclivity to overstate his wealth and fame; however, in the above verse he uses such status to purchase expensive cars--whips--for all of his family members, not Volvos, which are lower status vehicles from his perspective. A verse even more braggadocios, but reflective of the care one has for his extended family members, comes from the popular artist Jay-Z in his song “I Made It,” from his album, *Kingdom Come*. He rhymes, “Your baby boy’s a made man I’m a hold tha fam down like three generations/I’m talking when spaceships [everywhere]...” The rapper boasts of his wealth stating that he has so much money that it will benefit family members well into the future; he will have passed away. Indeed, advanced technology--spaceships--will exist. This understanding of family, thinking beyond one’s immediate familial connections and responsibilities, provides the listener some insight into the stated thoughts and beliefs of these individuals.

Another theme that emerged in the analysis of male rappers’ lyrics was their wholehearted embrace of their roles as fathers. For example, The Game, in the song “Like

Father, Like Son,” from the compact disc *Documentary*, raps “My son’s ultrasound is the closest I ever been to heaven.” The poetic resonance of this verse jumps off the page. Indeed, the line is more compelling because The Game frequently rhymes about his membership in the notoriously violent gang The Bloods operating out of California. In his song “Do Your Time,” from the *Theater of the Mind*, Ludacris states: “You lookin at a man that would die for his daughter, just to let her breathe.” Far from abdicating responsibility for his child, he claims that he would end his life for the betterment of hers. Lil Wayne epitomizes the idea of embracing fatherhood in his song “La La” from *Carter III*: “...yeah my daughter be the twinkle of my eye/You hurt her, you kill me, and nigga I ain’t ‘bout to die/See y’all are at ground, and my daughter is my sky/I swear I look in her face and I just want to break out and fly/four tears in my face and you ain’t never hear me cry.” Albeit reflecting traditional notions of masculinity that draw on violence, the rapper does express his love for his daughter and insists that those who would harm her would face his aggression.

In conclusion, Oware found that albeit a minority of the lyrics, these men offered sentiments that were pro-family and pro-children, contrary to previous literature. He argues that the rappers in these samples presented a more complicated type of masculinity than what we see on television and hear in popular music. They are more than caricatures of stereotypical black manhood, presenting themselves as providers, caring and loving, and protective despite their overly “hard” presentation. Indeed, these articulations align with the normative understandings of

fathering and fatherhood and parallels findings in sociologically oriented research addressing this topic.<sup>9</sup>

### *Mothering*

On another day in the proseminar course, Castañeda presented her research on doulas and mothering. In particular, the work of a doula, defined by Klaus, Kennell, and Klaus as “a woman experienced in childbirth who provides continuous physical, emotional and information support to the mother before, during and just after childbirth” (3) represents a complex and multidimensional form of intimate labor. Often doulas are associated with the phrase “mothering the mother” a notion that gets at the emotional support doulas offer women during labor (3).

Following her own experience with a birth doula at the birth of her son, Castañeda began questioning the role of a doula in relationship to anthropological interpretations of mothering.

In 2012, Castañeda started an ethnographic project with a fellow doula that focused on a small U.S. Midwestern town with a thriving doula community. They used multiple modes of data collection, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, online surveys, and content analysis of web-based material such as blogs. They conducted interviews with twenty-five doulas, sixteen labor and delivery nurses, four administrators, and six childbirth educators. In addition, they utilized participant observation by engaging with this community as practicing birth and postpartum doulas for dozens of mothers and families.

As a part of this research, Castañeda investigated the multiple ways mothering takes place through the intimate practices of doula-ing. She found that doulas work to cultivate trust with a laboring woman through their use of observation, continuous care, bodily upkeep,

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<sup>9</sup> See Edin and Mincy 2009 and Jordan 2009

closeness, and touch. Doulas wipe foreheads, share supportive words, and hold hands with laboring women, and when they walk away from a woman and her newly delivered baby, they carry personal knowledge and information about that woman as part of the mothering that forms their work as doulas. In particular, Castañeda looked at the ways in which doulas balance expectations of mothers, care providers and their fellow doulas.

For mothers, the intensity of the experience they share with doulas and laboring women translates in potentially permeable boundaries, which doulas must take care to manage. Jane, a veteran doula, described mothering the mother as a “dance” where she must honor who the laboring woman is and what she wants with her own knowledge as a birth worker:

While we’re developing this relationship and bonding, we can’t bond completely. She needs to keep her separateness...Because I need to be a projection screen, otherwise, she might try to please me or get me to like her, in a way that she changes what she wants to do. And that’s not necessarily healthy for her.

Today much of this mothering takes place in institutionalized settings with the overwhelming majority of women in the United States giving birth in hospitals.

As doulas transition to institutional spaces, such as hospitals, they interact most with labor and delivery nurses, and unfortunately, the relationship between these birth workers is often one fraught with tension.<sup>10</sup> Institutional knowledge and technological practices encourage nurses to see a birthing body as potentially dangerous and to engage in intimate labor that is different from the mothering doulas practice with women. Courtney, a labor and delivery nurse

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<sup>10</sup> See Gilliland 2002 and Papagni 2006



noted, “There are just two different ways to view the situation---one is from the nurse which views birth as a potential problem waiting to happen and the other is from a doula who views birth as a natural process.” In this research, Castañeda heard resentment and frustration from nurses when discussing the impact of this standardization. Courtney shared her experience as a nurse stating:

I wanted to be the professional doula and take care of the mother, and you really can't do that because there is so much to do because of all the interventions, which are ridiculous. Moms and nurses are overwhelmed with the amount of things to do, starting IVs, charting, monitors, and if you have a lot going on or a problem, emotionally the moms fall out of the picture.

This use of clinical knowledge to standardize the birthing body further alienates doulas within the hospital and frames their role as “fourth-class citizens” (Norman and Rothman 267). A nurse’s intimate labor produces a birthing body rooted in a technological frame, which is clearly situated in Robbie Davis-Floyd’s technocratic model of birth, which opposes the mothering doulas practice by instead emphasizing how “the institution is a more significant social unit than the individual” (Davis-Floyd 483).

The doula community itself is also a space where doulas find themselves navigating the boundaries between perceived degrees of professionalism in mothering within their practice. As doulas explain their work, they describe two perceived competing logics: one influenced by embodied care and the other a neoliberal market. Embodied care is used as a lived experience that is “relational, fluid and processual” (Jaye 41). This reflects what was heard from doulas who

speaking about their work in terms of a “doula spirit” that is performed, shared, and demonstrated through their interactions with mothers, fellow doulas, and other care providers. This form of care competes with a neoliberal market model in which individuals see themselves as sets of skills that need careful marketing (Gershon 539; Harvey 42). The difficulty in balancing a doula spirit within an increasingly commercialized birth culture is echoed in Helen’s observations:

[I find with] the business mind versus the mothering mind, there is a huge conflict. The conflict is why am I charging to do something women have been doing for thousands of years? It should just be a given, but I think the reason I’m charging is because the world has changed. And the birth culture has changed.

As doulas move between worlds and learn to negotiate liminal spaces, they occupy space that allows them to generate new cultural narratives about birth and mothering. Critical analysis of doulas as they both encounter and redefine boundaries suggests new ways of approaching maternity care, reproduction reform, and what it means to mother.

### **Student Perceptions of Mothering and Fathering**

One of the benefits to offering our proseminar is our ability to foster intimate conversations with both sociology and anthropology majors. Here we focus on the most recent proseminar offered at our institution as a small case study and a chance to hear from undergraduate students on their understanding of mothering and fathering. The class totaled 14 students with the majority being anthropology majors. The largest portion of students were juniors.

As previously mentioned, we both presented our research to the proseminar class in the spring of 2016. Prior to our talks we each asked the students to answer these questions: “Who can mother?”; “Who can father?”; “What does it mean to mother?” and “What does it mean to

father?”<sup>11</sup> We separated the responses into three categories: biologically determined, culturally constructed, and a combination of both. Biologically determined answers essentialized mothering and fathering, these acts are connected to chromosomally male and female bodies. Cultural construction refers to the specific refutation of biological and genetic arguments for mothering and fathering. The final set of responses included a combination of both perspectives.

**Table 1: Perceptions of Mothering and Fathering [1]**

	<b>Mothering (n=13)</b>	<b>Fathering (n=14)</b>
<b>Biologically Determined</b>	“The act done by females of caring and upbringing.” <b>Total 4</b>	“Any male can be a father figure.” <b>Total 6</b>
<b>Culturally Constructed</b>	“Anyone can mother.” <b>Total 7</b>	“When it comes down to it, I feel even animals can father humans and humans can father animals.” <b>Total 7</b>
<b>Both</b>	“Mothering is most likely done by a female due to our societ[al] definition of the word “mother.” The action of mothering however is simply caring for another.” <b>Total 2</b>	“Anyone can “father,” BUT biologically only a person with XY chromosomes can technically “father” an egg.” <b>Total 1</b>

[1] Questions: “What does it mean to be a mother/father?” and “Who can mother/father?”  
Note: Questions were asked of anthropology and sociology majors in the proseminar course.

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<sup>11</sup> When Castañeda presented her research in the course she asked questions related to mothering. When Oware presented his work he asked questions related to fathering.

### *Biological Determinism*

Approximately 10 students provided answers that we consider biological constructions of mothering and fathering. For example, in response to the question “who can mother,” one student stated: “A female who provides the child with the necessities required to survive and the skills one must need to learn how to function independently. This person doesn’t necessarily have to be the woman who births the child.” This response indicates that mothering is performed by women, although the responsibility does not reside with the birth mother. We see a similar sentiment expressed by another student--mothering is “the act done by females of [the] caring and upbringing [of kids and children].” Responses to who can father parallel those of mothering with one student commenting that “[a]ny male person can technically father.” Another states, “a father can be any male...who takes care of a child’s complete needs.” Anthropology and sociology as disciplines challenge essentialized notions of mothering and fathering; yet, the power of the normative definitions for these categories continually influences our everyday understandings, as we see in our own research on mothering and fathering.

### *Cultural Construction*

We also identified multiple comments that challenged biological determinism. Indeed, slightly more responses (14) understood mothering and fathering from this perspective. For instance, in response to the question of who can mother one student wrote this is “normally expected to be females but males can mother too.” Another remarked “to mother is to care for unconditionally. To provide for the person/thing that you are mothering. Mothering never ends. *Anyone* can mother.” These comments do not restrict this activity to a female body; indeed, the first comment

declares that males can mother also. We see similar responses to the question of who can father: “I really have no idea what kind of guidelines there are...if there are any at all. When it comes down to it, I feel even animals can father humans and humans can father animals.” This perspective demonstrates a particularly nuanced understanding of fathering; here, the act is a behavior both humans and animals possess. Following this logic, another student states “anyone can father even though father is socially constructed to be male.” Overall, these responses question the idea that biology determines behaviors attributed to males and females—a conceptual insight of sociology and anthropology that emphasizes how fathering and mothering are socially constructed.

### *Both Biology and Culture*

A minority of responses (3) defined mothering and fathering from both perspectives. Literally invoking biology and culture a person wrote “anyone can ‘father’ BUT biologically only a person with XY chromosomes can technically ‘father’ an egg.” In reference to mothering, a student responded “[m]othering is most likely done by a female, due to our socie[tal] definition of the word ‘mother.’” The action of mothering however is simply caring for another.” Clearly, both comments attempt to reconcile broader societal definitions of mothering and fathering that attach themselves to male and female bodies with conceptual and theoretical understandings offered from anthropology and sociology. These comments surely problematize the strict biological and cultural interpretations of these behaviors, in many ways a thoughtful and reflective process on our students’ part.

## Conclusion

By incorporating research and discourse on mothering and fathering in the classroom, we found benefits to our departmental culture, our students, and ourselves. As a dual discipline department, we are using research on mothering and fathering as a bridge to bring sociologists and anthropologists together. It provides a positive multidisciplinary space to exchange and challenge ideas and broaden the discourse on Mother and Father Studies. As illustrated in the proseminar example, this initiative also directly impacts our students. The benefit to undergraduates can be heard in their multifaceted views of fathering and mothering. The student responses to queries about mothering and fathering highlight perspectives on a spectrum that focuses on gender differences to gender equality (Doucet 21, 23). For example, responses that illustrate biologically determined understandings of mothering and fathering reflect a focus on *gendered bodies* doing the action of mothering or fathering and thus represents each as a “natural” role that men or women are charged to undertake. We see suggestions of this in the lyrics of rap artists and in the work of doulas. In contrast, those students who emphasized mothering and fathering as culturally constructed were focusing on the *actions* involved and not the person engaged in these activities, more in line with the conceptual understandings of gender and gender roles in sociology and anthropology.

The students that we encounter in the classroom today are immersed more than ever in a world heavily reliant upon technology. They are a generation that seamlessly mixes their politics, popular culture, and lived experiences via digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. It is within this context that our students also come to understand notions of mothering and fathering. Working with undergraduates gives us a unique opportunity to foster change. We engage in critical analysis with young people in a space that allows us to generate

new narratives about the people, the behavior and the institutions involved with mothering and fathering. Through our presentation of research on fathering and rap music as well as mothering and doulas, we encourage our students to look at mothering and fathering as constructed of “historically and culturally variable relationship[s]” (Nakano Glenn 3). And finally, as we reflect on how this research impacts us personally, we found this work encouraged us to craft a safe space within academia--a space that normally feels isolating and where discussions on mothering or fathering can feel taboo. Instead, this project has enabled us to unpack notions of mothering and fathering, not only from an academic perspective but in our everyday lived realities.

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