

A COMPARISON OF MOTHER AND FATHER REPORTS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

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Collecting large scale survey data is often expensive and time consuming. Many national surveys gather information from one respondent who answers questions about members of the household or family. Surveys about fertility or children typically target women only. While there are good reasons for this strategy (e.g., women bear children and are usually their primary caregivers), researchers have begun to realize that not having a male voice may be biasing our results and giving us an inaccurate picture of their side of the story (Goldsheider & Kaufmann, 1996). In the past, the statistical methods available allowed only a limited ability to compare men's and women's reports of various constructs. However, newer, more sophisticated statistical techniques now allow researchers to be able to more fully explore gender differences in reporting (Coley & Morris, 2002). New data sets, such as Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study and the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, collect information from both men and women, permitting comparisons of their reports.

The goal of the current study is to compare men's and women's reports of father involvement using data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study. Until recently, many studies of father involvement rely on the mother's report of the father's behavior (Bonney, Kelly, & Levant, 1999; Bronte-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, & Moore, 2007; Gaertner, Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Greving, 2007; Knoester, Petts, & Eggebeen, 2007). Research has shown that mothers typically underestimate levels of father involvement (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008). Furthermore, this pattern of findings depends in part on the parents' living arrangements. Mikelson shows that mothers and fathers are more likely to report different levels of father's physical involvement, but less likely to report different levels of emotional involvement, when the father and mother both live with the child than when the father is non-resident. Coley and

Morris show that there are certain characteristics associated with the mean level of father involvement and the discrepancy between mother and father reports of father involvement, including level of conflict between the parents. The more conflict parents report, the greater discrepancy in their reports of father involvement. Although research by Coley and Morris and Mikelson is informative, there are a number of shortcomings, which are discussed in detail below, that the current study is able to overcome.

Father involvement is important for a number of reasons. First, society has moved beyond the simple presence or absence of fathers in their children's lives and the expectation now is for responsible fathering (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998), in which fathers are accessible, engaged, and responsible (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). Accessibility means that the father is physically and emotionally present and available to his children. Engagement has to do with the level of interaction between father and child. This could mean playing games, reading books, telling stories, or helping with homework. Fathers are responsible when they contribute to decisions about the child's welfare (e.g. which doctor the child should see, what school they should go to), help with scheduling and take children to appointments. Second, father involvement is associated with a number of positive outcomes for children (see Lamb, 2004; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000) and for men (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). In their review of father involvement and child outcomes, Marsiglio and colleagues (2001) conclude that it is not the amount of time but the quality of interactions that is important for children. Finally, when fathers are satisfied with their role as parent, they engage in higher quality parenting, which is beneficial for children (DeKlyen, Brooks-Gunn, McLanahan, & Knab, 2006).

I will first discuss the problems with prior data collection and measurement strategies of father involvement, followed by an overview of past literature that has attempted to unpack the similarities and differences in reporting of father involvement. Next, I will discuss my strategies for improving upon prior work, followed by a discussion of the data, measures, and analytic strategy that will be employed.

Data and Measurement Issues of Father Involvement

Surveys that include measures of father involvement (and relationship quality) typically use the household or the woman as the enumeration unit. In these studies, one person in the household answers questions about other family members who may or may not live in the household. Measurement error is plausible as the respondent may truly not know the correct response or their response may be conditioned by some other factor. For example, a divorced mother may report lower levels of father involvement because she really does not know how much time the father spends with the child when the child is with him or simply because she is trying to make the father look bad. Without research to closely examine these possibilities, we cannot be certain when and under what conditions it is appropriate to use mother's reports about the father's behavior.

It is often expensive to survey more than one person in a household. Surveys such as the National Survey of Families and Households attempt to obtain information from the main respondent's spouse or partner, perhaps even after that person was no longer "in the picture" at a follow-up wave. While much can be gained from these techniques, they are costly and involve some risk. Men are subject to a higher nonresponse rate than women, particularly if they are not living in the same household as the main respondent (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mikelson, 2008).

Measures of father involvement have been fairly limited in past surveys. These measures may only include visitation and child support which is a problem for several reasons. First, such measures only pertain to nonresident fathers. Indeed, some surveys include only a measure of whether the father is in the household (Coley, 2001; Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Dykema, 1998). Second, neither measures the quality of involvement or even the amount of time fathers spend with their children. As emotional relationships between parent and child and parenting strategies are associated with well-being and outcomes of fathers and their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Lamb, 2004, Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), it is important to understand how these processes operate. These basic measures do not allow for those types of constructs to be examined. Taken together with the fact that these measures are obtained from mother reports who are most likely not romantically involved with the father, it is reasonable to conclude that these measures are limited and potentially biased.

Coley and Morris (2002) emphasize the importance of understanding the circumstances under which mothers and fathers generally agree about father involvement. They find support for the notion that couple-level characteristics, such as conflict, are good predictors of congruence, or lack thereof, in reporting of father involvement. Prior work found that although characteristics of the non-resident parent better predicted father's financial child support than characteristics of the resident parent, much of the variance in father involvement was not accounted for (Smock & Manning, 1997). Furthermore, Coley and Morris critique Smock and Manning's work for not accounting for characteristics of the couple that may have led to discrepancies in reporting.

Not only have there been problems with data collection techniques and measurement strategies, but statistical analyses, until recently, have been limited to paired t-tests which can

only determine whether there is a mean difference in reporting on a particular item. Statistical techniques have evolved to include hierarchical linear modeling which can determine the true mean score on a given item by both reporters and a true discrepancy score which indicates the difference between the reporters' scores while taking into account the correlation of the dyad (Coley & Morris, 2002). This technique allows for the researcher to control for other characteristics of the individuals and the dyad to determine what factors influence the level of discrepancy between reporters (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett (1995).

Prior literature on Reporting of Father Involvement

Two studies have directly compared mother and father reports of father involvement. Coley and Morris (2002), using data from Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three Cities Study, compare mother and father reports of father involvement and then employ paired hierarchical linear modeling to find the true dyadic mean and the true discrepancy score between the couples' reports. This is the first and only paper to utilize this technique to compare mother and father reports of father involvement. Coley and Morris construct a six-item scale to operationalize father involvement. Three questions, with a 4-point scale of responses ranging from 1 (*none*) to 4 (*a lot*), are (1) "How much responsibility does [father] take for raising child?" (2) "How much does [father's] involvement make thing easier for [child's mother] or make [her] a better parent?" and (3) "How much does [father's] help with financial and material support of child help [mother]?" Three other questions, original responses of number of hours, a 5-point scale, and a 6-point scale, respectively, ask (4) "How many hours per week does [father] take care of child?" (5) "How often does [father] see or visit with child?" and (6) "How often does child see or visit with [father's] family?" were recoded to match the 4-point scale of the first 3 questions. Although these items load on a single factor, only questions 1, 4 and 5 are direct

measures of father involvement. The other questions appear to measure how much the mother benefits from the father's involvement (questions 2 and 3) and the level of contact with extended family (which may or may not involve the father himself; question 6). Although this measurement strategy includes more items than had been examined previously on the subject of father involvement, these items may not fully capture the concept of father involvement.

Lamb and colleagues (1987) conceptualize a 3-part model of father involvement as interaction or engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Coley and Morris' operationalization does not address this model. Additionally, the 4-point response categories are rather imprecise. Given this limited set of measures and responses, the present study will greatly extend researchers' understanding of measurement and reporting of father involvement by including a more extensive, detailed set of father involvement measures as well as co-parenting measures. Furthermore, the current study will examine mother's and father's reports of father involvement over time to see if they become more or less similar as the child ages and as a function of changes in the relationship status.

Nonetheless, Coley and Morris find that across the six items, 61 percent of mothers and fathers are in exact agreement. Furthermore, 75 percent of coresident pairs agree whereas only 48 percent of noncoresiding pairs agree on the level of father involvement on average across the six items. The HLM analyses reveal that the average item score is 3.15 which is a moderately high level of father involvement reported by parents. The true discrepancy score is -1.37, which indicates that mothers, on average, report a level of involvement 1.37 units lower than fathers. When fathers are employed full time and when fathers live with their child, the true couple mean level of father involvement is higher. The more time that elapsed between the mother's and father's interview and higher levels of conflict between the parents results in a lower level of

father involvement. Additionally, the interaction term, father residency by employment status, indicates that employed resident fathers and unemployed resident fathers do not significantly differ in their level of involvement but employed nonresident fathers are more involved than unemployed nonresident fathers. This result is consistent with Townsend's (2002) findings that fathers who felt they could not provide financially for their children withdrew and were not as involved (Lamb, 1997; Liebow, 1967). It is also possible that mothers do not allow fathers to be as involved when they cannot provide financially for their children. These explanations were not tested. The multivariate results reveal a number of characteristics associated with greater discrepancy between mother and father reports of father involvement. Father's age, mother's education, employment, welfare receipt, and psychological distress, time between interviews and conflict are associated with a greater discrepancy score between mothers and fathers. In other words, these characteristics are associated with mothers reporting much lower levels of father involvement than fathers report.

Mikelson (2008) conducted a similar study using data from the three year follow-up of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study. Many studies in recent years which use Fragile Families data to examine the impact of father involvement on children and families only use reports from the mother. Given that data from the father are available, it is necessary to determine whether this is a good strategy, which is a goal of Mikelson's research. It must be acknowledged that missing data for fathers in the Fragile Families is nonrandom. In other words, the closer fathers are to mothers, the more likely they will be included in the survey. Fathers are least likely to be interviewed when they are no longer romantically involved with mothers. In fact, Fragile Families is most representative of cohabiting fathers and least representative of visiting and uninvolved fathers (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008).

Surprisingly, Mikelson did not use the same analytic strategy as Coley and Morris (2002). Instead, she simply created a difference score by subtracting father's reported involvement from mother's reported level of father involvement and used OLS regression to determine what factors were associated with the difference. Fragile Families includes a much more extensive set of father involvement indicators than other datasets, including the Three Cities Study. Mikelson focuses on both physical involvement (e.g., singing songs, playing with toys, putting child to bed) and emotional involvement (e.g., shows affection to child). There are 11 indicators of physical involvement and two indicators of emotional involvement. Furthermore, the mothers and fathers are asked on how many days in a typical week the father does a particular activity. This is a more precise measure than the 4-point scale used by Coley and Morris (2002) and is perhaps the most comprehensive operationalization of father involvement available in any recent dataset.

Mikelson finds conclusions regarding physical father involvement differ depending on how agreement/disagreement is defined. When mother reports are subtracted from father reports, fathers indicate more days of involvement than mothers on all 11 items and those differences are statistically significant. However, when differences are constructed between resident father and mother reports and nonresident father and mother reports, resident fathers and mothers exhibit greater levels of disagreement. For instance, resident father-mother disagreement on assisting child with eating and putting child to bed is higher than nonresident father-mother disagreement. This finding is contradicted, however, if exact agreement is considered. The level of exact agreement between resident father-mother pairs is higher than between nonresident father-mother pairs.

These findings reveal that whose report is considered or, if both parents' reports are utilized, how the reports are combined have strong implications for our understanding of father involvement. Reports of emotional involvement, however, are not as inconsistent as physical involvement. The descriptive results show that although both mothers and fathers report high levels of emotional involvement, resident fathers-mothers have higher levels of agreement, regardless of definition, than do nonresident father-mother pairs. It is possible that mothers and fathers agree that fathers love their child but disagree about day-to-day care and activities fathers engage in with their children.

The OLS regression results coincide with prior findings which show that father-mother discrepancy is lower (i.e., there is more agreement) when mothers report having a good relationship with the father and when the parents are married. On the other hand, father-mother discrepancy is higher (i.e., there is less agreement) when the father lives with the child (and the mother), the mother has received financial help from anyone except the father since the child was born, the father reports having a good relationship with the mother, and there is a greater difference in the child's age at the time of the father's interview (i.e., there is a larger amount of time between the mother's and father's interview). These results, as well as the results from the Coley and Morris research, indicate the importance of father residency, relationship status, and relationship quality in the level of agreement between mother's and father's reports of father involvement.

While both of these studies greatly contribute to our understanding of reporting on father involvement, there are a few limitations that I would like to address with the current study. First, Coley and Morris focus on children between the ages of two and four. Children are aged three at the time of the survey Mikelson utilizes. The current study will extend prior work by analyzing

reports of father involvement when children are one, three, and five years old. This strategy will allow for an examination of father involvement at different stages of children's development as well as how father involvement changes over time.

Additionally, during the five years of observation, parents' relationship status, relationship quality, and father residency may change. Including these variables will allow for an analysis of how a change in relationship status, relationship quality and/or father residency impacts the dyad's report of father involvement. The impact of father residency was not consistent between the two prior studies, perhaps due to the cross-sectional nature of both studies. The current investigation may shed light on the discrepant findings by accounting for change over time.

Lastly, Coley and Morris use a 4-point scale which indicates (4) a lot to (1) no father involvement on a given item. Mikelson's measurement, on the other hand, considers number of days of involvement on a given item. I would argue, as Mikelson does, that the number of days a father is involved in a given activity is a more precise measure than whether the father is involved a lot or a little. I will also use the number of days of involvement, as well as other constructions, discussed in the methods section, that will replicate and extend Mikelson's work with more sophisticated statistical techniques, namely hierarchical linear modeling.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current investigation will focus on two main questions: (1) what are the similarities and differences in reporting of father involvement between mothers and fathers in the Fragile Families data and (2) what factors are associated with those similarities and differences? The issue pertaining to similarities or differences in reporting of father involvement is that mothers and fathers are reporting on the same phenomenon, namely the father's behavior. The father is asked about his own behavior while the mother is asked about her perception of the father's

behavior. In other words, since they are both being asked to report on the same behavior, their responses presumably should be the same. When differences do arise, it is necessary to understand the reason for those differences to fully comprehend the family dynamics as well as to improve our measurements in the future. Differences in reporting may be because the mother really is not sure of how involved the father is, particularly when he is non-resident. Differences may also stem from her perceptions of him as a person. For example, if he does not invest a lot of time in his work, she may think he is equally lazy with his children. Finally, differences may stem from the father overestimating his level of involvement because of social desirability factors.

Based on the work of Coley and Morris (2002), I expect there to be a moderate level of agreement between mothers and fathers reports of father involvement. I expect there to be more disagreement among cohabitators than marrieds and the most disagreement about father involvement among parents who are no longer romantically involved. Mikelson (2008) found there to be more agreement between mother's and father's reports of physical involvement when the father is nonresident. While that finding seems counterintuitive, the measurement of involvement was the average number of days per week. It makes sense then that if, for example, the nonresident father has his child two days per week, mothers and fathers would both report his frequency of involvement as two days per week which results in higher levels of agreement than among resident parents with no set schedule. Therefore, I also hypothesize that when fathers are nonresident, there will be less disagreement about the level of father involvement than when fathers are living with both mother and child.

The selectivity of this sample must be addressed. First, fathers' participation in the Fragile Families study is contingent on their involvement with the mother (Carlson &

McLanahan, 2004) in that married and cohabiting fathers are most likely to participate followed by visiting fathers. Fathers who are no longer romantically involved with the mother at the time of birth are least likely to be in the sample. Second, as a result of this non-random non-response, fathers with the lowest level of involvement with their children are least likely to be included in the Fragile Families data so results presented are most likely to be representative of fathers and couples with higher levels of father involvement. Those parents who are not romantically involved but are still friends or in touch for the sake of the child will be included as they are still asked questions about their levels of father involvement.

DATA

This research uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (hereafter referred to as Fragile Families). The Fragile Families data are representative of births in cities with populations over 200,000. The baseline survey was collected between 1998 and 2000. Mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours after giving birth. The father was interviewed in the hospital or as soon after the birth as possible. Mothers and fathers were interviewed at the child's first, third, and fifth birthdays. For additional sampling and data information for the first three waves of data, see Reichman and colleagues (2001).

MEASURES

The purpose of this analysis is to compare mother and father reports of father involvement. Therefore, each measure discussed below, unless otherwise specified, is created for the mother and the father separately.

Dependent Variables: Father Involvement

Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985, 1987) introduced three dimensions of father involvement: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility. Measures of accessibility are fairly

limited in the Fragile Families data and simply include whether the father is resident or nonresident. A more fine grained measure of accessibility would be how many hours the father is available to the child which would be best measured with time diaries. Once it is established that the father and the child do see each other at least some of the time, the quality of that time becomes the focus and is measured through engagement and responsibility, which are discussed below.

Mothers and fathers are asked to report the number of days per week the father does each of the following: plays games like peek-a-boo, sings songs or nursery rhymes to child, reads stories, tells stories, plays inside with toys such as blocks or legos, takes child to visit relatives, and hugs or shows affection to the child. These are dimensions of *engagement*. As part of the above question, mothers and fathers also report the number of days per week the father changes the child's diaper, feeds or gives a bottle to child, and puts the child to bed. These are dimensions of *responsibility*. Original coding is unchanged.

Independent Variables

Assessing relationship quality between the parents is important for understanding this level of agreement on father involvement. Therefore, there are four relationship quality constructs which are measured in the Fragile Families study included here: conflict, supportiveness, companionship (baseline only), and overall relationship quality (except baseline). At baseline, conflict is measured with a question that asks "How often do you and baby's mother/father argue about each of the following: money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, alcohol or drug use, being faithful" with responses never (1), sometimes (2), or often (3). These responses are summed to get an overall *conflict score* which ranges from 6 to 18. Higher scores indicate more conflict. In the one and three year follow-up, conflict is measured

with a single indicator, “How often do you and baby’s mother/father argue about things that are important to you?” with responses ranging from never (1) to always (5).

At the baseline interview, mothers and fathers are asked, “How often is the baby’s mother/father: fair and willing to compromise, express affection or love for you, insult or criticize you or your ideas (reverse coded), encourages you to do things that are important to you” with responses never (1), sometimes(2), or often (3). These items are added to create a *supportiveness score*. At the one and three year follow-ups, additional items were added. For ease of comparison, I am only using the original four items in the follow-up waves.

The companionship questions were only asked at the baseline interview. Mothers and fathers were asked in the last month, did they visit with friends, go out to an entertainment event, eat out in a restaurant, and help each other solve a problem. They responded yes (1) or no (0) to each item. These items are summed, with a range of 0 to 4, to get a *companionship score* in which higher scores indicate more companionship.

In the one and three year follow-up surveys, mothers and fathers were asked an overall relationship quality question, “In general, would you say that your relationship with him/her is... poor (1) to excellent (5)” which is left approximately continuous. This question is asked regardless of relationship status.

At baseline, mothers are asked if they want the father to be involved in raising the child and fathers are asked if they want to be involved in raising the child. From these two questions, dummy variables are created to indicate *mother and father want father to be involved*, *mother only wants father to be involved*, *father only wants father to be involved*, and *neither parent wants the father to be involved*.

Mother's were asked, "In the past month, how often has the father spent one or more hours with the child?" and "How often do you think the father should spend one or more hours with the child?" Responses for both questions are reverse coded: everyday (4), several times per week (3), several times per month (2), once or twice per month (1), never (0). Three dummies are created to indicate that according to the mother, the *father spends too little time with child*, *the right amount of time with child* (reference), or *too much time with child*.

Central to the hypotheses about agreement or disagreement in mother's and father's reports of father involvement and relationship quality is the relationship status of the parents. Using a series of questions about the parents' current relationship status and living arrangements, Fragile Families constructs the parent's union status at the beginning of each wave. Dummies are included to indicate whether the parents are *married*, *cohabiting*, *visiting* (romantically involved but not co-residing), *friends*, or *do not have any relationship*.

Prior research has shown that similarity or dissimilarity of reports of father involvement is contingent upon whether or not the father lives with the child and the mother (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008), although the results were inconsistent. At the beginning of each wave, there are a series of questions about father's residence status in relation to the mother and the child. Constructed variables are created by Fragile Families. A dummy variable for *whether the father lives with the child* (1) is included in the analyses.

Gender of the child has been shown to be associated with greater levels of father involvement (i.e., fathers are more involved with sons; Lundberg, Pabilonia, & Ward-Batts, 2006; Yeung & Stafford, 2002; Barnett & Baruch; 19897; Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1987), higher levels of marital stability (i.e., lower divorce rates among couples with sons; Katzev, Warner, & Acock, 1994; Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988; Mott, 1994; Spanier & Glick, 1981) and increased

likelihood of cohabiting couples to transition to marriage (i.e., cohabiting couples with sons are more likely to get married; Lundberg & Rose, 2003), although some of these associations may have become weaker over time (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007; Morgan & Pollard, 2002). Therefore, child gender may be associated with the level of father involvement and relationship quality and with similarity in reporting (i.e., perhaps parents of sons will have higher levels of agreement than parents of daughters). *Gender of child* is taken from the mother's baseline survey: boy (1), girl (0).

Demographic characteristics of the father and the mother may influence the level of father involvement and relationship quality and the level of discrepancy in reports. However, since the prior work on discrepancy in reporting on father involvement is limited to two studies and there is no similar study on reports of relationship quality, it is premature to make predictions about how these variables are associated to the dependent variables, however, they are included nonetheless. The constructed variable of *father's age* at baseline is included. As mother's age and father's age are highly correlated, only father's age is included. Based on questions of racial and ethnic background, Fragile Families constructs a race variable from which dummies are created to indicate the father (mother) is *non-Hispanic White*, *non-Hispanic Black*, *Hispanic*, or of *another racial/ethnic background*.

Mothers and fathers were asked at each wave how many children they have together and how many children they have by other partners. Father's are asked if they have other biological children who do not live with them. Utilizing these questions, it will be determined *how many biological children the parents have together*, *how many children the mother has who are not biologically related to the father*, and *how many children the father has who are not biologically related to the mother*.

Mother's and father's education are both taken from self-reports. Each parent reports their highest level of education at baseline. Dummy variables are created indicating whether the mother (father) has *less than a high school degree, a high school diploma or equivalent* (reference), *some college or technical training*, or *a college degree or above*.

There is a constructed measure at each wave which indicates the *time difference between the mother and father interviews*. This is necessary to include because differences in reporting may be simply due to the fact that mothers and fathers are reporting on different time periods in the child's life, even though questions are not asked about a specific time period. It is also possible, for the relationship quality questions, that if a disruption occurred, one parent could have been interviewed when they were still together and the other after the disruption. Furthermore, efforts were made to interview parents as close to each other as possible. A long time period between interviews may indicate that the mother did not know how to contact the father or other issues that may signify problems between parents.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

I will employ hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) for to test the research hypotheses. HLM is the appropriate method of analysis as the model gives the true couple mean and the true discrepancy score between the mothers and fathers, while accounting for the dependent nature of the reporters responses.

RESULTS

I have coded the first three waves of data and am currently coding the newly released fourth wave. I will begin analysis shortly and be working continuously on this project as part of my larger dissertation work.

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