

## The Institutionalization of Families and Father Involvement

### **Background and Significance**

Resident stepfathers are less involved with co-resident children than resident biological fathers. On the whole, children who live with stepfathers do not obtain the same degree of material investment, attention, and emotional closeness as those who reside with biologically-related dads (Booth and Dunn 1994). This inequality is thought to partially account for another finding in the literature: children raised in stepfamilies appear more similar in their outcomes to children raised in single-parent households than to children raised in two-parent biologically-related families (Ganong and Coleman 2004).

The question of *why* resident stepfathers do not match the involvement of resident biological fathers has received scholarly attention but remains under-theorized and under-explored within the fatherhood literature. As it stands, ideas concerning the question can be roughly divided into two general schools of thought. The first emphasizes individual-level traits that have motivation—or agency—implications. For example, scholars have claimed stepfather-child relationships are weaker because they lack a biological subcomponent, rendering stepfathers less willing to invest in children with whom they do not share genetic ties (Anderson et al. 1999; Popenoe 1999; Daly and Wilson 1988). Others have noted that stepfathers and co-resident children are disproportionately dissimilar because they lack a shared history together (Pickhardt 1997). The lack of shared history renders stepfathers and children more diverse with respect to interests, hobbies, and dispositions—domains that have implications for stepfather involvement (Marsiglio 2004).

A second framework focuses less on motivational determinants and instead emphasizes *barriers*—or structural deterrents—to stepfather involvement. Studies of this type have most often examined structural barriers at the relationship level. Stepfathers who have children from previous relationships may be less involved due to their pre-existent expectations and commitments to raising different children (Manning, Stewart and Smock 2003). Other research has emphasized mothers' influence on stepfather involvement. It appears that they at times act as "gatekeepers" who obstruct stepfather involvement in an effort to protect children (Ganong and Coleman 2004). Marital quality has been found relevant too: stepfather involvement hinges partly on marital satisfaction, a condition seemingly irrelevant for biological fathers (Adamsons, Marion, and Pasley 2007). Stepfather involvement also appears lower when involvement on the part of biological fathers is higher (Marsiglio 2004). In sum, this second framework focused on relational barriers has revealed that stepfather involvement is more acutely prone to interference from other relationships.

The motivation versus barriers argument over stepfather involvement is intriguing and merits attention. One side couches structure as being of secondary importance and focuses mainly on motivational impediments. The other side assumes stepfather motivation is a given and identifies barriers to involvement. A concern with the debate as it stands now, however, is that findings produced by either side have few constructive implications for improving stepfather involvement. This is because both frameworks

implicitly employing *deficit models* of stepfather involvement (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997). One school identifies factors stepfathers seemingly lack in order to be fully involved parents (e.g. genetic ties, similarity, salience and interest). The other has revealed the determinants of stepfather *noninvolvement*, more than the determinants of involvement. Both frameworks of course have merit, but models either side can build appear to set up stepfathers to fail as much as they set them up to succeed.

An alternative approach to the study of stepfather involvement can study means by which stepfather involvement is facilitated, not hampered. In a seminal paper, Cherlin (1978) argued that stepfamilies are less institutionalized than biological families. Stepfathers have a lack of rules, roles and scripts from which to draw in order to inform and substantiate their actions. This feature of stepfamilies creates a distinct challenge that continues today. In Marsiglio's (2004:23), words, "The prevailing cultural ideology about family ties discourages people in the United States and other industrialized countries from expecting certain types of familial bonds between stepfathers and children."

While Cherlin's thesis is widely accepted by scholars and the paper itself has been referenced countless times in the literature, few attempts to model the relevance of institutionalization of stepfamilies to stepfather involvement have been conducted (Hofferth 2006; Hofferth and Anderson 2003). The lack of research in this area is particularly surprising because it has great potential to clear up the motivation versus barriers debate referenced above. If, for example, it were found that the greater institutionalization of stepfamilies is associated with greater stepfather involvement, such a finding would lend credence to the idea that barriers to stepfather involvement are what primarily account for lower stepfather involvement. If, however, research concluded that the greater institutionalization of stepfamilies does not have implications for stepfather involvement, literature stressing stepfathers' limited motivation would be strengthened.

Family institutionalization is a fuzzy idea and does not easily lend itself to empirical conceptualization. Notwithstanding, a significant body of literature has compared the institutionalization of marriage and cohabitation. Compared to marriage, cohabitation comes with fewer normative guidelines for couples to follow (Smock 2000; Nock 1995). Many questions and issues that are taken for granted in marriage must be actively worked out by cohabiters. The rise of cohabitation has also greatly increased the proportion of children who experience cohabiting unions (Bumpass and Lu 2000). The disparate statuses of cohabitation and marriage provide an opportunity to test whether or not increased institutionalization is indeed facilitative of stepfather involvement, and thus an opportunity to shed further light on the debate over stepfathers and their involvement with children.

### **Data and Analytic Strategy**

I rely on the 1997 and 2003 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) with a special focus on the Child Development Supplement (CDS). Children in the CDS were ages zero to twelve in 1997 and about six to eight in the follow-up wave. Only children

age six to twelve are present in both the 1997 and 2003 waves and analyses are restricted to them. The 1997 sample size is 1,447 and the 2003 sample size is 1,569.

**Variables.** Father involvement is the dependent variable. It is a measure of the total minutes spent with a co-resident adult male for one week and is derived from the time-diary supplement of the CDS. Both time spent directly interacting and time spent passively interacting with the resident adult male are included in order to provide a more accurate measure of father involvement.

One main independent variable is father type. There are three possible values: biological, cohabiting or married. An additional main independent variable indicates whether a stepfather transitioned from cohabiting to married at some time between the two waves. Another independent variable will indicate whether or not the child in question was adopted by the resident male between waves.

Models include several control measures. The child's race, gender and family class will be included. So too will the age and education of parents, and the number of children in the household.

**Analytic Strategy.** Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) will measure the relationship between family type and involvement. In addition, fixed-effects regression models will be run to model the effects of transitioning to marriage on stepfather involvement.

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