

I Get By with a Little Help from Others: Social Capital and Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Their Biological Children

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Introduction

The rise in nonmarital childbearing—from about 6% of all births in 1960 to about 41% of all births in 2010 (Hamilton et al. 2011)—has been accompanied by greater family instability and non-resident fatherhood. In fact, the majority of children born to unmarried parents in the U.S. will live apart from their father by age 5 (Carlson and McLanahan 2010). Research shows that children benefit when their biological fathers are positively involved in their lives (Amato and Rivera 1999; Lamb 2010; Marsiglio et al. 2000), but nonresident fathers tend to be less involved than fathers who live with their children (Furstenberg & Cherlin 1991; Sorensen, Mincy, & Halpern 2000). Given the increasing likelihood that children will live away from their fathers and the importance of father involvement for children's overall wellbeing, understanding the individual and contextual factors associated with non-resident fathers' involvement with their children is an important endeavor.

Fathers who live apart from their children may face significant challenges in staying connected to, and involved with, their children. Nonresident fathers may be unaware of—and/or disengaged in—their children's daily lives. These fathers may have little knowledge about their children's physical and emotional wellbeing and daily routines. While this reality alone may be difficult for nonresident fathers, the circumstances underlying parents' dissolved romantic relationships may further complicate fathers' ability to maintain positive involvement with their children. Research, for example, suggests that mothers' and fathers' romantic relationships are intricately connected to fathers' level of involvement with their children (Furstenberg & Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2002). When this 'package

deal' is dissolved, fathers become less involved and may lose contact with their children entirely (Seltzer and Bianchi 1988). On the other hand, using data from four national surveys, Amato et al. (2009) show that nonresident father involvement has increased between 1976 and 2002, which may signal that the package deal has become less important for father involvement. Even so, nonresident fathers are more likely to be disadvantaged compared to resident fathers, and the social context in which disadvantaged, nonresident fathers are embedded (i.e., difficulty with employment, a history of incarceration, multipartnered fertility, health problems, etc.) may introduce barriers to father involvement net of their relationships with mothers.

One important resource that may facilitate fathers' involvement with children is social capital, or social relationships which can provide access to resources across a range of different contexts. For example, social capital measured as 'access' to resources such as social support has been linked to parenting in stressful environmental situations (Ceballo & McLoyd 2002), parenting experiences and psychosocial adjustment among African American adolescents (Taylor, Casten, & Fickinger 1993), adjustment to motherhood among teen mothers (Unger & Wandersman 1985), and positive parent-child interactions within at-risk populations (Green, Furrer, & McAllister 2007) among others. More recently, research has shown that this form of social capital is associated with how involved nonresident fathers are with their children. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Castillo and Fenzl-Crossman (2010) show that social capital in the form of informal supportive networks is positively associated with unmarried, nonresident fathers' involvement with their children. The authors suggest that in addition to continuing to provide nonresident fathers with formal means of support (e.g., government programs), informal supportive networks provide additional resources to fathers "...which may help them in alleviating the environmental stressors affecting their involvement with their children" (Castillo & Fenzl-Crossman 2010: 73).

Much of the work examining the link between social capital and parenting has focused on mothers; research addressing the benefits that social capital affords nonresident fathers (with respect to their involvement with their children) is generally lacking. In addition, while Castillo and Fenzl-Crossman (2010) examine this link, their analyses are limited to linear regressions which fail to account for unobserved heterogeneity and the possibility that more involved fathers are also the ones who are more likely to have access to social capital (i.e., reverse causality). Non-resident fathers' social environments, and particularly their support systems, are indeed likely to influence how often they spend time with their children and possibility even the quality of their involvement (Marsiglio & Roy 2012), which likely has consequences for their children. In this paper, we will draw on social capital theory to examine: 1) The primary factors associated with nonresident fathers' access to social capital; 2) whether access to social capital is linked to fathers' involvement with their children; and 3) what are the pathways (i.e., mechanisms) by which nonresident fathers' access to social capital is linked to their involvement with their children.

Data and Methods

This project will use data from the Fragile families and Child Wellbeing Study—a longitudinal birth cohort study with an oversample of nonmarital births ($N = 4,897$ total, 3,710 to unmarried parents and 1,187 to married parents) to examine the pathways through which fathers' social capital is associated with their involvement with their children from birth to age 9. The baseline survey was conducted between 1998 and 2000 in 75 hospitals in 20 large U.S. cities. Follow-up interviews were conducted about 1, 3, 5, and 9 years following the birth. Fathers and mothers were interviewed with fairly high response rates (76% of mothers retained by year 9, and 88% of fathers were interviewed at least once). The weighted sample represents nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000.

In our preliminary analyses, our sample included $N = 1,507$ which consisted of $n = 396$ nonresident fathers, and for comparison $n = 1,174$ resident fathers. Father involvement is measured in terms of father's level of engagement with the child at the 9-year survey (e.g., plays outside and/or indoors, reads, talks about child's day, helps with homework, etc.) with children on a scale of 0 (no engagement) to 4 (engages every day). Social capital is measured in terms of fathers' access to financial resources, child care, and residential social support (1 = yes, at least one of these and 0 = none).

Our preliminary multivariate linear regressions control for fathers' race, education, age, income-to-poverty ratio, employment, childhood family structure, residential mobility, health and mental health, religion, drug use, incarceration, fathers' and mothers' multipartnered fertility, whether or not the father hit or slapped the mother, marital status, and gender of the focal child. The study includes roughly equal percentages of White, Black, and Hispanic fathers. Just over half of fathers have a high school degree or less, and about 86% were employed the week prior to the baseline interview. About 25% of fathers and 23% of the mothers had children with a different partner than the focal child's biological mother and father.

Preliminary Results

The bivariate results suggest that among all fathers, resident and non-resident, those who perceive any access to social capital are more engaged with their 9-year-old children compared to fathers who perceive no such access. Percentages within father categories (i.e., all fathers, resident, and non-resident fathers) are all significantly different. The percentage difference in levels of engagement between those who perceive support and those who do not, however, is twice as large for non-resident fathers than it is for resident fathers (a 12% versus 6% difference, respectively). Weights were applied to descriptive figures to adjust for the oversample of unmarried fathers.

When we examine different types of social support—financial, residential, and child care, the patterns of association are the same as when we combine these different types of support. It does, however, appear that among non-resident fathers, perceptions of child care support might be slightly more important for engagement than perceptions of financial and residential support (and no support). It appears that residential and child care support are associated with more engagement for all fathers, although financial support appears to be less important for residential fathers.

We estimate three separate regression models in which the primary predictor is whether or not fathers perceived access to any type of social support (dummy indicator) in year 9. The outcome is a composite measure of average level of father involvement ranging from 0 = no engagement to 4 = engaged every day. The multivariate regression results are consistent with the bivariate results and suggest that net of father's race, education, age, income-to-poverty ratio, employment, and all other covariates, perceptions of social support are significantly associated with fathers' increased engagement with children by age 9. Again, as is the case with the bivariate results, the coefficient for non-resident fathers is larger than the coefficient for resident fathers, although the association is positive and significant for all fathers.

Linear regression is limited in many ways, the most important of which is that it does not account for possible unobserved heterogeneity among nonresident fathers which may explain both fathers' access to social capital and their engagement with their children. We will address this issue using fixed effects models. In addition, we will use structural equation models to: 1) address concerns about the direction of causality; and 2) examine the pathways through which social capital is linked to fathers' involvement with their children.

Although this study is in the early stages, these preliminary results suggest that understanding more about the predictors of father involvement, particularly among non-resident fathers, may depend

on our efforts to incorporate the broader social contexts in which fathers are embedded into our examinations of nonresident father involvement (both in relation to—and independent of—their relationships with mothers). This approach is consistent with the argument that childrearing is best understood when one considers the larger social context in which fathers, and families more generally, are embedded (e.g., Marsiglio and Roy 2012).

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