

“Like Father, Like Son?’: Family Structure and The Intergenerational Transmission of Fatherhood and Fathering”

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Introduction

Research has consistently shown that living away from one’s father is associated with a higher risk of adverse outcomes for the next generation, including greater behavioral problems and lower cognitive development in childhood and lower educational attainment and early family formation in young adulthood (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004). The link between family structure and fatherhood and fathering behaviors across generations is less well understood—in other words, do sons replicate the family structure and fathering that they experienced, or do they compensate for absent fatherhood by choosing a different path with their own children, or neither? This topic is important for the wellbeing of children, and because these family behaviors and processes may contribute to increasing inequality within and across generations (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

In this paper, we address two questions. First, how is father absence in childhood linked to sons’ fertility behaviors in terms of becoming a father at all, at what age men become fathers, whether their first child is born within or outside of marriage, and whether they have children with more than one partner? Second, how is father absence linked to sons’ fathering behaviors once they *are* fathers in terms of whether they co-reside with their child and their level of paternal involvement?

Theoretical/Background

Our conceptualization of the intergenerational link between father absence and fathering behaviors focuses on two key mechanisms by which family structure is shown to influence child wellbeing – *economic resources* and *parental socialization* (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004).

Economic resources are central to children's development and life chances, as they enable parents to purchase the necessary material goods and services, such as medical care, higher quality child care and schools, as well as books, toys and experiences that improve developmental processes; it is well-known that low income is detrimental to children's home environment and wellbeing (Berger, Paxson, and Waldfogel 2009; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). Two (working) parents are better able to provide financially for their children than a single parent simply because there are two incomes in the home. In turn, economic resources have been shown to account for about half of the gap in wellbeing between children living in two-parent versus single-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Second, parenting practices and socialization processes also vary by family structure and are important for children's wellbeing. Two co-residential parents are better able to care for their children than one parent, largely because there are two adults to provide the warmth and support and appropriate social control that are intrinsic to positive parenting (Amato 1987; Baumrind 1966; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004).

Empirical Evidence

Research on the intergenerational transmission of fatherhood is limited, although a few studies have examined these associations. Using data from the Baltimore Parenthood Study, Furstenberg and Weiss (2000) found that young men whose fathers were absent from the home were significantly more likely to have their first child in their teen years. Studies also show that fathers who did not grow up living with their own fathers were less likely to co-reside with their children (Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007) and more likely to have a child with more than one partner (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007). Data from the National Survey of Adolescent Males confirm these results with an emphasis on the importance of young males living with their fathers during adolescence, although the authors contend that this relationship is decreased when background

characteristics and current education and work are controlled (Forste and Jarvis 2007). By contrast, in an earlier study using 1958 British birth cohort data, Dearden and colleagues (1994) found no significant difference in early fatherhood between fathers reared in one- versus two-parent families. Results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth suggest that the effects of family structure on men's fertility behaviors attenuated between 1985 and 2004 (Goldscheider, Hofferth, Spearin, and Curtin 2009). Thus, while the vast majority of research on the effects of family structure suggests that children do better with two biological parents compared to one, and Furstenberg and his colleagues' work suggests that there is an intergenerational effect of family structure on fatherhood, some studies find evidence to the contrary or that the intergenerational effects have diminished over time. Given the dearth of studies examining the effects of childhood family structure on fatherhood, we intend to add to this literature and help reconcile the mixed findings. We also extend this research to examine the association between childhood family structure and father involvement, once men become fathers.

Data and Expected Results

We use data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to estimate regression models examining the link between childhood family structure and fathers' fertility behaviors and paternal involvement. The NSFG was historically a study of women ages 15-44 with six repeated cross-sections interviewed between 1973 and 2002; the surveys included detailed questions about women's sexual activity, contraception, pregnancy and birth, marriage, cohabitation, and divorce. For the first time in 2002, the NSFG included in-person interviews with 4,928 men ages 15-44. Thirty-five percent ($n=1,731$) of these men reported having at least one biological child, 47% ($n=808$) of which were nonmarital. Even though these data are cross-sectional, they can be used to construct retrospective longitudinal histories, so we can examine the link between

childhood family structure and whether and in what context a birth occurred, as well as fathers' involvement with children.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a longitudinal study of births (with an oversample of nonmarital births) that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in large U.S. cities. The study includes 4,897 births—3,710 unmarried and 1,187 married, and the weighted sample is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers took place in 75 hospitals in 20 cities just after the baby's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted at one, three, and five years after the birth. Response rates at baseline were 75% for unmarried fathers and 89% for married fathers; 88% of unmarried fathers were interviewed at least once over the first four survey waves. Since the men in the Fragile Families Study are fathers by definition, we use these data to examine how men's family structure and fathers' involvement experienced in childhood are linked to their current fathering behaviors toward the focal child.

Preliminary results using the NSFG suggest that, despite some prior research to the contrary, there are notable effects of childhood family structure on fathers' fertility behaviors, particularly with respect to marital status at first birth and whether or not fathers have children with more than one partner. We expect that our findings regarding the link between childhood family structure and fathering (using the NSFG and Fragile Families data) will also show that men whose fathers were absent and less involved when they were growing up will be less involved in their own children's lives. We expect that the intergenerational transmission of father absence and fathering may be an important aspect of the growing inequality by socioeconomic status in the U.S. (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008). We discuss the implications of our findings for research and public policy.

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