

Exploring the Effects of Fatherhood Experiences on Single, Cohabiting, and Married Men's Lives

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Lost in the burgeoning scholarly attention devoted to fathers is a comprehensive analysis of the effects of fatherhood for men. Research has focused on the changing conceptions of fathering and the impact of fathers on child outcomes (Marsiglio et al, 2000). Yet, there is some evidence and there are some reasons to believe that fatherhood affects men's lives (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002; Snarey, 1993). The presence of children in men's lives appears to encourage men to become more involved in community and service-oriented organizations, establish more frequent contacts with extended kin, and be more committed to the labor force (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002). There is also evidence that fatherhood experiences can lead to declines in men's feelings of well-being (Cowan and Cowan, 1992; 1995; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002). However, previous research neglects how diverse fatherhood experiences may condition the effects of fatherhood on men's lives.

One aspect of diversity within fatherhood experiences involves men's marital status. There have been striking changes in the structural context of men's fatherhood experiences over recent decades: men are much more likely to have children later in life and to become nonresident, cohabiting, or single fathers than in years past (Eggebeen, 2002). There is also evidence that marriage (Nock, 1998), fatherhood (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002), and the structural context (i.e., coresident, nonresident, step, etc.) of fatherhood (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002) alter men's well-being and behaviors. Nevertheless, we know very little about the relative importance of men's marital status and the structural context of their fathering experiences in predicting men's feelings of well-being and their social behaviors. To what extent are the influences of marital status and structural context independent? A first step to answering this question is to obtain evidence of the extent to which marital and fatherhood statuses are linked to men's health, social connections, contacts with family members, and work activities.

The purpose of this study is to explore the significance of men's fatherhood and marital statuses as predictors of their well-being and social behaviors. Men are classified as either: a) coresident fathers of their own young children, b) coresident fathers of a partner's young children, c) nonresident fathers of their own young children, d) fathers of adult children only, or e) nonfathers. Because of previous theoretical and empirical work, the associations between men's fatherhood status and their psychological and physical health, social connections, family involvement, and work behaviors are examined. These relationships are analyzed separately for single, cohabiting, and married men.

An assessment of the relative importance of marital status and fatherhood context for men's lives is important because of the changing composition of American families, the positive or negative influence of fatherhood on men's lives, and the consequences of fathers' behaviors for children's development. Vast increases in the rates of divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing over recent decades have led to greater diversity in family composition (Teachman et al., 2000). Subsequently, the structural context for fathering is changing. About one half of White children and two thirds of African American children now spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Martin and Bumpass, 1989). Although the majority of single-parent families are female-headed and are associated with nonresident fathers, single-father families are the fastest-growing family type today (Meyer and Garasky, 1993).

Using a Census definition of families, the proportion of single father families increased by 240% between 1960-1990 and father-only families currently comprise over 15% of all single-parent families with children (Eggebeen et al., 1996; Garasky and Meyer, 1996). However, half of this increase was due to a surge in the number of custodial fathers who cohabit-- a family type that was not specified in the Census counts (Bumpass and Raley, 1995; Garasky and Meyer, 1996). In light of the increasing numbers of single and cohabiting fathers, it is especially important to investigate the relative significance of fatherhood for single, cohabiting, and married men's lives.

Exploring the impact of fatherhood on men's lives is also important because of the positive or negative impact that fatherhood may have on men's lives. Previous work suggests that fatherhood increases men's involvement in service organizations, church activities, the maintenance of family ties, and work (Eggebeen and

Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002). Fathers may even become more inclined to mentor children and young adults that are not related to them (Shapiro, 1993). If fatherhood does transform men into kinder, more caring, and more generous human beings then perhaps men should be more encouraged to become active fathers. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that the transition to parenthood (Belsky and Pensky, 1988; Cowan and Cowan, 1992; 1995) and becoming a nonresident father (Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002) leads to decreases in men's feelings of well-being.

Finally, the relationship between fatherhood experiences and men's well-being and behaviors has consequences for children's development. Children are affected by the behaviors and well-being of the adults in their homes (Child Trends, 1999). Nonresident fathers may also play an important role in their children's lives (Marsiglio et al., 2000). If fatherhood transforms men into more caring human beings and encourages them to be more service-oriented, involved in family life, and harder workers then their children stand to benefit. However, if men's feelings of well-being are adversely affected by their fathering experiences, this may have important consequences for their children. Parents' feelings of distress increase the risk that they display punitive, inconsistent, and unresponsive parenting behaviors (McLoyd, 1990).

Three perspectives of the significance of fatherhood for men are assessed in three analytic stages. First, regression analyses are used to present the bivariate relationships between men's fatherhood status and their well-being and behaviors. Then, the effects of variables that may influence both men's fatherhood status and their well-being and behavior are controlled (i.e., age, education, race, family income, number of children, and marital status). Finally, in separate models for each subgroup of fathers, the level of fathers' family involvement is used to predict men's well-being, social connections, ties to extended family members, and attachment to work.

The data for this study are taken from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH contains information from interviews conducted in 1987-1988 with a national sample of 13,017 individuals ages 19 and older. Individuals were randomly selected from a nationally representative sample of American households and oversamples of households that contained Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican

Americans, single-parent families, families with step-children, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). The sample for the present study consists of the 5,226 men who were interviewed.

Although previous work has examined the costs of early-timed fatherhood (e.g., Heath et al., 1995) and the immediate effects of the transition to parenthood (Belsky and Pensky, 1988; Cowan and Cowan, 1992; 1995; Sanchez and Thomson, 1997), few studies have explored the long-term consequences of normatively timed fatherhood for men's well-being and behaviors. Evidence suggests that men who are fathers differ from nonfathers in their well-being, social interactions, family ties, and attachment to work (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2002). However, there has been scant documentation of these differences and little theoretical or empirical attention devoted to explaining why they exist. Nevertheless, extant research provides insight into how fatherhood experiences may be linked to men's well-being, social connections, family ties, and work activities.

The transition to parenthood literature indicates that fatherhood may affect marital quality, employment, and feelings of well-being. The addition of a new child is associated with declines in marital satisfaction and feelings of distress (Belsky and Pensky, 1988; Cowan and Cowan, 1992; 1995). There is also evidence that fathers slightly increase their hours of employment (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000; Sanchez and Thomson, 1997). Thus, fatherhood may directly, or indirectly through changes in the quality of intimate relationships, lead to a decline in feelings of well-being and an increase in hours of employment.

A handful of studies also address the significance of fatherhood apart from the immediate effects of the transition to parenthood. Some evidence suggests that fatherhood is linked to marital stability (Cowan and Cowan, 1992) and marital satisfaction in later life (Heath and Heath, 1991; Snarey, 1993). Munch et al. (1997) find that childrearing increases the kin composition of men's social networks, at least temporarily. Other work notes that single fathers are more likely than other fathers to engage in activities with their children. Nonresident fathers are the least likely to be involved in their children's lives (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer and Bianchi, 1988). Kaufman and Uhlenberg (2000) report that among married men, fathers work more hours and are more likely to be employed than nonfathers. Yet, fathers who are highly involved with their

children may work fewer hours (Coltrane, 1996; Radin and Russell, 1983). Eggebeen et al. (1996) find that among custodial fathers, those who have never married are least likely to be employed.

In sum, previous research provides some evidence that fathers differ from nonfathers in their feelings of well-being, social connections, family interactions, and work behaviors. Among fathers, the family structure and the level of men's involvement with their children appear to be important factors in predicting men's well-being and behaviors. Nonetheless, work on the effects of fatherhood for men is sparse and does not adequately take into account the variety of family situations in which fathering occurs. A better understanding of the relative significance of fatherhood experiences for single, cohabiting, and married men's lives is needed. The present study provides a first step toward this goal by analyzing the associations between fatherhood experiences and feelings of well-being, social connections, ties to extended family, and work activities among single, cohabiting, and married men.

