

**FATHERS' PERCEPTIONS
OF PATERNAL ROLES:
VARIATIONS BY MARITAL STATUS
AND LIVING ARRANGEMENT**

**Center for Research on Child Wellbeing
Working Paper # 03-12-FF**

October 2003

Ariel Kalil

Fathers' perceptions of paternal roles:
Variations by marital status and living arrangement

Ariel Kalil
Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies
University of Chicago
1155 East 60th St.
Chicago, IL, 60637
(773) 834-2090
a-kalil@uchicago.edu

September 18, 2003

A previous version of this paper was presented in April, 2003 at the Biennial Meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Tampa, FL. I am grateful to Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest for excellent research assistance and to Marcy Carlson for detailed and helpful comments on an earlier version. Support for this work was provided in part by a grant from the McCormick-Tribune Foundation to the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy at the Harris School of Public Policy.

Fathers' perceptions of paternal roles: Variations by marital status and living arrangement

Abstract

Relying on new data from fathers in the Fragile Families and Child WellBeing survey (n=2,903), I examine fathers' reports of the "most important" perceived paternal role among six different domains: providing economic support, direct care, love and affection, protection, discipline, and teaching the child about life. Approximately half of all fathers identified providing love and affection as the most important thing that fathers do. A substantial minority said that teaching the child about life was the key activity; whereas a relatively small proportion said that economic support and direct care were fathers' major responsibilities. Controlling for an extensive set of fathers' background characteristics and attitudes and measures of the mother-father relationship, married and cohabiting fathers differ from each other in their perceived importance of financial support; cohabiting fathers are significantly more likely than married fathers to identify this dimension of parenting as the most important one.

Fathers' perceptions of parental responsibilities:

Variations by marital status and living arrangement

The involvement of fathers with their children-- in financial, emotional, and instrumental realms-- is a topic of growing concern among policy makers and the public. As the link between father absence and poverty has become clearer, this concern has been targeted particularly at unmarried, nonresident fathers and low-income families. Welfare reform made this concern explicit, including in the primary provisions demands that mothers in the welfare system comply with paternity establishment and child support enforcement efforts, and that states increase efforts to encourage marriage among low-income parents. The current federal administration is proposing to spend \$100 million annually to promote and encourage marriage more aggressively among low-income people, which will include, for example, education campaigns on the importance of marriage (Ooms, 2002). These policy levers are intended to increase the financial and possibly emotional connection of poor fathers and their children, thus helping to diminish child poverty, problematic child outcomes, and the state's role in supporting poor children.

Notably, the President's determination to make "committed, responsible fatherhood" a national priority is linked to the current administration's emphasis on marriage as "an essential institution" for the well-being of children. This political philosophy, however, fails to account for the large and growing number of children who are born into and growing up with two biological, unmarried parents in a cohabiting union. Cohabitation is an increasingly prevalent living arrangement in the United States. Some authors have suggested that this demographic shift illustrates the declining significance of marriage as a union status and as a setting for childrearing (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). This trend is worrisome for those who believe that

marriage confers economic and psychological benefits on adults and children, whereas cohabitation does not (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Although research on parenting, family processes, and child development in cohabiting unions has begun to develop, much remains unknown. In large part, this is due to data limitations – many nationally representative data sets that provide information on parenting and child well-being do not allow for the identification of cohabiting biological fathers in large enough numbers to be analytically useful (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Moreover, to the extent that information about cohabiting fathers is available, it focuses mostly on fathers' demographic characteristics. Missing in this literature is an assessment of the parental attitudes and behaviors of unmarried fathers themselves, in part because, until recently, such data were not available. The present paper draws on new and unique data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey. These data contain extensive information on the fathers of newborn children, gathered from fathers themselves, on topics including demographic and human capital characteristics, values and attitudes, and relationships with mothers.

The main question posed in this paper is whether cohabiting biological fathers of newborn children differ from their married counterparts in their assessment of their roles and responsibilities as fathers. This question is motivated by the observation in a small number of studies that children in two biological parent cohabiting unions have less optimal developmental environments and outcomes than their counterparts in married-parent households, even controlling for the demographic and economic differences that distinguish these two groups (DeLeire & Kalil, 2002; 2003; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Nelson, Clark, & Acs, 2001; Osborne, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). Some have also reported differences in the parental behavior of biological cohabiting and married

parents (Carlson & McLanahan, 2001; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). An examination of fathers' perceptions of their responsibilities to their newborn children, and whether these differ in the two groups of fathers, may provide insights into the differences in parental behavior and child development that have been observed among fathers of older children.

A noteworthy feature of the Fragile Families data is that it allows for a comparison not only of cohabiting biological fathers with their married counterparts, but a comparison of non-resident biological fathers with biological cohabiting fathers. Understanding the extent to which biological fathers' perceptions of parental roles and responsibilities differ in cohabiting versus marital arrangements can provide insights into the question of whether it is the marital relationship that distinguishes fathers, or whether living arrangements is the key distinguishing characteristic. In other words, are cohabiting biological fathers more like married fathers or more like non-resident biological fathers in their perceived parental responsibilities? The Fragile Families data are especially well-suited to address this question, as previous studies on this topic have suffered from an inability to distinguish non-biological cohabitators (i.e., cohabiting step-fathers) from their biological counterparts (Manning, 2002).

Background

The percentage of children born to unmarried mothers has increased dramatically in the past 20 years. Among children born to US women under 40 in 1999, 33% were to unmarried mothers, up from 21% for the cohort of children born in 1980-84 (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). However, the growth of children born to unmarried mothers is almost completely associated with cohabiting two-parent families. Indeed, about 39% of the children born to unmarried mothers in 1990-94 were born to cohabiting parents, up from 29% in 1980-84 (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Children's increasing likelihood of living in a cohabiting family is also a result of their mother's

entry into a cohabiting union. Current estimates suggest that about 40 percent of all children will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16 (Bumpass & Lu 2000).

Increasing rates of cohabitation raise important questions about the definition of “family” and about cohabitation as a context for childrearing. In particular, how much do cohabiting families behave like married families? A small literature has begun to address this issue by examining whether the adults and children in cohabiting families have similar economic, emotional, and psychological circumstances as adults and children in married families (Brown, 2000; Manning & Smock, 1995; Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994; Waite & Gallagher 2000).

To the extent that marriage confers benefits on adult and child well-being, and cohabitation does not, recent demographic trends are worrisome. One recent synthesis argued that married people enjoy higher levels of economic stability, happiness, and health relative to adults in cohabiting unions or single adults and that these effects are not simply artifacts of the kinds of people who select into marriage versus cohabitation (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Other studies suggest that cohabiting couple families have fewer economic resources than married couple-families (Manning & Lichter 1996), that the cohabiting union has a lower relationship quality and a higher incidence of domestic violence compared with marriages (Brown & Booth 1996; Kenney & McLanahan, 2002), and that cohabiting couples with children experience higher levels of depression compared to married parents (Brown, 2000).

In addition to potential differences in the economic and psychological contexts that children in cohabiting unions experience, cohabitation might be associated with the parenting contexts in which children develop. Parents differ in the ways in which they allocate resources including time, money, and affection to their children. Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin (1992)

showed that cohabiting-parent families eat breakfast together less often than do children in single-mother-only families. Carlson and McLanahan's (2001) analysis of the Fragile Families data suggested that cohabiting mothers read to their one-year old children somewhat less frequently than do married mothers. Finally, DeLeire and Kalil (2003) find that cohabiting couples with children spend a greater share of their income on alcohol and tobacco products, compared to married parents. These findings provide suggestive evidence that parents in cohabiting couple families allocate their resources differently than do parents in other family types. Such findings are interesting to the extent that they might provide an explanation for why children in cohabiting unions appear to have poorer developmental outcomes than children in married-couple families (DeLeire & Kalil, 2002; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Nelson et al., 2001; Osborne et al., 2003; Thomson et al., 1994).

Practically no research has focused on the attitudes or behavior of biological fathers in cohabiting unions and how they compare with their counterparts in marital arrangements. Indeed, as Carlson and McLanahan (2002) report, much of the fathering literature has focused on married or previously married fathers or on special samples such as unmarried teenage fathers. In one recent exception, Hofferth and Anderson (2003) showed that children living with an unmarried biological father spent 3.7 fewer hours directly engaged with him, compared to the engagement of children and fathers in married biological parent households; this decrement in time with father was comparable to the gap experienced by children living with a step-father and a non-biological cohabiting partner of the mother's. Unmarried biological fathers in that study also report themselves to be less warm toward their children than married biological fathers.

In the present study, I address the issue of fathers' perceived roles and responsibilities by examining their responses to a series of questions asking them to indicate which of a set of

parental activities is the most important vis a vis their newborn child. These behaviors cover financial investments in child well-being (e.g., providing regular financial support), emotional investments in children (e.g., showing love and affection for the child), and investments of time (e.g., teaching the child about life, serving as an authority figure for the child), all of which capture important dimensions of parenting. Responses to these questions can provide insights into how fathers intend to allocate their parental resources, which has implications for child well-being. Pleck and Pleck (1997) argue that it is important to know what paternal ideals of fathering are, since fathers will use them as a guide for behavior. For example, Rane and McBride (2000) reported that fathers' identification with the nurturing role in particular is linked to more frequent father-child interaction.

How do fathers perceive their roles and responsibilities and should we expect to find any differences by marital status and living arrangement? As Pleck and Pleck (1997) and others have reported, historical shifts in gender role attitudes have altered the landscape of all fathers' roles, from a 19th century pre-occupation with the father as economic provider to the more modern emphasis on fathers as nurturers and co-caregivers. However, the emphasis on the role of father as breadwinner is still prevalent, especially outside the middle class (Gerson, 1994).

It is not entirely clear whether, and in what ways, cohabiting biological fathers might differ from married biological fathers in their perceptions of fathers' responsibilities. Daly and Wilson's (2000) discussion of the evolutionary psychology of marriage is one lens through which to view potential differences. If biology is the basis for paternal investment (and attitudes thereto), then these two groups should perceive their responsibilities similarly. Both types of fathers should be motivated to adopt the investment beliefs and strategies that increase the ability of the next generation to reproduce and carry on the genetic family line. However, if marriage is

the basis for paternal investment, due in part to the solidarity it engenders as a socially recognized alliance deemed the appropriate or ideal context for child-rearing, we might expect divergent perceptions, with cohabitators more likely to resemble unmarried, non-resident fathers. This may be because cohabiting fathers lack the legitimacy and rights of married fathers, their roles are more ambiguous, and the duration of their relationships with the mother and child is shorter (Seltzer, 2000). Hofferth and Anderson (2003) present evidence suggesting the relative importance of marriage over biology in determining biological fathers' investments in their children.

Finally, cohabitators' characteristics might play a role in selection into different marital statuses and living arrangements and these same selection factors might be associated with their perceptions of appropriate parental roles. For example, cohabitators' less traditional gender-role attitudes play a role in their choosing cohabitation versus marriage as a union status (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). Given these more liberal attitudes, we might expect cohabiting men to emphasize more "modern" fathering activities, such as showing love and affection, than their married counterparts. Selection into cohabiting unions might also be associated with a variety of other economic and background factors and it is important to control for these factors to determine if there is any residual association between cohabitation status and fathers' perceptions of parental roles. The present data are extremely well-suited to this purpose by offering a wide range of background, interpersonal, and attitudinal measures.

Method

Data

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a new national survey designed to assess the circumstances of unmarried parents and their children over time following a non-

marital birth. The survey provides detailed information about fathers' demographic and human capital characteristics, attitudes, relationships with the child's mother, and father involvement at the time of the birth. The study follows a birth cohort of about 3,700 children born to unmarried parents in twenty U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. A comparison group of about 1,200 married parents is also interviewed in each of the 20 cities. New mothers are interviewed in the hospital within two days of giving birth and fathers are interviewed in person at the hospital or are located as soon as possible thereafter. Ultimately, data are or will be collected when the children are 1, 3, and 5 years old.

This paper uses baseline data from all 20 cities and includes 2,903 fathers who completed the baseline interview and had complete data on all study variables. In total, 3,830 fathers completed interviews at baseline, and 2,947 fathers provided information on all study variables. I exclude 44 fathers who report having no relationship at all with the mother at baseline as this group is too small to be analytically useful. Response rates for participation in the survey varied substantially according to fathers' relationship status with the mothers at the time of the child's birth; the data are more representative of fathers who are more closely connected to the mothers at baseline than those who no longer have a romantic relationship with her (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002).

Variables

Dependent variables. The dependent variables are drawn from responses to the following statement and question posed to fathers: "Fathers do many things for their children. Which of these is the most important to you?" The fathers were handed a card on which was listed a series of parenting activities including (a) providing regular financial support; (b) teaching the child about life; (c) providing direct care, such as feeding, dressing, and child care;

(d) showing love and affection to the child; (e) providing protection for the child, and (f) serving as an authority figure and disciplining the child. Fathers were instructed to circle only one item.

Independent variables. The key independent variables are the set of relationship status variables constructed from fathers' baseline reports. Drawing on information about marital status, cohabitation status, and the type of relationship fathers report having with mothers, four mutually exclusive categories are constructed: (a) married; (b) cohabiting; (c) "visiting" (romantically involved but living apart) and (d) not in a romantic relationship ("just friends").

The remaining independent variables assess fathers' background characteristics, indicators of economic resources, parents' relationship quality, fathers' reports of their own fathers' involvement, and fathers' gender role beliefs; all variables are drawn from the baseline survey. In terms of demographic characteristics, the analyses include age, race, and immigrant status. Age is specified as a continuous variable. Race is specified as a series of dummy variables: non-Hispanic white (the reference category), non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and other race. Fathers' immigrant status (i.e., whether he was not born in the United States) is indicated by a dummy variable (1 = "yes"). I also include an indicator for whether the newborn child is a boy (1 = "yes") and whether the father has at least one other child (either with this mother or a different one) (1 = "yes").

Several measures represent fathers' human capital or economic potential. Education is specified as a series of dummy variables: did not finish high school, finished high school but went no further (the reference category), and finished high school and at least some college. Fathers' employment status is a dummy variable for whether he was employed in the week prior to the baby's birth (1 = "yes"). Finally, I include a series of dummy variables representing

fathers' reported earnings in the past 12 months: less than \$10,000, \$10,000 - \$20,000, \$20,000-\$35,000, \$35,000 - \$50,000 (the reference category) and more than \$50,000.

Two measures capture the quality of the mother-father relationship. The first, mother-father conflict, is assessed with the mean of fathers' reports of whether he and the mother "never" (coded "1"), "sometimes" (coded "2") or "often" (coded "3") argue about money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful ($\alpha = .63$). The second is a summary index of fathers' supportiveness toward the mother (this information was collected from the mothers' survey). The four items ($\alpha .73$) ask how often the father is fair and willing to compromise during a disagreement, expresses affection or love for the mother, insulted or criticized her or her ideas (reverse coded), and encouraged or helped her to do things that were important to her. Answers included "never" (coded "1"), "sometimes" (coded "2") or "often" (coded "3").

Finally, I include measures of the fathers' religious attendance, experiences of own father involvement in the family of origin, and gender role attitudes. Religious attendance is a single item coded on a continuous scale ranging from 1 "not at all" to 5 "once a week or more." Own father involvement in the family of origin is represented as a series of dummy variables in response to the question: "How involved in raising you was your biological father?" Responses include "very involved" (the reference group), "somewhat involved", "not at all involved", and "never knew." Fathers' traditional gender role attitudes were measured with the average of two items (scale ranges from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"; $r = .36$); that state "it is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family" and "The important decisions in the family should be made by the man of the house."

Analysis Plan

First, I present some basic descriptive information about the fathers in this sample. Next, I present a series of logistic regression analyses predicting the father responsibility variables. For each outcome measure, I estimate four models. The first model includes only the marital status and living arrangement variables (i.e., cohabiting, visiting, and friends, with married omitted). The next three models add the demographic, relationship, and background experiences and attitudes variables in successive blocks to assess how much these variables explain any observed differences in the first model. Because fathers might select into different marital and living arrangement statuses based in part on these characteristics, this strategy allows for the partialing out of these observed background characteristics.

Results

Descriptive statistics

In this sample of 2,903 fathers, 794 (27%) are married, 1,361 (47%) are cohabiting, 618 (21%) are “visiting”, and 130 (4%) are “just friends.” Table 1 presents descriptive information on all fathers in Columns 1 and 2, and variations in all study variables by relationship status (married, cohabiting, visiting, and friends) in the next four columns. The final column indicates where significant differences occur across fathers in different relationship statuses.

The predominant pattern across the fathers’ demographic and human capital variables is that married fathers are more economically advantaged than all of their unmarried counterparts. Not only are they older, they are more likely to have higher levels of education, to have been employed the previous week, and to have higher annual earnings. Among unmarried fathers, there are no differences in education, but cohabiting fathers are more likely than visiting fathers to have been employed in the previous week and they are less likely than visiting fathers to have very low earnings.

In addition to these economic advantages, married fathers report lower levels of conflict and they are reported to be more supportive toward the mother of their child, they attend religious services more frequently, and they are more likely to have had involved fathers of their own. Among unmarried fathers, cohabiting fathers report less conflict than visiting or “just friends” fathers; conversely, they are reported to be more supportive of mothers than these two other types of unmarried fathers. There are no univariate differences among unmarried fathers in religious attendance, own fathers’ involvement, and gender role attitudes.

With respect to the dependent variable, across all fathers, the most frequently-cited “most important” responsibility was “showing love and affection to the child”, which was nominated by 52% of the fathers. The second-ranked responsibility was “teaching child about life” (19%), followed by “providing direct care” (12%) and providing financial support (11%). Only 4% of fathers said that serving as an authority figure was the most important fathering responsibility and only 3% of fathers nominated “providing protection” as such. Interestingly, these simple descriptive statistics suggest that many fathers hold a “modern” view of fathering and tend not to emphasize the traditional breadwinner role as the key fathering responsibility.

Several univariate differences appear across fathers in their emphasis on providing financial support, providing direct care, and showing love and affection. Both cohabiting and visiting fathers are more likely than married fathers to nominate providing financial support and providing direct care as the most important responsibilities; conversely, these two groups of fathers are less likely than married fathers to nominate showing love and affection as such.

Multivariate analyses

Because univariate differences by marital status and living arrangement emerged only for the measures of financial support, direct care, and love and affection, I estimate multivariate

logistic regression models for these three outcome measures only. Results from the regressions are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4, respectively. For ease of presentation, I present adjusted odds ratios instead of coefficients. The odds ratios measure the change in the odds that an event will occur for each unit change in a given variable. When the variable is dichotomous, the odds ratio measures the change in the odds that is due to belonging to one category versus the other. Because results from a logistic regression analysis can be somewhat difficult to interpret, I also simulate the responses for a series of “hypothetical” fathers; doing so allows me to assign meaningful characteristics to fathers and vary ones that are of particular interest. These exercises will be described further, below.

Table 2 presents the results for the multivariate logistic regression predicting the nomination of “providing financial support” as the most important father role. As the first model shows, unmarried fathers of all types are more likely than married fathers to nominate financial support as the most important role (recall that married fathers are the omitted group in all regression analyses). The second model adds the demographic and fathers’ human capital characteristics. The addition of these variables changes the significance of the odds ratios very little and none of the individual variables is statistically significant. The addition of the mother-father relationship variables in model three also does little to change the odds ratios on the relationship status variables; among these two variables, the conflict measure is significant. Fathers who have a more conflictual relationship with the mother are more likely to nominate financial support as the most important fathering role. This association could also reflect an association whereby a lack of fathers’ financial support (or viewing such as a key to the father role) could lead to greater conflict. Finally, among the attitude and family background variables added in the fourth model, the fathers’ own father’s involvement and the father’s traditional

gender role attitudes are associated with an emphasis on financial support. Compared to fathers whose own fathers were very involved, fathers who never knew their fathers are less likely to emphasize financial support. In contrast, fathers with more traditional gender role attitudes are more likely to state that providing financial support is the most important thing a father can do.

In sum, in predicting the nomination of providing financial support as the most important fathering role, cohabiting and visiting fathers are significantly more likely than married fathers to do so; these associations are relatively unchanged in the face of extensive background characteristics. Post-hoc analyses conducted in STATA show that there are no differences between these two types of unmarried fathers. Thus, in terms of their perception of the importance of providing financial support, cohabiting biological fathers are less like married fathers than they are like unmarried visiting fathers.

Table 3 presents the results for the multivariate regression predicting the nomination of “providing direct care, such as feeding, dressing, and child care” as the most important father role. As the first model shows, cohabiting and visiting fathers are more likely than married fathers to nominate these activities as the most important. The second model adds the demographic and fathers’ human capital characteristics. The addition of these variables reduces the cohabiting and visiting relationship status odds ratios to non-significance, although the coefficient for “just friends” becomes significant in this model. Fathers who are “just friends” are less likely than married fathers to nominate direct care as the most important fathering behavior. Among the background characteristics, age is significant; older fathers are less likely than younger fathers to emphasize direct care. Neither of the mother-father relationship variables added in model three is significant, although in this model paternal employment is significant. Employed fathers are more likely than unemployed fathers to say that providing

direct care is the most important fathering role. None of the attitude and family background variables added in the fourth model is significant.

In sum, in predicting the nomination of providing direct care as the most important fathering role, the univariate associations showing that cohabiting and visiting fathers are more likely than married fathers to do so is largely attributable to the fact that these fathers are younger than married fathers and younger fathers are more likely to emphasize direct care. However, fathers who are “just friends” with the mother are less likely to emphasize direct care than are married fathers; post-hoc analyses conducted in STATA show that fathers who are “just friends” are also less likely than visiting fathers to emphasize direct care.

Table 4 presents the results for the multivariate regression predicting the nomination of “showing love and affection” as the most important father role. As the first model shows, cohabiting and visiting fathers are less likely than married fathers to nominate showing love and affection as the most important role. The second model adds the demographic and fathers’ human capital characteristics; doing so reduces the coefficients on the cohabiting and visiting relationship statuses to non-significance. Among the demographic characteristics, black fathers and fathers of an “other” race are less likely than white fathers to say that “showing love and affection” is the most important father role. Relative to fathers with just a high school degree, fathers who have not completed high school are also less likely to emphasize love and affection, while better-educated fathers are more likely to do so. Immigrant fathers are also less likely to nominate showing love and affection as the most important fathering role. Among the variables added in model three, the mother-father conflict measure is significant; fathers who have a more conflictual relationship with the mother are less likely to nominate showing love and affection as the most important fathering behavior. Finally, among the attitude and family background

variables added in the fourth model, the father's own father's involvement and the father's traditional gender role attitudes are associated with an emphasis on showing love and affection. Fathers who report lower levels of involvement by their own fathers in the family of origin are more likely to state that showing love and affection is the most important father role. Conversely, fathers with more traditional gender role attitudes are much less likely to state that showing love and affection is the most important thing a father can do.

In sum, in predicting the nomination of showing love and affection as the most important fathering behavior, the univariate differences showing that cohabiting and visiting fathers are significantly less likely than married fathers to do so can be explained by the fact that cohabitators and visitors are less likely to be white and more likely to have limited education, and fathers with these characteristics are also less likely to emphasize showing love and affection.

Because odds ratios can be somewhat difficult to understand, I simulate responses from a series of "hypothetical" fathers in Table 5. In these scenarios, a "base case" is chosen and responses are calculated for fathers who share a set of characteristics but differ only in terms of relationship status. The details of these four different "base cases" are presented in the table note. For parsimony, I vary only whether the father is married, cohabiting, or visiting. In addition, I present these simulations only for the fathering role of "providing financial support" as this was the only outcome measure in which the relationship status variables remained significant in the presence of the background and control variables. The main finding to take away from the results presented in this table is that, in general, cohabiting and visiting fathers, compared to married fathers, are about twice as likely to nominate providing financial support as the most important fathering role, although the magnitude of these differences varies depending on the characteristics of the individual "base case."

Discussion

Motivated by previous work suggesting that cohabiting fathers differ in their parenting behaviors and their relationship with other family members, and by the observation that children in cohabiting-couple unions tend to fare less well developmentally than their counterparts in married-couple families, the present study sought to understand whether and in what ways cohabiting and married biological fathers differ in their perceptions of key fathering roles and responsibilities in relation to their newborn children.

In general, the picture revealed was one of greater similarities than differences. Looking across a range of perceived fathering roles and responsibilities, covering numerous domains of parental behavior including economic provision, emotional support and involvement, and direct caretaking behavior, all fathers overwhelmingly nominated “showing love and affection” as the most important thing that fathers can do. This interesting descriptive result, drawn from a new large-scale sample of fathers in America, provides support for the notion that the ideal of the new “nurturing” dad has taken a firm hold in contemporary society.

Despite a general picture of similarities in perceptions of fathers’ roles and responsibilities across marital status and living arrangements, this study identified one distinct difference: cohabiting fathers were significantly more likely than married fathers to nominate the provision of economic support as the most important thing fathers do. In this domain, cohabiting fathers and non-resident biological fathers who maintained a romantic relationship with the mothers reported a comparably greater emphasis on the breadwinning role, suggesting that at least along this dimension of perceived paternal responsibilities, marital status, rather than living arrangement, is the critical distinguishing characteristic of these fathers.

While the emphasis on breadwinning did not come close to eclipsing the perceived importance of providing love and affection to children, cohabiting biological fathers were about twice as likely as their married counterparts to state that providing economically for their children was the most important thing they could do as a father. It is important to reiterate that these findings were obtained controlling for a host of demographic, human capital, and personal characteristics, and thus the results cannot simply be attributed to the real economic differences that distinguish these two types of fathers. Thus, the question remains as to why this difference exists.

One possible explanation for this difference centers on the characterization of the cohabiting union as an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin, 2000; Seltzer, 2000). For example, as Seltzer (2000) argues, cohabitators lack the alliances between kin groups and exchange of property and other resources that characterize marriages. Fathers in these contexts may thus feel more compelled to provide economically in the absence of such public or kin support. In this sense, the responses of cohabiting fathers can be seen as rational responses to the environmental contingencies they experience in their day to day lives (Levine, 1973).

The emphasis on breadwinning could also be a signal of fathers’ economic uncertainty, whether real or perceived. That is, cohabiting fathers (or their female partners) could view themselves as being in more precarious economic circumstances than their married counterparts. Perhaps a fear or worry about future economic uncertainty is associated with a greater emotional fixation on being able to provide economically for one’s child. Although the analyses controlled for fathers’ education, current employment, and recent earnings, the data unfortunately do not have measures of other characteristics that might indicate past or future economic instability,

such as a detailed work history or previous experience with job loss, or perceptions about the likelihood of upward mobility in the future.

A second possible explanation for the different emphasis on providing financial support centers on the idea that characteristics of the cohabiting union itself shape fathers' attitudes about providing economically. If cohabiting fathers realistically perceive the partnership as less secure and potentially more short-lived than marriage, they are perhaps less willing to de-emphasize their labor force participation. In other words, their emphasis on the importance of breadwinning could be seen as a signal of "self" investment, or at least one in which the costs would not be lost should the relationship dissolve. The cohabiting father can continue to reap the returns to labor market experience even when he no longer resides with his child. In contrast, cohabiting fathers may perceive risks to investing emotionally in the child (at the expense of investing in work), given that these investments could be lost or diminished once the partners separate. Such a preference for different types of investments in parenting could reflect what Brines and Joyner (1999) referred to as the individualistic ethos of cohabitators versus the collectivist world-view of married partners. Brines and Joyner point to larger social structural forces, such as state laws concerning the division of property upon the dissolution of a cohabiting relationship, that inhibit investments among cohabitators that might bring the two partners closer together.

A third possible explanation is that cohabitators' relatively stronger emphasis on breadwinning is simply a reflection of the stage of the relationship in which we observe them in this one-time "snapshot." A vast majority of the unmarried couples in *Fragile Families* had "high hopes" for the stability of their relationship and many planned to marry (Waller, 2002). Other analyses with these data, including analysis of a companion qualitative study, suggest that among the cohabiting couples with marriage goals, a top priority is reaching financial stability to

successfully lay the groundwork for a future marriage (Gibson, Edin, & McLanahan, 2003). It is perhaps the case that the married fathers in this sample have already achieved their goals for financial stability, thus allowing these fathers to focus their attention on other dimensions of parenting.

Along these lines, it is interesting to recall that in these analyses, mother-father conflict was positively correlated with fathers' emphasis on providing economic support. Cohabiting fathers' relatively stronger emphasis on the breadwinning role could perhaps belie a troubled relationship and hence explain the fact that these cohabitators are not married to the mothers of the children. This emphasis on breadwinning could reflect a relationship history of money problems that interfere with the progression of the relationship from cohabitation to marriage. At the same time, it could also be that conflict is simply about the fathers' level of financial provision. It would be interesting to follow these unmarried fathers over time to see whether and how their perceptions of fathers' roles and responsibilities change in tandem with marital status changes.

Finally, the results reported here may serve as another indicator of entrenched class distinctions among fathers and their perceived roles in the family, insofar as the distinction between being married and cohabiting can be seen as a class distinction (e.g., see Landale and Forste's (1991) definition of cohabitation as a "poor man's marriage"). As Pleck and Pleck (1997) argue, the middle class nature of the new ideal of dad as emotionally nurturing, involved co-parent (as opposed to breadwinner) emerged from the middle class and is indeed most prevalent among the upper middle class. These authors propose that this middle class ideal serves "as a sign of the more privileged class's conception of its enlightened attitude toward fathering (p. 48)."

Irrespective of why this difference in the perceived importance of breadwinning exists, an important question is whether such differing attitudes toward breadwinning predict fathers' involvement and relationships with their children and their children's mothers. The cross-sectional nature of the present data precludes examining this important question. On one hand, fathers who emphasize being a financial provider might be more accepting of financial responsibility for their children. Yet, others have suggested that some men might use a lack of material resources as a justification for avoiding extensive involvement with children (Fox & Bruce, 2001), and others have found that higher levels of involvement are seen among fathers for whom the "nurturing role" is highly central to their sense of self (Rane & McBride, 2000). A primary concern is whether fathers can meet their own (and perhaps also their families') expectations for providing financially for their children. Fathers who cannot meet their financial goals may disengage out of shame or conflict with the mother or other family members (Lamb, 1997). An important question for future research is whether their ability to meet these baseline expectations predicts the stability of the mother-father relationship and fathers' connections to children.

References

- Brines, J. & Joyner, K. (1999). The ties that bind: Principles of cohesion in cohabitation and marriage. American Sociological Review, 64, 333-355.
- Brown, S. & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58, 668-679.
- Brown, S. (2000). The effect of union type on psychological well-being: Depression among cohabitators versus marrieds. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 41, 241-255.
- Bumpass, L. & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. Population Studies 54, 29-42.
- Carlson, M., & McLanahan, S. (2001, April). Shared parenting in fragile families. Paper presented at the Biennial Meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN.
- Carlson, M., & McLanahan, S. (2002). Early father involvement in Fragile Families. In R. Day & M. Lamb (Eds.), Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Cherlin, A. (2000). Toward a new home economics of union formation. In L. Waite (Ed.), The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation (pp. 126-146). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Clarkberg, M., Stolzenberg, R., & Waite, L. (1995). Attitudes, values, and entrance into cohabitational versus marital unions. Social Forces, 74, 609-634.
- Daly, M. & Wilson, M. (2000). The evolutionary psychology of marriage and divorce. In L. Waite (Ed.), The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation (pp. 91-110). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

DeLeire, T. & Kalil, A. (2002). Good things come in 3's: Multigenerational coresidence and adolescent adjustment. Demography, 39, 393-413.

DeLeire, T. & Kalil, A. (2003). How do cohabiting couples with children spend their money? Manuscript under review.

Dunifon, R. and Kowaleski-Jones, L. (2002). Who's in the house? Race differences in cohabitation, single-parenthood and child development. Child Development, 73, 1249-1264.

Fox, G. & Bruce, C. (2001). Conditional fatherhood: Identity theory and parental investment theory as alternative sources of explanations of fathering. Journal of Marriage and Family, 63, 394-403.

Gerson, K. (1994). A few good men. The American Prospect, 5 (16).

Gibson, C., Edin, K., & McLanahan, S. (2003). High hopes but even higher expectations: The retreat from marriage among low-income couples. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #03-06 FF. Princeton University.

Hofferth, S. & Anderson, K. (2003). Are all dads equal? Biology versus marriage as a basis for paternal investment. Journal of Marriage and Family, 65, 213-232.

Kenney, C. and McLanahan, S. (2001). Are cohabiting relationships more violent than marriages? Unpublished manuscript, Princeton University: Office of Population Research.

Lamb, M. E. (Ed.). (1997). The role of the father in child development (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Landale, N. & Forste, R. (1991). Patterns of entry into cohabitation and marriage among mainland Puerto Rican women. Demography, 28, 587-607.

LeVine, R. (1974). Parental goals: A cross-cultural view. Teachers College Record, 76, 226-239.

Manning, W. & Smock, P. (1995). Why marry? Race and the transition to marriage among cohabitators. Demography, 32, 509-520.

Manning, W. (2002). The implications of cohabitation for children's well-being. In A. Booth & A. Crouter (Eds.), Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children, and social policy (pp. 121-152). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Manning, W. and Lichter, D. (1996). Parental cohabitation and children's economic well-being. Journal of Marriage and the Family 58, 998-1010.

Nelson, S., Clark, R., and Acs, G. (2001). Beyond the two-parent family: How teenagers fare in cohabiting couple and blended families. Available on-line at http://newfederalism.urban.org/html/series_b/b31/b31htm.

Ooms, T. (2002). Marriage-Plus. *The American Prospect*, 13. Retrieved October 22, 2002, from <http://www.prospect.org/print/V13/7/ooms-t.html>.

Osborne, C., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003, September). Is there an advantage to being born to married versus cohabiting parents? Differences in child behavior. Paper presented at the National Poverty Center Conference on Marriage and Family Formation among Low-income Couples, Washington, D.C.

Pleck, E. & Pleck, J. (1997). Fatherhood ideals in the United States: Historical dimensions. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), The role of the father in child development (pp. 33-48). New York: Wiley.

Rane, T. & McBride, B. (2000). Identity theory as a guide to understanding fathers' involvement with their children. Journal of Family Issues, 21, 347-366.

Seltzer, J. (2000). Families formed outside of marriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62, 1247-1268.

Thomson, E., Hanson, T., and McLanahan, S. (1994). Family structure and child well-being. Social Forces 73, 221-242.

Thomson, E., McLanahan, S., and Curtin, R. (1992). Family structure, gender, and parental socialization. Journal of Marriage and the Family 54, 368-378.

Ventura, S. & Bachrach, C. (2000). Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-99. National Vital Statistics Reports 48 (16). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

Waite, L. and Gallagher, M. (2000). The case for marriage. New York: Broadway Books.

Waller, M. (2002). My baby's father: Unmarried parents and paternal responsibility. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Table 1

Characteristics of all fathers, by relationship status: Descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (N = 2, 903)

	Overall Mean	(SD)	Married (a)	Cohab (b)	Visiting (c)	Friends (d)	Significant Differences ¹
Father race							
Black	.46	---	.26	.45	.71	.66	a < b,c,d; b < c,d
Hispanic	.27	---	.22	.34	.20	.17	a < b; c,d < b
White	.22	---	.45	.17	.06	.12	b,c,d < a; c < b
Other	.05	---	.07	.04	.03	.05	b,c < a
Father's age	27.84	(7.31)	31.73	26.59	25.78	27.00	b,c,d < a
Father highest education							
Not a high school graduate	.31	---	.13	.38	.37	.32	a < b,c,d
High school graduate	.33	---	.23	.35	.39	.34	a < b,c
At least some college	.37	---	.63	.27	.24	.35	b,c,d < a
Immigrant	.16	---	.23	.16	.10	.06	b,c,d < a; c,d < b

Employed prior week	.82	---	.93	.82	.71	.77	b,c,d < a; c < b
Has at least one other child	.58	---	.65	.57	.50	.65	b,c < a; c < b; c < d
Earnings past 12 months							
Less than 10,000	.29	---	.09	.32	.47	.33	a < b,c,d; b < c
10,000 to 20,000	.26	---	.14	.32	.26	.30	a < b,c,d; c < b
20,000 to 35,000	.25	---	.28	.25	.19	.28	c < a,b
35,000 to 50,000	.10	---	.20	.07	.05	.07	b,c,d < a
Over 50,000	.10	---	.29	.04	.03	.02	b,c,d < a
Child is a boy	.53	---	.54	.51	.53	.61	
Mother-father conflict	1.42	(.37)	1.33	1.43	1.50	1.57	a < b,c,d; b < c,d
Mother-father supportiveness	2.63	(.40)	2.72	2.64	2.54	2.35	b,c,d < a; c,d < b; d < c
Religiosity of father	2.85	(1.32)	3.33	2.61	2.75	2.87	b,c,d < a
Own father's involvement							
Very involved	.41	---	.51	.38	.35	.37	b,c,d < a
Somewhat involved	.29	---	.30	.29	.27	.27	

Not at all	.23	---	.15	.25	.28	.26	a < b,c,d
Never knew	.07	---	.03	.08	.09	.10	a < b,c,d
Traditional gender role views	2.34	(.63)	2.34	2.34	2.38	2.24	
Most important							
Provide financial support	.11	---	.06	.12	.15	.12	a < b,c
Teach child about life	.19	---	.19	.18	.17	.26	
Provide direct care	.12	---	.08	.13	.13	.05	a < b,c
Show love and affection	.52	---	.60	.50	.47	.53	b,c < a
Provide protection	.03	---	.03	.03	.03	.02	
Serve as an authority figure	.04	---	.04	.04	.05	.02	
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	2,903		794	1,361	618	130	

¹Computed using the Bonferoni multiple comparison test ($p < .05$).

Table 2

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Provide Financial Support as Most Important Father Role

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	e^B		e^B		e^B		e^B	
Relationship status								
Cohab	2.19	***	1.97	***	1.95	***	1.97	**
Visiting	2.68	***	2.08	**	2.02	**	2.02	**
Friends	2.03	*	1.57		1.49		1.56	
Father's race								
Black			1.43		1.39		1.41	
Hispanic			.75		.75		.74	
Other			1.83		1.76		1.78	
Father's age								
			1.01		1.02		1.01	
Father's highest education								
Not high school graduate			1.17		1.16		1.14	
At least some college			.79		.80		.82	
Immigrant								
			.76		.80		.73	
Employed prior week								
			.88		.89		.90	
Has at least one other child								
			1.19		1.16		1.16	
Earnings past 12 months								
Less than 10,000			1.15		1.13		1.15	
10,000 to 20,000			.93		.92		.93	
20,000 to 35,000			1.22		1.21		1.25	
Over 50,000			1.00		1.02		1.04	
Child is a boy								
			.91		.92		.91	
Mother-father conflict								
					1.43	*	1.39	*
Mother-father supportiveness								
					.99		.99	
Religiosity of father								
							.95	
Own father's involvement								
Somewhat involved							.88	
Not at all involved							.95	
Never knew							.55	*
Traditional gender role attitudes								
							1.32	**
χ^2	33.82	***	79.32	***	84.50	***	98.31	***
<i>df</i>	3		17		19		24	
Coefficient differences								
	---		---		---		---	
% most important								
					11.09%			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

a cohab different from visiting; *b* cohab different from friends; *c* visiting different from friends

Table 3

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Providing Direct Care as Most Important Father Role

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	e^B		e^B		e^B		e^B	
Relationship status								
Cohab	1.62	**	1.00		1.01		.99	
Visiting	1.68	**	1.04		1.05		1.03	
Friends	.62		.41	*	.42	*	.42	*
Father's race								
Black			1.18		1.20		1.24	
Hispanic			1.27		1.28		1.29	
Other			.93		.94		.96	
Father's age			.97	**	.97	**	.97	**
Father's highest education								
Not high school graduate			1.16		1.16		1.15	
At least some college			.78		.77		.79	
Immigrant			1.12		1.10		1.06	
Employed prior week			1.45		1.45	*	1.46	*
Has at least one other child			1.04		1.05		1.06	
Earnings past 12 months								
Less than 10,000			1.58		1.59		1.60	
10,000 to 20,000			1.63		1.63		1.63	
20,000 to 35,000			1.35		1.35		1.36	
Over 50,000			.83		.82		.82	
Child is a boy			.99		.98		.98	
Mother-father conflict					.92		.90	
Mother-father supportiveness					1.08		1.09	
Religiosity of father							.96	
Own father's involvement								
Somewhat involved							.96	
Not at all involved							.89	
Never knew							1.07	
Traditional gender role attitudes							1.11	
χ^2	18.87	***	68.24	***	68.82	***	71.36	***
df	3		17		19		24	
Coefficient differences	b, c		b, c		b, c		b, c	
% most important					11.51%			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

a cohab different from visiting; *b* cohab different from friends; *c* visiting different from friends

Table 4

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Showing Love and Affection as Most Important Father Role

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	e^B		e^B		e^B		e^B	
Relationship status								
Cohab	.66	***	.85		.87		.85	
Visiting	.59	***	.85		.88		.87	
Friends	.75		1.00		1.10		1.03	
Father's race								
Black			.56	***	.58	***	.56	***
Hispanic			.84		.85		.85	
Other			.47	***	.49	***	.47	***
Father's age			.99		.99		.99	
Father's highest education								
Not high school graduate			.71	**	.72	**	.73	**
At least some college			1.31	**	1.30	**	1.24	*
Immigrant			.67	**	.64	***	.75	*
Employed prior week			.89		.89		.88	
Has at least one other child			1.05		1.08		1.07	
Earnings past 12 months								
Less than 10,000			.89		.90		.88	
10,000 to 20,000			1.07		1.07		1.07	
20,000 to 35,000			1.02		1.03		.99	
Over 50,000			1.20		1.18		1.16	
Child is a boy			.91		.90		.90	
Mother-father conflict					.76	*	.78	*
Mother-father supportiveness					1.17		1.16	
Religiosity of father							1.03	
Own father's involvement								
Somewhat involved							1.07	
Not at all involved							1.23	*
Never knew							1.37	*
Traditional gender role attitudes							.65	***
χ^2	30.12	***	138.99	***	149.45	***	200.35	***
df	3		17		19		24	
Coefficient differences	---		---		---		---	
% most important					52.19%			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

a cohab different from visiting; *b* cohab different from friends; *c* visiting different from friends

Table 5

Predicted Probabilities for Most Important Fathering Role is Provide Financial Support

	Father Type (a)	Father Type (b)	Father Type (c)	Father Type (d)
Married	.08	.04	.03	.05
Cohab	.15	.07	.05	.10
Visiting	.15	.08	.05	.10

Note: Father type (a) is Black, graduated from high school but went no further, is not an immigrant, is employed, does not have other children, sample child is a boy, has income 20-35K, and reports his own father was somewhat involved. Father type (b) is White, has at least some college, is not an immigrant, is employed, does not have other children, sample child is a boy, has income 35-50K, and reports his own father was somewhat involved. Father type (c) is Hispanic, has graduated from high school but not gone further, is an immigrant, is employed, does not have other children, sample child is a boy, has income 10-20K, and reports his own father was very involved. Father type (d) is of Other race, has at least some college, is an immigrant, is employed, does not have other children, sample child is a boy, has income 10-20K, and reports his own father was very involved. Continuous variables are held at the sample mean.