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## Measuring Father Involvement in Divorced, Nonresident Fathers

Kay Pasley

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

Sanford L. Braver

*Arizona State University*

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Fields & Casper, 2001) show that many children do not reside in two-parent families nor are all such families biological. In fact in 2000, 30.7% of children aged 17 years and younger were residing with one parent, usually a single mother (80%). Other estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998) show that about 11% of children have a nonresident, divorced or separated father. These figures have remained about the same since 1992. Given that there is no expectation of a dramatic decline in the number of children affected by divorce, continued focus on the experiences of these fathers is warranted.

In this chapter we examine the ways father involvement has been conceptualized and measured in studies of divorced, nonresident fathers. We discuss how those studies fall short by failing to adequately recognize and address (a) the consequences of the structural changes caused by divorce that affect father involvement, (b) the gendered context that promotes a deficit perspective by invalidating men's voices and experiences, (c) the breadth of ways fathers are involved after divorce, and (d) the developmental appropriateness of decreased involvement over time. Also, concern over the accuracy of reporting and inherent reporter biases in our measures of involvement are discussed, and we present a promising method

of triangulating biases. We end the chapter by offering recommendations for addressing some of these limitations.

## MEASURES OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Early conceptualizations of father involvement for divorced fathers assumed that fathers were either present or absent based on their marital status. Thus, married fathers were automatically considered to be present, and divorced fathers were considered to be absent. (We see this in the early work on boundary ambiguity in families by Boss in 1977.) Ahrons' (1981) study of coparenting in families of divorce was one of the first to assess parental involvement by questioning both fathers and mothers; she assumed that many divorced fathers, in fact, were involved, and the important question was how frequently they were involved. More recently, the construct of father involvement in studies of nondivorced and divorced fathers typically has been conceptualized as economic provision and other forms of behavioral involvements (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000) with some recent scholarship on fathering also examining the motivations for involvement. We briefly describe some of the measures used to assess these constructs. Studies are cited as examples only and are not meant to be inclusive.

Using economic provision as a measure of father involvement, scholars commonly ask divorced fathers and/or their former spouses about his payment or her receipt of child support and the amount of such payments "in the past year" (Berkman, 1986; Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991; King, 1994). Other studies query respondents about the amount and regularity (on-timeliness) of child support payments (Berkman, 1986), as well as contributions that do not include the exchange of money, such as the purchase of clothes, presents, dental care, and medical insurance (Teachman, 1991).

Measures that assess other forms of behavioral involvement in studies of divorced fathers often use the same measures applied to studies of intact, two-parent families with a few exceptions. Typical indicators of father involvement include the frequency of participation in a series of activities (Ahrons, 1983; Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Bruce & Fox, 1999; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Guidubaldi, Duckworth, Perry, & Redmond, 1999). Many of these activities reflect the constructs of engagement, accessibility, and social/emotional support, such as preparing meals, teaching a skill, attending events, doing household chores together, transporting to dental/medical appointments, discussing problems, being available for problems, and providing emotional support. Fewer studies include indicators of the cognitive domain of behavioral involvement, such as reasoning, planning, evaluating, and monitoring (Palkovitz, 1997). Of these studies that have assessed the cognitive domain, the effects of monitoring on child outcomes is the typical focus. No study was found

that addressed other aspects of cognitive involvement, although there are data available to assess planning (see report of the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Even fewer studies include measures of the affective domain of behavioral involvement (e.g., emotions, feelings, affection; Amato & Rivera, 1999), although Palkovitz (1997) offered a strong rationale for its inclusion and other scholars agree (Marsiglio, Amato, et al., 2000). In fact, when affective involvement is measured, respondents are asked to report the quality of the father-child relationship often in terms of closeness/connection and perceived supportiveness (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Arditti & Keith, 1993; Barber, 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Emery, 1999).

Measures of behavioral involvement unique to studies of divorced fathers included general assessments of the frequency, regularity, and duration of visits (face-to-face contact) and the frequency of phone calls, letters, and e-mail, usually referencing behaviors within the past year or the past month (see as examples, Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Beller & Graham, 1986; Buchanan et al., 1996). Other measures include estimates of time, such as the number of weeks the child visited or lived with the nonresident father (see studies using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, NSFH, 1998) or the percentage of time the child spent in the care of the father (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Fogas, Zvetina, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Still other measures attempted to assess the subjective nature of contact by asking about visitation quality (Arditti & Keith, 1993).

Marsiglio, Day, and Lamb (2000) suggest that the motives or perceptions associated with fathering are important to our understanding of men's behavior. To this end, scholars have examined some of the motivations of divorced fathers. Studies have assessed the effects of perceived competence, role salience, satisfaction, investment, employment status, and conditions of employment on involvement (Arendell, 1995; Fox & Bruce, 1999; Minton & Pasley, 1996a; Futris & Pasley, 1997). Other research has addressed the influence of the coparental relationship on father involvement after divorce, particularly the ways in which mothers may restrict involvement (Arendell, 1995; Braver, Wolchik, et al., 1991; Maccoby, 1995; Minton & Pasley, 1996b). However, most studies of coparenting focus on the influence of the coparental relationship on child outcomes rather than on father involvement (Lamb, 1997; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997).

## HOW MEASURES OF INVOLVEMENT IN DIVORCED FATHERS FALL SHORT

We argue that the measures just described above and many of the measurement strategies themselves are problematic for scholars seeking to understand father involvement in divorced, nonresident fathers. Next we outline these problems and

offer some recommendations for reconceptualizing and measuring father involvement following parental divorce.

### Structural Changes Affecting Involvement

When divorce occurs, the pattern of family life is disrupted and new patterns must be negotiated and developed. Several issues relevant to the study of father involvement following divorce stem from these changes. For example, divorce means that decisions must be made regarding the care of dependent children, and such decisions translate into formal legal arrangements regarding the access parents have to children (e.g., legal and physical custody, visitation schedules). Legal custody connotes which parent assumes the rights and responsibilities for making decisions affecting the health, education, and welfare of the child (Emery, 1994). Thus, joint legal custody arrangements continue the predivorce circumstance in which decisions affecting the child are shared by the parents. In contrast, sole legal custody means that only one parent is recognized legally to have this decision-making right and responsibility. Physical custody is distinct from legal custody, as it indicates who is going to provide care for the child on a daily basis. As such, great variation can and does occur in divorced families regarding the arrangement of physical custody. A common custody arrangement is the awarding of joint legal custody in combination with primary physical custody to the mother, although the definition of primary physical custody can vary (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

The distinction between legal and physical custody is more complicated than would appear from our earlier comments, because evidence suggests that informal changes in both types of custody can and do occur, so the formal (*de jure*) award of custody does not necessarily reflect what happens in daily (*de facto*) life (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Consider a couple that is awarded joint legal custody with primary physical custody to the mother. In one such couple, the father may abdicate his decision-making responsibilities to his former wife, but they equally divide the child's time so each parent provides half of the child's care. Another couple with this same custody arrangement finds the father highly involved in decisions, whereas the mother has most of the daily care of the child except during visitation with the father every other weekend.

Two points are germane to our argument about the consequences of the structural changes imposed legally or informally on families after divorce. First, as a result of divorce, most fathers simply do not have "at-will" access to their children, as they did prior to divorce. Although some custody arrangements are such that fathers have more access and contact than others, in nearly all cases it is impossible to duplicate the earlier pattern of resident fathering, no matter how much they might desire to do so. In reality, many fathers are relegated to a restricted visitation/access schedule, designated as every other weekend. Thus, when compared with nondivorced fathers, the structural barrier of the limited custody arrangement means that divorced fathers will appear less involved on most behavioral measures.

In addition, family life on the weekends, when divorced fathers are most likely to engage in face-to-face contact with children, is different than that during the week. Weekends typically have less routinized patterns and activities, and there is greater involvement in leisure pursuits. In contrast, behaviors such as planning (e.g., making dental/medical appointments) occur during the week, when the mother generally has responsibility for primary care. Applied to studies of father involvement, the nature and dynamics of the interaction during weekends would be expected to be different from that of weekly daily involvement. Yet, we could find no study that examined involvement within this structural reality.

*Clarity of Referent.* Many measures of involvement ask about the frequency of participation in an activity from a series. Such measures often lack a specific anchoring to time, and other measures require respondents to report a specific time frame (e.g., within the past month, within the past year). In either case, divorced fathers, their former spouses, and, in some cases, their children may answer such queries using different referents. Some may refer to the frequency of what occurs during weekend visits; others may consider frequency by comparing weekends with fathers to weekends without fathers as the referent; still others may refer to the combination of weekdays and weekends regardless of where the child resides at either time. Clear references to time allow us to make comparisons across groups and provide greater assurance that the response of one participant is similar to that of another. We could find no study that did this explicitly beyond the typical reference to "in the past month" or "in the past year."

*Boundary Issues.* We argue that behavioral involvement is influenced by the overt boundaries established between parental households following divorce and the accompanying behaviors of the parents and children. For example, the divorce decree ordinarily spells out the "visitation privileges." Whereas these privileges vary considerably from family to family, the most common provision is one that limits contact to every other weekend. Thus, to visit more frequently could actually be a violation of the law. We could find no research that took this structural limitation into account, although one way to do so is calculating "percentage compliance" for visitation (the amount of visits taking place divided by the amount of contact allowed by the decree or otherwise).

Regardless of what the decree says, a father's contact with his child could be virtually limitless, if the custodial mother permitted it to be so. She could easily—and with no outside interference—permit him to visit more than their decree stipulated. This fact puts a focus on the behavior of the former spouse and the nature of the coparental relationship in limiting father involvement. Both quantitative (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Rettig, Leichtentritt, & Stanton, 1999) and qualitative data (Arendell, 1995; Pasley & Minton, 1997) reveal the negative side of "gatekeeping" and continued coparental conflict. In fact, some evidence shows that when fathers and their young adult children are asked, both wanted more contact than either the mothers or the decree allowed (Fabricius & Hall, 2000). Other evidence (Rettig

et al., 1999) indicates the negative influence of continued conflict between former spouses on father involvement. That is, many former wives encourage more contact between the father and his children than is outlined in any formal order, only to be disappointed when the father does not respond, although this pattern seems less common than the reverse (Braver, Wolchik et al., 1991.) We would be remiss if we failed to recognize that many fathers and mothers work hard to promote and maintain a cooperative coparenting relationship and that the gate swings both ways (Walker & McGraw, 2000). Important to our argument is that the potential variation in boundary maintenance means that measures of involvement should include indicators of court-ordered access, as well as desired and allowed access. In this way additional insight into the complexity of involvement by divorced fathers would result.

*Mobility, Relocation, and Proximity.* Another commonly occurring structural change after divorce involves mobility and relocation, which dramatically alter the pattern of family life. Researchers recognize geographic proximity as an important variable affecting fathers' behaviors, and greater distance from a child is associated with less contact (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Stewart, 1999). For example, Braver and O'Connell showed that 34% of mothers moved "more than an hour's drive away from what used to be the family home," and in another 28% of families, the fathers moved (when both moved, these figures describe the parent who moved first). Thus, such relocations are normative and make face-to-face daily involvement impossible, such that special handling of the resulting measurement issues is required.

We note that proximity (distance) is used as a control variable in many studies of divorced, nonresident fathers; however, few attempts are made to tease out any differential effects of distance on various aspects of involvement (cf. Braver & O'Connell, 1998.) All else being equal, fathers who have adequate resources can continue to have access to and involvement with children who live at a distance via phone, e-mail, and letter writing, when distance and expenses prohibit face-to-face contact. However, we could find no study that recognized the greater effort and expense required to maintain contact at a distance. This greater effort and expense may undermine involvement, and inclusion of changes in location, distance, effort, and the associated expenses might better inform our understanding of father involvement. Because most nondivorced, resident fathers have ready access daily, less effort and expense is needed to maintain the father-child relationship. Divorced fathers who maintain contact in the face of relocation may represent a select group—one that is both more responsible and resourceful and that possesses the necessary economic resources. To date, scholars have done little to explore the nature and frequency of father involvement "from a distance."

*Economic Provision.* Divorce also results in heightened awareness of how the provider aspects of father involvement influence the patterns of family life. Although nondivorced fathers have this responsibility also, their involvement in

economic provisioning is taken for granted and commonly measured by their employment status and income. The legal context of divorce makes this responsibility explicit. Some variation across states regarding court orders for child support exists, and these differences result in higher or lower percentages of fathers being ordered to pay. For example, 83% of those in California were ordered to pay child support (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992); 75% were ordered to do so in Wyoming (personal communication, Office of Family Services, December 2000). Not only are there variations in whether fathers are ordered to pay, but there also are variations in how much they are ordered to pay (Emery, 1999; Pirog, Klotz & Byers, 1998). Morgan and Lino (1999) analyzed child support guidelines in every state and found enormous variability. For an identical family size and parental income scenario, a presumptive order varied from a low of \$550 per month in Mississippi to a high of \$1,054 in Nebraska. According to Venohr and Williams (1999), about half the states provide significant reductions based on the percentage of time fathers spend with children in determining the award, but, with two or three exceptions, only if that percentage is substantial (the "shared parenting adjustment").

For measurement purposes and in light of such variation, we believe that it is reasonable to divide the amount of child support paid by the amount of child support ordered to establish a "compliance ratio" instead of, or in addition to, simply asking about the amount paid. Whereas some data sets ask about court orders/awards (see the NSFH, 1998) and enable calculation of this ratio, other data sets do not include this query (e.g., ADD-Health, Udry, 1997). Also, researchers who worked with a data set that had the information available failed to make these calculations (e.g., King & Heard, 1999).

Additional complications arise because some fathers who are not ordered to pay do so anyway, informally and voluntarily (Argys et al., 1996; Greene & Moore, 1999). Fabricius, Braver, and Deneau (2003) studied the financial support divorced fathers provided for their young adult children's college expenses. Because the children were no longer minors, they were under no legal obligation to pay anything; however, substantial support was provided, especially among fathers with joint legal custody, who, after adjusting for differential income, provided proportionately more than did custodial mothers.

Failure to differentiate the economic contributions made voluntarily from those made under court order erroneously treats all divorced fathers as a homogeneous group. How would our reporting change if the research questions were about economic responsibility or compliance? If we included additional indicators of economic involvement by measuring responsibility (court-ordered), amount, and regularity of child support payments, designating involvement would be even more complicated. Typical measures do not account for these complex variations among divorced, nonresident fathers and their experiences, although we believe these measurement issues should be addressed.

A related problem in asking about financial provision has to do with the interpretation respondents make of a query. Consider an item that asks about the timeliness of payments. A father who directly mails his payment to his former spouse by the

due date or has the payment automatically withdrawn from his paycheck and forwarded to a collection agency typically will report making his payment "on time." Because it takes time for the payment to arrive (e.g., the agency has to process the payment or the mail system to deliver it), the former spouse may report the payment as "late" because it is not received on the designated date. Other questions may ask about the regularity of payments (whether they are made "regularly"), and these also can be more or less problematic depending on the specificity of the query. When questions allow respondents to define "regularity" for themselves, we cannot be confident that the query is interpreted in a similar fashion. Greater care must be exercised in selecting terminology and clearly articulating questions so more accurate reporting is possible.

### Gendered Context and the Deficit Perspective of Divorced Fathers

Some scholars acknowledge that divorce occurs in a context in which gender bias is enacted (e.g., Arendell, 1995; Buehler, 1995; Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pasley & Minton, 1997). Fineman (1991) suggested that the presumption of gender neutrality and gender equality served as a guiding principle in many of the statutory reforms related to property division and spousal support, stemming from the view of marriage as an economic partnership. Buehler (1995) argued that contributions by husbands to family life occur primarily through employment and secondarily through household/family work, and the reverse pattern is true for women. These primary and secondary role-related responsibilities connote gender bias that influences the ways in which we conceptualize and measure father involvement. For example, early studies focused on the financial contributions fathers made in terms of child support, so interest was on amount, frequency, and regularity of such payments (Cassetty, 1978; Chambers, 1979). Often compliance was viewed as a reflection of father involvement, and men have been disparaged for noncompliance as "deadbeat dads," although such beliefs have been effectively challenged (Braver & O'Connell, 1998).

The gendered presumption that men are economically responsible for families is apparent in research comparing the payment of child support by nonresident mothers and nonresident fathers. Findings show that nonresident mothers are less likely to pay (Brown, 2000; Stewart, 1999), the amount is frequently less than that ordered of fathers with equivalent standards of living, and mothers pay less regularly (e.g., Meyer & Garasky, 1993). However, we do not see the same negative labels (e.g., "deadbeat moms") applied to women who are noncompliant.

Another area in which gender bias is evident is in custody decisions. Many scholars (Buehler, 1995; Mason, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) note that, despite laws to the contrary, custody decisions are hardly gender neutral, and figures indicate that about 85% of divorced nonresident parents are fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). In this culture, parenting is conducted primarily by mothers,

and most parents prefer and adopt this pattern of role responsibilities. Although only one state (Minnesota) has a primary caretaker criterion as a formal part of its custody statute (meaning custody should be awarded to the parent who served as primary caretaker during the marriage; Crippen, 1990), judges in most states frequently apply a primary caretaker preference anyway (Buehler, 1995; Emery, 1994; Kelly & Lamb, 2000). The result is gender biased, because men rarely fit these criteria.

Further, the gender bias is apparent in many of the commonly used measures of father involvement because most are derived from measures developed and used primarily with mothers as respondents, implicitly suggesting that fathers should do what mothers do. As a result, most measures assess engagement activities; this kind of face-to-face contact, especially that which is instrumental in nature, is more characteristic of the types of behaviors mothers engage in than that of fathers, who are more likely to be accessible and engage in recreational activities (Lamb, 1997). Often there is little if any recognition of father's involvement in play activities with children, even though research shows this is a prominent way for fathers to spend time with young children. Given the structural barriers to engagement for divorced, nonresident fathers, we believe that measures of accessibility must be further explored, as accessibility is less affected by the structural changes that come with divorce. For example, whereas physical accessibility is common in nondivorced families, accessibility by phone might be expected when fathers are not in close proximity to the child as is the case in many divorced families. Also, because many fathers are restricted to having face-to-face contact with their children on weekends, we would do well to acknowledge that leisure activities commonly occur on weekends in most families, not just divorced families.

### Breadth of Father Involvement After Divorce

Much of the empirical work has not addressed the structural constraints of the divorced family context. Therefore, we have been unsuccessful in understanding the full breadth of father involvement among divorced fathers, and more work is needed on measures that assess accessibility, responsibility, and the emotional and cognitive domains of father involvement. We noted earlier that accessibility (and engagement) can and is restricted by the legal context, geographic proximity, and the nature and quality of the continuing coparenting relationship. Further, the child's response to the structural changes resulting from parental divorce can and does affect his or her willingness to connect with the father (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Emery, 1999), and both mothers and fathers are known to limit access because of what they believe is best for the child (e.g., Arendell, 1995; Wolchik, Fenaughty, & Braver, 1996; Pasley & Minton, 1997). Yet measures typically do not account for children's responses or parental responses in light of children's responses.

Moreover, we believe that the typical measures of responsibility (e.g., payment of child support, monitoring) inadequately address other dimensions of responsibility, such as protecting the child, meeting commitments (e.g., picking the child up on time, attending school-related activities), or teaching the child certain skills (e.g., appropriate social behavior). In fact, we know of no study of divorced, nonresident fathers that asked about their level of responsibility in a variety of parenting activities typically asked of fathers and mothers in nondivorced families (see Pleck, 1997). Thus, we do not know the answer to questions concerning who and at what level a parent is responsible for certain aspects of parenting, under what conditions (such as divorce) this responsibility changes, and how it changes.

We also believe an important aspect of father involvement remains virtually unexplored: the cognitive domain (Palkovitz, 1997). Research shows that divorced fathers and mothers are highly concerned/worried about the possible effects that their decision to divorce can have on their children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Kitson, 1992). Findings suggest that they are cognizant of their children's responses to the divorce, and fathers comment that these concerns prompt them to disengage from their children (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Futris & Pasley, 1997). Buehler and Pasley (1993) argued that the cognitive or psychological presence of the child to the father is likely heightened after divorced. Although this construct (psychological presence) may provide a unique understanding of some cognitions associated with fathering after divorce from both the father's and the child's perspectives, it has yet to be studied adequately. Because psychological presence reflects concern and worry about one's child, fathers may choose to limit their involvement in the hope that this reduces the children's stress (Arendell, 1995; Braver & Griffin, 2000; Futris & Pasley, 1997). Interestingly, using data from the Minton and Pasley (1996a) study, we found that the level of psychological presence of the child did not differ significantly between nondivorced, resident fathers and divorced, nonresident fathers (Minton & Pasley, 1996b). Thus, if psychological presence had been used as one indication of father involvement, these data would have shown that their level of this type of involvement is equivalent; however, the measure of engagement with this sample showed divorced, nonresident fathers as less involved.

### Developmental Appropriateness of Involvement

Another limitation is that most studies of fathering after divorce fail to consider the developmental appropriateness of different kinds of involvement as the child matures. For example, the often-cited study by Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, and Zill (1983) shows a dramatic decline in fathers' contact in the first 2 years after divorce. Less often noted is that these target children were 11–16 years of age, an age when children's focus turns to peers and when visitation interferes with

children's social agendas. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) reported that for the youngest group of children (those under 6 at the beginning of their 3-year study), visiting with their fathers remained a positive experience. It was only among those children 12 and older that increasing resistance to visitation occurred over time; in part, this resistance may be expected during this stage of children's development. Not only does the involvement of fathers change over time, it may be differentially important at varying points in the child's maturation. Coatsworth (2000) found that divorced fathers were, on average, less supportive of their college-age children than were divorced mothers. However, support from fathers accounted better than did support from mothers for the children's college adjustment. Clearly, more exploration of changes in father involvement over time in the context of the child's developmental needs is warranted.

Measures of behavioral involvement often do not address the developmental changes. Use of a scale such as Ahron's (1983) means that fathers of infants typically would answer *never* to "discussing problems with children," "religious and moral training," and "attending school or church related functions." If composite scores are used (a common practice), these fathers would appear less involved than fathers of school-age children where these items are developmentally appropriate. "Dressing and grooming" would be less appropriate behavioral involvement for fathers of school-age children or adolescents, and we would see the same problem surfacing.

### Accuracy of Respondents' Reports

At the foundation of the four limitations mentioned thus far lie concerns regarding the accuracy of the reports and information derived from various informants. In the recent decade review of research on fathering, Marsiglio, Amato, and associates (2000) summarized the findings regarding "shared-method variance, discrepancies among respondents' reports and the reliability of observational data" (p. 1179). They described some of the issues and ways in which the extant literature has or is addressing these issues. We do not summarize their comments here but limit our discussion to several key points for studying divorced, nonresident fathers.

*Biased Reporting.* Generally, the biases of informants appear to be of two sorts: a "self-serving" bias when the informant describes him-herself in terms of more socially desirable behavior and less undesirable behavior than is warranted (Braver & Rohrer, 1978; Cialdini, Braver, & Lewis, 1974; Miller & Ross, 1975; Sicolny & Ross, 1977); and an "ex-spouse-bashing" bias (Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991) characterized by exactly the opposite tendencies when the informant describes the former spouse. For example, scholars (Ahrons, 1983; Braver, Wolchik et al., 1991; Braver et al., 1993) found that a father's reports of his contact and emotional involvement with the child were significantly greater than were reports by his former spouse (the child's mother) on his behavior. Interestingly, other



research shows that nonresident mothers also have a tendency to report higher levels of contact with nonresident children than others report (Greif & Kristall, 1993; Warshak, 1992). Braver, Fitzpatrick, and Bay (1991) and Sonenstein and Calhoun (1990) found similar results for child support payment and compliance. One clear methodological implication of these biases for descriptive work on father involvement arises when only one former spouse, most commonly the mother, provides data. Generally, the researcher accepts the mother's report as a proxy for the father's, a practice that should be recognized as virtually guaranteed to produce misleading results. This practice is less problematic in hypothesis or model testing research than in purely descriptive studies because the former commonly relies on correlations between the matched reports, which are typically quite substantial and positive (e.g., Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991), despite the significant mean differences found in the absolute amount of involvement reported.

*Obtaining Objective (or Less-Biased) Data.* Because of these two well-documented biases in measuring father involvement after divorce, it is desirable to attempt to "triangulate" reports to get at the truth by obtaining both mother's and father's responses whenever feasible. Obtaining some more objective data in the form of archival or administrative data when possible, in addition to the parent's reports, is even better. The child support aspect of father involvement appears most amenable to this desideratum; however, this goal has proven elusive because trustworthy administrative databases do not appear to exist (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Garfinkel, 1985; Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Klawitter, 1991). Further, for most other father involvement indicators, administrative or official records simply do not exist.

Another alternative for a less-biased data source that often is overlooked is the child's report of father involvement, which should contain neither self-serving nor other-bashing biases. Although children may respond with biases of their own, they are less likely to be systematic than those previously mentioned. For many studies, however, such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the National Survey of Families and Households, querying the child may be difficult but not impossible. Even when it is practical, questions arise about the trustworthiness of the data when the child is too young to be a credible informant.

These latter problems are alleviated if we recruit older children as informants, such as late adolescents or young adults. Not only is such a child old enough to be credible, but also she or he should not be as biased as the parents are to either overreport or underreport involvement. Because young adults often have achieved some independence, distance, and perspective on family dynamics and may no longer reside in either parent's house, the biases of young adult children of divorce are less obvious and more complex, and these children might conceivably be entirely unbiased. Thus, we believe using young adult samples can provide valuable insights into father involvement. One way such a sample can be obtained is to screen the potential primary respondent in nationally representative data sets for age (e.g., selecting those aged 18–22) and parental divorce status. An easier method, albeit

not nationally representative, is to obtain responses about father involvement from college students.

A chief advantage of using college student samples is that their reports are among the easiest data to obtain. The numbers are adequate, they congregate in the exact domain of researchers (college campuses), and little or no financial resources are required to obtain responses. Of course, reports of college students about father involvement may contain a different bias: sample representativeness. College students are plausibly disproportionately from better adapted and more functional families because, after all, somehow the young adult had the "capital" (social, human) to attend college. Thus, young adult children of divorce who go to college may be a select sample with biased levels of father involvement. Diminishing that argument, however, findings from several recent surveys at a large state university (Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Fabricius, Braver, & Deneau, 2003) indicate that the proportion of college students who describe their parents as divorced was consistent at about 30%, corresponding well with national figures. For example, Bumpass and Sweet (1989) found that 31% of children whose parents are married are expected to experience parental divorce (see also National Center for Health Statistics, 1990, Table 1-31.)

We believe that using college student samples may be an important first step in identifying the areas in which multiple informants are needed. In the following section, as an illustration of the utility of this readily available sample, we describe the sample acquisition method and response rate results of a study recently undertaken as an honors thesis by Diana Coatsworth (2000) under the supervision of the second author. Then we report some intriguing results with this sample.

### COLLEGE STUDENTS AS RESPONDENTS: AN EXAMPLE

After receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board, we recruited college students for the study in the following way. During one class session before a scheduled exam, six introductory psychology classes received an announcement that students had an opportunity to receive extra course credit toward their final grade by participating in our survey. Our interest in surveying them and their parents was explained, and the students were instructed to bring their parents' addresses to the next exam in order to address a questionnaire packet to each parent. Parents were recruited by telling them in a letter that their child would be given additional points toward their final grade if they returned the survey but that no penalty would befall their student if they decided not to participate. The survey was one of several extra credit options. Students had the opportunity to earn 1 or 2 extra credit points per survey (depending on the instructor), allowing them 3 to 6 extra credit points maximum per student, a total of about 1.5% of their final semester grade.

On the scheduled exam day, students had the opportunity to indicate their desire to participate in the study as they left the classroom following the exam. The incentive was described again. Each student signed a prepared letter to each parent, explaining the study and our request of them. If the student knew each parent's address, they provided it at that time. If the child did not have the addresses with them, their e-mail address was requested as a way of communicating to obtain the parents' addresses later. Students had the option of completing their survey at that time or submitting the completed survey later to a designated place. The parent packets included a prepaid return envelope. After all surveys were returned, the student received the promised extra credit points.

Approximately 725 students (about 120 students in each section) were enrolled in the six sections of the course, Fall 2000. From responses on a previous survey given to these same class sections ( $N = 644$ ), of these 189 students (29.3%) indicated that their parents were divorced. Of these 189 students (presuming this number was correct as of the day of the exam), 166 (88%) chose to participate in the study by taking the materials for themselves and their parents. Of the students who took the materials, 34 (20.5%) of the students did not return their questionnaire by the deadline (2.5 to 3.5 weeks after the surveys were distributed), leaving 132 students whose data were analyzed. Of the 332 potential parents of the potentially participating 166 students, 31 father questionnaires and 5 mother questionnaires were not mailed because of address problems; 9 father questionnaires and 2 mother questionnaires were not mailed because they were either deceased or unable to complete a questionnaire for medical reasons; 15 father questionnaires were not mailed because the student indicated they had absolutely no contact with the father and no way of obtaining an address. This resulted in 111 father questionnaires and 159 mother questionnaires being mailed. Of the 270 questionnaires mailed, 243 were completed and returned (for mothers  $n = 141$ , for a response rate of 88.7%; for fathers  $n = 102$ , for a response rate of 91.9%), an extremely high rate for a mailed questionnaire. Restricting attention to the 132 students who returned their own questionnaires, 128 mother questionnaires were mailed (97% of the actually participating students), and 109 were returned (83% of the eligible mothers; an 85% response rate of those mailed). Again for the 132 responding students, 42 father questionnaires were unable to be mailed for reasons listed above, leaving 90 father questionnaires that were mailed (68% of the actually participating students), and 81 were returned (61.4% of the eligible fathers; a 90% response rate of those mailed).

### Sample Findings About Father Involvement

Clearly, using this method a variety of aspects of father involvement questions can be asked in parallel of the divorced mother, divorced father, and child. Questions can be asked retrospectively about involvement at earlier stages of the divorce or about indices of current involvement. As an illustration of the retrospective

**TABLE 10.1**  
Retrospective Reports of Father Involvement by Divorced Mothers, Divorced Fathers, and Their College-Age Children in Percentages

<i>Informant</i>	<i>Lived 20% Time or More With Dad</i>	<i>Had Own Bedroom at Dad's House</i>	<i>Had Own or Shared With Sibling a Bedroom at Dad's House</i>
Father's report	51%	35%	68%
Mother's report	40%	28%	54%
Child's report	56%	30%	59%

questions students and parents were asked: "Considering the entire time since the divorce, when [you were/the child was] either with [your mother or your father/you or your ex-spouse], what was the approximate breakdown of that time with each?" An example of possible answers was "about 10% of the time with [dad/me], 90% of the time with [mom/my ex-spouse]." Percentages of each of the responses reporting 20% or more time with the father appear in Table 10.1. Note that these respondents were matched (as they are in all of the following analyses) to maintain the greatest degree of comparability.

Another retrospective item construed as an indicator of father involvement asked of the child: "During the first 2 years after the divorce, when you stayed in the home of the parent you did not primarily live with, which of the following best describes where you stayed? I had a bedroom of my own; I had a bedroom I shared with one or more siblings; or I didn't have a bedroom I stayed in." (For parents, the question was phrased "During the first 2 years after the divorce, which of the following best describes the bedroom situation in the home of the parent the child did NOT primarily live with?"). Results also are shown in Table 10.1. Together, these results show fathers reporting substantially more involvement than mothers, with college-age children most often being intermediate. However, on one variable the young adults reported more involvement than did either parent.

As one example of current involvement in the area of the financial support, we asked, "How much money is [your/your father's/your mother's] household (including [your/her/his] [new husband/new wife] or live-in partner or [boy/girl]friend, if any) contributing to [your/your child's] total college expenses per year (tuition, books, room and board, fees, etc)?" We also asked each parent to make their "best guess about how much money your ex-spouse's household was contributing." The results are displayed in Figure 10.1. Fathers reported that they provide significantly more college expense support than mothers reported fathers providing. Mothers reported that they provide significantly more college expense support than fathers reported mothers providing. The children's report was intermediate but substantially more similar to the fathers' than to the mothers' profile.

A second example of current involvement concerned the degree of "small extras" the parents provided the college-age child (small extras was defined as "small presents, treats, additional clothing, spending money, free meals, etc."). This item



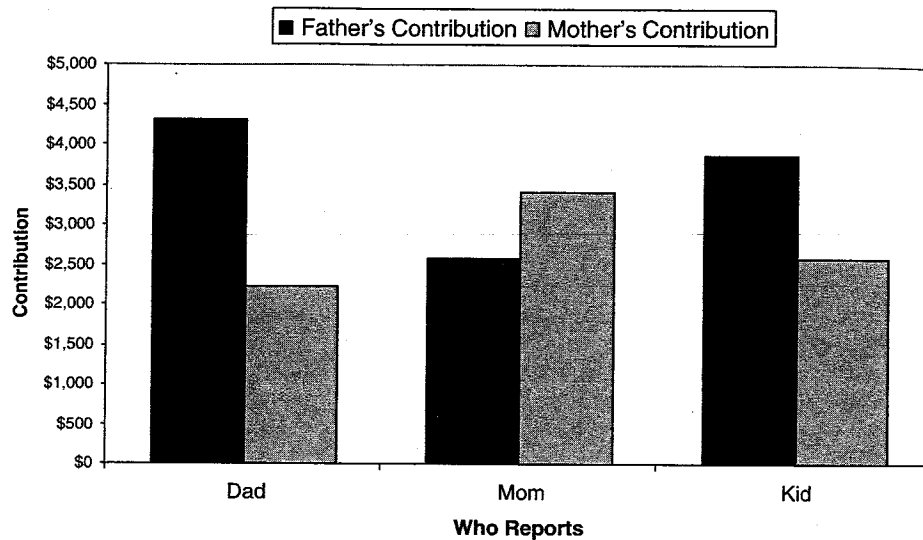


FIG. 10.1. Divorced parents' contributions to college expenses.

was answered on a 0-to-5 scale, with 0 representing *none*, and 5 representing *a lot*. Again, each respondent answered about the small extras given both by the father and by the mother. The interaction was highly significant,  $F(2, 61) = 13.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the means are displayed in Figure 10.2. Fathers reported that they provided more extras than mothers provided, whereas mothers reported that they provided many more extras than did fathers. Again children's reports were intermediate but this time bore substantially more similarity to the mothers' than to the fathers' profile.

A third pattern was found for the next example of current involvement: the answer to the question "To what extent is [the parent] really there for [the student] when [the student] needs [the parent] to be?" As before, matched questions were asked of all three matched informants about both the father's and the mother's "really there"-ness. The answers were on a 0-to-8 scale, with 0 representing *not at all* and 8 labeled as *extremely*. Results are displayed in Figure 10.3. The fathers reported that they were slightly (and nonsignificantly) more "really there" than the mothers were; the mothers' reversal of that pattern was highly significant,  $F(1, 61) = 93.4$ ,  $p < .001$ . Again, the child was intermediate, but in this instance, the child's report about the father was closer to the father's report than to the mother's, whereas the child's report about the mother was closer to the mother's report than to the father's.

This technique also can be used about other important family issues in addition to father involvement, such as the extent of family violence. Research on this issue has frequently obtained findings rife with reporter biases (Archer, 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, & Dawud-Noursi, 1998; Szinovacz, 1983). For example, with a

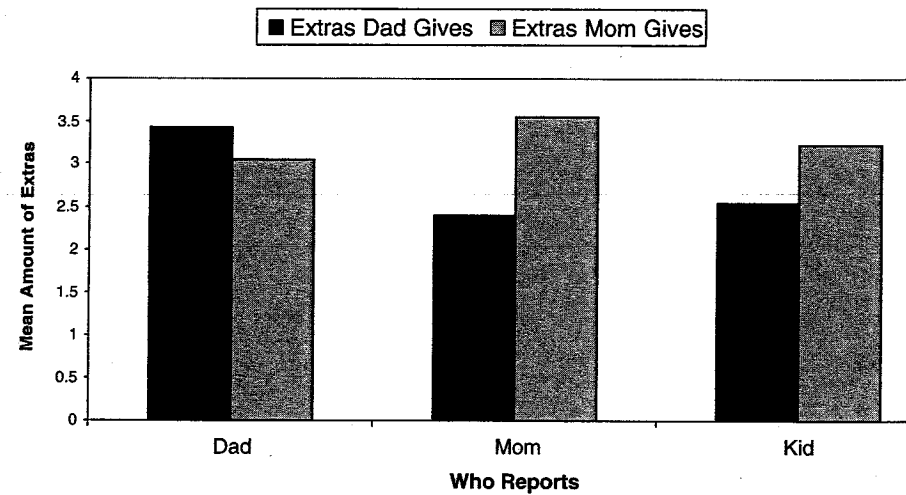


FIG. 10.2. Amount of small extras given to the child.

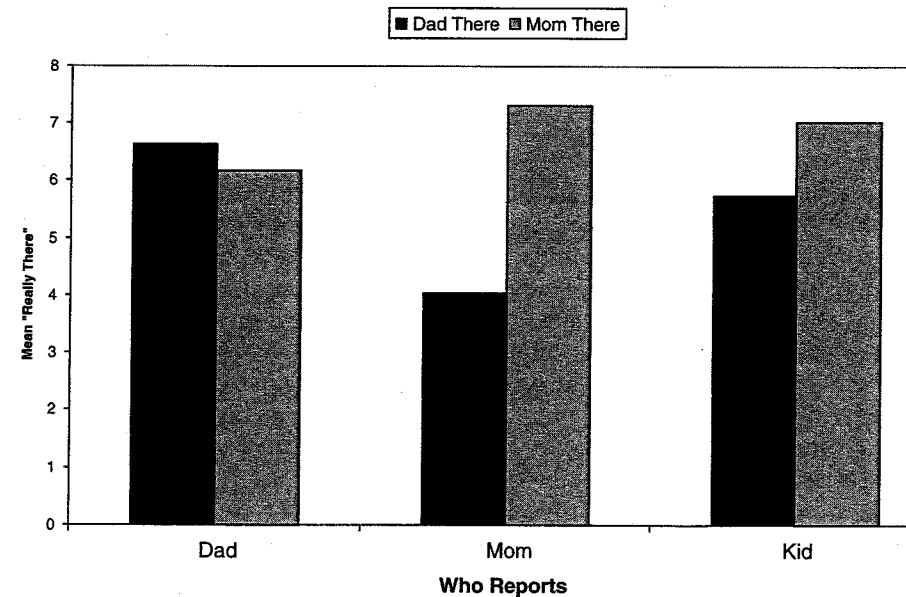


FIG. 10.3. Extent the parent is "really there" for the child.

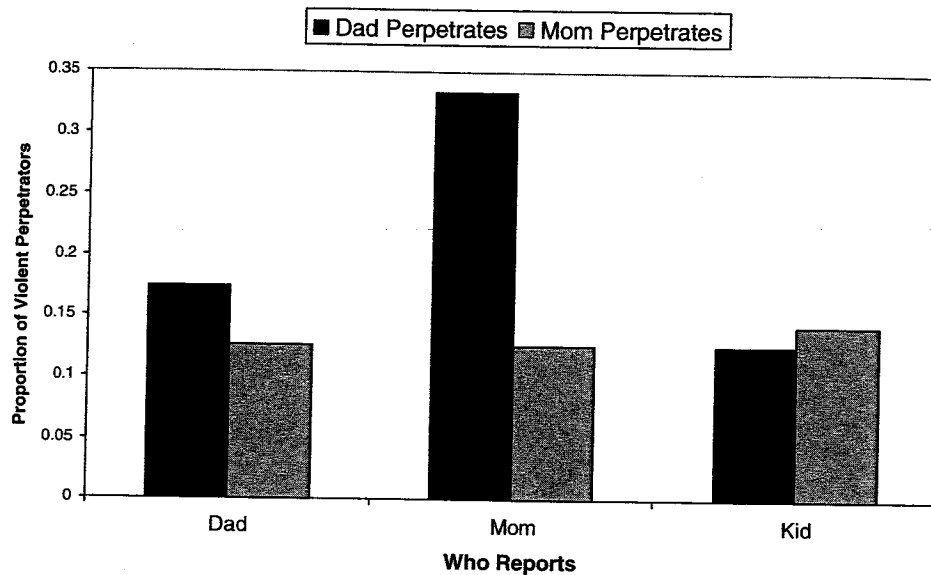


FIG. 10.4. Child-witnessed domestic violence before divorce.

sample of recently divorced couples, Williams, Schmidt, Braver, and Griffin (2000) reported that both mothers and fathers reported roughly three times more violence perpetrated by the former spouse against them than they perpetrated upon the former spouse. Most authors bemoan the lack of any external or validating evidence to detect who is actually assaulting whom. The current study attempted to use the now college-age child as this external source and, to maintain comparability, we asked all respondents to confine their reports to only before-divorce violence witnessed by the child. The exact wording was [parents' first/child's second]: "While [your child was/you were] growing up before the divorce, how many times did [your child/you] witness [you/your ex-spouse/your dad/your mom] hitting, slapping, or punching [your ex-spouse/you/your mom/your dad]?" The results are presented in Figure 10.4. The findings suggest that, despite mothers reporting that they were victims three times as often as they were perpetrators, and despite fathers admitting that they perpetrated slightly more violence than they were victim of, the now-young-adult children reported that their mothers were the slightly more violent parent.

### Analyzing Multiple Reports

A number of strategies might be used in analyzing responses from the family's multiple informants (father, mother, young adult child). When the purpose is purely descriptive, we recommend individually reporting each respondent's answer, with a commentary on discrepancies and likely biases. Recall that we have found consistent and predictable differences between mothers' and fathers' reports, but no

consistent or predictable pattern of where children's reports fall. For model or hypothesis testing research, combining responses into a composite might be more appropriate, depending on whether the intercorrelations between the informant's responses is high enough. For example, in the violence data reported earlier, informants correlated between .39 and .48 about fathers' violence, which would probably permit aggregation, but only from .12 to .30 about mothers' violent acts, for which forming a composite might be questionable. Composites might be formed by simple summing or averaging or by forming latent constructs. An interesting strategy is to determine whether adding various respondents' responses to such a composite strengthens the relationships found (comparable to adding additional items on a scale to increase reliability and validity). Another appealing strategy is to model the error term and determine whether the direction and degree to which certain informants' answers (e.g., the mothers') diverge from the composite of the remaining informants predicts anything interesting.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

From our discussion, we offer several recommendations that may enhance future assessment of father involvement in divorced, nonresident fathers. We believe that both the gendered nature of the context in which fathering after divorce occurs and the structural changes resulting from divorce places divorced fathers at a disadvantage, especially when studies of father involvement compare divorced and nondivorced fathers. Although such comparisons may be warranted, greater care must be exercised in making these comparisons. Specifically, we suggest that any assessment of involvement should factor in the percent of time divorced fathers are allowed to spend with their children. For example, if divorced fathers spend only weekends with their children, then the most realistic comparison would result from examining the weekend behavior of nondivorced fathers with that of divorced fathers. However, in the case where a divorced father is supposed to see his children every other weekend, but his former wife does not allow him to do so, then using a measure that fails to recognize this reality will result in his appearing less involved.

We advocate for research on father involvement that assumes heterogeneity among divorced fathers and uses within-group comparisons rather than between-group comparisons. In doing so, it is imperative that behavioral indicators go beyond allowed involvement to distinguish among father involvement behaviors that are ordered, desired, performed, and allowed. This will provide greater clarity of the complex nature of fathering after divorce. One way to do this is through examining gatekeeping as part of the coparental relationship with measures that assess how the gate swings in both ways. Needless to say, careful development and pretesting of items is imperative, if the measures are to resonate with the experiences of the range of divorced fathers and if the queries and referents used are to reflect a common understanding/meaning across informants. For example,

we can envision that a measure of performed behavior in terms of accessibility and responsibility might vary depending on the father's proximity to the child, the age of the target child, and the nature of any formal or informal coparental agreements, including the payment of child support.

Further, measures must reflect what men do with children, so new measures must do more to tap the recreational dimension of divorced fathers who see their children on weekends and assess the emotional and cognitive aspects of involvement. (Only 3 of the 10 items on the Ahron's measure, 1983, reflect recreational activities; 4 of the 16 items used by Pasley in a 1998 study of divorcing parents were recreational, and this measure was adapted from the 10-item Ahron's scale.) Marsiglio, Amato, et al. (2000) called for studies of the motivations for father involvement, and we concur that studying the emotional and cognitive aspects of fathering is an important step in furthering our understanding of fathering after divorce. Using measures such as those that assess psychological presence may be one way of doing so.

Given our discussion of accuracy of reporting issues and resulting biases, we advocate for greater use of young adult samples like the convenience sample described here with college-age students and their parents. We believe the advantages associated with this alternative are considerable, particularly in the initial testing of important research questions where multiple informants can provide greater insight into family life following divorce. However, we agree with Marsiglio, Amato, and associates (2000) that certain questions may not require multiple informants. Using the method we outline here may allow us to determine when multiple respondents are needed. Some recent work by Pasley, Futris, and Skinner (2002) on reflected appraisals (a father's perception/belief about his spouse's perceptions/beliefs about him as a father) with a sample of nondivorced, resident fathers showed that reflected appraisals were a strong statistical predictor of father involvement. Although not reported in that article, additional analysis showed a similarly strong link between reflected appraisals in divorced fathers. Our point is that his perceptions of her perceptions of him as a father may offer more explanatory power than either his perceptions of his own behavior or her self-reported perceptions of him. Had Pasley and Futris collected data using the method we outline here, they would have been able to test the value of using multiple informants.

Last, we believe that several areas warrant further attention. Little is known about father involvement in terms of responsibility for decision making, whether it is legally warranted or not. Future conceptualizations of involvement should include this cognitive dimension. Also, we could find little that taps the accessibility of divorced fathers except for the few studies that comment on gatekeeping as an inhibitor to involvement. We see both assessing responsibility and accessibility with students as multiple informants to be especially useful in exploring the range of behaviors that reflect these constructs. Also, students make good testing ground for understanding the structural and motivational barriers to involvement. For example, some evidence indicates that divorced fathers see themselves as accessible to their children (e.g., "my child knows they can call me if they need to," Futris & Pasley,

1997); however, limited information has been derived from either the child or the former spouse, who may attach a different meaning to accessibility. Only through carefully constructed measures with carefully constructed prompts can we better tap the complexity of father involvement across the diversity inherent in any population of divorced, nonresident fathers.

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## Early Father Involvement in Fragile Families

Marcia J. Carlson  
Columbia University

Sara S. McLanahan  
Princeton University

The proportion of children born to unmarried parents has risen dramatically in the past 40 years, with fully one third of births now occurring outside of marriage; the proportions are even higher among minority populations—42% among Hispanics and 69% among African Americans (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). The rise in the fraction of nonmarital births, along with demographic changes in marriage and divorce, has yielded a growing group of “fragile families”—unmarried parents who are raising their children together. Such families are deemed fragile because of the multiple risks associated with nonmarital childbearing (including poverty) and the vulnerability of the parents’ relationship. New research shows that more than four fifths of unmarried couples are in a romantic relationship—and just under half are living together—at the time of their child’s birth, indicating that they may be more “familylike” than typically perceived (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman, & Teitler, 2001). To understand how unmarried-parent families may differ from more traditional families and the consequences for children, it is important to examine the nature of fathering across various types of fragile families.

A growing number of studies have explored the consequences of father involvement for children, with an emerging consensus that (positive) involvement by fathers is generally beneficial to child well-being (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, Amato,