

What is Associated with Noncustodial Fathers' Satisfaction with Visits with their Children

(extended abstract)

Akiko Yoshida, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater

Loretta E. Bass, University of Oklahoma

The amount of scholarly literature concerning nonresident father involvement has increased in the past couple of decades. Interest in this topic originates in growing concerns over the increased number of children who live away from fathers – a consequence of increased divorce and unwed childbearing (Casper and Bianchi 2002; Nelson 2004). Much research on nonresident fathers has investigated level and type of involvement, factors related to this, and effects involvement has on children (e.g., Acquilino 2006, Cheadle et al. 2010, Cooksey and Craig 1998, King 1994, King and Heard 1999, Manning and Smock 1999, Seltzer 1998). On the other hand, studies of fathers themselves (e.g., self-perceptions, well-being) remain rare.

This study is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature by examining nonresident fathers' satisfaction level with the frequency of visits they have with non-custodial children. Specifically, we assess whether fathers derive satisfaction from the quantity of visits with children, or from certain qualities of visits. The study is guided by the fatherhood literature. Our society today holds that ideal fathers actively participate in children's lives and are emotionally close to children (Furstenberg 1988, Townsend 2002). Because it is difficult for living-away fathers to meet such social expectations, fathers who feel content with visits may be those who fulfill these expectations by visiting their children often and engage in meaningful activities when they visit. According to some recent qualitative studies (Forste et al. 2009, Olmstead et al. 2009), nonresident fathers tend to perceive the roles of teacher, provider, protector, disciplinarian,

caretaker, supporter and co-parent as important roles for them. Spending time with children and provision were more emphasized than other roles (Forste et al. 2009), but fathers also felt resentful when they were reduced to mere money sources (Olmstead et al. 2009). Although disciplinarian is identified as one of their roles, nonresident fathers tend to prefer spending time pleasantly because visiting time is limited (Olmstead et al. 2009). Informed by these studies, we hypothesize that nonresident fathers will be more satisfied with frequency of visits when frequency is high and allowed time is spent fulfilling ideal roles.

While there has been little research on nonresident fathers' satisfaction, scholarly literature on nonresident father's involvement suggests that several variables are associated with frequency of visits with non-custodial children. These variables include gender and age of non-custodial children (Hetherington 1993, Manning and Smock 1999, Parke 1996), fathers' marital status at the time of children's birth (Acquilino 2006, Guzzo 2009), child support payments (Juby et al. 2007, Nepomnyaschy 2007), presence of (other) children in fathers' current households (Guzzo 2009, Manning and Smock 1999), mothers' formations of new romantic unions (Juby et al 2007, Landale and Oropesa 2001, Tach et al. 2010), age of fathers and (noncustodial children's) mothers (Parke 1996, Landale and Oropesa 2001, Manning et al. 2003), education of fathers and mothers (Cooksey and Craig 1998), race and ethnicity (King et al. 2004, Thomas et al. 2008), fathers' employment (Landale and Oropesa 2001), and geographical distance (Cheadle et al. 2010). We control for these factors, except for those that are not represented in our dataset (i.e., mothers' new unions, age of children, and geographical distance).

Data and Methods

This research uses the male respondent file of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2002, Cycle 6 data, which represents the first time the NSFG asked questions of men. In this way, this paper takes advantage of a relatively new and untapped resource to examine men's involvement with children. The data were collected from a nationally representative sample of 4,928 male respondents 15 to 44 years of age (response rate = 78%). This study uses a subsample of 349 nonresident fathers who reported they visited their non-custodial (biological or adopted) child(ren) ages between 5 and 18 at least once within the last year. Those with children under age 5 are not included in this study because the NSFG asks a different set of questions regarding the types of activities fathers engage in during visits with these younger children.

The dependent variable is nonresident fathers' satisfaction with the frequency of visits with non-custodial children. In the NSFG, fathers were asked to rate their level on satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, in which 1 means "very dissatisfied" and 10 "very satisfied." As shown in Table 1, the frequency distribution of this variable suggests a binomial distribution. Because we want to examine factors related to fathers' high satisfaction, we grouped answers 1 to 9 into "not very satisfied," coded as 0, and compared this to fathers who are "very satisfied" (i.e., answer 10), which is coded 1. We use logistic regressions to predict the log odds of a high level of satisfaction among nonresident fathers.

Because our focal variables are quantity and quality of visits, the explanatory variables of this study are frequency of visits and five types of activities. The NSFG 2002 asks how often fathers visited their children and engaged in the following activities: 1) eating meals with children, 2) spending time with children on an outing away from home, 3) helping with homework or checking that children did homework, 4) talking with children about things that happened during the day, and 5) taking children to or from activities. We recoded answer

categories and created ordinal variables with values 0-4 (0 = not at all, 1 = less than once a week, 2 = about once a week, 3 = several times a week, and 4 = every day).

We use two sets of control variables. The first set includes factors regarding child's family characteristics: 1) whether fathers have at least one non-custodial male child, 2) whether fathers lived with the mothers of their non-custodial children when they were born, 3) whether fathers contributed money or child support in the past 12 months, 4) whether fathers have children in their current households, and 5) whether fathers are currently married or cohabiting. The second set controls for sociodemographic variables, specifically age, race and ethnicity (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and other race and ethnicity), years of education, and level of household income of fathers. Age and years of education are continuous variables, race and ethnicity are three dummy variables with non-Hispanic white as a reference category, and income is a 14-level ordinal variable.

Results

The descriptive statistics of the dependent variable and the results of logistic regressions are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Although the mean satisfaction level is 5.229, more than half of nonresident fathers in this sample are either very dissatisfied (30.09%) or very satisfied (23.78%). Table 2 shows the predictors for fathers' high satisfaction (i.e., likelihood to choose the answer "very satisfied = 10"). The first model examines the effect of the frequency of visits. The second model includes five activities and assesses the effects of quality of visits. In the third model, the first set of control variables, family characteristics, are included, and the fourth model controls for individual-level sociodemographic variables.

The first model reveals a positive and statistically significant effect of frequency of visits ($p < .001$ level). Its odds ratio is 1.989, meaning that a one unit increase in frequency of visits increases the odds of father satisfaction by almost two fold. In all four models, this effect of this variable remains robust, though the odds ratio becomes smaller with the introduction of other variables. Among the five activity variables included in the second model, only “spend time on outing” and “help with homework” are statistically significant (at $p < .10$). The odds ratios for these two variables are 1.378 and 1.243 respectively, which means that spending time on outings and helping with homework increase the odds of nonresident fathers’ satisfaction with the frequency of visits with children.

The above associations hold even after controlling for the family characteristics variables in Model 3. Among the control variables, “paid child support or money” and “have resident children” are statistically significant (at $p < .10$) and their odds ratios are .438 and .749, respectively. This means that fathers who pay child support (or other forms of monetary support) and those who have children in current households are less likely to be content with the frequency of visits with nonresident children.

However, after controlling for sociodemographic variables in Model 4, “help with homework” and “paid child support or money” are no longer statistically significant. On the other hand, the “spend time on outing” variable becomes significant at $p < .05$ level with a larger odds ratio (1.608). The smaller value of -2 log likelihood and the larger adjusted R-square in the fourth model suggest that the model fit is better for this model than the other models. Among sociodemographic variables, race and ethnicity, income, and age have statistically significant effects. The older fathers are, the more satisfied they are with the frequency of visits with

noncustodial children. Compared to white fathers, black and Hispanic fathers are more likely to be satisfied. Income, on the other hand, is negatively associated with satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study suggests that both quantity and quality are important for nonresident fathers' satisfaction with frequency of visits with non-custodial children. Across five types of activities, it appears that spending time on outings bears out as a predictor of fathers' satisfaction more than eating meals together, helping with homework, talking about the child's day, and taking the child to or from activities. Indeed, fathers who spend each level more of time on outings with the child are 1.6 times more likely to report being "very satisfied" with the frequency of visiting. Although empirical studies suggest that nonresident fathers perceive other roles such as teaching and caretaking as theirs, they may not derive satisfaction from such activities (i.e., eating meals together, helping with homework, and taking children to and from activities), perhaps because their time to visit is limited. Within time constraints, sharing "fun time" with children may be most meaningful to fathers. The lack of association between talking about the child's day and satisfaction may suggest that fathers are more likely to feel connected with children through instrumental, as opposed to expressive, means.

By using the relatively new survey data that ask nonresident fathers about level of satisfaction and types and frequencies of visits, this study found the importance of both quantity and quality of visits for nonresident fathers' satisfaction with frequency of visits. Nonresident fathers' perceptions have been understudied, but it is important to understand what is associated with their satisfaction with visits because this knowledge helps us understand how these men relate to their non-custodial children, and what motivates father involvement.

References

- Aquilino, W. S. 2006. "Noncustodial father-child relationship from adolescence into young adulthood" *Journal of marriage and family*, 68, 929-946.
- Casper, L. & Bianchi, S. 2002. *Continuity and change in the American family*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cheadle, J. E., P. R. Amato, and V. King. 2010. Patterns of nonresident father contact. *Demography*, 47, 205-225.
- Cooksey, E.C. & P.H. Craig. 1998. Parenting from a distance: The effects of paternal characteristics on contact between nonresidential fathers and their children. *Demography*, 35, 187-201
- Forste, R., J. P. Bartkowski, R. A. Jackson. 2009. "Just be there for them": perceptions of fathering among single, low-income men. *Fathering*, 7, 49-69.
- Furstenberg, F.F. 1988. Good dads – bad dads. In A. Cherlin (ed.), *The changing American family and public policy* (pp.193-218). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press
- Guzzo, K. B. 2009. Men's visitation with nonresidential children: Do characteristics of coresidential and nonresidential children matter? *Journal of Family Issues* 30, 921-944.
- Hetherington, E.M. 1993. An Overview of the Virginia longitudinal study of divorce and remarriage with a focus on early adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7, 39-56.
- Juby, H., J.M. Billette, B. Laplante, & C. Le Bourdais. 2007. Nonresident fathers and children: Parents' new unions and frequency of contact. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28, 1220-45.
- King, V. 1994. Variation in the consequences of nonresident father involvement for children's well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 963-72.
- King, V. & H.E. Heard. 1999. Nonresident father visitation, parental conflict, and mother's satisfaction: What's best for child well-being? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61, 385-96.
- King, V., K. M. Harris, & H.E. Heard. 2004. Race and ethnic diversity in nonresident father involvement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 1-21.
- Landale, N.S. & R.S. Oropesa. 2001. Father involvement in the lives of mainland Puerto Rican children: Contributions of nonresident, cohabiting, and married fathers. *Social Forces*, 79, 945-55.
- Manning W.D. & P.J. Smock. 1999. New families and nonresident father-child visitation. *Social Forces*, 78:87-116.

- Manning, W.D., S.D. Stewart, & P.J. Smock. 2003. The Complexity of fathers' parenting responsibilities and involvement with nonresident children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24, 645-67.
- Nelson, T. J. 2004. "Low-income fathers." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30:427-451.
- Nepomnyaschy, L. 2007. Child support and father-child contact: Testing reciprocal pathways. *Demography*, 44, 93-112.
- Olmstead, S. B., T. G. Futris, & K. Pasley. 2009. An exploration of married and divorced nonresident men's perceptions and organization of their father role identity. *Fathering*, 7, 249-268.
- Parke, R.D. 1996. *Fatherhood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press.
- Seltzer, J.A. 1998. Fathers by law: Effects of joint legal custody on nonresident fathers' involvement with children. *Demography*, 35, 135-46.
- Tach, L., R.Mincy, & K. Edin. 2010. Parenting as a "package deal": Relationships, fertility, and nonresident father involvement among unmarried parents. *Demography*, 47, 181-204.
- Thomas, P.A., E.M. Krampe, & R.R. Newton. 2008. Father presence, family structure, and feelings of closeness to the father among adult African American children. *Journal of Black Studies*, 38, 529-46.
- Townsend, N. 2002. *The package deal: Marriage, work, and fatherhood in men's lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Nonresident Fathers' Satisfaction

<u>Level of satisfaction</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1	105	30.09
2	13	3.72
3	23	6.59
4	11	3.15
5	39	11.17
6	15	4.30
7	25	7.16
8	24	6.88
9	11	3.15
10	83	23.78
<hr/>		
Total	349	100.00
Mean		5.2292
Standard Deviation		3.5814

Table 2. Log Odds of Nonresident Fathers' High Satisfaction with the Frequency of Visits with their Non-Custodial Children

Characteristics	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	b	SE	OR	b	SE	OR	b	SE	OR	b	SE	OR
<u>Explanatory variables</u>												
Frequencies of visits	0.6876	0.1238	1.989 ***	0.5258	0.1504	1.692 ***	0.4956	0.1518	1.641 **	0.3665	0.1636	1.443 *
Eat meals together				-0.0640	0.1479	0.938	-0.0525	0.1546	0.949	0.1052	0.1697	1.111
Spend time on outing				0.3208	0.1879	1.378 †	0.3428	0.1919	1.409 †	0.4747	0.2074	1.608 *
Help with homework				0.2178	0.1189	1.243 †	0.2353	0.1224	1.265 †	0.1917	0.1334	1.211
Talk about the day				0.0858	0.1366	1.090	0.0664	0.1408	1.069	0.1256	0.1530	1.134
Take to/from activities				-0.0476	0.1440	0.954	-0.0328	0.1476	0.968	-0.1047	0.1616	0.901
<u>Control variables</u>												
<u>Family characteristics</u>												
Have male child(ren)							0.2554	0.3091	1.291	0.2329	0.3346	1.262
Lived with mother at birth							-0.3993	0.2814	0.671	-0.0310	0.3283	0.970
Paid child support/money							-0.8267	0.4788	0.438 †	-0.8114	0.5349	0.444
Have resident child(ren)							-0.2887	0.1696	0.749 †	-0.3053	0.1762	0.737 †
Have wife/partner							-0.1575	0.3138	0.854	-0.1476	0.3365	0.863
<u>Sociodemographic variables</u>												
Age										0.0604	0.0280	1.062 *
Race and ethnicity												
R												
White										1.4004	0.3983	4.057 ***
Black										1.4408	0.4296	4.224 ***
Hispanic										0.5402	0.7945	1.716
Other										-0.0894	0.0800	0.914
Education										-0.1067	0.0422	0.899 *
Income level												

<i>df</i>	1	6	11	17
R ²	0.1335	0.1652	0.2017	0.3258
-2 log likelihood	350.400	342.202	332.523	297.494
Number of cases	349	349	349	349

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6, public-use male data file (2002)

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $p < .001$

b = parameter estimate for individual variables; SE = Standard error; OR = Odds ratio; R = Reference category