Family Structure and the Effects of Sex Composition of Children on Father's Involvement*

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Abstract

Prior literature on gender of children and father's involvement has consistently shown that fathers spend more time with children when they have sons than when they have all daughters. However, this literature has focused mostly on fathers in intact families. In this study, we examine whether the effects of sex composition of children on father's involvement differ by family structure. Using data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households, we find that only fathers in intact families are more involved with children when they have sons than when they have all daughters. This finding suggests that fathers who had a higher level of family commitment and believed their special role to sons may be more involved with children when they have sons. We speculate that fathers who had a lower level of family commitment and who did not hold such beliefs might be less likely to get married and more likely to divorce. Hence, gendered differential in father's involvement only occurred among fathers who remained in intact families.

Introduction

There has been a debate about the association between children and marital stability. Couples with children experience lower risks of divorce than childless couples (Bumpass, 1984; Heaton, 1990; Waite & Lillard, 1991). Some interpreted such association as children elicit more investment from parents and thus increase the cost of divorce (Becker, et al., 1977). However, others argued that the association between children and marital stability may be spurious because couples who were more committed and in a more stable relationship would be more willing to have children (Lillard & Waite, 1993).

Morgan et al. (1988) examined how the marriage-stabilizing effects of children differed by the sex composition of children. They argued that children of both genders can stabilize marriages; however, the effect of sons on marital stability is stronger than daughters because sons elicit more of father's involvement. They found that parents with sons experienced lower risks of divorce than parents with all daughters. They also found that sons living with both biological parents reported more of father's involvement than daughters. These results are consistent with their argument and they interpreted it as indirect evidence supporting that children may indeed stabilize marriages. However, the association between the gendered father's involvement and the gendered effect of children on marital stability may be explained

by a selection mechanism: Parents who are more compliant with social norms may be less likely to dissolve a marriage. These parents may have a strong belief in the importance of a special role fathers play in their sons' lives.

Prior literature on the gender of children and father's involvement has focused mostly on fathers in intact families, thus offering little empirical leverage to identify the selection mechanism. We argue that gendered father's involvement may differ by family structure. If so, it may suggest that gendered effect of children on marital stability (even the effect of children on marital stability) may select on the degree of parents' belief in or behavior compliant with the social norms.

In this present study, we use data on a nationally representative sample from the U.S. National Survey of Families and Households. We include fathers in almost every possible family structure and focus on fathers with children between 5 and 18 years of age. Specifically, we seek to first confirm whether the effects of child gender on father's involvement differ by family structure. We then examine whether such a difference will disappear after controlling for indicators of structural differences. Preliminary results show that only fathers in intact families are more involved with children when they have sons than when they have daughters. This pattern cannot be explained by structural differences. This finding, we argue, provides evidence for the selection argument.

Data and Measures

We use data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which includes a nationally representative sample (with an oversample of racial and ethnic minorities, single-parent families, families with stepchildren and recently married persons) of a total of 13,007 primary respondents. The oversampled subgroups for the primary respondents can be weighted to represent a national sample. The spouse/partner of the main respondent, whenever available, was also interviewed. This survey consists of a face-to-face interview and a self-administered questionnaire for primary respondents and a self-administered questionnaire for the spouse/partner.

Of the 13,007 respondents, 5,682 reported a child (including biological children, stepchildren, children of partner, adopted children and foster children) under age 19 living in the household. We restrict the sample to households in which a father is currently living with at least one child between ages 5 and 18 in the household (N=3,149). We divide family structure into two groups: intact families and other family structures, with detailed operationalizations following Thomson et al. (1992): Intact families refer to two-parent married families. Other family structures include cohabiting families (two-parent cohabiting families, mother-partner families, father-partner families, and complex cohabiting families), step-parent families

(mother-stepfather families, father-stepmother families, and complex step-parent families), and single-father families. Family structure was determined by the marital status of respondent and the relationship of each parent to children younger than 19 in the household. Two-parent married families (N=2,095) are married-couple families in which all children under 19 in the household were born to or adopted together by the couple. Mother-stepfather families (N=558) are those in which only the husband has stepchildren younger than 19 in the household (the couple may also have a child together). Father-stepmother families (N=94) were defined in a parallel manner. Complex step-parent families are those households in which both parents have stepchildren under 19 in the household (N=57). Cohabiting families were defined in a similar manner, except that the parents are cohabiting rather than married. Two-parent cohabiting families (N=31) are cohabiting-couple families in which all the children under 19 in the household were born to or adopted together by the couple. Mother-partner families (N=146) are those in which only the cohabiting partner of mother has children from his previous relationship who were younger than 19 in the household. Father-partner families (N=20) were defined in a parallel manner. Complex cohabiting families (N=13) are those households in which both parents have children with their previous spouses/partners under 19 in the household. Single-father families (N=119) include

never-married, divorced, widowed, or separated fathers. Lacking information for determination of family structure (N=10) and families in which one of the parents adopted a child before this current relationship (N=6) are excluded.

After deletion of cases with missing data on independent and control variables and nonparticipation in spouse/partner questionnaires of the female main respondent's spouse or partner, the maximum analytic sample size is 2,596. The main analytic sample included those fathers of two-parent married families (N=1,740), of two-parent cohabiting families (N=20), of father-partner families (N=14), of mother-partner families (N=102), of complex cohabiting families (N=12), of father-stepmother families (N=81), of mother-stepfather families (N=457), of complex step-parent families (N=52), and of single-father families (N=118).

To measure father's involvement, we use information from the main respondent's parenting questionnaires and parallel questions in the spouse/partner questionnaires, including meals with children, time spent with children, and involvement in youth group. These questions refer to the children in the household. Meals with children were measured by having how many breakfasts and dinners with children last week (from 0 to 7). Time spent with children was measured by the frequency of parental activities during the past year. Parental activities included taking children outside the home to do leisure activities; helping with reading or homework; having private

talk with children; and playing with children at home. Frequency was coded 1 for never or rarely, 2 for once a month or less, 3 for several times a month, 4 for about once a week, 5 for several times a week, and 6 for almost everyday. Involvement in youth group was measured by whether fathers participated in school activities, religious youth group, community youth group, or youth athletic clubs for or with the children combined at least one hour per week in the past year.

The main focus of this present study is whether the effects of sex composition of children on father's involvement differ by family structure. Sex composition of children was measured with two dummy variables: all sons and sons and daughters. The reference group is all daughters. We also construct variables including all two-way interaction between sex composition of children and family structure.

Female adult presence, unemployed mother presence, father's weekly work hours, household income and poverty status are used to indicate possible structural differences between fathers in intact families and fathers in other family structures. We construct a dummy variable for female adult presence (1= father's partner or father's mother presented in the households), a dummy variable for unemployed mother presence. We measured father's weekly work hours with unemployed fathers coded at zero, and included a dummy variable for unemployed fathers. Father's weekly work hours is constructed with the responses of usual work hours per week.

For fathers with no regular work schedule, we use the information of total work hours last week. We use mean substitution if no specific work hours are reported; refuse or no answer to employment status or work hours would be categorized as unemployed. We use the natural logarithm of household income and two dummy variables to indicate the family's poverty status. Fathers with no income information are substituted using the means specific to whether they have a spouse/partner present. A dummy variable indicating the lack of income information would be added at the same time. Poverty status is measured by two dummy variables indicating household income is under poverty line and poverty line unavailable (if the father or the father's spouse/partner is not the householder).

We follow Thomson et al. (1992), and control for the following variables of fathers' characteristics and children's characteristics. Father's education was measured in years of schooling completed. Race/ethnicity was measured as European American, African American, or Mexican American; other fathers were classified in a residual race/ethnic category. We also controlled for fathers' age. In addition to the sex composition of children, children's characteristics included age of youngest child in the household, number of children under age 19 in the household, adult children age 19 or older presence, non-biological children of fathers under age 19 presence, and biological children of fathers under age 19 living elsewhere.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the basic characteristics of the two groups of fathers. On average, fathers in intact families are older, have completed more years of schooling, work longer hours per week, have higher household income, and lower poverty rates than fathers in other family structures. However, these differences are small. About 15 % of fathers in other family structures are African American, while 8 % of fathers in intact families are. Near 100 % of fathers in intact families lived with at least one female adult, while 91% of fathers in other family structures did. Forty-five percent of fathers in intact families had an unemployed spouse/partner in the household, while 38% of fathers in other family structures did. Compared to intact families, other family structures have fewer and older children. Twenty-five percent of fathers in other family structures had biological children living elsewhere, while 5% of fathers in intact families did. Only 4% of fathers in intact families had non-biological children living in the household, while 78% of fathers of other family structures did. Sex composition of children is nearly the same in intact families and other family structures: 29% of fathers in intact families had all sons in the households, 43% had children of both genders, and 28% had all daughters.

[Table 1 about here]

OLS regression is used to test the differences in parental involvement between

fathers in intact families and fathers in other family structures. Models of father's involvement included all controls for father's characteristics and children's characteristics. Model 1 would be used to examine the interaction effects between family structure and child gender effects on father's involvement. Controls for possible structural differences would be added in Model 2. Statistical analyses of Model 1 and Model 2 are based on weighted data.

Results

The set of Model 1's (results presented in Table 2) shows the effects of sex composition of children on father's involvement in intact families and other family structures. As we can see, fathers in intact families displayed more involvement when they have sons than when they have all daughters. There is a clear pattern that having all sons and having at least one son in the household were associated with a higher level of father's involvement than having all daughters in intact families. By contrast, fathers of other family structures displayed a different pattern of parental involvement from fathers in intact families.

[Table 2 about here]

Fathers in intact families reported higher levels of involvement in six of the seven activities when they have all sons than when they have all daughters. When

having all sons rather than all daughters, fathers in intact families reported having breakfast and dinner more often with their children (for breakfast is -0.30+0.88=0.58; for dinner is -0.15+0.47=0.32); taking their children outside their homes more often for leisure activities (coefficient is 0.06+0.08=0.14); arranging more youth activities (0.07+0.08=0.15); spending more time playing with their children at home (-0.03+0.42=0.39); and having private talks more often with their children (0.03+0.43=0.46).

Fathers in intact families reported a higher level of involvement in five of the seven activities when they have at least one son than when they have all daughters. When having at least one son rather than all daughters, fathers in intact families reported having breakfast and dinner more often with children (for breakfast is -0.15+0.45=0.30; for dinner is -0.20+0.40=0.20); arranging more youth activities (-0.03+0.14=0.11); spending more time playing with their children at home (0.22-0.02=0.20); and having private talks more often with their children (0.24-0.03=0.21). This result is consistent with previous studies on father's involvement in intact families (Morgan et al., 1988; Harris& Morgan, 1991; Marsiglio, 1991).

On the contrary, fathers of other family structures tend to be more involved when they have all daughters than when they have all sons in such activities as having

breakfast and dinner, and help reading/homework. These fathers display similar levels of parental activities when they have all sons than when they have all daughters in such activities as outings, youth activities, home playing and private talk. For home playing and private talk, fathers of other family structures are more involved with their children when they have both genders of children than when they have all daughters (coefficient for home playing is 0.22 and for private talk is 0.24).

The results showed that only fathers in intact families are more involved with children when they have sons than when they have all daughters. However, some possible structural differences should be considered. The set of Model 2's presented in Table 3 showed the regression coefficients that included variables indicating structural differences.

[Table 3 about here]

As predicted, the structural difference that fathers of other family structures reported to have more meals and spend more time with children than fathers of intact families decreased after controlling female adult presence, unemployed mother presence, father's weekly work hours and household income. Controlling for these structural differences, the pattern that only fathers in intact families displayed son preference remained similar. The results suggested that structural differences cannot explain differences in father's involvement by sex composition of children between

fathers in intact families and fathers in other family structures. Gendered father's involvement indeed only occurred among fathers in intact families.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to examine whether and how gendered father's involvement differs by family structures. Using the 1987-1988 wave of the NSFH data, the results showed that only fathers in intact families are more involved with children when they have sons than when they have all daughters. These results suggest that greater father's involvement with sons than with daughters may be elicited by social norms that emphasize the importance of father's involvement in their sons' lives.

While Morgan et al. (1988) interpreted gendered father's involvement causally, our finding that gendered father's involvement differs by family structure may imply that gendered effect of children on marital stability reflect a selection mechanism on the degree of parents' belief in or behavior compliant with the social norms. Parents who are more compliant with social norms may be less likely to dissolve a marriage. These parents may have a stronger belief in the importance of a special role fathers play in their sons' lives. Hence, gendered differential in father's involvement only occurred among fathers who remained in intact families.

It should be noticed that the association between father's involvement and marital stability needs further investigations. Father's involvement may increase marital stability. However, parents who had a higher level of family commitment may be more involved with children and fathers may be especially involved more with children when they have sons. This present study used static family structures as indicators of family commitment. What future research needs is a longitudinal design with data on real probability of formation/dissolution of intact families.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Fathers in Intact and Other Family Structures

	intact families		Other family structures	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
sex composition of children				
all sons	.29	--	.30	--
sons & daughters	.43	--	.43	--
all daughters (r.g.)	.28	--	.28	--
father's characteristics				
age of fathers	40.84	8.21	37.55	8.71
African American	.08	--	.15	--
European American	.81	--	.75	--
Mexican American	.06	--	.07	--
Other race/ethnicity	.04	--	.04	--
fathers' years of schooling	13.22	3.04	12.51	2.66
children's characteristics				
age of youngest child in the household	8.71	5.32	8.28	5.17
Number of children under 19 in the household	2.13	1.06	2.15	1.13
Adult child presence in the household	.14	--	.08	--
nonbiological child presence in the household	.04	--	.78	--
biological children living elsewhere	.05	--	.25	--
N	1,740		856	

Table 2. Father's Involvement in Different Activities, Model 1

father's involvement	**Breakfast**	**dinner**	**Outings**	**Youth activities**	**Home playing**	**private talk**	**help reading/homework**
independent variables							
family structure							
intact families	-.57 *	.13	-.04	-.04	-.14	-.28 +	-.29 +
other family structures(r.g.)							
sex composition of children							
all sons	-.30	-.15	.06	.07	-.03	.03	-.11
sons& daughters	-.15	-.20	.02	-.03	.22	.24 +	-.09
all daughters(r.g.)							
Interaction							
intact*all sons	.88 **	.47 +	.08	.08	.42 *	.43 *	.16
intact*sons& daughters	.45	.40	.02	.14 *	-.02	-.03	.12
intact*all daughters(r.g.)							
fathers' characteristics							
age of fathers	.04 ***	.01	.00	.00	-.01	.00	-.01
Afican American	-.56	-.57 *	.02	-.12 +	-.13	.06	.30
European American	-.63 *	-.15	-.03	-.09	.01	-.16	-.05
Mexican American	.46	.39	.10	-.08	.07	.13	.36
fathers' years of schooling	.04	-.01	.01 ***	.04 ***	.03 **	.06 ***	.11 ***
children's characteristics							
age of youngest child in the household	-.10 ***	-.09 ***	-.01 ***	.00	-.12 ***	-.07 ***	-.12 ***
number of children under 19 in the household	.08	.01	-.02	.04 **	-.15 ***	-.10 **	-.11 *
adult child presence in the household	-.16	-.24	-.06	-.05	.25 +	-.07	-.13
nonbiological child presence in the household	-.35 +	-.10	-.07 +	.00	-.39 ***	-.32 **	-.36 **
biological children living elsewhere	.10	-.04	-.06 +	-.12 ***	.07	-.08	.01
_cons	2.31 ***	5.65 ***	.53 ***	-.10	5.18 ***	3.52 ***	3.81 ***
valid cases	2319	2304	2395	2048	2395	2212	2384

Table 3. Father's Involvement in Different Activities, Model 2

father's involvement	**Breakfast**	**dinner**	**outings**	**youth activities**	**home playing**	**private talk**	**help reading/homework**
independent variables							
family structure							
intact families	-.37	.07	.02	-.04	.00	-.16	-.13
other family structures(r.g.)							
sex composition of children							
all sons	-.32	-.13	.05	.07	-.08	-.02	-.14
sons& daughters	-.10	-.20	.03	-.03	.24	.23	-.07
all daughters(r.g.)							
interaction							
intact*all sons	.94 **	.47	.09	.08	.46 **	.48 **	.19
intact*sons& daughters	.43	.42 +	.01	.14 *	-.05	-.02	.09
intact*all daughters(r.g.)							
possible structural differences							
female adults presence	-.55 +	.26	-.18 **	.03	-.48 **	-.62 ***	-.44 *
nonemployed mothers presence	-.25 *	-.05	-.03	-.05 *	.04	-.01	-.12
fathers' weekly work hours	-.01	-.02 ***	.00 **	.00	-.01 *	.00	-.01
nonemployed fathers	.78	-.42	-.17 **	-.01	-.37 *	.09	.01
household income (log)	.04	.03	.04 **	.00	.10 *	.06	.04
missing income information	-.22	.02	.06 +	.01	.07	.04	.05
poverty status	.18	.16	.13 *	-.07	.08	-.07	-.03
fathers or spouse/partner is not householder	.49	-.15	.02	.08	.48	.08	.61 *
fathers' characteristics							
age of fathers	.03 ***	.01	.00	.00	-.01	.00	-.01
African American	-.61 +	-.57 *	.02	-.13 +	-.13	.05	.27
European American	-.59 +	-.07	-.03	-.09	.02	-.19	-.06
Mexican American	.44	.40	.07	-.08	.04	.13	.34
fathers' years of schooling	.06 **	.00	.01 **	.04 ***	.02 +	.05 ***	.11 ***
children's characteristics							
age of youngest child in the household	-.10 ***	-.08 ***	-.01 ***	.00	-.12 ***	-.07 ***	-.12 ***
number of children under 19 in	.11	.02	-.02	.05 ***	-.14 ***	-.10 *	-.09 *

the household							
adult child presence in the household	-.16	-.26	-.07	-.05	.26 *	-.05	-.11
nonbiological child presence in the household	-.22	-.14	-.03	-.01	-.29 *	-.22 +	-.25 +
biological children living elsewhere	.09	-.05	-.06	-.13 ***	.09	-.07	.02
_cons	2.34 *	5.89 ***	.41 *	-.11	4.94 ***	3.51 ***	3.96 ***
valid cases	2319	2304	2395	2048	2395	2212	2384