Who Is the Residential Parent?

Explaining Discrepancies in Unmarried Mother and Father Reports of Children's Primary Residence

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Despite efforts to evaluate reporting bias on survey measures of paternal involvement, there is little research examining the consistency of unmarried mothers' and fathers' reports of where their children reside. This paper uses data from the Fragile Families Survey (N=1,255) to compare parents' reports of children's residence 5 years after a nonmarital birth in situations where parents indicate they are living in separate households. Information from matched pairs show apparent discrepancies in about 34% of cases in response to a direct question about children's residence and in about 12% of cases to questions on the household roster. Findings from logistic regressions show that parents' part-time cohabitation status is highly predictive of discrepant reports on both measures. Discrepancies are also strongly related to mothers holding traditional gender beliefs and fathers giving positive assessments of their own parenting, suggesting some social desirability in their responses. Implications for survey measurement and policy are discussed.

Introduction and Background

A growing body of research examining the characteristics of families formed outside of marriage has shown that relationships in these families are quite diverse. In addition to differences between families headed by cohabiting and non-cohabiting parents, there appear to be important distinctions among unmarried parents who live apart. For example, while most "non-cohabiting" parents have ended their romantic unions, others maintain a romantic relationship and may even live together some of the time. There is also significant variation in the amount of time unmarried, nonresident fathers spend with their young children.

Although we have learned a great deal about children's living arrangements following a nonmarital birth, some research points to continuing difficulties in measuring the amount of time children spend with their "nonresident" parent, typically their father. Part of this difficulty is related to the fact that surveys often use different measures of paternal contact (Argys et al., 2006). However, we also know that mother and father reports of paternal contact and involvement also differ significantly, with mothers consistently reporting lower levels of involvement than fathers. Fathers' residential status and the quality of the relationships between parents have been found to predict discrepancy in mother-father reports, but not always in the same direction (Coley and Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008). It is possible that the ambiguity in unmarried parents' cohabitation status and household boundaries may also explain some of these discrepancies (Brown and Manning, 2009; Knab and McLanahan, 2006).

Despite these efforts to evaluate reporting bias on survey measures of paternal involvement, there is little research examining the consistency in unmarried mothers' and fathers' reports of where their children reside. From a research perspective, getting this measurement correct is important because resident and nonresident parents are asked a different set of questions in surveys regarding their economic support of children and interactions with them (Pleck, 2007). It is also important to have an accurate assessment of where children are living because this provides a more realistic picture of how they are parented on a day-to-day basis.

This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey to compare mothers' and fathers' reports of children's living arrangements 5 years after a nonmarital birth in situations where parents indicate they are living in separate households. We begin by looking at two different questions about children's residence to assess the discrepancy in paired mother-father reports descriptively. We then use logistic regression analyses to examine factors such as parental gender role attitudes and self-assessments, reports of relationship quality, and "part-time" cohabiting arrangements which could predict these apparent discrepancies.

Data and Methods

This project analyzes data collected from mothers and fathers who participated in wave 4 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Data for the Fragile Families survey was collected in 20 U.S. cities. When weighted, the sample is representative of all births to unmarried parents in cities with populations over 200,000. Surveys with both parents were initially conducted when their child was born and follow-up interviews took place when their child is one, three, and five. Response rates at baseline

were 87% for unmarried mothers and 76% for unmarried fathers. Fathers were not eligible to participate in the study if their child's mother was not interviewed. By Year 5, 84% of unmarried mothers and 61% of unmarried fathers whose partners were in the baseline survey continued to participate. The sample in this analysis includes 1,255 cases in which parents were unmarried at their child's birth, the father was still living, the mother said she was not living with the father full time, both parents participated in the baseline and 5 year survey, and information about child's living arrangements was available from both parents.

Dependent Variables: The paper examines two measures of children's living arrangements at Year 5. The first question asks mothers and fathers to report how much time the focal child lives with them (response categories include: "most, half, some, weekends, or none of the time"). A dichotomous measure was used to indicate an apparent discrepancy in matched pairs of parents where: 1) both parents said the child lives with them most of the time, or 2) one parent reports the child lives with them most of the time and the other parent says the child lives with them half of the time (Table 2).

The second measure was constructed from information mothers and fathers reported in the household roster. For these questions, parents were asked to report how many people were currently living with them (as defined by who was "sleeping in their home most nights"). A dichotomous measure was created from the matched pairs of parents to indicate a discrepancy if both parents reported that the focal child was living with them and sleeping in their home most nights (Table 3).

Explanatory Variables and Controls: The main explanatory variables include measures of parents' relationship quality and of their part-time cohabitation status. Relationship quality is a continuous measure of both parents' assessments of their relationship (1= poor, 2= fair, 3= good, 4= very good, 5= excellent). Part-time cohabitation is measured by whether or not either parent reports they are living together "some of the time." The sample is limited to cases in which mothers say they are not living with the father all or most of the time. In about 13.5% of matched pairs, however, at least one parent still reports living together at least some of the time. (Table 1) The analysis also includes measures of mothers' traditional gender views about which parents should have primary responsibility for children's care and fathers' self-assessments as parents (ranging from poor to excellent).

The analysis controls for the number of months between mothers' and fathers' interviews since changes in children's living arrangements could occur during this time. Parents' demographic characteristics (fathers' age, couples' race, the focal child's gender, the number of children parents have together, mothers' and fathers' multi-partner fertility) and parents' socio-economic characteristics (mothers' and fathers' education and employment) are also controlled.

Analysis: The analysis estimates stepwise logistic regressions in which the discrepancy in mothers' and fathers' reports of the focal child's living arrangements is a function of: 1) parents' and children's demographic characteristics; 2) parents' socioeconomic characteristics; 3) mothers' gender role attitudes and fathers' self assessments; 4) parents' reports of their relationship quality; and 5) parents' "part-time" cohabitation status.

Findings

Descriptive Results. The overwhelming majority of mothers said the child lived with them most of the time when asked about this directly and in the household roster. However, cross-tabulations of paired mother and father reports indicated discrepancies in about 34% of cases on direct question about how much time the child resides with them and about 12% of cases in the household roster. (More discrepancies are found using the first measure because it also compares reports of half and full time residence.) Further descriptive analysis of mother reports suggests that the focal child may be spending 2-3 times more nights with the father in situations where there is a discrepancy in reports on both measures compared to when there is no discrepancy.

Multivariate Results: Results from set of step-wise logistic regressions predicting which parent the child lives with suggest that ambiguity of parents' relationship status is a very strong predictor of discrepancy in their reports (Table 4). In the full model with all controls, the odds of giving discrepant reports on the direct measure of children's residence are 10.6 times higher if either parent reports living together at least some of the time. Mothers and fathers who report higher quality relationships are also more likely to disagree with each other. However, when parents' reports of living together on a part-time basis are included in the model, the magnitude and statistical significance of relationship quality coefficients are reduced (with coefficients for fathers becoming insignificant). The odds of parents giving discrepant reports are also higher when the mother has traditional gender views about caregiving and the father provides a higher assessment of himself as a parent. This may indicate social desirability in both mothers' and fathers' responses. Discrepancies are more common when fathers are employed and less common when they have children with other partners.

Logistic regression models predicting differences in mother and fathers reports of children's living arrangements in the household roster similarly show that the odds of providing discrepant reports are 14.5 times higher when either report living together some of the time (Table 5). Mothers' assessments of their relationship quality lose significance once part-time cohabitation status is included in the model, whereas fathers' assessments become negatively related to discrepancies. In the full model, discrepancies are more likely when fathers' give a higher self-assessment as a parent, are employed, and both parents are white (rather than African-American).

Conclusion

The way we measure children's living arrangements often assumes there is a resident parent, who is the primary caretaker, and a non-resident parent, who spend less time with the child and plays more of a secondary parenting role. Results from this study suggest that these designations may be less clear-cut in situations where unmarried parents have remained a romantic relationship five years after their child's birth and consider themselves to be living together some of the time. Although the quality of parents' relationships appears to increase the ambiguity about children's primary residence, this is largely accounted for by parents' "part-time" cohabitation status. These findings suggest it may be important to ask unmarried parents with ongoing romantic relationships the same questions "residential" parents are given in surveys. The designation of a resident and non-resident parent also

affects who is eligible to pay (vs. receive) child support as well as parents' eligibility for benefits such as TANF, the EITC, and Medicaid (Sorensen and Zibman, 2001). Therefore, understanding that distinctions between a resident and non-resident parent do not map on well to the situations of some unmarried parents may also have implications for policy.

Discrepancies are also strongly related to mothers holding traditional gender beliefs about who should care for the child and fathers giving positive assessments of their own parenting. As such, social desirability may be leading both mothers and fathers to over-report how much the child lives with them. Future studies should collect and analyze information from multiple sources, including mothers, fathers, and children (Brown and Manning, 2009) to provide a more accurate picture of where children are spending their time and who is parenting them on a day-to-day basis.

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Table 1. Summary statistics (N=1255)	
Variable	Mean/pct
Father age (years)	26.24
Couple white non-Hispanic	7.38%
Couple Black non-Hispanic	60.98%
Couple Hispanic	14.92%
Couple mixed race/ethnicity	16.45%
Boy	52.91%
Number of children together	1.58
Mother multi-partner fertility	56.49%
Father multi-partner fertility	55.66%
Time between interviews (months)	2.06
Mother H.S. education or more	60.64%
Father H.S. education or more	63.11%
Mother employed	60.40%
Father employed	68.72%
Part-time cohabitation	13.48%
Traditional gender views, mother	25.48%
Self-assessed fathering*	2.90
Relationship quality,mother report*	2.36
Relationship quality, father report*	2.83

*Scale = 1-5

Table 2. Cross-tabulations and discrepancies in mothers' and fathers' paired reports of where focal child lives at Year 5, based on direct question

How much of the time does child live with you, mother	**How much of the time does child live with you, father**						**Discrepancy**		
	Most	Half	Some	None	Weekend	Total	Yes	No	Total
Most	**209**	**186**	346	402	15	1,158	**425**	830	1255
	16.65	*14.82*	*27.57*	*32.03*	*1.2*	*92.27*	***33.86***	*66.14*	*100.00*
Half	**30**	11	4	4	0	49			
	2.39	*0.88*	*0.32*	*0.32*	*0*	*3.90*			
Some	11	1	3	11	0	26			
	0.88	*0.08*	*0.24*	*0.88*	*0*	*2.07*			
None	13	0	1	8	0	22			
	1.04	*0*	*0.08*	*0.64*	*0*	*1.75*			
Total	263	198	354	425	15	1,255			
	20.96	*15.78*	*28.21*	*33.86*	*1.20*	*100.00*			

Table 3. Cross-tabulations and discrepancies in mothers' and fathers' paired reports of focal child's primary residence at Year 5, based on the household roster

Mother reports child in roster	Father reports child in roster			Discrepancy		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Yes	**149**	986	1,135	**149**	1106	1255
	85.14	*91.3*	*90.44*	***11.87***	*88.13*	*100.00*
No	26	94	120			
	14.86	*8.7*	*9.56*			
Total	175	1,080	1,255			
	100.00	*100.00*	*100.00*			

Table 4: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Discrepancy in Mother and Father Reports of Where the Focal Child Lives at Year 5, Based on Direct Question (N=1255)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Father age	0.006	0.009	1.006	0.001	0.009	1.001	-0.001	0.010	0.999	-0.017	0.011	0.983
Couple White non-Hispanic	0.171	0.234	1.187	0.200	0.239	1.221	0.246	0.244	1.280	0.250	0.255	1.285
Couple Hispanic	-0.170	0.180	0.844	-0.103	0.194	0.902	-0.093	0.194	0.911	-0.295	0.207	0.744
Couple mixed race/ethnicity	-0.158	0.172	0.854	-0.102	0.186	0.903	-0.069	0.193	0.933	-0.136	0.201	0.873
Boy	-0.162	0.123	0.851	-0.068	0.130	0.934	-0.065	0.133	0.937	-0.043	0.141	0.958
Number of children together	0.138	0.079	1.149	0.142	0.083	1.153	0.142	0.084	1.152	0.056	0.090	1.058
Mother multi-partner fertility	-0.058	0.135	0.944	-0.029	0.143	0.972	-0.014	0.145	0.986	0.033	0.152	1.033
Father multi-partner fertility	-0.536***	0.130	0.585	-0.390**	0.137	0.677	-0.360*	0.141	0.698	-0.317*	0.150	0.728
Time diff. between interviews	-0.022	0.028	0.978	-0.005	0.029	0.995	-0.001	0.029	0.999	0.002	0.031	1.002
Mother HS education or more	-0.125	0.137	0.883	-0.045	0.143	0.956	-0.067	0.147	0.936	-0.051	0.156	0.950
Father HS education or more	0.054	0.135	1.056	-0.026	0.141	0.974	-0.004	0.144	0.996	0.023	0.154	1.023
Mother employed	0.029	0.131	1.030	-0.031	0.138	0.969	-0.011	0.141	0.989	0.043	0.153	1.044
Father employed	0.425**	0.140	1.529	0.327*	0.147	1.386	0.271	0.148	1.311	0.349*	0.163	1.417
Traditional gender views, mother				0.435**	0.152	1.544	0.419**	0.156	1.521	0.402*	0.165	1.496
Self-assessed fathering				0.736***	0.073	2.088	0.661***	0.076	1.938	0.684***	0.081	1.981
Relationship quality, mother report							0.167**	0.052	1.181	0.116*	0.057	1.123
Relationship quality, father report							0.161**	0.054	1.174	0.059	0.060	1.061
Part-time cohabitation										2.363***	0.241	10.623
Constant	-0.823*	0.334	0.439	-3.111***	0.411	0.045	-3.714***	0.440	0.024	-3.279***	0.467	0.038
X	42.85			137.87			149.56			208.24		
Log likelihood	-763.79			-700.62			-678.59			-612.93		

Table 5: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Discrepancy in Mother and Father Reports of Focal Child's Primary Residence at Year 5, Based on Household Roster (N=1255)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Father age	0.021	0.012	1.021	0.018	0.012	1.018	0.017	0.012	1.018	-0.003	0.014	0.997
Couple White non-Hispanic	0.940**	0.297	2.559	0.967**	0.303	2.631	0.992**	0.306	2.696	1.184***	0.343	3.268
Couple Hispanic	0.286	0.251	1.331	0.377	0.264	1.458	0.379	0.267	1.462	0.220	0.296	1.247
Couple mixed race/ethnicity	0.141	0.253	1.152	0.174	0.258	1.190	0.202	0.260	1.224	0.251	0.292	1.285
Boy	-0.066	0.182	0.936	0.019	0.185	1.020	0.036	0.187	1.037	0.115	0.204	1.122
Number of children together	0.317**	0.109	1.373	0.314**	0.112	1.369	0.311**	0.116	1.365	0.171	0.126	1.187
Mother multi-partner fertility	0.135	0.199	1.144	0.178	0.204	1.195	0.204	0.207	1.227	0.250	0.219	1.284
Father multi-partner fertility	-0.326	0.194	0.722	-0.233	0.198	0.792	-0.208	0.200	0.812	-0.130	0.220	0.878
Time diff. between interviews	-0.031	0.041	0.970	-0.015	0.041	0.985	-0.022	0.043	0.978	-0.018	0.048	0.983
Mother HS education or more	0.086	0.209	1.090	0.158	0.212	1.171	0.120	0.215	1.128	0.186	0.237	1.205
Father HS education or more	-0.199	0.197	0.819	-0.238	0.203	0.788	-0.270	0.204	0.763	-0.281	0.222	0.755
Mother employed	0.159	0.197	1.173	0.129	0.201	1.138	0.151	0.205	1.163	0.274	0.229	1.315
Father employed	0.689**	0.225	1.992	0.595**	0.227	1.813	0.554*	0.228	1.740	0.780**	0.258	2.181
Traditional gender views, mother				0.444*	0.212	1.558	0.380	0.216	1.463	0.425	0.237	1.530
Self-assessed fathering				0.577***	0.103	1.780	0.526***	0.109	1.692	0.525***	0.115	1.690
Relationship quality, mother report							0.209**	0.069	1.232	0.134	0.077	1.143
Relationship quality, father report							0.008	0.074	1.008	-0.232*	0.090	0.793
Part-time cohabitation										2.676***	0.234	14.523
Constant	-3.580***	0.534	0.028	-5.487***	0.651	0.004	-5.828***	0.696	0.003	-5.284***	0.756	0.005
X	44.51			72.76			75.85			189.680		
Log likelihood	-427.96			-409.35			-399.78			-332.410		