Voluntary Fatherhood:
When Men Voluntarily Invest in Non-Biological Children

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Abstract

Despite recent attention to social fatherhood in the stepfamily literature, scholarship has not consistently distinguished men who voluntarily parent non-biological and non-adoptive children from otherwise similar men. Our analysis addresses this literature gap by conceptualizing and identifying men who invest in the biological children of other men, despite having no legal or cultural obligation to do so; we term them 'voluntary fathers.' Formally, we define voluntary fatherhood as a type of parenting in which men voluntarily invest in non-biological children to the extent that they would be legally or culturally compelled to invest in biological and adoptive children. Once our measure is finalized, we estimate the proportion of children residing with non-biological father figures and the proportion of children residing with non-biological father figures who act as voluntary fathers. Given that high quality parenting relationships are associated with improved child outcomes, our research has important implications for child well being.

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I. Introduction

Over the last half century, the once ubiquitous two-biological-married-parent household has given way to myriad family structures (Cherlin, 2009). American children are increasingly likely to be raised within households that include any combination of biological mothers, biological fathers, and other persons. Given the role of women as primary caregivers, children have higher odds of residing with biological mothers as opposed to biological fathers. Subsequently, upon the dissolution of their parents' union, children are more likely to reside and interact daily with unrelated men--often mothers' resident partners--than with their biological fathers. The daily interaction between unrelated males and children may be more impactful than interactions with non-resident biological fathers (Hofferth et al., 2007).

Our analysis focuses on households that include biological mothers and resident men who are eligible to *voluntarily father* the biological children of other men. Because there are no laws or social mores that compel men to invest in unrelated children as they might in their own (Sweeney, 2010), the willingness to father non-biological children is distinct from the willingness to invest in biological children.

Moreover, while some voluntary fathers may be stepfathers, we argue that voluntary fatherhood is distinct from social fatherhood. The term "social father" is often used in the stepfamily literature to describe cohabiting or married stepfathers, irrespective of paternal investments. Unlike social fathers, voluntary fathers need not be romantically involved with biological mothers. In addition, non-biological fathers who voluntarily invest in non-biological children likely have higher quality relationships with non-biological children relative to social fathers who may or may not invest in stepchildren (Sweeney, 2010).

Using the 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics-Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS), we draw on the social fatherhood literature to conceptualize and operationalize voluntary fatherhood. Our research aims and objectives are as follows. First, we review cultural and legal definitions of biological and social fatherhood. Second, we introduce voluntary fatherhood and draw distinctions between this new concept and other forms of fatherhood. Third, we discuss our plans to construct a measurement of voluntary fatherhood, which will include four dimensions of social fatherhood (Hofferth et al., 2007) and additional dimensions that may be specific to voluntary fatherhood.

II. Background

Legal definitions of 'father' do not include men who act as voluntary fathers to non-biological children. Although non-resident biological fathers often retain legal rights over their biological children, men who form stepfamilies with biological mothers have limited legal rights to stepchildren. Furthermore, stepchild adoption is only possible if the biological parent's legal rights are terminated. Upon union dissolution, these legal ties are severed with no expectation that the stepparent will continue to contribute to the wellbeing of previous stepchildren. Likely owing to the legal tenuousness of the stepparent role, just 1/3 of children in dissolved stepfamilies recognize their former stepparents as family members (Sweeney, 2010). Older siblings and other relatives who are voluntary fathers are more likely to be perceived as legitimate caregivers as opposed to stepfathers who must produce written consent from custodial biological parents when dealing with schools and other institutions (Sweeney, 2010). Even after leaving the

household, non-biological father male relatives will have legitimate grounds to continue the relationship with children. Other research that privileges resident men who are romantically linked to mothers as father figures precludes other male relatives, unrelated men and older siblings who also do the work of fatherhood and may be more likely to continue this work irrespective of future residence.

Given the difficulty of tracing financial investments, family scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the investment of time in the measurement of fatherhood; time investments have been further refined to include quality and quantity of time investments (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Measuring quantity of time spent with a child is straightforward; researchers simply total the time fathers spend with children across a number of activities (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996). In contrast, measuring quality of father investments requires dividing time spent with children into quality categories. For Hofferth and colleagues (2007), *engagement*, includes time spent directly engaging with children; *accessibility (or availability)* measures time fathers are available, but not engaged in direct activities with children; *responsibility* refers to direct childrearing tasks (e.g., putting the child to bed); *warmth*, includes expressions of love, or caring (e.g., saying "I love you," expression appreciation of child's actions, etc.); and *monitoring/control* includes direct supervision, granting permission, and correcting child behaviors. These categories, however, are not standardized across studies. For example, Bzostek (2008) considers expressions of love and appreciation to be *engagement*, while Adamsons and colleagues (2007) consider playing to be *responsibility*.

The term 'social father' has been used to denote non-biological paternity for more than five decades (Simpson, 1960). Early usage referred to cultures in which biological mothers' older siblings assumed the role of children's father, despite the presence of biological fathers. More recently, social fatherhood has become nearly synonymous with 'stepfather' as these concepts are often used interchangeably (Sawhill, 2014). However, some work distinguishes social fathers as stepfathers who act as father figures, whether the men or children consider such investments to be parenting (Hofferth et al., 2007). Previous research on stepfathers suggests these men may perform the work of fatherhood without even realizing that they are doing kinship. Marsiglio (2004) identified several stepfathers who recalled investing in non-biological children prior to realizing the extent of their attachments to the children. It is also possible that older male siblings and other relatives may retain their ascribed kinship identities while performing the work of "fathers." The *parentification* literature largely considers elevating the role of minor siblings to parent—a role that requires "developmentally inappropriate levels of responsibility in the family of origin" (Hooper, Wallace, Doehler, and Dantzler, 2012)—to be detrimental. In addition, minor *parentified siblings* may not be performing fatherhood voluntarily. Rather, they are likely obligatorily meeting a family need. For these reasons, we do not rely on parental claiming, but objective components of parenting (e.g., time spent, activities performed, etc.) in our measure of voluntary fatherhood. In addition, we do not consider minor parentified siblings to be voluntary fathers.

According to recent data from the CPS, nearly two-thirds (63%) of all one-parent households include either a cohabiting partner or other adult age 18 and older (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Given the role of mothers as primary caregivers, these households are more likely to be headed by mothers than fathers. Therefore, one-parent households are more likely to include resident adult men as opposed to resident adult women. Certainly, not all men who reside in such households paternally invest in non-

biological children. But given the prevalence of one-parent households that include another adult and the potentially important impact resident non-biological father figures have on child wellbeing, our work addresses a significant gap in the literature. No other concept has adequately captured the complexity of men's voluntary investments in non-biological children, nor allowed for so many father figure types.

III. Research Goals

Our central goal is to introduce and implement a standard definition of *voluntary fatherhood* as a resident man who invests in non-biological children and need not be romantically involved with the mother. This concept draws an analytic distinction between the social fathers often discussed in the literature and the voluntary fathers we describe here. In addition, we provide information on the prevalence, composition, and basic sociodemographic characteristics of households that include voluntary fathers.

IV. Data, Measures, and Methods

Data and Sample. We draw our analytic sample from the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID), which is the longest-running household panel dataset available to family researchers. Launched in 1968 and conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, the original PSID sample (n = 4,800 families) was nationally representative, though low-income families were oversampled. The PSID has been administered to original family members and their descendants annually between 1968 and 1997, and biannually since 1997. Necessary adjustments have been made to maintain national representativeness of the growing sample, which now includes more than 9,000 families and 22,000 individuals. In 1997, the PSID implemented the Child Development Supplement (PSID-CDS) to collect detailed information on 3,563 children aged 0-12 as well as primary caregivers (PCG) and other caregivers (OCG). In 2002/2003, children aged 5-18 were reinterviewed by the PSID-CDS, while children older than age 18 entered the Transition to Adulthood (TA) study. The third and most recent PSID-CDS wave was conducted in 2007/2008 and included children who were aged 10-18 at that time.

A larger sample of children is available in this earliest wave, as some children age out of the PSID-CDS in 2002/2003 and 2007/2008. Therefore, our analysis uses data from the first wave of PSID-CDS to create the voluntary fatherhood measure, which includes time children spend engaged with resident men, responsibility, types of activities, and father figure warmth in addition to other dimensions and unobserved latent variables associated with other types of non-biological fatherhood. Our final analytic sample includes approximately 470 children who live in households headed by cohabiting or married stepfathers, older male siblings, or other non-biological father figures (uncles, grandfathers, foster fathers, etc.).

Measures. In constructing the first four dimensions of voluntary fatherhood, we use the PSID-CDS time diaries. The first measure is *time children spend engaged with their father figures*. Information contained in time diaries is reported by the child, or PCG. Specifically, we identify items regarding the nature of the primary activity performed by the child, other persons actively engaged with child, and other persons present but not engaged with the child. Using the item "Who else was there (but not engaged), we account for time resident men were *engaged* and time they were present (but not engaged) across activities. Second, we construct a *responsibility* measure that includes the following eight household tasks: "bathing and changing diapers;

disciplining; choosing children's activities; buying clothes; driving children to activities; selecting a pediatrician and making appointments; selecting a child-care program, preschool, or school; and playing with children" (Hofferth et al., 2007, p. 346). Resident men reported their level of responsibility for each task. Third, we identify *types of activities with father figures*, which includes the following thirteen activities: "washing or folding clothes; doing dishes; cleaning house; preparing food; looking at books or reading stories; talking about the families; working on homework; building or repairing something; playing computer or video games; playing a board game or card game, or doing a puzzle; and playing sports or outdoor activities." Finally, *father figure warmth* includes the following six items: "how often in the past month the [resident men] hugged each child, expressed his love, spent time with child, joked or played with child, talked with child, and told the child he appreciated what he or she did." Additional dimensions will include other behaviors and attitudes that tap voluntary fatherhood.

Methods. We use structural equation modeling (SEM) to construct our measure of voluntary fatherhood. The usefulness of SEM in this respect is well known. This multivariate analysis method will allow us to account for unobserved latent variables that may comprise a concept, but are not measured expressly. Latent variables specific to voluntary fatherhood may include a range of behaviors and attitudinal orientations that are likely important conditions of voluntary fatherhood. SEM is well suited to theory testing, as observed variables believed to define constructs may be tested through regression, path, or confirmatory factor models (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). Alternatively, SEM may be used to determine to what extent observed variables (e.g., disciplinary action) relate to latent variables (e.g., responsibility). Therefore, we begin our analysis by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm that all variables included in Hofferth and colleagues (2007) are the best measures for each social fatherhood dimension (accessibility, engagement, warmth and responsibility). As a second step, we use exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify: 1) additional observed variables that may be included in the four social fatherhood dimensions; and 2) additional dimensions that may be related to voluntary fatherhood.

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