Time vs. Money:
What Contributes to Children and Nonresident Fathers' Perceptions of Closeness?

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Despite evidence that children's feelings of closeness to their nonresident fathers are predictive of youth outcomes, there is limited research directly comparing nonresident father and child reports of father-child closeness or identifying factors associated with discrepant reports. This paper utilizes unique data from matched nonresident father-child dyads in the Fragile Families Survey (N=860) to examine whether fathers' investments of time are more predictive of closeness and consistency in father-child reports than are their economic investments in their children. Findings from multivariate models show that fathers' socioemotional involvement and contact were closely related to both child and father-reported closeness and that socioemotional involvement was also associated with more agreement in their reports. Although nonresident fathers' in-kind contributions predicted father-reported closeness, their formal child support contributions were not linked to either the child or fathers' perceptions of relationship quality.

Background

Previous research suggests nonresident fathers' socioemotional and economic investments in their children may be linked to both children and fathers perceiving themselves to have higher quality relationships. King (2006) found that contact with the nonresident father was positively associated with adolescents' reports of feeling close to them, and Arditti (1994) also reports that divorced fathers who spent more time with children in shared custody arrangements reported more closeness in their relationship. These findings are consistent with qualitative studies of low-income, nonresident fathers who emphasize the importance of "being there" for children as an expression of their emotional bond (Roy & Dyson, 2010; Waller, 2002). This concept of "being there" not only involves fathers spending time with their children, but spending quality time talking, listening, and engaging in activities with them. Qualitative studies also suggest that low-income, nonresident fathers perceive their in-kind financial contributions to children to symbolize their love for children more than formal child support payments. We know less about how children perceive these economic contributions, as few studies have looked directly at child reported closeness with respect to different father investments (see Hofferth, Forry, & Peters, 2010 for one exception).

Despite evidence that children's feelings of closeness to their nonresident fathers (Amato and Gilbreth, 2009) and discrepancies in parent and youth reports of parenting are predictive of youth

outcomes, there is limited research directly comparing nonresident father and child reports of father-child closeness. Studies examining children's and parents' reports of parenting have often found low to moderate levels of agreement, with parents generally conceiving of themselves more favorably (Guion, Mrug, & Windle, 2009; Gaylord, Kitzmann, & Coleman, 2003). It is important to identify these factors in light of a growing body of literature indicates that discrepancies in parent and child reports of parenting behaviors predict negative child outcomes (Guion et al., 2009; Gaylord et al., 2003; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

Data and Methods

This project analyzes data collected from mothers, fathers, and children who participated in Year 9 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Data were collected in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or greater, and the completion rate at Year 9 was 76% of eligible mothers and 59% of eligible fathers. The analysis includes 860 matched nonresident father-child dyads in cases where the father had seen the child within the last year and the child and father had complete dependent variable data.

Dependent Variables: The paper examines three measures of father-child closeness at Year 9. Fathers and children were both asked to report on a scale of 0 (*not very close*) to 3 (*extremely close*) how close they felt to one another. A discrepancy score was created by subtracting child reported closeness from father reported closeness.

Explanatory Variables: We operationalize nonresident fathers' financial and socioemotional investments using 4 measures: mother-reported measures of in-kind support and child support from fathers, mother reports of the number of days father has seen the child in the last month, and children's reports of father socioemotional involvement. In-kind support is a mean of 9 items ($\alpha = .90$) of how often the father buys things like toys, food, medicine, and school supplies for the child on a scale of 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). A dichotomous measure was used to represent whether the father had paid any formal child support in the past year (0=*not paid*, 1= *paid*). Child-reported father socioemotional involvement is a scale measure ranging from 0 (*never)* to 3 (*always*) of how often the father talks over important decisions, listens to the child's side in an argument, and spends enough time with the child ($\alpha = .65$).

Control Variables: Parenting characteristics are operationalized using 13 measures collected at Year 9. Specifically, we control for mother reported cooperative parenting (8 item scale,$\alpha = .88$), the number of years since the parents have lived in the same house, whether or not parents were married at the time of the child's birth, couple race, mothers' and fathers' multi-partner fertility, mother reports of whether the father has problematic substance abuse, fathers' age, education and employment status, father reports of his own depression, and distance that the father lives from the child. We also control for child characteristics, including child gender (0=Female, 1=Male), mother-reported child temperament collected at the age 5 interview (19 items,$\alpha = .82$), and child reports of closeness to mother on a scale of 0 (*not very close*) to 3 (*extremely close*).

Missing Data: Where possible, missing data were filled in using reports from the other parent or from previous study waves. Multiple imputation was used to address the remaining 1-15% of observations missing in each independent variable. The Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method with 10 imputations was used because the missing pattern was random, and reported regressions use pooled estimates.

Analysis: The analysis estimates 3 ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models in which father and child reported closeness as well as the discrepancy in children's and nonresident fathers' reports of closeness is a function of: 1) relationship investments of fathers, 2) parent characteristics, and 3) child characteristics.

Findings

Descriptive Results. Consistent with what other studies have found regarding father-reported involvement, nonresident fathers reported feeling more closeness than their children (Table 1). A paired samples t-test showed this difference to be significant $t(859)= -6.98$, $p<0.001$. Spearman rank correlation analysis showed that child and father reports of closeness were significantly but only modestly correlated, $r_s(858) = .21$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.14, .27].

Multivariate Results: Results from OLS regressions predicting father-child closeness and the discrepancy revealed that different things are important for children and nonresident fathers, unstandardized coefficients for these regressions are reported in Table 2. The results show that for children, father socioemotional involvement, a more positive coparenting relationship between their parents and feeling closer to mothers are associated with feeling closer to their father. Specifically, we observed that an increase in one unit of father socioemotional involvement was associated with an increase of 0.56 units of child reported closeness. Mere contact with the father- measured by the number of days the father saw the child in the last month- was not significantly associated with closeness. Neither in-kind nor formal support from fathers was predictive of children's reports of closeness with their fathers. Closeness to fathers was positively associated with the child being closer to their mother and cooperative parenting.

The results for father reported closeness showed a different pattern. As in the child model, socioemotional involvement was positively and significantly related to closeness while contact in the previous month was not. A one unit increase in child reported socioemotional involvement corresponds to a 0.11 unit increase in father reported closeness. Unlike the child model, however, the level of in-kind support was significant. Fathers who provided more in-kind support reported greater levels of closeness with their children, though formal support was not relevant. Specifically, an increase of one unit in in kind support was predictive of a 0.11 unit increase in father's reported closeness. In contrast, fathers felt less close to their children when more time had passed since they had lived with the child's mother (Table 3).

Father-child dyads that had lower mean levels of closeness showed significantly greater discrepancies. Lower child reported father socioemotional involvement was also related to a greater discrepancy in reports. Interestingly, when both parents were Black, fathers and children showed greater discrepancies in their reported levels of closeness. Discrepancies in reported closeness are significantly reduced if the child reports higher levels of father interest or closeness to their mother, suggesting that caution is required in interpreting single reporter levels of closeness in families where fathers are less actively engaged with their children or where the child's other adult relationships are strained.

Conclusion

How close nonresident fathers and children reported feeling to one another was dependent on different kinds of relationship investments. The time nonresident fathers spend with their children is associated with greater closeness and more agreement in reports than are economic

investments. However, it was the quality of time spent that was more consistently associated with closeness than the amount contact nonresident fathers had with their children. This echoes what previous studies on parenting have found, that fathers' high quality time is a more important dimension of "being there" (Roy & Dyson, 2010; Waller, 2002).

While nonresident fathers also value quality of time spent together, fathers give their financial contributions of in-kind support more weight than their children do in assessing closeness. Payment of child support was not predictive of either nonresident fathers or children's reports of closeness. Research suggests that in-kind contributions symbolize fathers' commitment to their children than formal child support payments, which may be mandatory in many low-income families who are receiving public assistance (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Overall, this study suggests that time together matters more than financial support to both nonresident fathers and children, especially when fathers provide.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics (N=860)

Variables	*Mean (SD) or Proportion*	*Min.*	*Max.*
Closeness			
Child Reported Closeness	2.17 (1.06)	0	3
Father Reported Closeness	2.46 (0.81)	0	3
Discrepancy between father and child reports	0.28 (1.19)	-3	3
Father Investments			
In-kind Support Scale(α=.90)	0.99 (0.81)	0	3
Formal Child Support	79% (*n*=680)	0	1
Child Reported Socioemotional Involvement (α=.65)	1.60 (0.90)	0	3
Days Last Month Father Saw Child	8.39 (9.35)	0	30
Child Characteristics			
Child is Female	51% (*n*=437)	0	1
Child Temperament Scale at Age 5 (α=.82)	7.22 (5.08)	0	31
Child Report of Closeness to Mother	2.66 (0.71)	0	3
Parent Characteristics			
Cooperative Parenting Scale (α=.88)	3.00 (0.84)	1	4
Years since Father Lived with Mother/Child	6.41 (2.53)	0	9
Parents Married at Birth	12% (*n*=104)	0	1
Couple White	9% (*n*= 77)	0	1
Couple Black	49% (*n*=417)	0	1
Couple Hispanic	12% (*n*=99)	0	1
Couple Mixed Race/Other	31% (*n*=266)	0	1
Mother Repartnered	30% (*n*=255)	0	1
Mother Multipartner Fertility	62% (*n*=535)	0	1
Father Multipartner Fertility	58% (*n*=496)	0	1
Father Problematic Substance Abuse	17% (*n*=150)	0	1

Father Age, years	35.59 (6.71)	25	60
Father Employed	67% (*n*=576)	0	1
Father HS Education	17% (*n*=150)	0	1
Father Some College	17% (*n*=150)	0	1
Father College Degree or More	17% (*n*=150)	0	1
Father Depression	19% (*n*=162)	0	1
Distance Father Lives from Child	2.18 (1.37)	1	5

Table 2. OLS Regression Results Predicting Father-Child Closeness and Discrepancy, (N=860)

	Closeness (Child)	Closeness (Father)	Discrepancy
	B *(SE)*	B *(SE)*	B *(SE)*
In-kind Support	0.06 (0.052)	0.11* (0.046)	0.04 (0.066)
Formal Child Support	0.02 (0.080)	0.04 (0.071)	0.02 (0.102)
Child Reported Socioemotional Involvement	0.56*** (0.036)	0.11*** (0.031)	-0.44*** (0.045)
Days Father Saw Child in Last Month	0.01* (0.004)	0.01 (0.003)	-0.00 (0.005)
Child is Male	0.03 (0.061)	0.01 (0.054)	-0.02 (0.077)
Child Temperament Scale at Age 5	-0.01 (0.006)	-0.00 (0.006)	0.01 (0.008)
Child Report of Closeness to Mother	0.28*** (0.043)	0.01 (0.038)	-0.27*** (0.055)
Cooperative Parenting Scale	0.10* (0.049)	0.05 (0.044)	-0.05 (0.062)
Years since Father Lived with Mother/Child	-0.00 (0.013)	-0.04** (0.011)	-0.03 (0.016)
Parents Married at Birth	0.04 (0.101)	-0.11 (0.089)	-0.15 (0.128)
Couple Black	-0.16 (0.119)	0.18 (0.106)	0.34* (0.152)
Couple Hispanic	-0.06 (0.139)	0.03 (0.123)	0.09 (0.177)
Couple Other/Mixed Race	-0.18 (0.122)	0.10 (0.108)	0.29 (0.155)
Mother Repartnered	0.03 (0.071)	0.09 (0.063)	0.06 (0.089)
Mother Multipartner Fertility	0.09 (0.066)	0.05 (0.058)	-0.04 (0.084)
Father Multipartner Fertility	0.02 (0.064)	-0.01 (0.057)	-0.03 (0.081)

Father Problematic Substance Abuse	0.07 (0.087)	0.02 (0.077)	-0.05 (0.111)
Father Age	-0.00 (0.005)	0.00 (0.004)	0.01 (0.006)
Father Employed	0.03 (0.068)	0.05 (0.060)	0.02 (0.086)
Father HS Education	0.02 (0.088)	0.06 (0.078)	0.04 (0.111)
Father Some College	-0.03 (0.088)	0.04 (0.078)	0.07 (0.111)
Father College Degree or More	0.01 (0.132)	0.08 (0.117)	0.06 (0.167)
Father Depression	0.01 (0.079)	-0.10 (0.070)	-0.10 (0.100)
Distance Father Lives from Child	0.01 (0.023)	-0.03 (0.021)	-0.04 (0.030)
Constant	0.22 (0.300)	1.83*** (0.266)	1.61*** (0.379)
R^2	.34	.12	.16
Adjusted R^2	.32	.10	.13
Note: B= Unstandardized estimate, ***= p <.001, **= p<.01, * = p< .05. Reference categories for father education and couple race are less than high school and White, respectively.			