Nonresident Fathers and Adolescent Problem Behavior: Explaining the Link

Alan Booth
Mindy E. Scott
Valarie King
The Pennsylvania State University
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Background

Approximately 50% of all children, at some point during their youth, will live in a home without their biological father (Bianchi, 1990; Bumpass, 1984). Research is consistent in showing that children with non-resident fathers are at greater risk of externalizing (e.g., risky behavior, trouble in school, substance abuse) and internalizing (e.g., depressive symptoms) behavior (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch, 1996). Most often cited as factors accounting for this link are low family financial capital and low social capital, with loss of income often thought to be the primary factor affecting problem behavior (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). However, there is evidence that non-economic factors (low social capital factors such as deficits in parenting skills or qualities that make the mother unattractive as an employee such as poor interpersonal skills and limited education) may be more responsible for the adverse outcomes of father absence than income deficits (Mayer, 1997). Poor quality relationships between nonresident fathers and their children also contribute to lower levels of social capital among nonresident father families. Many nonresident father-child relationships lack the necessary qualities (closeness and support for example) that protect against offspring problem behavior.

The risk and resilience perspective from the field of human development (Cowan, Cowan, & Schultz, 1996; Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000) suggests that closeness of the resident parent and individual characteristics of the children

may protect offspring from the lower levels of father closeness associated with father absence from the home and behavior problems on the part of offspring. The first goal of this paper is to reevaluate the mediating influence of low income and father closeness on the association between father absence and problem behavior to clarify the relative influence of these two factors. The second goal is to examine the extent to which mother's human (education and labor force participation) and social (mother-offspring relationship quality) capital along with protective individual qualities of offspring moderate and mediate the link between non-resident father-child closeness and offspring problem behavior.

The role of the mother-child relationship relative to fathers has not been assessed adequately using national studies. However, there is evidence that mothers' presence and involvement needs to be considered when attempting to understand nonresident father involvement, and that mother's closeness may influence offspring well-being more than fathers when fathers are out of the household (Amato, 1998; Harris and Ryan, 2004). Mother's who are highly educated, have greater labor force participation, and higher earnings may also influence their offspring's well-being in ways that compensate for low levels of nonresident father-offspring relationship closeness.

We further extend knowledge by examining offspring's individual qualities that may result in some children being more likely than others to have a close relationship with their father. There is now considerable evidence that children are biologically prepared for social, cognitive, and perceptual challenges, and that these attributes affect parent-child relationship quality (Plomin, 1994; Rowe, 1994). A child effects model suggests that children's characteristics may affect parents' attitudes and behaviors in the same way that parents' behaviors influence child well-being (Kerr and Stattin, 2003; Russell and Russell, 1992).

Certain individual competencies may influence a father's positive attitude toward his offspring, or may influence offspring's own interest in developing a close relationship with their father. Offspring with higher levels of competence may also be better prepared to cope with poor quality father-child relationships, making them less susceptible to the negative consequences of father absence. To our knowledge, the mediating and moderating influences of children's competencies such as **s**elf-esteem, problem solving ability, self-motivation, optimism, peer relationships, school attachment, and involvement in constructive activities on the link between nonresident father-offspring closeness and problem behavior have not been explored using national data.

Data and Methods

Data from adolescents with a nonresident biological father and those residing with two biological parents in the first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) were compared to explain the link between having a nonresident father and adolescent externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. The externalizing behaviors that were analyzed include delinquency, early sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, trouble getting along with others in school, and expulsion from school. Internalizing behavior was indicated by a scale of depressive symptoms. Using OLS regression, we began by assessing the extent to which per-capita family income and father closeness account for externalizing and internalizing behavior associated with nonresident father status while controlling for the adolescent's age, gender and race. We examined the extent to which financial and social capital had unique and shared influences on externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.

Our next step is to explore the extent to which mothers' educational achievement, participation in the labor force, and closeness to her adolescent offspring mediate or moderate the associated between nonresident father-offspring closeness and problem behavior. Once again using OLS regression, we will include measures for mother's education, number of work hours and relationship closeness to assess the extent to which each of these measures reduces the relationship between father-offspring closeness and externalizing and internalizing behavior within nonresident father families only. We will also create interaction terms between the mother variables and nonresident father-offspring closeness to examine the moderating influence of mother's human and social capital.

Our final step will be to examine the extent to which adolescent individual competencies (measures include self-esteem, problem solving abilities, self-motivation, feelings of optimism, school attachment, peer relationships and involvement in constructive activities) mediate or moderate the father closeness-offspring problem behavior association individually and collectively with mother's social and human capital.

Findings

Our findings to date indicate that although low household income accounts for part of the link between father absence and problem behavior, low levels of father-offspring closeness accounts for a much greater proportion of the association. Table 1 shows that father absence had a strong and positive relationship with externalizing behavior (model 1). When household per-capita income was included in the equation, the coefficient dropped 17% (from .70 to .64), but remained statistically significant (model 2). Father-offspring closeness had a much larger effect than income on the father absent-externalizing behavior association. Father closeness reduced the coefficient by about half (from .70 to .34, model

3). In the equation together, income and father closeness decreased the coefficient by 60% (from .70 to .29, model 4).

Compared to the association between father absence and externalizing behavior, the association between having a nonresident father and internalizing behavior is much lower (beta=.022, p<. 001; See Table 2, model 1). When per-capita income is added to the model, the coefficient for the effect of father absence on depressive symptoms is reduced slightly, but remains significant (model 2). The addition of father closeness reduces the coefficient to nonsignificance (model 3). When both income and father closeness are in the equation together, the sign of the coefficient reverses and is statistically significant, a finding we will explore further in future analyses.

Expected Findings

In the second phase of the study, we expect to find that mother's human and social capital, along with offspring's individual characteristics explain a significant proportion of the relationship between father-offspring closeness and problem behavior. In terms of the moderating influence of mother's education, hours worked and relationship closeness, we expect that father closeness will have a much greater impact on problem behavior when mothers are less educated, work fewer hours and are less close to their offspring. We also expect that lack of father closeness will be much less detrimental to offspring problem behavior when they have more positive qualities and higher levels of competence.

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Table 1. Externalizing behavior regressed on nonresident father status, family income, father-child closeness, and controls (N=10,250).

Panel 1: Main Effects	1	2	3	4
Father Absence	.70***	.64***	.34***	.29***
(1=NRF)	(.18)	(.16)	(.09)	(.07)
Age	.12***	.12***	.10***	.10***
	(.14)	(.14)	(.11)	(.11)
Gender	-.51***	-.50***	-.59***	-.58***
(1=female)	(-.16)	(-.16)	(-.19)	(-.19)
Race	.28***	.22***	.29***	.24***
(1=Black)	(.05)	(.04)	(.06)	(.05)
Financial Capital				
Household Per		-.39***		-.37***
Capita Income		(-.09)		(-.09)
Social Capital				
Father-Child			-.28***	-.27***
Closeness			(-.20)	(-.20)
R2	.0454	.0571	.0888	.0991

*** p < .001 ** p< .01 * p <.05

[a] Standardized coefficients are in parentheses

Table 2. Depressive symptoms regressed on nonresident father status, family income, father-child closeness, and controls (N=10,250).

Panel 1: Main Effects	1	2	3	4
Father Absence	.022***	.017***	-.007	-.01**
(1=NRF)	(.08)	(.06)	(-.03)	(-.04)
Age	.01***	.01***	.01***	.01***
	(.13)	(.13)	(.10)	(.10)
Gender	.03***	.03***	.02***	.02***
(1=female)	(.14)	(.15)	(.11)	(.12)
Race	.01	.002	.01	.004
(1=Black)	(.02)	(.01)	(.02)	(.01)
Financial Capital				
Household Per		-.03***		-.03***
Capita Income		(-.11)		(-.10)
Social Capital				
Father-Child			-.02***	-.02***
Closeness			(-.24)	(-.24)
R2	.0846	.0928	.1145	.1217

*** p < .001 ** p< .01 * p <.05

[a] Standardized coefficients are in parentheses