

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Yoshie Sano for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies presented on December 10, 2004.

Title: The complexity of Nonresident Father Involvement in Low-Income Families: Mothers' Perspectives.

Abstract approved:

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The two studies of this dissertation examined mothers' perspectives of nonresident fathers' involvement in low-income families. The overall goal of these studies was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of nonresident fathers' involvement and its effect on family well-being.

In the first study I applied a relatively new methodology, zero-inflated negative binomial regression, to overcome the methodological shortcomings of previous studies. The models ($N = 1215$) examined what factors predicted two aspects, *presence* and *level*, of father-child contact and paternal engagement. Different factors were found to influence presence of father-child contact and frequency of contact. Similarly, different factors predicted presence of paternal engagement and level of engagement. Thus, a nonresident father's decision to be

involved in his child's life may be a fundamentally different decision than how much he is involved.

In addition, parents' positive relationship—romantic relationship and higher quality of relationship—was found to be the major predictor influencing all outcome variables. It appears that a positive co-parental relationship is central to nonresident father involvement.

In my second study, I qualitatively examined rural mothers' perceptions of nonresident fathers' involvement ($N = 83$). Specifically, I investigated whether mothers are really "gatekeeping" the father involvement, as suggested by previous research. There was no simple yes/no answer to this question, rather, results suggested that whether a mother acts as a gatekeeper of her children depends on her unique circumstances. Mothers, by at large, wanted the nonresident fathers to be involved in their children's lives and to perform responsible fathering, but mothers' expectations of the fathers' roles may be narrowly defined and, therefore, easily violated. Some mothers did intentionally refuse or limit father-child contact in cases where they believed that father involvement would threaten the safety of their children. In these cases, "gatekeeping" behavior can be viewed as one survival strategy for the mothers.

The two studies presented here collectively demonstrate the complexity of non-resident father's involvement and provide insight that will be useful for policy targeted to low-income families.

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The Complexity of Nonresident Father Involvement in Low-Income Families:
Mothers' Perspectives

by

Yoshie Sano

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Dr. Alan C. Acock and Dr. Leslie N. Richards will be the co-authors of the first manuscript when submitted for publication. Dr. Acock provided his methodological expertise, as well as much technical support. Dr. Leslie N. Richards contributed to build a conceptual framework for this manuscript. Dr. Leslie N. Richards and Dr. Anisa M. Zvonkovic will be the co-authors of the second manuscript when submitted for publication. They helped conceptualization, and provided valuable editing advice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
Background for this Dissertation	2
A Description of Studies	4
Theoretical Frameworks.....	6
OVERALL LITERATURE REVIEW	10
General Information About Fathers	10
Nonresident Fathers and Family Well-Being.....	14
Limitations of Current Fatherhood Research.....	25
PREDICTING <i>PRESENCE</i> AND <i>LEVEL</i> OF NONRESIDENT FATHER'S INVOLVEMENT: APPLICATION OF ZERO-INFLATED NEGATIVE BINOMIAL MODELS	28
Factors Predicting Nonresident Father's Involvement.....	33
Research Objective.....	39
Methods.....	40
Results.....	46
Discussion	57
References	66
Appendix.....	71
ARE MOTHERS REALLY " <i>GATEKEEPERS</i> " OF CHILDREN?: RURAL MOTHER'S PERCEPTION OF NONRESIDENT FATHER'S INVOLVEMENT AFTER SEPARATION	73
Theoretical Framework.....	75

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Factors Affecting Family Well-Being.....	77
Research Goals.....	82
Methods.....	82
Results and Discussion.....	87
Conclusion	108
References	112
GENERAL CONCLUSION	117
Summary of Findings.....	117
Conclusion Drawn From Each of the Studies	119
Limitation of the Two Studies.....	125
Policy Implications Drawn from Both Studies	127
Overall Conclusions.....	135
BIBLIOGRAPHY	137

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.1 Family Systems for a Resident Mother's Household and a Nonresident Father	7

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
2.1 The biological and Social Aspects of Fatherhood.....	12
3.1 Classification of Terminologies Used in This Paper	31
3.2 Descriptive Statistics of Variables	47
3.3 Estimates of Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Model to Predict Father-Child Contact	52
3.4 Estimates of Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Model to Predict Father's Engagement.....	56
3.5 Significant Predictors of Presence and Level of Nonresident Father's Involvement from the zero-inflated Negative Binomial models	59
4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Sample.....	85
4.2 Coding Categories and Subcodes.....	87

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Wakako Sano, who always believed in me and inspired me as a strong and liberated woman.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, fathers have increasingly been receiving attention in both academic and political spheres. Previous research in the fields of social science, including psychology, sociology, and education, focused almost exclusively on mother-child interactions, largely ignoring fathers (Silverstein & Phares, 1996). Increased attention to fathers has helped deepen our understanding of the complicated nature of family relationships. Yet, our fatherhood knowledge is still incomplete and we do not have a comprehensive picture of the father's involvement in families. Some policies as well as scholarly work are driven by ideology rather than theory, most likely due to the limited timeframe over which fatherhood has been studied (Day, Lewis, O'Brien, & Lamb, 2005).

While some researchers assume that increased father involvement promotes positive outcomes in children (Blakenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1995), others question this assumption, claiming that the role of fathers in a family is often overvalued (Silverstein, 1996). In particular, feminist researchers raise concerns about the involvement of fathers who have a history of problems, such as domestic violence, child abuse, substance/alcohol abuse, or incarceration (Raphael 1996, 1999; Scott, London, & Myers, 2002; Tolman & Raphael, 2000). Issues of how to define the role of fathers and evaluate their impact on families inspire vigorous debate among researchers of various political and scholarly orientations. In this

dissertation, I intend to contribute to this discussion by examining the overall impact of father involvement on families.

Background of This Dissertation

The debate surrounding father involvement has been fueled in large part by the position taken by a group of researchers often labeled “neoconservative social scientists” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), who reason that current social problems, such as child poverty, child behavioral problems, teenage pregnancy, and low academic performance, can be explained by the absence of fathers from the lives of children. For example, Popenoe (1996) idealized a nuclear family where a child is raised by biological heterosexual parents, and emphasized the importance of fathers as the ultimate authority in families. Blankenhorn (1995) claimed that children need biological fathers for optimal child development. In fact, for some extreme neoconservatives, an abusive father is seen as better than no father at all (Silverstein, 1996).

The neoconservative orientation has had an influence in the political arena with some politicians basing social policy decisions on these ideologies. In particular, policy makers are aware that the majority of current welfare recipients are female-headed households with young children (Edin & Lein, 1997; Seccombe, 1999), and thus, are interested in the role of fathers and their earning capacity. During the 1990s, enforcement of child support payment was strengthened in an attempt to define it as one of the main economic provisions to families on welfare. Current welfare policies, including the Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed in 1996, largely envision the economic contributions of fathers as ensuring the financial security of these households. In addition to self-sufficiency, PRWORA's goals include reducing the number of out-of wedlock birth and creating more two-parent families (Lipscomb, 2001). Overall, the objective of recent legislation is to promote father involvement and to penalize non-involvement. For example, mothers lose their eligibility for welfare if they withhold information about fathers for paternity establishment; or, depending on the state of residence, noncompliance of child support can result in wage garnishment or arrest.

The underlying assumption of these political positions is that increased father involvement produces positive outcomes in a family. Although the simplicity of this view may appeal to the naïve audience, past research does not unilaterally support this claim. In fact, much feminist research has revealed that father involvement may not always be desirable, especially when fathers are violent, and many women receiving public assistance are victims of domestic violence (Raphael 1996, 1999; Scott et al., 2002; Tolman & Raphael, 2000). These researchers argue that the current legislation unintentionally endangers mothers and children when the fathers have risk factors. There is still too little evidence to conclude what aspects of father involvement are associated with positive and negative outcomes for families. Considering the high incidence of domestic violence involving women receiving public assistance, research that focuses on low-income populations and specifically takes the father's risk factors into account

is critical for obtaining a more accurate picture of the needs of the target population of public policies.

Therefore, in this dissertation I investigate father's involvement in low-income families. The overall research goal is to draw a more complete picture of the involvement of nonresident fathers and its effect on family well-being. I will identify factors predicting father involvement, and assess the effect of involvement on families, paying particular attention to the father's risk factors. These risk factors include having a history of domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and/or incarceration. This dissertation attempts to respond to many previous studies which were conducted rather ideologically. Recognizing the potential benefit of father involvement, this dissertation attempts to find a balance between the two distinct view points: overvaluing and undervaluing what fathers do.

Description of the Studies

In my first study, I quantitatively examine factors that predict a nonresident father's involvement in his child's life. Data are drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (hereafter referred to as "Fragile Families"), a nationally representative, longitudinal study focusing on unwed low-income couples living in urban areas. Using this secondary data set, I chose to use a zero-inflated Negative Binomial model to address shortcomings of previous quantitative analyses that used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Two dimensions of father involvement, father-child contact and paternal engagement, are used as response variables. Individual factors (e.g., maternal characteristics, paternal

characteristics, and child characteristics) as well as co-parental relationship factors are included in the model as predictors. In addition, I examine how fathers' risk factors (incarceration history, violence, etc.) influence their involvement.

My second study explores the consequences of nonresident father's involvement on family well-being. This study utilizes data from the multi-state "Rural Families Speak" project. While the Rural Families Speak is not a nationally representative sample, the project tracks rural low-income families who are considered a "hard-to-reach" population, and provides rich quantitative and qualitative data. The first study focuses on urban populations; and the second study examines nonresident fathers' involvement in rural communities. Focusing on rural populations is a unique endeavor in fatherhood research because previously little attention has been paid to geographic context.

The second study utilizes qualitative methodology to highlight mothers' perceptions of the nonresident fathers' involvement after separation. Again, particular attention is given to the fathers' risk factors. By examining rural mothers' perspectives, this study identifies barriers and facilitators to successful post-separation relationships for disadvantaged families. The second study yields information that will be useful in guiding more appropriate promotion of better father-child relationships. While each study of this dissertation focuses on families in a unique geographic context, both projects study financially disadvantaged families.

Theoretical Frameworks

Each study is guided by a specific theoretical framework, but this overall dissertation is rooted in an feminist orientation. Feminist perspectives cover a wide range of theories, such as, liberal, Marxist, radical, psychodynamic, socialist, post-modern, and ecological feminist. Although these theories are diverse, are rooted in different orientations, and often disagree with each other, feminist perspectives share important core themes that are central to the study of families. According to Osmond and Thorne (1993), there are five basic core themes of feminist scholarship: (1) it values the experience of undervalued populations, usually women's, (2) it uses gender as an organizing concept, (3) it examines gender relationships in a broader socio-historical context, (4) it recognizes how the unitary notion of a "family" is used for the oppression of women, and (5) it commits to changing the unjust subordination. Feminist theories are not simply for women; they are also applicable to the experiences of men. As Gordon (cited in Osmond & Thorne, 1993, p. 592) summarized, feminists pay attention to "gender and gender relations as fundamental to all of social life, including the lives of men as well as those of women." These concepts provide the underlying orientation for my research.

The specific theoretical framework that guides my first study is family systems theory. Family systems theory conceptualizes the family as a hierarchy of complex systems. Figure 1-1 illustrates systems for a resident mother's household and a nonresident father. The components of a family system are individual family

members (e.g., mother, father, and a child). Interrelations among family members are subsystems of the family (e.g., mother-father, mother-child, and father-child relationships). Components of systems and subsystems are interdependent, and influence each other. For example, if the mother-father relationship is strong and positive, the theory predicts that it positively influences father-child relationships. The family system is surrounded by larger systems called suprasystems, representing the communities in which the family lives. Racial/ethnic subcultures, such as the African American culture, are one example of a suprasystem.

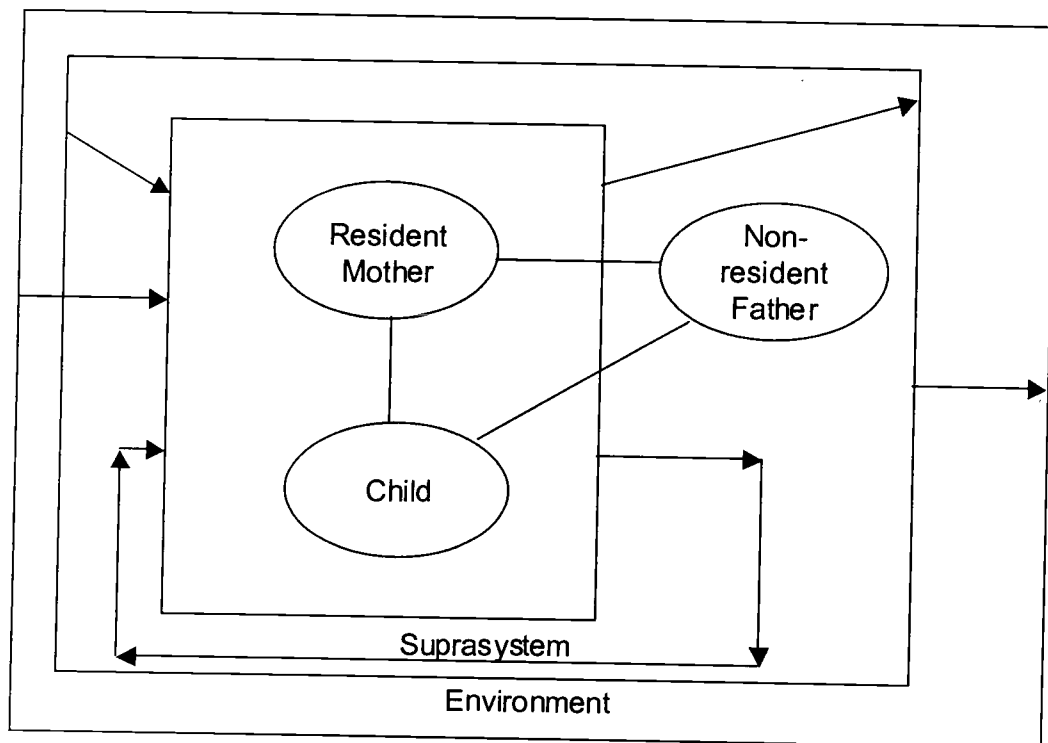


Figure 1. Family Systems for a Resident Mother's Household and a Nonresident Father.

Determining what constitutes a subsystem, however, is not so straightforward. Spencer Brown (1972) claimed “the very act of identifying several components as a system is equivalent to drawing a boundary between what is included within the system and what is not part of the system” (p.333, cited in Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Because of nonresident status of the father, in some cases neither mother nor father may perceive the mother-father relationship as a family subsystem. In such a case, the father may be excluded from the main family system, and the father-child link may become very tenuous. A family system seeks homeostasis (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Unless family members are able to negotiate boundaries with each other, the system may eliminate the nonresident father’s involvement from the family.

In my second study, I apply symbolic interactionism to examine custodial mothers’ perceptions about nonresident fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives. Symbolic interactionism shares important core themes with feminist perspectives. First, both theories value the meanings, experiences, and interpretations of individuals. They value an individual’s “subjective experience” as opposed to “objective reality.” Second, both theories pay special attention to an individual’s social position, recognizing human behaviors are more or less shaped by contextual factors. These positions are particularly powerful when investigating marginalized populations—such as rural low-income mothers, who are marginalized in terms of geographic location, socioeconomic status, and gender.

In addition, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the creation of roles and identities assigned to groups and individuals (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This concept is similar to family systems theory which also addresses the importance of negotiation in drawing boundaries to determine what is included within the system. Norms regarding post-divorce/separation parental relationships have yet to be clearly established in society (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Symbolic interactionism suggests that both custodial mothers and nonresident fathers formulate their post-separation relationships through interaction. How mothers define their experiences and how they interpret the meaning of the father's involvement plays a key role in assessing family well-being. This theory validates experiences of rural low-income mothers, a population absent from fatherhood literature.

CHAPTER 2

OVERALL LITERATURE REVIEW

As public ideology of fatherhood evolves, so do the goals, methods, and interpretations of scholarly inquiry about fathers. This overall literature review serves, first, to place this dissertation into the context of past and current research and to illustrate its significance. Second, this review presents an overall picture of nonresident fathers and family well-being, which is the common theme of my two studies. Finally, it discusses the limitations of current fatherhood research and lays out how this dissertation challenges these limitations.

General Information About Fathers

Brief History of Fatherhood Ideology

A brief history of fatherhood ideology was summarized by Casper and Bianchi (2002) and Lamb (2000). In the United States and European countries in the 18th and early 19th centuries, fathers were perceived as a “moral overseers” or “moral teachers”. The main responsibility of fathers was to provide religious training for their children. With industrialization, men’s work places shifted to outside the home and the fathers’ role changed to that of being a “provider.” Father absence and the issue of sex role models for children, particularly sons, became a prominent issue for scholars during and after World War II. Along with feminist movements of the late 60s and early 70s, the public started to emphasize the ideal of “nurturing fathers”. In the current era, in addition to their role as “provider,” fathers are expected to be co-parents with mothers and to engage more in

caregiving; although, in reality, fathers still spend significantly less time with children than mothers do (Acock & Demo, 1994).

Fatherhood research today mainly focuses on topics such as father involvement, child outcomes, and the co-parental relationship. It should be noted here that the terms “fatherhood” and “father involvement” refer to distinct constructs (Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Day & Lamb, 2004). According to Day, Lewis, O’Brien, and Lamb (2005), “fatherhood” refers to the sense of responsibility or intention to be a part of child’s life, and entails the decision and motivation to perform the paternal role. In contrast, “father involvement” refers to the specific actions or behaviors associated with the paternal role.

Who Are Fathers in Today’s Society?

The term “father” is not easy to define because it comprises a group with a tremendous diversity in terms of demographics, socio-economics, and cultures. Marsiglio et al. (2000) noted that the term “father” can include biological, social, psychological, and legal fathers and depends on the perception of the relationship. The definition of who is a “father” can also vary significantly by culture. As Palkovitz (cited from Day et al., 2005) noted, one obvious characteristic of “fathers,” however, is that there is “no such thing as a father independent of relationships.”

Day et al. (2005) proposed classifying fathers using two dimensions: biology, and intentionality or motivation. Table 2-1 presents Day et al.’s classification. Biological fathers who are motivated to fulfill their paternal role

(Cell #1) have long been considered “ideal dads” by the public, and the group of fathers most often studied by scholars. Biological fathers who are not motivated to fulfill their paternal role (Cell #2) are characterized as “bad” or “deadbeat” dads. Non-biological fathers who are motivated to fulfill the paternal role (Cell #3) comprise step-fathers and father-figures and are defined by the intention or motivation to act as fathers. Researchers have recently begun to study this group of men (Marsiglio, 2004; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Finally, fathers who are neither biological nor have the intention of fulfilling the paternal role (Cell #4) are men who are father-like in a household but do not make strong long-term commitments to childrearing. An example of this group would be a mother’s cohabiting boyfriend who is not interested in childrearing. The classification proposed by Day et al . attempts to conceptually organize a diverse group of fathers. Notably, Day et al.’s classification does not include the residential status of fathers. Nonresident biological fathers, who are the focus of this dissertation, can fall into either cell 1 or cell 2.

Table 2-1. The biological and social aspects of fatherhood.

	Biological Connection Present	Biological Connection Absent
Motivation Present	1. Motivated bio-father	3. Motivated non-biological father (e.g. involved step-father)
Motivation Absent	2. Unmotivated bio-father (e.g. disengaged father)	4. Unmotivated non-biological father (e.g. casual, uninvolved transitory relationship)

Note. Cited from Day, Lewis, O’Brien, & Lamb, (2005).

Conceptualization of Father Involvement

Despite the increased interest in fathers in the last few decades, researchers have struggled to clarify what constitutes father involvement. Again, this is largely because of the diversity among those identified as “fathers.” As Marsiglio et al. (2000) described, fathers can be biological, social, psychological, and legal. Because of this diversity and complexity, and despite recent development in this area, there is still no widely accepted, reliable, and valid measure of father involvement (Palkovitz, 2002).

The most frequently used framework for father involvement was proposed by Lamb, Pleck, Charnow, and Levine (1985, 1987). Lamb et al. identified three components of father involvement: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Although each component includes a wide range of paternal functions, summaries of the concepts were succinctly provided by Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera (1999, p6) as follows:

- (1) Engagement—father’s experience of direct contact and shared interactions with his child in the form of caretaking, play, or leisure.
- (2) Accessibility—father’s presence and availability to the child, irrespective of the nature or extent of interactions between father and child.
- (3) Responsibility—father’s understanding and meeting of his child’s needs, including the provision of economic resources to the child, and the planning and organizing of children’s lives.

Lamb et al.'s conceptualization of father involvement was an attempt to widen the definition of the paternal role from that of being the "breadwinner," to capturing the entire range of functions performed by fathers.

Extending Lamb et al.'s notion, Palkovitz (1997) listed 15 different categories of paternal activities which included such things as doing errands, planning, teaching, or physical care. Other researchers suggested including moral and ethical guidance (Day & Lamb, 2004), and supportiveness to female partners (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Moreover, Gadsden et al. (2004) proposed including fathers' "healthy living" as an indicator of father involvement. Fathers' healthy living includes being a role model of a healthy lifestyle and behaving in a socially appropriate manner and avoiding inappropriate behavior such as using drugs, participating in criminal activities, or acting violently. The on-going discussion of what constitutes father involvement reflects the multifaceted nature of father's roles in the family.

Nonresident Fathers and Family Well-Being

The Importance of Research on Nonresident Fathers

Due to recent demographic changes in the United States, research on nonresident fathers has been receiving special attention from policymakers and scholars. In the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of households without fathers, resulting from higher divorce rates and increased nonmarital childbearing (King, 1994). Although the divorce rate declined slightly after 1979 (Moffitt, 1992), it is estimated that between one-half and two-thirds of

all marriages today will end in divorce (Sigle-Rushton & Garfinkel, 2002). Nonmarital birth also increased sharply in the latter half of the 20th century, increasing from 4% in 1940 to one third of all births in 1999 (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). It is estimated that nearly half of all children born in the last few decades live without a biological father for at least a part of their childhood (Binachi, 1990; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

Research suggests that children in single-parent homes are at higher risk for academic, behavioral, and emotional problems, compared to children who grow up with both biological parents (for review, see Amato, 2000). Although there are many explanations for the negative consequences to children, such as economic hardship of single-parent families and lowered quality of resident parents' parenting, the non-involvement of nonresident fathers is found to be one of the factors influencing negative child outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Stewart, 2003).

Current social policies attempt to increase nonresident father's involvement through strict enforcement of child support payment and paternity establishment for unwed fathers, as well as encouragement of joint custody. The assumption behind these policies is that increased father involvement is beneficial to all family members: children, fathers, and mothers (Arditti & Bickley, 1996). Yet, there is little empirical evidence to support this conjecture. Fatherhood research fails to present a comprehensive picture of nonresident fathers and family well-being, especially for low-income families which are most affected by public

policies. Scholars argue that current policies regarding fathers were designed based on research on families that are not their target populations (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). Understanding the particular challenges faced by these vulnerable populations and evaluating the potential harmful consequences of public policies is critical in this period of demographic change.

Demographics of Nonresident Fathers

The U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) provides demographic statistics of nonresident fathers. According to the Census data, in 1998, 23% of children had living nonresident fathers: 16, 55, and 27% for White, Black, and Latino children, respectively (cited from Hernandez & Brandon, 2002). These data, however, undercounted many nonresident fathers, because in the Census survey, if children have a step or adoptive father, these children were considered as not having a nonresident father. Many current national surveys assume that children have only one father. In addition, they rarely ask men if they have children with whom they are not living (Hernandez & Brandon, 2002). Today, it is not uncommon for divorced or unwed mothers to establish a new relationship with a new partner after separating from their previous partners, while nonresident biological fathers may also have children with different partners. Thus, the actual number of children who do not live with a biological father is higher than those presented by the Census survey.

Lack of a national demographic picture of nonresident fathers is a serious disadvantage, especially when scholars try to estimate the father's ability to pay

child support. Examining the 1993 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) where men self-reported or indirectly reported their paternity, Sorensen and Wheaton (2000) estimated that 41% of Black nonresident fathers were not included in the SIPP data. They explained that one of the major reasons for these “missing” fathers was because a large number of the fathers were in jail or prison. The incarceration of fathers appears to be a serious issue, particularly for, but not limited to, the African American community. Hernandez and Brandon (2002) reported that, the number of Black men in jail has doubled in a last decade and half, from 309, 800 (1985) to 753, 700 (1997). According to Hernandez and Brandon’s estimate, 14 to 18 % of Black men between the ages of 20 to 39 were either in prison or in jail by 1999.

Data suggests that incarcerated fathers are more likely to be poor, and low-income fathers, regardless of their race or ethnicity, face multiple life challenges, which can be barriers to their involvement in the lives of their children (Sorensen & Wheaton, 2000). Sorensen and Wheaton reported that 40% of nonresident fathers have annual incomes below the 200% poverty threshold and the majority of them did not pay child support. Among these nonresident fathers, about half did not have a high school diploma, or had not been unemployed for the past 12 month, and 20 % of the fathers were incarcerated. In a different study, Hairston (1998) reported that fathers who do not pay child support tended to have a cluster of problems such as alcohol/drug abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, and other criminal activities. These problematic behaviors, in addition to multiple life

challenges, make it difficult for fathers to make positive contributions to the lives of their children.

Nonresident Fathers' in Children's Lives

Although past studies revealed that the majority of nonresident fathers gradually fade away from children's lives (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), many of them maintain some degree of contact with their children (Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Syer, 2002). Based on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics—Child Development Supplement (PSID—CDS), Hofferth et al. presented the most recent summary of nonresident fathers' involvement. According to Hofferth and colleagues, in 1997, one-third of children did not have any kind of contact with their nonresident fathers. Almost half of children had some kind of contact with their fathers at least once a month, and 72% of children had seen their fathers in the last 12 months. Hofferth et al. also reported that frequency of contact between children and their nonresident fathers tended to decrease if their mothers had remarried.

High frequency of contact does not necessarily mean there is a high quality of involvement. Scholars pointed out there are several ways that father involvement influences, directly and indirectly, their children's lives both positively and negatively (King, 1994). The most important contribution by fathers can be economic. There is overwhelming evidence that financial contributions from fathers significantly enhance child well-being (for review, see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). The contribution of financial resources to custodial mothers helps

with the purchases of day to day necessities, and can improve access to health care or educational opportunities. Second, involved fathers can provide social capital such as attention, guidance, emotional support, or social and community connections (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004). Third, involved fathers can contribute to maintaining consistent discipline of their children (King, 1994). Finally, involved fathers may help alleviate the stress of parenting felt by the mothers, especially single-mothers (Seltzer, 1991).

At the same time, father involvement can sabotage positive child outcomes. Past studies consistently found that inter-parental conflict, regardless of the fathers' residential status, is one of the most detrimental factors affecting children's outcomes (See Emery, 1982, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly, 2000, for reviews). Father-child interaction provides increased opportunity for former partners to interact and experience conflicts with each other. If fathers and mothers cannot establish supportive co-parenting relationships, children may be "caught in between" and feel pressure to take sides, or they may receive inconsistent discipline and guidance. In cases where nonresident fathers are abusive or violent, damage to both a child and a mother can be devastating. Hofferth et al. (2002) indicated that in many cases inter-parental conflicts arise from disagreements over issues related to childrearing, discipline, and lifestyle. Common topics of conflict included the amount of time the father spent with the child, father's visitation, and child support payments. Less common are conflicts

over how the mother spent money on the child, father's drug use, and father's friends.

In some cases, nonresident fathers' involvement has no effect on children. Grief (1997) reported that even when nonresident fathers regularly visit children, they are rarely involved in their children's daily lives. These nonresident fathers are sometimes characterized as "Disneyland dads" (Stewart, 1999). In fact, much research supports such a characterization of father involvement. It is reported that about 43% of fathers used their time with children in leisure-type activities (Hofferth et al., 2002). The fathers tend to engage in largely social or recreational activities with children rather than committing to their children's daily lives by helping with homework or discussing problems (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Hetherington, 1993). Resident mothers claimed that the fathers bought too many gifts for their children, didn't help with disciplining, and were permissive (Arendell, 1986). Reviewing fatherhood research, Amato and Rivera (1999) concluded that mere contact with children or having fun together (e.g., going to movies, eating out) does not contribute to the children's well-being. Instead, authoritative parenting, including supportiveness, discipline, monitoring, and supervision, has been documented as influencing children in a positive way (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994).

Nonresident Fathers in Context

Scholars claim that fathering is more contextual than mothering (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). While it is true that motherhood is also a socially constructed ideology as opposed to an “instinct,” fatherhood is even more influenced by external factors, such as, culture, social institutions, socioeconomic status, marital status, and fathers’ own ideologies. This is largely because social expectations of what fathers are supposed to do or how they are supposed to act are more ambiguous than for mothers. (Lewis & O’Brien, 1987). Social norms for nonresident fathers are even more ambiguous and this ambiguity is often a source of role confusion for nonresident fathers (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). A brief look at the history of fatherhood reveals that the expected role of the father has evolved over time. In contrast, the prescribed role for mothers as the primary caregivers to children has been relatively stable over time.

A fair amount of previous research demonstrates that women do significantly more caretaking than men; in fact, they do most of the care work inside and outside the household (Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001). Not surprisingly, it is reported that mothers’ interaction with children is dominated by caretaking, while fathers are more defined as “playmates” (Lamb, 2000), despite the fact that mothers play with their children significantly more than fathers do. Nonetheless, fathers are considered as playmates more than mothers because, as a proportional

amount of time, playing is the prominent component of the fathers' interaction with their children.

This imbalanced distribution of parental responsibility has been investigated in previous studies (Lamb, 1997; Lamb & Goldberg, 1982). According to these studies, in the time period immediately following childbirth, mothers and fathers function equally well (or equally poorly). Also, both parents acquire appropriate parenting skills as they interact with their babies. The difference is that mothers are "on the job" (Lamb, 2000, p.35) all the time, whereas fathers are on the job only part time; as a result, mothers become more sensitive toward children's needs and characteristics. Due to lack of experience, the fathers become less sensitive towards their children and feel less competent with their parenting abilities. Fathers, in turn, start to defer or cede parenting responsibilities to the mothers while the mothers increasingly assume more responsibility. Thus, fathers become increasingly dependent on mothers for childrearing.

A number of studies have shown that the quality of a father-child relationship is strongly influenced by the co-parental relationship as well as maternal factors (e.g., Doherty et al., 1998). Fathers tend to withdraw from children's lives when they do not get along with the mother, while mothers do not show the same level of withdrawal under similar circumstances (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). If nonresident fathers cannot establish supportive co-parental relationship with custodial mothers, it is more likely that the father-child contact decreases

(McKenry, Price, Fine, & Serovich, 1992). Maternal characteristics are equally influential for father involvement. There is evidence that, for married/cohabiting couples in which the mother works, fathers become more involved, (Beitel & Parke, 1998), show more autonomy (Grossman, Pollack, & Golding, 1988), and develop more egalitarian gender ideologies (Barnett & Baruch, 1987). For nonresident fathers, the mothers' values and beliefs about the importance of the paternal role (Simon, Whitbeck, Conger, & Melby, 1990), as well as, their satisfaction with the father (DeLuccie, 1995; King & Heard, 1999) are important factors in predicting the fathers' involvement.

Regardless of their resident status, fathering appears to be vulnerable to negative social forces, too. Research demonstrated that lack of income and poor occupational opportunities impact fathering behaviors negatively (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). Fragile economic positions may undermine fathers' efforts to be a "good father" in general and, in particular, to be a "good provider." Research found a positive association between fathers' financial contribution and other fathering behaviors such as frequency of contact (Seltzer, McLanahan, Hanson, & Will, 1998). It is unlikely that fathers who are unable to offer one source of involvement (e.g., financial support) will compensate with another form of involvement (e.g., emotional support) (King & Heard, 1999). In addition to economic factors, facing racial discrimination is found to negatively impact fathers. Examining African American fathers, McLloyd (1990) reported that a combination of poverty and racial discrimination created psychological

distress for the fathers, which decreased quality of fathering and co-parenting relationship.

Institutional practices and public policies are important contextual factors because they set guidelines and contribute to the “social norm” for fathers’ behavior. In the 1990s, child support payment was increasingly enforced. Welfare reform legislation of 1996 requires child paternity establishment for recipients. These policies mainly target nonresident fathers. There is evidence that these policies were successful, at least for a certain group of fathers. McLanahan & Carlson (2002) reported that there was a rise in the 90s in overall rates of paternity establishment, child support orders, and collections. Carefully examining these increases, however, McLanahan and Carlson concluded that these policies were effective in the case of wealthier fathers, but not as effective for low-income fathers. Studies have consistently indicated an association between low-income, unemployment, and nonpayment of child support (Dubey, 1995; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer & Seltzer, 1998; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997, Sorensen, 1997). There is a sizable number of nonresident fathers who are struggling financially, and cannot meet the expectations set by these public policies. Given that fathering is more vulnerable to contextual factors, it is possible that that these policies had unintended negative consequences on the low-income fathers, such as diminished involvement in the child’s life.

Limitations of Current Fatherhood Research

Despite developments in fatherhood research over the last two decades, current research has limitations. One limitation is that previous studies on fathers were based on small samples, collected by convenience sampling, with high levels of exclusion (Cabrera & Peters, 2000), focused primarily on middle-class fathers (Cabrera, Brooks-Gunn, Moore, West, Boller & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002). As a result, it is difficult to generalize findings to broader populations. This limitation is particularly detrimental to policy design and evaluation. An effort to change this situation was started about 10 years ago. Under the leadership of the Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and federal agents came together in 1996-97 to discuss various topics such as male fertility, family formation, and fathering. Their widely recognized report, *Nurturing fatherhood: Improving data and research on male fertility, family formation and fatherhood* (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998), motivated scholars to produce nationally representative data on disadvantaged families including fathers' data. Recently, a few longitudinal data sets targeting such populations have started to become available to the public. Examples of such data sets are the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, the Early Head Start (EHS) Research and Evaluation Project, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) (Cabrera, et al., 2002). In order to be able to generalize findings to larger populations, I use the Fragile Families data set in the first study of my dissertation.

The second limitation is related to commonly used quantitative methodologies. Methodology used by many researchers to study fathers may not be ideal for capturing the overall picture of nonresident father's involvement. Given that the majority of divorced or unwed non-resident fathers gradually fade away from children's lives (Marsiglio et al., 2000), a significant number of fathers do not have any contact with their children. Thus, the distribution pattern of father-child contact is usually extremely non-normal, including a large number of fathers who do not have any contact with their children, and other fathers who have contact at various frequencies. Despite this non-normality of the data, many research studies apply simple OLS regression models which assume normal distribution. Other researchers simply dichotomize the data into fathers with no contact and fathers having contact, forfeiting information about frequency of contact. Neither method is ideal because they violate the assumption of the model or distort natural features of the data. In order to overcome the shortcomings of previous work, I apply a relatively new methodology, zero-inflated negative binomial model for count data which preserves natural features of the data.

Another limitation or challenge facing current fatherhood research is the influence of ideology on outcomes. As described in the first chapter, much scholarly research on fatherhood has been conducted from the standpoint of encouraging father involvement, sometimes with moral overtones (Walker & McGraw, 2000). As a result, fathers' contributions to child outcome are often overvalued (Silverstein, 1996). Three main concerns about current policy-making

ideology have been raised by feminist researchers: (i) the ideological position celebrating fathers' involvement may work against mother-headed families and lesbian parents by marginalizing and stigmatizing these families; (ii) public resources such as intervention programs and services may be used by fathers at the expense of mothers and children; and (iii) increasing fathers' involvement may endanger the safety of mothers and children. All these claims can be certainly legitimate and are supported by empirical studies (for review, see Silverstein, 1996). While these points should be considered most seriously, undervaluing the potential benefits that "nurturing fathers" can make on mothers and children is also not an effective way to deconstruct patriarchal society where women are confined to family and motherhood. A more effective strategy is to participate in the discussion of fatherhood with careful and balanced examination of the impact of father involvement on women and children. This position is reflected in my second study, in which I evaluate the overall impact of nonresident fathers on family well-being, taking into account fathers' problematic behaviors. Through this study, I give voice to women's concerns about their and their children's well-being, which has largely been overlooked in previous studies.

CHAPTER 3

PREDICTING *PRESENCE* AND *LEVEL* OF
NONRESIDENT FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT:
APPLICATION OF ZERO-INFLATED NEGATIVE BINOMIAL MODELS

As nonresident parenting—especially nonresident fathering—becomes increasingly common in the United States, scholars are striving to accumulate a knowledge base concerning nonresident fathers. Despite progress in this area over the last few decades, researchers today continue to struggle to develop a comprehensive understanding of nonresident father's involvement. This is partly because patterns of involvement by nonresident fathers vary considerably more than for resident fathers. By definition, nonresident fathers do not reside with their children. However, while some fathers may never have seen their children, some may contact their children intermittently, and still others may have frequent regular contact with their children. These diverse patterns of involvement make it difficult to choose an methodology that can capture the overall picture of nonresident fathers.

Specifically, the data distribution of father-child contact is often extremely non-normal. While there are many fathers who maintain contact with their children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004), the majority of nonresident fathers gradually fade away from children's lives (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, Lamb, 2000). As a result, there are a significant number of fathers who have no contact with their children. The non-normality of the distribution often results in two groups of fathers: those who do not make any contact with children, and those who make contact at various

frequencies. Because of this non-normality, many researchers focus only on the cases in which the father has some contact with his child, excluding cases where there is no contact (Ahrons, 1983; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Other researchers collapse the data into two categories, fathers with no contact and fathers with contact. Still other researchers apply ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models without any special treatment of the non-normal (zero-inflated) distribution. These choices are not ideal, because they distort the data, lose critical information, or violate model assumptions.

Another methodological issue that needs to be addressed is the appropriate choice of analytical methods to investigate count data. The level of father-child contact and paternal engagement should be considered count data if they measure the number of times contact is made or a specific activity is performed. Gardner, Mulvey, and Shaw (1995) argue that transforming the count data into binary or categorical outcomes, or simply applying OLS regression, is not desirable. Data transformation often distorts or loses information of count data. Application of OLS regression to count data may be problematic for two reasons: First, it is likely that OLS produces meaningless negative predicted values, even though it is impossible for count values to be negative. Second, although OLS assumes that the dispersion for a dependent variable scores around the expected values, this assumption is unlikely to be met in count data. The count distribution is highly skewed and has an excess of zero values, which results in asymmetric dispersion of dependent variable around the expected values.

Gardner et al. (1995) suggest that alternative nonlinear models for the count data such as Poisson and Negative Binomial models respect the fact that counts are nonnegative and skewed. In addition, these models use “probability distributions for the dispersion of the dependent variable scores around the expected value that are appropriate for dependent variables which take on only nonnegative integer values (p.393).” It should be noted here that Poisson models assume that the mean of the outcome variable is equal to its variance, while Negative Binomial models allow variance to be *overdispersed*, which means that variance of count variables are greater than their mean.

Zero-Inflated count models—both zero-inflated Poisson and zero-inflated Negative Binomial models,— overcome the methodological issues described above. Zero-inflated count models were introduced by Lambert (1992) to account for excess of zeros and dispersion of count data. Long and Freese (2003) explained the analysis process of this model in plain language:

The zero-inflated model assumes that there are two latent (i.e., unobserved) groups. An individual in the Always-0 group (Group A) has an outcome of 0 with a probability of 1, while an individual in the Not Always-0 group (Group ~A) might have a zero count, but there is a nonzero probability that she has a positive count. This process is developed in three steps: 1) Model membership into the latent groups; 2) Model counts for those in Group ~A, and 3) Compute observed probabilities as a mixture of the probabilities for the two group (p. 274).

A zero-inflated model preserves a natural feature of count, namely the excess of zeros.

Application of a zero-inflated model in this study allows for a more robust conceptualization of nonresident father's involvement. Previously, the *presence* and *level* of father involvement were considered to be points along the same continuum. In part, this conceptualization was the result of the methodological shortcomings mentioned above. It may, however, be more appropriate to conceptualize *presence* and *level* of father involvement as separate but related aspects of a single issue. Zero-inflated models allow researchers to simultaneously test two questions, in this case what factors predict *presence* (or *absence*) of father-child contact and what factors predict *level* of contact if the father makes contact at all. Thus, *presence* and *level* may be considered two components of father-child contact (Table 3-1). If the same factors are predictive of *presence* and *level*, the treatment of *presence* and *level* as points on a continuum may be justified. If, on the other hand, different factors are predictive of *presence* and *level*, the treatment of *presence* and *level* as separate components may be appropriate.

Table 3-1. Classification of terminologies used in this paper.

Paternal Behaviors	<i>Presence/Absence</i>	<i>Level</i>
Father-Child Contact	<i>Presence/Absence</i> of father-child contact	<i>Frequency</i> of contact
Paternal Engagement	<i>Presence/Absence</i> of engagement	<i>Level</i> of engagement

Similarly, this study examines if there are two components in paternal engagement: *presence* of engagement and *level* of engagement as seen in Table 3-

1. Paternal engagement refers to a father's active interaction with his child by

performing specific activities. These may include such things as reading to a child, changing diapers, or playing with toys with the child. Even when a nonresident father has contact with his child, it does not necessarily mean that he engages in paternal activities. For example, a nonresident father can watch a TV show that is not child-oriented while his preschool-aged daughter is playing by herself in the same room. In such a case, the father sees his daughter but does not show paternal engagement. Just like father-child contact, a nonresident father's decision to engage in a paternal activity (*presence* of engagement) may be a different decision from his decision on how much he engages in these activities (*level* of engagement), and thus, it may be appropriate to conceptualize *presence* and *level* of paternal engagement as two separate but related components.

In this study, I use zero-inflated count models to identify factors that predict *presence* and *level* of father-child contact and paternal engagement. In addition, I test the appropriateness of separating the concepts of *presence* and *level*. I focus on nonresident fathers whose children are still infants—specifically one-year olds. One reason is because infants and toddlers are not old enough to read or write letters, carry on phone conversations, or arrange visits with their fathers by themselves. Thus, the nonresident fathers' decisions to be involved in their children's lives play a more significant role in the creation and maintenance of the father-child relationship. Focusing on fathers with infants minimizes the impact of children's behavior on the relationship, understanding that regardless of age, the infant will always have some influence on the father-child relationship.

Perhaps more importantly, past literature has demonstrated that, despite the fact that there are many nonresident fathers who maintain contact with children after parents' separation (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004), as a general trend, nonresident fathers gradually lose contact with children (Marsiglio et al., 2000). It is rare that nonresident fathers who make no contact with their child early on, initiate contact when the child is older, or that level of involvement increases as a child ages. Young children who do not live with their fathers have less of a chance of developing a relationship with their biological fathers compared with children born in a household with two biological parents. Mincy (2003) has claimed that a child's birth is a "moment of miracle," during which many fathers express strong motivation to be involved in their child's life regardless of resident status. Identifying the factors that prevent a father from seeing a child, or those that decrease levels of involvement may provide insights into effective intervention.

Factors Predicting Nonresident Father's Involvement

Coparental Relationship

The coparental relationship is found to be one of the most salient determinants of father involvement (Emery, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Family systems theory offers a compelling explanation for this phenomenon. According to family systems theory, family members, regardless of their resident status, are components of systems that are interdependent. Relationships between family members create subsystems of the family that are mutually influential. There is strong evidence that the

nonresident father-child relationship (subsystem) is interrelated with the mother-father relationship (Emery, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Madden-Derdich, et al., 1999). Family systems theory predicts that hostile mother-father relationships negatively affect father-child interactions, an outcome that is supported in the literature. For example, Coley & Chase-Landsdale (1998) reported that hostile coparental relationships significantly reduced positive involvement of unwed fathers, while supportive relationships promoted better father-child interaction. Koch and Lowery (1985) even claimed that about 35% of the variance of noncustodial father's involvement can be explained by the coparental relationship. It is plausible that, in order to avoid hostile interaction with the mother, fathers may decrease their interaction with children. At the same time, mothers may want to limit father-child contact to avoid negative interaction with the fathers. Poor relationships with mothers are found to be one reason for the decline of nonresident father-child contact over time (Arendell, 1986, 1992).

At the same time, the causal direction between conflict and father-child contact may be the opposite. In order for a conflict to occur, some contact must exist between parents. According to Arditto and Keith (1993), several studies with larger scale of national data found a positive association between frequency of father-child contact and parental conflict (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). King and Heard (1999) claim some degree of conflict may be inevitable between parents if a nonresident father

remains in contact with his child. Amato and Rezac (1994) also support the idea that contact provides an opportunity for parents to experience conflict.

The lack of conflict between parents, however, does not necessarily mean parents are getting along. It may simply mean that a mother and nonresident father avoid conflict by not communicating. Furstenberg (1988) called such disengagement between parents as “parallel” parenting. In parallel parenting, it is possible that parents do not discuss any parenting issues with each other even when the nonresident father is actively involved in his child’s life. Although cooperative parenting is surely correlated with the level of conflict between parents, Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) pointed out that the quality of parental relationship and parental conflict represent two separate concepts. A high quality of relationship between parents benefits the whole family in various ways. First, such parents are more likely to discuss parenting issues, and thus, the child is more likely to receive consistent parenting (King, 1994). Second, such a relationship may also alleviate the stress of parenting felt by the mothers, especially single-mothers (Seltzer, 1991). Third, a mother who is satisfied with her relationship with the father of the child is more likely to encourage high quality father-child interaction (Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1998). Fourth, an engaged father is more likely to make financial and/or material contributions (Arendell, 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Furstenberg, 1988; Green & Moore, 2000) as well as provide social capital (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004).

High quality parental relationships appear to be one of the central components for establishing successful relationships between mother, father and child.

Despite the scholarly knowledge of the importance of coparental relationship, there is little information in current literature on how these important factors—parental conflict and relationship quality—affect the *presence* and *frequency* of father-child contact, and *presence* and *level* of paternal engagement. It is possible that parental conflict and relationship quality influence only presence and not the level, or vice versa. High conflict may discourage fathers from becoming involved in their children's lives, but if the fathers are already involved, perhaps parental conflict does not affect the extent to which fathers are involved. Current literature fails to provide any answers to these questions.

Social and Demographic Factors

Nonresident father's involvement can be also influenced by parents' social and demographic characteristics. It is well documented that lower levels of education, employment instability, and low-incomes are strongly linked to lower levels of father involvement (Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Landale & Oropesa, 2001). Fathers with fewer resources may struggle with costs associated with visitation and/or transportation. They may also feel incompetent when they cannot provide financial support, which may discourage their involvement. Past research indicated that fathers who are unable to offer one source of involvement (e.g., financial support) are less likely to compensate with other forms of involvement (e.g., emotional support) (King & Heard, 1999). This

implies that maintaining any involvement in their children's lives is particularly difficult for nonresident fathers with lower socio-economic status. In addition, resident mothers may be less inclined to support father involvement when the fathers fail to contribute financially.

A nonresident father's involvement may also be influenced by cultural background. Some studies found that African American nonresident fathers make more contact with their children than fathers from other racial/ethnic groups (King, 1994; Mott, 1990; Seltzer, 1991). Allen and Connor (1997) claim that role expectations for fathers are more flexible in the African American community, making it easier for nonresident fathers to create relationships with children who do not see their fathers on a daily basis.

Maternal factors are also strongly associated with father involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Beitel, Parke, 1998; DeLuccie, 1995; Grossman, Pollack, and Golding, 1988). In addition to demographic factors (e.g., income and education), mothers' attitudes toward, expectations of, and feelings about fathers impact father involvement even within groups that have a similar quality of parental relationship (DeLuccie, 1995). Marsiglio (1991) reported that mothers' characteristics are more strongly related to father involvement than father's characteristics. After all, mothers are the ones who live with children on daily basis, thus, it is not surprising that mothers' values and beliefs influence children's relationships with nonresident fathers. Mothers' assessments of the competency or desirability of the fathers may also predict nonresident fathers' involvement. In

fact, there is evidence that when mothers perceive that the father's involvement would negatively impact or even threaten their children's lives, the mothers "gatekeep" to limit father involvement (Sano & Richards, 2003).

Presence of Mother's New Partner

A substantial amount of past research has demonstrated that mothers' remarriage significantly decreases nonresident fathers' contact with their children (Bronstein, Stoll, Clauson, Abrams, & Briones, 1994; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). This is particularly unfortunate for children not only because they lose emotional connection with their biological fathers, but also because they might also lose economic and social capital that might have been provided by the nonresident fathers. In addition to income loss, the children may miss out on attention, parental guidance, emotional support, or social and community connections from their fathers. Although step-fathers and other father figures in children's lives also promote children's well-being (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; White & Gilbreth, 2001), step-fathers or male partners of mothers are less likely to commit to a child's well-being than biological fathers (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). It is not yet clear why a mother's new partner has such a negative impact on nonresident fathers. It may be because a nonresident father feels "left out" and is less motivated to be involved, or a mother may feel that the new partner has "substituted" for the nonresident father and is less compelled to encourage father-child contact, or the child may become confused by

the presence of both biological and social fathers, which negatively affects father involvement.

Family systems theory again provides insights into the dynamics of this phenomenon. The theory indicates that each subsystem (relationship) is arranged in a hierarchy of power (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). When a mother has a new married or cohabiting partner, this relationship may have more power over the mother-nonresident father relationship and nonresident father-child relationship. If so, because the father does not live in the main residential household of the child, the link between the nonresident father and the child may become very tenuous. A family system seeks homeostasis (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Unless each family member successfully negotiates new boundaries with each other, the system may eliminate the nonresident father's involvement from the family. Therefore, according to the theory, involvement by a nonresident father must be understood in the context of subsystems as well as within the broader social system.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to test how predictors of nonresident father involvement influence two separate components of father involvement: *presence* and *frequency* of father-child contact and *presence* and *level* of paternal engagement. By using a zero-inflated model, this study attempts to overcome methodological shortcomings faced by previous studies, and to thereby improve conceptualization of father involvement.

Method

Data

Data for this study came from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ("Fragile Families"), which follows a cohort of parents and newborn children in 20 large cities in 15 states in the United States. The Fragile Families project was designed to examine the issues of nonmarital childbirth, welfare reform, and the role of fathers (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel & McLanahan, 2001). The sample was selected based on a multi-stage stratified sampling procedure. First, all U.S. cities with populations over 200,000 were stratified based on 1) welfare assistance generosity; 2) strictness of child support collections; and 3) labor market strength. Sixteen cities were selected from the stratification to reflect community variability. Four additional cities were also included in this study because of their unique political environment. Within these cities, hospitals were chosen, and finally, parents who were expecting to give birth were selected from the hospitals. As baseline data, both mothers and fathers were interviewed shortly after the birth of their children in the period from 1998 to 2000, resulting in interviews with 4898 mothers and 3830 fathers. Follow-up interviews with both parents were conducted one year and three years later (for a detailed information on study design, see Reichman et al., 2001.)

Sample Selection

The sample for this study was selected based on the relationship between parents and residential status at the one-year follow-up interviews. Of the 4898

mothers interviewed at baseline, 4365 (89.1%) were re-interviewed one-year later. Because the interest of this study is to examine nonresident fathers' involvement in resident mothers' households, I first excluded those mothers who were married, romantically involved with a cohabiting partner, or did not report their relationship status at the one-year follow-up interviews. From the remaining mothers ($n = 1836$), I further eliminated mothers cohabiting with the biological father of their child ($n = 173$), and those living with the focal child less than half of the time ($n = 43$). Cases were also dropped if mothers reported that a biological father was deceased, unknown, or didn't know about birth of the child ($n = 31$). If the father was incarcerated at the one-year follow-up interview, the mother of the child was also excluded from the study because it was not possible to obtain information about their paternal behaviors at the time of the interview ($n = 163$). Finally, mothers who reported that they had no relationship with the child's father both at baseline and at the one-year follow-up were also dropped ($n = 211$). This decision was made based on the fact that one of the interests of this study is to examine how overall coparental relationships and parental conflict influence nonresident fathers' involvement and no information was provided about these key variables. As a result, 1215 mothers were included in this study.

Variables

Outcome Variables

Father-child contact. Frequency of father-child contact is an indicator of a father's availability to his child. The father-child contact was defined in this study

as that a nonresident father actually sees his child. It indicates the number of days a father saw a child during the past 30 days, according to the mother's report. Responses range from 0 to 30 days. As Table 3-2 (see page 47) shows, in this study, 24.38% of the nonresident fathers did not see a child during the past 30 days.

Father's engagement level. Another outcome variable of this study is the paternal engagement. Paternal engagement is a father's active interaction with his child. Mothers were asked how many days per week the father usually did each of 10 different activities with a child, such as "play games like 'peek-a-boo' or 'gotcha' with child," "read stories to child," and "hug or show physical affection to child." Response ranges from 0 to 7 days per week. The mean score of the 10 items indicates a father's engagement level. In this study, 34.94% of the nonresident father did not engage any paternal activities (see Table 3-2). Alpha reliability for this measure was .95. It should be noted here that, a father who did not see his child during the past 30 days obviously also did not engage in any paternal activities. Thus, there are many fathers who scored zero for both father-child contact and engagement level.

Independent variables

Structural factors. One of the key predictors of a nonresident father's involvement is father's location of residence. The father's residence was coded as 1 if a father lived in the same state as a mother and child lived, and coded as 0 if otherwise. A mother's cohabiting status with a new partner was also dummy coded.

If a mother was either married or cohabiting with her romantic partner (not the child's father) at the one-year follow-up interview, cohabitation was coded as 1.

Mother's characteristics. About two-thirds of participants of this study were African American. Mother's race was dummy coded (African American=1). Mother's education level was ordered into five categories: 1= 8th grade or less, 2=some high school, 3=high school diploma/G.E.D., 4=some college/two year college/technical school, and 5=bachelor's degree and above. Mother's annual income was also included in the model. The distribution of the annual income showed that it had a mildly positive skew and, consequently, it was transformed by square root. In addition, because the unit of this variable was greater than other variables in this analysis, square root of their income was also divided by 10 in order to make its scale more compatible to other variables.

Father's characteristics. Father's characteristics include father's race (African American=1, not African American=0), education level (1= 8th grade or less, 2=some high school, 3=high school diploma/G.E.D., 4=some college/two year college/technical school, and 5=bachelor's degree and above), and annual income. Father's annual income was also transformed by square root and divided by 10. In addition, father's incarceration history was included in the model as a measure of father's desirability. For this variable, a mother reported if a father had ever spent any time in jail or prison (*yes*=1, *no*=0).

Parental relationship. Parental relationship variables include a mother's relationship status with child's father, overall quality of relationship, and level of

conflict reported by mothers at the one-year follow up. Relationship status with child's father was dummy-coded into two separate variables, using "not in any kind of relationship" as a reference group. One relationship status variable was coded as 1 if the parents were in a non-romantic relationship, meaning that they were either separated, divorced, or "just friends." The other relationship status variable was coded as 1 if parents were in romantic relationship, but had never lived together. For overall relationship quality, mothers were asked to rate their general relationship with a child's father on a Likert scale of score one to five, with higher scores indicating a better relationship. Mothers were also asked; "no matter how well parents get along, they sometimes have arguments. How often do you and father argue about things that are important to you?." Ratings ranged from Never (1) to Always (5). The Pearson correlation between overall relationship and parental conflict was $-.21$.

Missing Value Strategies

Like any other public survey data, Fragile Families suffers from substantial missing values. In this study, missing values for any given variable range from 0 to 30%, averaging approximately 15% missing values. The variables that had 30% missing values were items related to father's abusiveness. Traditional approaches such as listwise or pairwise deletions may not be an appropriate choice because they discard a significant number of cases, resulting in findings which may be seriously biased (Acock, 2004). This study, therefore, utilized multiple imputation (MI) using NORM version 2.02 (Schafer, 1999). Using observed data on all

related variables, NORM simulates the missing data $m > 1$ times. For MI, I included the outcome variables, predictor variables, and mechanism variables which are considered to influence whether a value is missing or not. According to Acock, single imputation such as Expectation Maximization (EM) as implemented in SPSS, produces only one solution and, thus, underestimates standard errors, which results in overestimating the level of precision of the model. Multiple imputation, however, can incorporate the uncertainty of missing values into the standard errors, and thus, is superior to single imputation. In this study, each coefficient and its standard error were estimated five times, based on these five different imputed data sets (Schafer, 1999). In the final stage of the analysis, these five different estimates were combined by NORM to obtain overall coefficients and the standard errors. (For detailed discussion of MI, see Schafer & Olsen, 1998).

Analytical Strategies

This study utilizes a zero-inflated Negative Binomial regression model to simultaneously test membership (if a father is involved in a child's life or not) and count outcome (how much the father is involved in his child's life if he is involved at all). This model was also selected because it preserves a natural feature of count data. As explained earlier, while a Poisson model assumes that mean of outcome variable is equal to its variance, a Negative Binomial model allows variance to be *overdispersed*. In this study, Negative Binomial model is chosen over Poisson model because there is significant evidence of overdispersion ($G^2 = 70.17, p < .01$). The following analyses were conducted using Stata version 8.2 (StataCorp, 2003).

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Sample

Table 3-2 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample. Resident mothers and nonresident fathers showed similar demographic characteristics. Average age of both mothers and fathers was in the mid-twenties, with a wider distribution for fathers' ages. On average, both mother's and father's educational levels at the birth of the child were less than high school. Mother's annual income was higher than father's (approximately \$20,000 and \$17,000, respectively) and encompassed a wider range (0-250,000 and 0-100,000, respectively).

About two-thirds of sample was African American, followed by Latino (21.32 % for mothers and 22.20% for fathers), and White (11.79 % for mothers and 9.42 % for fathers). The high proportion of African Americans in this study can be explained by the demographics of the target population of Fragile Families. The main sample of the Fragile Families was unwed parents of newborn children who lived in urban cities at the baseline interview. Because the proportion of unwed parents is higher for African Americans than other racial groups, and also because there is a higher proportion of African Americans living in urban areas, the Fragile Family data set tends to over-represent African Americans.

About 90% of nonresident fathers lived in the same state as mothers and children, and about 11% of mothers were either married or cohabiting with romantic partners who were not biological fathers of the target child. More than half of parents were not romantically involved and were either being separated,

Table 3-2. Descriptive statistics of variables (N=1215).

Variables	M	SD	Range
<i>Outcome Variables</i>			
Frequency of Father-child contact (0=24.38%)	11.31	11.36	1-30
Father's engagement (0=34.94%)	1.83	1.85	1-7
<i>Structural factors</i>			
Nonresident father is living in the same state as mother and child (yes=1, no=0)	.90	.29	0-1
Mother is either married or cohabitating with her romantic partner other than nonresident father (yes=1, no=0)	.11	.31	0-1
<i>Mother's Characteristics</i>			
Age at one-year follow-up	25.13	5.73	12-48
Educational level at child's birth			
1=8 th grade or less			
2=Some high school			
3=High school diploma/GED	2.85	.93	1-5
4=Some college/2yr college/technical school			
5=Bachelor's degree and above			
Annual income (thousand dollars)	20.06	24.44	0-250
Race (African American=1)	.64	.48	0-1
<i>Father's Characteristics</i>			
Age at one-year follow up	27.33	7.12	16-68
Educational level at child's birth			
1=8 th grade or less			
2=Some high school			
3=High school diploma/GED	2.87	.87	1-5
4=Some college/2yr college/technical school			
5=Bachelor's degree and above			
Annual income (thousand dollars)	16.66	15.23	0-100
Race (African American=1)	.66	.47	0-1
Substance abuse (yes=1, no=0)	.14	.35	0-1
History of incarceration (yes=1, no=0)	.40	.49	0-1
Known serious violence toward mother (yes=1, no=0)	.19	.39	0-1
<i>Child's Demographics</i>			
Number of child(ren) with nonresident father	1.41	.79	1-7
Sex of child(ren)			
A child is a girl/Children are girls for multiple birth	.47	.50	0-1
Multiple birth—both sexes	.01	.08	0-1
<i>Relationship factors</i>			
Relationship status (Reference group="Not in any kind of relationship")			
Non-romantic relationship (yes=1, no=0)	.53	.50	0-1
Romantically involved but never lived together (yes=1, no=0)	.17	.38	0-1
Overall relationship quality	2.46	1.28	1-5
Parental conflict	2.98	1.22	1-5

divorced, or “just friends”, 30% were not in any kind of relationship, and 17% were romantically involved but had never lived together at the time of one-year follow-up interview. The number of children fathered by the nonresident fathers with the mothers ranged from one to seven, averaging 1.41. According to mothers’ reports, about 40% of fathers had a history of incarceration, 19% of fathers were abusive (including physical violence and/or severe emotional abuse) toward mothers, and 14% had a substance abuse problem. The correlation matrix for the variables that were used in this study is presented in Appendix A.

Preliminary Analyses

Due to the complexity of the model, it was necessary to make the zero-inflated model simpler in order for Stata to converge. In order to do so, I conducted preliminary analyses with additional variables that were theoretically relevant to nonresident father’s involvement. The additional variables included in the preliminary analyses were mother and father’s ages, number of children with the nonresident father, child’s sex, and father’s desirability. Father’s desirability covered history of domestic violence and father’s substance abuse. Two separate sets of analyses were conducted with these additional factors. Using logistic regression, one set of analyses tested if a father made father-child contact at all, and if he engaged in parental activity or not. The other set examined what factors were associated with frequency of father-child contact, and father’s engagement level, using Negative Binomial regression. (Results not shown but available upon request). The predictors included in the zero-inflated Negative Binomial model

were selected based on the results of these preliminary analyses along with theoretical considerations.

Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Models

Predicting Membership for Father-Child Contact

The left half of Table 3-3 (see page 52) shows results of the zero-inflated Negative Binomial model predicting membership for father-child contact. It predicts the log of the odds of a father's non-involvement in a child's life. It should be kept in mind that, in regular logistic regression, the result predicts father's involvement, not non-involvement. As introduced in earlier section, the zero-inflated model first predicts likelihood of an individual to be in "always 0" group (Long & Freese, 2003). Thus, the left part of Table 3-3 has to be read in an opposite manner compared to regular logistic regression. In order to make this clear, the left part of Table 3-3 was labeled as "*Prediction For Absence of Father-Child Contact.*" The table also includes odds ratios and percent changes in the right two columns in order to make interpretation easier. Percent changes shown are the percent change in the outcome variable for a one-unit increase in each predictor, with the exception of income. Because income was transformed by square root and divided by 10, it is not easy to interpret the result by a one-unit increase. Thus, percent changes shown for income are percent change in the outcome variable for a one-standard deviation increase, not one-unit increase, of income. Because these percent changes should be interpreted according to the unit

of each predictor, a percent change for one variable cannot be directly compared to that of another variable.

Structural factors and relationship factors showed strong significance while there was some evidence that maternal characteristics were also influential factors. Specifically, living in the same state as the mother and child influences the odds of fathers' non-involvement by a factor of .098, holding other variables constant. In other words, the odds of not being involved are only one tenth as great for a father who lives in the same state as mother and child. Equivalently, if a father lives in the same state as the mother and child, the likelihood of father's non-involvement decreases by 90.17%. In contrast, the presence of a mother's married or cohabiting partner in her household increases the odds of nonresident father's non-involvement by 103.64%, holding other variables constant.

Although there was no significant effect of paternal characteristics, mother's annual income and education showed significant and marginally significant impacts on father's non-involvement, respectively. This result is consistent with previous research that found father involvement was more dependent on maternal characteristics than paternal characteristics (Marsiglio, 1991). The results suggest that one standard deviation increase in the mother's income increases the odds of father's non-involvement by 29.19 percent holding other variables constant. This result may imply that a mother's higher income gives her more independence and prevents her from relying on the father of the

child, which may result in diminishing father-child contact. However, a one-unit increase of mother's education decreases the odds of father's non-involvement by 19.92%. More educated mothers are more likely to promote father-child contact, although the significance level for mothers' education is marginal.

Finally, relationship factors are found to be strong predictors of father-child contact. This result is also consistent with previous research (Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1998; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Koch and Lowery, 1985). Understandably, if parents have any kind of relationship regardless of the type of relationship (separated, divorced, friends, romantic), it increases the odds of father-child contact, compared to parents with no relationship at all. A one-unit increase of relationship quality between parents decreases the odds of father's non-involvement by 55.91%, holding other variables constant. Interestingly, the zero-inflated Negative Binomial model suggested that a one-unit increase in parental conflict also decreases the odds of father's non-involvement by 27.43%. As King and Heard (1999) suggested, it is probably inevitable to have some kind of conflict if there is a relationship. Although much of previous literature suggested the parental conflict prevents fathers from being involved in child's life (e.g., Arendell, 1992), this result suggests that contact may provide increased opportunity for parental conflict.

Predicting Frequency of Father-Child Contact

The right half of the Table 3-3 contains estimates for change in the expected frequency of father-child contact for the fathers who had opportunities to

Table 3-3. Estimates of Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial model to predict absence of father-child contact and frequency of contact (N=1215).

Variables	Coefficients ^a	Standard errors	Odds ratio	Percent change ^b	Variables	Coefficients ^a	Standard errors	Odds ratio	Percent change ^b
<i>[Prediction for Absence of Father-Child Contact]</i>					<i>[Prediction for Frequency of Father-Child Contact]</i>				
Structural factor					Structural factor				
Father's residential state	-2.320***	.292	.098	-90.17	Father's residential state	.397**	.137	1.488	48.81
Presence of cohabiting partner	.711**	.273	2.036	103.64	Presence of cohabiting partner	-.363***	.109	.695	-30.46
Maternal characteristics					Maternal characteristics				
Education	-.222†	.133	.801	-19.92	Education	-.045	.037	.956	-4.40
Annual income	.033*	.015	1.034	29.19 ^a	Annual income	.004	.006	1.004	3.15 ^b
African American	-.409	.331	.664	-33.58	African American	.152	.112	1.165	16.47
Paternal characteristics					Paternal characteristics				
Education	-.049	.122	.952	-4.77	Education	.011	.040	1.011	1.07
Annual income	-.029	.024	.971	-15.75 ^a	Annual income	.005	.007	1.005	6.72 ^b
African American	.128	.339	1.137	13.70	African American	-.081	.114	.922	-7.81
History of incarceration	.145	.212	1.156	15.62	History of incarceration	-.050	.066	.952	-4.85
Relationship factors					Relationship factors				
Non-romantic relationship	-1.164***	.214	.312	-68.77	Non-romantic relationship	.159	.079	1.172	17.19
Romantic relationship	-1.493***	.421	.861	-13.87	Romantic relationship	.425***	.098	1.530	52.97
Overall relationship quality	-.819***	.135	.441	-55.91	Overall relationship quality	.205***	.028	1.227	22.72
Parental conflict	-.321***	.086	.726	-27.43	Parental conflict	.040	.030	1.041	4.08

Note. ^aUnstandardized coefficients. ^bPercent change in expected count per one-unit increase in X, except for income. For incomes, the percent change in expected count is per one standard deviation increase in income. Standard deviations for incomes that were transformed by square root and divided by 10 are 7.76 for mothers and 5.91 for fathers.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

contact their children. Unlike the estimates for membership prediction (binary outcome), the results can be interpreted more intuitively. A coefficient with a positive sign indicates more father-child contact while a coefficient with negative sign shows a decreased frequency of father-child contact. Thus, direction of estimates of right half is opposite to that of left half (binary outcome) in Table 3-3.

Significant predictors for frequency of father-child contact are slightly different from binary outcomes for father-child contact. Among the fathers who make contact with their child, living in the same state as the mother and child increases the expected frequency of contact by 48.81%, holding other variables constant. If a mother is either married or cohabiting with a partner, the expected frequency of contact decreases by 30.46%, holding other variables constant. While it is reasonable to expect that fathers who live outside the mother's state of residence are likely to see their children less frequently compared to those who live in the same state, the model also provided strong evidence of negative impact of mother's married or cohabiting partner on father-child contact.

Unlike the binary outcome of father-child contact, neither maternal nor paternal characteristics had a significant impact on *frequency* of father-child contact.

Binary and count outcome models present different pictures of the effect of parental relationship on father-child contact. Among fathers who have contact with their children, only a romantic relationship between parents significantly increases father-child contact (by 52.97%), holding other variables constant. There was no

difference in father-child contact between fathers who were in a non-romantic relationship with the mothers (separated/divorced/friends) and those who had no relationship with the mothers.

In addition, while a one-unit increase of overall quality of the coparental relationship increases father-child contact by 22.72%, there was no significant impact of parental conflict on the *frequency* of contact, holding other variables constant. It should also be noted that the direction of parental conflict was positively related to father-child contact—meaning more conflict is associated with more contact—although the relationship was not statistically significant. Taken together, these results suggest that the mother's positive perceptions of the parental relationship, in addition to structural factors, are a significant factor in predicting *frequency* of father-child contact.

Prediction of Presence of Paternal Engagement

Paternal engagement is defined in this paper as father's active interactions with his child. As with father-child contact, the zero-inflated Negative Binomial model examined what factors predicted a father's decision to *not to* engage in paternal activities (*absence* of paternal engagement) and his decision of how much he engages in such activities if he engaged in the activities at all (*level* of engagement).

Results for prediction of father's engagement is shown in the left half of Table 3-4 (see page 56). Understandably, living in a different state than the mothers significantly and negatively influences a father's engagement. More

specifically, living in the same state as the mother and child decreases the odds of father's non-engagement by 92.13, holding other variables constant. Presence of mother's married/cohabiting partner increases the odds of father's non-engagement by 97.78%, although this was marginally significant. In other words, nonresident fathers are less likely to engage in specific parental interactions if mothers have married/cohabiting partner.

Although both maternal and paternal characteristics did not show any significant impact on father's engagement, parents' relationship factors were found to be strongly related to predictors of *presence* of father's engagement. Similar to prediction of father-child contact (the left half of Table 3-3), any type of parental relationship, compared to parents with no relationship, decreases the odds of father's non-engagement significantly, holding other variables constant. A one-unit increase in overall relationship quality or parental conflict decreases the odds of father's non-engagement by 61.03% and 22.68%, respectively, holding other variables constant. Again, the negative direction of parental conflict indicates some conflicts are likely when a nonresident father engages in parental activity with a child who resides with a mother.

Predicting Father's Engagement Level

A model predicting father's engagement level showed no significance of father's state of residence or presence of mother's cohabiting partner for fathers who engage parental activities. This result suggests that for fathers who are engaged, structural factors do not prevent them from being more engaged.

Table 3-4. Estimates of Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial model to predict absence of father's engagement and level of engagement (N=1215).

Variables	coefficients ^a	Standard errors	Odds ratio	Percent change ^b	Variables	coefficients ^a	Standard errors	Odds ratio	Percent change ^b
<i>[Prediction for Absence of Father's Engagement]</i>					<i>[Prediction for Level of Father's Engagement]</i>				
Structural factor					Structural factor				
Father's residential state	-2.542***	.333	.079	-92.13	Father's residential state	-.048	.121	.953	-4.70
Presence of cohabiting partner	.682 [†]	.356	1.978	97.78	Presence of cohabiting partner	.014	.108	1.014	1.38
Maternal characteristics					Maternal characteristics				
Education	-.115	.147	.891	-10.88	Education	-.049	.031	.952	-4.79
Annual income	.020	.017	1.020	16.79 ^b	Annual income	-.001	.004	.999	-.77 ^b
African American	-.541	.348	.582	-41.81	African American	.040	.093	1.041	4.12
Paternal characteristics					Paternal characteristics				
Education	.110	.149	1.116	11.65	Education	.028	.034	1.028	2.84
Annual income	-.035	.027	.966	-3.39	Annual income	.006	.006	1.007	3.61 ^b
African American	.104	.360	1.109	18.69 ^b	African American	-.033	.097	.968	-3.24
History of incarceration	.151	.258	1.163	16.29	History of incarceration	-.108*	.537	.898	-10.24
Relationship factors					Relationship factors				
Non-romantic relationship	-1.203***	.269	.300	-69.98	Non-romantic relationship	.084	.798	1.087	8.74
Romantic relationship	-1.725***	.436	.178	-82.18	Romantic relationship	.205*	.889	1.227	22.71
Overall relationship quality	-.942***	.164	.390	-61.03	Overall relationship quality	.140***	.256	1.150	15.02
Parental conflict	-.257**	.095	.773	-22.68	Parental conflict	.034	.025	1.035	3.51

Note. ^a Unstandardized coefficients. ^b Percent change in expected count per one-unit increase in X, except for income. For incomes, the percent change in expected count is per one standard deviation increase in income. Standard deviations for incomes that were transformed by square root and divided by 10 are 7.76 for mothers and 5.91 for fathers.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Based on this result, factors that significantly increase a father's engagement are overall relationship quality and romantic status of the parental relationship. Among fathers who engage in parental activities, a one-unit increase of overall relationship quality increases father's engagement level by 15.02%, holding other variables constant. Also, being in a romantic relationship with the mother of the child increases the father's engagement level by 22.71%. Being in a non-romantic relationship with the mother did not increase paternal engagement, relative to fathers who had no relationship with the mothers.

Finally, having a history of incarceration decreases father's engagement level by 10.24%, holding other variables constant. Considering the fact that incarceration history does not affect frequency of father-child contact among fathers who have contact with their children (the right half of the Table 3-3), this result may imply that fathers who have a criminal record may be less skilled in their parenting techniques, compared to fathers with no incarceration history.

Discussion

This study makes a unique contribution to fatherhood research in that it separates, for the first time, the concepts of *presence* and *frequency* of father-child contact; and *presence* and *level* of paternal engagement and tests how predictors of father involvement, in general, influence the two components of these variables. Many past studies treated the two components as one and considered them to be points along the same continuum, from having no father-child contact to frequent contact, or from having no engagement to being highly engaged. The results of this

study indicated that while some factors significantly influence both components, other factors affect the two differently (Table 3-5). It implies that there are two different components—*presence* and *level*—in each variable.

Table 3-5 summarizes the significant predictors of *presence* and *level* of the two outcome variables, contact and engagement. Mother's lower income and higher education level predicted *presence* of father-child contact but paternal factors did not. Although this result differs from previous research in which an association was found between father's involvement and his education level or income (Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Landale & Oropesa, 2001), this study is consistent with previous research which found that maternal factors have a greater influence on father's involvement than paternal factors (Marsiglio, 1991). Interestingly, these maternal factors did not influence *frequency* of father-child contact. It may be possible that mothers with lower incomes need more support from nonresident fathers and, thus, make sure that fathers have contact with their children. At the same time, for these mothers, *frequency* of father's contact with child may not be as important as *presence* of contact. Father-child contact was measured as the number of days a father saw his child in the past 30 days. For many mothers, *frequency* of contact in a one-month period may not be as essential as the fact that the father saw his child in the previous month. Similarly, mothers with higher education levels may encourage father-child contact, but how many times the father contacted the child in a month may not be as critical as *presence* of contact.

Table 3-5. Significant predictors of presence and level of nonresident father's involvement from the zero-inflated Negative Binomial models.

<i>Paternal Behaviors</i>	<i>Presence/Absence</i>	<i>Level</i>
Father-Child Contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father's residential state • Presence of mother's cohabiting partner • Mother's education[†] • Mother's annual income • Relationship status—non-romantic relationship • Relationship status—romantic relationship • Overall relationship quality • Parental conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father's residential state • Presence of mother's cohabiting partner • Relationship status—romantic relationship • Overall relationship quality
Paternal Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father's residential state • Presence of mother's cohabiting partner[†] • Relationship status—non-romantic relationship • Relationship status—romantic relationship • Overall relationship quality • Parental conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father's history of incarceration • Relationship status—romantic relationship • Overall relationship quality

Note. [†] indicates marginally significant ($p < 0.1$).

Structural factors—father's state of residence and mother's married/cohabiting partner—influenced *presence* of father-child contact, *frequency* of contact, and *presence* of engagement, but not *level* of engagement. It is understandable that fathers who live in a different state from children are less likely to see their children, and less likely to contact children frequently. It is also reasonable to assume that fathers who do not live in the same state as their children are limited to their ability to engage in paternal activities. However, among fathers who engage in parental activities, their state of residence is not an obstacle to

being engaged fathers. Fathers' residence may function as a barrier for them to be involved, but it may not prevent them from being engaged fathers if they are already involved in their children's lives.

The presence of a mother's new partner or spouse in the household influences nonresident fathers in the same way as does the father's living in a different state. This study supported previous research findings that a mother's remarriage significantly decreases a nonresident father's contact with his child (Bronstein et al., 1994; Frustenberg & Nord, 1985; Frustenberg et al., 1983; Hofferth et al., 2002; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). This study also indicated negative impact of a mother's partner on *presence* of contact, *frequency* of contact, and *presence* of engagement. But one significant difference between this study and previous studies is that this study found little impact of mother's partner on father's engagement *level*. As in the case of father's resident state, presence of mother's partner is not an obstacle to being a more engaged father, once they engage in paternal activities. Taken together, these results imply that presence of mother's new partner may decrease *frequency* of father-child contact, but nonresident fathers can be highly engaged fathers, even when the number of opportunities decreases.

Having a history of incarceration had a negative impact on the engagement *level* of fathers. Considering the fact that it did not influence father-child contact as much as it affected *level* of engagement, this result may indicate that fathers with history of incarceration are less skilled as parents, which decreases their

engagement in parenting activities such as reading stories to their children, taking their children to visit relatives, or changing diapers. In preliminary analyses, I included father's desirability variables such as presence of known serious violence or substance abuse. These variables did not significantly influence any outcome variables, and, thus, were dropped from the zero-inflated model. It should be noted, however, that non-significance of these variables may have been due to the fact that they were dummy coded and did not have much variance. Nineteen percent of mothers reported serious violence from fathers, and 14% reported a substance abuse problem of the father. Despite the lack of statistically significant influence of these variables on father involvement, these descriptive statistics indicate the prevalence of fathers with risk factors and should be a consideration for policy makers and practitioners.

Relationship factors showed similar patterns of influence on both father-child contact and father's engagement. For *presence* of father-child contact and *presence* of father's engagement, relationship quality and parental conflict had significant impacts as did their relationship status. As found in previous literature, a higher quality of parental relationship led to *presence* of father involvement. At the same time, higher parental conflict was also related to *presence* of father involvement. This result is consistent with other large-scale studies that reported a positive association between conflict and involvement (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). This study supports King and Heard's (1999) claim that some degree of conflict is inevitable when a

nonresident father is involved in child's life. It is important to note, however, some studies reported a negative relationship between the conflict and father involvement (Arendell, 1986, 1992).

In this study, parental conflict influenced neither *frequency* of contact nor *level* of engagement, while higher quality of parental relationship showed significant impact on both variables. This result indicates that parents may experience conflict when fathers are involved in their children's lives (*presence* of involvement), but that, among fathers who are involved in their children's lives, conflict does not influence father's *level* of involvement. The patterns of results suggests, rather, that what matters for *level* of involvement is a positive quality of parental relationship. As described in an earlier section, concepts from family systems theoretically support the result in that one subsystem is interdependent to another subsystem—in this case, a father-child relationship depends on a mother-father relationship.

Similarly, a romantic relationship between parents—presumably indicating a strong attachment between mother and father—significantly increases both likelihood of the father's involvement and his level of involvement. Other type of relationships (separated, divorced, and friends) also positively impacted *presence* of involvement but did not influence father's *level* of involvement, compared to parents not in any kind of relationship.

Taking these results together, this study demonstrated that multiple relationship factors, such as relationship status, quality, and conflict, influence

presence of father's involvement, but parents' positive relationship is the major factor that predicts increase of father's involvement, measured by *frequency* of contact and *level* of engagement. For a nonresident father, the decision to be involved in his child's life may be a different decision from how much he is involved. This finding demonstrates the importance of conceptually separating *presence* and *level* of nonresident father's involvement.

While this study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of nonresident father involvement, it also has its limitations. One concern is that this study only used mothers' reports on all measures. The decision to use only mothers' reports was based on the fact that less than 70% of the fathers in the sample of this study were interviewed, and among these fathers, many of them did not respond to some critical variables of this study. While it is true that the data collection rate on fathers of the Fragile Families is much better than for other national data sets, the high percentage of missing data would have been detrimental to both the statistical power of the analyses and generalizability of the results. Nonetheless, we recognize that relying on a single data source may lead to biased results. Future research would benefit by including reports from nonresident fathers.

Another concern is that some variables had to be dropped from the main analysis due to limited number of parameters allowed by the zero-inflated model software. While the advantage of the zero-inflated model was to test the two different questions simultaneously, its complexity required omission of some

variables from the model. In order to examine a more comprehensive model, we may have to wait for improvements in the statistical software. Considering the available analytical tools, however, conducting preliminary analyses to select variables for inclusion in a final model may be the best option available to researchers.

Because this is the first study to simultaneously test factors associated with *presence* and *level* of father involvement, it is necessary to validate these results with other data sets. Members of this sample were parents with newborn babies who live in urban cities. It is possible that geographic characteristics affect the significance and relative importance of various factors in predicting father involvement. It is also possible that involvement between nonresident fathers and older children are influenced by different factors. As suggested by our preliminary results, demographics of children—sex of the child and number of children by nonresident fathers—did not impact nonresident fathers' involvement in this study. It is reasonable to assume, however, that adolescent children may influence father involvement differently from infants. As predicted by family systems theory, when children get older, the father-child interaction becomes more interactive and father and child have a greater influence each other. Future research should strive to incorporate these other variables.

This study furthers our understanding and conceptualization of nonresident father's involvement. Specifically, this study suggested the possibility that father involvement may not be a simple linear concept from non-involvement to high

involvement but may consist of two components—*presence* and *level*. If different factors predict *presence* and *level* of involvement as this study suggested, practitioners may decide to take a different approach to get fathers involved and to increase their involvement.

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Appendix. Correlation matrix of variables.

	Father-child contact	Paternal engagement	Father's Residential state	Mother's new partner	Mother's Age	Mother's Education	Mother Income	Mother: African American	Father's age	Father's education
Father-child contact	1.00									
Paternal engagement	.77	1.00								
Father's Residential state	.21	.17	1.00							
Mother's new partner	-.17	-.11	-.02	1.00						
Mother's age	-.03	-.04	-.05	-.07	1.00					
Mother's education	.03	.01	-.05	-.03	.25	1.00				
Mother's income	.02	.01	-.12	-.03	.05	.17	1.00			
Mother: African American	.12	.01	.09	.03	.00	.09	-.13	1.00		
Father's age	.00	-.01	-.01	-.04	.71	.18	.02	.02	1.00	
Father's education	.03	.02	-.04	.02	.14	.43	.18	.12	.22	1.00
Father's income	.08	.11	-.11	-.03	.26	.30	.44	-.11	.27	.28
Father: African American	.10	.09	.06	.02	.02	.08	-.13	.79	.01	.09
Father's incarceration Relation—Separated/Divorced/Friends	-.14	-.16	.04	.01	-.09	-.13	-.10	.02	-.07	-.17
Relation—Romantic	.05	.12	.06	.02	-.03	-.05	.00	.04	.00	-.03
Relationship Quality	.34	.26	-.01	-.16	.03	.10	.05	.06	.01	.04
Parental conflict	.48	.48	.07	-.09	-.03	.02	.05	.09	.00	.01
<i>M</i>	-.04	-.03	-.03	-.05	-.10	.02	.02	.01	-.12	-.04
<i>SD</i>	11.31	1.83	.90	.11	25.13	2.85	20.06	.64	27.33	2.87
	11.36	1.85	.29	.31	5.73	.93	24.44	.48	7.12	.87

Appendix. Correlation matrix of variables (Continued).

	Father's income	Father: African American	Father's incarcerat- ion	Relation: Separated/ Divorced/ Friends	Relation: Romantic	Relation- ship Quality	Parental conflict
Father-child contact							
Paternal engagement							
Father's Residential state							
Mother's new partner							
Mother's age							
Mother's education							
Mother's income							
Mother: African American							
Father's age							
Father's education							
Father's income	1.00						
Father: African American	-.09	1.00					
Father's incarceration	-.24	.04	1.00				
Relation—Separated/ Divorced/Friends	.05	.03	-.03	1.00			
Relation—Romantic	.01	.06	-.10	-.49	1.00		
Relationship Quality	.15	.10	-.22	.13	.38	1.00	
Parental conflict	-.05	.03	.11	-.01	-.08	-.21	1.00
<i>M</i>	16.66	.66	.40	.53	.17	2.46	2.98
<i>SD</i>	15.23	.47	.49	.50	.38	1.28	1.22

CHAPTER 4

ARE MOTHERS REALLY “GATEKEEPERS” OF CHILDREN?: RURAL MOTHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF NONRESIDENT FATHERS’ INVOLVEMENT AFTER SEPARATION

Parental conflict after divorce or separation is one of the most detrimental factors to children’s adjustment (Emery, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Although practitioners and policy makers try to encourage supportive co-parenting relationships after separation, establishing such cooperative relationships is particularly difficult for low-income families (Ambert, 1989). Limited resources and multiple stressors make it even more difficult for the families to cope with separation. Understanding barriers to and facilitators of successful post-divorce relationships for disadvantaged families is becoming an important issue for academics as well as social policy makers. This study qualitatively examines factors that contribute to parental interaction after separation. In particular, focus is given to mothers’ voices in rural, low-income families.

Past literature indicated that nonresident fathers often see custodial mothers as “gatekeepers” of their children (e.g., Arendell, 1992). Many fathers claim that mothers interfere with their visitations (Arendell, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), control their children’s schedules, and construct guidelines that restrict the amount of time that they can spend with their children (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). The implication of these statements is that the mothers are rejecting the fathers’ involvement by using children against their former husbands.

The fathers' perceptions, however, may not accurately reflect the mothers' behaviors or the intention behind their behaviors. Although there are few empirical studies dealing with mothers' perspectives of their former partners' involvement, some scholars have reported evidence contradicting the fathers' claims. Pleck (1997) found that mother's gatekeeping is relatively weak and indirect. Seery and Crowley (2000) reported that, by providing emotion work, resident mothers tried to promote father-child relationships even after separation. These contradictory results indicate the need to further investigate mothers' perceptions to understand the dynamics of nonresident fathers' involvement and family well-being.

Research focusing on disadvantaged populations, such as rural low-income families, is particularly important for a number of reasons. First, rural areas are not simply smaller versions of urban areas; rather, they are qualitatively different in terms of resource availability (Findeis et al., 2001), and as such, face unique challenges. Second, the majority of previous father involvement studies have focused on middle-class populations; yet many social policies based on these studies target low-income populations. As a result, policies make assumptions about families which may not reflect the reality of low-income families. Third, factors related to father involvement may be more complicated for low-income families than for the populations of other social classes. It is increasingly common for divorced or unwed mothers to have multiple nonresident fathers, while nonresident fathers may also have children in multiple households from different partners. Although the situation of multiple partners is not unique to low-income

families, the limited economic resources of these families, combined with limited social services in rural communities, complicate the situation. Low-income populations are more socially and economically vulnerable than other populations, and thus, they may be in greater need of assistance from their previous partners. Nonetheless, past research has failed to recognize these complexities, and has treated divorced parents as having only

one set of children (Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). It is important to examine how low-income families handle these complicated situations, including multiple partners, in order to maximize the resources available to them. Scholars argue that to understand the everyday experiences of families, it is essential to examine the families' perspectives (Katras, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2004). How do mothers really feel about the nonresident fathers' involvement? Are mothers gatekeeping to restrict father-child contact? Do mothers benefit from a greater involvement of nonresident fathers, as the policies assume? The feelings of low-income mothers toward their former partners need to be examined in more detail.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism provides the framework for this study. According to this theory, former partners formulate new relationships through interaction, especially under circumstances where there are no social norms. Norms regarding post-divorce parental relationships have not yet been clearly established in society (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). Re-identifying social roles involves complicated emotional processes. Former partners have to redefine their roles from those of a

romantic relationship to being a resident or nonresident parent, while still dealing with various emotions of affection, hostility, and/or preoccupation toward each other (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999; Masheter, 1991; Tschann, Johnson, & Wallerstein, 1989). How resident mothers manage their own emotions and interpret nonresident fathers' behaviors becomes a crucial factor affecting overall family well-being.

Because our analysis focuses on only the mothers' perceptions, we are aware that their comments are likely to be influenced by their histories with the former partners, their interpretation of fathers' behavior, social desirability, and possibly other agendas. Still, we are interested in examining how mothers define their own experiences, and not in portraying an 'objective' reality. Symbolic interactionism suggests "human beings act toward thing on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (cited from LaRossa & Reitzes, p143). The theory points out that it is a mother who defines the meaning of nonresident father's behavior and acts on it. Examining mothers' perceptions help us understand their subjective experiences through their own words. In addition, previous research suggests that fathering behaviors are strongly influenced by the mothers' support (Doherty, Kouseski, & Erikson, 1998), and thus, may depend largely on mothers' perceptions. Also, from a theoretical standpoint, it is reasonable to assume that mother's perceptions more or less shape their children's interactions with their nonresident fathers, because the custodial mothers are the ones who live and interact with their children on a daily basis. These factors assure

us that focusing on mothers' perceptions is not a limitation of the study, but rather, addresses an issue previously absent from the literature.

Factors Affecting Family Well-Being

Child Support Payment

Child support from a nonresident father can be an important financial resource for a residential mother and her household. Arendell (1986) found that mothers who are most satisfied with their former spouses are ones who experience the least economic hardship after separation. In addition, there is overwhelming evidence that financial contributions from fathers make a significant impact on child outcomes (for review, see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Child support payment can increase family well-being by, for example, improving living conditions, providing necessary materials, or creating easier access to health care. But in reality, only a quarter of resident mothers actually receive the full amount of support owed to them (cited from Lin, 2000). Clearly, most mothers and children, especially those of low-income families, would be more secure economically if nonresident fathers paid more child support.

Although there is the popular image of "dead-beat dads" in the media, among low-income populations, the majority of fathers are also struggling financially, and thus, are unable to pay much child support. Many studies supported the association between low-income, unemployment, and nonpayment of child support (Dubey, 1995; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer & Seltzer, 1998; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997, Sorensen, 1997). Studies on nonresident fathers in inner

cities showed that they have limited ability to pay child support (Furstenburg, 1995; Stier & Tienda, 1993). The number of young nonresident fathers living in poverty is considerably higher than older divorced fathers (Pirog-Good & Good, 1995). Sorensen and Zibman (2001) showed that fathers who do not pay child support face multiple barriers to employment, such as limited education, limited work experience, lack of English skills, transportation barriers, lack of access to telecommunication, and shelter instability. In rural areas, there are generally fewer jobs available, fewer educational and training opportunities, and more limited access to social services (Bauer et al., 2000; Weber, Duncan, & Whitener, 2001).

Interestingly, fathers and mothers seem to have different views on what prevents fathers from paying child support (Bloomer, Sipe, & Ruedt, 2002). According to interviews by Bloomer et al., fathers claim that, in addition to employment difficulty, poor relationships with resident mothers and distrust of the spending habits of the resident mothers prevent them from paying. In contrast, the mothers attributed non-payment of child support to factors such as the fathers' substance abuse problems, new relationships/families, and the mothers' belief that the fathers are paid under the table to avoid child support payments. Hairston (1998) also reported that fathers who fail to provide child support are more likely to have a cluster of problems involving drugs, alcohol, and incarceration. These findings suggest that non-payment of child support cannot be explained simply by employment and economic factors.

The issue of child support for low-income families requires careful examination beyond formal methods of child support payment. Studies of low-income families revealed that the fathers often provide informal “under the table” payments to children and/or in-kind support such as the purchase of diapers and toys, instead of formal payment (Ash, 1997; Edin, 1995; Johnson & Doolittle, 1998). For fathers with intermittent employment, informal and in-kind support allows them to contribute when they are able to do so (Greene & Moore, 2000). Some fathers reported that they prefer having control over how money is spent by providing items rather than providing money directly to the mothers or the welfare office (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994). Low-income mothers also seem to prefer informal support, because of their perception that they can receive more money this way, and the belief that direct payment encourages father-child relationships (Edin, 1995).

Past studies on child support for low-income families have demonstrated the importance of understanding perceptions of both mothers and fathers. As described above, there is contradicting information from mothers and fathers regarding nonpayment of child support. Unlocking the meaning of child support as it is interpreted by women would help resolve the gap between resident mothers and nonresident fathers.

Interparental Conflict

Establishing a cooperative co-parental relationship after separation is essential for there to be a benefit to the child of continued father involvement.

Supportive relationships allow the parents to maintain consistent discipline of their children, and as a result, mothers may experience less parenting stress with the fathers' help. Also, fathers who maintain regular visitations are found to be more likely to pay child support (King, 1994; Nord & Zill, 1996). Unfortunately, establishing a cooperative relationship is particularly difficult for low-income families because of limited resources and multiple stressors (Ambert, 1989).

Research indicated that nonresident fathers' visitation is a common source of interparental conflict (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Arendell, 1986; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982), which, in turn, affects the level of father involvement (Ahrns & Miller, 1993; Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1998; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Father-child interaction provides increased opportunities for former partners to interact and experience conflict with each other. Generally, contact between a nonresident father and his child declines over time (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), presumably due in part to poor relationships between former spouses (Arendell, 1992). In order to avoid hostile interaction with the mother, fathers may decrease their interaction with children. At the same time, mothers may want to limit father-child contact to avoid negative interaction with the fathers.

In particular, mothers' satisfaction with nonresident fathers' involvement seems to play an important mediating role between fathers' visitation and child outcomes. King and Heard (1999) indicated that fathers' involvement, interparental conflict, and mothers' satisfaction are highly interrelated. According

to King and Heard, children are least well off when a father has a high level of contact and the mother is dissatisfied with his involvement. Conversely, when mothers are satisfied with the fathers' high involvement, children seem to benefit the most. It is not known yet what factors determine mothers' satisfaction.

Although few studies have focused on the mothers' satisfaction, limited data suggested that positive emotional support from nonresident fathers (Arendell, 1986) and acceptable parenting skills (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002) are related to mothers' satisfaction. These studies, however, were investigated middle-class families, and it is possible that these factors weigh differently for low-income families.

Poverty magnifies the negative effect of interparental conflict on children, especially conflict involving violence (Ayoub, Ceutsch, Maraganott, 1999). There is evidence that low-income mothers are at higher risk of being victims of domestic violence (Raphael, 2000), and that the violence is more likely to co-occur in high-conflict relationships (McNeal & Amato, 1998). Examining multiple dimensions of conflict such as frequency and intensity, scholars found that hostile conflict (e.g., physical aggression) is related to the worst outcome for children (Beuhler et al., 1998; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Krishnakumar & Beuhler, 2000). Thus, it is vital to examine the context in which interparental conflicts occur, and how parents deal with the conflicts, especially in low-income populations.

Research Goals

The overall goal of this study is to examine low-income mothers' feelings and perceptions of nonresident father's involvement in rural communities. In particular, careful attention was paid to investigation of whether mothers are really controlling or "gatekeeping" father involvement, as suggested by some previous studies. This includes an examination of how low-income mothers perceive and negotiate the issue of child support. By examining these questions, this study attempted to reveal what factors promote or discourage better parental relationship for rural low-income populations.

Methods

Sample

Data for this study are drawn from the Rural Families Speak Project. The Rural Families Speak Project is a longitudinal multi-state Agricultural Experiment Station research project, which assesses changes in the well-being and functioning of rural families in the context of welfare reform (Bauer, 2003). The original project included 414 families across 14 states and 24 counties. Participants were primarily recruited from non-metropolitan areas with populations between 2,500 and 19,000. Participants were recruited through programs serving low-income families, including the Food Stamp program, Head Start, WIC, and welfare-to-work. The primary qualifying criteria for inclusion in the study were having an income below the 200% poverty threshold and having at least one child under the age of 13 at the time of the initial interview.

All of the participants were mothers, and were interviewed about various subjects such as family well-being, employment, parenting, and community characteristics. Interviewees also completed surveys of specific measures during the interviews, which lasted between 2 and 3 hours. Each family was asked a standard set of questions described above, but because of the qualitative nature of the interviews, some mothers were allowed to talk freely about topics that were not in the interview protocol. In some cases, although not many, other members of the household, such as a mother's partner and her extended family member, were present at the interview. Upon agreement of the mother, they also were allowed to respond to interview questions freely.

Wave 1 data were collected from 1999 to 2000. In Wave 2 (2001-2002), 326 families from 13 states were re-interviewed; the attrition rate was 21%. Attrition analysis suggested that there were few significant differences between the dropped and retained samples. While probability sampling was not used, the sample provides rich in-depth data from a population that is understudied.

Subsample For This Study

This study focused on Wave 2 qualitative data. Wave 2 interviews were conducted using semi-structural interview questions and systematic questions regarding nonresident fathers. Examples of such questions included: "During the past 12 months, how often did your child see her father?," "What is your relationship like with the child's father?," "Do you think the father wants a close relationship with his child?," and, as a follow-up probe, "Why did you answer in

that way?." Among the 326 families who participated in Wave 2, 167 families had at least one child who lived with a biological mother and had a living, biological, nonresident father. From the 167 families, 83 families (50 %) were randomly selected and included in this study.

Table 4-1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample of this study. The average age of participating mothers was 30.8. The average age of children with nonresident fathers was 7.3. Among them, there are 76 boys and 70 girls. About two-thirds of mothers in this sample did not have a partner in their household at the time of the Wave 2 interview (n=56). Their marital statuses were single (n=35), divorced (n=13), or separated (n=8). The rest of the women had a partner in their household, either by marriage (n=15) or cohabitation (n=12). Fifty-eight (69.9 %) mothers had only one nonresident father, 23 (27.7 %) mothers had two different nonresident fathers, and 2 (2.4%) mothers had three different nonresident fathers. The sample primarily comprised White mothers (n=59), followed by Latino (n=12), African American (n=8), and multi-racial (n=2). Average income of the mothers was just slightly over the federal poverty guideline for 2001. Approximately 42 % of the mothers did not have high school diploma or G.E.D at the time when they first became parent, while about 36 % of them had either high school diploma or G.E.D.

Table 4-1. Demographics characteristics of sample ($n = 83^a$).

	<i>N</i>	<i>M or %</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Mother's Household Characteristics</i>			
Annual income	83	19133.62	14567.79
Percent of poverty line ^b	83	109.60	82.76
Number of nonresident fathers			
One father	58	69.9	—
Two fathers	23	27.7	—
Three fathers	2	2.4	—
<i>Mother's Characteristics</i>			
Mother's age	82	30.8	7.61
Marital Status			
Single	35	42.2	—
Divorced	13	15.7	—
Separated	8	9.6	—
Married	15	18.1	—
Living with partner	12	14.5	—
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	59	71.1	—
Hispanic/Latino	12	14.5	—
African American	8	9.6	—
Multi-Racial	2	2.4	—
Unknown	2	2.4	—
Education level at first became parent			
8 th grade or less	10	12.0	—
Some high school or GED	26	31.3	—
High school or GED	30	36.1	—
Technical or vocational training	6	7.2	—
Some college including AA	11	13.3	—
<i>Child Characteristics^c</i>			
Age of Children	155	7.34	4.24
Gender			
Male	76	49.0	—
Female	79	51.0	—

^aNumber of resident mothers. ^bBased on 2001 federal poverty guideline. ^cNumbers of children reflect those of target children who have biological nonresident fathers.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, I first read the entire interview transcripts for 43 cases several times to identify emerging themes. Interview transcripts contain a large volume of qualitative data. Qualitative data needed to be reduced, and transformed into more manageable units of data. Utilizing grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I first identified five main categories of topics emerged from the interviews: They are Structural factors, Financial contributions, Relationships among immediate family members (mothers, fathers, and children), Topics with non-immediate family members, and Father's problematic behaviors. Among each category, then, I developed sub-codes for sub-themes. If topics did not fall into any categories, they were coded as miscellaneous, although the code of miscellaneous was rarely used.

In the second stage of the analysis, three different coders coded the remainder of transcripts ($N = 124$) using these codes. Although original thematic codes were developed based on the preliminary analysis, qualitative methodology is an on-going "back-and-forth" between theory and the data. Thus, if a coder felt that a new code needed to be added or some codes needed to be combined, the coder discussed with the lead coder and new codes were added or some codes were combined. Table 4-2 represents the final codes that were developed through this iterative process of induction and deduction. It should be noted, however, these codes are not mutually exclusive, but all themes are intertwined and cannot

be clearly separated. Thus, the coders were allowed to use double-codings, or even triple-codings.

Table 4-2. Coding categories and subcodes.

<i>Structural Factors</i>	<i>Financial Contributions</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Custody • Geographic Distance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Support Payment • Insurance
<i>Relationships Among Immediate Family Members</i>	<i>Topics With Non-Immediate Family Members</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-parental Relationship • Father-Child Relationship • Father's Parenting Skills • Visitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father's New Partners • Mother's New Partners • Father's Family of Origin • Social Fathers • Social Support
<i>Father's Problematic Behaviors</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic Violence/Child Abuse • Incarceration • Substance Abuse 	

Note. Topics that cannot be coded by the codes above were coded as "miscellaneous."

Coded segments were then entered into the MAXQDA program to organize the data. After these processes were completed, coded segments of 83 cases of this study were retrieved from MAXQDA for analysis. These coded segments were, then, systematically interpreted.

Results And Discussion

Findings from the interviews indicate that resident mothers share three major issues or concerns regarding nonresident father's involvement. Among these issues, child support will be covered first, because it is a topic much discussed in policy and because it provides a background against which low-income mothers

evaluate the fathering role. Then, other aspects of nonresident fathering will be considered. In the issue of mothers' evaluations of fathering, following three sub-issues will be presented: conflict over lack of father-child contact, mothers' gendered distrust toward fathers' parenting, and dissatisfaction with fathering performance. Lastly, the topic of mothers' gatekeeping is considered with the mother's concerns of children's well-being and safety.

Child Support Payment

An overwhelming number of mothers expressed their dissatisfaction with regard to child support payment. In our sample, only three mothers explicitly stated that they receive regular reliable child support payments from the fathers of their children. About 20 % of the mothers reported that they do not receive any support at all. The majority of the mothers stated that payments were sporadic and, even when payment was made, they often did not receive the full amount that was owed to them. The percentage of the mothers who receive full amount of child support was lower than national average where quarter of the resident mothers received the child support in full (cited from Lin, 2000).

Mothers' frustration toward fathers' irregular payment is understandable considering the fact that the mothers' household incomes were already severely limited. Particularly when mothers rely on the child support for paying necessities such as electric or telephone bills, nonpayment or irregularity of payment directly impacts family subsistence. Three mothers reported that their entire monthly income at the time of interview was child support payments, even though the

support was not reliable. Many mothers needed to use the court system to obtain child support payments or payment increases, resulting in wage garnishment or, in some cases, imprisonment of the non-resident fathers. In the case of Leandra, whose former partner denied paternity, she obtained a court order for a DNA test to establish paternity as well as child support obligation. Another mother, Raven, was pleased that her state of residence aggressively enforces child support payment. She explained:

...you go to the prosecuting attorney and he [her former husband] is on their computer and they keep track of his payments and I don't have to worry about it any more. I don't have to call the courthouse all the time. I don't have to deal with the headache. You know I have done what I can do...and they will either put him in jail or get him.

Although penalties for fathers' noncompliance vary from state to state, for these mothers, a court functions as mothers' legitimate support as well as a means of avoiding direct negotiation with the nonresident fathers.

Another strategy that many mothers use to deal with the irregularity of child support is to "not to count on it". A significant number of mothers expressed similar comments reflecting this attitude. Margo, a single mother of three-year-old son, said, "I never have depended on it, because I know that I can't depend on it being there. If we get it, it's like 'wow, it's a surprise.'" Raven, a mother of two children, also stated, "I don't expect it. And when it shows up, I just have extra." In general, the majority of mothers begrudgingly accepted the fact that they would never receive a regular payment of the child support award. Stacia described her pattern of receiving child support;

Well, it goes in spurts. He'll give me thirty bucks a week every couple weeks, or every week for a couple weeks, and then quit his job or do whatever he thinks he needs to do and I won't see another dime for a month or so. I added all the money he ever gave me up, and it was like twenty-two bucks a month, ...It wasn't regular at all. I might not see anything for a month.

These mothers also seemed to be keenly aware that the nonresident fathers were also struggling financially. As previous research indicated (e.g., Garfinkel et al., 1998), this study also revealed a strong association between fathers' financial struggles and nonpayment of child support. Mothers' reasoning for nonpayment included "he lost his job," "it [child support] depends on how many days he's working that week," "he switches jobs so many times," and "he filed for bankruptcy." The mothers knew first-hand that job opportunities were limited, especially in rural areas. Asked about job opportunities in their community, the most common answer from the mothers was "not good." Lack of resources and opportunities in rural communities make these families' financial situations even more vulnerable. Limited resources in rural communities may make father's contributions more important to the mothers and children, while on the other hand, fewer job opportunities in the communities negatively impact the fathers' employment, resulting in non-payment of child support.

In some cases, mothers accepted material goods such as clothes and school supplies as a substitute for child support payment. Louanne, a mother of a newborn son, was such a case. Asked how much monthly support she received from the father of her son, she replied, "I would say less than \$100, but he buys diapers once in a while. They are almost \$20!" While they felt receiving regular

child support in full was their entitlement as a parent, they, at the same time, seemed to have adjusted their perception to the reality of the father's financial situation. Sue, a mother of six, summarized this sentiment succinctly, saying, "Well, what can you do? I ain't gonna get it! What can I say!...you can't get blood out of a rock."

In addition to the fathers' financial difficulties, this study also found that fathers' incarceration and their children with different mothers were also major obstacles to regular payment of child support. Some mothers ($n=4$), although not many, reported the fathers were in jail at the time of interviews and, thus, could not pay child support. About 12% ($n=10$) of another mothers voluntarily talked about the fathers' past incarceration during which time these mothers evidently did not receive payment of child support.

Mothers frequently mentioned the father's children with different partners. Both men and women today may enter new romantic relationships and/or remarry after separation and have children with their new partners. Or, their new partners may bring their own children into the relationship, creating new financial and social responsibilities. The complexity of family life makes the nonresident fathers' resource allocation very difficult. Keely, a single mother with six-year-old son, reported that she had no income except child support at the time of interview. She was frustrated because "...he's got six kids he's supporting...he has two biological sons. Then he adopted one of her [father's new partner] kids, one of

their four kids, so there are three other kids. And then they got a baby on the way..." Kira described a similarly complicated situation:

Interviewer: Is he [a father of Kira's daughter] paying it to the state?

Kira: Yes, and they have to split it between 7 kids.

Interviewer: How many different families does that go to?

Kira: Well, one for sure, I know he don't have to pay because she gave the child away. So, now, it's maybe 6 kids. But it's five different mothers, if I'm correct.

Knowing how complicated the fathers' situations are, a mothers sometime accept lower levels of child support. Arlene was raising two children with her new partner. She started to receive five dollar and seventy-seven cents of weekly child support after long period of nonpayment. She said

...it's really kind of pathetic to have to cash a check for five dollars and seventy-seven cents. I figured he's gotten caught up with both my child support and his first ex-wife's child support..., at the time of divorce, the reason I set the child support so low was because, quite frankly he was thirty thousand behind on his first ex-wife. I figured I have no way...

Despite these complexities, past studies often made the incorrect assumption that separated parents had one set of children (Manning et al., 2003). These mothers' comments indicated that not only fathers' economic factors, but also the complexities of children with multiple partners contribute to limited child support payment.

Notably, none of the mothers stated that fathers should not see their child because of nonpayment of child support. As described in the following section, the majority of the mothers hoped that the fathers made regular contact with their

child(ren). Marlene's comment represented these mothers' feelings. Marlene claimed:

My primary concern is not to get money from him, but to make sure that Larisa [her daughter] is safe and happy. She just loves her father, and she wants to see him. My primary concern is to make him behave himself, and be a good father. I don't really care about the money. I should be able to make enough to take care of myself and the kids. I don't really care about the money.

For most of low-income mothers, child support, though important, may not be the mothers' primary concern because they know that the fathers are also low-income. Instead, it is possible that the issue of child support may have a more significant impact on the fathers than the mothers. Reflecting the social expectation of men's role as a breadwinner, low-income nonresident fathers may feel that their identity as a father is undermined when they are unable to pay. Louanne's comment highlighted the importance to the fathers of being a good provider. She described her former partner's attitude toward child support; "it is like putting it [money] right in my hand like he is doing such a noble thing." Although none of the mothers made comments regarding the linkage between child support and psychological impact on men, the fathers' inability to meet required financial obligation may make the fathers withdraw from such a situation where they feel financially incompetent. A father living in a rural community where job opportunities are limited may suffer even more than a father living in an urban community.

The issue of child support payment certainly creates a significant backdrop to other aspects of the co-parental relationship. On one hand, the mothers

feel they are entitled to receive the full-amount of child support on a regular basis, which is supported by the legal code. On the other hand, low-income nonresident fathers are unable to provide enough support for their children due to their own fragile economic situation, particularly in rural community. Interviews with the mothers clearly illustrated the low-income fathers are struggling to catch up with child support payments. For example, Sue's former husband has a large amount in arrears on child support to the state. Sue commented, "He owes money from years ago that he's still paying on. But the interest is so high it keeps it up there...I wouldn't make him pay current support." The findings of this study suggest that strict child support enforcement without recognizing the complexities of situation may not only fail to work but also unintentionally push the fathers away from their children. Even worse, it is also possible that an issue of child support payment may put women against men, which may result in jeopardizing children's well-being.

Mothers' Evaluations Of Fathering

Conflict Over Lack Of Father-Child Contact

About two-thirds of the mothers in our sample expressed dissatisfaction with the fathers' lack of contact with their child. This is the most frequently mentioned parental conflict by the mothers. Asked what kind of conflicts she had with the father of her son, Margo replied, "...him just not seeing him [her son] regularly. Saying that he's going to come and he never does. And then I get left answering the question why." As Seery and Crowley (2000) reported, many mothers attempted to promote father-child relationship even after parents'

separation by providing emotion work such as calling a father and providing information about their children to the father. But when the nonresident fathers do not make contact with their child, the mothers are left with various negative feelings such as anger, frustration, and disappointment. These negative feelings eventually lead to conflict between the mothers and fathers. Inocencia illustrates such a case. She explained:

I would have to call and say, are you gonna get Lavar [her son] this day? Or, are you gonna do this with Lavar? Or Lavar want to talk to you. He didn't call or come unless I called him. And what I want him to realize is that I shouldn't have to ask him, Is he gonna come get Lavar? Is he gonna do this for Lavar? That shouldn't be a question. That should be something he knows well.

Raven, a single-mother of two children, gave up providing emotion work because of these negative feelings. She shared:

If he's not going to come, he just doesn't come. We can be sitting here twiddling our thumbs waiting. And I don't like waiting on him...He [her son] is supposed to get the call once a week, he never calls when he is supposed to. And I've quit waiting. I just don't stick around and wait on him any more.

Willa's comment summarizes these women's feelings. "I have kept the door open for him, but he's just never ever tried."

Past literature suggested two possible directions between parental conflict and father-child contact. One possibility is parental conflict decreases father-child contact (Arendell, 1986, 1992). The other is father-child contact provides more opportunities for conflict to occur (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). This study, however, suggests that there may be a third possibility whereby the father's lack of contact creates mother's distrust

toward the fathers, which produces a relationship of conflict. The relationship between parental conflict and father-child contact may not be as simple as previous research assumed.

For the mothers, lack of father's contact with his child directly means the father's lack of interest in the child. When asked if the father wants to have a close relationship with his children, almost all of these mothers who showed dissatisfaction about lack of contact answered "no." Common comments included, "he acts like he doesn't care," "he has never proved that he does," "[if he cared,] he would try harder." These mothers' evaluations of the fathers' level of interest in their children is based on the physical actions taken by the fathers, not on their presumption of fathers' desire. Thus, the limited actions of the fathers are taken to mean the lack of interest in their children. "He never calls and asks about her," said Soleil, a mother of 9-year-old daughter, providing evidence of her former husband's lack of interest in their daughter.

In contrast, when fathers initiated action to reach their child(ren), the mothers perceived this as indication of their interest in being fathers. Cora, for example, reasoned that her ex-husband wanted to have a close relationship with their children because "he does call, and he does send things for birthdays and stuff." Interestingly, Cora's children saw their father only once in the previous year, on Christmas day. In Cora's case, the father lives in a neighboring state so the geographical distance may partly explain the infrequency of visits. Other mothers who recognized the fathers' interests in their children also provided

behavioral evidence such as fathers' asking about a child's grades, providing transportation for the children, and sending birthday cards, even when there were few visitations. Custodial mothers may accept even minimal contribution by fathers as indication of interest in their children, as long as the contribution is positive action initiated by the fathers.

Although this study does not provide the fathers' side of the story, a study by Arendell (1992) offers insight into the father's perspectives. Conducting in-depth interviews with 75 divorced fathers, Arendell revealed that father absence was a strategy of action by the nonresident fathers. According to Arendell, a nonresident father may intentionally avoid contact with his child for various reasons. He may do so to gain dominance and control. It may be his rejection of being treated like a "visiting uncle (p. 570)." Or, it may be his strategy to manage his emotional loss. In this study, however, none of the mothers suggested a possible linkage between lack of father-child contact and fathers' strategic action. In these mothers' perspectives, a child should come first before anything, and "a good father" should be always actively involved in a child's life, regardless of their residence status.

Despite their perception that the fathers lacked interest in their children, almost all of these mothers wished that their former partners showed more interest in parenting. Moreover, they wanted their children to keep in touch with their fathers. Although the mothers' emotions toward the fathers varied from "civil" to "very angry" in their interviews, they seemed to separate these negative emotions

from the fact that their former partners are still the fathers of their children. Sue, a mother of four, admitted that she had a lot of anger toward one of her ex-husbands. Yet, she made an effort to keep him in touch with his children even though she perceived that he did not show any interest in being a father. Sue explained, "As a parent, it's empathy...I sent him school pictures, kind of as a reminder that 'they're still here'." If her former husband wanted to see their children, she stated, "I wouldn't stand in his way."

Although social norms regarding post-divorce relationships have not been firmly established (Madded-Derdich et al., 1999), these mothers' comments suggested that there is some consensus, at least on the part of resident mothers, regarding how parents should behave after separation. Thus, when mothers sensed the fathers' lack of interest in parenting, or lack of effort to keep the relationship alive, they felt that the fathers had violated expectations of paternal roles. This may lead to the increased sense of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and anger among the mothers.

Mothers' Gendered Distrust Toward Fathers' Parenting

The interviews with the mothers consistently indicated that mothers were doubtful of the men's ability to be nurturing fathers. Overwhelmingly, the majority of the mothers made comments which reflected gender-role stereotypes found in society. The most common response was that a father may want to be close to his child, but "he doesn't know how" to nurture a child and, instead, the fathers put themselves before the child. For example, Alyne thought her former husband

didn't know how to be a father because "he's not a house-bound person. He's more of an adventure-type guy." Other statements included such as "he is not emotionally mature," "He's a huge child himself," "he has good intentions, but he does not have his priorities straight," "his main focus is on his and what he is doing," "he does not channel things to the kids," and so on.

Marie described her former husband's attempts to interact with their one-year-old son as follows: "he grabs him and hugs him, but you got to force the kid on him. I don't know if it's a whole jail thing. If he starts crying, he gives you the kid right away. You can't do that. You can't." Flora, a mother of two-year-old twins, shared her experience. According to Flora, her former husband was a "proud dad" when the babies were born. But she continued, "he couldn't accept, he didn't know what it was all about raising kids...some men are like that, you know. Some women are like that, too. Yeah, it changes your life, but...you've gotta-, you're constantly caring for them you know. They're babies."

According to these mothers' observations, a father can be a more involved father especially when a woman around him plays an active role. Some mothers commented that their former partner's mother "makes him contact" his child. A father's new wife or partner can also play an important role in promoting father-child interaction. Although some mothers said that they did not get along with their ex-partner's new wives, other mothers stated that the new wives helped father-child contact. Daria, a mother of three children, appreciated her ex-

husband's remarriage. Daria characterized his new wife as "very stable and very kid-oriented" woman. She continued:

This marriage has been good for him. She's older and if he was not married to her, I'm sure there would be conflicts...He's doing good right now as far as being a father and he's being regular...if he was not with a woman he did not lead a very family oriented lifestyle, if that makes sense.

The comment like Daria's suggest that the even when mothers are still skeptical about men's nurturing ability, other women around the fathers often provide support for the fathers to become more responsible parents, easing the custodial mother's dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfaction With Fathers' Parenting Performance

The fathers' child-rearing method (strategy) was often of great concern to the mothers. The majority of women felt that the fathers' parenting skills were inadequate. Mothers made comments such as "he does the opposite of what I do," and "he lets them [children] get away with stuff that I wouldn't."

Maryann's situation clearly illustrates this point. One parenting difference between Maryann and her former husband was whether or not to allow their child to watch scary movies. Despite her opposition, their 7 year-old son was allowed to watch a scary movie at his father's house. Consequently, their son woke up screaming in the middle of the night because of nightmares. Another example of parenting differences is Norine's case. Norine's 9-year-old son had ADHD. She felt her son needed to be medicated. But the father of her son "doesn't think he has

it as bad as what I say. He doesn't think that he needs all the medicine. He just thinks that he needs his dad in the picture all the time."

These differences in parenting are seldom communicated and resolved. Asked how she resolved conflicts with the father, Aneesa replied, "I don't know, we really don't. If something would come up, I would just state my view, and he would state his, and we would probably just feel real weird for a little while. We would never get anywhere."

All mothers expected the fathers to be responsible parents. Their definitions of responsible fathering, however, were rather narrowly defined. The mothers expected the fathers to perform the same parenting as the mothers. Norine claimed, "that's my kids, and it can be done the way I want it to be done." Aneesa also stated, "he knows that I'm very picky about my parenting, and he needs to—, I'm the one who's with her, you know, and he knows that." In these mothers' opinion, they had the final authority on how to raise their children because they were the ones who live with their children. With this belief, the mothers rarely negotiated on parenting with the fathers. Elke said that she didn't have any conflict with her child's father because "I have complete control, so, if he doesn't like it, then, it's like too bad." It is plausible that the fathers, if asked, would claim that the mothers were not responsible enough for their children. Yet, instead of negotiating as co-parents with their fathers, these mothers set a firm standard and are easily frustrated by fathers' deviation from it.

Unfortunately it is not uncommon for children to be caught in the middle between parents. Soleil reported that her son “keeps coming home and telling me that his dad’s saying this, his dad’s saying that, he’s definitely telling him things that a nine year old should not have to worry about.” Most mothers who had negative relationships with their former partners felt it was inappropriate to speak ill of each other in front of their children. Although Soleil described her former partner negatively to the interviewer, she believed that she had not crossed that line as a parent. Blithe, who has two different nonresident fathers for her two children, was proud of herself because she has “never said anything bad about these two people in front of kids.” Not speaking ill of the other parent in front of children seemed to be one of the most important dividing lines between being responsible and not being responsible.

Not surprisingly, the mothers were concerned about children’s reactions after visitation. Arlene reported, “every time I got them back from his house, I had the worst attitude problems to deal with.” Some children even called their mothers bad names after seeing their fathers, and the mothers blamed the fathers for these attitudes. In addition, many mothers felt that inconsistent parenting between the mothers and fathers sent mixed messages to their children and confused them. Mothers also observed that children were exhausted after visitation and that it took them several days to calm down. In addition to the psychological excitement and stress children experienced from seeing their fathers, the mothers were concerned

about losing their authority as parents as well as the inconsistent parenting that the children received from their fathers.

The mothers perceived that the fathers did not have adequate parenting skills, because they did not perform the same parenting style as the mothers do. They believe that children were not only receiving low-quality care from the fathers, but they were even receiving bad influences. It might be true that the mothers were more knowledgeable about how to discipline their children than fathers because they interacted with the children everyday and because women are more likely to have internalized their role as nurturers in society. At the same time, their strong disapproval of fathers' parenting may send a subtle message to the fathers which may be interpreted as "gatekeeping" by the fathers. Such discrepancy between mothers' intentions and fathers' interpretations may create conflict between the mothers and the fathers. Bolkan, DeCosta, Acock, and Day (2003) suggested that consistent parenting between parents is not always necessary for optimal child outcomes. Inconsistent parenting may not harm children as long as one of them performs authoritative parenting. While the mothers' desire to protect children from "bad influences" is certainly legitimate, allowing children to be exposed to various parenting styles may not be always damaging.

Gatekeeping for Children's Well-being and Safety

For some mothers, the fathers' involvement with children requires careful attention. About 20% of our sample expressed strong concerns about fathers' substance abuse, violence, abuse, and/or criminal activities. Because we did not

explicitly ask about fathers' problematic behaviors, these issues emerged only when volunteered by the mothers. We speculate that the actual number of mothers having such concerns may be greater than 20%.

The problem most commonly cited by the mothers was alcohol abuse by the children's fathers. In Sue's case, her son, Daniel (now 13 years old), used to live with his father. During the time that Daniel lived with his father, Sue frequently received calls for help from Daniel: "Mom, Dad flew off the handle. He's drunk. They had a big fight. Come get me." Furthermore, she reported that Daniel's grades went down dramatically while he was living with his father. At the time of the interview Sue was trying to get full custody of Daniel, arguing that his father is not an adequate parent. Jenice, a mother of a 7 year-old daughter, also shared her strong distrust toward her former husband. She distrusts him because she "never know(s) when he's going to be drinking." Jenice insisted, "I feel that no one is absolutely safe around someone who is drinking." In addition, her former husband frequently threatened her before their divorce saying, "I could kidnap Holly [her daughter] and you'd never see her again'." As a result, Jenice decided to "hang on even tighter" and never to leave her daughter alone with her father after their separation.

Fathers' substance abuse often accompanied violence towards the mothers or children. Deb didn't like her former husband's involvement in her household, because, according to Deb, he still "drinks a lot," "[he] don't want no other guys around me," and "wants to beat on me." Getting restraining orders against former

partners was a common survival strategy for those mothers who had experienced domestic violence. Due to the fathers' abusiveness, some mothers chose to or hoped to allow father-child interaction only under supervised visitations. Blithe openly admitted that she didn't welcome one of her ex-husbands into her home. She explained:

Lindsey's father is not welcome here. He went to jail for attempted manslaughter, while I was pregnant. He beat me, and so I turned him in, he went to jail. He has a drug history. He's a horrible, horrible person. And he just recently has been calling—I called the police department, for harassing phone calls, I'm going to have his phone blocked...he's not welcome here, I'm going to court pretty soon to get full custody of her so that he has to have supervised visits.

Considering the circumstances, these mothers' distrust toward their former husband is understandable. But the situation becomes complex when children still want their fathers. Although Allene's former partner was abusive to her and her children, she said her son "gets sad at times. He wants daddy home." The mothers have to balance the safety of their children and their children's desire to be close to their fathers. Blithe's decision to allow supervised visits came from her belief that "as much as I cannot stand them, they're still their fathers."

In rare cases, fathers recognized their own problems and their impact on a family. One example of this is Sybil's former partner who now lives in Florida. Sue hesitated to send her child there because "he was physically very abusive to his son." She reported, "He admittedly knows it is probably best if he does not come down there." Thus, the father tried to stay out of his child's life. In contrast, some fathers did not admit that they had a problem. One of Sue's former partners

was charged with a sexual crime. But she said, "I think he's in denial. You know, he won't go to the court-ordered sexual offender classes. He thinks he's done nothing wrong...he won't follow through with the court order. Denial's a bad thing." Allene, who allowed only supervised visitation, wanted to help her former husband by suggesting anger management therapy. But the help did not work out well. She explained:

We've tried family therapy...he went three times, and that was it. It was getting old. He couldn't do it no more. The lady actually started coming here, and he would either sit on the couch watching TV, or he would make sure he was gone before she got to here.

Many of these mothers have wished that the fathers would "someday wake up" (Sue), get appropriate help, and create positive father-child relationships.

Still other mothers refused fathers' involvement completely. Sybil did not allow one of her former husbands to be involved in her daughter's life. In Sybil's case, her former husband once went to jail on a theft charge. After being released from the jail,

...he came around the house and was calling and being polite and saying he wanted a relationship with them [children]. They were old enough and I thought that they need[ed] to see for themselves instead of just looking to me. So, they spent a lot of time with him.

But what happened next was, "he molested my daughter and he was incarcerated."

Now Sybil hopes that she never has to "talk to him again or see him again".

Similarly, Lee, a mother of three children, tried to hide their location from one nonresident father of her youngest daughter (Sukie). Lee's cohabiting partner who was present at the interview explained:

He's a violent person...he set one of our houses on fire, he's held guns up to her [Lee] head, he's a very violent man that wants Sukie with him, and if we wouldn't give Sukie up to him, he would kill Sukie or Lee to make sure nobody get them.

Because of this incident, Lee pressed charges against the father and had a restraining order put on him. Although the father was arrested, Lee expressed that she would never feel safe again. Lee reasoned her "gatekeeping" action as "mostly for my kids' safety because they're important. They got a life to live."

Even when a mother tries to limit the father's involvement, it may be difficult to do so in a small community, especially for cases involving violence and criminal charges. Grace's case illustrates this point. Grace's former husband was in jail for statutory rape of a 14- and a 15- year-old girl. Grace found out about his actions from one of the victim's mothers. Even at the time of the interview, Grace occasionally ran into the 15-year-old girl who was pregnant by her former husband. Grace strongly wished that she and her daughters would never associate with the father again, but knew it was not possible because he was originally from the same community. She commented, "I'm in the grocery store and he shows up there, I'm supposed to do what? I want him to stay as far away from us as possible." When an incidence such as the one experienced by Grace occurs, living in a small community where encounters cannot be avoided can become very unpleasant.

Based on the comments of the mothers in this study, we can conclude that mothers decide to act as a gatekeeper when they believe that the fathers' involvement *decreased* their children's well-being, or when the fathers were a threat to their children's lives. Most of the time, it is a difficult decision after weighing children's safety and needs. Jenice's comments succinctly summarized these mothers' feelings. She stated, "My number one concern is her [child's] safety, ...my ability to provide a safe environment."

Conclusion

Voices of rural, low-income mothers are largely ignored in divorce literature. As women described the challenges associated with sharing social networks, public spaces, and scarce resources with the fathers of their children, it is clear that rural context provides unique challenges to women's post-divorce parental adaptations. We listened to their voices in attempt to identify barriers to and facilitators of positive post-divorce parental interaction. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meaning of the nonresident fathering perceived by resident mothers. The mothers' interpretations of how men attempted or failed to attempt to carry out their paternal role help us understand the dynamics of co-parenting relationship. One of our research questions was whether mothers are really gatekeepers of children as some fathers claimed (e.g., Arendell, 1992). This qualitative study revealed that the question does not have a simple yes/no answer because post-separation relationships are complex. The data provide a much more textured, negotiated version of father access than previously seen in the scientific

and policy literatures. Whether a mother acts as a gatekeeper of her children depends on her interpretation of unique situation.

This study found that despite the ambiguity of parental roles after separation, there is some consensus among mothers how parents should behave after separation. Almost all mothers believed that children's well-being should be considered first, regardless of the parents' own emotions. Most mothers desired that the fathers keep contact with their children after separation. The mothers also expected the nonresident fathers to act as responsible fathers, which they described as showing interest in their children, and actively promoting their well-being, and ideally contributing materially and financially to their children. Their evaluation of the quality of fathering, however, was based only on the actions initiated by the fathers. The mothers' idea of responsible fathering may be narrowly defined. Thus, their expectations of nonresident fathering may easily be violated, leading to more dissatisfaction and anger, which in turn may be interpreted as "gatekeeping" by the fathers.

The payment of child support is an important and complicated issue for low-income mothers. It is true that the majority of mothers were frustrated by the fact that they received little child support, but they also seemed to be aware that their former partners were also struggling financially. As one mother stated, "you can't get blood out of a rock." Low-income mothers seemed realistic in not expecting regular and full child payments from former husbands whose incomes were also likely to be low. The inability to pay child support may have a greater

psychological impact on nonresident fathers than the mothers. The mothers, however, did not seem to be aware of the possibility that social pressure for men to be good providers may be influencing other aspects of paternal performance. The strong dissatisfaction expressed by low-income mothers towards the fathers may result from the combination of the inability of father to contribute financially and/or socially, as well as the mothers' fragile financial situations.

By asking mothers about their experiences, this study also sheds light on the negative impact of fathers' problematic behavior on the family. Although no specific questions about problematic behavior were asked in the interview, one out of five mothers in our sample volunteered information about fathers' alcohol and drug abuse, violence against themselves and/or their children, and criminal activity. If specific questions had been asked, it is likely that a greater percentage of the women would have reported problematic behaviors. The mothers of these families protected their children by limiting father-child interactions or refusing the interaction completely. This "gatekeeping" behavior can, thus, be viewed as a survival strategy.

This study focused on an important group, rural families, which has been largely ignored in previous literature. Most previous research on divorce and co-parental relationship focused on urban populations. Our findings show that while rural families face similar issues and experiences post-separations urban families, rural communities present a unique set of circumstances. One of the significant challenges faced by rural families is a lack of job opportunities and resources in a

community. This makes low-income mothers more dependent on fathers' contributions, even though the fathers' employment opportunities are more limited than in urban areas. Moreover, a small rural community may make the families' lives difficult when the father shows a problematic behavior. A mother may not have much choice to "hide" from a problem, or avoid unpleasant encounters in a small community. These results point to the importance of considering the characteristics of the community for promoting father involvement.

Implications of this study concern broadening an understanding of the parental role, including mothers and fathers arriving at a consensus around the comprehensive nature of parental responsibilities. Establishing a positive co-parental relationship is essential for child well-being. Yet, the task of creating such a relationship involves constant negotiation between the parents over various issues, such as understanding the different meanings of financial and/or material contributions for mothers and fathers, increasing a contact initiated by fathers, lowering mothers' rigid standard of parenting, and improving fathers' parenting skills. Equally importantly, however, the study suggests that not all the parents can establish a positive relationship when a mother perceives the father involvement as a danger. A positive co-parental relationship can be established based in the context of community characteristics, individual circumstances, and mothers' concerns.

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CHAPTER 5

GENERAL CONCLUSION

I investigated nonresident father's involvement in low-income families using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies with the objective of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of nonresident father's involvement and its effect on family well-being. The two studies presented here collectively demonstrate the complex nature of this topic. In this chapter, I first summarize findings from the two studies, integrate these findings, discuss limitations of the studies, and present implications for social policy.

Summary Of Findings

In my first study, *Predicting Presence and Level of Nonresident Father's Involvement: Application of Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Models*, I examined what factors predicted two aspects, *presence* and *level*, of father-child contact and paternal engagement. A shortcoming of much previous work using OLS regression was treatment of *presence* and *level* as points on a continuum. I contend that it is more appropriate to view *presence* and *level* as related, but separate, aspects of an issue that may be affected by different factors. Analyses using zero-inflated Negative Binomial regression models which allow simultaneous investigation of factors predicting *presence* and *level*, indicated that different factors influenced *presence* of father-child contact and *frequency* of contact. Similarly, the model indicated that different factors predicted *presence* of paternal engagement and *level* of engagement. Thus, a nonresident father's decision to be involved in his

child's life may be a fundamentally different from the decision about how much he is involved. The results supported the contention that *presence* and *level* should be treated as two different aspects of contact and engagement.

While multiple factors including structural, maternal, and relationship factors were found to influence *presence* of father-child contact and paternal engagement, positive co-parental relationships was the primary predictor of the increased *levels* of non-resident father's involvement.

In my second study, *Are Mothers Really "Gatekeepers" of Children?: Rural Mothers' Perception of Nonresident Father's Involvement After Separation*, I qualitatively examined mothers' perceptions of nonresident father's involvement. The objective of this study was to identify barriers to, and facilitators of, positive co-parental relationships as experienced by rural low-income mothers. Specifically, I investigated whether mothers are really "gatekeeping" father involvement as some previous research suggested (e.g., Arendell, 1992).

Because post-separation relationships are dynamic and multifaceted, there is no simple yes/no answer to this question. Whether a mother acts as a gatekeeper to her child depends on her unique circumstance. The interviews indicated that mothers, by and large, wanted nonresident fathers to be involved in their children's lives and to perform responsible fathering. Although the mothers were often frustrated by the fact that they received little child support, quality of father's parenting seemed to be more of a concern. It appeared, however, that mothers' expectations of the fathers were easily violated, leading to dissatisfaction,

frustration, and anger, perhaps due to a narrow definition of what it means to be a 'responsible' father.

Mothers did intentionally refuse or limit father-child contact in cases where they believed that father involvement would threaten the safety of their children. In this study, one out of five mothers volunteered information about a father's problematic behaviors, including alcohol or drug abuse, violence against mothers and/or their children, and criminal activities. In these cases, "gatekeeping" behavior should appropriately be viewed as one survival strategy for mothers. These findings demonstrate that establishing a cooperative co-parental relationship is a more complicated task than often assumed by public policies.

Conclusions Drawn From Each Of The Studies

The Importance of Low-Income Mothers' Perceptions

Although each study was guided by a specific theoretical framework, overall, this dissertation was rooted in a feminist orientation. A core theme of feminist scholarship embraced by this study is the validation of the experiences of undervalued populations. Both of my studies relied on the reports from low-income mothers, who are doubly disenfranchised because of their gender as well as their weaker socio-economic status. Although these women are the targets of many social support programs, current policies dealing with nonresident fathers are largely based on studies of middle-class families (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). Examples of such policies are the Family Support Act of 1988 and the welfare reform legislation of 1996. Scholars argue policies may not be as effective as

expected because the assumptions underlying these policies may not apply to low-income populations. This dissertation sheds light on the experiences of low-income families and provides valuable information about a population targeted by social policies.

In addition to valuing experiences of low-income mothers, there was an additional rationale for focusing on the residential mothers' reports. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Overall Literature Review*, there is strong evidence that nonresident father's involvement is strongly influenced by maternal factors (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Beitel & Parke, 1998; DeLuccie, 1995; Grossman, Pollack, & Golding, 1988). Both of my studies provided evidence in support of these previous findings. My first study indicated that mothers' education and their annual income significantly impact presence of father-child contact. My second study demonstrated the importance of mother's satisfaction with father's parenting with regard to nonresident father's involvement. These results, along with findings of past research, suggest that the father-child relationship cannot be understood without incorporating maternal factors. Symbolic interactionism, which provided the theoretical framework for my second study emphasizes the importance of social interaction to create the roles and identities assigned to groups and individuals (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). A nonresident father's role and identity are formulated through interaction with the custodial mother, as well as their children.

Complexity of Nonresident Father's Involvement

Both of the studies illustrated the complexity of nonresident father's involvement.

My first study furthered our understanding of nonresident father's involvement by challenging the conceptualization of *presence* and *level* of father-child contact (or paternal engagement) as points on continuum and providing evidence in support of viewing *presence and level* as related, but separate, aspects of a single issue. The latter perspective necessitates a data structure which includes both binary and count data. Because OLS regression is not able to handle this complex data structure, it was necessary to apply a relatively novel methodology in this area of fatherhood research, zero-inflated Negative Binomial regression, to simultaneously assess *presence* and *level*. This study demonstrated that more careful selection of methodology might be necessary to accurately reflect nonresident father's involvement.

The second study presented examples of the complicated life circumstances faced by nonresident fathers and resident mothers. For example, the interviews revealed that many fathers had children with multiple partners, a situation which impacts his resource allocation. As previous research indicated (e.g., Garfinkel et al., 1998), this study also found that many fathers were struggling financially, dealing with substance abuse, and/or were incarcerated. Finally, in some cases (about 20% of this study), nonresident fathers' involvement may be a threat for safety of mothers and children. Even though the overall

number of fathers with risk factors is comparatively low, they are a significant minority whose negative consequences to mothers and children cannot be ignored

Taken together, both studies established that the nonresident father's involvement cannot be fully understood without considering the complicated nature of circumstances surrounding nonresident fathers and resident mothers. Previous studies might have portrayed the nonresident father's involvement rather simplistically. They plainly assumed that increased father involvement promotes positive outcomes in children (Blakenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996) either minimizing the complexities of life circumstances, or ignoring potential danger to mothers and children. Although research does indicate that *positive* father involvement is beneficial to child development (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), these studies might be depicting only one aspect of nonresident fathers' involvement among a restricted range of family circumstances.

Centrality of Co-Parental Relationship to Nonresident Father's Involvement

The centrality of co-parental relationship to nonresident father's involvement was suggested by both studies. In my first study, fathers who were in a romantic relationship with the mother were more likely to be involved. Similarly, better relationship quality between parents significantly increased both *presence* and *level* of father involvement. The second study also indicated that the father-child interactions were influenced by co-parental relationships, and the quality of co-parental relationship depended on mother's satisfaction toward the father. These results are consistent with previous research that also found that the parental

relationship is the most salient predictor of father involvement (Arendell, 1986, 1992; Coley & Chase-Landsdale, 1998; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Family systems theory, which guided the first study, validates the centrality of co-parental relationship to nonresident father's involvement. Family systems theory conceptualizes a family as a hierarchy of complex systems and predicts different relationships influences each other.

Each of the studies, however, indicated a different relationship between parental conflict and a father's contact with his child. Past literature suggested two possible directions between parental conflict and father-child contact. One possibility is that parental conflict decreases father-child contact (Arendell, 1986, 1992). On the other hand, father-child contact may provide more opportunities for conflict to occur (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). The first study indicated that higher parental conflict was positively related to the presence of father-child contact and presence of paternal engagement, supporting the latter argument. The results of the second study, however, did not support either direction. Rather, it pointed to a third possibility, that the father's *lack of contact* creates mother's distrust toward the fathers, which produces a relationship of conflict.

The inconsistency of the results of these studies illustrates the complex nature of the relationship between the parental conflict and father's involvement. The relationship between the two may not be as simple as indicated by previous

research. Further research focused more specifically on this relationship is necessary to resolve this debate.

Fathers With Risk Factors

Both studies pointed to the importance of including father's problematic behaviors in future analyses. While many feminist studies have addressed the negative impact of father's involvement on women (Raphael, 2000; Scott, London & Myers, 2002; Tolman & Raphael, 2000), the majority of fatherhood research largely ignores father's risk factors.

While the first study indicated father's history of incarceration significantly decreases paternal engagement level, other problematic behaviors did not influence father's involvement and were dropped from the final analysis. In contrast, the second study indicated that about 20 % of the mothers, a significant minority, refused or limited the father's involvement due to the father's problematic behaviors.

These seemingly inconsistent results illustrate the relative strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In my first study, descriptive analysis of the sample revealed that about 40% of the fathers had a history of incarceration, 19% of the fathers were physically and/or emotionally abusive toward mothers, and 14% had a substance abuse problem. Nonetheless, no significant association was found between these risk factors and father's involvement, except history of incarceration on paternal engagement level. The greatest advantage of quantitative research is its *generalizability* to a broader

population. Thus, these father's risk factors, as a general trend, may not influence father-child contact or paternal engagement. The lack of a statistical significance, however, does not mean that these problematic behaviors do not have a negative impact on mother's households. This point is vividly illustrated in my second study. Qualitative research values individual "voices," and seeks to understand how subjects perceive, understand, and define events in their lives. Many mothers discussed how father's problematic behavior influenced their decision to "gatekeep." Thus, although problematic behaviors were not shown to have statistical significance, clearly, they had an impact on some mothers and need to be considered in future research.

Limitations of The Two Studies

Despite the independent contributions of these two studies, one limitation of the overall dissertation was the inability to directly compare results of the two studies. This was due largely to the discrepancy in the type of information available in the two data sets. The data for the first study came from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, which examined non-marital childbirth, welfare reform, and the role of fathers (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001) and was primarily quantitative. The participants of the Fragile Families represented families in urban cities with populations over 200,000. Data for the second study came from the Rural Families Speak project that assessed changes in the well-being and functioning of families in the context of welfare reform (Bauer, 2003). The data for this research project comprised families living

in rural communities with populations less than 20,000. The Rural Families Speak applied a mixed method design and data were collected accordingly. I tailored my research questions and methodology to match the strengths of each data set, making direct comparison difficult.

Previous research on fatherhood seldom paid attention to rural families, most likely because rural communities are (mistakenly) perceived to be smaller versions of urban areas (Findeis et al., 2001). However, as discussed in my second study, families living in rural areas face unique challenges. These circumstances may result in different factors influencing nonresident fathers in rural and urban areas. Assessment of geographic differences is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, understanding the effect of geographic factors on nonresident fathers is essential for tailoring policies to better target populations.

Another limitation of this dissertation is the reliance of both studies on reports by mothers. Although focusing on mother's perceptions is well-justified, obtaining nonresident fathers' perspectives on involvement is also important. Fathers as well as mothers were interviewed for the Fragile Families data. The collection rate for fathers was 68.7 % of the mothers at the baseline, and 87.7% for the one-year follow-up, which is a higher rate than for many other research projects. However, examining dyadic data would have required complicated statistical treatment that would have prohibited analysis using zero-inflated Negative Binomial regression. In the case of the Rural Families Speak Project, no data are collected from fathers.

For future research, it would be beneficial to include fathers' perspectives in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of father involvement. After all, in most cases, fathers are the ones who ultimately decide whether or not to be involved in their children's lives. In addition, data from fathers would allow for triangulation—simultaneous assessment of data from different sources—which would serve to strengthen any conclusions drawn by the research.

Policy Implications Drawn from Both Studies

Policies are intended to regulate or promote certain paternal behaviors both directly and indirectly and to influence the amount, frequency, and types of fathers' involvement. As noted in the introductory chapter, issues surrounding nonresident father are highly politicized and some policies are driven by ideology rather than theory. As a result, scholars argue that these policies may not be as effective as policymakers expected (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). The studies of this dissertation collectively offer insight into the reality of low-income families that may allow better targeting of policies.

Child Support Payment Policy

Key features of the welfare reform legislation of 1996 were stricter child support enforcement and paternity establishment (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). In current legislation, it is required for a custodial mother applying for public assistance to cooperate in establishing paternity and child support collection by helping to locate the father. Because the method of child support collection is at the discretion of each state, there is much variation in collection methods between

states (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). Some states take punitive approaches toward noncompliance by, for example, wage garnishment, incarceration, or suspension of driver's, hunting, or fishing licenses. The assumption behind these punitive approaches is that nonresident fathers try to avoid responsibilities such as establishing paternity (for unwed fathers); thus, coercion is necessary to make "delinquent" fathers comply to their obligations. These measures assume that fathers fail to pay child support because they do not want to pay, and not because they are unable to pay.

This dissertation provides evidence that the assumption of delinquency may not be entirely correct, at least for low-income fathers. Consistent with past research (Dubey, 1995; Garfinkel et al., 1998; Mincy & Pouncy, 1997, Sorensen, 1997), my second study supported the strong association between low-income, unemployment, and nonpayment of child support. The study showed that many fathers are struggling financially and that their life circumstances may be otherwise complicated. They may have children with multiple partners or previous incarceration may lower their job marketability. In the sample I investigated, there were a sizable number of such fathers who failed to pay because they were unable to do so.

Current child support systems are based on the father's ability to pay, and thus, such policies may be ineffective for low-income populations. In some cases, child support enforcement may actually work against father involvement. The second study indicated that overemphasis on a man's economic contribution might

undermine his identify as a father, which might, in turn, result in his unwillingness to become involved in his child's life. Feelings of financial incompetency may cause fathers to withdraw. Punitive child support collection policies may not be in the best interest of low-income populations—nonresident fathers, resident mothers, or their children.

Some scholars argue that child support policy should be revised for low-income fathers and propose alternatives policies (Curren, 2003; Feeley, 2000; Johnson, Levine, Coolittle, 1999; McLanahan, 1994). The detailed elements of these proposals are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, brief summaries of such policies are presented here.

One such policy, which has been implemented experimentally in California and New York, is the Assured Child Support program (Curren, 2003). Under this program, the state provides additional funds to the mother if the father cannot pay the required amount of child support. As the second study showed, child support payment was a significant issue for almost all the mothers interviewed. A few mothers reportedly relied on child support payment as their single source of monthly income. Thus, guaranteed income would stabilize custodial mothers' finances and decrease the possibility of conflicts between the mothers and nonresident fathers over child-support payment.

Another approach that has been experimented with is the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) program. Under the PFS, in exchange for the fathers' cooperation with the child support systems, the fathers are offered various social services such

as employment-related training, mediation with the custodial mothers, and peer support. While the fathers are in the program, the amounts of child support payments are adjusted according to the fathers' earning capacity. Although the effectiveness of PFS has not yet been confirmed by a program evaluation (Feeley, 2000), this program recognizes the low-income fathers' fragile economic situation, and attempts to adjust their child support obligation accordingly.

Although scholars do not agree on specifics of policies and programs, there is strong consensus on a basic need of low-income families, also supported by this dissertation, which is to improve the earning power of both nonresident fathers and resident mothers. This dissertation points to the importance of raising minimum wage, ensuring greater job opportunities in both urban and rural areas, and providing job-training assistance to low-income families.

Finally, policymakers must address the fact that paternity establishment and strict child support enforcement may endanger families of abusive fathers. Paternity establishment may lead to retaliation or attempts to gain custody and/or visitation rights by currently or previously abusive partners. This may put mothers and children in danger through increased contact with their abusers. The interviews with rural low-income mothers vividly illustrated that some nonresident father's involvement actually decreased or threatened the well-being of the resident mother's family. Although a "good-cause" waiver of child support enforcement is available, currently, only a small number of qualifying women actually obtain the waiver (Pearson, Theonnes, & Griswold, 1999). Requirements

for the waiver are so stringent that additional women who are at risk do not qualify. In these cases, the negative consequences of child support collection may outweigh the economic benefits to these families.

Government's Efforts To Promote Marriage

The current policy climate surrounding low-income families has increasingly focused on marriage. Recognizing that the majority of welfare recipients are single mother families (Edin & Lein, 1997; Seccombe, 1999), along with their concern for high divorce rate and increased out-of-wedlock childbirth, policymakers have recently proposed legislation to promote marriage as the federal government's treatment of poverty (Lipscomb, 2001). The assumption is that married couples would be better off financially than single-mother families, and that higher numbers of marriages consequently would reduce welfare expenditures.

Scholars argue the significance and function of marriage from various perspectives. One consistent finding often cited by "pro-marriage" social scientists is that children raised by two well-functioning and continuously married parents are more successful academically and better adjusted socially than children raised in other family structures (Amato & Booth, 1997; Emery, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Similarly, some pro-marriage fatherhood researchers claim that because of the contextual nature of fathering, married fathers are more likely to be involved in their children's lives (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998).

While the association of stable two-parent families and better child outcomes is fairly consistent, the scope is limited to “*well-functioning*” parents. Much of the literature on divorce has demonstrated that conflicting parental relationship within marriage is strongly related to children’s behavioral and emotional problems (for review, see Kelly, 2000). In such cases, divorce frees children from dysfunctional household (Amato & Booth, 1997). In addition, scholars who reported positive associations between stable two-parent families and better child outcomes acknowledged that many children in various family structures—divorced, step-, never married parents’, cohabiting parents’ families—also developed into well-functioning adults (Amato & Booth, 1997; Emery, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Similarly, research on father involvement suggests that poor relationship quality between parents significantly discouraged father involvement, even within marriage (Ahrns & Miller, 1993). Finally, examining results from the PAIR Project, a longitudinal study that traced life trajectories of couples for 14 years, Huston and Melz (2004) concluded that not all marriages are beneficial to children or parents, and not all dysfunctional marriages are salvageable. Based on these results, Huston and Metz question current efforts to strengthen marriage.

The two studies of this dissertation provided insight into the effect of the co-parental relationship on father involvement, with evidence of both positive and negative influence. My first study indicated that nonresident fathers who are romantically involved with the custodial mother are more likely to be involved

with their children. Although this study did not include married parents, there is evidence that many of the romantically-involved couples had the intention of marrying in the future (McLanahan et al., 2003). In these cases, the intention to marry may motivate a nonresident father to be involved in his child's life. In reality, however, only 1 out of 10 couples who planned to marry at the time of the child's birth actually married one year later, and about 50% of couples not cohabiting at childbirth broke up one year later (Center for Research on Child Well-being, 2003). From a probabilistic standpoint, therefore, it is likely that romantic relationships between mothers and fathers in the first study may dissolve sometime in future, which would decrease the fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

According to the findings of my first study, better parental relationships, regardless of relationship status, promote higher father involvement. In order to increase active fathering, thus, it seems more realistic to promote a positive parental relationship than marriage. In addition, studying a subsample of the Fragile Families, Edin, Kefalas, and Reed (2004) claimed that better relationship quality, in addition to economic stability, is one of the keys for the couple to actually marry. Taken together, it can be concluded that marriage or intention of marriage positively impact father-child interaction. But for many individuals, intentions of getting married might not be realized unless they feel their relationship quality is good. Regardless of relationship status, the most important factor for nonresident fathering is the high relationship quality between parents.

My second study also offers another insight regarding promoting marriage. Complicated life circumstances faced by low-income mothers and fathers may decrease the individual's "*marriageability*." Lipscomb (2001) explained marriageability and its needs as following:

"Marriageability" has been a term adopted with the belief that many poor fathers are not presently "marriageable." It is believed that services to help men overcome such barriers as unemployment, lack of education and skills training, alcohol and drug problems, and violence could be provided with the result of increasing the marriage prospects of poor men (cited from Lipscomb, p 8).

The second study clearly showed that nonresident fathers face many barriers which decrease their marriageability. Considering these difficult life circumstances, it is understandable that a single-mother would hesitate to marry. According to Edin (2000), there were four main reasons why women postpone marriage despite their desire to marry. First, women feel that marrying someone with financial difficulties will increase their own economic burden. Second, they hold high expectations for marriage and do not want to marry with the possibility of divorce. Third, the women were concerned about being expected to fulfill gendered roles in childcare and family. Finally, the women voiced concerns about men's faithfulness, substance abuse, and violence. The Rural Families Speak mothers in the second study clearly shared the same concerns as reported by Edin.

In order to promote marriage, multiple barriers faced by low-income men need to be addressed. Single-minded marriage promotion may not work for low-income populations. Huston and Melz (2004) describe marriage as a complicated set of relations that are embedded in unique ecological contexts. As Edin

suggested, the decision for a single mother to marry or not depends on her assessment of how much economic benefit the marriage will bring, how well a man can fulfill the role of father to his children and as a partner for the mother, and how trustworthy the father is.

Marriage works when the quality of relationship is good. Even when parents do not marry or dissolve marriage, good parental relations promote positive father-child interaction. Thus, promoting healthy relationships regardless of marital status would be more beneficial than simply promoting marriage itself.

Overall Conclusions

The goal of studying nonresident father's involvement in his child's life ultimately comes down to improving the well-being of the child. In the first chapter, this dissertation introduced the debate regarding the value of father's involvement. On one hand, neoconservatives claim that children need biological fathers for optimal child development. On the other hand, feminist researchers raise strong concern that involvement by abusive fathers may be detrimental.

Findings from previous studies suggest that *positive* father involvement does benefit children. Although child outcomes were not directly tested in either study, both studies suggested the importance of building a high quality of co-parental relationship to promote father involvement. Positive co-parental relationship, regardless of marital status of parents, is the key to increase positive child outcomes.

Hostile co-parental relationship is detrimental to children (Emery, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Madden-Derdich, et al., 1999). Just as mothers' problematic behaviors can be detrimental to families, increased father involvement is not universally beneficial. Social policies and fatherhood research need to encourage positive co-parental relationship but also recognize the potential danger and must take every reasonable precaution not to sacrifice the well-being of any family member—man, woman, or child.

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