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## Identity Salience and Involvement among Resident and Nonresident Fathers

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### Abstract

The literature on father involvement suggests that the value men ascribe to the father role is important for understanding their involvement with their children, yet this theory has received only limited empirical attention. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ( $N = 3,554$ ), I examined the association between fathers' identity salience reported at their child's birth and their involvement (accessibility, engagement, and responsibility) when their child was about 1, 3, and 5 years old, carefully considering the role played by fathers' residence status. I found that fathers' identity salience predicted future levels of engagement net of a large number of fathers' characteristics, and that fathers with high identity salience were more likely to reside with their child, which facilitated their involvement. These results suggest that programs designed to enhance the salience of the father role would be useful for teaching men to become more involved fathers.

Keywords: Fatherhood, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW), Longitudinal Data, Parental Involvement, Social Psychology (Family)

Fatherhood has become an increasingly ambiguous role. As Furstenberg noted more than twenty years ago (1988:199), “as men have escaped from the good provider role, they have been freed to participate more fully in the family. They have also been freed from family responsibility altogether.” Today, even more fathers have moved beyond “breadwinning” to become more directly involved in nurturing and caring for their children (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Other fathers have distanced themselves from their children or chosen not to participate in their children’s lives at all (Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998). In fact, unprecedented levels of divorce, separation, nonmarital childbearing, and incarceration means that the number of children who have limited or no contact with their father is likely higher than ever before (Cherlin, 2010). With more and more studies documenting the positive effects of father involvement for child outcomes (Carlson, 2006; Lamb, 2010) there is an immediate need to identify and promote the characteristics associated with highly involved fathers.

The focus of the present study is on one characteristic that has been repeatedly cited in the theoretical literature as a key predictor of father involvement but has received only limited empirical attention—father identity. The term ‘identity’ refers to the discrete roles individuals use to answer the question “Who am I?” (Stryker, 1968). The more salient an identity the more a person seeks out opportunities to enact that role, suggesting that men’s involvement with their child should vary as a function of the salience of their father identity. Nevertheless, there have been few empirical investigations of this hypothesized association, and studies that have been conducted have been limited by the use of small, non-representative samples and cross-sectional data, making it difficult to generalize results to a large population of fathers and to assess the direction and duration of the association between identity and involvement.

The main objective of this study is to address these shortcomings by using a nationally representative sample of urban births and longitudinal data about fathers collected from the birth through early childhood. It also aims to enhance the previous literature by examining ways in which fathers' residence status may account for or modify the direct association between identity salience and involvement. Specifically, this paper addresses the following three research questions: 1) Is the reported salience of men's father identity at the birth of their child associated with their involvement when their child is approximately 1, 3, and 5 years old? 2) Does fathers' residence status mediate the association between identity and involvement by acting as a mechanism through which identity influences involvement? 3) Does the association between identity salience and involvement operate differently in residential and nonresidential contexts?

### Theoretical Perspectives and Prior Research

#### *Father Involvement and its Importance for Child Development*

Fathers today are often directly involved in caring for their children in a number of ways (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hoffereth, & Lamb, 2000). Lamb and colleagues (1987) highlight three distinct domains of paternal involvement: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility. *Accessibility* refers to fathers' availability for interaction with their child. *Engagement* concerns fathers' direct contact with their child through shared childcare and play activities. Finally, *responsibility* refers to the role of fathers in ensuring their child's needs are taken care of, such as by taking the child to daycare or the doctor. A number of studies have demonstrated positive associations between father involvement and desirable outcomes for children, including children's social functioning (Carlson, 2006; Coley & Medeiros, 2007), cognitive development (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, Horowitz, & Kinukawa, 2008), educational attainment (Menning, 2006), and economic attainment later in life (Harris, Furstenberg, &

Marmer, 1998). The other side of this coin is that lower levels of father involvement are associated with children's heightened delinquency and lower educational and economic attainment. This is particularly troubling given that children who are already members of society's most disadvantaged groups—such as the poor and racial/ethnic minorities—are especially likely have limited contact with their father and suffer these deleterious consequences.

Particularly in light of evidence about the importance of father involvement for children's wellbeing, researchers have endeavored to identify the antecedents of father involvement. In his classic model, Belsky (1984) posits three broad categories of factors that are likely to influence fathers' involvement with their child: characteristics of the father, characteristics of the child, and socio-contextual factors, such as the status and quality of the mother-father relationship. A handful of characteristics related to fathers' background and family structure have been subject to rigorous empirical examination, including fathers' race/ethnicity (Cabrera, Hoffereth, & Chae, 2011; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004), educational attainment (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Coley & Hernandez, 2006), and relationship with the child's mother (Carlson, 2006; Carlson & McLanahan, 2004; Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009). In contrast, one social-psychological characteristic that has been emphasized by Belsky and others as a particularly important determinant of fathers' involvement but has received very little attention in the empirical literature is their identification with the father role; i.e. their father identity.

#### *The Association between Father Identity and Father Involvement*

As early as the 1960s, Stryker (1968) suggested that researchers turn to the concept of identity to explain variations in father involvement. Two components of identity are particularly relevant for behavior. The *meaning*—or content—of an identity influences the specific behaviors a person will use to enact that identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). For example, a man

for whom being a father primarily means being a breadwinner may view working long hours as a necessary part of enacting the father role, whereas a man for whom being a father primarily means engaging with his children may view this same long workday as an obstacle to enacting this role. Although the data used in the present study do not assess the meaning men ascribe to the domains of accessibility, engagement, and responsibility, fathers' degree of involvement in each of these tasks is expected to vary based on their differing conceptions of what being a father means to them. The second component of identity that bears upon behavior is its salience.

*Salience* refers to the importance individuals ascribe to a particular identity compared to all of their other identities (Stryker, 1968). In their theory of the association between fathers' identity salience and their involvement with their child, Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler (1993) posit a causal and reciprocal association between these two variables, with the salience of the father identity affecting subsequent levels of involvement, and involvement affecting the subsequent salience of the identity in a feedback loop.

Unfortunately, inconsistent findings and methodological shortcomings have made it difficult to draw general conclusions about the association between fathers' identity salience and involvement from prior empirical work. Although most qualitative studies have noted a positive relationship between men's general valuation of the father role and their level of involvement with their child (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, & Guzman, 2006; Roy, 2006), the results of quantitative studies have been mixed, with some finding a positive association between salience and involvement (Bruce & Fox, 1999; Fox & Bruce, 2001; Ihinger-Tallman, et al., 1993) and others failing to find an association (Henley & Pasley, 2005; Minton & Pasley, 1996).

Furthermore, prior quantitative examinations have possessed two important limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional data has precluded an examination of the direction and duration

of the association between identity and involvement. The theoretical literature portrays identity salience and involvement as mutually reinforcing, which suggests that their cross-sectional association may get stronger over time. Understanding the causal ordering of these variables is important if we hope to use these findings to develop interventions and policies that aim to enhance fathers' involvement. Unfortunately, the data used in the present study only contain a measure of identity salience at a single time point, making it impossible to evaluate the reciprocal association over time. Nevertheless, the ability to examine the relationship between fathers' baseline identity salience and subsequent measures of involvement provides a fruitful and much needed advance in the examination of the causal component of this theory.

A second shortcoming of past research has been the use of small, non-representative samples, which has inhibited the generalizability of results to a diverse population of fathers and reduced the number of covariates researchers can include in their models. In order to determine whether an association between identity and involvement exists independent of related individual and contextual characteristics it is necessary to control for factors that may affect both men's levels of father identity salience and their involvement with their child. Several characteristics of fathers that are likely positively related to both salience and involvement include their age (Lerman & Sorensen, 2000), educational attainment (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999), physical and mental health (Paulson, Dauber, & Leiferman, 2010), income (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Coley & Hernandez, 2006), whether they were born in the U.S. (Landale & Oropesa, 2001), and the quality of their relationship with their own father (Roy, 2006). Also likely to be relevant is their race/ethnicity, as studies have found differing patterns of involvement among fathers of White, Black, and Hispanic origin (Cabrera, et al., 2011; King, et al., 2004). Characteristics of the family context that may be positively related to fathers' initial identity

salience and involvement include whether the focal child is a boy (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007), fathers' marital status and relationship quality with the child's mother (Belsky, 1984; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & McLanahan, 2004), and whether fathers were present at their child's birth (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Finally, two factors that are likely to be positively related to identity salience but negatively related to involvement include the amount of time fathers spend working and whether they have previous children (Yeung, et al., 2001).

The present study uses longitudinal data from a large, nationally-representative sample of fathers and their children, and in doing so takes the next step in evaluating the theory that fathers' identity salience is associated with subsequent levels of involvement. Based primarily on the theoretical argument that father identity salience affects involvement, I hypothesize that fathers' identity salience measured at the birth of their child will be positively associated with future levels of involvement, although it is difficult to predict how far into the future this association will persist.

#### *Fathers' Residence Status as an Intervening Factor*

Many researchers have noted that the meaning and nature of fatherhood differ greatly for fathers who live with their child versus those who do not (Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009). It is therefore worth investigating the extent to which fathers' residence status alters the direct association between identity salience and involvement. One way in which residence may affect this association is by acting as a mechanism through which identity impacts involvement. The salience of the father role may affect the probability that fathers reside with their child, because men with high father identity salience may perceive greater costs to separating themselves from meaningful relationships associated with fatherhood, such as relationships with their child and child's mother. A small amount of descriptive evidence regarding differences in fathers' identity



salience by residence status lends credence to this argument. Studies of resident fathers have found that the vast majority of these men report their father identity as highly salient, important, and psychologically central to their sense of self (Bronte-Tinkew, et al., 2006; Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002), whereas studies of nonresident fathers suggest that these men often lack the requisite experiences to reinforce the father role, resulting in feelings of ambiguity toward fatherhood (Forste, Bartkowski, & Jackson, 2009; Olmstead, et al., 2009). Nevertheless, no study to date has looked at identity salience as a predictor of men's residence status. A large body of research also suggests that fathers' residence status is a key determinant of involvement with their child; resident fathers tend to have much higher levels of involvement than nonresident fathers (Carlson, 2006; Edin, et al., 2009). A number of explanations have been offered for this pattern, including resident fathers' increased opportunities for interaction with their child (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) and their tendency to have a closer and higher-quality relationship with the child's mother (Erel & Burman, 1995). Evidence suggesting that resident fathers possess a more salient father identity and are more involved in their child's life than nonresident fathers leads to my second hypothesis—that residence status mediates the association between father identity salience and involvement.

It is also likely that the association between father identity salience and involvement operates differently for resident and nonresident fathers. Resident fathers—who compared to nonresident fathers have more opportunities to interact with their child and tend to have a higher-quality relationship with their child's mother—may be more successful at enacting their father identity in the form of involvement with their child. On the other hand, it is also possible that because father-child interactions occur almost “automatically” within a residential context, the salience of the father identity is more predictive of involvement among nonresident than resident

fathers. Empirical investigations of the moderating role of residence on the association between identity salience and involvement have yielded mixed results. A handful of interviews with nonresident fathers suggest that although many of these men care greatly about being a good father, they often struggle to find the time or resources necessary to be highly involved in their child's life (Forste, et al., 2009; Olmstead, et al., 2009). In spite of this, one comparison of resident and nonresident fathers found that even though levels of involvement were higher for resident than nonresident fathers, identity salience did more to increase the involvement of nonresident fathers than their resident counterparts (Bruce & Fox, 1999). The large sample size and longitudinal design of the data used in the present study allow me to address these inconsistent findings by examining the extent to which fathers' residence status influences the relationship between identity and involvement. In accord with most prior research, my third hypothesis is that identity salience has a stronger direct association with future levels of involvement for resident fathers than for nonresident fathers.

### Method

#### *Data*

The data for this research come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS)—a longitudinal study of 4,897 births that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in 20 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. The FFCWS includes an oversample of unmarried births and when weighted, is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Baseline interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers within 48 hours of the focal child's birth. An in-hospital interview with the mother was necessary for inclusion in the sample. If fathers were not available to be interviewed at the hospital, they were contacted for an out-of-hospital interview, the vast majority of which occurred within 1 week of the birth. Traditionally,

response rates among unmarried fathers in nationally-representative surveys have been low (Rendall, Clarke, Peters, Ranjit, & Verropoulou, 1999). The decision to interview parents in the hospital following the birth of their child was an attempt to raise response rates among these men. This plan was largely successful, as approximately 78% of fathers—89% married and 75% unmarried—were interviewed at baseline. Follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone when the child was approximately 1, 3, and 5 years old; completion rates for these three survey waves were 89%, 86%, and 85% for eligible mothers and 69%, 65%, and 64% for eligible fathers, respectively.

Of the 4,897 cases in the baseline FFCWS sample, my analyses excluded 1,068 cases (21.8%) in which the father was not interviewed at baseline and another 10 cases (0.2%) in which the father was interviewed but had a missing measure of identity salience. I also excluded from the sample 74 cases (1.5%) in which the focal child did not reside with the mother at each wave, 153 cases (3.1%) that lacked valid responses to all of the father involvement measures in at least one wave, and 39 cases (0.8%) that had missing father residency information. There were 219 cases (4.0%) that had missing information on one or more of the covariates included in the multivariate models; I used multiple imputation (Royston, 2004) to impute missing covariates for these cases, but not for the father identity or involvement measures. The final analytic sample consisted of 3,554 fathers who completed the baseline identity measures and had a valid report for all three of the involvement measures at any given wave.

A limitation of this analytic sample is that it likely over-represents men who ascribed a greater importance to their father identity, because presumably fathers who did not complete the baseline interview had lower average identity salience than those who did. Previous research also suggests that fathers who dropped out of subsequent waves of the FFCWS were less

involved with their child and less likely to reside with the mother of their child (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). Because fathers' attrition is correlated with my outcome of interest, I used mothers' reports of fathers' involvement for all fathers. One potential caveat of this approach is that prior analyses using Fragile Families data suggest that mothers' reports of fathers' involvement tend to be lower than fathers' reports of their own involvement (Mikelson, 2008). Nevertheless, using mothers' reports allowed me to maintain a larger proportion of my sample over time and to avoid the "shared method variance" that results from using the same individual to report both the independent and dependent variables (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Furthermore, sensitivity analyses using available fathers' reports of their involvement (not shown) suggested that my results were substantively similar regardless of which parents' reports were used.

### *Measures*

*Father involvement.* To assess multiple ways in which fathers may be involved with their child, I used three measures of father involvement, each of which was reported by the mother at the 1, 3, and/or 5 year interview. *Accessibility* was represented by how often the father spent one or more hours a day with the focal child, ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every day*. *Engagement* was a composite item measured as the mean number of days per week the father participated in each of four activities with the child—singing songs or nursery rhymes, reading, telling stories, and playing inside with toys ( $\alpha = 0.79$  at 1 year, 0.85 at 3 years, and 0.86 at 5 years). Finally, *responsibility* for child-related tasks was measured by mother's reports of how often the father helped her by 1) looking after the child, 2) running errands and picking things up from the store, and 3) taking the child places he/she needed to go. Values on each item ranged from 0 = *never* to 4 = *often* and were averaged to create a single measure of father's responsibility ( $\alpha = 0.84$  at 1 year, 0.86 at 3 years, and 0.88 at 5 years).

*Father identity salience.* I created a dichotomous measure of father identity salience using three items from the father baseline survey. Following the birth of the focal child, each father was asked to rate his level of agreement with the following three statements: 1) “Being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have,” 2) “I want people to know that I have a new child,” and 3) “Not being a part of my child’s life would be one of the worst things that could happen to me.” Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. I defined a father as having high identity salience if he indicated that he strongly agreed with all three of these statements and as having low identity salience if he did not ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ). Although this may appear to be a particularly stringent measure of identity salience, 60% of fathers met this criterion for high identity salience. Fathers’ high level of agreement may reflect the fact that the birth of their child represented a “magic moment” in their lives—a time when their father identity was particularly meaningful (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001), or it may stem from social pressure to respond affirmatively to these items. Either way, any indication that a father did not strongly agree with all of these statements at such a critical moment in time was taken to be indicative of a lack of salience of the father identity. Sensitivity analyses (available upon request) indicated that my substantive conclusions were robust to alternative specifications of identity salience, for instance as a continuous variable and as a tri-fold measure with categories for low, medium, and high salience.

*Residence status.* Father’s residence status was a dichotomous, time-varying measure of whether the father lived with the mother and focal child at each survey wave. It was based on mother’s reports of whether she lived with the father at least “some of the time” (note: at baseline, the only response options were “yes” or “no”). Couples who were married were not asked about their residence status; therefore I assumed that fathers who were married to the

child's mother were living with her and the child.

*Other variables.* I used two sets of control variables in my regression analyses, all of which were based on father's reports at the baseline survey. The first set included personal characteristics of the father. Father's age at the focal child's birth was measured in years. Father's race/ethnicity was specified as non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, or other. Categories of educational attainment included less than high school, high school/some college, and bachelor's degree or higher. A dummy variable indicated whether or not the father was born in the U.S. Father's self-rated physical health was measured on a scale of 1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*. Depressive symptoms were measured using a subset of seven items from the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (Mirowsky & Ross, 2001). The father was asked how many days per week he experienced each of seven symptoms, and responses were averaged to create a single measure of the number of days per week he experienced depressive symptoms. Employment was a self-reported measure of the number of hours the father worked at paid employment during the week preceding the survey. Economic status was assessed by a dichotomous variable indicating whether the father's income placed him below the appropriate poverty line for his family size. Finally, I included two measures of the father's family history. Each father reported how involved his own biological father was in childrearing on a scale of 1 = *didn't know biological father* to 4 = *very involved*, and whether he lived with both of his biological parents at age 15.

The second set of control variables reflected the father's family context. Gender of the focal child was specified by a dummy variable indicating whether the child was a boy. Also included were measures of the couple's marital status and relationship quality when the child was born. Relationship quality was assessed by asking the father to report on a scale of 1 = *often*

to 3 = *never* how often the mother 1) was fair and willing to compromise, 2) expressed affection or love for him, 3) insulted or criticized his ideas, and 4) encouraged or helped him to do things that were important to him. Responses to the first, second, and fourth items were reverse-coded and all four items were averaged to create a measure of relationship quality ranging from 1 = *poor* to 3 = *excellent* ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ). Two final items reflecting the father's family context included whether the father had previous kids and whether he was present at the focal child's birth.

### *Analytic Strategy*

*Descriptive Statistics and Mean Differences.* I first present descriptive information for all fathers in the sample, as well as separately for fathers with high and low identity salience. This is followed by bivariate mean differences in the measures of father involvement when the focal child was 1, 3, and 5 years old for fathers with high and low identity salience overall, as well as separately by residence status within each group at each year. I also present the percent of fathers residing with the focal child's mother at each survey wave for fathers with high and low identity salience. I used city sampling weights for the descriptive statistics and bivariate mean differences, but not for the multivariate analyses because the final model included all of the variables for which the weights adjust.

*OLS Regressions.* The next step was to evaluate the association between fathers' identity salience and subsequent involvement with their child. For this purpose I estimated a series of three Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions for each measure of father involvement at 1, 3, and 5 years. The first model estimated the bivariate association between each measure of involvement and fathers' identity salience. The second model added controls for fathers' personal characteristics, and the third model added controls for characteristics of fathers' family context. By accounting for these two sets of factors, I was able to evaluate whether the

association between identity and involvement was attributable to characteristics of fathers and/or their family, or if an independent association existed. Furthermore, assessing involvement at three time points allowed me to investigate the duration of the association between fathers' baseline identity salience and future levels of involvement. Finally, I added fathers' residence status to Model 3 to examine whether this factor mediated the association between identity and each involvement measure. The attenuation or disappearance of the association following this step would indicate that fathers' residence with their child and child's mother accounted for much or all of the relationship between identity and involvement (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

*Difference-in-Difference Estimates.* The final step in my analyses tested whether the association between identity salience and involvement differed for resident versus nonresident fathers. To do this, I assessed whether differences in father involvement by identity salience for resident fathers were equal to such differences for nonresident fathers by first comparing the main effect of identity on involvement for resident fathers to that of nonresident fathers, and then examining the interaction of identity and residence status in a model that included two-way interactions for each covariate and residence status. A rejection of the null hypothesis that differences were identical for resident and nonresident fathers would warrant the conclusion that the association between salience and involvement significantly differed by residence status.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics and Mean Differences*

Descriptive statistics for all fathers and by identity salience at the birth of the focal child are presented in Table 1. Significant differences between groups were tested using a *t*-test for weighted survey data. The personal characteristics of fathers with high and low identity salience differed in some key respects. Fathers with high identity salience were more likely to be White,



to have finished high school and completed some college, to have been born in the U.S., and to report better physical health than fathers with low identity salience. In contrast, fathers with low identity salience were more likely to report their race/ethnicity as “other,” to have less than a high school education, and to have income below the poverty line than fathers with high identity salience. There were also some interesting differences in fathers’ family context across groups. Compared to fathers with low identity salience, fathers with high identity salience were more likely to be married to the focal child’s mother, to report higher relationship quality with the mother, and to have been present at the child’s birth.

Table 2 displays mean scores on each of the three involvement measures at 1, 3, and 5 years, as well as the percentage of fathers residing with the child and child’s mother at each wave, for fathers with high and low identity salience. Scores are shown for all fathers, as well as separately for resident and nonresident fathers. For all fathers, possessing high identity salience was associated with higher levels of all three measures of involvement at each wave. For two of these measures—engagement and responsibility—the association was statistically significant at all three waves. Fathers’ identity salience was also predictive of their residence status; at each survey wave, fathers with high identity salience were more likely to live with their child than fathers with low identity salience. In the remaining two panels of Table 2, I present the bivariate association between identity salience and involvement separately for resident and nonresident fathers. Resident fathers displayed much higher levels of involvement than nonresident fathers across all measures at 1, 3, and 5 years. For example, when their child was 1 year old, resident fathers with high identity salience had a mean engagement score of 3.98 (on a scale of 0 - 7), whereas nonresident fathers with high identity salience had a mean score of 1.46. Also noteworthy is the large degree of attenuation in the strength of the association between identity

and involvement when fathers were separated by residence status. For resident fathers, identity remained positively associated—albeit weakly—with their engagement over time. For nonresident fathers, there were no statistically significant differences by identity salience on any of the involvement measures.

### *OLS Regressions*

The results from the regressions of father involvement on identity salience and residence status are presented in Table 3. These analyses tested the following two hypotheses: 1) fathers' identity salience is positively associated with their involvement with their child over time and 2) fathers' residence status mediates the direct association between identity and involvement. Panels A, B, and C display results for each of the three involvement measures at 1, 3, and 5 years. Each of these panels contains three regression models. In the first model, each involvement measure was regressed on the dichotomous measure of fathers' identity salience. The coefficients for these bivariate estimates differed somewhat from the mean involvement estimates presented in Table 2 because the descriptive analyses were weighted whereas the regression analyses were not. The second model added to the regression equation controls for fathers' personal characteristics, and the third model added controls for fathers' family context. Finally, the results displayed in Panel D reflect the addition of fathers' residence status, in order to examine its role as a mediator of the association between identity and involvement. It is also worth noting that the sample size at 1 year was somewhat reduced because questions regarding fathers' responsibility were not asked of all respondents.

Panel A shows results for fathers' accessibility to the focal child. Model 1 indicated that fathers with high identity salience at the focal child's birth were more accessible to their child, and that this association persisted over time. This stark change from the weighted bivariate

estimations displayed in Table 2 suggests that certain factors associated with fathers' probability of being in the sample, which were controlled for in later models, accounted for the apparent association between identity and accessibility found here. Adding fathers' personal characteristics in Model 2 attenuated the association between identity and accessibility, and adding characteristics of fathers' family context in Model 3 eliminated it altogether. These patterns support the prediction that key elements of the sampling frame (such as fathers' level of educational attainment and their baseline marital status) accounted for much of the apparent association between identity salience and accessibility.

The results for the regression of engagement on identity are displayed in Panel B. As indicated in the bivariate model, at 1 year fathers with high identity salience had a mean level of engagement that was 0.54 points higher (on a scale of 0 - 7) than father with low salience. Although this association remained statistically significant at years 3 and 5, the magnitude declined to 0.44 at 3 years and 0.30 at 5 years. Again, adding fathers' personal characteristics in Model 2 somewhat diminished the association at all three waves, and adding fathers' family context in Model 3 reduced it even further. Nevertheless, accounting for all controls, fathers with high identity salience continued to have significantly higher levels of engagement than fathers with low identity salience at years 1 and 3, but by year 5 this association was no longer significant.

Panel C presents the results for fathers' responsibility for the focal child. Fathers with high identity salience displayed higher means levels of responsibility when their child was 1, 3, and 5 years old. Controlling for fathers' personal characteristics attenuated this association somewhat, and adding fathers' family context diminished it even further. Accounting for all controls, the direct association between identity salience and responsibility was no longer

significant at years 1 and 5, and was only significant at year 3 at the  $p \leq 0.10$  level.

Stepwise examination of the covariates (not shown) indicated that a handful of characteristics accounted for a sizable portion of the reduction in the bivariate association between fathers' identity salience and each involvement measure. With regard to fathers' personal characteristics, fathers' race and education played an important role; Black fathers and fathers who did not complete high school had lower levels of identity salience and involvement than fathers with other racial/ethnic backgrounds and those with more educational attainment. Measures of fathers' family context accounted for a much larger portion of this attenuation than their personal characteristics. Fathers who were present at the focal child's birth, married to the child's mother, and reported higher relationship quality with the mother averaged much higher levels of identity salience and involvement, resulting in the reduction of many of the direct associations between fathers' identity salience and involvement to the point of non-significance.

Finally, Panel D reflects the addition of fathers' residence status to Model 3 for each involvement measure, in order to test whether residence mediated the direct association between identity and involvement. Previous bivariate analyses (Table 2) indicated that fathers' identity salience was associated with their residence at 1, 3, and 5 years, and that their residence status, in turn, was associated with their degree of involvement with their child. I limit the present discussion to the outcome of engagement because it was significantly associated with identity at years 1 and 3 net of all controls. At both of these time points, the addition of residence attenuated the magnitude of the coefficient for identity. At 1 year, the coefficient was reduced from 0.30 to 0.20, and at 3 years, it was reduced from 0.15 to 0.11. These results suggest that where an association between identity and involvement existed, much of it was due to fathers' residence status rather than to a direct association between identity and involvement. In other

words, fathers with high identity salience were more likely to live with their child, which facilitated higher levels of involvement.

#### *Difference-in-Difference Estimates*

Table 4 displays the results from the difference-in-difference estimates used to test my third hypothesis that the association between identity and involvement differs for resident versus nonresident fathers. The coefficients presented in the table are based on Model 3, which included all of the control variables. The first row in each panel suggests that for resident fathers, high identity salience was generally associated with greater involvement with the focal child. The positive associations were quite large and statistically significant for engagement at years 1 and 3; however, I also found a significant negative relationship between salience and accessibility at year 1. The second row in each panel suggests identity salience did not predict any differences in involvement among nonresident fathers. Finally, the third row of this table presents the difference-in-difference estimates. For all measures of father involvement at all time points, I failed to reject the null hypothesis that differences in involvement between fathers with high and low salience were the same for resident and nonresident fathers. These results suggest that net of residence status, identity salience did not significantly differentiate fathers' involvement with their child. Nevertheless, the lack of statistically significant differences should not undermine the substantively important finding that identity salience was associated with much higher levels of engagement for resident fathers, and that this association persisted until the child was at least 3 years old.

#### Discussion

Identity theory suggests that the salience of men's father identity is an important determinant of their involvement with their child. This study was the first to examine this

argument using longitudinal data from a large, nationally-representative sample of fathers. Overall, father identity was associated with subsequent levels of accessibility, engagement, and responsibility. Furthermore, these associations persisted after controlling for a large number of fathers' personal characteristics, and in the case of engagement, after controlling for important characteristics of fathers' family experience as well. Subsequent analyses also provided evidence that the direct association between identity and involvement was mediated by fathers' residence status. Finally, the nature of this association did not significantly differ between resident and nonresident fathers; however, compared to resident fathers with low identity salience, those with high identity salience maintained higher levels of engagement when their child was about 1 and 3 years old.

The first hypothesis under examination was that fathers' identity salience reported at the birth of their child would be positively associated with their future levels of involvement. The results of this study accord with prior research that has uncovered a positive association between identity salience and involvement (Bronte-Tinkew, et al., 2006; Bruce & Fox, 1999; Ihinger-Tallman, et al., 1993; Roy, 2006). Specifically, fathers' baseline identity salience was found to be associated with subsequent levels of accessibility, engagement, and responsibility net of fathers' personal characteristics, but the addition of certain characteristics of fathers' family context—most notably their marital status and relationship quality with the child's mother and their presence at the birth of the child—accounted for a significant portion of this direct association. This suggests that a stable and positive relationship with the child's mother prior to their child's birth influenced men's identification with and enactment of the father role, which is consistent with ideas about the 'package deal' for men's roles as partner and parent (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Nevertheless, identity salience continued to exhibit a direct association with

engagement when the child was 1 and 3 years old, even net of family context. The persistence of this association suggests that fathers considered engaging with their child to be a key component of fatherhood, and thus chose to enact their father identity via this type of involvement. Future studies should examine this prediction that the association between men's father identity salience and different types of involvement is mediated by the meanings men attribute to the father role. Finally, where an independent association between identity salience and involvement existed net of all controls (as in the case of engagement), the association was strongest at 1 year, attenuated at 3 years, and no longer significant at 5 years. The reduction in the strength of this association over time may have been due to external factors—such as fathers' changing work schedule or the birth of subsequent children—weakening the influence of fathers' baseline identity salience on future levels of involvement. Nevertheless, it remains conceivable that the cross-sectional association between identity and involvement stayed the same or even grew stronger with time if these factors did, in fact, serve to mutually reinforce each other (Ihinger-Tallman, et al., 1993).

The second hypothesis—that fathers' residence status would mediate the direct association between identity and involvement—was clearly supported. Identity salience was strongly associated with fathers' co-residence at 1, 3, and 5 years, and residence status, in turn was associated with fathers' level of involvement. When fathers' residence status at each survey wave was entered into the full regression model of involvement on identity, the direct association decreased substantially. Focusing on the results for engagement because it was strongly associated with salience at 1 and 3 years net of all controls, accounting for fathers' residence status reduced the association between identity salience and engagement by approximately one third. This suggests that the importance men ascribed to their father identity when their child was born was a key predictor of whether they would reside with their child over subsequent

years, which is important given that residence is strongly associated with how involved fathers are in their child's life.

Finally, I uncovered very limited evidence for the third hypothesis that the association between identity salience and involvement would be stronger for resident than for nonresident fathers. The results of the difference-in-difference estimates revealed no statistically significant differences in the association between identity and involvement between resident and nonresident fathers. In fact, controlling for fathers' residence status eliminated many of the statistically significant associations between identity salience and involvement, lending further credence to the argument that residence status serves a mechanism through which identity impacts involvement. There are a number of reasons why this may have been the case. For resident fathers, it is plausible that being accessible to and responsible for their child occurred somewhat automatically and therefore were not strongly influenced by the salience of the father identity. Given this line of reasoning, the fact that identity salience continued to be positively related to engagement suggests that this behavior was not automatized, but rather highly sensitive to variations in the importance resident fathers ascribed to the father role. Among nonresident fathers, the lack of significant differences in involvement by identity likely occurred because these men face a number of obstacles to being involved in their child's life, such as visitation orders, distance, or poor relationships with the child's mother, which may have impeded them from translating their father identity—no matter how high—into behavior.

This study has a number of limitations that should be considered in relation to these findings. First and foremost, the Fragile Families data only include a measure of fathers' identity salience at the birth of the focal child, which precluded a more extensive examination of the hypothesized causal relationship between identity and involvement. Although the longitudinal



evidence uncovered in this study certainly supports the existence of a causal effect of identity on involvement, much more robust statistical evidence is necessary to make this claim. A second limitation is that the sample excluded men who were not interviewed, for whom the salience of the father identity was likely very low. Fortunately, the use of mothers' rather than fathers' reports of involvement allowed me to retain those fathers with somewhat low identity salience who did complete the baseline interview but failed to complete subsequent interviews. Furthermore, the omission of fathers with very low salience likely resulted in a downward bias on my estimates of the association between salience and involvement, because if these fathers had been present, fathers with low identity salience would have appeared to be even less involved. A third limitation of this work is that it only focused on a subset of possible involvement measures. To the extent that fathers in this study opted to enact their father identity in ways other than the measures used here, their involvement was overlooked. For instance, some nonresident fathers may develop unique ways to interact with their child, such as by exchanging letters or chatting via the internet. If these types of involvement had been considered, I may have observed different associations between identity salience and involvement for nonresident fathers.

The shortcomings of this study highlight multiple avenues for future research. To investigate the proposed causal association between identity salience and involvement, researchers should examine the association between changes in identity salience and changes in involvement over time, net of other time-varying controls (for instance, using fixed effects models); alternatively they could go a step further and utilize experimental methods with interventions designed to increase paternal identity salience. In a similar vein, empirical studies should pay more attention to the fact that identity theory posits a reciprocal relationship between

fathers' identity and involvement, and begin to explore the link from involvement to identity. Finally and more generally, family researchers should pay more attention to the ways in which fathers' beliefs, conceptions, and identities influence and constrain their behaviors. Exploring the role of psychological factors, in addition to demographic, social, and structural factors, in accounting for fathers' behaviors has the potential to greatly broaden our understanding of why these men do what they do.

The present study serves to advance research related to father involvement by examining the association between fathers' identity salience and various measures of their involvement using a longitudinal and nationally-representative sample of fathers and their children. Controlling for a large number of factors that might explain the association between identity and involvement, this study found that men who ascribed a great deal of importance to fatherhood at the time of their child's birth engaged more with their child during infancy and as a toddler. Furthermore, fathers who exhibited high levels of identity salience were more likely to reside with their child, which greatly enhanced their likelihood of continued involvement in their child's life. In light of recent evidence highlighting the malleability of identity (Burke, 2006), these findings suggest that social programs and interventions designed to increase the salience of the father role might be useful for teaching men to become more involved fathers. Programs such as the Supporting Father Involvement Program (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009) that offer parental education classes, father support groups, and/or couple support groups for fathers with young children may enhance the importance men ascribe to fatherhood and, hence, increase their contributions to the lives of their children.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, by Fathers' Identity Salience at Child's Birth

	Overall		High Salience		Low Salience		Sig.
	<i>M</i> or %	(SD)	<i>M</i> or %	(SD)	<i>M</i> or %	(SD)	
<u>Fathers' Personal Characteristics</u>							
Age ( <i>M</i> , in years)	29.61	(7.19)	29.76	(6.70)	29.34	(8.05)	
Race/ethnicity							
White non-Hispanic	26.9		30.0		21.4		*
Black non-Hispanic	34.1		31.9		38.0		
Hispanic	32.3		32.9		31.3		
Other non-Hispanic	6.7		5.2		9.3		†
Education							
Less than high school	28.3		24.7		34.6		*
High school degree or some college	49.3		53.0		42.8		**
Bachelor's degree or higher	22.4		22.3		22.6		
Born in U.S.	71.9		75.8		65.1		*
Health status ( <i>M</i> , range = 1 - 5)	3.99	(.94)	4.11	(.87)	3.77	(1.02)	**
Depression ( <i>M</i> , range = 0 - 7) <sup>1</sup>	1.02	(1.20)	.97	(1.12)	1.12	(1.35)	
Hours worked last week ( <i>M</i> )	38.05	(19.47)	38.68	(18.12)	36.93	(21.79)	
Income below poverty line	20.9		18.8		24.7		†
Own father's involvement ( <i>M</i> , range 1 - 4)	3.15	(.93)	3.17	(.94)	3.11	(.91)	
Lived with both parents at age 15	57.6		57.2		58.2		
<u>Fathers' Family Characteristics</u>							
Married to child's mother	53.4		56.0		48.7		†
Relationship quality with child's mother ( <i>M</i> , range 1 - 3)	2.66	(.36)	2.70	(.35)	2.60	(.37)	**
Has previous kids	59.4		59.4		59.5		
Present at child's birth	84.3		87.0		79.4		**
Child is a boy	57.4		56.5		59.0		
<u>Number of unweighted cases (<i>N</i>)</u>	3,554		2,157		1,397		

*Note:* Variables based on fathers' reports. All figures measured at baseline (just after baby's birth) and weighted by fathers' city sampling weights. Significant differences between fathers with high and low identity salience tested using weighted *t*-tests. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Sig. = statistical significance.

†*p* ≤ .10, \**p* ≤ .05, \*\**p* ≤ .01 (two-tailed test for difference by identity salience using weighted data).

<sup>1</sup> Based on seven items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale.



Table 2: Fathers' Involvement, by Identity Salience at Child's Birth and Residence Status at Survey

	1-Year			3-Year			5-Year								
	High Salience		Sig.	High Salience		Sig.	High Salience		Sig.						
	M	(SD)		M	(SD)		M	(SD)		M	(SD)				
<b>All fathers</b>															
Accessibility (range = 1 - 5)	4.51	(1.02)	4.40	(1.25)		4.38	(1.20)	4.18	(1.42)	*	4.10	(1.40)	4.04	(1.59)	
Engagement (range = 0 - 7)	3.64	(2.00)	2.96	(2.03)	**	3.46	(2.16)	2.92	(2.20)	**	2.73	(1.94)	2.26	(2.03)	**
Responsibility (range = 1 - 4)	3.33	(.77)	3.16	(.93)	**	3.23	(.90)	3.07	(1.03)	*	3.10	(1.05)	2.92	(1.17)	†
Unweighted number of total cases ( <i>N</i> )	1,784		1,149			1,906		1,228			1,816		1,187		
Percent of Fathers who are Resident	84.9%		75.8%		**	80.1%		71.1%		**	69.8%		62.1%		†
<b>Resident fathers</b>															
Accessibility (range = 1 - 5)	4.79	(.50)	4.81	(.47)		4.82	(.43)	4.77	(.55)		4.79	(.46)	4.80	(.50)	
Engagement (range = 0 - 7)	3.98	(1.68)	3.39	(1.66)	**	3.98	(1.72)	3.57	(1.81)	†	3.46	(1.45)	2.98	(1.58)	*
Responsibility (range = 1 - 4)	3.52	(.48)	3.41	(.58)		3.54	(.46)	3.45	(.55)		3.61	(.47)	3.50	(.54)	†
Unweighted number of resident fathers ( <i>n</i> )	1,326		727			1,286		728			1,045		592		
<b>Nonresident fathers</b>															
Accessibility (range = 1 - 5)	2.78	(2.25)	2.91	(2.27)		2.39	(2.07)	2.60	(2.00)		2.26	(1.85)	2.64	(2.11)	
Engagement (range = 0 - 7)	1.46	(2.51)	1.42	(2.40)		1.07	(2.23)	2.21	(1.95)		.82	(1.73)	.91	(1.85)	
Responsibility (range = 1 - 4)	2.13	(1.46)	2.29	(1.53)		1.81	(1.35)	2.05	(1.43)		1.75	(1.21)	1.84	(1.27)	
Unweighted number of non-resident fathers ( <i>n</i> )	458		422			620		500			771		595		

Note: Fathers' involvement and residence status based on mothers' reports. All figures weighted by city sampling weights. Significant differences between fathers with high and low identity salience tested using weighted t-tests. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Sig = statistical significance. 89.9% of fathers with high salience and 84.4% of fathers with low salience resided with their child at one or more survey wave ( $p \leq .01$ ).

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$  (two-tailed test for difference by identity salience using weighted data).

Table 3: OLS Regression Estimates of Fathers' Involvement at 1, 3, and 5 years on Identity Salience

	1-Year			3-Year			5-Year		
	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.
Panel A: Accessibility									
Model 1: Bivariate	0.23	0.05	**	0.24	0.06	**	0.25	0.06	**
Model 2: Add fathers' personal characteristics	0.17	0.05	**	0.17	0.05	**	0.16	0.06	**
Model 3: Add fathers' family characteristics	0.04	0.05		0.03	0.05		0.03	0.06	
Panel B: Engagement									
Model 1: Bivariate	0.54	0.08	**	0.44	0.08	**	0.30	0.08	**
Model 2: Add fathers' personal characteristics	0.45	0.08	**	0.29	0.08	**	0.19	0.07	**
Model 3: Add fathers' family characteristics	0.30	0.08	**	0.15	0.08	*	0.06	0.07	
Panel C: Responsibility									
Model 1: Bivariate	0.18	0.04	**	0.19	0.04	**	0.15	0.04	**
Model 2: Add fathers' personal characteristics	0.15	0.04	**	0.15	0.04	**	0.10	0.04	*
Model 3: Add fathers' family characteristics	0.05	0.04		0.07	0.04	†	0.01	0.04	
Panel D: Residence Status as a Mediator									
Accessibility	-0.05	0.04		0.00	0.04		0.01	0.04	
Engagement	0.20	0.07	**	0.11	0.07	†	0.04	0.06	
Responsibility	0.00	0.03		0.04	0.03		0.00	0.03	

Note:  $N = 2,933$  at 1 year;  $N = 3,134$  at 3 years;  $N = 3,003$  at 5 years. The reference group for all models was fathers with low identity salience at baseline. Fathers' personal characteristics included the father's age at the focal child's birth, father's race/ethnicity, his educational attainment, whether he was born in the U.S., his self-rated physical health, his mental health, the number of hours the father worked in the week preceding the child's birth, whether his income was below the poverty line at the time of the child's birth, his own father's involvement, and whether he lived with both of his biological parents at age 15. Fathers' family characteristics included whether the father was married to the focal child's mother at the time of the birth, his reported relationship quality with the child's mother at the time of the birth, whether he had previous biological children when the focal child was born, whether he was present at the child's birth, and whether the child is a boy. The models in Panel D added residence status to model 3 for each involvement measure.

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

Table 4: Difference-in-Difference Estimates of Associations between Fathers' Residence Status and Involvement at 1, 3, and 5 years by Identity Salience

	1-Year			3-Year			5-Year		
	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Sig.
Panel A: Accessibility									
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Resident Fathers ( $n = 2,007$ )	-0.05	0.03	*	0.02	0.03		0.02	0.03	
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Nonresident Fathers ( $n = 861$ )	-0.03	0.11		-0.02	0.10		0.00	0.08	
Difference-in-Difference Estimate	-0.02	0.08		0.04	0.08		0.02	0.08	
Panel B: Engagement									
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Resident Fathers ( $n = 1,846$ )	0.22	0.09	**	0.20	0.09	*	0.02	0.09	
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Nonresident Fathers ( $n = 1,088$ )	0.16	0.12		0.03	0.11		0.06	0.08	
Difference-in-Difference Estimate	0.06	0.15		0.23	0.14		-0.04	0.12	
Panel C: Responsibility									
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Resident Fathers ( $n = 1,496$ )	0.01	0.03		0.03	0.03		0.00	0.03	
High vs. Low Identity Salience for Nonresident Fathers ( $n = 1,315$ )	-0.02	0.08		0.06	0.07		-0.02	0.06	
Difference-in-Difference Estimate	0.03	0.06		-0.03	0.06		0.02	0.06	

Note:  $N = 2,933$  at 1 year;  $N = 3,134$  at 3 years;  $N = 3,003$  at 5 years. The reference group for all models was fathers with low identity salience at baseline. All estimates based on models that include both fathers' personal characteristics and fathers' family context (Model 3, Table 3).

† $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ .