

When Sons Become Fathers: Examining Patterns of Fatherhood across Generations

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The transfer of beliefs and resources from parents to children plays an important role in the persistence of inequality in the United States. Intergenerational transmissions have been documented across phenomena as diverse as income (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Solon 1992), health (Ahlburg 1998; Coneus 2008), divorce (Amato 1996; Wolfinger 1999), and fertility patterns (Barber 2001; Sipsma et al. 2010). The transmission of such characteristics across generations is striking as this suggests that an individual's life chances or opportunities are not independent of their parents' social origins.

Parenting attitudes and behaviors represent a particularly important transmission. Past work finds that men's childhood family experiences influence the types of fathers they become (Cowan and Cowan 1987; Forste and Jarvis 2007; Furstenberg and Weiss 2000; Snarey 1993; Townsend 2002). However, it is still unclear how the parenting experience of men is influenced by the behaviors displayed by their fathers. This study extends previous research by examining fathering behaviors and perceptions across generations. Using data on two generations of men - the grandfathers and fathers of the 2001 U.S. birth cohort - I determine whether paternal behaviors in the first generation influence the perceptions and stress associated with fatherhood in the second generation. Such measures are worthy of inquiry given the substantial evidence that finds fathers play a significant role in child and later adulthood well-being (Amato 1994; Lamb 2004). Understanding the origins of men's parenting perceptions can shed light on the importance of men's role in families, the generation and maintenance of inequality in child well-being, as well as how life trajectories are shaped by previous generations.

Background

Previous research suggests that early relationships with one's own parents affect how an individual interacts with his/her children (Cox et al. 1985; Townsend 2002). Scholars have noted father-son similarity in patterns of involvement; men with fathers who displayed high levels of father involvement were more likely to become involved in their own child's life (Block and Haan 1971; Cowan and Cowan 1987; Reuter and Biller 1973). Others found that some men

perceived fatherhood as an opportunity to rectify their own fathers' lack of involvement and become a more involved, caring father.

Stress associated with parenting is just one of many conditions that may impact father's attitudes, behaviors, and involvement. Cooper and colleagues (2009) refer to parental stress as a feeling that manifests when parents believe the demands of child-rearing are higher than the personal resources available to them. Indeed, it is documented that stress exhibited by parents is associated with parental behavior as well as child adjustment and developmental outcomes (Anthony et al. 2005; Crnic et al. 2005). To date, the few studies on this subject focus exclusively on the consequences of stress and remain silent on larger questions of its origins. Further, most studies that examine the father-son similarity in parenting draw from small convenience samples with limited generalizability and little variation on race and ethnicity. As a result, these findings that pertain to the reproduction of inequality cannot be explored at the population level. Finally, existing research on intergenerational transmission fails to incorporate men without father figures in their own lives – a large and substantively unique group of U.S. fathers.

The present study focuses on how fathering practices in one generation relate to parenting attitudes with an emphasis on parental stress, among the next generation of fathers. By pairing the work on generational similarities and fatherhood, this study contributes to the nascent field of parenting practices among fathers and their adult sons. In doing so, the research attempts to navigate a number of the limitations of existing work. Given that fathers' behaviors are associated with child development (Amato 1994; Amato and Gilbreth 1999), it is crucial to understand the origins of paternal attitudes to more efficiently promote father involvement and reduce childhood disparities.

This project has three aims: 1) to assess whether paternal behaviors in one generation influence stress associated with fatherhood in another generation; 2) determine if perceptions of fatherhood are influenced by the father-son relationship; and 3) tests whether stress and perceptions differ among men with and without father figures.

Method

Data from this study come from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B, which was conducted in the United States, is a nationally

representative sample of over 10,000 children born in 2001. Four rounds of data collection occur when the child is approximately 9 months, 2 years, 4 years, and 5 years of age. Data are gathered from the child's birth certificates and at-home child assessments, as well as interviews with parents, child care providers, and teachers. One of the unique characteristics of the ECLS-B is that fathers are asked about their paternal attitudes and involvement with their child, as well as the paternal behaviors of their own father (the child's grandfather). Self-administered questionnaires at each wave of collection are distributed to resident and non-resident fathers to evaluate their influence on child development. In addition, an extensive amount of information on parenting behaviors, relationship quality, medical history, marital history, and socioeconomic indicators are also recorded. For the purposes of this paper, analyses will be restricted to resident fathers due to the specific nature of the ECLS-B questionnaires.

The analysis begins by considering whether paternal behaviors in the first generation are influencing the perceptions and stress levels associated with fatherhood in the second generation. Perceptions and stress can be measured in several ways with these data; I begin by using indicators that correspond to refined measures of the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, which measures different components of paternal stress.¹

I use a set of nested OLS regressions to observe whether the inclusion of additional covariates changes the relationship between paternal behaviors and stress among adult sons. I then compare the difference in perceptions of fatherhood and paternal stress for respondents who did and did not have a father. This extends previous research that examines generational similarities in parenting (e.g. Cox et al. 1985; Snarey 1993) by explicitly focusing on the father-son relationship, and by examining the paternal outcomes for a group that is often overlooked: men without father figures. The rich set of controls in the ECLS-B data – including educational attainment for both generations of fathers - allow me to assess how much of these relationships are driven by poverty, household, and the simultaneous transmission of education across generations. Finally, I consider whether these patterns differ among racial and ethnic groups.

Preliminary findings reveal several interesting patterns. Table 1 includes the results of three OLS specifications predicting men's paternal stress. The first specification indicates that respondents are less likely to experience stress associated with being a father if grandfathers

¹ Measure developed by *Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.* Adapted by National Center for Education Statistics.

displayed warmer parenting. Strikingly, men who did not have a father-figure are less likely to report stress compared to men who did have a father growing-up; this relationship persists after the inclusion of additional covariates. However, when a “closeness” interaction term is introduced in the third specification, grandfathers’ parenting is no longer significantly associated with stress for respondents; the relationship only holds for men who are close to their own fathers. These preliminary findings support the notion that important aspects of the fatherhood experience are part of an intergenerational process. Preliminary findings on parenting perceptions (not shown) also support the theory that fathering experiences are reproduced across generations. Examining the possible heterogeneity in these patterns across U.S. racial and ethnic groups will deepen our understanding of the persistence of childhood disparities in well-being and development. Thus, this study will shed additional light on family processes that reproduce inequalities.

Table 1: Selected Coefficients regressed on Paternal Stress

	Model 1	SE	Model 2	SE	Model 3	SE
Grandfathers paternal behavior	-0.059***	0.016	-0.076***	0.022	-0.040	0.027
No grandfather figure	-1.022**	0.373	-1.812***	0.497	-1.762***	0.495
Grandfather's parenting serves as role model			0.334†	0.178	0.369	0.541
Father is close to grandfather			0.080	0.167	1.062*	0.531
Role model x grandfather paternal behavior					-0.004	0.029
Close to dad x grandfather paternal behavior					-0.056*	0.028
† p < .1 *p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001						
Model 2 adjusts for respondent education, grandfather's education, race/ethnicity, nativity, respondent age, child's gender, and relationship quality between the respondent and child's mother.						
Grandfathers' paternal behavior is a 6-item scale, larger values indicate warmer fathering.						
Note: N=4,000 after rounding. Robust standard errors are presented. Data are weighted using person-weights from the ECLS-B.						
Source: Early Child Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort, wave 2.						

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