

**Effects of Relationship Transitions and Paternal Residency
on Fathering Salience: Evidence from the NLSY79**

Extended Abstract

Historically, the role of primary caretaker of children in U.S. families has been taken on by the mother (Lamb, 1986), and for decades sociological research on fathers' paternal behavior was limited mainly to the indirect method of relying on mothers' reports of fathers' behaviors and attitudes (Brownstein and Cowan, 1988; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb, 2000). Since the 1970s, however, research on fathers has accumulated in recognition of the increasingly central roles fathers are playing in child raising and parenting (Pleck and Pleck, 1997). More studies on fathers have focused on not just fathers' place in the context of the family unit, but also on fathers' impact on child development as well as on how and why a man's identity as a father develops and changes. My study belongs to this last area of research, specifically to the theoretical approach of identity theory as presented by Stryker (1987) and Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1993), which conceptualizes how a man's concept of himself as a father is generated and maintained.

In this paper I examine under what circumstances paternal identity is likely to be terminated, and define identity termination as disacknowledgement by the father of any child he had previously claimed as a biological child. I specifically wish to address the following questions: 1) How does a father's

hazard of disowning a child change according to the father's relationship circumstances? 2) To what extent does having his children in residence, or of frequent visitation with nonresident children, affect a father's disowning hazard? and 3) How does a man's family history, measured as whether he was resident with his own father as a child, affect his hazard of disowning?

I explore these research questions by using fertility reports from the male respondents in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). NLSY79 data were collected on a range of behaviors and attitudes from 12,686 men and women ages 14-21 in 1979. Follow-up surveys were conducted on an annual basis from 1979 to 1994, then biennially since 1996. The NLSY79 data I am using summarizes the fertility histories of 4,149 men who report having had at least one child during the 1979-1998 interview period, as well as selected characteristics of their 9,241 children. This includes how many total children the male has ever reported and his children's dates of birth, as well as a year-by-year record of each child's presence on the man's reported household and biological child rosters. Also included in the dataset are variables that enable me to identify whether each male respondent was in a marriage or cohabiting relationship at each interview date, and whether the spouse/partner reported is the same spouse/partner as the male respondent reported at other survey points. I can therefore identify transitions into and out of marriage and cohabitation on a year-by-year basis.

The NLSY79 male fertility roster data indicates when a biological child disappears from the male's biological fertility roster after previously being claimed, whether by disappearing entirely or by being claimed instead as a

nonbiological child. In both cases, the respondent is *disclaiming* a child whom he has previously recognized as his biological child, and this is my effective operationalization of the cession of paternal salience; as the father has to make an active decision not to claim the child in both situations¹. I have been able to identify 321 NLSY79 men who disclaimed at least one child during the 1979-1998 interview period.

My expected findings for this research are that:

1. Fathers who experience a relationship transition from either cohabitation or marriage to no relationship will have a significantly higher risk of disclaiming a child² than fathers who do not experience a transition in their cohabiting or marriage status..
2. Fathers who are not in residence with their children at the interview point will have a significantly higher risk of disclaiming a child than fathers who are in residence with all or some of their children.
3. Fathers who are not in residence with their children, and who visit their nonresident children less than once a month, will have a significantly higher risk of disclaiming a child than fathers who are not in residence with their children but visit them at least once a month.

¹ The follow-up procedure for fertility roster collections in the NLSY79 largely precludes fathers merely “forgetting” a child.

² In the same interview year as the transition is reported.

4. Fathers who resided with their own fathers as children, measured at ages 4, 10, and 16, will be less likely to disclaim children than fathers who lived with their father either less or not at all.