

Conducting Studies with Fathers: Challenges and Opportunities

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Traditionally, researchers interested in understanding father involvement in the lives of young children have relied on mothers as proxy respondents for fathers, yet recent research has made noteworthy strides in collecting data from fathers themselves yielding an unprecedented wealth of data on fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Despite this progress, there remain many methodological challenges in conducting studies with fathers and their children. Therefore, this article highlights several methodological challenges, including the identification of fathers, recruitment of fathers as participants, and retention of participants in small-scale studies with longitudinal designs, and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of several strategies our research team and others have used to collect data from fathers. The paper concludes with a set of suggestions for improving methodological approaches in fatherhood research, as well as remaining challenges in this area of study.

Traditionally, researchers interested in understanding father involvement in the lives of young children have relied on mothers as proxy respondents for fathers (Cabrera & Peters, 2000). Yet recent research has made noteworthy strides in collecting data from fathers themselves yielding an unprecedented wealth of data on fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Cabrera et al., 2002). However, despite this progress, there remain many methodological challenges in conducting studies with fathers and their children.

The goals of this paper are: (1) to highlight several methodological challenges, including the identification of fathers, recruitment of fathers as participants, and retention of participants in small-scale studies with longitudinal designs, and (2) to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of several strategies our research team and others have used to collect data from fathers. The paper concludes with a set of suggestions for improving

methodological approaches in fatherhood research, as well as remaining challenges in this area of study.

Identifying Fathers

How and which fathers are identified as research participants depends on several factors, including the population sampled and the study's goals and design (e.g., cross-sectional versus longitudinal). If the research goal is to study the impact of father involvement on children's outcomes, then researchers must decide whether to include only biological fathers, regardless of their residency and accessibility to their child, and/or father-figures—stepfathers, mothers' romantic partners, and male relatives. Given recent demographic shifts in family structure, many young children, in addition to or in place of a biological father, have a father-figure in their lives who may spend more time with the children than do biological fathers (Coley, 2003).

In studies where parents instead of children are the sampling unit, mothers are typically identified first and then asked to identify their child's father. Although this approach is cost effective and has

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the potential to yield comprehensive data, it can also yield a biased sample (Heckman, 1979). That is, participating fathers are more likely to have higher education and incomes, be married and have positive relationships with their partners than non-participants (Cabrera, Shannon, West, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004).

Some mothers facilitate recruitment by encouraging fathers to participate and by coordinating contact between researchers and fathers. However, mothers can also act as “gatekeepers,” regulating paternal involvement in research, “Maternal gatekeeping” is a great challenge for researchers who are required to seek consent from mothers to contact fathers and for those interested in collecting observational data on father (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Mothers can select fathers *in or out* of the study for a variety of reasons, including to protect the father’s limited time, lack of relationship with the father, or to protect themselves and their children from violent fathers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). It is then essential to collect demographic information about the father from the mother to determine the selective nature of the sample.

When the study samples fathers directly, researchers use a variety of techniques to identify possible participants, such as a snow ball (i.e., word-of-mouth), or community-based advertising in public locations such as churches and clinics (Sonenstein, Pleck, & Ku, 1989). The data collected with these techniques, while select, can be qualitatively rich (see Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Jarret, Roy, & Burton, 2002). Another approach, used in large scale national studies, is conducting telephone surveys with fathers (National Survey of Family Growth; National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). These interviews can produce a national sample of men. However, the type of measures used in national surveys may be broad in scope but limited in breadth.

In longitudinal designs, identification of who is the father must be done at each point of data collection. If fathers are identified at baseline only, biological or father figures who subsequently enter a child’s life will be excluded from the sample. For example, in our study of fathers, Healthy Attachment Promotion for Parents and Infants: Father Study (henceforth referred to as the HAPPI: Father Study; Cabrera et al., 2005), one mother refused to identify her child’s biological father but named a father-figure (i.e., the child’s stepfather) at baseline. However, at the 6-month follow-up visit, the child’s mother and biological father had reunited, and thus both the child’s biological and social father were included in the study. While including both men accurately reflects the child’s life, it is costly and introduces analytical challenges.

In summary, when selecting the sampling procedure and research design, researchers must weigh the costs and benefits of various selection effects. The sampling design determines how fathers will be identified and, thus, which fathers are potential participants. Given the fluidity of fathers’ residencies and relationships to their children’s mothers, it is important in a longitudinal design to ask mothers’ consent to contact fathers at each data collection wave.

Recruiting Fathers

Following identification, fathers must be recruited into the study. Researchers must have current and accurate contact information and be able to make a convincing recruiting pitch to fathers. Obtaining comprehensive contact information (e.g., home address, email and phone number; place of business, position, address and phone number; other relatives and friends contact information; and their child’s school/child care center) from mothers about the father as well as possible times to contact him is critical. This is particularly important for studies focusing on low-income fathers, many of whom do not live with their children and may be living with parents’ and/or with a friend or extended relative (Cabrera et al., 2004). Additionally, many of these men move frequently and may even reside in a foreign country.

Once a mother gives consent and provides contact information for the father, researchers should immediately *make contact* with the father. Recruiting one father can take anywhere from one 5-minute phone call to 5 or 6 months of repeated phone calls to various family members, daily trips to the child care center, and weekly drop-by visits to the father’s home and workplace. Such tasks require the efforts of several research assistants and a substantial budget, not to mention patience and persistence.

Although making phone calls is an inexpensive and easy way to recruit, making phone contact with a father, especially those who do not live with their children, is almost impossible. Phones may be disconnected, calls are screened, and housemates “gatekeep” by not revealing the father’s whereabouts or not relaying his messages. Mistrust of strangers can make fathers’ family members wary of researchers’ telephone inquiries.

We have found that face-to-face visits are often a more personal and successful approach to recruit participants. They provide an opportunity for fathers to meet the researchers, learn about the study, and hear how much their participation is valued. Whenever possible, meeting fathers at the

child care center where their children attend school is an effective way to recruit. Establishing a list with the help of teachers and staff of when and who typically drops off or picks up child (mother, father, grandmother, friend, and so on) allows researchers to strategize and narrow down the list of fathers who need to be contacted by phone.

When phone calls and visits to a child care center (if relevant) prove to be ineffective in making contact, the next step is to make a “drop-by” visit to their residence, which can be “hit or miss.” Fathers who work multiple jobs, work shifts on nights and weekends, or work overtime to earn extra money are often not home and have limited time to spare. While some resident family members respond positively to the researcher’s request and provide further contact information, others tend to protect the privacy of the men and refuse to provide further information. Depending on the nature of the sample and the city where the study is being conducted, drop-by visits can be successful with some families. Although it can be very time-consuming and require a car to go into possibly unsafe areas, drop-by visits can yield results in urban centers, such as New York City, where public transportation is frequent and efficient. In the Washington, DC, area, where public transportation is not as widely accessible, we have found drop-by visits to low-income families to be less effective and more burdensome.

Once fathers are contacted, the next challenge is to make a convincing pitch to the father to participate in the study. During the researchers’ first contact with fathers, it is important that researchers convey a positive attitude about the research study and express sincere gratitude for his time and participation. In making our pitch, we often emphasize three themes: “we want to hear *your story*,” the information we collect is completely confidential, and the data will provide invaluable information about how fathers matter in their children’s lives (Cabrera et al., 2006).

Some fathers understand the value of research and want to talk about their children hence they are immediately interested in participating. Others want people to know they are good fathers and do not mind sharing their personal information. In fact, many fathers we have interviewed seem to enjoy talking about their life experiences and their children, perhaps because it validates their role as father. However, other fathers decline participation in the study for several reasons, most frequently, time constraints. Fathers who work more than 40-hour weeks may have very little free time to participate in research. Because the HAPPI: Father Study requires two home visits, each an average of 2½ hours, many of the fathers who wish to participate in the study

have to sacrifice leisure time with their children, which is a tremendous disincentive. Even for fathers who might welcome extra income, monetary incentives are ineffective because of the time burden on participants.

Other men decide not to participate because they are not interested in research. These men may see recruitment efforts as a nuisance or an invasion of their privacy and may not understand the purpose of the research or the contribution their participation may make to research on families. Sometimes we have found it helpful to emphasize *how* their participation is significant. We inform them that it will not only help inform policy to improve programs for families like his own, but it will also reduce the stereotype that fathers are uninvolved with their children.

For studies that focus on low-income families, recruiting is more difficult because a growing majority of low-income families are immigrants or members of an ethnic minority. Culture and language greatly exacerbate barriers to contacting fathers as well as pose many additional challenges to recruitment. Some immigrant fathers refuse participation on account of their illegal status and feel uncomfortable speaking about their background. The role of the researcher is not always clear to them, and while they may recognize that researchers do not represent government agencies, they may perceive involvement with research projects risky to their families’ status.

In summary, strategies to recruit fathers are varied and range in effectiveness as well as cost. An important aspect to recruiting is defining the recruitment period. Often, this is a pragmatic decision based on budget considerations. In the HAPPI: Father Study, the cost of phone calls and frequent drop by visits rarely paid off in participation, and thus, a decision was made to stop recruitment after 3 months. It is suggested that researchers develop an in-depth recruitment plan a priori and factor recruiting efforts into their budgets.

Retaining Fathers

Retaining fathers in longitudinal studies is particularly challenging. While some attrition is always expected in longitudinal studies, retention rates are typically much lower in studies of low-income families and nonresident fathers. Retaining fathers in low-income families is more difficult because of their increased mobility, lack of accurate contact information, difficulties in relocating fathers, and incarceration (Groves & Couper, 1998). For other families, changes in the mother–father relationship (e.g., dissolution; re-partnering)

also affect fathers' participation in research because fathers who do not maintain at least a friendly relationship with their children's mothers are significantly less involved with their children (Cabrera et al., 2004). Given the instability of partner relationships and changes in family structures (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006), it is common to find a father who is involved with the child at the beginning of the study, but "not in the picture" 6 months later. Additionally, a child may not have contact with his or her biological father at baseline but may have a father-figure at a later data collection wave (if the mother becomes romantically involved with someone new).

At other times, circumstances that once made fathers unavailable for participation improve over time. For instance, in the HAPPI: Father Study (Cabrera et al., 2006) some fathers who previously had no stable living arrangement secured permanent housing and it thereby became easier for researchers to contact them and more convenient for fathers to participate. In other cases, fathers were released from prison during the study and were eager to become more involved in the lives of their children and in the research project. Even fathers who were originally uninterested in research participation renewed interest as they became more engaged with their children and mothers encouraged them to participate.

Faced with low retention rates in studies of fathers, we suggest researchers make concerted efforts to maintain rapport with fathers. One approach we have tried to institute is to have the original interviewer make contact with the father and conduct the interviews at each data collection wave. We have found that fathers feel more comfortable when they recognize the same interviewer's name and voice on the phone, and are then more likely to meet with them again. Having a new interviewer at each assessment point can make fathers skeptical of the research and less secure about confidentiality.

It is also critical for researchers to build rapport with fathers' social network, that is, the multiple persons related to them: mothers, family service agencies, family members, and housemates. Monetary incentives are not always effective because many families live complex lives. But when the father's social network trusts the researchers' motives, they will: identify known fathers; provide up-to-date, accurate contact information; facilitate contact between researchers and fathers; and encourage fathers to participate or continue participating in the research study. Building rapport also requires learning about cultural norms and showing sensitivity to family beliefs and practices.

In addition to researchers establishing and maintaining a positive rapport with fathers and their families, it is also imperative for researchers to maintain up-to-date files on each father/family. For fathers who frequently move, one strategy we have found effective is to provide fathers with "change-of-address" note cards with stamped envelopes addressed to the project's office. Another strategy is to mail holiday, birthday or Fathers' Day cards, or reminder notes when the follow-up visit is approaching, which are returned to sender if fathers have moved. Magnets or calendars with the project's contact information on them are friendly reminders of their participation and also provide fathers with the information to call researchers if they relocate.

Finally, if the goal of the research study is to better understand the relationship between fathers and their young children, it can be very beneficial to affiliate the research project with a child care center or family service agency that serves the targeted population. Weiss and Bailar (2002) describe developing "community authority contacts" as a main strategy in obtaining high response rates in in-person studies (p. 102). When leaders in the community are alerted of the project and its goals, interviewers feel supported and safer. By developing positive relationships with center directors, teachers, and staff members who know and work with the families, identifying fathers, obtaining contact information, and making contact will be less time consuming and burdensome. Center staff can be key informants on families' individual situations, including families' languages and cultures. Moreover, from our own experiences, fathers are more likely to talk to researchers when they know of the affiliation between the research team and the child care center.

In summary, barriers to contacting fathers or overcoming discord in mother-father relationships remain obstacles for conducting research on fathers. Keeping up-to-date information on fathers and building and nurturing rapport with them are keys to successful data collection.

Remaining Challenges and Useful Strategies

One remaining challenge to conducting research with fathers is when to take "no" for an answer. Most researchers agree that you should never just "give up" when faced with a negative response. However, given personnel and monetary limitations, it is necessary to set a cut-off point when recruiting fathers. In the HAPPI: Father Study, we originally set a time limit of 3 months to recruit each father, after which time we would send a letter explaining

to the father that his participation in the study was important to us, and that if we did not hear from him soon, he would no longer be eligible for participation. However, it is difficult to say whether this amount of time is sufficient. Although some participants in our study changed their minds after hearing more about the study, those who were approached repeatedly over several months typically did not change their responses.

Another remaining challenge is monetary incentives. Weiss and Bailar (2002) showed that monetary incentives given to low-income families from five different studies varied from \$20 to \$45. Interestingly, the impact of incentives on recruitment suggests that more money does not always increase response rate for all fathers (Brick, Hagedorn, Montaquilla, Roth, & Chapman, 2006). For example, in the HAPPI: Father Study we did not see any difference in participation rates when fathers were given \$50 versus \$30 in cash. The main reason fathers cited for not participating was lack of personal time due to hectic work schedules. However, Parke et al. (2004) compensated their families with \$200 per visit to their laboratory, which helped to maintain an acceptable response rate. It is difficult to determine how much money is enough to compensate participants for their time and encourage participation without being coercive. More attention needs to be given to when and why monetary incentives are effective, and what amount is acceptable to compensate fathers for their time without draining project budgets.

Although challenges remain, there are several strategies that have the potential improve the way fathers are recruited and retained into studies. These strategies include: (1) Gather contact information about father from multiple resources and constantly update contact information; (2) Make face-to-face visits and “drop-by” visit to their homes when contacting by phone is ineffective; (3) Develop a recruitment plan priori that includes the cost of various strategies as well as the recruitment window; (4) Make the recruitment “pitch” about *how* their participation is important and *how* it will help them and others; (5) Plan for participants, especially in longitudinal studies, to be interviewed by the same interviewer at each point of data collection; (6) Maintain rapport with fathers, especially in longitudinal studies, by providing fathers with “change-of-address” note cards with stamped envelopes addressed to the project’s office, mailing holiday, birthday or Fathers’ Day cards, or reminder notes when the follow-up visit is approaching, and sending magnets or calendars with the project’s contact information.

Conclusion

Conducting research with fathers is a challenging yet rewarding experience. Based on lessons learned from our research as well as on the extant literature, we offer several strategies for identifying, recruiting, and maintaining fathers in studies that focus on fatherhood. These strategies need to be tailor-made to fit the specific needs of research projects and highlight the fact that over the last decade or so there has been great progress on methodological approaches to include fathers in research. Researchers need to continue to improve upon these methodologies to keep apace of the recent conceptual and theoretical advances in fatherhood research.

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