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Disagreement in Parental Reports of Father Involvement

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Abstract

Despite agreement on the value of father involvement in children's lives, research has been limited due to the exclusion of fathers in studies, questionable validity of mothers' reports on father involvement, and simple measures of fathering behavior. Our study extends previous research by comparing reports of father involvement using robust, multidimensional father involvement measures. Data from 113 fathers and 126 mothers reporting on 221 children were used to assess father involvement. Results indicate that fathers reported significantly higher levels of involvement than mothers reported. Findings from hierarchical linear models suggest that race/ethnicity and mothers' reports of positive relationship quality were associated with smaller discrepancies in reports of father involvement, whereas nonmarried partnerships, older children, father residence, and biological status predicted larger discrepancies. Our study demonstrates the importance of obtaining father involvement reports directly from fathers and why father involvement should be assessed as a multidimensional construct to examine fathering behavior.

Keywords

father involvement; parent report; informant discrepancies; low-income families; parental relationship quality

Substantial evidence supports the benefits of father involvement for child development, including improved academic achievement, social and cognitive skills, mental health, and self-esteem (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Pleck, 2010; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Consequently, researchers and policy makers have sought to better understand the extent and qualities of father involvement among increasingly diverse family configurations and the impact of variation in involvement on children's development.

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Despite advances in research on fathering, many issues remain. The nature and quality of father–child interactions has received relatively little attention with significant focus on limited aspects of father involvement such as extent of contact and child support (e.g., Berger, Cancian, & Meyer, 2012), particularly among nonresident fathers and cohabiting or “social” fathers (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Halle, 2002; Lamb, 2000). In addition, many studies have relied only on mothers’ reports of father involvement (Hernandez & Coley, 2007). In the limited number of studies that have collected data on father involvement from both fathers and mothers, discrepancies between reports have been found, with fathers generally reporting higher levels of involvement than mothers’ report of fathers’ involvement (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994; Smock & Manning, 1997). What evidence exists suggests the extent of discrepancy varies by dimensions of involvement and the nature of the relationship between the father and mother (e.g., cohabiting vs. noncohabiting, extent of interpersonal conflict). To better understand the role of fathers in child development and the effects of programs targeting fathers and parenting, measures and measurement models capturing relevant elements of father involvement are needed. In addition, there is a need to better understand the nature and meaning of differences between mother and father reports of involvement. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on father involvement by evaluating these discrepancies in a sample of children and parents living in high-risk, economically disadvantaged urban environments.

Background

Measuring Father Involvement

As research on the role of fathers has increased in the past 30 years, operationalization of father involvement has broadened to include multiple dimensions of meaningful contributions by fathers to their children’s development (see, e.g., Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). Lamb et al. (1987) furthered fathering scholarship when they expanded the construct of father involvement to include three core domains in which fathers are involved with their children: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility. Accessibility is defined as being emotionally present and physically available to the child; engagement refers to interaction with the child in one-on-one activities such as playing, feeding, or putting the child to bed; and responsibility refers to making important decisions about the child’s life and helping plan and assist in providing needed resources for the family.

Concurrent with work in the fathering field that developed in the 1970s and 1980s, attention to fatherhood by the federal government emerged in the 1990s as part of federal welfare reform efforts focused on marriage promotion and responsible fathering. In 1994, an Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics was created with a multidisciplinary group of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to coordinate and integrate collection and reporting of data on children and families. The Developing a Daddy Survey (DADS; Cabrera et al., 2004) was one of a series of “Targets of Opportunity” identified by the forum, and was designed to improve the federal government’s capacity to conceptualize, measure, and gather data from men on fertility and their roles as fathers. The DADS project helped serve as the foundation for measurement development work of fathering in several future studies, including the study from which the data in this article are drawn.

Differences in Reports on Father Involvement

Although early research identified differences between mothers' and fathers' reports on father involvement (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994), Coley and Morris (2002) were the first to examine predictors of these discrepancies. Using data from "Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study," the authors analyzed consensus among 228 mother–father pairs, with each pair reporting on the same child (aged 2–4 years). Consistent with previous research, mothers reported lower father involvement than fathers reported, although level of involvement was highly correlated among mothers and fathers, and parents overall reported high levels of father involvement. Coley and Morris (2002) also found increased discrepancies in families in which: parents did not live together, parents reported high levels of conflict, father was older than the mother, mother had more education, and mother was employed. Significant differences in reports were also found when the time between parent interviews was longer.

Mikelson (2008) also compared reports by mothers and fathers using a sample of 2,058 families with 3-year-old children from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Similar to Coley and Morris (2002), Mikelson (2008) found that both mothers and fathers reported high levels of father involvement, with fathers reporting more involvement than mothers. Increased conflict between mothers and fathers, in addition to the length of time between interviews, predicted greater discrepancy in reporting, as did father residency and mother–father relationship quality, marital status, age of children, and whether the mother received financial help from anyone other than the father. Parents' reports of emotional involvement were more similar when the father and mothers were married and lived together. Thus, while these two studies found parent relationship quality and time between interviews related to greater discrepancies, they differed in their findings of father residency, father age, maternal education, and financial support from someone other than the father, suggesting the need for additional research.

Another notable difference between the two studies was that Mikelson (2008) used two methods to evaluate disagreement, exact agreement and mean discrepancy scores. Analysis using exact agreement showed that parents living together had higher levels of agreement than parents living apart, while the opposite was true when using mean difference scores. The difference in results highlights the importance of the conceptualization and measurement of *discrepancy* and again, suggests the value in conducting further research.

Research Questions

We examined discrepancies in reports by mothers and fathers about father involvement using a sample composed of low-income, minority families. We used three dimensions of father involvement—accessibility, engagement, and responsibility—to assess for a more nuanced understanding of discrepancies in father involvement reports than has been conducted previously. Based on Mikelson's (2008) study, we conducted analyses using two measures of discrepancy. First, we examined exact agreement between mothers and fathers on an extensive range of father involvement measures providing corollary information to Mikelson's (2008) study. Second, we evaluated differences in mean scores of reports on the three dimensions to establish the extent of discrepancies. Then, we added a third assessment

and examined interrater agreement with one-way random effects intraclass correlations (ICCs; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). Finally, we evaluated factors (e.g., mother and father demographic characteristics, relationship quality and status, and child characteristics) associated with reporting differences. This combination of rigorous analyses extends previous research in several ways: (a) using diverse measures of involvement, (b) including biological and nonbiological children as the basis for parental reports of involvement to account for repartnering and complex family arrangements, and (c) using complete father-report data instead of relying on mother reports when father reports are absent.

Method

Data

We drew data from the Chicago Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study of developmental risk among young African American and Latino males in disadvantaged urban Chicago neighborhoods (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). Participants who had become fathers ($n = 164$) were asked a wide range of questions, including their relationship with their children, level and type of father involvement, financial and other support for their children, and their relationship with the mother(s) of their children. The mothers of each of their children were also interviewed using parallel measures resulting in uniquely matched data for up to five children. In some cases, multiple mothers were interviewed if the father had partnered with more than one mother.

The analytic sample consisted of matched mother–father pairs assessed in two waves of data collection when fathers were between the ages of 20.5 and 30.5 years. We retained mother–father pairs from the first wave whenever possible and added unduplicated pairs from the second wave when there was no mother–father pair available in the first wave. Interviews conducted more than 365 days apart were excluded from the sample ($n = 8$), as were cases with missing data on independent and dependent variables ($n = 9$). Our final sample used data from 221 children from 113 fathers and 126 mothers. The vast majority of children (96%) were reported to be living with their mother most of the time; the rest of the children in the sample were living with their father (3%) or a grandparent or other relative most of the time (1%).

Measures

Dependent Variables—The outcome variables are discrepancies between mothers' and fathers' reports on father involvement in three domains of father involvement (Lamb et al., 1987): accessibility (two items), engagement (three subscales), and responsibility (three subscales). These measures were developed by the DADS Initiative (Cabrera et al., 2004; Cabrera & Peters, 2000).

Father accessibility—We measured accessibility using two items asked of all matched pairs for each child reported: "How often can you (or *the father* when asked of mothers) see the child?" and "How often do you (or the father) see the child?" The frequency of perceived access was measured with a six-category Likert-type scale (1 = *any time I want to*, 2 = *once per day but not anytime I want to*, 3 = *once per week but not every day*, 4 = *between once*

per week and once per month, 5 = less than once per month, 6 = never). We subsequently reverse-coded the scale so higher numbers would be associated with higher levels of perceived access to the child. We measured frequency of contact using a five-category Likert-type scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*— maybe once or twice per year, 3 = *sometimes*— about once a month or so, 4 = *often*—not every day but several times per week or month, or 5 = *every day*). We constructed both measures using the mean of nonmissing values, and we used both measures as continuous variables.

Father engagement—The engagement domain of father involvement consisted of three subscales: (a) recreation and leisure (6 items), (b) education (2 items), and (c) caregiving (5 items). For each question in the engagement domain, parents were asked, “How many times in the past month have you (or has the father) done any of the following with (child’s name)?” For each item, respondents reported how often the father engaged in activities with his child (1 = *at least once per day*, 2 = *a few times per week*, 3 = *a few times per month*, 4 = *rarely*, or 5 = *not at all in the past month*). We reverse-coded responses so higher numbers indicated more frequency of involvement. We then created mean scores using nonmissing values ranging from 1 to 5.

Father responsibility—The responsibility domain consisted of three subscales: (a) assistance with planning (18 items), (b) financial contributions (8 items), and (c) the father’s influence on important decisions related to the child (8 items). For assistance with planning, fathers and mothers were asked, “Please tell me who makes sure these things get done for (child’s name)? That is, who usually takes responsibility for making sure that (child’s name) gets these things or services? By responsibility we don’t mean paying for the item or service, but just making sure that the service gets done.” For each of the 18 items, we collapsed the original five-category response set indicating who helped with those items (1 = *father*, 2 = *mother*, 3 = *both*, 4 = *someone else*, or 5 = *no one*) into a single indicator variable representing any occurrence of a father’s help with planning (1 = *father or both parent contributed*, 0 = *mother, someone else, or no one contributed* to the items). We constructed the final planning measure by taking the mean of the nonmissing 18 indicator variables measuring whether the father was involved in helping with planning.

Similarly, father’s financial investment was based on one question asked of all fathers and mothers regarding eight distinct items: “Please tell me who usually pays for the following for (child’s name). Is it mainly you (or *the father* when asked of mothers), mainly the child’s mother (or *you* if asked of the mother), both of you equally, or mainly someone else?” We used the same approach to construct the financial investment subscale measure that we used with the planning subscale.

The third subscale in the responsibility domain represented how much influence fathers had in making decisions related to the child’s care. Parents were asked, “How much influence do or does (you/father’s name) have in major decisions such as ...” For each of the eight items, we collapsed the three-category response set indicating how much influence the father had on decisions (1 = *none*, 2 = *some*, 3 = *a lot*) into an indicator variable representing any degree of influence (0 = *none*, 1 = *some or a lot of influence*). The final score on the

influence scale was constructed by taking the mean of the nonmissing eight indicator variables measuring whether the father had influence in the related decisions.

Finally, using scores of father involvement obtained from the parental reports, we created a discrepancy score for each subscale using the three domains of involvement by subtracting the mean scores of matched responses from mothers and fathers on each subscale.

To verify that the subscales associated with the father engagement and responsibility domains reflected distinct dimensions of father involvement, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses of all the items. Father accessibility was not included because this domain is measured by two distinct items used as individual items in analyses. Multiple-fit indices including the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI) were used to evaluate model fit (Bentler, 1990; Steigler, 1990). The confirmatory factor analyses suggested that three-factor solutions for engagement and responsibility, respectively, were most appropriate. The final model for the engagement domain included three factors with six indicators for recreational involvement, two for educational involvement, and five for caregiving with the following fit indices: $\chi^2(58, N = 146) = 90.9, p = .004, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .99$. The final model for the responsibility domain also included three factors with 18 indicators for planning, 8 for financial contributions, and 8 for influence with the following fit indices: $\chi^2(519, N = 149) = 618.4, p = .002, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .98$.

Covariates—Control variables were constructed for fathers (education, race/ethnicity, and household income), mothers (employment status), pairs (interview date difference, relationship quality reported by both the mother and father, and relationship status), and child (age, gender, biological status, and whether the child lived with the father).

Father characteristics—Level of education was measured by a question on school completion (1 = *less than 7 years of school*, 2 = *7–9 years of school*, 3 = *10–11 years of school*, 4 = *high school graduate*, 5 = *1 year of college or business/technical school*, 6 = *some college*, 7 = *college graduate*, 8 = *professional*—MA, MEd, MD, PhD) and whether fathers were currently employed (1 = yes, 0 = no). Education was used as a continuous variable. Total household income was used as a continuous measure (1 = *less than \$5,000*, 2 = *\$5,000–\$9,999*, 3 = *\$10,000–\$14,999*, 4 = *\$15,000–\$19,999*, 5 = *\$20,000–\$24,999*, 6 = *\$25,000–\$29,999*, 7 = *\$30,000–\$39,999*, 8 = *\$40,000–\$49,999*, 9 = *\$50,000 or more*). Fathers' self-reports on race/ethnicity were collapsed into two categories (1 = non-Hispanic black, 0 = Hispanic or other race).

Mother's employment—Mother employment was assessed using a dichotomous variable of whether they were currently employed (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Pair characteristics—Both parents were asked, "In general, how would you describe your relationship with the child's mother/father?" (1 = *excellent*, 2 = *very good*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *fair*, 5 = *poor*). Relationship quality was used as a continuous variable with reverse-coded responses so higher numbers indicated better relationship quality. To address the issue of common method variance, since we included reports from mothers and fathers, we used (a)

mothers' reports of relationship quality and (b) a difference score generated by subtracting mothers' from fathers' scores (father – mother = difference score). Relationship status was also included based on fathers' reports on marital status and cohabitation with the mother, resulting in a four-category variable (1 = *married*, 2 = *cohabiting*, 3 = *romantically involved but not cohabiting*, 4 = *divorced/single/friend/sister*).

Child characteristics—Fathers reported the age of each child, which was treated as a continuous variable measured in years and months. Fathers also reported each child's biological status (1 = biological, 0 = nonbiological), and child gender was coded as a binary variable (1 = male, 0 = female). The father's residence was measured at the child level using a question asked of all fathers: "Do you currently live in the same house as (child's name)?" (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Analytic Strategy

We conducted the analysis in three stages. First, we used exact agreement in mother–father reports of father involvement to assess the frequency with which matched mother–father pairs answered survey questions identically. Evaluated at the item level across the three domains of father involvement, we determined exact agreement scores for 49 measures of father involvement. Second, we used basic descriptive analyses (paired *t* tests) to evaluate the mean scores of reports of involvement for two single items assessing accessibility, and three subscales each to assess dimensions of engagement (recreation, education, and caregiving) and responsibility (material planning, financial contribution, influence on major decisions). At the item and subscale level, we also calculated one-way random effects ICCs to further assess inter-rater agreement (Hallgren, 2012; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). Finally, we used multilevel or hierarchical linear models (HLMs) to examine the effects of father- and child-level predictors on the outcome variables adjusting for clustering of children within fathers. The individual unconditional models (not shown) resulted in ICCs ranging from .46 to .78 suggesting that 46% to 78% of the variance in outcomes is due to differences across fathers. Mothers were treated as having child-level characteristics because so few fathers partnered with more than one mother. All models included key control variables at the father and mother/child level. Specification for the analytic models in HLM notation is presented below:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ij} = & P0j + P1j(\text{Mother Employment}) + P2j(\text{Child Sex}) \\
 & + P3j(\text{Child Age}) + P4j(\text{Biological Child}) + P5j(\text{Father Resident}) \\
 & + P6j(\text{Mother Relationship Quality}) + P7j \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Father- Mother} \\ \text{Relationship Quality} \end{array} \right) \\
 & + P8j(\text{Days Between Interviews}) + P9j(\text{Cohabiting vs. Married}) \\
 & + P10j(\text{Noncohabiting Romantic vs. Married}) \\
 & + P11j(\text{Nonromantic vs. Married}) + r_{ij}
 \end{aligned}$$

Level 1

(child/mother level)

$$\begin{aligned}
 P0j &= B00 + B01(\text{Father Education}) + B02(\text{Father Race}) + B03(\text{Father Income}) + e0j \\
 P1j &= B10 \\
 P2j &= B20 \dots \\
 P11j &= B110
 \end{aligned}$$

Level 2 (father level)

where Y_{ij} is an outcome measure for child i and father j , $B00$ is the intercept for all of the children of father j , $B01$ is the effect of father education on the outcome for all children of father j , $B02$ is the effect of father race on the outcome for all children of father j , $B03$ is the effect of father income on the outcome for all children of father j , and $B11$ through $B110$ are the effects of mother employment, child sex, child age, biological child, father residence, mother relationship quality, the difference between father and mother relationship quality, days between interviews, and three dummy codes for relationship status, respectively. $e0j$ is the variance of child intercepts and rij is the residual term.

Results

The descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1. The majority of fathers were African American (73%) with an average household income of \$20,000 to \$24,999. Sixty-six percent of fathers reported having a high school degree or higher. Sixty-six percent of the children according to father reports ($n = 145$) lived with their father some or most of the time. Sixty-eight percent of mothers were currently employed at the time of the survey. Nearly, one quarter of father participants were married and over one third were cohabiting. Fewer than 10% were romantically involved but not cohabiting, and 33% were not romantically involved (i.e., divorced, single, friends). Fifty-four percent of the children in the sample were male, and 82% were biological children of fathers in the study. Children ranged in age between infants and 14 years old, with an average age of 4.6 years. Overall, parents reported relatively high relationship satisfaction, with fathers reporting higher levels of satisfaction than mothers reported (4.2 or very good vs. 3.7 or good, respectively).

Table 2 presents the results of the exact agreement analysis. We find strong agreement on both items measuring accessibility, with 86% of reports agreeing on how often the father can see the child (i.e., access), and 76% agreeing on how often the father sees the child (i.e., contact). Exact agreement on engagement was generally weak, with mothers and fathers agreeing less than 43% of the time on all items. For recreation, in most cases, pairs' reports were in precise agreement about one fourth to one third of the time. In addition, parents agreed on fathers' involvement in educational activities approximately one third of the time. Responses to questions on caregiving showed similar results with agreement scores ranging from 34% (giving a bath) to 42% (helping get dressed).

Contrary to engagement, exact agreement about responsibility was strong, particularly regarding questions on father's influence on the child. Pairs agreed at least 62% of the time

on all items in this subscale, with a high of 92% agreement regarding fathers' influence on safety. There was moderately strong agreement on fathers' financial responsibility (66% to 75%) and planning (51% to 88%). Specifically, parents agreed more than one half the time that the father arranged child care, attended school events, met with teachers, took time away from work if needed, and ensured the child had clothing. Parents agreed 61% to 88% of the time on the remaining items in the planning subscale.

The mean differences between mothers and fathers on each measure are shown in Table 3. Consistent with the exact agreement results, mean differences were generally greater regarding engagement, with smaller differences regarding responsibility. In addition, mothers consistently reported less father involvement than fathers reported. The average difference in reports on how often the father saw the child was statistically significant, with fathers ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.77$) reporting higher levels of contact than mothers ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(220) = 4.05$, $p < .001$. However, the difference in reports on how often the father *can* see the child was not statistically significant. Fathers reported significantly higher levels of recreation involvement ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.10$) than mothers reported about fathers' involvement ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(220) = 2.84$, $p < .01$, as well as caregiving ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.20_{\text{fathers}}$, $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.24_{\text{mothers}}$), $t(220) = 3.79$, $p < .001$. Differences in the means of fathers' and mothers' reports on each subscale of responsibility were statistically significant, with pairs reporting average scores on planning ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.23_{\text{fathers}}$, $M = 0.59$, $SD = 0.31_{\text{mothers}}$), $t(220) = 7.45$, $p < .001$; financial responsibility ($M = 0.82$, $SD = 0.25_{\text{fathers}}$, $M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.38_{\text{mothers}}$), $t(220) = 8.02$, $p < .001$; and influence ($M = 0.87$, $SD = 0.19_{\text{fathers}}$, $M = 0.77$, $SD = 0.29_{\text{mothers}}$), $t(220) = 4.84$, $p < .001$.

One-way random effects ICCs for each subscale mean are also presented in Table 3. Higher values of ICCs would suggest greater interrater reliability with an ICC of 1 indicating perfect agreement and a 0 indicating only random agreement (Hallgren, 2012). We use Cicchetti's (1994) cutoffs for interpretation of ICC ratings which suggest poor reliability with values of less than .40, fair for values of .40 to .59, good for values .60 to .74, and excellent for values from .75 to 1.0. The ICCs among this study's group of parents suggest generally poor interrater reliability with all but one score in the range of .18 to .50.

Results from the HLMs are shown in Table 4. These analyses help answer questions about the factors associated with differences in reports of involvement between mothers and fathers. Examination of the likelihood ratio test statistic to compare the fit of the random intercept models with those of regression models suggests that we can reject the null hypothesis that the intercept is the same across all fathers, as ordinary regression models assume. The full model ICCs are also presented in Table 4 and range from .35 to .71 compared with the unconditional model ICCs (not shown) which ranged from .46 to .78. Thus, after controlling for all variables in the model, the ICCs in all models but one (accessibility) were reduced compared with the ICCs from the unconditional models suggesting a decrease of variance in the outcome due to differences among fathers.

All the models included covariates at the father, as well as mother, and child levels. Father residency and relationship status significantly predicted differences in father and mother reports in accessibility. For romantic pairs not living together, discrepancies in reports about

father contact were, on average, .56 points higher than those in the married reference group ($p < .05$) and .85 points higher among nonromantic pairs (divorced, single, friends; $p < .001$). Discrepancies in reports were also, on average, .64 points higher among resident fathers than those who did not reside with their child ($p < .001$).

For the recreation subscale, two predictors were statistically significant: There was a .27 average increase in discrepancies for parents of boys (compared with girls; $p < .05$) and for each additional year in child age, the discrepancy in reports on recreational involvement increased by .05 points ($p < .05$).

Three factors were significantly associated with differences in mother and father reports on father engagement in educational activities. As mother reported relationship quality increased, the discrepancies decreased by .11 points ($p < .05$). Cohabiting pairs had, on average, .77 points greater discrepancy than married pairs had ($p < .05$). The days between interviews was also significant ($p < .01$), indicating that longer periods between interviews were associated with a slight decrease in discrepancies.

Three factors significantly predicted discrepancies in reports on caregiving: African American fathers had .76 points less discrepancy, on average, than fathers who were Hispanic or of another race/ethnicity ($p < .01$). Cohabiting pairs had .66 points average greater discrepancy compared with married pairs ($p < .05$) and fathers who resided with their child compared with those who did not, had on average, .83 less in discrepancy points.

Only one variable was statistically significant in predicting the father's contribution to planning in the responsibility domain, as well as in the financial domain. Specifically, as mother-reported relationship quality improved, the discrepancy in reports of planning decreased by .10 points ($p < .001$). Similarly, as mothers' reports on relationship quality improved, the discrepancy in fathers' financial contributions decreased, on average, by .10 points ($p < .001$). Two variables were statistically significant in predicting a father's influence on important decisions related to the child: (a) The discrepancy in parental reports decreased, on average, by .07 points as mothers' reports on relationship quality improved ($p < .001$) and (b) For each additional year in child age, the discrepancy increased, on average, by .01 points ($p < .05$).

Discussion

This study extends past research on why mothers and fathers differ in their perceptions of a father's involvement in his child's life. It uses a broader range of measures of involvement than has been used before including accessibility to, engagement with, and responsibility for his children (Lamb et al., 1987) among a low-income, inner-city sample of families. It also includes the mothers of all children fathered by the man. Research on differences in reports among multiple informants has been examined in other areas, for example, child behavior reported by parents, teachers, and children; intimate partner violence and psychological aggression reported by romantic partners (e.g., Achenbach, Edelbrock, & Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). However, empirical research assessing discrepancies among mothers' and fathers' reports of father involvement with children is limited and to our

knowledge has been assessed in only two studies conducted by Coley and Morris (2002) and Mikelson (2008), respectively.

As found in this previous research (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008), fathers report more involvement with their children than mothers indicate. The discrepancy may be because fathers want to present themselves as more involved than they really are (social desirability), particularly among those who tend to be characterized as uninvolved because of limited employment, financial hardship, or incarceration. On the other hand, mothers may be biased if they perceive the father in a negative light because of conflict between them and, thus, report that fathers are less involved than they actually are. Bias in mothers' reports may also occur in cases where mothers are not physically present to observe father-child interactions calling into question the validity of their reports. For instance, two thirds of children in this study lived with fathers some or most of the time suggesting the possibility of father-child interactions that may have occurred in the absence of mothers in the rest of the sample. It is possible that the discrepancies observed in this study could, in part, be due to subtle bias in some mothers' ability to accurately report on father involvement activities.

Differences in parents' perceptions of direct and indirect interaction with children may account for the results that emerged in our exact agreement analyses. We find, for example, a strong pattern of agreement in measures assessing responsibility and accessibility, both of which are less tangible forms of involvement with the child (e.g., paying bills, having a say in what the child eats for dinner). In contrast, we find less agreement on concrete, direct forms of involvement (i.e., engagement), such as playing, reading stories, or helping the child get dressed. It may be that mothers and fathers have different interpretations of direct involvement or perspectives on what it means to engage with a child in concrete ways. This is congruent with previous research that has found variation in mothers' and fathers' ratings of child behavior problems according to type of behavior with higher correspondence between parent's reports of externalizing (or more observable) behavior and less correspondence of internalizing (or less observable) behavior (Duhig, Renk, Epstein, & Phares, 2000; Kerr, Lunkenheimer, & Olson, 2007).

Similar to previous work, when a mother rates her relationship with the father more highly, we find fewer discrepancies of opinion about his responsibility toward their children, and to a lesser extent his engagement with them. Mothers' reports on relationship quality do not predict differences in ratings of fathers' accessibility. In this case, actual contact measured by the frequency with which the father sees the child may represent a less ambiguous characterization of his involvement and not something influenced by mothers' perceptions of the quality of the relationship. That said, differences in opinion about accessibility are greater when the pair is less stable (noncohabiting romantic or nonromantic vs. married). It is unsurprising that perceptions of access differ more among parents in less stable partnerships, since it is these very relationships that are likely to be more conflictual compared with relationships among stable, married parents. The results reinforce an important consideration when measuring father involvement: A mother's perception of the relationship may matter in her assessment of father involvement. Conversely, it is possible that if mothers perceive that fathers are not doing as much with the children, they may hold more negative views of the relationship. However, it is also possible that the same processes

that lead a mother to rate father involvement lower may also lead her to rate the quality of the relationship lower. This is a limitation in our study that warrants further assessment. Previous studies also suggest that fathers may take cues from mothers regarding the type of involvement expected or needed (Lamb, 2000). Therefore, it is important that future research examine the mother's expectations for the father's involvement and whether she perceives low levels of involvement as problematic (Haney & March, 2003). Communicating expectations could affect father involvement and might help researchers understand why the mother's report on relationship quality remains a central predictor of discrepancies in perceptions of father involvement.

Furthermore, because some fathers in this sample were not living with their child, the extent to which mothers and fathers coparent could also affect reports of father involvement. Previous research suggests that coparenting, the extent to which parents share care for the child, is a unique dimension of parenting that has important implications for child development (Waller, 2012). Future research could examine whether cooperative coparenting, regardless of relationship quality, also reduces differences in reports of father involvement.

Unlike findings from previous studies (Coley & Morris, 2002; Mikelson, 2008), we find that child demographic characteristics are associated with differences in reporting on some aspects of father involvement. It could be that the wider age range of children in our study allows us to detect these distinctions. Evidence suggests that fathers become less involved with children over time (Lamb, 2000; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001) and our findings suggest that discrepancies in reports on engagement (recreation and education) and responsibility (influence) increase as children age. It is unclear whether differences emerge because mothers see fathers as doing less as time progresses—whereas fathers believe themselves to be as involved—or whether fathers do different types of activities when children get older that leads to differences in perceptions of involvement. Further investigation of these findings could inform researchers' understanding and the extent to which perceived differences in reports mirror reality. Prior research is inconsistent regarding whether fathers are more involved with their sons than with their daughters (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Hofferth, 2003). Increased discrepancy on the recreation subscale of involvement may be related to fathers believing they do more recreational activities with their sons than mothers realize. Overall, it is unclear whether child characteristics such as gender or age influence parental reports of involvement because fathers have quantitatively different levels of involvement (i.e., they spend more time playing with boys than girls, or older children than younger children) or are involved in qualitatively different ways with sons than daughters or as children age (e.g., the activities that fathers do with sons differ from what they do with daughters but they take equal amounts of time).

In addition to providing nuances to previous research findings, our study demonstrates that discrepancies vary depending on the dimension of involvement assessed. Therefore, it is likely that a one-dimensional construct would fail to capture the unique types of father involvement that are most likely to be reported differently between mothers and fathers. This echoes the findings of Schoppe-Sullivan, McBride, and Ho (2004), who found that fathering consists of distinct domains of involvement and that the domains do not always correlate

with one another. Our use of multiple dimensions of involvement corresponds with their overall conclusion that multidimensional measures of father involvement have greater utility than unidimensional measures.

This being said, it is important to note that our findings of lower levels of agreement (and generally larger discrepancies) on father engagement items compared with father responsibility items may be influenced by the type of ratings used in the assessments (Achenbach, 2011). The scale with the least agreement (engagement) relied on a frequency-based typology (1 = *at least once per day*, 5 = *not at all in the past month*), whereas the scale with the highest agreement (responsibility) used a different typology: Planning and financial assistance were assessed by asking “Who took responsibility for ...” and “Who paid for ...” (1 = *father or both parents*, 0 = *mother*; else, *no one*). The differential in agreement scores between the scales could be the result of raters more easily identifying *who* performs certain parenting functions than assessing (and agreeing on) how *frequently* these behaviors are exhibited.

Future research may want to test the same typology of measures across father involvement constructs. If this leads to increased and consistent reliability in ratings between mothers and fathers, it might be acceptable to use maternal reports to assess father involvement given mothers are generally easier to recruit into studies. If this is not the case, than when feasible, researchers should include both fathers and mothers. In general, the use of multiple informants may be warranted (if not preferred) because of the different underlying motivations that fathers and mothers may have in reporting father involvement and in their interpretations of the measures. If informant discrepancies exist across populations and contexts (e.g., parents and teachers reporting on child behavior; parents and adolescents reporting on parenting behavior), it may be beneficial to include multiple informants in assessment of behavior to increase validity. An important caveat to advocating for both mothers’ and fathers’ reports, however, and an area that could benefit from additional research, is when mother–father pairs do not coreside and father–child interactions may occur without mothers’ full acknowledgement or understanding. The validity of mothers’ reports in such cases might be questionable.

Despite this study’s contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. Although we were able to detect discrepancies using self-report measures of father involvement, reliability of these reports is limited. Additional forms of data (e.g., time diaries, audio and video recorded observations) would increase the rigor of the research and provide data to improve the validity of parent self-reports on father involvement. Studies that have used direct observation through video recordings (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, & Jones, 2004) have used those data to measure the quality of father–child interactions. Innovative methods to measure not only the quality of interactions but the types and absolute levels of involvement are still needed.

Furthermore, because of constraints owing to study design, we were unable to account for child development and changes that may occur in relationships between mothers and fathers. Using a developmental perspective to better understand the role of fathers in families and how their parental interaction influences child development is critical (Parke, 2000). Finally,

our sample consists of mostly African American and Hispanic, low-income families from one inner-city urban setting. Generalizability to other groups with a more heterogeneous demographic profile is limited.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that collection of information from both fathers and mothers is important in studies on parenting and child development and, in particular, on the role of fathering in children's lives. A pattern emerged in our study showing a link between relationship quality and discrepancies in reports on involvement. This pattern suggests an important point of intervention for families that focuses on both parental relationships and healthy fathering behavior. Our findings also indicated that agreement between mothers and fathers was highest on dimensions of behavior that were indirect and served a managerial function (Parke, 2000) and lowest on direct day-to-day caregiving tasks. By including multidimensional measures in all domains of involvement, future studies may be able to verify and further ascertain why such distinctions between mothers and fathers exist in their perceptions of father involvement. As interest in fathering continues to build in the practice and policy communities, rigorous research should inform services and policy decisions regarding the most effective ways to support families and bolster the positive role of fathers in children's lives.

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Table 1Sample Characteristics of Fathers ($n = 113$), Mothers ($n = 126$), and Children ($n = 221$).

Variables	%/M	SD
<i>Father characteristics</i>		
Education		
High school degree or greater	66.4	
Less than high school degree	33.6	
Race/ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Black	72.6	
Hispanic or other race	27.4	
Household income ^a	5.8	2.7
<i>Mother characteristics</i>		
Employed	68.3	
<i>Couple characteristics</i>		
Days between interviews	88.1	88.6
Relationship quality		
Father report ^b	4.2	1.0
Mother report ^b	3.7	1.2
Relationship status		
Married	23.9	
Cohabiting	34.5	
Noncohabiting romantic	8.9	
Divorced/single/friend/sister	32.7	
<i>Child characteristics</i>		
Male child	53.9	
Child age	4.6	3.4
Biological child of father	81.9	
Child lives with father	65.6	

^aHousehold income scale from 1 to 9, where 1 = *less than \$500* and 9 = *\$50,000+*.^bRelationship quality scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = *poor* and 5 = *excellent*.

Table 2Exact Agreement Percentages of Fathers ($n = 113$) and Mothers ($n = 126$).

Variable	Agreement (%)
<i>Accessibility</i>	
How often father can see child	85.5
How often father does see child	76.0
<i>Engagement</i>	
Recreation ^b	
TV or videos	41.2
Play outside	35.3
Play with ball (<5) ^a	34.7
Take to play with other children	31.7
Play with toys (<5) ^a	27.6
Go for a walk	26.7
Education ^b	
Tell stories	32.6
Read stories	30.8
Caregiving ^b	
Help get dressed	41.6
Help brush his or her teeth (<5) ^a	40.9
Put to bed	40.3
Help use the toilet (<5) ^a	37.8
Give bath (<7) ^a	33.5
<i>Responsibility</i>	
Planning ^c	
Ensure safety	87.8
Presents	82.8
Pay bills	73.8
Clean place to live	71.5
Visit with other children	71.0
Take to school	69.7
Toys to play with	67.0
Books	66.1
Doctor appointments	65.6
Groceries	63.8
Health insurance	63.4
Care items (e.g., diapers)	63.0
Register for activities	61.1
Clothes to wear	58.4
Take off work if needed	57.5
Meet with teachers	55.6

Variable	Agreement (%)
Attend school event	53.0
Arrange child care	50.7
Financial responsibility ^d	
Clothes	75.1
Toys and/or books	74.2
Activities/social outings	73.8
Child care items	71.7
Groceries	67.9
Health insurance	67.0
Babysitter	66.5
Medical expenses	66.1
Influence ^e	
Safety	91.9
Rules or curfew	85.1
Education	81.9
Bedtime	79.6
Health care	73.3
Day care	70.6
Religion	64.3
Diet	61.5

^a Only asked of parents with children who were younger than 5 or 7 years (<5 and <7, respectively).

^b Question asked, "How often does the father do the following items with the child ..."

^c Question asked, "Who took responsibility for the following items ..."

^d Question asked, "Who paid for the following items ..."

^e Question asked, "How much influence does father have on decisions about the following ..."

Table 3

Means, Mean Differences, and One-Way Random Effects Interrater ICC for Mean Scores on Mother and Father Reports of Father Involvement.

Outcome (child level)	Father		Mother		Mean difference	ICCs
	M	SD	M	SD		
Accessibility						
Can see	5.78	0.75	5.82	0.73	−0.04	0.18
Do see	4.61	0.77	4.43	0.99	0.18***	0.72
Engagement						
Recreation	3.50	1.10	3.29	1.10	0.21**	0.50
Education	3.31	1.35	3.14	1.32	0.17†	0.26
Caregiving	3.20	1.20	2.86	1.24	0.34***	0.38
Responsibility						
Planning	0.74	0.23	0.59	0.31	0.15***	0.33
Financial responsibility	0.82	0.25	0.63	0.38	0.19***	0.28
Influence	0.87	0.19	0.77	0.29	0.10***	0.28

Note. ICC = intraclass correlation coefficient (95% confidence interval). One-way random effects absolute individual measures ICC.

† $p < .1$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).

Table 4

Hierarchical Linear Model Regression Analyses Predicting Discrepancies in Parental Reports of Father Involvement ($n = 221$, Children).

Predictor	Accessibility			Engagement			Caregiving			Planning			Responsibility			Influence		
	Contact			Education			B			B			B			B		
	B	SE		B	SE		B	SE		B	SE		B	SE		B	SE	
<i>Father</i>																		
Education	-0.08	0.05 [†]		-0.07	0.11		0.08	0.08		-0.02	0.02		-0.01	0.02		0.004	0.02	
Non-Hispanic Black (ref: Hispanic or other)	0.01	0.14		-0.49	0.33		-0.76	0.25 ^{**}		0.02	0.05		0.09	0.07		-0.04	0.05	
Income	0.01	0.02		-0.05	0.05		-0.07	0.04 [†]		-0.01	0.01		0.003	0.01		0.002	0.01	
<i>Mother</i>																		
Employment	0.001	0.10		-0.05	0.25		0.04	0.20		0.03	0.04		0.04	0.05		-0.01	0.04	
<i>Couple</i>																		
Days between interviews	0.001	0.00		-0.004	0.00 ^{**}		-0.001	0.00		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	
Relationship quality	-0.02	0.05		0.15	0.13		0.005	0.10		0.03	0.02		0.03	0.02		0.03	0.02	
difference (father-mother reported)																		
Relationship quality (mother reported)	-0.09	0.06		-0.11	0.15 [*]		-0.10	0.12		-0.10	0.02 ^{***}		-0.10	0.03 ^{***}		-0.07	0.02 ^{**}	
Relationship status (ref: married)																		
Cohabiting	-0.05	0.14		0.29	0.22		0.77	0.34 [*]		0.66	0.26 [*]		0.10	0.07		-0.03	0.06	
Noncohabiting romantic	0.56	0.28 [*]		-0.33	0.47		-0.89	0.68		-0.25	0.55		-0.06	0.13		-0.09	0.12	
Nonromantic	0.85	0.19 ^{***}		-0.44	0.33		-0.36	0.48		-0.47	0.39		0.08	0.09		0.01	0.08	
<i>Child</i>																		
Male child	0.03	0.07		0.27	0.13 [*]		0.16	0.17		0.15	0.15		-0.01	0.03		-0.06	0.03 [†]	
Child age	-0.003	0.01		0.05	0.02 [*]		0.06	0.03 [†]		0.02	0.03		0.002	0.01		0.01	0.01 [*]	
Biological child	0.04	0.11		0.36	0.20 [†]		0.53	0.27 [†]		0.04	0.24		0.001	0.05		0.09	0.05 [†]	
Father lives with child	0.64	0.18 ^{***}		-0.46	0.32		-0.68	0.45		-0.83	0.39 [*]		-0.09	0.08		-0.10	0.08	
Constant	-0.03	0.39		0.27	0.65		1.41	0.95		1.77	0.77 [*]		0.49	0.18 ^{**}		0.31	0.16 [†]	
Random effect intercept	0.25 ^{***}			0.42 ^{***}			1.25 ^{***}			0.49 ^{***}			0.06 ^{***}			0.03 ^{***}		

Predictor	Accessibility			Engagement			Responsibility		
	Contact			Recreation			Planning		
	B	SE		B	SE		B	SE	Influence
Log likelihood	-174.38			-378.47			-0.79		8.91
ICC of full model	0.64			0.56			0.71		0.46
Number of observations	221			221			221		221

Note. ICC = intraclass correlation. The reference group for the categorical variables is shown in parenthesis.

[†] $p < .1$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.