



Do married and cohabiting fathers differ in their commitments to fathering?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Cohabitation
Children
Fathers
Norway
Family

ABSTRACT

Using Norwegian survey data from 2003, this paper examines whether cohabiting fathers have a weaker commitment to fathering than do married fathers. Two differences between cohabiting and married fatherhood are thought to affect fathering commitment: the level of institutionalisation; and relationship quality. Three indicators of fathering commitment are studied: the father's willingness to allocate time to his family over work time; his willingness to ensure his child siblings; and to be a good parent to his child. Married fathers are found to be more likely than cohabiting fathers to agree that their child needs siblings. This indicates that even in a country where cohabitation is very marriage-like, the union status of co-resident fathers has some relevance for their commitment to fathering.

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1. Introduction

Family patterns in western industrialized countries have undergone profound changes over the last four decades. In many countries, cohabitation has replaced marriage as the preferred first union among young adults and quickly gained acceptance and popularity as an acceptable arena for childbearing. Nowhere has this demographic trend been more pronounced than in the Scandinavian countries. Here, every second first born child has cohabiting parents, cohabitation as a childrearing institution is common across the social spectrum, and it enjoys wide social acceptance. Cohabitation also enjoys many of the legal rights associated with married childbearing (Kiernan, 2002; Noack, 2001; Perelli-Harris et al., 2009). This has led some to argue that in Scandinavia cohabitation is largely indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004).

The increase in cohabitation has important implications for men's fathering experiences, as fathers who are cohabitants at the time of their children's births have a much higher chance of becoming non-resident fathers

than those who are married (Clarke, Cooksey, & Verropoulos, 1998; Jensen, 2003; Jensen & Clausen, 1997). Cohabitation and marriage may also differ in ways that affect co-resident fathers' opportunities and willingness to invest in their children. For example, Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) claim that the father–child relationship is particularly sensitive to contextual forces like the parents' relationship (e.g. quality and union status). Moreover, economic theory regards children as a relation-specific investment (Becker, 1991). Accordingly fathers in relationships that are less likely to last long, as is the case in consensual unions, are less willing to invest in the relationship with their children than are fathers in highly committed relationships. In support of this, some American studies indicate that cohabitation is associated with poorer fathering commitment and involvement (men's willingness and opportunity to consistently invest time, money and personal resources in their children's welfare) than marriage (e.g. Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Gibson-Davis, 2008; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003).

In the US, together with many Western-European countries (e.g. Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium and Germany) cohabitation is still not firmly established as a childrearing institution (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004;

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Kiernan, 2002; Perelli-Harris et al., 2009). For example, in the US only 12 percent of every first born child has cohabiting parents, while in Italy and Germany the percentages are 10 and 19 respectively. In line with this, a central question is whether differences between cohabiting and married men's fathering behaviour reported in American studies will diminish or change in other ways as cohabiting childbearing becomes even more widespread or truly replaces marriage. One way to judge this would be to compare the fathering commitment and involvement of cohabiting and married men in the Scandinavian countries, where cohabitation as a family-building institution is considered to be almost indistinguishable from marriage.

The purpose of this study is to examine differences in fathering commitment between Norwegian cohabiting and married fathers. We assume that cohabiting fatherhood will differ from married fatherhood in the level of institutional support and relationship quality. The possible implications of these differences for the levels of involvement among fathers are discussed, and the association between union status and fathering commitment is analyzed by comparing cohabiting and married fathers' attitudes towards children and family life. The analysis is based on data from a 2003 Norwegian survey. The associations do not merely reflect causal effects of the fathers' union status on their commitment to fathering. Union status is also likely to be a result of a number of different factors that may also affect men's investment in fathering. These factors are difficult to control for in a statistical analysis.

2. Prior research comparing married and cohabiting fatherhood

Demographic studies document that fathers' union status is the strongest predictor of later non-resident fatherhood. For example, Jensen & Clausen (1997) found in a Norwegian study that children born to cohabiting couples are two to three times more likely than children born to married couples to have a non-resident father. In Great Britain and the United States the likelihoods are six and three times greater, respectively (Clarke, Cooksey, & Verropoulos, 1998). This higher risk of non-resident fatherhood clearly demonstrates that cohabiting unions, even those involving children, are a more temporary arrangement than marriage.

Does the father's union status at the time of the child's birth have implications for the father-child relationship beyond the elevated risk of non-resident fatherhood? Studies of fathers' contact with their children after a break suggest that. For example, British studies have found that formerly cohabiting fathers on average tend to spend less time with their children after a break than divorced fathers (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; McHenry, McKelvey, Leigh, & Wark, 1996). A Norwegian study (Jensen & Clausen, 1997) did not find differences in the average number of days formerly cohabiting and married fathers spent with their children monthly. However, the average numbers masked a considerable variation in contact among the formerly cohabiting fathers. Among the formerly cohabiting fathers,

those with high income and education had more contact with their children than divorced fathers, while the fathers with low education and income had less contact than divorced fathers. Because there is a probable positive association between fathers' involvement before and after a break, these studies suggest that cohabiting fathers (perhaps except from those with high educations and incomes) are less involved also prior to a break.

More recently, some American studies have compared the level of fathering commitment and involvement between resident cohabiting and married fathers. They have included measures on attitudes, level of engagement, emotional attachment and financial investments. A study by Landale & Oropesa (2001) of father involvement in infants in an ethnic minority, mainland Puerto Rican, reported that fathers who were married to the mother at the time of the birth had higher levels of financial investments and participation in care giving than cohabiting and non-resident fathers. Hofferth & Anderson (2003) reported that cohabiting fathers spend less time actively engaged with their children and they rate themselves lower on warmth toward their children than married fathers. Two studies of parenting in low income families found that cohabiting fathers have lower levels of parental cooperation (Berger et al., 2008) and are more likely to use physical punishment (Gibson-Davis, 2008).

Although cohabitation is firmly established as a child-rearing institution in Scandinavia, there has been little research, as well as political concern about it as an influential fathering context on the offspring. This is noteworthy since measures to stimulate and increase father involvement is an important part of Scandinavian family policies (e.g. Lappegard, 2008). This could reflect a perception of co-resident fathers' union status as being unimportant to their fathering behaviour. However, even if cohabitation is more like marriage in Norway than in the US, there may still be differences between marriage and cohabitation that are important to men's fathering commitment and involvement. For example, a recent study found that cohabiting fathers are more hesitant to formalize their union than cohabiting mothers are (Reneflot, 2006), and while this in part may be due to their perception of the similarities between cohabitation and marriage, two out of three fathers hesitate to get married out of fear of making union dissolution harder. This finding may suggest that cohabiting fathers have little concern or awareness of difficulties associated with non-resident fathering and the potential harm of parental separation for the child. To what extent this is also reflected in the investments cohabiting fathers are making in their resident children is hard to say, but at least this deserves further attention.

3. Differences between cohabiting and married fathers and the implications for their commitments to fathering

Cohabiting fatherhood is expected to differ from married fatherhood in the level of institutional support and the quality of the relationship with the mother. These differences might in turn have implications for the fathers' level of commitment to fathering.

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