



Adult non-response bias from a child perspective. Using child reports to estimate father's non-response



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ABSTRACT

Most parenting research on paternal involvement uses data from a father perspective. Nevertheless, research on bias in father non-response is scarce. In this study, we examine the non-response bias of fathers, hypothesizing that fathers who engage in parenting studies might already be fathers who are more involved with their children than fathers who do not engage in these studies. Furthermore, we expect a double non-response bias by socio-demographic characteristics of the father, which impacts both paternal participation as well as paternal involvement.

Using the multi-actor dataset from the “Divorce in Flanders”-project, which provides data from children whose fathers actually participated ($N = 461$) as well as data from children whose fathers did not ($N = 137$) with children reporting on paternal involvement, we are able to test our hypotheses. Results confirm our first hypothesis, indicating that non-participating fathers are significantly more uninvolved than participating fathers. Regarding our second hypothesis, an indirect effect of father's educational level and age on non-response was revealed for one out of three indicators of paternal involvement.

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1. Introduction

As stated by Aquilino (1999), the choice of the informant with regard to data collection is becoming an increasingly critical issue in research on intergenerational relationships. Especially in research on paternal involvement, there has been an evolution of informants with regard to data collection. According to Gorvine (2010), research on fathering has traditionally relied primarily on mother reports. Such data capture only the maternal perceptions of paternal involvement. As demonstrated in a study by Mikelson (2008), mother and father reports of paternal involvement can vary significantly, with fathers reporting higher levels of paternal involvement than mothers do. Although some recent studies on paternal involvement continue to be based on maternal informants, due to data limitations (Flouri and Buchanan, 2003; Gorvine, 2010; Ryan et al., 2008), current research on paternal involvement is often based on data from a father perspective (e.g. Capaldi et al., 2008; Douglas, 2003; Fagan and Palkovitz, 2011; Hohman-Mariott, 2011; Paquette et al., 2000).

Despite the advantages of studying paternal involvement based on reports from fathers, such data are vulnerable to two types of bias. First, father data are susceptible to self-serving bias. As indicated in a study by Pasley and Braver (2004), non-residential fathers tend to describe their involvement with their children in a more socially desirable way. They also reveal that children's reports on non-residential paternal involvement generate an image that is situated between those generated

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by father reports and by mother reports. In a study by Aquilino (1999), parents rated the parent–child relationship more positively than their children did. A second source of bias involves the possibility that fathers' reports regarding their involvement might be subject to non-response bias if refusal to participate in survey research is not completely random with regard to the target variables. To our knowledge, no previous studies have investigated the issue of whether the participation of fathers in family studies might be selective with regard to their own involvement in raising children.

One possible solution for these two types of bias might be to use child reports. In studies on children's well-being, children are more frequently seen as active agents who can provide information on their own lives and who can become the main unit of observation (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Ben-Arieh and Frønes, 2011). The use of child data has also been increasing in recent studies on paternal involvement (e.g. Booth et al., 2010; King, 2006; Menning, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2009; Stewart, 2003; Videon, 2005; Yuan and Hamilton, 2006). Such data might offer a more reliable source of information on paternal involvement (see also the previously mentioned studies by Aquilino, 1999 and Pasley and Braver, 2004).

This study draws upon multi-actor data to investigate selectivity in paternal non-response due to paternal involvement and socio-demographic characteristics associated with paternal involvement. We use data from the Divorce in Flanders (DiF) project (Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). The DiF database contains multi-actor data obtained by questioning fathers, as well as other actors (e.g. children and mothers). It thus contains information on fathers who participated in the study, as well as on those who did not participate. In this study, we investigate (1) whether paternal non-response is selective with regard to paternal involvement and (2) the possibility of double bias, with socio-demographic characteristics influencing both involvement in raising children and survey participation.

2. Non-response

2.1. Model of survey participation

One well-known and widely used conceptual model of survey participation is that developed by Groves and Couper (1998; Groves et al., 2004a). According to these authors, the participation of respondents depends upon their contactability and their willingness to participate. Making contact and obtaining cooperation in face-to-face surveys are two completely different processes. Bias caused by attrition can therefore be subject to entirely different interpretations, depending upon the underlying mechanism. The attempt to contact a sample unit is the first step in obtaining response. Contactability depends upon physical impediments (e.g. locked apartment entrances), the at-home behavior of the respondent and the call pattern of the interviewer. Ease of contact can be measured by the number of calls leading to the first contact (Groves and Couper, 1998; Groves et al., 2004a). Although several cautions are in order with regard to this method (Stoop, 2005), it is generally acknowledged as the best indicator of contactability.

Once the selected individuals have been contacted successfully and deemed eligible given the sample and fieldwork design, the interviewer must persuade the prospective respondents to participate in the survey. One crucial factor in obtaining such response involves the interaction between the interviewer and the sampled person. The outcome of this interaction is determined by the characteristics and fieldwork design of the survey, as well as by the social environment and various characteristics of the interviewer and the individual who has been invited to participate (Groves and Couper, 1998; Groves et al., 2004a). Differences in these factors can lead to different outcomes. In some cases, the interaction between the interviewer and the sample unit is effective, such that the prospective respondent immediately accepts the invitation for an interview. In other cases, however, individuals refuse immediately when the interviewer presents the survey and asks for their participation. A third outcome involves the temporary or permanent inability of respondents to participate due to such reasons as illness, language problems, mental disabilities or physical disabilities.

The model developed by Groves and Couper (1998; Groves et al., 2004a) distinguishes between contactability and cooperation, thereby clearly indicating that non-response in surveys can be caused by several different underlying mechanisms. The model was developed based on the conviction that analyses involving the selectivity of attrition are beneficial and that they can be performed by distinguishing between various types of non-response. Moreover, non-response due to non-contacts and non-response due to refusals should be clearly distinguished. The former are prospective respondents for whom contact attempts remain unsuccessful. Refusal non-response goes beyond the concept of contactability and focus on the willingness to cooperate. These prospective respondents were contacted but the interviewer could not convince them to participate in the study. This could be due to many reasons, although an important one is the topic of the study. The assumption that the attitude towards a survey is largely determined by the topic of the survey is confirmed in many studies (Groves and Couper, 1998; Snijders et al., 1999; Brehm, 1993; Voogt et al., 1998; Groves et al., 2004b). Consequently, for this research, we concentrate only on non-response in terms of refusal by exploring the likelihood of cooperating relative to the likelihood of refusing. The analysis of non-response due to non-contactability and inability would exceed the scope of this study.

2.2. Selectivity of non-response

Unit non-response occurs when sampled individuals do not participate. Such non-response causes missing data, which is likely to introduce bias into the estimators (Bethlehem et al., 2011). There are three types of missing data. The first category includes data that are missing completely at random (MCAR), meaning that there is no relationship between the response

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