

Reconceptualizing the Role and Involvement of Fathers: A Conceptual View Examining the Importance of Fathers from a Historical and Attributional Approach

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Abstract

Despite the many advances, programs and education centered around effective involved parenting, research continues to lag as it relates to offering an informed definition and conceptualization of father involvement through the lens of the father. Instead, research is shifting towards socially constructed ideals of caring or reconstructed masculinities, which offers promise but is still missing the key component of the father's voice – to guide the discussion. Taking historical and attributional viewpoints, this review examines ways in which fathers and father involvement have been conceptualized over its history and how our views have been shaped by these conceptualizations. The paper looks at attribution bias to shed light on reasons why fathers may move away from this role. Finally, the paper makes suggestions for further study, centered around recommendations urging researchers to include fathers in research and also looking at father involvement from an ecological perspective.

Keywords: Father Involvement, Attribution Bias, Father's Role

Introduction

Defining fatherhood has taken on several different meanings over its history (Lamb, 1986, 2000). It has often been regarded as having unidimensional features or characteristics (Griswold, 1997; Lamb, 2000), such as breadwinning, to encompassing multidimensional (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013), reconstructed masculinized and purposive features (Joshi, 2021; Scheibling, 2018). As time has progressed, so have the many definitions and perceptions of fatherhood. Absent from our understanding and knowledge of the father role and father involvement is substantive qualitative research on (a) what fathers have considered their role to be, (b) how it should be defined, and (c) the environmental, social and cultural influences that either promotes or hinders father involvement. Certain exceptions do exist. For example, Berman and Long (2021) conducted a qualitative study examining fathers' view of their roles and what they believed best represented their duties as fathers. However, their results were limited to middle to high income earning white fathers in a South African province (2021). In fact, much of the research involving fathers, utilizes middle-class, white intact families, where mothers are often the respondents.

While some researchers have sought to broaden our understanding of the various aspects of fatherhood (Lamb, 2000), the essential element of father input and broader contextual perspectives continues to be a concern. Continual efforts in research have helped to promote a better understanding of the role of fatherhood and father involvement, but understanding this concept from a father's perspective may offer considerable insight into their relationships with their children, child development and relationships with mothers.

The current analysis has two objectives. The first objective is to examine how various conceptualizations and definitions of fathering and father involvement have emerged and shaped research. The second objective is to tie these perceptions to attribution theory, specifically through examining the literature on mothers' and media's perceptions of father involvement. Because the concept of fathers and father involvement has a history of being defined by various groups of interest (minus fathers), a proper conceptualization of the role of the father, in addition to considerations regarding their perceived lack of involvement has not been attempted and attribution theory may offer an alternative explanation. We first turn to a historical analysis of father involvement.

2.1 Historical Perspectives of the Fathering Role

The father role has endured incredible scrutiny over the last several decades. It has taken on various meanings, especially around historical events. As early as the 19th century, ministers, child-rearing experts and women were known to share and record advice on their ideals of what fathers were supposed to be (Griswold, 1993; Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

According to Pleck (1984), the concept of fatherhood has been dissected into four periods over history—with each new concept emerging during certain social and economic change. Additionally, the four pivotal periods have been identified in research as periods in time when father ideologies dominated each respective time (Griswold, 1993; Lamb, 1987; Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

The Colonial/Puritan Period. During pre-industrialization, the father was seen as the moral guide or moral center—teaching his children right from wrong and enhancing their religion (Lamb, 2000). Fathers were largely responsible for the welfare of their children and were actively involved with both sons and daughters (Griswold, 1993; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). While other parental duties were shared between the mother and the father, it was perhaps this period alone that mothers were not viewed as essential as fathers in the rearing of their children.

In fact, fathers were more likely to be given presumptive custody rights in the event a separation or divorce had taken place (Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

In years past, fathers had a closeness with their children (Griswold, 1993). They were with their children all day during work and once work was completed, during dinner and study periods (Griswold, 1993). Because fathers' work did not require them to be away from the homestead to fulfill work obligations, fathers frequently shared all of the family meals, further spending time with the family. During this colonial period, the father was fully responsible and engaged in providing morals, education, discipline, counsel, food and shelter and recreation for their sons and daughters (Griswold, 1993). When the Industrial Revolution occurred, the father's role diminished drastically—as this period pulled fathers away from the home to work and affected the interaction they once had with their children.

The Industrialization Period. During industrialization, fathers were thrust into the role of “breadwinner” as home agriculture waned and consumerism increased. To complicate matters, this period of time brought a number of policy initiatives by the state, which took away roles such as educating and disciplining from the father, further reducing his role (Griswold, 1993). In theory, the fathers' former roles were still important but, increased time away from home made it difficult to do much else than provide financially for the family (Griswold, 1993). The role of the father shifted from counselor, educator and disciplinarian to breadwinner. Fathers were now expected to go away from the home and provide financially for the family while the mother garnered more of the responsibility of raising the children (Griswold, 1993). This also signified the division of roles between the mother and the father (Griswold, 1993).

The 3rd Period-Post Depression. The image of fatherhood shifted yet again during a period between the 1920s and the 1940s (LaRossa et al., 1991). The great depression had a negative effect on parenting (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) and as a result, following the great depression, fathers were urged to be better sex-role models for their children — both sons and daughters (Lamb, 2000). In fact, it was in the 1940s that the dominant motif of the fathering role was sex-role modeling (Lamb, 1986).

Also, during the 1940s, there was a turnaround point for fathers in that they were defined as nurturers and in some instances, 2 ½ times more than being defined as a provider. This amount would decrease slightly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, but sex role modeling continued through the early 1960s.

The 4th Period-The New Father. Beginning in the 1970s, focus on the amount of time fathers spent with children began to take shape and the term “new father” emerged (Lamb, 2000). Fathers were now admonished to spend more time with children and to become nurturers of their children. Indeed, in the two decades to follow, research showed substantial increases in the amount of direct father involvement (Pleck, 1997). Where fathers spent about a third as much time with their children as mothers in the 1970s, these numbers increased significantly between 43% and 67% in the 1990s.

Fathers today are more involved with the care and welfare of their children than in recent decades (Cannito, 2019) and interestingly, the role of fathers today appear to resemble the role of the pre-industrial father (Erasmus et al., 2020; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004). Fathers are present during the birthing experience (Parke, 1981). Fathers nurture, care and not only provide for the child’s economical needs but their physical, emotional and psychological needs as well (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Adamsons et al., 2007). Further, the embrace of the new masculine and caring ideologies also seem to promote more engaged father involvement (Offer & Kaplan, 2021).

3.1 Father Involvement

Father involvement is a multifaceted concept and has many parts and levels (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). The complexities of the concept of father involvement exists in part because it takes on different meanings, depending on who you ask. Like the father role, father involvement is defined based on what stakeholders believe constitutes father involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2000), and indeed, there are conflicting details on what constitutes father involvement. For example, research indicates that father involvement entails parental support, companionship (Marsiglio et al., 2000), and providing materially for their children (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Still, one of the most salient and thematic elements of father involvement examined in research has been a father’s ability to provide financially for his family (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Offer & Kaplan, 2021).

While to some, father involvement is providing financially and being the head-of-the-household (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001), to others, it may be providing moral guidance (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Many have uniquely contributed to the conceptualization of father involvement by emphasizing traits of particular perceived importance while de-emphasizing others (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Seemingly, the only consensus regarding father involvement is that it is important.

In his seminal work on father involvement, Lamb et al., (1987) identified three categories of involvement, which included engagement, accessibility and responsibility. This work, considered the catalyst for father involvement research, was expanded by Palkovitz (1997) and Marsiglio et al. (2000) to broaden the concept of father involvement to include affective, cognitive, ethical and behavioral dimensions than just the behavioral dimensions discussed by Lamb (1987). Though this work has proved useful to the study of fathers, to date very few researchers have asked fathers to conceptualize father involvement.

4.1 Theoretical Framework – Attribution Research

Attribution Theory has been identified in research as a potential link between the perceptions of low father involvement and bias. This process is most often embedded in social interaction where, individuals make attempts to answer questions as to why people act the way they do (Kelley, 1967).

Two reasons exist as to why Attribution Theory is important in father research and more importantly mother’s and media perceptions and judgments regarding father involvement. First, there is question regarding the fairness and accuracy of attributions. Though Kelley (1984) stated the conditions under which attributions are valid, people still make inaccurate inferences about the causes of another person’s behavior (Jones et al., 1972).

Mothers may, for example, place a higher premium or give greater regard to a father that participates because he wants to and does so on his own than the father that isn't as willing, or has to be asked to participate. While both fathers participate, the latter father's efforts are discounted because they may have been pressured to participate. Paralleling this thought is the investigation conducted by Thibaut and Riecken (1955, cf., Kelley, 1972) on the discounting principle in attribution theory. The results of this study revealed that the subject attributed the high-status person's cooperation to internal factors (i.e., because he wanted to). However, the subject attributed the low status person's cooperation to external factors (i.e., being pressured externally to cooperate). As a result of these attributions (however erroneous), the subject thought more highly of the high-status person because it was perceived that the high-status person cooperated on his own. The low status person may have cooperated because of internal factors as well, but this notion was discounted because there were other plausible explanations as to why he assisted the subject (Thibaut & Riecken, 1955, cf., Kelley, 1972). Considering the previous example, what if the father doesn't participate because lack of experience has made him uncomfortable with the task or he simply feels that the task is not what constitutes the most important part of his role?

Second, the attributions that one makes about another's behavior have consequences for future behavior (Jones et al., 1972). Mothers may attribute perceived lack of father involvement to a lack of desire, without considering the various reasons why fathers are not involved; thus, causing unnecessary conflict or resentment (on either part) in the family domain. In addition, making negative attributions concerning a father's behavior could cause the mother to inadvertently take on more parenting duties than desired because of the assumption that the father will not participate. Another consequence to making inaccurate attributions could result in the mother having an "I can do it better" attitude, thus alienating and driving the father from his duties. The mother may think that she is more involved than the father based on her knowledge of the facts. That is, she could believe that she is more involved because she is fully aware of everything she does. On the other hand, being less aware of what the father does, even if the father feels he is adequately involved, generates the perception that he isn't involved.

While it is difficult to pinpoint what mothers attribute to perceived lack of involvement, research suggests that these perceptions may affect behavior. Further, negative attributions may influence a father's involvement with his children. Therefore, further discussion is warranted regarding the negative attributions toward fathers. In the current analysis, attributional bias and error is represented by examining the mother's perception of the father's role, maternal gatekeeping and the media and literature bias concerning fathers.

4.2 Mother's Perception of the Father Role

Men and women have different perspectives regarding what father involvement entails (Beitel & Parke, 1998). While the use of maternal reports for father data have brought about useful information, it has also caused some challenges. For example, among mothers and fathers who experience high levels of conflict, the mother may consciously or subconsciously report that father involvement is lower than it actually is, based on unresolved issues of the conflict (Coley & Morris, 2002). Further, the higher the levels of discrepancy between mothers and fathers' perceptions of father involvement, the more likely mothers are to assess low levels of father involvement (Coley & Morris, 2002). Indeed, mothers may feel that fathers aren't involved or are conditionally involved, and while not totally discounting their claims, there may exist some degree of bias.

Research examining men's and women's perceptions of the father's role also suggest that explanations regarding perceived lack of involvement is related to maternal characteristics rather than paternal characteristics. For instance, maternal criticism, and not factors associated with the father, was found to have an effect on father involvement (Beitel & Parke, 1998). The more critical mothers were of fathers, the less likely fathers were to engage in stimulating engagement (Beitel & Parke, 1998). In addition, husbands had often been excluded from family tasks by their wives, when the wives perceived fathers were not as involved in domestic matters as they should be (Hawkins et al., 1995), attesting to the problem underlying the mother and not the father. Finally, though researchers have sited difficulty in conducting research on fathers, studies indicate that lack of participation can be linked to the mother. Coley and Morris (2002) found that only 6% of fathers refused to participate and that the actual challenge stemmed from the lack of cooperation of the mother. Mothers either refused to provide consent for the father to participate or refused to provide adequate information that would allow the researchers to locate the fathers (Coley & Morris, 2002; Gavin et al., 2002).

4.3 Maternal Gatekeeping

Research on maternal gatekeeping indicates that the perception that fathers are not involved is again attributed more to mother's characteristics than to father's characteristics. Fagan and Barnett (2003) found that mothers decided how much time fathers spent with their children and that this decision was based on the mother's perception of the father's competence. So, if mothers felt fathers were competent in their parenting, the father had more access to the child. Conversely, less competence resulted in restricted access to the children. Mothers then, shouldered more of the responsibility and, higher maternal gatekeeping was therefore predictive of lower father involvement. Restricting the role and access of the father resulted in the father being less involved with his children. This was especially true for nonresident fathers (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

The deficiencies in this area of research involve making erroneous attributions regarding fathers and perceived lack of father involvement based solely on mothers' views. This greatly underscores the need to move research in a direction that takes a broader approach when it comes to understanding the role of fathers and their involvement with their children, their family and their children's development.

4.4 Media and Literature Bias Concerning Fathers

In addition to mothers' biases regarding fathers and perceived lack of father involvement, media's portrayal of and perceptions of fathers have weighed heavily on how society views fathers, thus, contributing to a considerable amount of bias as well. Media, film and literature portrayals of fathers have not been a subject of much interest in social science research but, as the following suggests, has significance.

Media, film and literature portrayals of parenting tend to favor mothers more than fathers. While literature and media have taken more proactive measures to endorse and reference fathers as more involved, the images of fathers in media still portray them as secondary figures compared to mothers (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Mothers are depicted more in commercials as the primary, caring or soothing parent. In sitcoms, the depiction is the same, with fathers being depicted as the proximal sideline figures. While it is difficult to speculate what the media attributes perceived lack of involvement to, the fact that fathers are represented in a much less favorable light suggests there are definite media bias and reliance on stereotypical ideas of fathers. Also, that media still portrays fathers in a negative, arbitrary light, suggests that society isn't as progressive as it claims when it comes to promoting the "new fatherhood."

Kaufman's (1999) study on the presence and participation of men in families in TV commercials also suggested that fathers were more likely to be represented in commercials during sporting events. They were more likely to be away from home and purchase masculine products than in the home or purchasing products for the home. They were less likely to be involved in domestic activities (i.e., less likely to be shown caring and providing for children). When men were pictured with children, it was usually in the presence of women who they often deferred to. Two exceptions were the findings that fathers were adequately represented in fast food restaurant commercials and commercials where the father was playing with the children. It was speculated that the men portrayed in the food commercials did not represent the involved father necessarily because, no preparation was needed for fast food. With regard to the commercials where fathers were playing with children, this represents the long-held view that fathers engage in their children's play activities more than planning activities or other essential activities. The emanating results from Kaufman's study shows that men are not regarded in TV commercials as involved fathers.

While the attribution literature is useful in explaining mothers' and media perceptions of father involvement, it projects a narrow view when it comes to looking at fathers and what makes them uninvolved. For instance, mothers and the media attributed lack of father involvement to lack of ability or competence. The implications for studying father involvement from such a narrow viewpoint is counterintuitive and a major limitation of Attribution theory. A proper conceptualization of the role of the father and father involvement in addition to an explanation regarding perceived lack of involvement is needed in psychological research. Further, it must be examined from broader contexts to determine the factors that promote or hinder father involvement.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper took a critical look at how fathers and the fathering role are conceptualized. Further, it examined factors that may or may not be contributing to the decline in their role and engagement with their children. One factor that was discovered during this process was that mothers have often been considered the primary caregiver and fathers have been considered the marginal caregiver. Based on this, there may be an assumption that the mothers are the only parent of interest. It is also assumed that because mothers volunteer to participate in research more often, they are more willing to participate than fathers. However, Woolett et al. (1982) found that fathers were no more difficult to recruit than mothers and that if researchers asked fathers to participate they would (Churven, 1978). Therefore, it is predicted that father involvement studies would benefit immensely from having fathers report on their own representations of fathering and their relationships with their children. Future research should recognize this importance and make concerted efforts to include them in research studies. In fact, researchers should take caution to include fathers every time research is conducted, during each phase of the research process. Rather than going through mothers for fathers contact information, researchers could recruit fathers directly, the reverse of typical recruiting or sampling methods.

Aside from the overarching goal of including fathers in the recruitment and research process, examining fathers, their involvement and their relationships with their children should be approached from a much broader perspective; one that looks at many more factors that may promote or hinder this role. An ecological systems approach may help us to understand or at least create a mapping point of the complexities related to the fatherhood role.

Improvement in the area of father research is still greatly needed. While efforts have already begun to take shape, a stronger focus on fatherhood will pave the way and reveal a look into the father-child dynamic that social science has never seen before. However, the way fatherhood is defined now, how father involvement is measured, how fathers are recruited for research leaves much to be desired.

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