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Commonalities and Diversities of Fathering. Overall Commentary on Fathering

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Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, researchers have amassed substantial knowledge of fatherhood, fathering, and the influence of fathers on children. Although debate remains within and across fields as to whether fathering should simply be subsumed within the broader field of "parenting," [1] or whether fathers and mothers each engage in unique behaviours and influence their children in differing ways,[2] it is generally accepted that fathers are a potentially important source of influence on the development of young children.[3,4] However, the nature and mechanisms of fathers' influence in various contexts and domains remain less explored. The articles contained in this section each address aspects of the diversity of fathers (Latino fathers in the U.S., Black nonresident fathers in South Africa, First Nations and Métis fathers in Canada, changing fatherhood ideals in countries such as Brazil, Russia, Bangladesh, and Australia) and the multiple pathways of influence they have on young children, as well as the characteristics of successful interventions and policies with fathers of young children.

Research and Conclusions

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Fatherhood, among humans as in the animal kingdom, is not a singular phenomenon. Cultural and societal proscriptions intermingle with personal circumstances and beliefs to create diverse patterns of fathering behaviour. Oppression creates its own legacies that many fathers are challenged to find ways to overcome. As noted by Makusha and Richter, nonresident Black fathers in South Africa face challenges stemming from the legacy of Apartheid, having to migrate in order to be employed, and the social obligations of inhlawulo and lobola, which limit the ability of many fathers to be physically present in their children's lives. Nonresident Black fathers in the US face the legacy of slavery and issues of systemic racism and discrimination, including disproportionate incarceration and poverty, which also limits their ability to be physically present in their children's lives. In both countries, however, even when unable to be physically present, nonresident Black fathers often contribute to their children's lives in other ways, such as via financial contributions (formal and informal), emotional connections, and providing a sense of identity and family/community belonging.[5]

Oppression also can exist in the form of majority cultures imposing their beliefs and expectations upon all fathers, regardless of fathers' own culturally-specific beliefs and traditions. Ball and Moselle pointed out the difficulties faced by Indigenous fathers in Canada who are attempting to recover, re-establish, and pass forward cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices that were all but eradicated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Taking children from Indigenous families and placing them in Indian Residential Schools eliminated the ability of Indigenous men to transmit language, spiritual beliefs, or to maintain relationships of children with extended family and community Elders, issues which are only barely beginning to be addressed by current policies and programs. Karberg and Cabrera noted contextual challenges facing Latino fathers in the U.S., who tend to emphasize the importance of familism and optimism and to therefore be coresident with their children and the children's mothers, to have relatively high involvement in their children's lives, and to have relatively lower rates of divorce and relationship dissolution. At the same time, these Latino fathers reside in a country which has the second highest divorce rate among all industrialized nations and which emphasizes individual achievements and happiness over family solidarity and obligations. Achieving a balance between acculturation with majority values and fidelity to their own personal beliefs and practices can be a difficult task for many Latino fathers.

Research, as well as policy, needs to be vigilant not to regard culturally diverse families and fathers through a singular cultural lens. This is particularly important to illuminate the strengths

of fathers, rather than assuming a deficit perspective when researching a cultural minority. We know from past experience that using one culture or set of ideals as the gold standard to which all others are compared leads us to misunderstand or miss completely a variety of culturally specific behaviours that are beneficial to children in diverse families (e.g., the racial socialization practices of parents of color in the U.S.), just as comparing mothers to fathers historically has led to fathers "coming up short" in our assessment of their parenting abilities.

Gray and Anderson, and Chaudhary, Tuli, and Sharda each discuss fathering from a broader perspective, looking across cultures rather than within a specific context (and in the case of Chaudhary et al., even to fathering among animal species). Both note that fathers still retain breadwinning as a central role, but that most countries are demonstrating notable shifts away from this being the only role that fathers play, towards a definition of fathering that includes more nurturing behaviours. Recent cross-cultural research supports the efficacy of such a shift, suggesting that paternal warmth and affection perhaps should be the new universal standard of fathering. A meta-analysis of 66 studies in 22 countries indicated that paternal warmth, even more so than maternal warmth, is strongly associated with child psychological adjustment and well-being.[6] However, how fathering is enacted also remains variable by context. Some countries have adapted to new economic realities and societal demands by relying on multiple fathers as the norm. For example, Australia has seen an increase in social fathering being done by other men, and due to high fertility rates, families in Southern Africa use uncles in this role. Other countries instead have adjusted their expectations of biological fathers (e.g., Brazil emphasizing the loving affectionate role of fathers). Across countries, Gray and Anderson highlight the numerous ways that fathers, including non-resident fathers,[7] influence children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. However, these influences are moderated by numerous characteristics, including sex of the child, child age, fathers' SES, marital status of the parents, and father-child relationship quality. As such, even the "global" aspects of fathering can and should be specified in greater detail and are more nuanced than it might appear at first glance.

Implications for development and policy

As is the case with policies that affect any large and diverse group of individuals, sweeping policy recommendations regarding fathers are difficult to come by. The needs and resources of and opportunities available to fathers vary dramatically, by socioeconomic status; race, ethnicity, and country of origin; family structure; age; and a multitude of other factors. Policies will be most

effective that understand and take into account the unique circumstances of fathers, rather than attempting to be “one size fits all.” Fagan and Palm noted the need for differing goals depending upon the population of fathers being assisted; for example, unmarried teen fathers have greater need of educational goals and job training than older married fathers. As they aptly state, “There are many different pathways to supporting positive father involvement, father-child and coparenting relationships.” Successful policies and interventions will take advantage of and build upon these multiple pathways, assisting fathers in creating unique trajectories to being successful fathers. Fagan and Palm also pointed out some of the ways in which fathers are best engaged in programs that are distinct from the ways in which we have traditionally engaged mothers (e.g., allowing hands-on activities and father-child interactions so that fathers can “practice” techniques, inclusion of male staff and facilitators). Creating “father-friendly” programs and policies, rather than generic parenting programs and policies, is crucial to positively engaging fathers with their children.

Another example of the importance of policies that specifically target fathers is found in the arena of paternity leave. In Sweden, fathers are granted 60 days of paid paternity leave that is reserved specifically for them, as well as an additional 420 days of leave that can be taken by either fathers or mothers during the child’s first 8 years[8] (Sweden is currently attempting to increase fathers’ designated proportion to 90 days). Since the introduction of the 60 “daddy days” of leave, Swedish fathers have been much more likely to take paternity leave, whereas fathers/families tend to allocate most of the “joint” time to mothers. In Iceland as well, parental leave is divided into thirds, with mothers receiving three months, fathers receiving three months, and the remaining three months being available to either parent. This leave was implemented in phases between 2001 and 2003, and by the end of the implementation the average paternity leave taken by men in Iceland had increased from 39 days to 83 days.[8] Similarly, in Spain, fathers are granted thirteen days of paternity leave and may get up to ten additional weeks of maternity leave transferred to him, but very few men use any leave beyond the designated thirteen days.[9] As with other policies and programs, the key to involving fathers during the transition to fatherhood appears to be having policies that target fathers specifically, as otherwise fathers will tend to defer to mothers and see their own involvement and time with children as less important and optional.

Conclusion

These articles highlight the importance of fathers to their children's development and outcomes, as well as the multiple pathways fathers can take to being "successful" fathers. Policies that promote positive father engagement and that support men as fathers, in and of themselves, need to consider the specific needs and goals of different populations of fathers. Too, policies and interventions need to specifically target fathers, rather than merely grouping them under the larger umbrella of parenting programs or policies. Doing so will promote both fathers' own health and well-being, as well as the health and well-being of mothers, children, and families, and will serve to strengthen the societies in which fathers are embedded.

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