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Fathering in Diverse Cultural Contexts: An Emerging Picture. Overall Commentary on Fathering

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Introduction

As emphasis on cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous perspectives on family socialization processes gain traction in the psychological sciences, there has been greater interest in research on father-child relationships across cultural communities.[1,2] These essays chronicle the different ways in which men are involved in children's lives and the implications of varying levels of paternal involvement for childhood development across a few cultural communities. The authors discuss local and particular aspects of fathering and the evolving nature of how men embrace their diverse roles in families. These roles and responsibilities co-occur with other life events (e.g., economic challenges, discrimination, oppression, cultural transplantation) and are often driven by internal scripts or ethno-theories about masculinity/manhood that are contested and changing. To this end, there are cultural pathways to fathering wherein men place emphases on different socialization goals and practices across communities to achieve common ends—the

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health and wellbeing of families and children.

Diverse Mating and Marital Systems

Although much of the fathering research base is confined to European and European-heritage families and the dyadic, co-parenting model, what is evident is that across cultural communities, fatherhood and fathering occur in diverse family constellations with different residential patterns and levels of pair-bond commitment.[3,4,5] That is, men become fathers in diverse mating and marital systems with possible conceptual separation between parenting and partner roles in some cultural communities.6 Moreover, fathers and mothers join forces with diverse other individuals (siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, other male adults) in several cultural communities in attempts to meet the varying needs of children. For instance, Chaudhary et al., Ball and Moselle, and Makusha and Richter highlight the roles of multiple caregivers in the context of horizontal and vertical relationships within systems of extended living arrangements that are culturally sanctioned and convey the importance of non-parental socialization agents in young children's lives. Far from seamless, some of these non-parental figures work in a complementary manner with fathers in extended living arrangements, as alternative caregivers in nonresidential father living situations, and as surrogate caregivers when fathers migrate to other geographic locations for employment reasons to meet the economic needs of family members. At the moment, the contribution of fathers to childhood development relative to these other figures in these dynamic caregiving systems is not clearly delineated and we continue to examine the significance of paternal involvement relative to patterns of mothering most of the time.[7]

Variations in Paternal Investment and Involvement

Just as paternal presence should not be equated with psychological presence, non-residential fatherhood does not exclude men from becoming involved with their children. Fathers may be physically around but are not emotionally available to children. At the same, some non-resident fathers may find unique ways to provide in-kind resources and stay in touch with their children. Of course paternal involvement varies by context and in terms of patterns of behaviours that have evolved in response to the demands of the local ecology.[3] As all of the authors point out, fathers offer protection, provide material resources, and engage in the direct and indirect care of children. Further, levels of paternal involvement are invariably influenced by economic status, residential patterns, hegemonic models of masculinity, how men were fathered themselves, and

the nature of the pair-bond. Yet in most cultures around the world men still see their primary role as economic providers and this undergirds a good deal of their responsibilities in families and drives the quantity and quality of their involvement with children. Paternal involvement ranges from men assuming roles as helpers to being highly engaged in the socio-affective and cognitive aspects of their children's daily lives.[1]

In rare cases, exceptions also exist where fathers are more involved than mothers in specific aspects of caregiving. A case in point is the Aka, a foraging group in the Central African Republic. Aka fathers held their infants about 22% of the time and soothe and display more affection to them than mothers did. There are also challenges to the much touted role of fathers as playmates to children and the affectional distance that fathers in certain Asian communities have presumably assumed in the socialization and education of children. In a number of cultural communities (e.g., some foraging, Indian, Taiwanese, Thai) around the world fathers rarely engage in the rough stimulating play observed among European American fathers,[8] and in a few settings mothers exceed or engage in equal amounts of play with children as fathers do.[9,10] Likewise, in some Asian societies fathers and mothers do not differ much in the display of affection to young children. In short, there is indication that fathers are becoming increasingly involved in the socio-emotional aspects of caregiving but in a number of developing societies this largely occurs at the insistence of mothers and children.

Links Between Paternal Involvement and Childhood Development

As suggested by Karberg and Cabrera, father involvement can serve a protective function against childhood risks. Researchers are beginning to demonstrate ways in which different dimensions of father involvement are linked either directly or indirectly (e.g., through relationship quality, family solidarity) to childhood outcomes. Among seminal attributes, warmth and sensitivity as a construct appears to impart similar influences on childhood development across societies.[11] Along with economic resources and educational attainment, the primacy of paternal warmth and sensitivity in shaping childhood developmental trajectories cannot be overstated. The foundational aspects of warmth and sensitivity provide a platform for other aspects of meaningful engagement (e.g., cognitive stimulation, room to explore new objects and experiences). On the flip side, there are some troubling trends. Long periods of paternal separation from the family (e.g., among Black South Africans, Arab men in the Middle-East) and intermittent contact with family members can have deleterious effects on children's cognitive and social development. Additionally, family social and structural dynamics change in

unanticipated ways when men leave their families behind to seek better economic opportunities or when they enter new intimate relationships[12,13] The complexity of these living arrangements are only now drawing the attention of researchers in a world community that is on the march and in which families are living transnational lives.

Fathering and Interventions

Fathers bring developmental assets to children but can place children at risk as well. As noted already, mere presence does not guarantee heavy psychological investment. Thus, researchers have developed primary and secondary fatherhood and family intervention programs to strengthen family relationships and different dimensions of father involvement in children's lives. Based on family science and ecological models,[14,15,16] that focus on proximal (e.g., parental characteristics and competence, belief systems) and distal processes (neighborhood quality) in the lives of families in diverse structural arrangements, and based on emphasis placed on protective relationship factors (e.g., constructive conflict strategies, social support) that guard against poor parenting and neighborhood conditions, researchers and community-based organizations have developed interventions that target parenting among men. The overriding goal of these programs is to improve father-child relationships with the hope of improving the everyday lives of young children and maximizing their developmental potential.

Fagan and Palm provide a good synopsis of the impact of these programs on childhood development outcomes. Across a range of programs (e.g., Kangaroo care, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, participation in early education programs, massage) the results appear promising in reducing paternal risk factors and behavioural difficulties in children. However, the effect sizes of programs have been rather small. This could be attributed to the difficulties associated with methodological issues and lack of uniformity in measurement strategies. Fagan and Palm identified the pregnancy and transition to parenthood period, the early childhood years (0-5), the content of programs, and staff training as important elements in designing successful fatherhood intervention programs. In a similar vein, Ball and Moselle emphasize the need to consider issues of cultural sensitivity and appropriateness in designing social programs for Indigenous fathers in Canada. Obviously more rigorous and different research designs (e.g., mixed-methods) would also enhance our understanding of the impact of fatherhood interventions in maximizing children's life chances in at risk home and neighborhood environments.

Conclusion

A major challenge in fathering research is defining cultural pathways to childhood development. Across cultures, families aspire to imbue their children with the skills necessary for life within their cultural communities. Describing how this is achieved and what role men play in this process were major goals of these articles. Today we know much more about father involvement and childhood development than just a decade ago. Fathers contribute in meaningful ways to children's immediate cognitive and social development and later educational achievement and social adjustment, thereby attenuating risks to children especially in challenging ecological niches. Studies of father involvement have grown in their sophistication, and so too will theory construction in this line of work.

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