Paternal Involvement Across Cultures: Implications for Childhood Development

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Fathering has come to the forefront of several societies around the world because of its association, in part, with the decline of the “traditional family” and changes in women’s roles. One may reasonably argue that the increased attention to fathering is tied to issues dealing with the economic and social welfare of the family as well. Indeed, private foundations, nongovernmental organizations, and governmental agencies in several regions of the world have recognized the significance of fathers in the promotion of the growth and well-being of children within families and the society at large. For example, The Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Netherlands convened a summit in 2003 that identified men’s roles within families as “an area of international concern” (Contributions from the International Fatherhood Summit, 2003). The importance of fathering in determining the welfare of children has been emphasized by high ranking members of UNICEF, and the Beijing Declaration, adopted over a decade ago by the Fourth World Conference on women, urged the full and equitable participation of men in family relationships. Specific articles (e.g., 7, 9, 14, 18) of the Convention of the Rights of the Child stress the roles and legal responsibilities of parents in childrearing, and different governments have implemented paternal leave policies aimed at encouraging men to become more involved in young children’s lives (see O’Brien, 2004). At the same time, researchers from varied disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, child development, family studies, pediatrics, demography) have gathered qualitative and quantitative data on men’s varying levels and quality of participation in different activities with children and their impacts on the intellectual and social development of children in technologically developed and developing societies (see volume by Lamb, 2004).

In keeping with the theme of this conference, Achieving Development Without Losing Our Families, a major goal of this paper is to examine different dimensions of fatherly involvement during the early childhood years (0-8 years) and articulate their importance for the healthy development of children in diverse cultural communities around the world. My discussion centers on: the different family constellations within which fatherhood is realized and children are socialized; on conceptions of manhood and fatherhood; on levels and quality of paternal involvement; and on the impact of paternal involvement on developmental outcomes in children in a few behavioral and cognitive domains. In the final segment of the paper, policy implications are entertained with an eye toward cultural relevance. The overall intent is to situate fathering within a larger cultural-contextual framework. In doing so, I share some of the findings from our own studies conducted on fathers in underrepresented groups in the United States and in technologically developing societies.

As per Rogoff’s (2003) suggestion, the term “cultural communities” will be used throughout so as to focus on individuals and processes and to avoid making population-level inferences. A few other caveats are necessary for the present discourse. Although cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous psychological frameworks diverge on their central tenets and
methodological approaches to studying families and children (for good a discussion see
Greenfield, 1997; 2003), an attempt is made to draw on these three strands of thinking in order to
examine symmetries and asymmetries in paternal investment in children in different cultural
communities. According to LeVine (1974), parents worldwide have similar overall goals for
their children—offspring reproductive success, attainment of instrumental competence, and the
acquisition of social and cultural knowledge. Having said that, across cultures parents may
prioritize socialization, health, and educational goals differently and may employ different
processes to achieve similar goals in childbearing and childrearing—equifinality. It would be
difficult to summarize the entire literature on fathers across cultures in this short paper. Because
much of the research on fathers has been conducted in the technologically developed societies
(North America and Europe), more emphasis is given to what we know about men’s involvement
with children in technologically developing communities.

Socio-Cultural Context of Fatherhood

It is well documented that men in different cultural communities become fathers in
diverse family configurations. Likewise, beliefs about what it means to be “a man” and “a
father” range from very traditional views steeped in gendered ideological cultural scripts to more
contemporary attitudes about equitable role distribution within families. To more adequately
capture the cultural variations in paternal involvement and their developmental sequelae, it is
first necessary to consider some of the social-structural dimensions of fatherhood: namely, the
family constellations within which fatherhood is realized and beliefs or ethnotheories about
fatherhood and manhood. The family organization patterns in and of themselves embody
specific socio-cultural realities in the lives of children and their families. Variations in mating
and marriage systems convey community and society-wide attitudes about reproductive
strategies and affect inheritance patterns, the sexual division of labor, resource allocation, and
investment biases in biological and non-biological children, and the abandonment of children
(see Low, 2005). It is within the family and community that the canalization of reproductive
strategies and the meaning of pair bond stability are cemented (see Quinlan & Flinn, 2003).

Diverse Family Configurations. In many societies around the world, marriage is a basis
for establishing fatherhood and residence patterns (e.g., matrilocal, patrilocal, etc.). Economics,
attitudes toward marriage, church attendance, emotional quality of partner relationships, and
beliefs about family roles all contribute to marital patterns, age of entry into marriage, and
marital longevity (see Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; McLanahan & Carlson, 2004).
Typically, in families based on marriage, organization patterns are a mixture of nuclear and
extended households. Extendedness may be for life, where three-generational families share a
domicile and pool economic resources. It may follow a transitional extended phase in which
married children live within a three-generation family initially and after a few years establish a
separate residence that is nuclear, or it may involve a pattern where married couples live
separately but maintain functional extendedness with kinship members. Often the assumption is
that there is one father—the biological father—even when other men are present in children’s
lives. In the face of rapid societal changes—cultural, social, political, and economic—that are
occurring in so many societies, married and other family structural configurations are treated in
the research as if they remain static throughout the life cycle.

Although cultural abstractions of family organization patterns can lead to exaggerations
of the “essentialist ideal” (i.e., a married couple living under the same roof), in some cultural
communities, non-marital births, nonresidential fatherhood, and female-headed households are common. The diversity of family configurations can be seen in both Anglophone and Francophone African Caribbean families. Among these families, mate-shifting and child-shifting are common phenomena where a majority of births occur in non-marital unions, such as visiting and common-law relationships. In the Contributions of Caribbean Men to the Family study (Brown et al., 1993), in a sample of 700 low-income men in four different communities in the Kingston area of Jamaica, 9.35% of men under 30 were married, 41.3% were in common-law unions, and 44.9% were in visiting relationships. In the same sample, 54.4% of men had one “baby-mother,” 37.5% had two or three “baby-mothers,” and 8.1% had four or more “baby mothers.” “Outside children” were also evident among married Jamaican men with better economic standing (Ramkissoon, 2002) (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Percentage of Childhood Years Spent Without a Father (0-18 years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Brown & Barber, 2003

Table 2: Percentage of Fathers Present in Household in English-speaking Caribbean Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Fathers Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antigua</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diverse mating and family patterns have been documented in other ethnic and cultural groups, where social fathers and father figures are not uncommon. In the *Fragile Families* study, conducted on multiple ethnic groups in the United States, among men under 20 years of age a mere .4% were married, whereas for men 30 years and older, 61.8% were married. A majority of White non-Hispanics, Hispanics, and Black non-Hispanics in this study were in cohabiting or visiting relationships (Mclanahan & Carlson, 2004). Mate-shifting has also been observed in Norwegians who spend time in “trial families” (Seltzer, 2005). Research on African Americans suggests the prevalence of “social fathers” in families; these individuals act as surrogate fathers (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999) (see Table 4). Moreover, in some other societies, as in the Ongee of Little Andaman (Pandaya, 1992) and in foraging and farming communities in South America, men other than the biological father are centrally involved in nurturing and playing with young children (see Beckerman & Valentine, 2002).

Due to the complex nature of mating-shifting and the ambiguity surrounding paternity, we might expect an increase in nonresidential fatherhood and inadequate economic support to family members, reduced contacts between fathers and their offspring, conflicting demands among a man’s various families, and further confusion about what constitutes a family or qualifies a man to be labeled as “a father.” Table 2 shows the percentage of childhood years that children under 18 would not be with their fathers. On the point about who should be considered “a father”, an anecdote from Seltzer’s (2005) clinical analysis of Norwegian adults in “trial families” illustrates the confusion children face in negotiating and understanding familial relationships. When six-year-old Anne was asked about her father, she mentioned that “she is not sure, but maybe Ole, because he lives with her mother, her, and her brother (=half-brother),” After some thought, she adds: “But he is mostly my brother’s father, but a little bit my father too.” When asked who might be mostly her father, Anne said “Knut was my father before…. but not any more…because he used to live with us…before…but not now.” Further questioning that focused on who feels like a father inside, she replied, “Maybe Svein, because he lived with us when I was in my mommy’s tummy.” Then she carefully wipes the tears from her eyes, and adds: “And his eyes look like mine” (p. 273). While this anecdote clearly reflects children’s emerging understanding and lack of clarity on who is “a father” in trial families, is there a systematic encoding of reproductive strategies during the early childhood years? A hypothesis is that children who are raised in unstable conjugal unions during their early years (ages 5-7) are more likely to develop a “mating effort strategy” (early maturation, short-term mating relationship, high fertility) (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991). In contrast, children who grow up in stable unions develop a “parental effort strategy” (delayed maturation, stable long-term relationship, low fertility) (Quinlan & Flinn, 2003). Young children may become attuned to the early familial rearing environment and use this model to formulate and encode the reproductive strategy they use later—the “canalization of reproductive behavior.” Support for this hypothesis is weak at best, at least, when tested on Caribbean families.

In closing this section, let me address the issue of paternity certainty. Research within the evolutionary biology tradition has examined men’s levels of provisioning and caring for children in terms of mating and parenting effort. In multiple male mating situations there is skepticism concerning who is the biological father, which may limit the degree of support and direct care provided to offspring. There is also public shame attached to raising another man’s child in some societies. In Jamaica, men who “unknowingly” raise a non-biological child are derogatorily classified as “wearing a jacket,” and in village communities in Dominica adults may actively examine infants for phenotypic characteristics that may raise doubts about paternity. In
both cases, this may generate a good deal of gossip or commes (Durkrow, 1999). But does paternity certainty affect men’s physical and material investment in children? In other words, is there an evolutionary bias in providing food and other resources to biological offspring? Here the evidence is somewhat mixed. Hadza hunter-gatherer fathers extended more direct care to biological than non-biological offspring (Marlowe, 1999). However, men in hunting-gathering communities distributed most of the food captured to other families rather than keeping it for their families (Hawkes, O’Connel & Blurton-Jones, 2001). It appears that provisioning for biological offspring may depend on mating opportunities (Marlowe, 1999).

What Does it Mean to be a Man and What Does it Mean to Be a Father? Why should we consider belief systems about manhood and fatherhood within different cultures? Parental beliefs (considered here as cognitions, ideas, or ethno-theories) provide a template for how individuals structure their thoughts and actions regarding their investment in the socialization of children (Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002; Super & Harkness, 1997). Beliefs represent the psycho-cultural schemas that are behind fathers’ (parents’) attempts to shape the lives of their children (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). They may be pre-packaged (e.g., father is always the head of the family) (Schweder, 1982) or “constructed” (see McGilliCuddy-DeLisi, 1982) as fathers revise their views on manhood and fatherhood. Because beliefs about manhood and fatherhood vary across ethnic and cultural groups and by socioeconomic status, applying a single cultural metric to determine their relevance for family functionality and childhood development is rather unwieldy. Nonetheless, the manner in which men define manhood and fatherhood and culturally construct the meaning of each often conveys information on the legal status accorded children and the type and quality of care children receive. In other words, beliefs about manhood and fatherhood present a glimpse into cultural systems of childbearing, childrearing, and how children are valued and treated in cultural communities. It should come as no surprise, then, that beliefs about manhood and fatherhood introduce levels of abstraction that would be difficult to reconcile in this paper.

Historically, family roles and responsibilities have had their structural roots in patriarchal traditions articulated in ancient religious texts (e.g., Ramanaya, Upanishads, Mahabharata) and doctrines. For example, the Shastras (e.g., Laws of Manu, 200 B.C.-A.D. 200) specify the responsibilities of Indian men and women in family life along strongly gender-demarcated lines. In essence, Manu’s edicts support the superiority of men and the subordination of women (pativrata). Likewise, Kadazan (Muslims in Malaysia) men’s roles within the family are planted in the beliefs of Adat—affirmation of patriarchy and control of women’s sexuality (see Bowen, 2003; Kling, 1995; Sanday, 2002 for reviews). In a few Caribbean societies, men’s authority over their families is viewed as God’s plan (Brown et al, 1997), and in Brazil, the concepts of house (casa) and street (rua) help define women’s and men’s roles (Rebhun, 2005) (see, Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Indian (India)</td>
<td>Laws of Manu</td>
<td>Superiority of men and the subordination of women; austere father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pativrata, Shravan Kumar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadazan (Malaysia)</td>
<td>Adat</td>
<td>Affirmation of patriarchy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Institution/Role</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Confucianism (Analects)</td>
<td>Kind mother, strict father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Kacho</td>
<td>Head of family; absolute authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>God’s plan</td>
<td>Heterosexual prowess, head of household, economic provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Rua, Casa</td>
<td>Street and house; complementary roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Today, a continuing challenge is to determine to what extent psychological constructions of manhood and fatherhood in technologically developing societies are driven by doctrines and precepts that are traditionally based. To be sure, in quite a few societies, traditional beliefs about maternal and paternal roles—mother as nurturer and father as breadwinner—persist. In rural and urban settings in Guyana, Dominica, Barbados, and Jamaica, low-income men and women primarily see the father in the provider role. Among the Black Caribs of Belize, in which more traditional gender roles are observed, men rarely interact with or display nurturance toward young children (Munroe & Munroe, 1992), and in a group of southern Brazilian families (Benetti & Roopnarine, 2006), there is an association between gendered ideologies and paternal investment in caring for children in middle childhood. These perceptions are not confined to technologically developing societies. In separate studies, 74% of Japanese fathers perceived their function in the family as “economic provider” (Shwalb, et al., 1997), and 54% of Chinese men believed that they should be responsible for activity in society (CNBS, 2001). Despite such strong assertions about traditional role dichotomy in these cultural communities, men’s roles in the family may be more nuanced where there is an inner psychological struggle in men to blend present and past conceptions of manhood and fatherhood.

**Paternal Involvement Across and Within Cultural and Ethnic Groups**

The focus on fathering in the early childhood years underscores the significance of paternal involvement during a most vulnerable period in children’s lives. During the early childhood years, paternal involvement has been linked to increased nutritional status in children, childhood safety and protection, lower infant mortality, and better social and academic outcomes (see Amato & Rivera, 199; Hutardo & Hill, 1992; Lamb & Lewis, 2004). Thus, having an actively involved father around during early childhood may assist in establishing a strong footing for children to negotiate the socio-cultural demands of life within specific communities. On the other hand, under certain circumstances, having fathers around can be a liability; men can also be abusive to children and partners/wives. Maltreatment of children by fathers has been linked to maladjustment and other psychological and educational difficulties (see Holden & Barker, 2004). Additionally, men may be physically present but psychologically absent—rendering themselves emotionally and socially inaccessible to children. This can lead to frustration in young children.

Before outlining men’s involvement with children, it is perhaps worthwhile to state some of the factors that may contribute to or influence participation in different activities with young children. These include but are not limited to: parental competence, gender ideology, relationship quality and stability, economics and modes of production, child’s gender and age,
family size and configuration, history of own father’s involvement, personal health, knowledge about child development, social networks, role strain, institutional practices and policies, and neuroendocrine mechanisms (lower testosterone levels as well as prolactin and vasopressin) (see Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004; Gray, Parin, & Samms-Vaughn, 2007). Note that the primacy of influence of these factors may vary by ethnic/cultural group and should be interpreted in multivariate terms.

**Conceptualizing and Measuring Paternal Involvement.** Father involvement is a multifaceted construct with “an array of significant qualitative components—the quality, sensitivity, developmental appropriateness, emotional climate, degree of connection, mutual delight, and meaning” (Palkovitz 2002, 126). An assumption is that more involvement is always better. While quantity/quality issues have been debated, the focus here is on the parenting behaviors that are sensitively attuned to meet the child’s needs—social, emotional, and intellectual. A dominant framework that has guided much of the early work on father involvement contains three major components: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1987). This model will be used as a benchmark for discussing paternal involvement across cultures. Some researchers (e.g., Palkovitz 2002) have added other sources of variability to father involvement: father’s personal factors, child characteristics, and the like. More recently, Cabrera et al. (2007) introduced a quantitatively based model that accounts for moderating and mediating variables and possible effects, speaks to autostability/instability of fathering among a network of relationships across the lifespan, acknowledges multiple inputs and pathways to developmental outcomes, hints at self-stabilization and self-regulation in family systems, and includes multiple factors that may influence fathering and developmental outcomes in different family constellations.

On the measurement front, researchers have used time diaries, observational methods, surveys, experience sampling methods (wearing pagers), interviews, narratives, and hormonal assays (blood samples, salivary cortisol, urine samples) to assess paternal involvement as separate from maternal involvement and/or as conjoint activity with mothers and other adults (see Day & Lamb 2004; Stueve & Pleck 2004). The involvement activities largely mirror what women have traditionally done in families; fathering is largely conceived and measured using maternal behaviors. The different methods of assessments have yielded time estimates of paternal engagement in different activities, the relative frequency of different activities with children inside and outside of the home, maternal and paternal distribution of responsibilities in childcare and other activities, and hormonal levels and childcare. What follows is a brief summary of some of this literature, beginning with relative estimates of time spent on global measures of childcare across cultures.

**Levels and Quality of Paternal Involvement:** As already stated, paternal investment in caring for and nurturing children has implications for the development of children. However, high levels of quality involvement between father and child can also impact marital/relationship quality, husband-wife/partner relationships, and men’s own development. In covering men’s involvement with children, I present data on time investment with children relative to that of mothers, which is followed by a few behavioral indicators of the quality and style of involvement. In particular, the display of affection, playful stimulation, and verbal stimulation are considered. These behaviors have been shown to contribute to the development of parent-child attachment and a number of social and cognitive skills in children (e.g., self-esteem, self-control, social competence, school performance) (see Lamb & Lewis 2004). Much of the data described below are for two-parent/partner families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds,
and in which the father resides with the child. A few of the findings are from observational studies, but most are from self-reports provided by fathers themselves or by mothers.

Assessments of ethnographic accounts from 156 cultures suggested that in only 20% of them are men’s relationships with infants encouraged (Brown & Barker, 2003). Among hunter-gatherers, such as the Aka, who practice monogamy, father’s direct care of children is high. In industrial states where the marriage system is based on monogamy, father care is somewhat moderate. By contrast, among pastoralists and agriculturists (intensive farming) that practice polygyny, father’s direct care of children is usually low (see Hewlett, 2004). Of interest to social scientists and policymakers is whether the longstanding differences in men’s and women’s involvement in basic caregiving activities is currently narrowing and at what pace. Table 4 presents data on men’s relative time involvement with children in two-parent families in select cultures around the world. As can be seen in this table, the amount of time fathers spend in caring for children or being around them each day ranges from a low of 11 minutes in Japanese families to a high of 5 hours in East Indian families. In all of the societies listed in Table 4, women are the primary caregivers to children. That is, they are the ones who are responsible for the physical care of children (e.g., feeding, cleaning, diapering/toileting). With rare exceptions (e.g., Batek of the Liber River watershed in Kelantan, Malaysia; Endicott 1992), the predominance of mother care seems to be a worldwide trend. On this score, it might be instructive to look at fathers’ proportional involvement in basic caregiving relative to that of mothers, even though this does not provide an accurate picture of mothers’ total investment in young children. As displayed in Table 5, in most of the societies assessed, fathers’ relative involvement fluctuates between a third and two-fifths of mothers’ care engagement. Considerably higher estimates have been found for fathers’ engagement in physical care in Canadian and US families (74.4% and 78% respectively) (Yeung et al. 1997; Zuzanek 2000). An observational study by Roopnarine et al. (2005) showed that, compared with mothers, involvement with infants was about 24% in upper SES and 9% in low SES African American families. By the way, the data on nonresident fathers in the United States and the Caribbean indicate that fathers, although involved in caring for children, do so at much lower rates than mothers do (Mclanahan & Carlson, 2004; Roopnarine, 2004 for reviews). The observational findings on African Americans stand in stark contrast to those obtained through self-reports of men in the US and call into question the much-touted “new fatherhood.”

Table 4: Fathers’ and Mothers’ Time Involvement in Different Activities Per Day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Group</th>
<th>Age of Child</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese (Sorifu, 1997)</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Being with children</td>
<td>2.03 hrs</td>
<td>.20 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese (Sun &amp; Roopnarine, 1995)</td>
<td>1 year-olds</td>
<td>Caregiving</td>
<td>6.75 hrs</td>
<td>3.33 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Indians (India) (Suppal &amp; Roopnarine, 1996)</td>
<td>3-5 year-olds</td>
<td>Being with/around children</td>
<td>12.13 hrs</td>
<td>5.0 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadazan (Malaysia)</td>
<td>1 year-olds</td>
<td>Feeding Cleaning</td>
<td>3.48 hrs</td>
<td>1.45 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.23 hrs</td>
<td>1.75 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/Ethnic Group</td>
<td>Relative Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand (Tuananda et al., 1994)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Malay (Malaysia) (Hossain et al., 2007)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadazan (Malaysia; Hossain et al., 2007)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Indians (India) (Suppal &amp; Roopnarine, 1996)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay and Chinese Malaysians (Noor, 1999)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data were compiled for the entire week. The total was divided by 7.*
Brazil (Benetti & Roopnarine, 2006) | 62
Puerto Rican-US mainland (Roopnarine & Ahmeduzzaman, 1993) | 37
African American (Ameduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992) | 42
African American (Roopnarine et al., 2005) | 24
Navajo (Hossain et al., 2007) | 75
US representative sample (Yeung et al., 2001) | 78
Canada (Zuzanek, 2000) | 74
Holland (Smith, 2002) | 44

Engagement in physical affection, verbal interaction, and play stimulation are indicative of sensitively attuned caregiving. The associations between these behaviors and childhood social and cognitive competence are empirically discerned. From a historical standpoint, Chinese, Japanese and Indian fathers have been characterized as being emotionally distant from children. The Chinese father has been considered “strict” (Strict father, kind mother), the Japanese father “absent,” and the East Indian father “austere.” These conceptions may not apply to some contemporary Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian fathers. Observational studies suggest that East Indian fathers in New Delhi (Roopnarine et al. 1991), Chinese fathers in Taipei (Sun & Roopnarine 1996), and Thai fathers in Chaing Mai (Tulananda & Roopnarine, 2001) display similar amounts of affection towards young children. In African Americans living in Syracuse, New York (Roopnarine et al. 2005), and AKA hunter-gatherers of the Central African Republic (Hewlett 1987), fathers were significantly more likely to display affection to children than mothers were. AKA fathers also soothed children more often than mothers did and African American fathers directed more verbal stimulation at children than mothers did. In Indian families in New Delhi, Thai families in Chiang Mai, Chinese families in Taipei, and Jamaican families in Kingston, mothers provided more verbal stimulation to young children than fathers did.

What about time investment in play? One area in which fathers distinguish themselves from mothers is in their role as playmates to children. Until recently, the role of the father as “playmate” was widely accepted. Starting in the 1990s, this behavioral distinction received increasing research scrutiny. Pleck and Masiadrelli (2004) suggested that possibly “previous research may have… obscured the recognition that play is also mothers’ most frequent engagement activity” (p.238). In the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (US, national representative sample), there were no differences in the amount of time mothers and fathers engaged in play and companionship (Hofferth et al. 2002). Similarly, there were no differences in paternal and maternal time investment in play in southern Brazilian families (Benetti & Roopnarine 2006), Jamaican families in Kingston (Roopnarine et al. 1995), Thai families in Chiang Mai (Tulananda & Roopnarine 2001), or African American families (Hossain & Roopnarine 1994). By comparison, in Taiwanese, rural Malay, and Kadazan families in Malaysia, mothers spent more time in playing with children than fathers did (Hossain et al. 2006, 2007; Sun & Roopnarine 1996).

It has been suggested that mothers hold and pick up young children for the purpose of caregiving, while fathers pick them up to engage in stimulating physical play. Arguably, the
physically stimulating play aids in the development of attachment relationships. In North America, European–American parent–child physical play is apparent early in the infancy and preschool years before dropping precipitously after age 10 (Macdonald & Parke 1986). There is an inverse association between physical play and age of parent, and it appears that physical play is more characteristic of the social engagement of fathers and sons than fathers and daughters (Lamb 2002). The ubiquity of parent–child physical play (rough-housing, tossing, bouncing, poking etc.) among European-American fathers and children (Lamb 2002) is not evident in the social activities of parents and children in many other cultures. For example, it does not figure prominently in the parent–child social activities of East Indian families in New Delhi (Roopnarine, Talukder, Jain, Joshi, & Srivastav 1991); families residing in urban and peri-urban areas of Taiwan (Sun & Roopnarine 1996); Thai families in Chaing Mai (Tulananda & Roopnarine 2001); Malaysian families in Kuching, Sarawak (Roopnarine, Lu, & Ahmeduzzaman 1989); AKA foragers in the Central African Republic (Hewlett 1987); and Jamaican families in Kingston (Roopnarine, Brown et al. 1995). In all cases, major physical play (e.g., rough-housing) and minor physical play (e.g., tickling and poking) were observed less than one incident per hour or were reported to be absent from social exchanges with young children. Physical play was also less prevalent in the play of families and children in Dhol-Ki-Patti, India, San Pedro, Guatemala, and Kecioren, Turkey, than in Salt Lake City, Utah (Goncu et al. 2000). Nevertheless, when physical play does occur, it is more likely to be between fathers and children than mothers and children.

Finally, a very promising area of fathering research that has received scant attention involves fluctuations in the hormonal levels of fathers when caring for children. Presumably, exploring this line of inquiry can aid in medical interventions to promote father involvement with children. The link between non-human primate paternal care and elevated prolactin levels has been demonstrated in marmosets (Dixson and George 1982; Nunes et al. 2000), and other hormones such as oxytocin, vasopressin and cortisol may also feature significantly in paternal care (Gray et al. 2007). Among Canadian men, lower testosterone levels were found in fathers after their wives gave birth than before their wives gave birth (Storey et al. 2000), and evening testosterone levels were lower in fathers than in controls (Berg and Wynne-Edwards 2001). Lower testosterone levels have also been found in Kenyan Swahili men with younger versus older biological offspring (Gray 2003) and between Chinese married couples with children compared to those without children (Gray et al. 2006). In a soon to be published study, Gray et al. (2007) examined hormone concentrations of Jamaican men in three relationship categories: single men, biological fathers engaged in visiting relationships, and biological fathers co-residing with their youngest child. The aim was to determine whether, after a 20-minute interaction session, co-residential and visiting fathers exhibited different hormone levels compared with single men. There were no differences in cortisol, oxytocin or vasopressin levels across groups. However, when the two groups of fathers were lumped together, they were found to have lower testosterone levels than single men. In a related vein, even predictable separations from fathers have been associated with elevated cortisol levels in young children (Flinn et al. 1996).

Summary

The data reviewed could very well magnify changes that are occurring in men’s investment in basic caregiving. However, they were collected during different decades and used measures that may not be equivalent across cultures. Having said that, there is no basis for
judging whether men’s and women’s roles are converging at the same rate in the technologically
developed and the technologically developing world, or whether they are converging at all in
some technologically developing societies. What is certain is that there are increasing rates of
divorce and maternal employment in several cultural communities. These two factors along with
men’s migration to find work are bound to change patterns of paternal involvement with children
in the technologically developing societies of the world. A few general points can be surmised
from the literature just reviewed:

(a) Beliefs about manhood and fatherhood remain fairly traditional in a number of cultural
communities. However, these beliefs may be changing with men trying to bridge
traditional and contemporary belief systems.
(b) In some cultural communities in the technologically developing world, rates of paternal
involvement with children are comparable to those of men in the post-industrialized
world.
(c) The affectional distance that was ascribed to fathers in some Asian cultural settings
seems to have dissipated. Furthermore, in some cultural groups, fathers display more
affection and verbal stimulation to young children than mothers do.
(d) Attributing the role of “playmate” to fathers may have been overstated.
(e) Studies show that there is some consistency in the association between testosterone levels
and human paternal care in some cultures.

**Fathering “Effects” on Children**

Despite progress in documenting what constitutes fathering and the level and quality of
paternal involvement across diverse cultures, we still lack a solid understanding of how fathers
contribute to young children’s intellectual and social development above and beyond that of
mothers in different family configurations. Undoubtedly, such data are much needed to capably
inform polices, educational interventions, and clinical interventions in specific cultural settings.

Although paternal behaviors should not be presumed to have the same influence on
children’s behaviors across different cultural/ethnic groups, there are some consistent findings on
paternal involvement and sensitive interactions with young children and childhood
developmental outcomes, such as cognitive skills, social skills, and behavioral difficulties (see
Amato & Rivera 1999; Lamb & Lewis 2004; Phares 1997). For instance, there is a relationship
between paternal sensitivity and infant-father attachment (see the meta-analysis by Van
Ijzendoorn & DeWolff 1997), and insecure child-father attachments predicted behavioral
problems in Belgian children (Verscheuren & Marcoen 1999), secure attachment to either parent
was related to children’s sociability with strangers in Israeli families (Sagi et al. 1986), and
secure attachment to fathers influenced school adjustment and social relations with peers in
Belgian families (Verscheuren & Marcoen 1999). Finnish fathers who read more to children had
children who showed a heightened interest in books later on (Lyytinen et al. 1998), the quality of
the father-child relationship is related to child well-being (Amato & Rivera 1999), and father-
child closeness is related to later adjustment (Flouri & Buchanan 2002). Parallel associations
exist for father-child relationship and school performance in African American children in some
studies (see Roopnarine 2004).

Note that most of the studies on paternal influences were conducted in North America
and Europe, and few separated out maternal influences on “father effects.” Three studies that
controlled for maternal influences produced mixed findings. Unlike earlier findings, Thai fathers’ investment in caregiving, display of affection, discipline, and involvement in play were not related to children’s social skills in preschool (Tulananda & Roopnarine 2001), and Brazilian fathers’ levels of involvement with children were not associated with children’s social competence (Benetti & Roopnarine 2006). A study on Caribbean immigrant families in the United States produced results that were consistent with findings on the influence of parenting styles on childhood development in Chinese and Russian children (see Chen, Liu, & Li 2000, Chen & Casper 2004; Hart, Nelson, & Robinson 1998; Sorkhabi 2005), but not Finnish children (Aunola & Nurmi 2005). Basically, Caribbean immigrant fathers’ authoritarian style suppressed the development of language skills in children, whereas the authoritative style promoted social outcomes in children (Roopnarine et al., 2006).

From a meager body of work on father influences in the technologically developing societies, we are ill-advised to come to any conclusions about the impact of fathers on children’s intellectual and social functioning. Because mothers are still the major socialization agents in children’s lives in most cultures, undoubtedly they are likely to have a greater influence on childhood outcomes during the formative years. The economic support and protection men offer children should not be overlooked, however.

Policy Considerations

It may seem problematic to propose policy initiatives at this stage of our current knowledge on fathering in the technologically developing societies of the world. The reality is that in many cultural communities families struggle to meet the daily demands of life to ensure survival. Furthermore, consider for a moment that:

(a) Notions of fathering, at least in post-industrialized societies, stem largely from idealized notions of mothering: fathers have been judged on how similar or different they are from mothers in their beliefs and involvement patterns with children. Do we need a separate conceptual framework on fathering that may better inform policy decisions?

(b) Conceptions of fatherhood are informed by multiple cultural scripts (e.g., inculcating moral responsibility, teaching children farming-related skills, protecting children) that may differ from one another, but intersect with social class and hegemonic spousal/partner relationships. To what extent is idealized fatherhood constructed in different ethnic/cultural groups? How do men in marginalized economic or social locations negotiate idealized conceptions of fatherhood? Short shrift is paid to cohort effects, the cost and benefits of idealized fatherhood, and transitional experiences at different life stages.

(c) How do poverty and some ideological beliefs undermine paternal involvement?

(d) It is not clear how biological factors interact with social, cultural, and economic factors to influence fathering behaviors (e.g., paternity certainty, interaction with biological and non-biological offspring).
Interpretations of cross-cultural data on fathering are hindered by a lack of measurement equivalence (Van De Vijver & Leung 1997).

Successful social policies hinge on a good understanding of a society’s cultural, social, and economic landscape. Nowhere is this more evident than in the developing world. Often, in these societies, the welfare and employment systems are underdeveloped. As noted above, a productive approach to the development of policies would involve a consideration of the intersection of economic conditions, ideological beliefs, health conditions, and family structural arrangements. Stated differently, it would make more sense to formulate paternal policies and programs that consider the most pressing needs of families in different locales. In the poorest nations of the world, HIV/AIDS, maternal deaths, infant mortality rates, prenatal and postnatal care, registration of child births, legal rights of children in non-marital relationships, employment, and educational training are a few of the issues that may take precedence in improving paternal involvement in the family. Drawing on recommendations made at the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the suggestions made at the Fatherhood Summit sponsored by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and the stipulations in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it would be prudent for governments, NGOs, religious organizations, international donor agencies, and local agencies to target the following practices to increase paternal involvement in diverse family configurations throughout the human life cycle in the developing world:

(a) Educate men (fathers) about the health and well-being of women by focusing on pregnancy and STDs, paternal involvement in prenatal visits, preparations for childbirth, the nutritional needs of pregnant women and the developing fetus, support for breastfeeding, assistance in getting children immunized, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and equitable treatment of daughters and sons.
(b) Register births and establish legal ties between children and biological fathers in non-marital unions.
(c) Involve male elders and men in childcare policy decision-making, non-familial childcare, and early childhood education (e.g., daycare, early childhood intervention programs, etc.).
(d) Introduce or strengthen child and family development education that emphasizes the caring dimensions of parenting and their links to childhood outcomes (e.g., appropriate disciplinary practices, parent-child routines and rituals that are growth-promoting, developmental milestones).
(e) Emphasize family planning, however defined.
(f) Provide educational and employment training for men.
(g) Use technology and the media to send messages about the importance of fatherly involvement and men’s shared responsibility in childcare and domestic tasks.

Conclusion

In this overview, I have attempted to provide an overall picture of men’s involvement with young children in some of the developing societies of the world, where poverty, ideological beliefs about gender roles, and underdeveloped welfare and employment systems can undermine paternal involvement during the early childhood years. By incorporating fatherhood and fathering issues in policies geared toward eradicating poverty and health concerns, community
agencies (e.g., schools, health care facilities, religious organizations), governments, international donor agencies, NGOs and the like can make a significant difference in ensuring that children receive the care and education they deserve to become productive citizens in an increasingly dynamic and changing global community.
References


