Fatherhood: How Differentiation and Identity Status Affect Attachment to Children

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Fathers have often been misrepresented in studies evaluating the father’s role and the father’s relationship to his children, due to being evaluated by theories that were originally intended to study the relationship between mothers and children. The current study evaluates fathers’ differentiation and identity status as predictors of their attachment to their children. We used structural equation modeling and multiple regression to evaluate the relationships among the variables. We found that differentiation predicted identity status but that neither differentiation nor identity status predicted attachment. Further, commitment significantly predicted parent attachment, relationship avoidance, and relationship anxiety, whereas crisis significantly predicted only relationship avoidance. The implications of these results for therapists are discussed.

We, along with other Western Societies, are unique in the exclusiveness of the mother’s role as infant caretaker and in our emphasis on her importance in the development of a child’s attachment.

Margaret Mead, 1954

Fathers have frequently been misrepresented in the research literature on parenting effects due to being evaluated by theories originally intended to study the relationship of mothers to their children (Roggman, Fitzgerald,
Bradley, & Raikes, 2002). Recalibration of these theories is a necessary action for social scientists to appropriately study the role of fathers, as well as to provide more appropriate therapeutic techniques for fathers and their children.

Social scientists have conducted myriad studies on families that have analyzed different components of the family. Many of these studies have validated the essential role that mothers play in the lives of their children. Further, most theories of child development have been significantly influenced by the mother-child dyad, and therefore assume a child’s development rises or falls in relation to how well that child was mothered. For instance, according to psychodynamic theory, an individual’s psychological health is generally determined by the mother-child relationship during the first three years of life (Lamb, 1975; Mahler, 1967; Mahler & McDevitt, 1980; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Additionally, early attachment theory, social learning theory, and cognitive developmental theory principally posit that a child’s relationship to the mother is fundamental for normal development to occur (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995; Ainsworth, & Wittig, 1969; Bandura, 1989; Bowlby, 1951, 1969; Lamb, 2004; van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). Each of these theories seems to assume that when childcare or parenting are analyzed, the mother is and should be the primary focus, whereas the father remains in the periphery, if present at all.

Due to this myopic view, the role of fathers has been blurred in the eyes of social scientists, warranting relatively little of their attention or interest, especially when one considers the number of studies done on mothers in comparison to the number of studies done on fathers. Further, there is a lack of refined research applicable to the role of fathers (Phares, 1992; Phares, Fields, Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005). For example, Phares (1992) found that of 577 studies dealing with parenting, only 8 (or 1.4%) involved fathers only. More recently, Phares conducted the same analysis and found that of 514 studies, only 11 (or 2.1%) involved only fathers (Phares et al., 2005). Research or literature devoted solely to the role of father is obviously lacking in the professional field, and there is little difference in popular child rearing books. Fleming and Tobin (2005) analyzed 23 popular child-rearing books and of the 56,379 paragraphs, only 4.2% referenced fathers. The father’s role was predominately ancillary to the role of mother and was frequently portrayed as negotiable and voluntary (Fleming & Tobin, 2005). Alarmingly, some research plainly invalidates the role of fathers, suggesting that fathers may not make any significant or unique contribution to their children’s development (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

It wasn’t until the 1960s that social scientists undertook a significant analysis of the role that fathers play in their children’s development. However, the role of fathers was not scrutinized for what fathers actively contributed to their child. Rather, social scientists focused on what happened when fathers were absent from their child’s life (Lamb, 1975; Pleck, 2004a; Pleck &
Masciadrelli, 2004). Thus, social scientists endeavored to analyze the unique role of fatherhood by evaluating families without any substantial father presence at all. These theories assumed that by comparing and contrasting the behavioral patterns and personalities of children from father-present homes and father-absent homes, then one would learn—by the simple process of subtraction—what sort of unique contributions fathers actually had on their children’s development (Lamb, 2004).

Much was learned from this body of research; however, research still lacked in-depth understanding of what fathers actually contribute (van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). It wasn’t until the 1980s that social scientists began to see the unique contributions of fathers more clearly. As Lamb (2004) reports “[t]he effects of increased paternal involvement have been addressed in several major studies, and the results have been remarkably consistent. Children with highly involved fathers were characterized by increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control” (p. 9). Other studies have begun to identify significant results of involved fathers (Pleck, 1997; Pruett, 2000). Furthermore, the value of a father’s role has recently increased as evidenced by a study conducted by Pleck (1997), who found that newly married couples ranked the father’s role as the second priority in their marriage, which is a significant change from being ranked the eleventh priority in 1981. However, despite the increased focus on the father’s role in children’s lives, social scientists have yet to uncover why fathers make the unique contributions to their child’s development that they do (Cabrera, Tamis-LaMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Lamb, 2004). Cowan (1997) has called for research that examines how paternal attachment is acquired from a systemic perspective. In response to these calls, a review of systemic theory and identity status will be undertaken to begin to answer the question of why fathers make the unique contributions that they do.

**HYPOTHESES**

The current study will endeavor to determine whether differentiation and identity status individually or collectively affect the security of attachment between a father and his child, indicated by trust, communication, and alienation. The first hypothesis that we will test is that differentiation predicts father’s identity status. The second hypothesis that we will test is that differentiation directly affects a father’s perceived attachment between to his child. Finally, the third hypothesis that we will test is that identity status affects the style of attachment between a father and his child.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypotheses that differentiation and identity status affect attachment. A higher level of differentiation (less fusion and cut off, less emotional reactivity, and higher I-Position scores) directly predicts stronger attachment. Differentiation and identity together predict stronger attachment.
Identity Achievement predicts strong attachment; Identity Moratorium predicts moderate attachment; Identity Foreclosure predicts moderately weak attachment; and Identity Diffusion predicts weak attachment. Higher scores of differentiation predict Identity Achievement; moderate score of differentiation predicts Identity Moratorium; moderately low scores of differentiation predict Identity Foreclosure; and low scores of differentiation predict Identity Diffusion.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

One hundred and sixty fathers participated in this study. We recruited participants from a public comprehensive university in Northwest Indiana, primarily in elementary psychology classes and in some upper-division classes. We offered extra credit for their participation, which involved answering a series of out-of-class questionnaires that was expected to take 30–45 minutes to complete. Each participant voluntarily participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 79, with a mean age of 36.4 (SD = 1.4). Most participants (71%) were Caucasian, with fewer participants reporting African-American (11%), Hispanic (14%), Asian-American or Pacific Islander (2%), or other (1%) ethnic heritage. Most participants (80%) were married; 11% were
single, 6% were in a committed relationship, 2% were cohabiting, and 1% declined to respond to this question. The median income (using 11 blocks spanning $10,000 each, with a final category of over $100,000) category was $50,001–$60,000.

Materials

Three manifest variables were included in the present study serving as an indication of latent contributions (i.e., inherent qualities) in a father’s repertoire: Paternal Attachment, Paternal Differentiation, and Paternal Identity Status.

Parental Attachment

A revised version of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to evaluate paternal attachment. However, given the focus on paternal attachment, the 25-item subscale to measure peer attachment was omitted from the present study. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never or never true) to 5 (almost always or always true). Cronbach’s alpha for the reliability of the scale was .86. We calculated attachment scores by computing the mean of the 25 items.

The Experience in Close Relationship Scale is a 36-item self-report measure of adult attachment, derived from a comprehensive factor analysis of the major attachment measures used through 1998 (Brennan, Shaver, & Clark, 1998). Responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). The instructions direct respondents to rate how they generally experience romantic relationships, not what may be happening in a current relationship. The Anxiety subscale (18 items) assesses fear of abandonment, preoccupation with one’s romantic partner, and fear of rejection. The Avoidance subscale (18 items) assesses avoidance of intimacy, discomfort with closeness, and self-reliance. Cronbach’s alphas for the Anxiety and Avoidance subscales were .91 and .89, respectively. The 18 items on each of the two subscales were averaged to produce scale scores for Anxiety and Avoidance.

In order to calibrate this measure to analyze fathers’ perceived attachment to their child, we changed some words in the questions for this study to appropriately direct the question to the father. For example, question one in the original form, “My father respects my feelings,” was changed to “My child respects my feelings.”

Differentiation

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) is a 43-item self-report measure that focuses on adults, their significant
relationships, and current relations with family of origin. Participants respond to items using a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me). The DSI contains four subscales: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. The DSI full scale score is calculated by reversing raw scores on the majority of items on the Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others subscales and one item on the I-Position subscale, and then averaging all item scores, yielding scores that range from 1 (low differentiation) to 6 (high differentiation). Reliabilities for each subscale, as measured by Cronbach’s alphas, were as follows: Emotional Reactivity = .61, I-Position = .61, Emotional Cutoff = .75, and Fusion with Others = .54.

IDENTITY STATUS
Identity status was measured using the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status. Consistent with Marcia’s (1966) different identity statuses, this measure evaluates Identity Achievement, Identity Foreclosure, Identity Moratorium, and Identity Diffusion. Reliabilities for each subscale, as measured by Cronbach’s alphas, were as follows: Achievement—Ideological = .62, Foreclosure—Ideological = .82, Moratorium—Ideological = .75, Diffusion—Ideological = .74, Achievement—Interpersonal = .63, Foreclosure—Interpersonal = .84, Moratorium—Interpersonal = .77, and Diffusion—Interpersonal = .64.

We computed two subscales that are hypothesized to measure the two dimensions of identity status in the following way. We computed the score for commitment by summing the scores from ideological achievement, interpersonal achievement, ideological foreclosure, and interpersonal foreclosure, then subtracting the scores from the sum of ideological moratorium, interpersonal moratorium, interpersonal diffusion, and ideological diffusion. We computed the score for crisis by summing the scores from ideological achievement, interpersonal achievement, ideological moratorium, and interpersonal moratorium, then subtracting the scores from the sum of interpersonal diffusion, ideological diffusion, ideological foreclosure, and interpersonal foreclosure.

Procedure
We recruited participants conveniently from undergraduate courses in which the fathers, or fathers whom students knew, were enrolled at a regional comprehensive university. We asked all participants to complete measures of attachment, differentiation, and identity status. We asked participants to complete the questionnaire after being presented with an informed consent that outlined the risks involved with participating in the study. After the
researcher attained an informed consent, each participant or group of participants read the instructions of the study. If students took a questionnaire to a father they knew, we collected the informed consents separately from the questionnaires. The instructions defined the nature of the study, assured anonymity, and informed participants of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. We asked the participants to withhold information about the study from other students who have not yet participated. After a questionnaire was completed, we gave that participant a statement of feedback about the nature of the study and contact numbers if they should have further questions.

RESULTS

Assumptions

The assumptions of multivariate normality and linearity were evaluated in SPSS. There were no univariate or multivariate outliers. Using Mahalanobis distance and cases with largest contribution to Mardia’s coefficient, no multivariate outliers were detected \((p < .001)\). The analysis was performed on 160 participants; of those, 91 (or 57%) had no missing data. The most common missing data were questions that were related to dating, likely due to the characteristics of the participants. For example, almost 90% of the respondents were either married or in a committed relationship. Questions such as “I’m trying out different types of dating relationships. I just haven’t decided what is best for me” may not have been considered relevant or appropriate for such respondents. However, some of these questions were not entirely irrelevant because each participant was instructed to think about the times when some of the questions applied to them and give their best answer. The participants were given the option to answer or not.

A matrix of scatter plots was used to test the assumption of linearity among the variables and all pairs of variables met the assumption. A matrix of correlations was computed among all variables to test for multicollinearity, and no pairs of variables were multicollinear. Thus, the data appear to be multivariate normal and linear, meeting the assumptions of regression.

Test of the Structural Equation Model

Using EQS (Bentler, 2004), we examined the relationships among differentiation, a latent variable with four indicators (emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cut off, and fusion with others), four identity statuses (achievement, moratorium, diffusion, and foreclosure), each a latent variable with two indicators (ideological and interpersonal), and attachment, a latent variable with three indicators (parent attachment, relationship avoidance, and relationship anxiety). The results of the model test are presented in Figure 2.
Maximum likelihood estimation was employed to estimate all models. The independence model that tests the hypothesis that all variables are uncorrelated was easily rejected, $\chi^2 (105, N = 160) = 1061.1, p < .001$. The hypothesized model was tested next and did not provide a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (83, N = 160) = 277.6, p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .80, RMSEA = .12. A chi-square difference test indicated a significant improvement in fit between the independence model and the hypothesized model, $\Delta \chi^2 (22) = 783.5, p < .001$. In the model, differentiation significantly predicted identity status, but neither differentiation nor identity status
significantly predicted attachment status. However, given the relatively poor fit of the model to the data, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Test of Path Analysis Model

After the structural equation modeling analysis was run in EQS, we conducted additional post-hoc analyses to examine the effects of the participant’s identity status on attachment. Identity status was divided into the two concepts that originally defined identity status, commitment, and crisis (Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1966). The results of the path analysis, which combines the results of three separate multiple regressions with commitment and crisis as independent variables and parent attachment as the dependent variable, can be found in Figure 3.

Using multiple regression, we found a significant prediction of parent attachment, which explained a moderate proportion of the variance, $F(2, 157) = 11.44, p < .001, R^2 = .13$, adjusted $R^2 = .12$. Commitment had a significant effect on parent attachment, $B = .043$, $ß = .30, p < .001$, and crisis had a marginally significant effect on parent attachment, $B = .03$, $ß = .15$, $p = .053$. We also found a significant prediction of avoidance attachment, which explained a moderate proportion of the variance, $F(2, 157) = 18.03, p < .001, R^2 = .19$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$. Commitment had a significant effect on relationship avoidance attachment, $B = −.10$, $ß = −.38, p < .001$, as did

![Figure 3](image-url)
crisis, \( B = -0.06, \beta = -0.16, p = 0.036 \). Finally, we also found a significant prediction of anxiety attachment, which explained a moderate proportion of the variance, \( F(2, 157) = 6.55, p = 0.002, R^2 = 0.08, \) adjusted \( R^2 = 0.06 \). Commitment had a significant effect on relationship anxiety attachment, \( B = -0.07, \beta = -0.23, p = 0.003 \), whereas crisis did not, \( B = -0.05, \beta = -0.12, p = 0.132 \). Thus, across the three regressions included in the path analysis model in Figure 3, commitment predicted attachment well, whereas crisis did not predict attachment as well.

**DISCUSSION**

**Conclusions**

**STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL**

Each of the four measures of differentiation significantly loaded on the latent variable of differentiation. In contrast, none of the three measures of attachment significantly loaded on the latent variable of attachment. Differentiation did predict identity status, but did not predict attachment, either directly, or via identity status, which also did not predict attachment. The finding of no significant predictor of attachment may appear theoretically inconsistent. However, this apparent inconsistency depends upon the degree of faith in the validity of attachment, and the measures used to gauge it, and thus whether it is a good model to assess the relationship between a father and his child.

From several studies, it is clear that a child’s attachments to mother and to father are not significantly correlated with each other (Cowan, 1997; Cox, Tresch Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992). Consequently, it is not surprising that the structural equation model in this study did not yield a solid prediction for attachment either. There are likely many reasons for this finding. A pervasive focus on attachment viewed through the mother-child lens is likely to affect the way we interpret a father’s attachment to his child, and further affect the way we measure attachment to a father’s child. Therefore, at the present time, attachment theory, theoretically and psychometrically, may not be broad enough to include the father-child dyad, or at least to measure accurately the impact of their interactions.

To date no measure has been found to reliably predict the antecedents of fathers’ attachment to their children. This comes as no surprise considering the fact that fathers are rarely exclusively studied in attachment research. For example, De Wolf and van IJzendoorn (1997) conducted a meta-analysis on parental antecedents of attachment to children for *parents*; however, the only *parents* that were studied were mothers. A family systems approach has been called for to examine these differences (Cowan, 1997). To some degree, the present study hearkened to this call by including differentiation as a predictor of a father’s attachment; however, the results did not support
differentiation as a significant predictor of attachment. A measure grounded by a systemic approach may more likely account for the myriad interactions between a father and his child, which in turn may provide a more accurate measure of the relationship between the two.

What the research has failed to report is whether father-child and mother-child attachment relationships affect each other or combine to affect children’s development (Cowan, 1997). Social scientists also have yet to explore the possibility of creating a separate measure to study the quality of a child’s relationship to his or her father. Perhaps measuring the quality, utility, and reciprocity of the relationship between a father and his child is more accurately studied without using the paradigm or model of attachment theory as a standard. After all, fathers are not mothers, and mothers are not fathers; each may require a model and a measure that captured the unique qualities each gives to his or her children.

Path analysis model. Using a path analysis model it was found that identity status as measured by the underlying dimensions of identity (Marcia, 1967)—namely commitment and crisis—did reliably predict attachment of fathers to their children. Commitment was a significant predictor of each of the three attachment measures. Crisis, however, was a significant predictor of only one of the attachment measures (avoidance attachment) and nearly achieved conventional levels of statistical significance (p = .053) for another of the attachment measures (parent attachment). Thus, commitment significantly predicted all measures of attachment. Marcia (1966) referred to the concept of commitment as the degree of personal investment that an individual exhibits. One concept of attachment that may be relevant for both a father and a mother is the personal investment each displays to their child.

The transition to fatherhood may be a stimulus for fathers to invest themselves fully to their child, which may provide the level of commitment needed to achieve identity. It is clear, however, that the simple transition to fatherhood alone would most likely not provide the experiences to achieve identity and attachment. Marcia (1967) stated: “The individual about to become a … father, with little or no thought in the matter, certainly cannot be said to have ‘achieved’ an identity, in spite of his commitment” (p. 119). However, fatherhood may be a catalyst that stimulates enough crises to achieve identity. In fact, many have called the transition to fatherhood a crisis (LeMasters, 1957). Fawcett (1988) described the transition of becoming a parent as the greatest psychological transition during the lifespan. Longitudinal work that was conducted through the 1980s and 1990s found that identity status changed for some adolescents from late adolescence to early adulthood (the period of life when most males first become fathers). The statuses most frequently involved were from foreclosure or diffusion to moratorium or achievement (Cramer, 1998, 1995; Marcia, 1967).

The relationship between identity status and attachment can be described in this way:
during adolescence and adult life a measure of attachment behavior is commonly directed not only towards persons outside the family but also towards groups and institutions other than the family. A school or college, a workgroup, a religious group or a political group can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment-figure’, and for some people a principle attachment-figure’. In such cases, it seems probable, the development of attachment to a group is mediated, at least initially, by attachment to a person holding a prominent position within that group (Bowlby, 1969, p. 207).

Theoretically, it makes sense that there was a relationship between attachment and identity status since these qualities that Bowlby describes are similar to achieving identity.

In contrast, crisis did not consistently predict attachment. This finding is also not surprising because fathers who have not shown personal investment to their child are not likely to form a significant relationship, or what many call attachment, with their children. Researchers have found that the experience of too much crisis may actually impede optimal identity development (Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1966), which would conceivably impede forming a relationship, or attachment.

Limitations

POPULATION

The sample used in this study was derived from a local university within Northwest Indiana. The sample obtained was a convenience sample and is not necessarily representative of the general population. The sample size of 160 also is relatively small, and fathers in their sixties and above, single fathers, and fathers in a committed or cohabiting relationship were underrepresented. Caucasians, wealthy fathers, and married fathers were overrepresented; all other ethnic groups were underrepresented. These factors may have influenced the differentiation, identity status, and strength of attachment of the respondents.

In addition, we did not collect the ages of the children of the fathers in the study. This omission leads to important questions. For example, older fathers may have reported more perceived attachment to their child because of a greater amount of time spent with their children. In contrast, younger fathers, who may still be adjusting to fatherhood (i.e., going through the crisis of adjustment to fatherhood), may report less perceived attachment to their children. Further, the number of children was not reported either. These omissions also lead to questions as to whether or not the number of children affects a father’s perceived attachment to his children, and whether a father’s attachment to each of his children is identical or idiosyncratic. Such questions were beyond the scope of this study.
Scales

Changing the questions in the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment thus may not have elicited the information from the fathers that we sought. A measure that assessed more concrete information, such as amount of time spent playing with their child, may have provided more appropriate information. Questions that measured the amount of investment (defined by quality and quantity of time spent with child) a father exerted with his child may also prove to be better indicators of the quality of the relationship between fathers and their children.

Implications

This study supported what Johnson et al. (2003) found, in that identity status is related to differentiation. Therefore, it would behoove future researchers to determine whether or not doing transgenerational therapy with a father will help a therapist to work with a client in achieving identity to increase differentiation among fathers. It should be noted, however, that this finding was not found with women, as the present sample consisted only of men.

Future researchers may find it necessary to evaluate if a therapist’s work will be more effective if a therapist explores how a father’s identity status and differentiation pertain to his attachment to his children. At the very least, researchers could evaluate if therapists who are assessing a father’s differentiation may find it helpful to measure the father’s identity status as well to ensure a more consistent measurement.

It would also be useful for future research to ascertain if therapists assist a father in becoming more invested, or committed, to his child to improve the relationship, or attachment. Some fathers have difficulty making the transition to fatherhood. Exploring this experience may decrease the anxiety of fathers and allow them to make more of an investment in their child’s life. Finally, a father who is trying to improve his relationship with his children may benefit from therapy using a transgenerational approach to increase differentiation, which increases identity status, which in turn predicts attachment, at least when broken down into the two underlying dimensions of communication and crisis.

The field of marriage and family therapy will need to develop more refined ways to enhance fathers’ relationships with their children. At present, the field’s understanding of how a father’s differentiation and identity status affect the attachment to his child is unsophisticated. Additional theoretical models and empirical testing of those models will lead to greater understanding of the importance of differentiation and identity status as predictors of fathers’ attachments to their children. A replication of this study may aid in pursuit of this type of understanding. Perhaps developing a model that incorporated tenets of differentiation, identity status, and components
of attachment could be developed to assess the quality of the relationship between a father and his child.

CONCLUSION

While we did not find support for differentiation and identity status as significant predictors of fathers’ attachment to their children using structural equation modeling, we did find that differentiation predicts identity status. Using path analysis, we found that the two dimensions of identity status, commitment and crisis, do predict attachment, with commitment being the more consistent predictor. Given these inconsistencies, attachment theory, theoretically and psychometrically, may not presently be broad enough to accurately model the father-child dyad. Future theories may need to address mother/child dyads and father/child dyads independently, and build a model encompassing both, so that formal treatment models and social programs can be developed to meet the needs of both.

REFERENCES


