

## Challenges to Modeling Dynamics in Developing a Developmental Understanding of Father–Child Relationships

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*This article discusses the challenges of theorizing and modeling father–child relationships in a developmentally sensitive context. Challenges to the creation of comprehensive theories are briefly discussed and concerns with conceptualizations of father involvement are reviewed. An alternative view of father–child relationships is garnered from meta-analytic perspectives. Affective climate, behavioral style and relational synchrony are identified as factors that always matter in father–child relationships regardless of the age of gender of the child, the context of fathering, or moderating factors.*

Since 1979, I have been a participant observer in the study of father involvement. It was in 1979 that I made my first transition to fatherhood and did my dissertation on predictors of father involvement. These events marked my entrance into fathering both as a father and as a scholar. In this article, I will frame my responses to the lead article and my own theoretical musings about fathering and child development in the context of being a participant observer in the concurrently developing contexts of being a father and being a fathering scholar. Examining Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, and Roggman's (2006) model has caused me to rethink some assumptions I hold regarding fathering and relationships, development, and research and theory. These considerations have caused me to reread some classic papers and to think in an integrative manner across the past few years of my own scholarship, the courses I regularly teach as a faculty member, and my lived experiences as a father and as an observer of families. Perhaps the model itself motivated post-formal thinking in relation to fathering and child development.

Fathering scholarship has been transformed by rapid and multiple areas of progress across the past 30 years. In 1976 there were few conceptual and fewer empirical papers addressing fathering and the reciprocity of father–child relationships in shaping development in family systems. A contemporary literature search yields literally hundreds of professional sources focused on fathering.

Professional organizations have groups of scholars who focus on fathering, and there are symposia and entire conferences devoted to fathering. The rapid interest and growth of fathering literature has been driven by social reform, policy considerations, and a desire to facilitate family development. Yet, the burgeoning fathering literature suffers from a lack of an overarching theory of fathering.

Cabrera et al. (p. 2006) note that our recent surge in fathering scholarship has come during three decades of “major societal flux” and that it has been conducted in the absence of a “comprehensive, integrative theory of fathering.” Doherty, Kouneski, and Erikson (1998) state “The fathering literature has been long on empirical studies and notably short on theory. Researchers have mostly adapted concepts from social sciences to fit their particular empirical research area, but work is beginning on overarching conceptual frameworks to guide research and program development.” Stated otherwise, the lack of an overarching theory results in researchers adopting a patchwork approach to covering the variables and constructs they want to tap for their study.

Instead of attempting to provide an overarching theoretical framework for fathering in general, Cabrera et al. have ambitiously decided to focus on a heuristic model that will: (1) direct research, (2) inform practice, (3) guide policy-making around the issues of father involvement and child development outcomes, and (4) provide a framework for facilitating further theory development. Given where the field is in regard to fathering scholarship, I believe that these are much more specific, and realistic, targets than

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attempting to create an overarching, integrative fathering theory. Before focusing on the proposed model, it may be useful to briefly reflect on the issue of why there is *not* a comprehensive, integrative theory of fathering, and to consider the stated purposes of the paper and model in light of these reflections.

### Big Picture Challenges to Comprehensive Theories

Rather than marshalling comprehensive arguments to support each of the following points, in the interest of keeping our focus on fathering theory and the proposed model, I briefly, and without elaborating supporting documentation, propose that there are multiple important and interactive reasons why we do not have a comprehensive, integrative theory of fathering. Each of these points has important implications for the proposed model, both in terms of calling for advancement and in recognizing realistic hurdles and limitations with which any fathering model must contend:

- (1) The very “stage” that fathering scholarship is in precludes comprehensive and overarching theorizing. The bulk of serious scholarly treatment of father-child relationships has occurred within the past 30 years. In regard to fathering, we are still in a preparadigm stage of research (Kuhn, 1962) most often characterized by description and hypothesizing.
  - (2) We are beginning to recognize the vast diversity of fathering contexts (Palm, 1995) during an era when diversity is highly valued. In a spirit of inclusiveness, it can be overwhelming to create a fathering theory general enough to encompass the range of diversity we have observed, yet specific enough to lead to predictive capacity.
  - (3) Understanding fathering in a developmental framework is necessarily fractionated, because contemporary theories of development are not comprehensive. Rather, we have competing specialized theories that describe, explain, predict and apply to separate and qualitatively distinct realms of development (e.g., cognitive, personality) with varying degrees of success. There is not a widely accepted, overarching theory of life span development. Further, because of the widespread (and warranted) acceptance of organismic and systems approaches to development, we subscribe to the belief that development is multiply determined, dynamic, and contextually embedded. In short, we recognize that development is
- complex and that no single theory works. The same challenges and disclaimers apply to fathering. If developing people are complex, how much more so developing relationships embedded within developing families?
- (4) Fathering describes a *relationship* between (at minimum) one man and one child, and most often, fathering is embedded in an intricate array of other relationships (Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, & Holmes, 2003). Both father and child are developing in a manner that is not uniformly described across stages (see #3 above). Both fathers and children can be conceptualized as developing systems. They are also developing in the contexts of other developing systems (families, relationships, communities, institutions, and so on). Therefore, by definition, the study of fathering involves conceptualization and measurement of developmentally dynamic relationships. Within the discipline of developmental psychology, we do not have well-elaborated theories of relationship development. However, we do have an emerging understanding of fathering as a diverse range of multiply determined, dynamic, complex, systemically embedded relationships that occur in the context of other equally dynamic and complex developing systems (Palkovitz, 2002a). To describe the effects of father involvement on child development in a manner that reflects developmental diversity, contextual integrity, and multiple levels of sensitivity is a demanding order.
  - (5) Father-child relationships entail a history of relational style, positive and negative interactions, consistency or inconsistency in involvement, and an ebb and flow of experiential closeness. Empirical investigations of father involvement tend to place variables into a model that are best described as “snap-shot” measures. Even in longitudinal studies, a few “snap-shot” measures are collected in an effort to predict child outcomes or other dependent variables. The reality, however, is that relationships unfold over time and their developmental consequences for both fathers and children are best understood in terms of incremental shifts in patterns of relating over time in the context of relationship history as embedded in larger changing contexts. We have a basic mismatch between things that matter most in affecting father-child relationships and modeling components that adapt to measurement. Simply stated, historically sensitive qualitative indicators of father-child relationships may better predict outcomes for fathers and children than frequency counts or duration data.

Given these realities, it is little wonder that we do not have an overarching, integrative theory of fathering. Though I do not expect to emerge from this volume with one in hand, I do believe that Cabrera et al.'s paper has brought things into focus in a manner that should yield significant progress in delineating some core understandings around fathering scholarship. The model moves away from attempting to provide an overarching theory of fathering and instead brings a more circumscribed focus to addressing the effects of father involvement on child development. Even this goal is daunting for the reasons elaborated above.

Though the field of fathering faces many challenges as an emerging and integrative discipline, theory construction, and model building helps to advance our understanding of both fathering as a field, and fathering as a set of developing relationships in family contexts. Efforts toward elaborating fathering models and review of the literature on fathering have the potential to bring advancements to both the scholarship of fathering and the practice of fathering.

#### **A Focus on Father Involvement in Models of Father–Child Relationships**

In the opening article of this issue, Cabrera et al. develop a heuristic model intended to model the dynamics of paternal behavior and influence on children over time, highlighting father involvement as a central component. I applaud the dynamic integrative components of the model and believe that a central strength of the model is that it is intended to capture developmental aspects of father–child relationships. The model has integrated components of its predecessors (Doherty et al., 1998; Lamb, 1981; Palkovitz, 1980) and has combined and expanded them in some novel ways.

I find it interesting that the model highlights father involvement as a key variable. Given the degree of interest and effort that involvement has received as a construct, and the work that has been invested in devising measures of various kinds, it is understandable that involvement would be a key element. I, too, have argued (Palkovitz, 1996) that the level of father involvement is related to developmental outcomes, and have elaborated different models and moderating effects when looking at men's adult development (Palkovitz, 2002b). Similar arguments apply to the task of attempting to predict the effects of father involvement on child development outcomes.

For reasons elaborated elsewhere (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Palkovitz, 1996; 1997), much of the recent effort within fathering scholarship

has focused on conceptualizing and measuring father involvement. The enterprise of creating models regarding father-involvement has a relatively short, yet multifaceted history. There are various important components to describing, understanding, and explaining father–child relationships, their causes, and their consequences for children, families, communities, and for fathers. There are different interests and different foci in constructing models to describe or capture the range of components of father involvement in their children's lives. If the primary focus is to understand men's adult development, it is a different exercise than if the target is to explain or predict child development outcomes. If the chief purpose is to describe family formation or functioning, there is a distinct set of focal considerations and aspects of father–child relationships which inform our understanding. A different set of parameters would be appropriate if the goal is to understand relationships between paternal behavior and child outcomes from a public policy perspective.

Though Cabrera et al.'s model has many positive qualities, the task it is intended to accomplish is daunting and gargantuan. Any model targeting developmental components of father–child relationships will be limited because of the very nature of what is attempting to be done. The challenge of creating a comprehensive model is juxtaposed with the need for inclusiveness and diversity. There is debate, both in theory and in practice; regarding the question of what is fathering, or who are fathers? For example, I have sat in gatherings of leading fathering scholars as they have argued about whether women can be a father. I suppose that there may be parallel discussions of who are children, but I am not aware of those conversations.

The goal of building a heuristic model is complicated by recognizing that systems, life span plasticity, multiple causality, contextual embeddedness, equifinality, and multifinality are crucial to a realistic representation of fathering across time. Conceptualizing a model that can encompass these developmental principles is challenging. Devising measures that operationalize them is even more complex. Building dynamically sensitive models that will mesh with current statistical parameters introduces yet another layer of constraint.

#### **Moving Toward a Different View**

In our undergraduate courses on life span development and family studies, we teach about systems approaches, multiple and dynamic sources of influence, and interactive effects. The ways that we conceptualize the interrelated and multilayered

components of development, paint a picture of complexity and interdependence that defies reductionistic description. If we really believe these things, why do we think that the (necessarily) reductionistic models we posit should capture significant variability in functioning or outcome measures? Reason would suggest that we should not expect such models to adequately capture significant variability in father–child relationships over time because we cannot capture the dynamic complexity of real world relationships.

On the other hand, a “complex” understanding of father involvement is prohibitive to model building. If we build models that are sensitive to all of these constructs and account for the interrelationships of the various components in all of their complexity, will we be able to conceptualize and measure significant components in a manner that is characterized by reliability and validity? Would we be able to recruit participants who could tolerate the lengthy and detailed measurement process? The same criticisms that plague contextual approaches to development will hinder model building, data collection, and analyses of father–child relationships over time. Any comprehensive fathering models we could construct would move beyond the realm of established theory to integrate multiple theories with differing levels of analyses, differing underlying assumptions, differing goals, and interdisciplinary origins.

A goal of many models of father involvement has been to predict developmental outcomes. Yet, contemporary theories of human development (which predate fathering models and are far more established theoretically and empirically) are better at description and explanation than they are at prediction or control. Given these observations, it may be appropriate to shift the lens and to ask, “why is it that we strive toward creating theoretical models of father involvement that are expected to explain and predict developmental outcomes?” Given this abbreviated review of developmental conceptualization, it is time to turn the tables and to ask, “Why do the reductionistic models work at all?” Maybe the reason that these models work at all is that they are capturing, at some level, significant factors that override inadequate conceptualization and measurement schemes. Perhaps they are tapping into something that is overarching and central to life, to development, or to relationships.

Let’s consider for a moment, what happens if we reflect on alternatives to “father involvement” as a key predictor of child development? What options are available to us with similar foundational levels of conceptualization and measurement? Parenting (or fathering) style (Baumrind, 1991) may be a tenable candidate. Significant bodies of research relate high parental warmth and moderate control

with positive developmental outcomes in children. A different, well-established set of studies outline secure attachment as foundational in facilitating positive child development (Ainsworth, 1989), and focuses on “mutual delight” between caregivers and children. Despite an inability to reach consensus regarding a definition of families, a bottom-line consistent factor associated with every definition I have seen indicates that families are about relationships.

These considerations lead to the question, “How would models differ if, instead of focusing on father involvement as a key predictor, we were to ask, what is the father–child relationship like?” How does the father–child relationship change over time? Would the model have the more or less utility?

Why focus on father involvement? Why not select other established indicators of relationship *quality* or *style*? Alternatively, are current conceptualizations of father involvement sufficiently sensitive to relational style and quality? Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) have convincingly argued that paternal involvement is, in practice, interpreted as positive paternal engagement. In short, positive paternal engagement is synonymous with quality involvement and developmentally facilitative styles. If quality and style of father involvement are elaborated and captured in a manner that can be added to the proposed heuristic model, what is gained? Perhaps involvement serves as a proxy for what we can not capture otherwise.

### Meta-Analytic Thematic Analysis of Things That Matter in Fathering

Are there things that always matter, no matter what the age of the child, the context of fathering, or the moderating factors? Are there a few basic things that dads can focus on to bring about significant benefit to the father–child relationship and development for both fathers and children?

Meta-analytically, what do the theories, the data and experiences of men and their families tell us? What are the things that matter in father–child relationships?

- (1) *Affective climate*: Connection. Attachment. Being there. Warmth. Love. Trust. Security. Protection. Provision. Involvement.
- (2) *Behavioral style*: Moderate control. Safety. Developmentally facilitative interactions. Modeling. Relational style. Answering questions. Monitoring. Involvement.
- (3) *Relational synchrony*: Developmentally appropriate and sensitive. Scaffolding. Tuned in to

signals. Teaching. Capitalizing on emerging interests and abilities.

Positive paternal engagement, or good fathering, or positive father involvement reflects a part of these characteristics. I suspect that that is why involvement (positively conceptualized and operationalized) predicts variability in child development outcomes.

In building a heuristic model, we need to account for all of the existing data, and to integrate it, but I also think that we need to move to post-formal analyses and to use our professional and relational intuitions. Embracing the tenants of positivism as a cornerstone of science precludes employing the highest levels of cognitive functioning to scientific inquiry (Palkovitz, 2006). If we characterize post-formal reasoning as the epitome of cognitive development in the literature on cognition, why do we rule it out when designing models, and doing data analyses? Predictive models of father-child relationships will not emerge until, as a discipline, we move beyond positivism as the basis for scientific knowledge.

I highly value the expressed values of Cabrera et al. in embracing practical applicability as a driving force in the proposed model. They acknowledge the need for fathers, for practitioners, and for policy makers to have well-grounded guidance when making decisions about fathering. My own focus on practical direction to fathers has been heightened as I have begun work on a popular press book (as unpopular as that is among academics) for fathers. I understand that fathers will want to know *what* to do, *when* to do it, *how* to do it, and *why* to do it. At a basic level, without too many qualifications and disclaimers, but based on the best that data and theories have to offer us, what should we be telling fathers, practitioners, and policy makers about the things that matter in father-child relationships? What are the primary things we know that are related to positive developmental outcomes for children? If we were to boil down all of the theories and empirical studies to a few guiding principles, what would they be, and what does that tell us about a heuristic model of fathering? What elements are central or essential? Based on the professional literature that is out there regarding fathers and child outcomes, what would we tell them? If it was possible to take a grounded theory approach to meta-analysis of the scholarly fathering literature and asked what do the theories and the data tell us? What is the emerging theory of fathering? What would it look like? Would it result in the heuristic model proposed or does it suggest a different set of key variables?

## Conclusion

Father involvement may serve as a proxy for qualitative issues in father-child relationships that are otherwise difficult to operationalize and to measure. It may be that indicators of father involvement mirror the more important, long-term qualities of father-child relationships, and that is why they explain some of the variability in outcome measures. Rather than focusing concerted attention on devising better measures of father involvement, perhaps the field should focus attention on conceptualizing and measuring components of father-child relationships that capture the essence of *affective climate*, *behavioral style*, and *relational synchrony*.

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