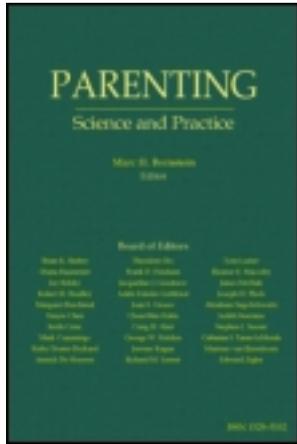


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Integrating Father Involvement in Parenting Research

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Integrating Father Involvement in Parenting Research

Joseph H. Pleck

SYNOPSIS

This article presents the approach that other investigators and I take in fathering research employing the construct of paternal involvement. First, I review the involvement construct, analyzing its social and methodological background, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it evolved subsequent to its initial formulation. Next considered are approaches and findings concerning the sources and consequences of involvement, with emphasis on my research program. Finally, five potential contributions of paternal involvement research to the broader parenting field concerning the dimensions of parenting, what is optimal parenting, and the sources and consequences of parenting are suggested, as well as implications for intervention and social policy.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of increasing attention to fathers, and growing evidence of their importance in development (Lamb, 2010), they still receive less research consideration than do mothers. This article reviews work employing a foundational construct in contemporary fathering research, paternal involvement, focusing on its development and evolution, analysis of its sources and consequences, and its implications for the parenting field.

THE PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT CONSTRUCT

Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985; Pleck, Lamb, & Levine, 1985) proposed the construct of paternal involvement, which includes three component constructs: (1) engagement (direct interaction with the child, in the form of caregiving, play, or other activities), (2) accessibility (availability) to the child, and (3) responsibility (making sure that the child is taken care of, distinct from providing the care, as well as arranging for resources for the child). In formulating the overall involvement construct and its components, Lamb et al. (1985) sought to bring attention to aspects of fathering that had not been previously identified in parenting research, but that now seemed to be reflected in social changes that were occurring in the fathering role (p. 884). Up to that time, the paternal variable studied most frequently was fathers' presence in the child's household. Other aspects of paternal behavior such as fathers' role in children's moral development, fathers' interaction style, and infants' attachment to fathers had also received some consideration (Lamb, 1976). By contrast, the engagement component of involvement focused on how much time fathers actually spent interacting with their

children. The engagement construct in effect addressed growing social concerns about whether fathers were doing enough as parents, particularly in the context of rising rates of maternal employment. Methodologically, the engagement construct was grounded in time diary research. Using this methodology, researchers had begun to report findings about the amount of time fathers spent in activities with their children. In addition, some diary studies coded for fathers' time in activities in which a child was reported simply as being present with the father, but not participating in an activity with the father. This latter measure was the methodological source of the accessibility construct. Accessibility corresponded to fathers' being "on duty" with the child. Accessibility, however, has received relatively little subsequent attention, and is not discussed further here. The responsibility component of involvement had no specific methodological underpinning. Its source was entirely cultural: many mothers complained that even if fathers did things with their children, it was only because mothers told them to do so (Levine, 1976).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Engagement and Responsibility Constructs

Engagement. A key strength of the engagement construct was that it identified an aspect of fathering not previously recognized but that now seemed important in light of social concerns about whether fathers were doing "enough." Of the three components of involvement, engagement became by far the one most frequently studied. In fact, the broader term involvement was (and is) frequently used as a synonym for the engagement component alone. A second strength was that data on paternal engagement from time diary research were available from large, representative samples in both the United States and Europe. Large-scale time-use surveys were also repeated on an ongoing basis, making it possible to ascertain trends over time. However, research failed to document associations between engagement time and child outcomes (Pleck, 1997), a critical weakness. These results fundamentally challenged a key premise in the new research interest in fatherhood, that fathers' spending time with their children should promote better child development.

Responsibility. Like engagement, the responsibility component of involvement had the strength that it addressed something relevant to social concerns about fathering. As with engagement, one limitation was that researchers failed to find an empirical association with child outcomes. (Responsibility was more likely to be linked to outcomes for mothers such as decreased stress, because some mothers experienced needing to tell fathers what to do as a particular strain [Levine, 1976], although this linkage was not being studied.) Another weakness was that Lamb and Pleck had not defined responsibility precisely enough. Their definition actually concerned two different things: At a broader level, overseeing the provision of care ("the role the father takes in making sure that the child is taken care of"), and at a narrower level, arranging goods and services for the child ("... arranging for resources to be available for the child). For example, this might involve arranging for babysitters, making appointments with pediatricians and seeing that the child is taken to them, determining when the child needs new clothes, and so forth." (Lamb et al., 1985, p. 884). Furthermore, many researchers operationalized "responsibility" with items simply asking the degree to which a parent is "responsible for" various activities such as feeding, disciplining, buying children's clothes, and making appointments for the child (e.g., Hofferth, 2003). In common usage, however,

“responsible for” is generally interpreted to mean who usually does the activity, not who makes sure that the activity is done, the focus of the first part of Lamb and Pleck’s definition. Additionally, the activities assessed with this responsibility wording often entailed direct interaction with the child (as in Hofferth, 2003), thus confounding measures of responsibility with engagement.

Revised Conceptualization of Paternal Involvement

As subsequent researchers employed the involvement construct, its operationalization and underlying conceptualization began to shift. Pleck (1997) noted that, instead of time diaries, most researchers now used measures assessing what he termed *positive* engagement, engagement assessed as the frequency of specific kinds of interactive activities likely to promote development like play and reading, often combined with items concerning qualitative dimensions such as warmth and sensitivity. Pleck (2010a) later observed that because so much recent work operationalized involvement as including warmth/responsiveness and control (concepts long established in parenting research), the involvement construct now in practice included these dimensions. Pleck (2010a) proposed a revised conceptualization of paternal involvement including three primary components: (1) positive engagement activities, (2) warmth and responsiveness, and (3) control. In addition, to clarify the two distinct aspects of the responsibility component as originally defined, Pleck’s (2010a) revised formulation includes two auxiliary domains: (4) social and material indirect care, activities that parents do *for* the child but not *with* the child; and (5) process responsibility, ensuring that the four prior components are provided.

Lamb and Pleck had not situated paternal involvement in any particular theoretical context. The revised conceptualization interpreted the first three components as entailing the kind of reciprocal, increasingly complex interaction captured in Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) concept of proximal process, thus promoting development. In addition, as parental socialization behaviors, these components provide social capital to the child (Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg, 2005). Social indirect care includes fostering children’s peer relationships, and therefore proximal process interaction. Social indirect care includes as well other behaviors that provide social capital: parents’ sharing their adult social networks and knowledge with their child and advocating on behalf of their child.

Pleck developed a specific argument for the influence on child outcomes of material indirect care. A family’s having financial resources is a precondition for providing goods and services to the child, with the developmental benefits that ensue. But having income does not necessarily mean it is used on behalf of the child, because families vary considerably in how they allocate economic resources to different family members. Parents’ arranging and purchasing goods and services for the child (material indirect care) is the mediating behavior through which family financial resources are used to promote development.

The final component in the revised formulation, process responsibility, is grounded in family process theory’s concept of family “executive function,” a dynamic within families that ensures that family tasks are done and family norms are followed. Process responsibility refers to the father’s monitoring whether the child’s needs for the four prior components of involvement (positive activity engagement, warmth/responsiveness, control, and social and material indirect care) are being met,

and if not, taking action to make sure they are provided. Thus, the effects of fathers' process responsibility are mediated by the other involvement components.

SOURCES OF PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT

Lamb and Pleck proposed a four-factor model for the sources of father involvement. Their model includes: (1) motivation, (2) skills and self-confidence, (3) social supports (especially from the child's mother), and (4) absence of institutional barriers (especially in the workplace). My work concerning sources of involvement focuses primarily on motivation (operationalized in two different ways) and on maternal influence.

Motivation Operationalized as Fathers' Attitudes about Father Involvement

This approach views fathering behavior as motivated by individuals' beliefs about what should be true or is true about fathers in general (notions that, although conceptually somewhat different, are empirically strongly correlated). Typical items include "A father should be as heavily involved in the care of his child as the mother" and "Fathers play a central role in the child's personality development." Most research on the association between men's attitudes about father involvement and paternal involvement is cross-sectional, has other design weaknesses, and has generated mixed results (Hofferth, Pleck, Goldscheider, Curtin, & Hrapczynski, in press). In a more methodologically rigorous analysis, using data from the 1997 and 2003 Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, more favorable attitudes toward father involvement were associated with greater engagement, warmth, and control as reported by fathers (Hofferth et al., in press). In addition, change in father involvement attitudes was associated with change in fathers' warmth and control, providing stronger evidence of causal influence than prior cross-sectional analyses. Other analyses in this study were the first to examine the association between fathers' reports of their attitudes and measures of their involvement from a different reporter (time diaries completed by mothers about children's activities). Fathers' self-reported attitudes were positively associated with mothers' diary reports of fathers' teaching activities, but not caregiving or play. Comparison of results when fathers vs. mothers reported about father involvement suggested that same-source bias may exaggerate the association between attitudes and involvement when fathers are the informants about both. Finally, involvement attitudes were significantly more favorable among single fathers than among married biological fathers, and marginally less favorable among stepfathers. Taking attitudes into account reduced the association between father type and paternal involvement.

Motivation Operationalized as Paternal Identity

The construct of paternal identity has provided a second useful approach to the study of fathers' motivation for involvement. In the symbolic interactionist interpretation of identity, fathering behavior is motivated by men's self-conceptions as individual fathers, assessed by self-report measures including items such as "it's important to me to be a good father" or by procedures in which fathers report their investment in fatherhood compared to other roles, for example as areas in a pie chart (Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2001). Paternal identity is conceptually distinct from attitudes about father involvement

in that attitudes refer to a father's beliefs about what fathers in general should or actually do, whereas identity concerns a father's perceptions of what kind of father he himself is.

Quantitative research on paternal identity suggests two conclusions. First, it is important to distinguish between father identity at the broad "role" level (e.g., how important to be a good father) and identity at the narrower level of specific domains within fathering (how important to be a good caregiver, how important to have a close emotional relationship with the child, how important to be a good breadwinner). Measures of paternal identity and behavior are unlikely to be related unless they are assessed at the same level (Maurer et al., 2001). In particular, self-ratings of the importance of being a father are unrelated to behavioral engagement because different men may rate their father role as important for different reasons (one because interacting with the child is important to him, but another because breadwinning is important to him).

Second, even when assessed at the same level, the association between paternal identity and behavior is complex. Maurer et al. (2001) hypothesized and found that paternal identity and involvement are more strongly associated for domains of fathering that are gender-congruent (e.g., breadwinning) than for domains that are gender-incongruent (e.g., caregiving), consistent with research in social psychology suggesting that behavior is less related to identity in domains for which identity and corresponding self-appraisals are less crystallized and established (Moore, 1985). Fathers' caregiving behavior was more strongly related to their perceptions of how their coparent views them as caregivers than to their own identities as caregivers.

Narrative approaches to paternal identity have also proved valuable. In a study of two-parent families with preschoolers, Stueve and Pleck (2001) coded fathers' and mothers' descriptions of "meaningful experiences" they had had in multiple domains of parenting for whether these narratives referred to themselves only or to their partners as well. Stueve and Pleck (2001) interpreted the relative proportion of these references as reflecting the balance in parents' identities between *self-as-solo-parent* versus *self-as-co-parent*. Fathers' identities were relatively more co-parental than mothers'. For both mothers and fathers, having a co-parental rather than solo-parental identity in the executive domain of parenting (assessed in narratives about "arranging and planning" for the child) was associated with higher self-reported performance of parenting tasks and increased play/companionship with the child.

Maternal influence. Other research investigates maternal influences on father involvement. Studies of the association between mothers' attitudes about fathering and fathers' behavioral involvement have yielded inconsistent results (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). However, observed maternal "gatekeeping" (operationalized as undermining behaviors and low supportive behaviors) is associated with decreased paternal involvement (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).

Pleck and Hofferth (2008) investigated an additional aspect of maternal influence, the influence of mothers' own *level* of involvement on fathers'. Their notion was that mothers' involvement level serves as a baseline against which fathers calibrate their own. Although they may not expect themselves to be as involved as their partners, many fathers may feel that to "pull their share" as parents, their involvement should be some reasonable proportion of what the child's mother does. In addition to this benchmarking, mothers' involvement level may influence fathers' via role modeling. In an analysis testing reciprocal causation using data from NLSY 79, with numerous controls, mothers' level of involvement influenced fathers', but not the reverse.

CONSEQUENCES OF PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT

Lamb et al.'s (1985) presentation of the involvement construct held that paternal involvement potentially had consequences not only for children, but also for mothers, for the marital relationship, and for fathers themselves.

Consequences for Children

It seems fair to say that research on mothering presumes that mothering influences child development, with the research agenda being to delineate exactly what aspects of mothers' behavior influence exactly what child outcomes and through what processes. By contrast, whether fathers' involvement makes a difference has been a fundamental question. Methodological issues in this research are considered first.

Investigations in this area have become increasingly rigorous. Three design standards are now evident: (1) use of data for father involvement and child outcomes from different sources, (2) longitudinal analysis, and (3) taking mother involvement into account. The last requirement is important because father and mother involvement are moderately correlated (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008); if mother involvement is not controlled, estimates of the independent effect of paternal involvement on child outcomes may be biased upwards. Recent research has also begun to use techniques to take into account potential selection effects on father involvement (i.e., factors not controlled for in the analysis that influence both level of father involvement and child outcomes). In addition, in assessing paternal effects, the need to address potential reciprocal causation is being recognized, because part of any the association between father involvement and child outcomes may occur because the latter influences the former.

An accumulating number of studies with these three key design features document the independent influence of paternal involvement (assessed with measures incorporating fathers' positive activity engagement, warmth-sensitivity, and/or control) on positive child and adolescent outcomes (Pleck, 2010a). In a particularly valuable study that controlled for the reciprocal influence of children on fathers, Hawkins, Amato, and King (2007) found that resident fathers' shared activities and communication with their adolescent promoted fewer internalizing problems and higher academic achievement. However, these paternal behaviors did not influence externalizing problems, and fathers' emotional closeness was not associated with any of the three outcomes. Furthermore, for nonresident fathers, causal influence operated only from adolescent outcomes to father involvement. As additional studies employing rigorous designs are conducted, patterns may emerge regarding what aspects of paternal involvement influence which developmental outcomes, and how these linkages may differ for resident and nonresident fathers, but consistent patterns are not evident at present.

As noted earlier, the conceptualization of paternal involvement has shifted from its original emphasis on paternal engagement as time spent with the child, to a focus on positive engagement activities, warmth/responsiveness, and control. This shift was partly prompted by early findings that fathers' total time spent with the child has no direct association with child outcomes (Pleck, 1997). However, additional study suggests that engagement time may nonetheless have a role, specifically as a moderator of the effects of qualitative aspects of involvement (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007). In this

study, fathers' weekly amount of time spent with toddlers had no main-effect relation to toddlers' attachment security, consistent with prior research. However, fathers' engagement time moderated the effect of the quality of their interaction with their child: both fathers' intrusiveness and their low warmth (assessed in laboratory observation) were more strongly related to insecurity of attachment among fathers who spent more weekly time with their child.

Consequences for Mothers, the Marital Relationship, and Fathers Themselves

Research suggests that greater paternal involvement benefits not only children, but mothers and fathers themselves as well (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). For example, in longitudinal data from a sample of fathers born in the 1930s, positive paternal engagement when their children were young and during adolescence accounted for 21% of the variance in fathers' marital success at midlife and 6% of the variance in their later occupational mobility, with sociodemographic background controlled, although earlier marital success was not (Snarey & Pleck, 1993). In addition, engagement explained 14% of the variance in men's societal generativity in midlife (coded from interview data as demonstrating a clear capacity for establishing, guiding, or caring for the next generation, excluding their own children). Other shorter-term longitudinal research further suggests involvement's positive effects on fathers' well-being and relationships (Hawkins & Belsky, 1989; Palkovitz, 2002). The longitudinal nature of these associations provides a limited basis for inferring causal direction.

WHAT IS UNIVERSAL AND OPTIMAL, AND OTHER ISSUES IN PARENTING

Most research on paternal involvement has been conducted in a parallel but independent track relative to the broader parenting field. What does the paternal involvement perspective offer to parenthood research more generally concerning enduring questions such as whether there are cross-cultural universals in parenting, how to conceptualize parenting's underlying dimensions, what kinds of parenting are optimal, and other issues?

Paternal involvement research includes a growing body of analyses of fatherhood in varied cultural contexts, both across societies and among ethnic and immigrant subgroups within Western societies. This research suggests important variations in the conduct and social construction of fathering (e.g., the non-playful roles of fathers in some cultures, and the high involvement of Aka fathers; Lamb, 2010). However, comparing research on paternal involvement with research on mothers raises the universality question in an additional way: Are there universals in parenting even across gender? At present, parenting research does not provide a clear answer. However, because paternal involvement research began by developing constructs for aspects of fathers' parenting not already existing in parenting studies, and developed an independent approach to the sources and consequences of parenting in fathers, the study of paternal involvement provides a lens through which to view the broader research area.

- (1) Paternal involvement research suggests that in addition to the dimensions currently employed in the parenting discipline concerning type and quality of

parent-child interaction, the *degree or amount of parental engagement may matter as a moderating dimension* (Brown et al., 2007). Coding the behaviors that parents enact with their children in a laboratory task assesses parents' ability to perform these behaviors in the context studied, but not necessarily how frequently parents show these behaviors in the varying contexts of daily life. This distinction is illustrated in Parke and Sawin's (1976) early finding that fathers are just as competent as mothers, on average, in bottle feeding (assessed by number of ounces of milk or formula the baby ingested during an observation period); however, when the observation period ended, most fathers promptly passed the baby back to the mother to complete the feeding. Thus, conceptualizing optimal parenting should take into account not just quality of parenting, but quantity as well.

- (2) Research on father involvement calls attention to the potential importance of *parents' material indirect care* (arranging and obtaining goods and services for the child) as an influence on development. This kind of care has received special attention in research on nonresident fathers, in which it is termed "in kind" contributions (e.g., buying clothing). Material indirect care was not previously identified in the broader discipline as a parenting behavior, perhaps because it is taken for granted in mothers. But mothers, too, vary in their performance of material indirect care, and this variation may have consequences for the child.
- (3) Parenting research already recognizes parents' role in fostering children's peer relationships. Paternal involvement research frames this as part of a broader construct of *parents' social indirect care*, which in addition includes parents' sharing their adult social networks and knowledge with their child, and by advocating on behalf of their child. Both this expanded concept of social indirect care, and the concept of material indirect care, enhance our understanding of the importance in parenting of activities that parents do for the child, but not with the child.

In summary, to existing conceptualizations of key parenting dimensions and what kinds of parenting are optimal, paternal involvement research adds: parents' degree of involvement with the child, their provision of material indirect care, and their provision of social indirect care in ways besides promoting peer relationships. These are important dimensions of parenting, and optimal parenting includes them.

- (4) What is distinctive in research on the sources of paternal involvement is its special focus on *motivation for involvement* as the foremost influence on the degree and kinds of involvement that fathers exhibit, a focus not currently shared in research on mothers. This emphasis reflects that in most cultures, among those who are parents, mothering is mandatory while fathering is discretionary. To be sure, factors such as depression are studied in mothers, but not motivation for parenting in the more fundamental sense used in paternal research. No scales for "mother involvement attitudes" exist that parallel measures of father involvement attitudes. For parental identity in the symbolic interactionist sense used in paternal involvement research, maternal identity has been investigated almost entirely in studies focusing primarily on fathers (but see Bornstein et al., 2003). In those studies, the finding that maternal caregiving identity is associated with variation in mothers' caregiving behavior (Maurer et al., 2001) suggests that research on mothers could benefit by incorporating this and other approaches to the study of parenting motivation.

- (5) In research on the consequences of parenting, paternal involvement research is noteworthy for the attention it has given to *longer-term consequences of variations in parenting experience for parents themselves* such as generativity, and to *longer-term consequences for their partners and for their marriage*. Research on mothers has certainly addressed phenomena such as parental stress and depression resulting from maternal work overload which can be framed as shorter-term sequelae of parenting, but has given less attention to longer-term psychosocial consequences such as generativity, which future research could usefully explore. Pleck (2010b) reviews in depth current research on the relation of generativity to mothers' and fathers' parenting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS AND SOCIAL POLICY

Three questions about interventions and policy can be posed: (1) Do biological and evolutionary influences on parenting set limits on the extent or nature of father involvement, making the fostering of involvement in fathers more challenging than in mothers?; (2) What interventions and policies promoting father involvement exist, and with what effects?; and (3) What should be the rationale for these initiatives? For discussion of the first two questions, addressed in growing literatures too extensive to review here, see, Waynforth (in press) and Lamb (2010).

Greater clarity is needed concerning the third question, the underlying justification for programs promoting increased father involvement. Among the lay public the most prevalent rationale is the belief that fathers are essential to their children's positive development, because of their unique contribution as male parents. (For example, a Google search on the terms "father" and "essential" in November 2010 yielded 30 million web pages.) This widespread view poses a quandary for fathering and parenting researchers.

The dilemma is that, although this belief in "paternal essentiality" is clearly motivating and inspirational for many fatherhood practitioners and fathers themselves, in reality fathers are not essential in the literal sense illustrated by the common dictionary example, "Water is essential to life." It is plain that many children develop successfully without involved fathers. Nor is there evidence that fathers' contribution is "unique" in the sense of being related specifically to fathers' being male. The comparison often thought to establish that having a male parent makes a unique contribution, the comparison of child outcomes in single-mother vs. two-parent families, confounds the presence or absence of a resident male parent with the number of resident parents. Comparisons that control for the number of parents (e.g., Wainright, Russell, and Patterson's, 2004, study involving a large representative sample of adolescents reared in two-parent heterosexual families vs. two-parent lesbian families) find no differences favoring families with resident fathers as opposed to two lesbian parents. Elsewhere (Pleck, 2010b), I develop a positive alternative to the "essential father" hypothesis that is more consistent with current evidence: the "important father" hypothesis. This alternative interpretation is grounded in a risk-resilience perspective, in which involved fathering is considered as a potentially extremely important (though not essential) protective factor in development. This interpretation of fathering's role simply brings our understanding of fathering in line with the way the parenting field views all other social influences on development.

CONCLUSION

As Stolz, Barber, and Olsen (2005) aptly stated, "We once studied primarily mothers and called their behaviors 'parenting' without considering whether we had accurately portrayed fathers, but now we often study only fathers and call their behaviors 'fathering' without considering whether . . . those behaviors are similar when enacted by mothers" (p. 1076). Paternal involvement research over the last two decades has helped surmount the first problem: mothering is no longer assumed to be synonymous with parenting. In the coming decade, the parenting discipline can make progress in the second area by exploring how the concepts and approaches distinctive in paternal involvement research can contribute to greater understanding of mothering, and to the understanding of parenting in a truly gender-inclusive perspective.

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