



Fathers and Family Systems

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Family Systems Principles

Family systems theoretical perspectives (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985) emphasize that families operate as systems of individuals and relationships, with each individual or relationship constituting its own subsystem. These levels of systems within families are organized hierarchically and governed by boundaries that provide the rules for interactions between family members. Boundaries are largely set by parents, who form the “executive subsystem” of the family and share primary responsibility for managing family members and their relationships (Minuchin, 1974).

A key principle of family systems theories is that individuals and relationships within families are interdependent, meaning that these subsystems affect one another. Family members’ mutual influences on one another are often called bidirectional effects, reciprocal or transactional patterns (Cox & Paley, 1997; Sameroff, 1975; Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). Families have emergent properties, such that the family whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, one cannot understand the whole family

merely by combining knowledge about individual family members or subsystem relationships (McHale et al., 2000). Family systems are also characterized as both stable and dynamic (Cox & Paley, 1997; Palkovitz et al., 2014). On the one hand, families exhibit homeostasis via processes of internal regulation that maintain boundaries and interaction patterns within the family even in the face of broader environmental challenges or changes. On the other hand, families demonstrate adaptive self-organization, or the capacity to reorganize in response to changes both within and outside of the family, such as the birth of a new family member or immigration to a new country. These processes of stability and change are considered adaptive but may or may not be ultimately healthy for family functioning.

What Does It Mean to Take a Family Systems Perspective on Fathering?

Taking a family systems perspective on fathering means to study fathers in the context of key relationships and interactions with others in their families. It means refraining from studying fathers or father–child relationships in isolation from other family members or relationships, even though mothering is typically studied in isolation from fathering (Cabrera et al., 2018). Because of the primacy of the “executive subsystem” in family systems theories (Minuchin, 1974), taking a

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family systems perspective invites a focus on interparental relationships, including romantic relationships shared by parents, co-parenting relationships, and important interparental processes such as marital conflict and maternal gatekeeping. To the extent that dyadic (e.g., father–child, mother–father) and triadic (e.g., co-parenting) family subsystems are considered simultaneously, a family systems model of fathering is more fully achieved.

Even scholarship that does not include measures of multiple family subsystems, however, can still take a more systemic approach. For example, studies of fathering can center the relationship between the father and child, rather than the father's involvement or parenting behavior toward the child. The child is not a mere recipient of the father's behavior; the child affects the father just as the father affects the child, consistent with family systems theories' emphasis on bidirectional and transactional patterns (Cox & Paley, 1997; Sameroff, 1975; Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). Moreover, given families' simultaneous tendencies toward homeostasis and adaptive self-organization, research on fathering guided by a family systems perspective follows fathers and families over time to track stability and change and may focus on key family transition points, such as the transition to parenthood, when reorganization of family roles and relationships is necessary.

Studying fathering in this manner also necessitates consideration of the function of gender in family dynamics. Palkovitz et al. (2014) pointed out that family members have different roles in families, and that these roles and how family members enact them are shaped by gendered expectations. Family rules, or the unspoken norms about how families operate, are also shaped by gendered expectations and associated power dynamics. Acknowledgment of gender dynamics in parenting invites a focus on differences as well as similarities between fathers' and mothers' roles in families, manifestations of gendered power dynamics such as maternal gatekeeping, and comparison of fathers' versus mothers' vulnerability to interparental relationships. Consideration of gender also implies that

gender of children and parents may contribute to family roles and relationships in complex, interactive ways.

Several key theoretical models of fathering are consistent with and/or have explicitly incorporated a family systems perspective. One of these is Cabrera et al.' (2014) expanded model of father–child relationships, which incorporates interrelations between fathers and family relationships, including co-parenting and mother–child relationships, as well as the roles of other family members' characteristics and behaviors. This model also considers reciprocal and transactional influences between fathers and children and the role of child characteristics in father–child relationships. Palkovitz and Hull's (2018) resource theory of fathering adopts a family systems perspective by centering the father–child relationship (dyad) and focusing more on how fathers relate to children than on how fathers behave toward children. Resource theory also reflects systemic principles by its consideration of the important role of interpersonal resources, such as the co-parenting relationship, to fathering and the processes through which resources flow back and forth (reciprocal relations). Both Cabrera et al.'s model (2014) and Palkovitz and Hull's (2018) resource theory also consider how fathers, their relationships, and the contexts in which they are embedded evolve and adapt over time.

Interparental Relationships and Fathering

Given that family subsystems are mutually interdependent (Minuchin, 1985), how fathers relate to other important figures in the family (e.g., mothers) shapes fathers' parenting beliefs and behaviors. The interparental relationship is an important aspect of the family system that can have an impact on various aspects of fathering. Most past research has focused on the marital/romantic relationship, especially the role of marital conflict in fathering. Recently greater attention has been devoted to co-parenting, which is a more proximal context because of its focus on childrearing, and thus has a more direct influence

on parenting behaviors and child development (Feinberg, 2003). In discussing the roles of interparental relationships in fathering, the coparenting relationship should not be ignored and, in fact, may merit even greater attention from researchers (Cabrera et al., 2014).

Moreover, fathers and mothers may not be affected equally by interparental relationships. Krishnakumar and Buehler's (2000) meta-analysis found that parents with higher levels of interparental conflict showed more negative behaviors across multiple dimensions of parenting (e.g., harsh discipline, low parental acceptance). The associations between interparental conflict and parenting held for both mothers and fathers, although the effect was stronger for fathers (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In other words, fathering appears more susceptible to negative relationships and interactions in the family context, an idea referred to as the "father vulnerability hypothesis" (Cummings et al., 2010). However, there is also evidence suggesting that the father's vulnerability in the interparental context is nuanced (Cummings et al., 2010). To better understand family processes and promote family wellbeing, it is important to know how parenting is shaped by interparental relationships and whether fathering and mothering are affected by interparental relationships in different ways.

Fathering and Marital Relationships

Fathers' experiences in the marital subsystem affect their parenting. Fathers' positive experiences in the marital subsystem promote fathers' involvement in childrearing, while negative experiences discourage fathers from engaging with their children. Fathers with higher marital satisfaction devote more time to parenting, and this link holds for resident fathers with young children in both western and non-western countries (Bouchard & Lee, 2000; Kwok et al., 2013). This association was further supported by a longitudinal study of new parents, which found that marital satisfaction positively predicted fathers' involvement in childrearing (Lee & Doherty,

2007). Likewise, fathers' reports of marital conflict were negatively associated with fathers' involvement in activities with infants (i.e., verbal stimulation, caregiving, and physical play), and these associations were consistent across different races/ethnicities, including African American, Latino, and White fathers (Cabrera et al., 2011). Notably, patterns of father involvement in infancy tend to persist as children develop (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012).

The marital relationship also shapes the quality of fathers' parenting behaviors. A more positive marital relationship appears to foster warm and responsive fathering behaviors. Stroud et al. (2011) found that better marital functioning was associated with fathers' greater responsiveness to children in dyadic interactions as well as more warmth in triadic interactions in early childhood. In addition to fathers' own perception of the marital relationship, a more positive marital relationship reported by mothers was also associated with fathers' parenting style (i.e., greater responsiveness) reported by children (Ponnet et al., 2013). Other studies indicate that marital relationship quality is positively related to father-child relationship quality (Galovan et al., 2014; Kouros et al., 2014). Moreover, the marital relationship can also affect fathers' parenting cognitions. Better couple relationship functioning is associated with fathers' higher parenting self-efficacy (Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2010). Kersh et al. (2006) found that in families of children with developmental disabilities, higher levels of marital quality predicted lower levels of fathers' and mothers' parenting stress over and above socioeconomic status, social support, and child characteristics. Overall, marital relationship quality is positively related to fathering quality and fathers' parental adjustment.

Additionally, negative aspects of the marital relationship (e.g., marital stress, conflict) and their adverse impact on fathering have drawn special interest from researchers. Elam et al. (2017) found that higher marital stress in middle childhood predicted lower monitoring and parenting consistency from fathers in early adolescence. In regard to marital conflict, Stevenson et al. (2019) found that prenatal interparental

conflict predicted a decrease in paternal parenting self-efficacy postpartum. These results were consistent with the study of McCoy et al. (2013), which showed that destructive marital conflict (e.g., hostility, physical aggression) was associated with fathers' inconsistent discipline, whereas constructive marital conflict (e.g., problem solving) was associated with higher paternal warmth. Using both observations and reports, Low and Stocker (2005) found a connection between marital hostility and father-child hostility in families of 10-year-old children. Similarly, a study of adoptive families found that a more hostile marital relationship was associated with greater hostile parenting of adoptive fathers, which was further linked to aggressive behaviors of children in toddlerhood (Stover et al., 2012).

The associations between the marital relationship and fathering are influenced by other contextual factors and family characteristics. For example, a study of low-income Mexican American families found a negative link between interparental conflict and fathering quality in single-earner families, but not dual-earner families (Formoso et al., 2007). In addition, the association between interparental relationship quality and fathering is not equally strong for resident and nonresident fathers. Fagan and Palkovitz (2011) found a stronger positive association between relationship quality at 1 year postpartum and father involvement in childrearing at 3 years postpartum among nonresident unmarried parents than among coresidential parents. The spillover effect from the marital subsystem to fathering may also be moderated by child gender. Bernier et al. (2014) found that fathers' marital satisfaction when children were 15 months old was positively related to the quality of observed father-son interactions when children were 18 months old but was not related to father-daughter interaction quality.

Fathering and Co-parenting Relationships

The co-parenting relationship is a proximal context in which parents work together to parent

children. The co-parenting relationship, especially its key components—support and undermining—affects multiple dimensions of fathering (Altenburger & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Merrifield & Gamble, 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). Supportive co-parenting includes one parent's respect, recognition, endorsement, and help for the other's parenting, whereas undermining co-parenting refers to attack, blame, and disparagement towards the other's role/work as a parent.

One focus of co-parenting research is on investigating how co-parenting relationships influence fathers' involvement in childrearing. Accumulated evidence has supported the positive link between supportive co-parenting relationships and fathers' greater involvement, including a series of studies stemming from large-scale longitudinal data sets (e.g., Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort). Hohmann-Marriott (2011) found an association between cooperative co-parenting and greater father involvement among both married and unmarried coresident couples. A similar pattern was observed for unmarried nonresident fathers with young children, such that positive co-parenting was a strong predictor of greater father involvement (Carlson et al., 2008). These findings were also supported by a longitudinal study, which found that, among unmarried nonresident fathers, co-parenting support at 1 year postpartum was longitudinally and positively related to fathers' engagement at 3 years postpartum (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). As for co-parenting conflict, a study of low-income Mexican American families found that higher levels of co-parenting conflict were related to less paternal engagement (Cabrera et al., 2009). In addition, compared to families with a disengaged or conflicted co-parenting style, families with a cooperative co-parenting style showed higher quantity and quality of fathers' involvement (Waller, 2012). Furthermore, co-parenting conflict did not impair paternal involvement as long as parents could cooperate and support each other, whereas a conflicted co-parenting style without cooperation impeded

paternal involvement more than a disengaged one (Waller, 2012).

Links between co-parenting relationship quality and fathers' involvement are moderated by many factors, like fathers' age, residential status, family employment patterns, and race/ethnicity. Fagan and Lee (2011) found that co-parenting support was positively related to adolescent fathers' involvement regardless of the relationship status between parents (i.e., romantically involved or not), and the association between co-parenting and fathers' involvement was stronger among adolescent fathers than adult fathers. With regard to fathers' residence, the positive association between co-parenting quality and fathers' involvement in childrearing may be stronger for nonresident fathers than for resident fathers, given that the coparenting relationship plays a critical role in shaping non-resident fathers' access to children (Carlson et al., 2008). Fagan and Palkovitz (2011) found a more robust link between co-parenting relationship quality and fathers' involvement among nonresidential non-romantic parents than among coresident or non-coresident romantically involved parents. As for family employment status, a study of families with preschoolers found that dual-earner couples demonstrated less undermining co-parenting behaviors in triadic interactions when fathers reported greater involvement in caregiving and play, whereas similar associations were not found in singer-earner families (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). Only in single-earner families, greater paternal involvement in caregiving (but not involvement in play) was associated with more perceived undermining and less perceived support in co-parenting. Race and ethnicity also play a role in shaping the associations between co-parenting relationships and fathers' involvement. A study of an at-risk population showed that supportive co-parenting was related to greater fathers' engagement in infancy, and this association was stronger in White families than in minority families (Pudasainee-Kapri & Razza, 2015).

The co-parenting relationship not only exerts an impact on fathers' involvement in childrearing but also affects the nature of fathers' involve-

ment. Drawing data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Sobolewski and King (2005) found that, for nonresident fathers, cooperative co-parenting (but not co-parenting conflict) predicted higher levels of father-child contact frequency, which in turn promoted responsiveness in fathering and strengthened father-child relationship quality. A study of low-income nonresidential fathers showed that a stronger co-parenting alliance with children's mothers was associated with higher father-child closeness, less father-child conflict, and higher paternal parenting self-efficacy (Fagan et al., 2016). Brown et al. (2010) found that supportive co-parenting was associated with greater father-son attachment security, but the same link was not found for father-daughter attachment security.

Fathers' experiences in the co-parenting subsystem can shape their self-perceptions and psychological adjustment to parenting. The support that fathers receive from partners can reduce their perceived difficulties of being a parent (Thomas et al., 2011). Similarly, Pinto et al. (2016) found that higher co-parenting support predicted higher levels of fathers' parenting self-efficacy at the transition to parenthood, whereas Merrifield and Gamble (2013) demonstrated that undermining co-parenting was associated with lower levels of fathers' parenting self-efficacy. Solmeyer and Feinberg (2011) found that parents with less co-parenting support and more undermining experienced higher levels of parenting stress. In addition, high co-parenting support buffered the adverse effect of high levels of negative infant temperament on fathers' depressive symptoms, while low undermining co-parenting promoted fathers' parenting efficacy in the context of low levels of negative infant temperament (Solmeyer & Feinberg, 2011). Consistent with these results, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2016) also identified a negative association between fathers' perceived supportive co-parenting and parenting stress. Additionally, fathers' perception of supportive co-parenting was linked to higher levels of parenting satisfaction in the context of high paternal parenting self-efficacy (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016).

The literature reviewed thus far bolsters the concurrent and longitudinal associations between co-parenting relationships and fathering. However, there are also studies supporting the opposite direction of effects, indicating that father involvement in childrearing predicts subsequent co-parenting relationship quality (e.g., Fagan & Cabrera, 2012; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012). These conflicting results are not necessarily surprising. From a family systems perspective, associations between co-parenting and father–child relationships are bidirectional and transactional. Evidence for one certain perspective or direction cannot preclude other possibilities. Moreover, research findings can vary depending on populations, family structures, child developmental stages, and so on, given that co-parenting and fathering may shape each other in different manners in families with different characteristics. For example, co-parenting seems to more strongly predict paternal involvement for at-risk families than for low-risk families (e.g., adolescent fathers vs. adult fathers; resident fathers vs. nonresident fathers; Carlson et al., 2008; Fagan & Lee, 2011; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011).

Marital Relationships, Co-parenting Relationships, and Maternal Gatekeeping

As suggested by family systems theories, the marital relationship and the co-parenting relationship are two interdependent dimensions of the interparental relationship. The marital relationship and the co-parenting relationship jointly influence fathering. The co-parenting relationship, with its close connection to the parenting context, mediates the associations between the marital relationship and fathering (Feinberg, 2003). Margolin et al. (2001) found that, for both fathers and mothers, partners' co-parenting relationship quality mediated the link between partners' marital conflict and their own parenting (i.e., parenting stress and parenting practices) in families with preschoolers and preadolescents. Similarly, Pedro et al. (2012) found that for families with 9- to 13-year-old children, mothers'

marital satisfaction had a positive influence on a series of fathering practices (i.e., emotional support, rejection, and control attempts) through maternal co-parenting behaviors. Holland and McElwain (2013) found that fathers' perceptions of co-parenting relationship quality mediated the associations between marital quality and father–child relationship quality in toddlerhood. Thus, co-parenting is central to understanding fathering in the family system.

Besides studying the general co-parenting relationship, one component of co-parenting relationships—maternal gatekeeping—has attracted many researchers' attention due to its strong connection with fathers' involvement in childrearing and fathering behaviors. Maternal gatekeeping refers to mothers' beliefs and behaviors of encouraging (gate opening) and discouraging (gate closing) fathers' engagement in childrearing (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Mothers may close the gate to fathers by criticizing fathers' parenting approach, setting high standards for fathers, or assuming mothers should be in charge of making decisions on child-related issues (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Mothers can also open the gate by inviting fathers to get involved in childcare and related decision-making, facilitating father–child activities, or endorsing fathers' parenting efforts (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Maternal gatekeeping has a direct influence on fathers' involvement in childrearing (Cannon et al., 2008; Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008), which, in turn, affects the father–child relationship and fathers' parenting quality (Altenburger et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2014).

Furthermore, maternal gatekeeping may mediate or moderate the association between interparental relationships and fathering. A longitudinal study of families with adolescents indicated that more marital problem behavior was linked to less father–adolescent interaction via increased maternal gatekeeping attitudes, and the findings held for both European American and Mexican American families, as well as for both biological fathers and stepfathers (Stevenson et al., 2014). Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2008) demonstrated that maternal gate opening (i.e.,

encouragement) mediated the link between co-parenting quality and fathers' involvement during infancy, such that higher co-parenting quality was related to greater father involvement in childcare through elevated maternal gate-opening behaviors. In addition, maternal gate opening moderated the link between co-parenting quality and fathers' parenting competence. Only in the presence of higher maternal encouragement was co-parenting quality positively associated with higher observed paternal parenting competence in childcare.

Are Fathers More Vulnerable?

Fathers are not only influenced by interparental relationships but may be more susceptible to the family context than mothers. This notion is described by the father vulnerability hypothesis, which posits that interparental relations may have a stronger impact on fathering than mothering (Cummings et al., 2010). However, Cummings et al. (2010) argued that the father's vulnerability in the context of the marital or interparental relationship is nuanced. Although accumulating studies indicate that fathers and fathering are more influenced by marital relationships than are mothers, there is also evidence indicating no difference or different patterns for mothers and fathers. Some aspects of fathering may be more vulnerable to the marital context than others. Also, the association between interparental relationship quality and fathering is likely to be modified by many factors, including child's gender, child's age, marital status, and father's education level (Cummings et al., 2010; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Since Cummings et al.'s (2010) review, more studies have emerged to test potential differences between fathers' and mothers' vulnerability to interparental subsystems. Some studies have provided evidence in support of the father vulnerability hypothesis. For example, Stroud et al. (2011) found that in families with children aged 3–6 years old, low quality of marital functioning more strongly predicted low responsiveness in parent–child dyadic interactions for fathers than

for mothers. A study of families with adolescent and adult children who had autism spectrum disorders found that fathering is more strongly influenced by marital satisfaction and child characteristics than mothering (Hartley et al., 2011). In regards to marital conflict, although the constructive marital conflict was associated with higher levels of maternal and paternal warmth in parenting, destructive marital conflict was only associated with paternal inconsistent discipline (McCoy et al., 2013). Moreover, the stronger impact of the marital system on fathering may last for years. Young adolescents reported less fathers' monitoring if parents reported more marital stress in children's middle childhood, while the same association was not found between marital stress and mothers' parenting behaviors (Elam et al., 2017).

In addition to fathering behaviors, the co-parenting relationship also appears to be more susceptible to fathers' experiences in the marital subsystem. A longitudinal study of first-time parents suggested that fathers' (but not mothers') perceptions of prenatal and postpartum marital quality could longitudinally predict co-parenting quality at 24 months postpartum (Christopher et al., 2015). Moreover, some family characteristics could strengthen the link between fathering and interparental relationships. By analyzing 15-day daily diaries from 203 families, Kouros et al. (2014) found that both fathers' and mothers' daily ratings of marital quality were positively related to their parent–child relationship on the same day, after controlling for global marital satisfaction, marital conflict, and parenting. However, mothers showed less spillover effect when fathers experienced high levels of paternal depressive symptoms. Furthermore, the time-lagged analysis found that lower maternal marital quality predicted an increase in mother–child relationship quality on the next day, in line with the compensatory effect. In contrast, the paternal marital relationship spilled over to the subsequent father–child relationship on the next day if high levels of maternal depressive symptoms were reported.

However, some studies also indicate a lack of evidence for differences between fathers and

mothers, suggesting both fathers and mothers appear susceptible to the marital experience. The results of Solmeyer and Feinberg (2011) suggested that the interaction of co-parenting quality and child temperament exerts similar influence on fathers' and mothers' parenting efficacy, parenting stress, and depressive symptoms in early parenthood. Moreover, high prenatal interparental conflict was predictive of both fathers' and mothers' decreased parenting self-efficacy after their child's birth (Stevenson et al., 2019). Some studies even demonstrated results indicating greater maternal than paternal vulnerability. Korja et al. (2016) found that only mothers' marital satisfaction from pregnancy to 18 months could longitudinally and concurrently predict cooperative and coordinated family relationships in triadic interactions at 18 months. In a study of low-income Black single-mother families with cohabiting male partners and adolescent children, maternal marital relationship quality was associated with mothers' parenting behaviors, but the same association was not found for male partners (Parent et al., 2014). Yu et al. (2010) found that the parent–adult child relationship of married mothers was more vulnerable to marital conflict than that of fathers or of divorced mothers.

These studies have revealed the complexity of family dynamics and the interdependence of family subsystems and have also left much space for future research. The overall extent of support for the father vulnerability hypothesis would be clearer if researchers explicitly tested differences in associations between interparental relationships and fathering versus mothering, rather than assuming that a significant association for fathers and a nonsignificant association for mothers is strong evidence of greater father vulnerability. It also may not simply be the case that fathering is more vulnerable to the family context than mothering. There are many potential factors that moderate the effects of interparental relationships on fathering. Besides investigating differences between mothers and fathers, future research could also investigate within-group variability among fathers in their vulnerability to the family context and identify factors that could buffer the

adverse impact of negative interparental relationships on fathering.

Moreover, 'vulnerability' is not necessarily universally negative. Consistent with the differential susceptibility hypothesis, some studies found that fathers with certain personality traits were more susceptible to the effects of the family system, for better and for worse (Jessee et al., 2010; Slagt et al., 2015). For example, a study of parents of adolescents showed that, compared to parents low on openness (i.e., low flexibility and receptivity to new information and experiences), parents high on openness provided children with more support if they received high support from children, and they offered children less support if they received low support from children (Slagt et al., 2015). Similarly, Jessee et al. (2010) also found that, for fathers of infants high on the personality construct of constraint (i.e., highly conventional, inflexible), their parenting stress was more susceptible to the effects of marital relationship quality for better and for worse. Future research could further explore what aspects of fathering and what kinds of fathers are more susceptible to the impact of the family system and use this information to develop more individualized intervention strategies based on parents' characteristics and susceptibility. It will also be important to examine whether differences in fathers' and mothers' vulnerability exist across different populations and people with different gender ideologies.

In addition to focusing on the general associations between interparental relationship quality and fathering, future research could also investigate the more immediate effects of interparental interactions (e.g., delightful event in marital relationship, marital conflict, co-parenting support, and undermining) on fathering and father–child interactions (see, for example, Kouros et al., 2014), and examine whether fathering is also more vulnerable than mothering at the micro-level. A diary study by McDaniel et al. (2018) showed that daily couple relationship quality contributed to fluctuations in both fathers' and mothers' daily feelings about co-parenting. A better understanding of how these processes unfold on a day-to-day or even minute-by-minute

basis would not only contribute important knowledge toward a greater understanding of family systems but could also inform prevention and intervention programs for couples and families.

Parent–Child Relationships and Fathering

Interdependence of Parent–Child Relationships

As discussed previously, Cabrera et al.'s (2014) expanded model of father involvement details a variety of factors that can affect fathers' parenting. Thus far, we have focused on the marital and co-parenting relationships and their effects on fathers' parenting. However, the parenting on the part of the mother or father can affect the other parent in ways that do not necessarily depend on the relationship between the mother and father. One parent may model the behaviors of the other parent in their own parenting (Barnett et al., 2008). Alternatively, the thoughts and feelings of one parent may influence the other parent through emotional contagion (Murdock et al., 2014). Positivity or negativity in one parent–child dyad may influence the other parent–child dyad, processes that could be particularly important in early infancy as parenting patterns are being established (Bell et al., 2007).

Among the first studies that examined the potential interdependence of mothers' and fathers' parenting comes from Barnett et al. (2008), who found that negative parenting, characterized by negative regard and intrusiveness, in one parent–child dyad was positively associated with negative parenting in the other dyad when children were 6 months of age. The authors noted that this finding is unfortunate in that negative parenting is likely to be consistent between parents, minimizing the chance for positive parenting from one parent to buffer the negative parenting of the other parent. Subsequent studies have found that interdependence between parent–child dyads goes beyond negative parenting. Zhang and Chen (2010) found that for parents of children 2–3 years of age, greater mother–child

closeness was negatively associated with father–child conflict 9 months later, whereas higher father–child conflict was positively associated with mother–child conflict 9 months later. Murdock et al. (2014) found that among parents of 3- to 5-year-old children, mothers' and fathers' negative affect were positively associated, as well as their positive affect. They also found crossover effects between mothers' and fathers' harsh parenting behavior, as well as their supportive parenting behavior.

Interdependence between parent–child relationships may extend to physiological regulation, as Blandon (2015) found that fathers' respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), a measure of physiological regulation, with higher values indicating better regulation, was positively associated with their own and mothers' supportive parenting of children's negative emotions when children were 2- to 5-years-old. Interestingly, Blandon (2015) also reported that there was a positive association between mothers' RSA and fathers' negative parenting. This may indicate that mothers with high RSA are well equipped to handle children's negative emotions and take on most of the responsibilities in doing so, leaving fathers ill-equipped when dealing with these situations. Newland et al. (2015) found that there is a significant crossover effect in which higher maternal hostility when children were age 4 predicted less dyadic pleasure in the father–child relationship when children were age 5. No such crossover effect was observed between paternal hostility and the mother–child relationship, which could lend further credence to the father vulnerability hypothesis regarding parent–child dyad interdependence. Finally, there is evidence that interdependence between parent–child dyads continues as children grow older, as shown in a longitudinal study by Scott et al. (2018). This study followed families from the time when children were 54 months old to fifth grade. They found that, at all time points, fathers' and mothers' sensitive parenting, characterized by respect for autonomy, positive emotional responsiveness, and encouragement, predicted changes in the other parent's sensitive parenting.

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that the father–child and mother–child relationships are often interdependent, and this holds for both positive and negative parenting behaviors. Furthermore, in some cases, fathers appear more influenced by the mother–child dyad than mothers are by the father–child dyad, supporting the father vulnerability hypothesis. Thus, the literature indicates that fathers’ parenting in the context of the family system is interdependent with the mother–child dyadic relationship, in addition to its relations with interparental relationships. Future research should further investigate the potential crossover of different facets of parenting and potentially find ways of preventing the crossover of negative parenting behaviors between parents using interventions.

Reciprocal Relations Between Fathers and Children

Although fathers’ parenting is greatly affected by mothers, it is also important to consider the effects of children on fathers’ parenting. Cabrera et al.’s (2014) expanded model of fathering illustrates a bidirectional relationship between fathers’ parenting and children’s characteristics, with children’s characteristics influencing parenting behaviors as fathers’ parenting behaviors affect children’s development. This is consistent with transactional models (Sameroff, 1975), which state that child development is the result of constant back-and-forth interactions between a child and the environment they are raised in, of which parents are a prominent element. Indeed, many studies have observed varying effects of children’s characteristics on fathers’ parenting.

One child characteristic that may affect fathers’ parenting is gender, although these findings are not always consistent between studies. Manlove and Vernon-Feagans (2002), as well as Leavell et al. (2012), reported that fathers are more involved and engaged with sons than with daughters. However, Cole et al. (2020) reported the opposite pattern—that fathers exhibited higher engagement as well as higher indirect care and less frustration with infant daughters than

infant sons. Child gender is not limited to affecting the quantity of fathers’ involvement, however, as Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2006) found that while mothers and fathers were equally sensitive to their 1-year-old sons, fathers were less sensitive than mothers to daughters. Differential effects of child gender have even been found on fathers’ internalizing problems, as Andreas et al. (2018) found that daughters’ internalizing symptoms at 7 years of age predicted depressive symptoms for fathers 1 year later, whereas the same association was not observed for sons’ internalizing symptoms.

Child gender may not only directly affect fathering, however, as research has also found differential effects of fathers’ parenting on child development for girls and boys. Regarding the effects of fathers’ parenting quality, Hertz et al. (2019) found that while higher father’ parenting quality was associated with better executive functioning for both sons and daughters, the association was much stronger for sons at 18 months. With respect to other outcomes, fathers’ parenting has been found to benefit daughters to a greater degree than sons, as seems to be the case with social competence. Corwyn and Bradley (2016) found that fathers’ autonomy support was positively associated with daughters’ self-control, resistance to peer pressure, and responsible behavior at age 16, while no significant associations were found between fathers’ autonomy support and sons’ measures of social competence.

Other characteristics besides child gender that can affect the parent–child relationship include children’s temperament and behaviors, although findings for the roles of these characteristics in the father–child relationship and fathers’ parenting behavior are similarly mixed. Temperament is a general term for how an individual typically reacts to different situations and regulates these reactions, and includes factors such as positive and negative affect, activity level, approach vs. withdrawal, and adaptability (Putnam et al., 2002). Early studies such as Volling and Belsky (1991) found that difficult infant temperaments characterized by fussiness, dullness, unpredictability, and inadaptability were negatively associ-

ated with fathers' responsiveness and affection. A subsequent study by McBride et al. (2002) yielded similar results, in that fathers of emotionally intense children experienced more parenting stress, and fathers were also less involved with less sociable children. However, these findings were only found amongst father–daughter dyads; there were no such associations for father–son dyads.

Not all studies have been consistent in indicating that children with more difficult temperaments elicit less involvement and less positive parenting behavior from fathers, however. Goldberg et al. (2002) found that fathers engaged more with infants that were higher in negative emotionality, although this study also found that fathers were less affectionate with children who were higher in negative emotionality. Padilla and Ryan (2019) reported similar findings, with fathers engaging more with their infants when infants were high in negative emotionality. However, they also found that there was a positive association between fathers' negative interactions, such as negative regard and intrusiveness, and children's negative emotionality. An explanation for these inconsistent and often contradictory findings may come from a recent study by Altenburger and Schoppe-Sullivan (2020), who reported no significant associations between fathers' parenting quality and infants' negative emotionality or regulatory capacity. They suggest that these nonsignificant findings may be due to their sample being low-risk and nonclinical, whereas a study that included families with fewer resources or children with higher negative emotionality may have yielded different results.

The reviewed literature indicates that children's characteristics affect fathers' parenting and the father–child relationship just as fathers' parenting affects children's development. However, the results of studies that have examined this topic are often inconsistent, with different studies finding seemingly contradictory results. There is a clear need for future research on the reciprocal effects of fathers and children on one another, which may be able to clarify some of these contradictory findings. Additionally, the effects of children's characteris-

tics on fathers' parenting must be heavily considered when designing interventions focused on enhancing fathers' engagement and parenting quality.

Implications

Family systems theories and the research based on them have the potential to be of use in informing public policy and interventions involving fathers. When making decisions that can have far-reaching ramifications for both fathers and their children, it is not only important to consider how fathers are affected as individuals but also how the family system as a whole and subsystem relationships are impacted. Failure to consider these ramifications could lead to decreased efficacy of policy changes or interventions or even worsening of family systems functioning and fathers' parenting prospects. Although there have been some attempts to expand support for parents, there is much more that could be done, especially for fathers (Teti et al., 2017). Two areas that may benefit from family systems theories and the research these perspectives have inspired are programs that aim to support new fathers and public policy regarding parental leave.

Parenting Programs for New Fathers

The transition to parenthood is a crucial time for parents, as it is during this time that patterns of parenting are being established for mothers and fathers (Bell et al., 2007). To this end, intervention programs meant to assist fathers in the transition to parenthood or increase fathers' parental engagement may be extremely helpful. Thus far, there have been a variety of attempts to design interventions that can accomplish these goals. One type of program that was designed to increase parental engagement is Head Start—early childhood programs meant to foster parental engagement to improve child outcomes among at-risk families. Most fathers that are part of Head Start programs, even nonresident fathers,

are involved with their 2-year-old children and engage in a wide variety of caregiving behaviors (Cabrera et al., 2004). However, fathers who were married or had an otherwise positive relationship with their child's mother reported higher engagement with their children than those who did not have a strong relationship with their child's mother, which supports the notion that the mother–father relationship can have important effects on the behavior of the father within the father-child dyad.

Interventions that target new parents and aim to improve family relationships, such as couple and co-parenting relationships, have also been implemented. Family Foundations is one such intervention, which consists of a series of classes before and after the birth of a family's first child (Feinberg et al., 2010). Follow-up studies conducted up to 3 years after the implementation of the program found significant improvements in parenting stress, parenting self-efficacy, co-parenting, harsh parenting, and children's emotional adjustment. Figuring it Out for the Child is an intervention curriculum that aims to inform unmarried parents about the benefits of positive co-parenting for children's development, as well as to develop the mother-father relationship and skills such as communication and problem-solving (McHale et al., 2015). Assessments indicated that most families who took part in this intervention saw improvements in constructs of interest, including mother–father communication and co-parenting (McHale et al., 2015). Finally, Supporting Father Involvement is an intervention meant to increase father involvement and improve the co-parenting relationship between fathers and their partners (Pruett et al., 2019). Implementation of the intervention reduced couple conflict, reduced harsh parenting, and led to generally better child outcomes (Pruett et al., 2019).

Thus far, intervention programs have proven effective in improving family relations, especially the couple and co-parenting relationships between fathers and mothers. Future interventions may want to move beyond the mother–father dynamic and focus on the improvement of multiple family subsystems. Strengthening the two parent-child dyads as well as the couple and

co-parenting relationships may improve fathers' parenting by giving the father a strong model in the mother–child relationship in addition to fostering cooperation with the mother. Thus, it may be of use to practitioners who work with children or families to consider ways to intervene in multiple family subsystems simultaneously to achieve stronger and potentially longer-lasting positive changes.

Parental Leave Policies

As stated above, the transition to parenthood is an important time for parents to establish their routines as a family (Bell et al., 2007). It is therefore worth considering the establishment of parental leave policies for fathers, as doing so may help promote higher paternal involvement with children. Seward et al. (2006) found that fathers who utilized parental leave were more likely to share childcare tasks with mothers than those who did not utilize leave, although there were no differences in time spent on childcare. Similar results were found by Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007), who found that fathers who made use of parental leave or worked shorter hours were more involved in childcare. There is also evidence that paternal leave allows fathers to develop their co-parenting relationship with their partner and eases some of the burden of childcare on mothers. For example, Petts and Knoester (2020) reported that the length of time fathers took off from work after the birth of their child was positively associated with couple and co-parenting relationship quality 1 year after birth. This improvement extended for up to 5 years after the birth of the child.

Given the evidence that parental leave can improve fathers' relationships with their co-parenting partners as well as boost their involvement with their children, parental leave for fathers has the potential to improve various relationships within families. Therefore, the implementation of policies regarding paternal leave should be considered to facilitate positive outcomes for families. However, policies must be carefully considered, as the effects of policy changes can be inconsistent. For example, the

implementation of two mandatory “daddy months” of parental leave in Germany did not lead to an increase in fathers’ time devoted to childcare (Kluve & Tamm, 2013). The lack of change may indicate that other factors, such as societal expectations of fathers’ parenting, may matter more than the amount of time fathers have available outside of paid work. However, the amount of parental leave days taken as part of a government-mandated policy in Sweden was shown to have a positive association with fathers’ participation in childcare (Haas & Hwang, 2008). Again, cultural attitudes around gender roles may influence the effects of parental leave policy, as Sweden’s parental leave policy was designed specifically to promote gender equality (Haas & Hwang, 2008). It is important to consider not only fathers but also mothers when implementing parental leave, as a study of couples in Italy found that mothers often take a primary role in the decision-making process regarding fathers’ use of parental leave (Cannito, 2020).

As research and practice with fathers continues to expand, the benefits offered by adopting a family systems perspective are significant. Considering fathers not in isolation but in the context of reciprocal, transactional relationships and interactions with others in their family systems will foster a deeper understanding of fathers, children, and families and position practitioners to intervene more effectively.

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