

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Father's Role in Parenting: a Comparison of Different Cultures and Psychological Perspectives

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Abstract: **Background:** Despite the increasing attention to the role of the father and its importance in child development, little research has been done in this area compared to the mother's role. **Methods:** In this article, the father's role in child development was systematically reviewed from the perspective of different theoretical approaches as well as different cultures. **Results:** The findings showed that the role of men as fathers is changing and evolving from a mere breadwinner to a supporter. Most new generation fathers seek to participate in their children's lives and are more caregiving and emotionally responsive than the previous generation. Fathers have a unique role in raising children, which is different from the mothers' role. The role of the father varies under the influence of culture and social structure. In Asia economic problems have changed the clear definition of the role of father. In the Middle East, Islamic beliefs determine the role of the father as the head of the family. In Europe, the role of the father as a participant and responsible person is improving. The modernization of society in Africa has complicated gaining a coherent and clear image of the father's role for children. In North American countries, parents play an almost equal role in raising children. Expectations from fathers are vague in South America, but these expectations seem to be changing more rapidly. **Conclusion:** Studies confirm the important role of fathers in parenting from different psychological approaches and the change in men's definition of fatherhood. However, the father's roles are different in different cultural and social contexts.

Keywords: Father; Fatherhood; father's role; Parenting

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1. Introduction

"I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection" (1). Despite the increasing attention to the father's role and existing evidence on its important in child development, research on this role is still scarce compared to the mother's role. The role of men as fathers is changing. This remarkable change in the perception of the father's role has created a new identity that differs from the role of men as fathers in previous generations; an identity in which fathers are more nurturing, kinder, and emotion-

ally responsive than previous generations. Most new generation fathers want to participate in their children's lives (2). Men today try to balance their role at work with their role as fathers in the family structure. Since the role of the father is influenced by culture and social structure, understanding how men behave as fathers, which is in turn influenced by intrinsic motivations and experiences, is important in family health and child behavior.

Phares (1996) noted the irony of commonly being asked to define "father" in her research writing and presentations, although never being asked to define "mother." It appears that the role of the mother is assumed to be filled by the primary caretaking biological mother for most children, whereas the role of the father might be filled by any number of male individuals, such as the biological father (who may or may not live with the child), the stepfather (who may or may not

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live with the child), or a father-figure (such as the mother's boyfriend, an uncle, or a grandfather-any of whom may or may not live with the child). Thus, the question is a legitimate one, but it also conveys a lack of consensus about how to define fathers currently (3). For the purposes of this article, we broadened our focus from biological fathers to include step-fathers, resident and non-resident bio-fathers and adoptive fathers.

Freud demonstrated the importance of the father's role in the drive theory with the concept of the Oedipus complex (the phallic stage); thus, before the age of four, the mother, as the only source of nutrition and care, has an exclusive relationship with the child, and the father has no share in the child's development up to this age (4). Freud's account of the Oedipus complex in men is such that in fact the father is both present and absent in the pre-oedipal realm; A contradiction that has never been elaborated or resolved in his works (5). The father appears in various roles in Freud's writings, especially in the phallic stage: early object of love and identification (6), object of envy (7), a protector (1), and castrating authority (8). Although there were no specific sources until 1956 to show the importance of the father in the child's mental development, Jacques Lacan introduced the new concept of "name-of-the-father". According to Lacan, the father should manage his paternal role for the healthy mental development of the child, and the mother should consider her husband's words as the bearer of moral rules that he conveys to the child through his words, and it is only in such a condition that the child can refer to the name-of-the-father and be integrated on a symbolic level. If the child does not accept the law of the parent or does not consider it the function of the father, in this regard, the dualistic relationship remains at the imaginary level and will not be able to reach the symbolic level (9). Kohat (10) in his "theory of the self" emphasized on understanding the inner psychological world of the individual. This inner world includes feelings, thoughts, dreams, and desires that can be understood by the individual through the process of inner contemplation and by others through empathy. Internal contemplation, instead of other people, is a human capacity for empathy and allows the father to have a deep understanding of the child's inner world. Self-psychology explains how parents can shape and influence a child's self-esteem and identity through empathetic responses; thus, a father who is more empathetic is likely to better understand the child's inner emotional world (11). Men with higher self-esteem have much better relationships with their fathers than men with lower self-esteem. These men also consider their father to be emotionally accessible, highly perceptive, easy-going, and encouraging (12).

The "school of object relations" also dealt exclusively with mother-infant relations, and it is only for a short time that the father has been introduced as the "second subject" who

can be with the baby when the relationship with the mother is in trouble (9). In Klein's object relations theory, the internal father is both an object of rivalry and of desire; However, Klein did not talk clearly about the infant's separate relationship with the father (13). According to Klein, both good and bad aspects of self are separated as love and hate, and are projected first on the mother and later on the father (14). Unlike Freud, Klein believed that the father was not the first internalized subject and that the mother was the first internalized subject; this internalization occurs before the phallic stage (15). In the article "the capacity to be alone", Winnicott stated that when the baby is in the stage of absolute dependence on the mother, the father is not known to him (16). Although he added that the father will be seen later, his emphasis was still on the quality and manner of parenting rather than the father himself (17); Thus, the role of the father in the pre-oedipal period was to support the mother-child relationship to provide a safe environment for the mother so that she, in turn, could create a facilitating environment for the child (18).

In the theory of individuation and separation, Mahler considers the father as an important and effective figure who helps the child in the process of separation from the mother. Mahler's work was the beginning of research into the role of the father in early triangulation, when the child, at about 18 months of age, at least noticed the presence of both parents (19, 20). In the rapprochement stage, the father appears as a stable image (19) and becomes an important figure (21) and not a secondary subject. Although the mother is usually the first person with whom the infant is attached, the attachment theory moves the father from a supportive role to a new position so that he can provide a secure foundation for the child as a major attachment figure (22). The theory of attachment suggested that the infant can develop a secure attachment in addition to the father and siblings as well (not only the mother), and this attachment is an important developmental milestone in the early years (22). Increasingly, the father is seen as an alternative face of attachment and a bridge to the outside world (22, 23); therefore, the father's role as a face of secondary attachment is also important (22). Although secure attachment of the child to the mother in the early years leads to optimal emotional health, secure attachment to the father also enhances growth (24). Bowlby later defines a more active role for the father, when he intervenes to have a relationship with the child and reinforces a healthy separation. The father does this knowing that the child can return to the safe base he built with the mother (25, 26). However, while there is attachment to both parents, the infant prefers the mother when there is anxiety or confusion (25, 27).

Behaviors related to the role of the father are constantly redefined because men are constantly balancing external expectations (the workplace) with internal structures (their per-

ception of being a father) (28). The role of men in the family is changing and a new identity of men is emerging that redefines the role that men play in the family (29). Most fathers today tend to be involved in their children's lives (30). The concept of fatherhood is changing; the perception of the role of the father has changed from a purely breadwinner perspective to a foster, participatory and active father who has more feelings and understanding (31). Essays on the role of fatherhood are increasingly indicating the need for a theory to guide research in this area (32). The motivation for more and more research on the father, especially about its origins and consequences, has been to increase awareness of the potential importance of the father in the child's development since the 1980s (33). Many studies examined the amount of time fathers spend with their children and the type of involvement and related activities during this time (34).

1.1. The parental involvement construct

Lam et al. (35) proposed the parental involvement construct, which has three components: engagement (direct interaction with the child in the form of care, play or other activities), accessibility (for the child), and responsibility (ensuring that the child is cared for is different from caring for the child, as well as providing resources for the child). In formulating the structure of engagement and its components, Lam et al. (35) drew attention to aspects of fatherhood that had not previously been identified in research on the role of the father, but which now appear to be reflected in social change of this role. The engagement component focuses on how much time a father actually spends interacting or working together with his or her child, and is actually in response to concerns about whether the father is active enough. The accessibility component is the amount of time the father is busy but does not engage with the child and the child is only beside the father; In other words, the father is next to the child in terms of duty (36). The component of responsibility refers to the father's assurance of adequate care of the child and also includes such things as hiring a babysitter, referring to a pediatrician and determining when to prepare new clothes, feeding the child, etc. (35). Of course, the activities assessed by these phrases often require direct interaction with the child (37); thus, the evaluation of the responsibility component is intertwined with the engagement component.

1.2. Revised concept of father involvement

Instead of spending more time with the child, Pleck showed that researchers emphasize on positive engagement, and evaluate it by the frequency of certain types of interactions, such as play and reading, that are likely to promote growth, and they are often combined with items such as intimacy and sensitivity and examined qualitatively. Because many recent studies measure involvements as intimacy/response

and control (concepts that have been used for a long time in parenting research), the structure of engagement includes these concepts in practice (38).

Pleck (39) introduced a revised construct of father involvement that includes three basic components: positive engagement activities, warmth and responsiveness, and control and the two components of indirect material and social care, and responsibility process. In fact, in the revised formula, the component of responsibility includes two complementary dimensions: indirect material and social care (activities that parents do for the sake of the child and not with his / her participation), as well as the responsibility process (which is the father's assurance of the provision of the previous four components: positive engagement, warmth, control, and indirect care). Indirect social care involves strengthening the child's relationships with peers and thus the process of interactive intimacy. Indirect social care also includes behaviors that provide social capital, such as sharing adult social networks and knowledge with the child, as well as defending their children.

The responsibility process is derived from the concept of "executive function" of the family in the family process theory; Intra-family dynamism that ensures that family responsibilities are performed and family norms are followed. The process of accountability refers to the father's oversight of whether the child's needs are met in the four basic components of involvement (positive interaction activities, intimacy / response, control, and indirect material and social care) and, if not met, taking action to ensure that they are met. (35). The reason for the revision of the original structure was that the initial findings showed that when fathers spend with children is not directly related to the positive consequences of children (38); In contrast, many studies designed with these three components (positive engagement activities, warmth and responsiveness, and control) have shown the direct impact of father involvement on the positive outcomes of children and adolescents (39).

1.3. Sources of father involvement

Lam et al. (35) proposed a four-factor model for father involvement demands as follows: motivation, skills and confidence, social support (especially from the mother of the child), and lack of organizational barriers (especially in the workplace). Motivation refers to the father's attitude towards participation in parenting. A more favorable attitude is associated with more engagement, warmth and control.

2. Methods

This study is a review on the importance of the father's role in parenting from different psychological perspectives and systematically examines the change in men's definition of fa-



therhood and identity as a father. Changing patterns of partnering and child-bearing have created a new landscape of relationships and paternal roles, so we broadened our focus from biological fathers to include step-fathers, resident and non-resident bio-fathers and adoptive fathers. In order to obtain the studies, a search was performed using every major social science research database to find studies examining the unique impact of fathering which published between 2000 and 2021. So Persian and English articles indexed in scientific databases such as Science Direct, Scopus, Google Scholar, ISC, SID, etc. were used. The search terms included fathering, fatherhood, father involvement, paternal, child-rearing, and several other terms and all of their combinations. It needed to examine the unique role of fathers in a way that could be conceptually distinguished from other primary variables under consideration. Inclusion criteria were applied to narrow the studies to those relevant to our specific research. Articles targeted for the current review fulfilled the following requirements: published studies; Books, book chapters, literature reviews, and qualitative and quantitative works; studies included a measure of direct father role as the independent variable. In order to remove articles that were clearly not relevant to the purposes of this study, we applied exclusion criteria. First, all duplicate citations were eliminated, Second, reports in which fathers might have been a topic of discussion, or mentioned in the title, but were not studied in any way were eliminated. No dissertation researches were included and just published studies were used. After we sorted the articles based upon the exclusion and inclusion criteria described previously, about 100 articles and books on the role of the father in parenting and children's development in different cultures and from different theoretical perspectives were reviewed. Finally, after eliminating duplicate results, the main results of 85 latest articles, which addressed the relationship under study, in two general sections (psychological and cultural approaches and geographical origin) were presented.

3. Results

In the last three decades, attention to the role of the father in the development of children and understanding of the father-child relationship has increased (40); As a result, our understanding of the important concept of fatherhood has changed over time (41). The role of parents in raising children is not the same and their performance does not completely overlap (42). Fathers have a unique role in the upbringing of children, which is different from the role of mothers (42, 43) and is associated with positive social, educational, and psychological consequences (44). Fathers focus more on preparing children for life ahead than mothers (45-47) and have a better understanding of children's long-term patterns of be-

havior than mothers (46-48). Moreover, although mothers are more inclined to emotionally support their children than fathers (45-47), in critical situations, fathers' emotional support is beneficial to their children (42, 49, 50). Children who have a warm, emotionally responsive father are less likely to have impulsive emotional reactions (51), are less prone to depression (52) and anxiety disorders (53). However, the father's behaviors and roles are different in different cultural and social contexts (54, 55). Cultures are generally within a particular region because they share a particular history. Cultures also are geographical neighbors and share a long history of interaction and therefore in this article we study the role of father in culture based on Geographical areas.

3.1. Asia

In Asia, most research on fathers has been conducted in three East Asian countries, China, Korea, and Japan. In East Asia, economic problems have changed the clear definition of the role of father and mother, and the division of responsibilities has become ambiguous. Cultural similarities show that the nuclear family has become smaller and the divorce rate has increased, both of which are related to the role of the father. The Japanese traditionally had an ideal and majestic image of the father (40), but this image has become softer over the course of two generations; For example, in a national study to examine the image of the father with data from fathers, mothers and children aged 12-18 years, the results showed that common descriptions of fathers by men were reliable but stubborn, low communication, wise, and kind. While data from children showed that they described their fathers as more understanding and kind, and mentioned low communication with the father less than the men had mentioned (56). The fathers of preschool children also describe their father's role in the family as breadwinner, supporting the child to enter the community, supporting the family, the decision-maker, supporting the spouse in caring for the children and doing household chores, and supporting the mother-child relationship (57). The amount of time that Japanese fathers spend caring for their children over the age of 5 is almost half that of the mother (58).

In China, the father plays the role of the second parent; Middle school students have a stronger relationship with the mother than the father (59) and elementary school children have higher levels of secure attachment to the mother than the father (60). Shanghai fathers, regardless of their economic status, have ambitious aspirations for their daughters and value their daughter's education. In addition, the fathers' definition of success has changed from marrying a good spouse to academic achievement. There is also a good emotional relationship between these fathers and daughters (61). Chinese fathers are much less influential in raising their school children than mothers (56).

The concept of paternity in Korea seems to have changed less than in Japan and China, emphasizing the role of breadwinners and supporting mother's activities rather than participating in children's daily activities (56). In Korea, teenagers consider their father to be a mature person who loves his children, consults and advises them, is family-friendly, and has financial authority (62). The division of labor in Korean families in such a way that the father is the financier and the mother is the housewife which causes the father to be absent from the family (63) and especially his absence in their child's adolescence period (56).

Indian fathers distance themselves from their children, are bored with their children, and refrain from expressing open feelings in order to maintain their authority. Of course, globalization and relocation to urban areas have changed the expectations of fathers and has made them become closer to their children (64). In the Middle East, Islamic beliefs are the main source of fatherhood, and the father is the head of the Muslim family (65), and most Arab fathers and mothers lack the necessary parenting skills (66). Australian fathers have been largely neglected (67) and, as in most large countries, the absence of a father is a serious problem (40).

In Iran, the role of the father in the family is more complementary to the role of the mother. The family is described as a garden whose mother is the gardener and the father is the guardian. Thus, the role of the father becomes indirectly important through the creation of marital satisfaction. The father is obliged to help raise a healthy child in the shadow of the mother's love by creating a feeling of satisfaction and vitality in the mother and providing a safe environment for the family (68). In many teachings in this regard, according to Islamic beliefs and texts, the father's responsibility is to observe fairness and kindness and treat the mother well, which ultimately leads to the formation of a family based on love, compassion and mercy. Children in this family have healthy physical, mental, social, and spiritual development (68). Research findings in this regard generally focus on the impact of parent-child relationship or family parenting typology (combination of parent-child parenting style) on children (69-72). Quantitative research has examined the role of the father in parenting and its impact on children in the form of cross-sectional studies (72); For example, the conflict resolution method based on the father's physical aggression and the father's verbal aggression predicts the adolescent's self-esteem inversely. Overall, it has been shown that the father's use of destructive strategies has negative effects on adolescents' self-esteem and reasoning-based strategies have positive effects on psychological adjustment indices (72).

3.2. Europe

In Europe, the focus of politics is on the amount and quality of time fathers spend with their children; In Europe, more

than half (57%) of the full-time fathers feel that they do not spend enough time with their 9-11 month-old children (73). From 1965 to 2003, the average time fathers spent caring for their children, doing basic household chores, and doing unusual household chores increased from 100 minutes per day to 150 minutes (74). This trend of increasing time spent for children is more in men with higher education and (75). In Europe, the concept of the father is evolving from the perspective of the participant who is responsible for all aspects of the child's life (emotional, social, educational and economic) (76). In Europe, fathers who are deeply attached to their baby are more involved in his development (77).

3.3. Africa

In Africa, children have traditionally been educated alongside their parents and in their social context through the daily activities and interactions of parents and prepared to form their own identity and acceptance of their role in society (78), but research has shown that the roles of the father, mother and children are changing (79, 80) and with the modernization of society, it has become difficult for children to form a coherent image of parents, especially fathers (78). Fathers are far away from their children as a result of difficult economic conditions (81), while research has shown that when the father spends time children and the family, it has many benefits (80).

3.4. America

In North American countries, such as the United States and Canada, fathers and mothers have an almost equal share in raising children, and even a number of fathers are primary caregivers, and parents discuss the division of duties and responsibilities (82). High-income fathers are more likely to participate in parenting, while unemployed fathers are less likely to participate (83). In South American countries such as Chile and Brazil, expectations of fathers are vague, but these expectations seem to be changing more rapidly, especially among the younger generation (84).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the importance of the father's role in parenting and child development from different psychological approaches, and the change in men's definition of fatherhood and their identity as fathers. Different theories have different views on the importance of the role of the father in the development. Research has shown that behaviors related to the role of the father are constantly redefined. The role of men in the family is changing and a new identity of men is emerging. It is important for men to balance their perception of fatherhood with external expectations (of the workplace). Fathers have become more inclined to partic-



ipate in their children's lives, and the perception of the father's role has shifted from a purely breadwinner perspective to a supportive, involved, and active father who is more emotional and understanding. In the last three decades, attention to the role of the father in the development of children and understanding of the father-child relationship has increased. Fathers have a unique role to play in raising their children, which is distinct from the role of mothers and is associated with positive social, educational, and psychological consequences. However, the father's roles are different in different cultural and social contexts.

4.1. Suggestions and limitations

Despite the increasing attention to the father's role and existing evidence on its important in child development, research on this role is still scarce compared to the role of the mother and there are a few recent studies on the father's role and most literature is old. On the other hand, the role of men as fathers is changing and the father's behaviors and roles are different in different cultural and social contexts so more research on the cultural scope of fatherhood and its impact on children is warranted. We need larger prospective international studies, with greater ability to address causal inference.

5. Appendix

5.1. Acknowledgment

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5.2. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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5.4. Author's contributions

All the authors had the same contribution.

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