

An Ecological Approach to Understanding Father Involvement

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Abstract

This analysis addresses the perceived lack of father involvement using Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. Several factors are discussed in hopes of better understanding what promotes or hinders father development. Considerable attention is given to understanding the experiences of African American fathers and the systems that may be at work when it comes to their involvement and engagement with their children. An ecological model is important in this regard because, it takes into account a myriad of factors that other theories may not consider. Following a thorough summary of this ecological perspective, suggestions for further study and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Father Involvement, Ecological Perspective, Bioecological Model, African American Fathers

Despite trends and statistics regarding the number of children and adolescents living in one-parent versus two-parent "nuclear family" homes (see United States Census), fathers, whether in the home or not, play a fundamental role in their young and adolescent children's development and provide great opportunities for them as well (Roggman et al., 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2001). Their love (behaviorally defined as warm, nurturing, affectionate and comforting) and influence in their children's development are unique and distinct from that of a mother, according to reviews of the child development literature (Cabrera et al., 2000; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Furthermore, findings from Lamb's (2000) review, Marks and Palkovitz's (2004) analysis on fathering types, Adamsons, O'Brien, and Pasley's (2007) study utilizing data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care along with Lamb's (1976b) work on infants and Veneziano's (2003) work on cross-cultural contexts -- all suggest that there are a myriad of paternal behaviors and characteristics such as warmth, caring, providing emotional, physical and financial support that aid in the healthy and positive outcomes of children. On the other hand, the lack of these supportive or involved behaviors is predictive of negative outcomes in children, especially adolescents (Baumrind, 1991).

Though the aforementioned studies highlight active father involvement and their obvious benefits, there is still a significant gap in the research literature examining factors that either promote or hinder father's involvement. Of particular concern is the perception that fathers are not involved, contrary to what some of the research studies show.

This analysis aims to address the perceived lack of father involvement by drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. Specifically, the analysis aims to propose a model that may explain what and how factors may actually affect a father's role as a parent. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bioecological framework allows us to take into consideration the various systems and contexts that influences father involvement. A particular emphasis is given with regard to African American fathers in some of these contexts, as they are often studied from a deficit perspective and regarded as risk factors to their children's development.

2.1 An Ecological Perspective

A fair body of research has been conducted aimed at examining factors that either promotes or hinders father involvement. From the research, factors ranging from marital conflict to child difficulty have been associated with low father involvement (Harper & Fine, 2006; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006). However, what if these factors do not fully address why fathers are not involved or why it is perceived that fathers are not involved? What if there are alternative explanations regarding fathers in their parenting role? What if there are ethnic differences as it relates to fathers in their parenting roles? The proposed model in the current analysis includes the following variables: Personal characteristics (e.g. race, father's role, and father's identity), and contextual influences (e.g. family structure, court ordered support, and economic status) (see Figure 1).

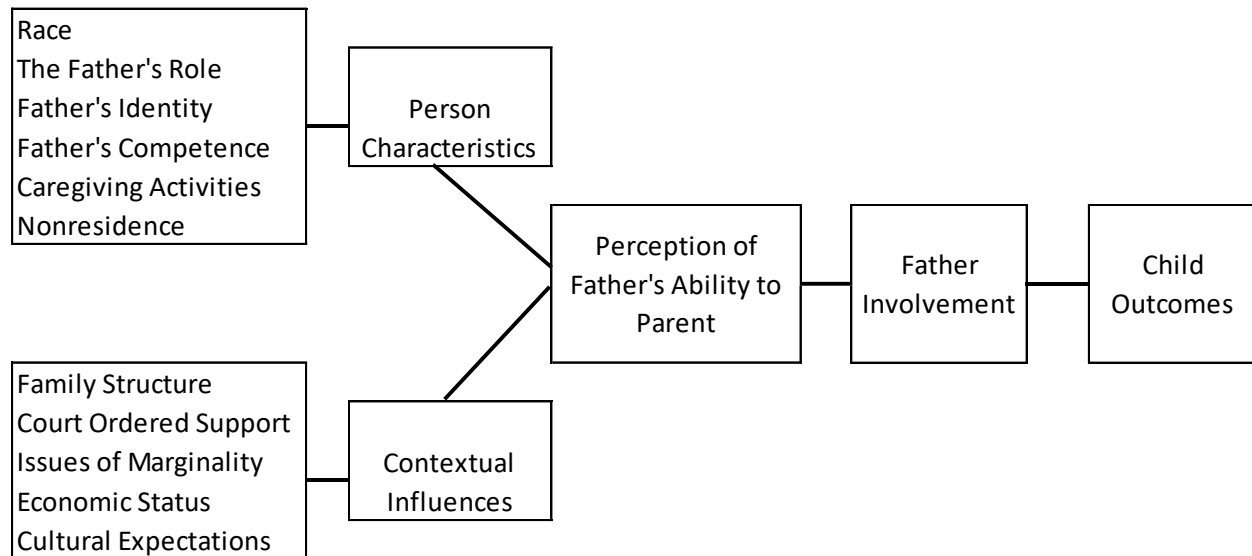


Figure 1. Proposed Ecological Model Examining Father's Role

To the extent that effective fathering and father involvement are essential for their own development in this role, it is important to gain a better understanding of what factors make a father either an involved or uninvolved parent. When looking at fathers and what makes them more or less involved with their children, it's important to go beyond immediate considerations (e.g., what mothers attribute to father's lack of involvement) and begin to look at the larger picture.

3.1 Personal Characteristics

Race. Research indicates that race plays a role in father involvement. However, much of the research on fatherhood and father involvement has focused heavily on the middle-class white father. As a result, few researchers have taken into consideration how race and ethnicity and factors related to race and ethnicity affects fathers, their roles and father involvement. An exception to this is the study conducted by Toth and Xu (1999). They found that African American fathers differ in many ways from Caucasian fathers. For instance, African American fathers spent more time teaching their children pride, loyalty, kinship, responsibility toward others and self-esteem within their culture and equipping them with the means to live in a racially biased society (Toth & Xu, 1999). Cazenave (1979) is also credited for being one of few researchers to conduct research on middle-class African American fathers, though he only focused on one aspect of fatherhood—providing financially. Further research is needed, however, focusing on the factors that are important for father involvement among African Americans, paying particular attention to the things that are unique about them, rather than trying to affix them to the standard Caucasian family model and comparing them to other groups.

The Father's Role. Research has found that a father's perception of his parenting role reaches beyond providing financially for his children (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006). Although breadwinning appears and remains to be a role that fathers identify with, especially for African American fathers, they perceive other duties to be important as well. In fact, men perceive their parenting roles to be more liberal and less traditional today than in the past (Cannito, 2019; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Fathers that were seen as more progressive, perceived their role to be one of collaboration and guidance, in addition to being the provider and setting good examples (Taylor & Behnke, 2005). How a father perceives his role appears to have important implications for the amount and type of involvement he has with his children.

Father Identity. As mothers typically bond and immediately begin the process of developing a maternal identity, this process is not as clear or immediate for fathers. Further, understanding the process through which a father establishes his sense of identity is an understudied area of research. Fathers identify themselves as that of a role model and provider, but also as a person who exhibits love, involvement, and is available to his children (Morman & Floyd, 2006). They perceive their role to be one where they are invested in their children (Minton & Pasley, 1996). However, fathers do also perceive their role to be more salient and important when they are satisfied and have higher levels of competence (Minton & Pasley, 1996). They have also identified that being there for their children, providing support and physical activities were among the most important in their role. While money matters were rarely mentioned, Summers et al. (2004) observed that fathers felt that money was also important to their role and identified money as either a barrier to parenting, i.e., needing more money to buy special things or as a resource (i.e., having it when they need it; Summers et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, conceptualizing fathers' roles from a perspective other than the father may compromise what is known about how fathers identify with their role. Consistently seeking out mothers as respondents in fathering research has often resulted in what Morman and Floyd (2006) refers to "privileging one member's perception over another" (p. 124). Though similarities exist, no research has been able to capture — from a mother's perspective — for example, the premium that some fathers place on the little things. More research is needed on fathers' perceptions regarding their own roles.

Father's Competence. Competent fathers are comfortable and effective in their roles. They desire to spend time with their children and are more motivated to spend time with their children (Fagan & Burnett, 2003; Lamb, 1986, 1997). They are able to recognize the qualities that make them stand out but are also able to seek support when needed (Dufour & Bouchard, 2003). In addition, confident fathers report having a more active role in their children's lives (Jacobs & Kelley, 2006). As a result, a feeling of competence, knowledge, skill and experience in the parenting role is associated with increased father involvement (Beitel & Parke, 1998; Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Doherty et al., 1998; Minton & Pasley, 1996); however, research also indicates that some fathers feel they lack these necessary skills. Incompetent fathers are not involved fathers and are ambivalent with regard to their parenting skills (Dufour & Bouchard, 2003).

It may be concluded that while inexperienced fathers may have feelings of incompetence, those feelings change with time and experience (Ferketich & Mercer, 1995). And based on this finding, it may be inferred that perceived lack of involvement is really a lack of competence that emanates from a lack of experience. However, as the father's child grows older, he becomes more competent in his role.

The findings thus far suggest that despite the numerous urgings for fathers to become more involved, level of role competence is an important component of father involvement.

Caregiving Activities. The types of caregiving activities fathers find important to their role are key for father involvement. Specifically, these roles include physical care (bathing, meal preparation, diaper changing, and feeding) and providing warmth, but not nurturing activities (like comforting child when upset), caregiving activities (like dressing the child or taking child on errands) or cognitively stimulating activities (like reading or singing) (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006).

Unlike Marsiglio et al. (2000) and Rane and McBride (2000) who asserts that nurturance and provision of care is essential in the father role, fathers themselves may see this as being less important than physical care or warmth. Further research is needed on the nuances and levels of caregiving that fathers find important.

Nonresident Fathers. There are a number of factors affecting a father's involvement with his children. Issues of residency becomes an even greater factor as, there are marked differences between a resident and nonresident father's involvement with their children. Plus, access to children appears to be a problem for many nonresident fathers due to several factors including, conflict with the mother, issues of child support, new unions, maternal gatekeeping or post-divorce conflict .

Children with nonresident fathers lack many of the benefits that children with resident fathers benefit from. Many opportunities for socializing, teaching and monitoring are lost between nonresident fathers and their children (King et al., 2004). In addition, nonresident children lack the available resources that their former resident father once afforded them. Opportunities to teach and inform are greatly diminished as visits with nonresident fathers are typically social in nature, consisting of playtime, short trips or dinner, rather than cognitively stimulating activities (Furstenberg & Winquist Nord, 1985). In addition, fathers are rarely privileged to make decisions concerning the child, even if they maintain contact with their children and have good relationships with the mother (Furstenberg & Winquist Nord, 1985).

In addition, nonresident fathers are typically linked to less involvement with their children, being irresponsible, having low income, not paying child support, and not able to provide the everyday care that resident fathers provide (Cabrera et al., 2004). Without frequent contact, nonresident fathers were least likely to make as many positive influences.

With about 60% of marriages ending in divorce, it becomes necessary to examine factors that hinder father involvement among nonresident fathers. It is essential that these factors are examined early and from a father's perspective because, as children grow into adolescents, the frequency of contact with nonresident fathers is lower than younger children's contact (King, 1994). However, nonresident fathers who maintain a positive and warm relationship aids in their child's well-being (Harper & Fine, 2006).

4.1 Contextual Influences

The Family Structure. The nuclear family of one man, one woman and their children does not necessarily or adequately describe the African American family (Peart et al., 2006). For instance, Cain and Combs-Orme (2005, c.f., Vereen, 2007) revealed in their study, the following composition; 36% of the participants lived alone, 23.9% lived with grandmothers, 25% were cohabiting and 14.5% were married. The African American family structure is indeed unique and does not always reflect a two-parent model (Vereen, 2007).

Historically, African American fathers have had fewer economic, political and social resources at their disposal. However, the large network of family support they have had has greatly and positively influenced their involvement with their children (Hamer, 1998). Hamer and Marchioro (2002) found that single custodial fathers often relied on family networks to relieve some of the pressures of parenting. The ties between an African American father and his family of origin is profound and is evidenced by the high levels of support given to him and his children (Rivara et al., 1987; c.f., Cochran, 1997). Therefore, as the research suggests, before any attempts are made at conceptualizing African American fathers and factors that affects their role and involvement, it is important to delineate the family structure from which they emerge.

Court Ordered Support. Child support is a key factor in a father's involvement with his child. Fathers who pay child support on a regular basis are more likely to have frequent contact with their children than fathers who don't pay child support (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Juby et al., 2007). For instance, fathers who paid child support in the Seltzer (1991) study, not only had frequent visits, but they were also privileged to the decision making. On the other hand, fathers are more likely to be blocked from visitation by the mother if child support isn't paid. Though this constitutes an action from the mother that has very little benefit to the child; from a developmental standpoint, the issue of child support is important because higher levels of support have been shown to be positively linked to scholastic competence and math and reading scores (King, 1994).

Marginality. The view that fathers are uninvolved have also generated another view that fathers are marginal or have marginal status. The varying circumstances leading to perceived and actual lack of involvement has lead fathers to be labeled as marginal dads. Men of color are especially likely to be labeled marginal. Marginal status refers to the perception that fathers have little contact with their children or contribute minimally to the child's development. By this definition, one may assume that marginal fathers include both resident and nonresident fathers and fathers of any race.

However, the issue of marginality typically arises around the subject of African American fathers and perceived lack of support (Weissbourd, 1999). The marginal status of African American fathers, then, is often sustained because of the negative stereotypes and characteristics thrust upon them. Little consideration has been given to economic, racial, social, and other societal barriers that hinder African American fathers' access to much needed resources (Hossain et al., 1997). However, Hamer (1998) points out that because fathers lack the resources to care for his child, doesn't equate to marginal status.

Economic Status. Indeed, African American fathers are defined in terms of their economic status and geography, (i.e., poor, absent and uninvolved). However, this view is severely inaccurate. Because of the overutilization of absent African American fathers and fathers with low socioeconomic status, it is assumed that all fathers are not involved. However, African American fathers are involved (Julian et al., 1994) and as Shears (2007) has found, are more involved with their children than Caucasian fathers, even though Caucasian fathers reported having more education and income than African American fathers. Houssain et al. (1997) also concluded that poor African American fathers are far from uninvolved with their children. They are responsible and emotionally attached to their children (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999) and invest noticeable time with their children. They subscribe to traditional views, which is why their role as provider is among the most important of their roles (Peart et al., 2006). Even though women entering the workforce have facilitated the sharing of financial obligations, African American fathers continue to see the role of provider as key to his role.

Cultural Expectations: Effects of Father Socialization. African American fathers do differ in many ways from Caucasian fathers, especially in how they socialize and prepare their children (Cooper et al., 2015). They are culturally predisposed to care for and raise children differently than their Caucasian counterparts. As stated previously, African American fathers spent more time teaching their children pride, loyalty, kinship, responsibility toward others and self-esteem within their culture and equipping them with the means to live in a racially biased society. This is, in large part, due to the various acts of discrimination and barriers that their children will face (Toth & Xu, 1999). African American fathers are also highly protective of their children (Cooper et al., 2014; Toth & Xu, 1999). Exposure to violence (neighborhood, media) also facilitates fathers teaching their children safety and survival skills. It should not be construed that fathers are more strict and controlling than they are protective and cautious (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2003).

This is poorly understood in science because of the groups of African American fathers typically examined in research—poor, uneducated and absent fathers. Rarely has an effort been made in research to sample middle-class African American fathers or Caucasian fathers with low socioeconomic status. Researchers should address this immediately so that a full view of fathers and their differences is obtained. Using one size fits all models doesn't accomplish the task. Therefore, the belief that there is a traditional standard or model of fathering, with Caucasian fathers as the benchmark, should be dismissed (Shears, 2007). More research examining a diverse group of African American fathers is needed to gain a better appreciation of these fathers (Cazenave, 1979).

Based on the research, it is clear that cultural differences and socioeconomic status affects father involvement. However, it is poor and biased sampling and a tendency to use inappropriate theories to explain the African American father (e.g., the deficit perspective and the matriarchy perspective; Cochran, 1997) that affects how others view African American fathers. This deeply underscores the need for research on father involvement utilizing large representative samples and parallel methods that examines differences across race, ethnicity and SES. Despite the claims of African American fathers, especially low-income African American fathers, not being an integral part of their children's lives, evidence from Gadsden, Wortham and Turner (2003) has suggested otherwise. Specifically, they observed that despite their obstacles, African American fathers have significant and nurturing bonds and the ability to negotiate when it comes to outlining roles and responsibilities in raising children. This continues beyond early childhood.

5.1 Summary

In order to appreciate the importance of fatherhood and father involvement, we need to define it appropriately (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Compared to research on mothers, there has not been a large enough focus on fathers in child development (Yeung et al., 2000). While there are many distinct and unique ways mothers and fathers are involved with their children (Marsiglio et al., 2000), a preponderance of research is geared more toward the mother's than father's involvement.

In addition, while fathers are involved in their children's lives in a number of ways, determining which of these ways holds the most importance remains unclear as, very little research has actively and directly involved fathers in answering these questions. Further, very little research focuses on the importance of individual, social and contextual factors that influences father involvement. This is in spite of the fact that research shows that father involvement has had long and lasting, direct and indirect effects on children's development (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Research has even found some components of father involvement to be more salient in predicting child outcomes than maternal involvement (Veneziano, 2003).

Consistent with Veneziano's (2003) research, Lamb (1976b) found that fathers are as important to child development as mothers and that children benefit from warm and close relationships with their fathers (Lamb, 1986) and that fathers provide great opportunities for their children's development (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen & Jones, 2004; Yeung, Duncan & Hill, 2000).

Roggman and his colleagues (2004) have also noted the positive influence that fathers have in their children's lives as well. They found that when fathers and their children engage each other in complex play, the children have better cognitive, emotional development and language outcomes.

Studies indicate that the positive influences a father has on his children and that having healthy father-child relationships are essential for positive adjustment and well-being in children and adolescents (Brotherson et al., 2003). Yet, additional research is still needed that reassesses the role of fathers (via an unbiased approach) and takes into consideration the various systems and contexts that are at work that affects father involvement, in particular, how it incorporates or how we incorporate culture, race, and societal influences on father's involvement.

6.1 Discussion and Implications

The goal of this analysis was to use a bioecological framework to account for the various individual, contextual and social factors affecting father involvement. These are factors that other theories may neglect to take into account.

Studying father involvement from a bioecological perspective not only provides a greater understanding of how fathers are viewed and perceived but, it demonstrates that there are a myriad of factors affecting father involvement that are rarely considered, but deserves attention.

Bioecological theory sheds light on the limitations of other developmental theories, by taking into consideration that fathering is not a simplistic function but instead a complex function or system that is influenced by a number of factors. Where mothers and other stakeholders may attribute lack of father involvement with lack of interest or ability, the bioecological theory of development illustrates that there are much more complex environmental, social and cultural considerations at work shaping the experiences of fathers, which also shapes father involvement.

The current analysis establishes, for example, that a strong family network is responsible for influencing father involvement. Therefore, it can be inferred that criticism and conflict - attributions of the mothers - only facilitates the breakdown of the family and thus hinders father involvement, as fathers may be less likely to engage in fathering activities.

Person Characteristics. Race, father's role, identity, competence, residency, and caregiving activities were all characteristics within the bioecological framework that affected father involvement. Issues of race have a bearing on how fathers parent. Where others perceive African American fathers as not involved (by their standards of what involved is), African American fathers teach their children coping and surviving skills in a racially biased society (Toth & Xu, 1999) – fathering skills that are perhaps not necessary in other ethnic groups. Other determinants affecting African American fathers included economics, geography, race, and sociohistorical factors. With regard to father's role and identity, these also played a major role in father involvement. In their own words, fathers' perceptions of their role were different from the perceptions of others. This is not to say there were no similarities. For many fathers and stakeholders, for instance, being able to provide financially continues to be an important factor. However, fathers conveyed very clearly the roles that were most important to them and roles that were not, but were important to others.

In addition, fathers felt that a sense of competency greatly affected their role and involvement with their children. When fathers were not competent, they were not as involved with their children. Further, it appears that efforts to encourage father involvement were unsuccessful so long as fathers didn't feel competent as a parent. This also suggests that creating policy, programs and initiatives aimed at increasing father involvement serves no useful purpose unless you address fathers directly.

The present analysis also addressed factors affecting nonresident fathers. Though nonresident fathers may have less contact with their children, it does not mean they are not involved. The research did point out some barriers that hindered nonresident fathers' contact with his children and therefore, his involvement including post-divorce conflict, gatekeeping, child support, and distance.

Contextual Influences. Several contextual factors were represented within the bioecological framework. These included the family structure, court ordered child support, issues of marginality, economic status and cultural expectations. These were all expected to influence father involvement. The relationships between mothers and fathers and also visitation arrangements for nonresident fathers were found to affect father involvement. For example, fathers who had cohesive and amicable relationships with their children's mothers were more likely to have frequent visiting arrangements with their children (Cabrera et al., 2004) and be more involved (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007).

Consistent throughout the research on fathers, maternal reports have been used with the occasional father response. Any research studies examining fathers and father involvement had pre-constructed lists of what researchers assumed to best represent fathering and father involvement. Thus, more instruments are needed because research has shown that definitions and ideals of fathers and father involvement may not adequately reflect what fathers perceive their role to be. In addition, Phares (1992, 1996) suggested more concerted efforts for fathers to be included in research every time research on mothers is conducted. When fathers aren't available, it should be stated explicitly why they were not able to participate.

It should be noted once again, that research on fathers has improved, but methodological issues is a source of great concern. Researchers should take great caution to include fathers every time research is conducted. In addition, rather than going through mothers for father contact, researchers should recruit fathers directly. Finally, concerted efforts should be taken to examine the many factors that affect father involvement. As was illustrated, using a bioecological model, several individual, social and contextual factors affected father involvement.

Implications

There are several overarching concerns regarding the treatment of fathers that makes this research important. First, when fathers are perceived to be uninvolved, the reaction from fathers can be potentially damaging. For instance, the potential for discord and communication breakdowns between the mother and father may increase. Fathers may feel alienated from their parenting roles, further causing breakdown in the family unit. Second, when fathers aren't involved, there may be a heavier burden on the mother, family members, and society at large to step into a supporting or surrogate parenting role. For example, because state and government funded resources are available for single-parent families, the burden to tax payers becomes greater when fathers aren't involved.

With about 2/3 of marriages ending in divorce and the number of single-parent homes continuing to rise, it's important that fathers not develop a reluctance to become or stay involved with their children and families based on biased or erroneous attributions that are imposed on them. Instead, advances in research are needed that focuses on what fathers say is important in their role and what external factors affect their involvement with their children. Having this increased understanding has very large implications. Perhaps stakeholders will no longer attribute lack of father involvement with a simple lack of interest or lack of ability. Further, by knowing the various factors contributing to father involvement, policies, services and programs geared toward fathers now becomes viable resources. Implementing such programs and services with the goal of focusing on the father's experience should facilitate healthier relationships with children, who will grow up and have more favorable outcomes.

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