

Sonia Molloy
Pierre Azzam
Anthony Isacco *Editors*

Handbook of the Psychology of Fatherhood

 Springer


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Editors


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*We would like to dedicate the handbook to our fathers,
grandfathers, spiritual fathers, and those in our lives that
inspire us to study the psychology of fatherhood.*

Foreword

The Virtuous Cycle of Progress Toward Understanding Fathers

While the number of fathers has remained consistent for the past 10 years, our understanding of the role fathers play in families has expanded exponentially. In 2020, almost 26 million men are fathers representing nearly 55 million children ages 0–18 (United States Census Bureau, 2021a). Yet it is only in the last several decades that scholarly activity around these fathers has begun to hit its stride. Searching the major scientific databases reveals this major shift in research to understand and include fathers and fatherhood as a dedicated research focus. Using search terms of “father*” or “fatherhood,” the number of articles recorded in PubMed, the US government’s clearinghouse for scientific literature, has increased from 66 for the year 1950 to over 2700 in the year ending in 2021, and a cumulation of over 49,000 PubMed publications in the ensuing years.

The result of this expansion of scholarly activity is an underpinning of the potential benefits and importance of the role fathers play in families from a variety of perspectives. Father involvement has been linked to improved maternal and infant health, including longer breastfeeding duration (Hunter & Cattelona, 2014), lower levels of maternal depression (Mallette et al., 2020), earlier prenatal care initiation (Martin et al., 2007), higher utilization of postnatal care services (Yargawa & Leonardi-Bee, 2015), and improved child developmental, psychological, and cognitive outcomes (Cabrera et al., 2018; Sarkadi et al., 2008). Beyond influencing the health of their families, fatherhood presents a critical opportunity for men to improve their own health (Salvesen von Essen et al., 2021). Healthy men are more likely to participate in childrearing (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007), support mothers in parenting (Price-Robertson et al., 2017), and have healthy children (Brophy et al., 2012). Fathers, even those in unmarried relationships, report a desire to “be there” for their offspring as the child grows and reaches milestones like entering kindergarten or graduating high school; this forward-looking perspective is reportedly directly related to taking on the new responsibilities of becoming a father (Garfield et al., 2010).

Building and sustaining this pipeline of scholarly work has highlighted the importance beyond simple scholarly publications to societal implications and community benefits. Several major family support programs now focus on

involving fathers, often with mandates for contacting and engaging fathers. These include the Office of Family Assistance's (OFA) focus on key qualities of fatherhood that are Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential and represent the backbone of the OFA's Fatherhood FIRE grants program. Home Visiting programs have also begun to focus on fathers both qualitatively (HHS) and with innovative technological interventions using text messaging (Hamil et al., 2021). Healthy Start, a national program designed to improve perinatal maternal and infant health outcomes, recently instituted a requirement that all programming include some outreach and inclusion of fathers, the first time in its 31 year history to make this requirement (*Fatherhood/Health & Well-Being*).

In the wake of these events—heightened awareness of fathers in society, increased scholarly activity aimed at understanding fathers and fatherhood, focused attention in programming to engage fathers as never done before—a book such as this makes sense. This is an opportunity to coalesce the extant literature on fatherhood in one place for the benefit of the practitioner. That enough literature exists in such abundance to allow for the bounty of chapters included in this handbook is testament to the dedicated work advancing the concept of fathers and fatherhood in families over the past several decades.

We might pause momentarily to consider the forces at play to allow for such a paradigm shift in understanding families with an appreciation of fathers. The figure below shows *the virtuous cycle of progress toward understanding fathers*, which we propose may play a role in advancing this conceptualization of fathers' involvement in families. Starting at the societal level—which is essentially made up of individuals within communities—a shift occurs. In this case, the role of fathers in families begins to receive more attention. This call for attention may come from any number of shifts within the society—pressures from within the home for a different role or set of responsibilities, work force changes affecting women and men, and expectations on the part of a new generation of parents wanting to do things “differently” from their own parents. Primed to identify, study, and report on emerging phenomena, the research community picks up on these shifts at the individual, community, and societal levels. The task of the research community then is to determine the best methods for studying, measuring, and articulating these shifts, their magnitudes, and impacts on certain outcomes. A typical evolution in research that may certainly have been the case in the fatherhood realm is a movement from anecdotal evidence to small-scale qualitative findings, which inform hypothesis, to larger-scale surveys, observational studies, and eventually longitudinal and intervention studies at population level samples. Findings along this research continuum lead to data briefs, opinion pieces, peer-reviewed publications, calls for action, and improved data collection, and form the foundation of facts and outcomes for advancing the field. Examples of the culminating activities include the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (FFCWB) (Reichman et al., 2001), the Early Headstart Study (EHS) (Cabrera et al., 1999), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Avenilla et al., 2006), and the more recent Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System for Dads (PRAMS for Dads, Garfield et al. (2018, 2022)).

This essential work feeds the next step in this virtuous cycle. Armed now with data, policy makers can respond to and advocate for change through evidence-based policies. A host of examples are available related to families more generally, and a growing number that are father focused. The first national summit on fatherhood held in 1994 by the National Fatherhood Initiative eventually led to President Clinton’s 1995 memorandum on fatherhood in which he directed all federal agencies to “engage and meaningfully include fathers” (Sylvester & Reich, 2002). Fast forward 25 years, and while things have changed with the remarkable arrival of the first “second gentleman” of the United States, the debate remains on parental leave, paternity leave, and the continued need for support of mothers and fathers as they transition into parenthood (Fuchs, 2021).

What began in the community, was advanced by research findings, and ultimately was included in the policy agenda, which is now ready for the final step, funding. Certainly, funding is necessary to sustain the research and policy enterprises; however, major funding is necessary to implement research findings and policy decisions into large-scale, community practices. Key to this step is identification of programming and interventions that are evidence based and scalable to the populations of interest. Funding is also required for sustainability and to measure impacts over time in order ensure fiscal responsibility for resources dedicated to supporting individuals, families, and communities (Fig. 1).

As this cycle continues to spin, new inputs are added that require different or adjusted outcomes to be considered. The 1950s television show, *(The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet)* (Brooks & Marsh, 2007), that modeled a cis-gendered, heteronormative family consisting of a stay-at-home mother caring for children while the father works every day is far from the norm (if it ever was). In fact, only 26% of opposite-sexed married couples with children under age 18 today live in opposite-sexed married couples where the

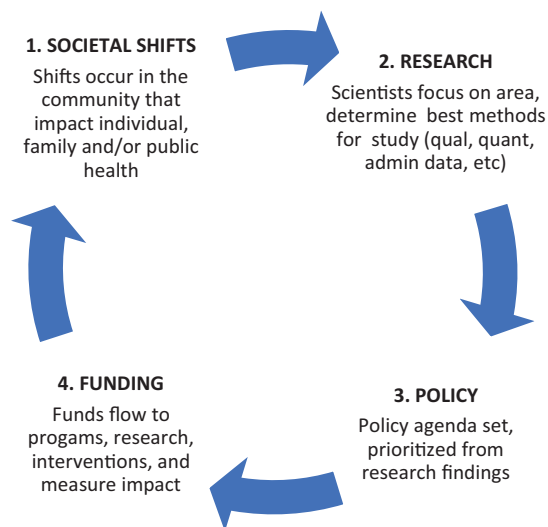


Fig. 1 The virtuous cycle of progress toward understanding fathers

mother is out of the workforce and only the father is in the labor force (United States Census Bureau, 2021b). A myriad of family structures now exist rivaled only by the diversity of fatherhood experiences. Fathers (and father figures) may be married or unmarried, single, at-home or incarcerated, immigrant or native born. In the past, the definition of fatherhood was often limited to cis straight men; however, fathers and father figures come from across the gender and sexuality spectrum, including bisexual, gay, transgender, and intersex. This variety can be celebrated by their beneficial contributions to families and children.

Here is where a handbook such as this comes in. While the topic of fatherhood is massive, it is far from monochromatic; there is no one size fits all. How one comes to be a father, how a father interacts within a larger family context, and how he engages with this particular partner and child can impact the health and well-being of the father, child, partner, and family as a whole. Each chapter in this book strives to represent one key aspect of fatherhood, the proverbial group of blind people describing their one portion of an elephant for each other. The editors link together essential components for understanding fatherhood. These include conceptual chapters such as theory and methods, lifecourse and transitions, fatherhood subpopulations such as military and LGBTQIA+ fathers, and practical aspects of fatherhood such as the intersection of fathering with physical and mental health. Collectively, these authors' contributions lay the foundation to understand where the scholarship on fatherhood stands today in our country and point to new directions for the future.

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Theorizing Fathering: Past, Present, and Future

Kari Adamsons, Laura Cutler, and Rob Palkovitz

Although men have always been fathers and fathers have always been a part of families in varying forms and fashions, research and theorizing about fathers is a relatively recent development; instead, the bulk of parenting research and theorizing has focused on the ways mothers influence children. In fact, a 1985 article reviewing the theories used in fatherhood research began by observing that:

The subject of fatherhood has not attracted much theoretical interest. Theoreticians not only tend to ignore fathers per se, they have managed to overlook issues raised by the fact that the father role is found in all societies, and that expectations and performance of this role vary widely from place to place (Benson, 1985, p. 25).

As recently as 2011, Johansson echoed similar sentiments, stating “There is today a lack of conceptualisations and theories of fatherhood” (p. 227). With most societies holding patriarchal structures, men’s roles as workers, leaders, and “heads of household” have been assumed, but men’s roles as parents were less prominent in research and theory. The limited research on men

as parents typically revolved around indirect or secondary forms of parenting, such as financial provision, discipline, or gender role models, rather than direct involvement in the care and nurturance of children’s development. Benson (1985) went on to summarize theoretically based fatherhood research and noted that it had occurred under a wide variety of perspectives: systems, biological (instincts and genetics), Freudian, attachment, symbolic interaction, social learning, and exchange theories. However, his discussion provided more in the way of how these theories *could* aid in investigations of fatherhood than how they have done so, and this was echoed in his closing statement that “such perspectives do not so much answer the questions they raise as provide dramatic reminders that these issues deserve continuing attention” (p. 38).

A focus on fathers as influential parental figures in the lives of their children began to emerge in the 1970s. This was largely due to the increasing divorce rate coupled with a maternal custody preference (itself due to the popularity of the Tender Years Doctrine that children need their mothers in early childhood) and thus, the number of households with “absent” fathers. This led judges, practitioners, and researchers to query whether such father absence adversely impacted children. In the 1970s, gender roles were also in flux due to the feminist movement, further pushing research, theory, and families to consider the ways in which fathers might contribute more to

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parenting and therefore “free” mothers from the demands and obligations of motherhood (although feminists were somewhat divided on this issue, which will be discussed more later) or provide childcare while mothers entered the workforce in increasing numbers.

By the 1990s, fathers as a focus of research had gained substantial traction and had blossomed into a more “mainstream” topic, although at that point research diverged into two distinct paths. The first path consisted of what are often termed “parenting” researchers, who viewed mothers and fathers as interchangeable caregivers for children, and who therefore simply added fathers to their samples of mothers and added/included fathers in their overall theories of parenting. It should be noted, however, that such additions to samples typically were not in equivalent numbers to mothers, and particularly within generally underrepresented populations, fathers remained far less visible. The second path consisted of “fathering” researchers, who viewed gender as a distinguishing characteristic of parents that divided mothering and fathering into distinct cultures and contexts, and who therefore primarily researched and theorized fathers as unique, or at least distinct. Because this is a *Handbook of the Psychology of Fatherhood*, here we will focus primarily on the latter group and those theories which have focused on the specific roles, sometimes overlapping and sometimes unique, that fathers play in families.

This chapter will provide readers of the *Handbook* with a “lay of the land” in terms of the ways that theorizing fathering has evolved over time, as well as future directions for theorizing fathering. As noted by Roggman et al. (2002), “there is no Grand Unifying theory of fatherhood to effectively guide research on fathers” (p. 6); rather, numerous and varied theoretical lenses have been employed. We will not necessarily cover every theory and model that has been used to address fathering, but we will discuss prominent themes and trends. Fathering research, like most research, can be grouped into studies that examined the impacts/outcomes of fathering, explored predictors of fathering, and contributed to our conceptualizations of fathering; this chap-

ter will be organized according to the theoretical work done in each of these areas. Within each area, particular theories have been more or less prominent, and many theories have followed their own journeys over time. After reading this chapter, you should be aware of where we have been, where we are, and where we hope to see the field go in terms of the ways we theorize fathering. It is our hope that this chapter provides you with a variety of lenses through which you may view the subsequent chapters, as well as your research, so we can begin to address the often unanswered “why” behind the findings in our field.

Impacts of Fathering on Children and Families

Among the earliest studies were those that examined the potential impact of fathering on their children and, somewhat later, on mothers and fathers themselves. Driven by the aforementioned social changes, a number of theories were utilized or developed to help explain the mechanisms by which fathers could have a positive influence. Most of these studies took a systemic, developmental, or relational approach, although some theories contain elements from more than one of these. Each theory is discussed in more detail below.

Systemic Approaches

Systems Theory

Family systems theory emphasizes the interdependence of family members upon one another, with the behaviors and experiences of one person influencing the behaviors and experiences of all others in the system (Cox & Paley, 2003). Family members enact social positions according to implicit family rules, which tend to create homeostasis in family functioning over time. Multiple subsystems and alliances exist within families as well, including the mother–father relationship (both their overall relationship and as co-parents specifically), parent–child relationships, and

sibling relationships. Additionally, family systems vary in their level of boundary permeability, meaning how easily new members are allowed in, or old members are removed. Particularly early on, research on fathers from a systems perspective tended to come from the “parenting” camp of research, examining overall patterns of family interaction (Grigg et al., 1989; Jacobvitz et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019), especially interactions within the marital subsystem such as marital hostility and conflict (e.g., Franck & Buehler, 2008; Richmond & Stocker, 2008), and their resultant influences on child outcomes. Research that took a “fathering” perspective focused heavily on the importance of involvement by noncustodial fathers (e.g., Kissman, 1997) and the importance of viewing divorced, separated, and unmarried parents with children as what Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) termed the “binuclear family,” a family whose boundaries and systems extended over two or more households, rather than limiting our view to single households and deeming such families “single-parent families.” However, no research has looked at custodial fathers as also being members of a binuclear family system with noncustodial mothers, a gap that could be addressed in future research.

Because of its emphasis on the interdependence of families, research from a systemic perspective has tended to be less focused on fathers’ direct impacts on children’s outcomes and more interested in the mediating and moderating pathways through which fathers and mothers influence children. Examples of such research include fathers’ influence on the mother–father co-parenting relationship (e.g., Pech et al., 2020), mothers’ parenting (Wang et al., 2019), and on family communication, parental hostility/marital conflict, and sibling conflict and behavior problems (Relva et al., 2019; Richmond & Stocker, 2008).

With parenting scholars tending to view (primarily married) mothers and fathers as interchangeable and fathering scholars viewing (primarily nonresident) fathers as unique, there has been a dearth of research examining the unique influence of fathers in married families

from a systems perspective. Palkovitz et al. (2014) utilized systems and feminist theories to support an argument that mothers and fathers differ in their influence on children due to essential differences in family roles and rules for men versus women, but they, too, noted the underutilization of systems theory in fathering research. Particularly co-parenting research would benefit from greater integration of the ways in which the mother–father system interacts in both coresident and nonresident father families and the ways mothers and fathers both influence their children in unique and overlapping ways. Also, systems theory has focused primarily on the family system, to the exclusion of other systems with which fathers interact and that can shape the development of their children (e.g., schools, work, and healthcare).

Ecological Theories

Similar to family systems theory, ecological theories (primarily Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework) emphasize the interdependent influences of multiple contexts on children’s development. Unfortunately, also like family systems theory, research using this perspective has focused heavily on the family system and its impacts on children’s development rather than truly examining the full ecology of fathering and interactions between fathers and external institutions and influences (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, churches, government policies and laws, and cultural beliefs). In fact, there are only two articles that propose ways to examine such non-familial influences (Cabrera et al., 2007, 2014, discussed more below).

Regarding family influences, Pleck wrote in 2007 about a number of theoretical perspectives that could illuminate the processes by which fathers benefit children, with bioecological theory playing a prominent role. He noted, “In Bronfenbrenner’s concept of proximal process, development is an inherently relational event, rather than an event taking place within the individual” (Pleck, 2007, p. 199), and he saw fathers as not only being proximal process partners in children’s microsystems but also as being a *unique* microsystem partner for children. A

number of studies took this approach, for example, examining the role of fathers as socializers of ethnic and racial identity (Park et al., 2020) and fathers' impacts on children's behavior and well-being in a variety of family structures, including samples of married (Hanetz Gamliel et al., 2018), married/unmarried, and biological/nonbiological fathers (Black et al., 1999), single-mother and single-father families (Hilton & Devall, 1998), and even the influence of biological fathers on children in foster care (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012).

Only one study has examined fathers' influence on mothers rather than children using an ecological perspective (Fagan & Press, 2008), investigating fathers' work-family crossover and its impact on mothers' work-family balance. They found that when fathers reported bringing more stress home from work, mothers reported lower work-family balance. However, future ecological research could do more to examine fathers' influences on relationship partners beyond just children, as it is far more common to examine children's outcomes. This is due in large part to the fact that policymakers typically are more interested in protecting children than in "just" supporting adult well-being. In fact, the first author once heard a legislator comment in a state legislative hearing specifically about supporting fathers, "we're only here because fathers impact kids; we aren't particularly concerned with supporting fathers only for their own sake."

The only scholars to look outside the family microsystem have been Cabrera and colleagues, who suggested two ecological models of fathering, examining predictors of fathering and the impact of fathers on children in 2007 (Cabrera et al., 2007) and then again with an updated model in 2014 (Cabrera et al., 2014). The 2007 model was more simplistic; it incorporated Belsky's parenting model (1984) with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and examined the ways fathers' histories (cultural, biological, and their own rearing) influence their economic resources as fathers, which influenced fathers' parenting, which influenced children's outcomes. Fathers' parenting also was hypothesized to be influenced by mothers' parenting and

the co-parenting relationship. In the first model, the focus remained heavily upon individual and family microsystem influences on fathers and, consequently, on children, with no real attention paid to external systems and influences, with the possible exception of fathers' cultural history. It was not until the 2014 model that broader meso- and exosystem influences were more centrally considered, with fathers' social networks and community; fathers' work; and broader social, cultural, political, and economic conditions being added to the model as influences on fathers or fathers' parenting in direct and indirect ways. The authors noted that "our original heuristic model did not fully incorporate reciprocal developmental influences or the idea that parent-child relationships are embedded in complex, dynamic systems" (Cabrera et al., 2014, p. 343), and so this updated model represented an improvement in theorizing about fathering influences from an ecological perspective.

However, even with the proposed theoretical models from Cabrera and colleagues and the empirical support that they cite for their proposed model, little to no empirical research has examined how systems outside the family affect the ways that fathers impact their children from an ecological perspective. Therefore, current research has yet to tap the true potential of ecological perspectives for fathering research. Cabrera et al. (2014) also specifically noted a dearth of research using an ecological perspective to examine cultural differences in fathering, something that ecological perspectives are particularly well-suited to address (see chapters "The Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Applications to Asian American Fathers" and "Cultural and Sociopolitical Influences on African American and Latinx Fathers", this volume, for research regarding cultural differences in fatherhood).

In addition, although a number of studies claim a foundation in bioecological theory, it has been far more common for studies to mention bioecological theory than to truly *use* bioecological theory in terms of actually examining proximal processes and variability in various systemic influences. It is more often employed as a

discussion point and as a way of framing findings than as a true theoretical foundation for studies of fathering (guiding research questions, design, sampling, and interpretation, rather than just interpretation). This is a common problem with the bioecological theory, and frankly, theory overall, and not limited to fathering research (Tudge et al., 2016). However, the commonality of a weakness makes it no less of a weakness, and future research and the field would benefit from the true integration of bioecological theory.

Relational Approaches

Attachment

The primary focus of relationally based theorizing has come from attachment theory (see also chapter “[Fathers and Family Systems](#)”, this volume), which was one of the early theories used to address fathering. Formed in the wake of WWII deployments, particularly by women, the core tenet of attachment theory is that all children form an attachment relationship with their primary caregivers in the first 1–2 years of life, which shapes children’s trajectory of expectations and behavior in relationships over the life course (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Sensitive, responsive caregiving leads children to develop a secure attachment style, indicative of a sense of predictability of the world and trust that others will meet the child’s needs and resulting in children feeling safe to explore the world around them, knowing they can return to the “safe haven” of their parent. In contrast, inconsistent or nonresponsive/neglectful parenting leads children to form an insecure attachment, characterized by either clinginess (anxious ambivalent), nonchalance and lack of comfort-seeking (avoidant; Ainsworth et al., 1978), or a third, less common category that was added later and which was typical of children from abusive homes (disorganized; Main & Solomon, 1986).

Bretherton (2010) suggested several stages of attachment research on fathers, each of which addressed different questions. Beginning in the 1970s, researchers focused on the nature of attachment, testing first whether fathers could

serve as attachment figures for children. Once it had been established that they could, comparisons were then drawn between mothers and fathers to investigate whether fathers were equally important attachment figures or secondary to mothers, the comparative quality of mother versus father attachment for children, and what intergenerational relationship qualities might be passed on from mothers versus fathers. Finally, research examined whether the outcomes of attachment for children differed by parent.

In addition to these proposed stages of theorizing, fathering attachment research also has diverged in the aspects of attachment assessed. Most scholars, and especially those from a “parenting” perspective, have assessed the importance of child-father attachment for a variety of children’s outcomes, such as effortful control (Warren & Barnett, 2020), academic achievement (Chen, 2017a), suicidal ideation (Nunes & Mota, 2017), adolescent secure base use (Jones & Cassidy, 2014), and procrastination (Chen, 2017b). Recently, however, some scholars have pushed attachment research in a relatively new direction, emphasizing the “base of exploration” aspect of attachment as a unique way fathers contribute to child development via their encouragement of risk-taking, being disruptive and unpredictable, and encouraging children’s exploration of the outside world (Paquette, 2004). Paquette and Bigras (2010) expanded upon this idea, suggesting the Risky Situation as a companion assessment to the traditional Strange Situation to assess the degree that such “activation” is present in the father-child attachment relationship. They suggested that activation levels could either be optimal (leading to children’s safe exploration of their worlds), overactivated (leading children to ignore limits and boundaries placed upon them for safety reasons), or underactivated (leading children to be hesitant to explore and go beyond their comfort level). Research testing such an approach to attachment is just beginning to get underway, with promising results that support an additional way fathers influence children’s development (Lee et al., 2020a; Volling et al., 2019).

In addition to research on activation, attachment research on fathers also has been expanding

via a biobehavioral approach and investigations into the neuroscience of attachment (Palm, 2014). For example, Feldman (2012) has demonstrated the differential impact of oxytocin on mothers' versus fathers' behaviors, with oxytocin leading mothers to demonstrate more affectionate parenting behaviors but fathers to encourage children's exploration, stimulation, and arousal, both of which can promote children's secure attachment. Such research could help elucidate the neurochemical mechanisms behind fathering behaviors and father-child attachment.

IPARTheory

Although a great deal of relational research has taken an attachment perspective, Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection Theory (IPARTheory; Rohner, 1975, 2021) also has researched the influence of both mothers and fathers extensively for the last 45 years. Originally focused on parents but later expanded to include all important interpersonal relationships, IPARTheory focuses on the cross-culturally universal influence of parental acceptance (warmth and supportiveness) and rejection (hostility, aggression, and neglect) on child outcomes and extending into adulthood and old age (Rohner, 2021). Unlike many theories, IPARTheory has done a great deal of research on the influence of fathers both in combination with and as unique from mothers and has found that father acceptance/rejection, over and above maternal acceptance/rejection, is strongly associated with a variety of children's outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, school achievement, prosocial behavior, self-esteem, loneliness, and overall psychological adjustment (e.g., Caliendo et al., 2017; Giovazolias & Malikiosi-Loizos, 2018; Hussain & Munaf, 2012a, b; Li & Meier, 2017; Miranda et al., 2016; Putnick et al., 2015; Rohner, 2014). With an extensive international/cross-cultural research base, IPARTheory provides perhaps the best evidence of the universal impact of fathers on children via the quality of their relationships and whether their children feel "cared for," as well as the long-lasting impacts of these relationships on the entire life course.

Although such direct associations have been well-researched and supported cross-culturally, future research using IPARTheory could benefit from the investigation of potential moderators of these associations and operationalization of the constructs of acceptance and rejection. For example, there is evidence that "parental warmth" is conceptualized and expressed differently by mothers and fathers in the USA (Adamsons & Buehler, 2007). However, such examinations have not been conducted for the constructs of acceptance and rejection across genders or cultures. Therefore, it is unknown whether acceptance or rejection might be expressed differently across genders or cultures or whether gendered or cultural expectations differ around specific forms of accepting or rejecting behaviors. For example, perhaps a lack of physical affection is perceived as more rejecting when it comes from mothers versus fathers or in more expressive versus restrictive cultures, due to higher expectations for physical affection from some groups relative to others. Most research using IPARTheory has examined the universal impact of children's perceptions of parental acceptance or rejection rather than possible differences in the specific behaviors that created such impressions.

Developmental Theories

The primary developmental theoretical approach in fathering research has been life course theory. Life course was an early entrant to theorizing about fathering, dating back to Reuben Hill's work and his assertion in 1970 that fathers serve as "generational bridges". Roy (2014) built upon this, noting that fathers, and also likely mothers, "reconstruct patterns of parenting across time and maintain durable intergenerational mechanisms of socialization into parenthood" (p. 322), as fathers learn how to parent or how not to parent from their own experiences of being fathered. Key to life course theory is the idea of linked lives, that "lives cannot be defined independently; choices and chances are shared socially" (Roy, 2014, p. 325), and such interdependence has

long-lasting implications for fathers and children. As noted by Roy (2014), the family and work experiences and transitions fathers experience all have implications for their children both in the immediate short term and in the long term. For example, a father losing or gaining a job could have implications for his child's ability to attend college in the future, influencing their later employment opportunities.

A life-course approach to fathers' influence on children has focused on a number of diverse outcomes and processes, including the intergenerational transmission of outcomes between fathers and children (e.g., Thornberry et al., 2009), "off-time" events such as adolescent fatherhood (Recto & Lesser, 2020), and the influence of fathers on maternal and child health (Lu et al., 2010) and in families that experience divorce (Ahrns, 2007; Hogendoorn et al., 2020). The role of time, whether via longitudinal or cohort studies, tends to be central to life course approaches to fathering. However, as noted by Roy (2014), there is little work done on older fathers and fathers of adult children, with most focusing on fathers of younger children or the transition to fatherhood. Further research on transitions within fathering (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009) and the latter end of the life course would be beneficial.

Essential Father Theory

One last theory that is helpful to understand as a historical note is the essential fatherhood theory. Just as it sounds, this perspective held that fathers play a unique, essential role in children's development that cannot be filled by mothers or other individuals (e.g., Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Largely reactive to the increase in "father-absent households" due to increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing in the 1970s and 1980s, this perspective had its roots in emphasizing the key role men, and only men, play in socializing sons and the importance of marriage for tying men to their children and convincing/requiring them to be responsible fathers

(Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Such a perspective resulted in a heavy policy emphasis in the late 1990s on marriage promotion, including the Healthy Marriage Initiative of President Bush and the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. Unfortunately for such policies, research fails to support such a perspective unless it is oversimplified or misinterpreted (Pleck, 2007; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). For example, single-mother households have no father present but also have a much higher likelihood of being in poverty than two-parent households, and it is poverty, not father absence per se, that is the primary mechanism by which children are adversely impacted (McLoyd, 1998; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). And, when comparing two-parent heterosexual families with two-parent lesbian mother families so that the number of parents is held constant, research resoundingly fails to support that children without fathers suffer a universal deficit (Pleck, 2007). As noted by Silverstein and Auerbach:

In contrast to the neoconservative perspective, our data on gay fathering couples have convinced us that neither a mother nor a father is essential. Similarly, our research with divorced, never-married, and remarried fathers has taught us that a wide variety of family structures can support positive child outcomes. We have concluded that children need at least one responsible, caretaking adult who has a positive emotional connection to them and with whom they have a consistent relationship. Because of the emotional and practical stress involved in childrearing, a family structure that includes more than one such adult is more likely to contribute to positive child outcomes. Neither the sex of the adult(s) nor the biological relationship to the child has emerged as a significant variable in predicting positive development. One, none, or both of those adults could be a father [or mother] (1999, p. 3).

As such, although research strongly supports the (sometimes unique) benefit that fathers can have when involved in positive ways with their children, the idea that fathers are *essential* to children's development is best left as a historical footnote that is critical to understand but should not be utilized to guide research or policy on fathers and families.

Predictors of Fathering

Once the potential positive impact of fathers had been relatively well-established, scholars moved to investigate what factors encouraged or inhibited fathers' engagement with their children. Research in this area frequently focused on maternal factors (e.g., mothers' employment, gatekeeping), child factors (e.g., child age, gender, temperament, behavior), father factors (e.g., father age, education, employment, identity, self-efficacy, incarceration), and relational factors (e.g., mother–father relationship status and quality, co-parenting quality). As with research on the outcomes of fathering, research on predictors of fathering has used a variety of theoretical frameworks. Systemic approaches again were prominently featured, but developmental approaches shifted to focus on the internal and external factors influencing the development of fathers rather than of their children, and a particular focus could be seen on societal and cultural influences on fathering via feminist, gender, and queer theories.

Systemic Frameworks

Systemic approaches have been the most commonly used to investigate predictors of fathering, again including both family systems theory and bioecological theory, and focusing heavily on what factors promote or inhibit father involvement with children, with some focusing on the promotion of particular fathering behaviors. A great deal of family systems research has focused on the influence of the mother–father relationship, particularly with regard to co-parenting, on father engagement (Baker et al., 2018; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019; Lee et al., 2020b; Kopystynska et al., 2020), as well as the interdependence of mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors (Garrett-Peters et al., 2011; Ngu & Florsheim, 2011). Although such processes are unquestionably important to understand, additional research looking at outcomes other than father involvement and beyond the mother–father subsystem is needed.

Fathering research using a bioecological perspective has focused on a wider variety of fathering outcomes, including the involvement of gay fathers in schools (Goldberg et al., 2020), father sensitivity with infants (Goldberg et al., 2002), father–child interaction quality (Holmes & Huston, 2010), abuse (Lee et al., 2008), custodial fathering (Hamer & Marchioro, 2002), and father involvement in early childhood programs (Palm & Fagan, 2008). Such research notes the highly contextual nature of fathering and highlights the variety of factors that influence the roles, behaviors, and competence of fathers. Cabrera and colleagues' ecological model of fathering (2014) described above also speaks to the numerous factors influencing fathering and specifically proposes father demographics, employment, social network, and history; family/household characteristics, behaviors, and relationships; and social, political, and economic climate, policies, and circumstances as factors that frequently influence fathers' parenting. However, similar to studies of fathering outcomes, Cabrera et al. (2014) also note a lack of cross-cultural studies of predictors of fathering employing an ecological lens.

Developmental Approaches

In addition to a life course perspective, research on predictors of fathering also was used to develop multiple midrange theories of identity development from social psychological, Eriksonian/generativity, resource, and responsible fathering perspectives; midrange theories use broader theoretical frameworks to develop explanatory models of specific topics or phenomena. Research using life course theory tended to investigate the impact that cumulative risk over the life course has on fathers (Bowen, 2010; Hogendoorn et al., 2020) and the impact of policies such as parental leave (Moss & Deven, 2015) and custody policies (Roy, 2008), as well as the ways that social change and time influence cohorts of fathers (Roy, 2014). Fathering scholars also have developed numerous midrange identity development theories that examine how fathering is shaped by fathers' desires for generativity

(Mitchell & Lashewicz, 2019) and resources (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018) and by the ideals of “responsible fathering” held by the community and families (Doherty et al., 1998).

A large body of work also has examined fathering from an identity theory perspective, a social psychological midrange theory derived from symbolic interactionism that suggests that identities (ideals about the self in various social roles) are derived from social expectations of those roles and result in the enactment of identity-relevant behaviors (Stryker, 1968). Feedback received from others about such identity-relevant behaviors then reshapes behavior and identity until congruence is achieved between desired identity standards, behaviors, and behavioral feedback (Burke, 1991, 1997; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1993) first proposed that identity theory be applied to postdivorce fathering, suggesting that fathers’ identity salience (likelihood of enactment), centrality (identity importance), and commitment (relationships supporting an identity) predict the postdivorce involvement of fathers with their children. Since that time, an extensive body of work has investigated links between identity and father involvement (Adamsons, 2013a, b; Adamsons & Pasley, 2013; DeGarmo, 2010; Dyer, 2005; Fagan, 2020; Fox & Bruce, 2001; Goldberg, 2015; Maurer et al., 2003; McBride et al., 2005; Pasley et al., 2014; Rane & McBride, 2000), with the vast majority supporting the link between identity and behavior for fathers.

However, research using an identity theory perspective has multiple weaknesses. Importantly, a general lack of clarity and consistency in the conceptualization and measurement of identity concepts makes it difficult to compare findings across studies (Pasley et al., 2014). Also, although studies generally have found consistent associations between identity and behavior, the effect sizes are typically quite small and pale in comparison to more practical concerns such as residence and employment status and hours, leading some to question whether the theory is “too theoretical” and not practical enough (Pasley et al., 2014). Finally, research using an identity theory perspective has been relatively homogeneous and

focused heavily on White samples and with either divorced or incarcerated fathers, contexts where disruptions to identity are most likely to occur. Greater diversity of the types of fathers (race/ethnicity, SES, gender/sexual identity, age, and ability status) and greater precision and consistency across studies in conceptualization would strongly benefit research in this area.

Social/Cultural Approaches

Feminist and Gender Theories

Research investigating the predictors and nature of fathering has frequently taken a feminist or gender theory lens. The distinction between feminist theories and gender theories is an important one in the fathering realm, as there were disputes within feminism about whether motherhood was oppressive or empowering for women and, in parallel, whether fathers were supportive or oppressive to women. As such, feminist theorists of the 1970s and 1980s were divided on the issue of whether fathering, or any men’s role, was truly a “feminist” issue. As Doucet and Lee (2014, p. 357) noted:

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, feminist theories had an ambivalent relationship with motherhood around questions of whether mothering empowered or disempowered women (for an overview, see Kinser, 2010; O’Reilly, 2008; Snitow, 1992). Part of this ambivalence was connected to feminism’s complex relationship with men as fathers and parallel questions as to whether men in their roles as husbands and fathers oppressed women (see, e.g., Delphy & Leonard, 1992). By the late 1980s, however, feminist theories of care, social reproduction, and work and family issues were beginning to reconfigure theoretical relationships between feminist theories and mothering, focusing on reframing the strengths and benefits of relationships and relationalities while also being attentive to the costs of caring and the socioeconomic and political effects of different and unequal gender roles (e.g., Folbre, 1994; Ruddick, 1983). This attentiveness to both the costs and the benefits of parental caregiving spurred an interest in studying women, work, and family (e.g., Lamphere, 1987; Lewis, Porter, & Shrimpton, 1988; Zavella, 1987), which, in turn, slowly moved toward the study of men, work, and family. Specifically, there was a small chorus of feminist voices who argued

that distinct gender roles for fathers and mothers would lead to adverse effects for both women and men.

Such research on men as fathers sometimes was compatible with feminist goals of equality and enhanced well-being for women and children, such as when research has focused on fathers as caregivers and the benefits of father involvement for children (Coltrane, 1996; Lamb, 1981, 2000; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). At other times, fathering research puts men in competition with women (e.g., maternal gatekeeping, postdivorce custody, and policy discussions about shared parenting versus maternal custody presumptions). As such, a feminist lens is not always appropriate for work on fathers, and broader gender theories should be employed at such times. Gender theories retain the focus on gender as a critical organizing force for the experiences of individuals and families, and as noted by Collins (2004), “talking about gender does not mean focusing solely on women’s issues. Men’s experiences are also deeply gendered” (p. 6).

Over time, both feminist and gender perspectives began considering the importance of intersectionality and the ways in which an exclusive focus on gender historically has diminished the voices and experiences of men and women of color and from various socioeconomic statuses. This has been true in the fathering realm as well, with recent research examining the important intersections of gender with race and class (Hodges & Budig, 2010; Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Williams, 2010) and particularly the ways that fathers who are unable to successfully fulfill traditional breadwinner roles seek alternative identities and roles in the family.

Also, with increased societal recognition of gender as a nonbinary construct, there have been internal debates within these perspectives and pushes made by queer theory about the best balance between a focus on the influential nature of gender norms in all societies and also acknowledging and valuing the fluid and socially constructed nature of gender. Intermingled within this is the recent emergence of greater advocacy for both transgender individuals (which reinforces the gender binary) and for those who iden-

tify as nonbinary (which rejects the gender binary), such as gender fluid, agender, or gender-queer. It is an ongoing question, therefore, of how to acknowledge both that there is no “essential gender” and yet that gender is essential to the construction of our daily lives via its influence on policies and social expectations. Doucet and Lee (2014) built upon this complexity, noting the real disadvantages imposed by gendered norms on both men and women, regardless of whether perceived gender differences are “real”:

As Joan Williams (2010, p. 128) explained, ‘People have thousands of ‘real differences’ that lack social consequences. The question is not whether physical, social, and psychological differences between men and women exist. It is *why* these particular differences become salient in a particular context and then are used to create and justify women’s continuing economic disadvantage.’ We would add here that we also need to consider how particular perceived differences, including embodied differences, about men are used to create and justify men’s continuing disadvantages in parental responsibilities (p. 365).

Theories of masculinity have been surprisingly limited in their applications to fathering research, perhaps due to conflicts between hegemonic ideals of disengaged and unemotional masculinity and expectations for nurturant and caring fatherhood. However, theories that highlight changing ideals and challenges to hegemonic masculinity may provide a lens whereby both traditional notions of gendered parenting and “new” discourses of involved fatherhood can intersect (e.g., Pleck, 2010b; Randles, 2018).

Conceptualizations of Fathering

Finally, the ways in which we have conceptualized fathering itself have evolved over the decades. Grounded theoretical work has played a prominent role here, but so, too, have theories attending to sociocultural influences and fathers’ developmental trajectories. Generally speaking, research on conceptualizations of fathering has fallen along two paths: how researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners conceptualize fathers, and how fathers conceptualize themselves.

Although a less extensive body of work than in the two prior sections, research in this arena nonetheless has been influential in highlighting the diversity of fathers and the pitfalls of viewing men as simply “fathers” without an intersectional lens. Somewhat ironically, an intersectional theory has not been applied to the understanding of fatherhood and fathering, something we discuss further in our recommendations for future directions.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (GT), or developing theory “from the ground up” by analyzing typically qualitative data for themes and connections, has been used in numerous studies of fathers. Such studies have explored how to understand fathers and how fathers understand themselves in a variety of contexts, including their roles in low-income families (Shears et al., 2006) and during meals (Jansen et al., 2020), when they have children with developmental disabilities (Ridding & Williams, 2019; Thackeray & Eatough, 2018), and in other countries/cultures (Behnke et al., 2008). Most grounded theory work, perhaps unsurprisingly with its focus on participants’ voices, has focused on how fathers see themselves and make sense of their experiences as fathers, and GT has been particularly valuable in amplifying the voices of marginalized fathers who often are invisible in large-scale quantitative studies. However, little work has built on the foundations of grounded theory studies, and as is the case with many studies claiming to use a grounded theory approach (Hardesty & Haselschwerdt, *in press*), most studies stopped short, simply identifying themes rather than truly developing theories or comprehensive conceptualizations of fathering. As such, the field would benefit from more actual theory development coming from participants, as the way researchers conceptualize, and therefore how they research and measure, fathers and fathering has not always matched the ways that fathers define and see themselves.

For example, over the last 30 years, fathers consistently have cited the importance of “being there” for children (Randles, 2020; Roy, 1999), which is not captured by typical measures of involvement or relationship quality. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers frequently emphasize tangible, trackable forms of fathering such as frequency of engagement in particular activities and time or dollars spent, things which are rarely cited by fathers themselves and which are unattainable by many, such as nonresident fathers, incarcerated fathers, or low-income fathers; we build further upon the problematic nature of this in our Future Directions. Despite this mismatch in conceptualizations of fathering and continued calls from researchers themselves (including two of the authors on this chapter; Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999) to move beyond “ticks and clicks,” contact, and child support as primary assessments and conceptualizations of fathering, the field of fathering has been slow to achieve these goals. It is our hope that continued work using a grounded theory approach which truly results in theorizing can help push the field of fathering in this much-needed direction.

Systemic Theories

In contrast to grounded theory work, research taking a systemic approach to conceptualize fathering has tended to focus more on external perspectives about fathers in various contexts, rather than on the views of fathers themselves, and has mostly consisted of an ecological approach. Ecological frameworks have been applied to ways of conceptualizing fathering while incarcerated (Clarke et al., 2005), the interactions between African–American fathers and institutions (McAdoo, 1993), fathering in other countries and cultures (Taylor & Behnke, 2005), and varying family structures and contexts (Hanson, 1985). Given the previously noted lack of focus on external systems and contexts in other ecological research on fathers, it is interesting that such attention has been given to the ways that external contexts influence our definitions

and ideas of fathering. Harking back to the family systems focus, one study utilized a systems theory approach to examining the perceptions of adolescent mothers of father involvement and their own gatekeeping (Herzog et al., 2007). However, like earlier-mentioned research on fathering predictors and outcomes, no studies using family systems theory have examined how conceptualizations of fathering are influenced by macro systems outside the family or family subsystems other than the mother-father subsystem.

Other Approaches

Other theoretical lenses have been applied to conceptualizations of fathering, but in limited quantity for any given theory. A feminist lens was applied to examining views of fatherhood in law and policy in the UK (Busby & Weldon-Johns, 2019). A life course perspective was used to explore how Hispanic adolescent fathers view fatherhood (Recto & Lesser, 2020). Identity theory was used to frame a discussion of the possible selves of incarcerated fathers (O'Keefe, 2019), and a caring masculinities framework was the foundation for a study of stay-at-home fathers and masculine identities (Lee & Lee, 2018). As any of these perspectives would be fruitful for guiding our conceptualizations of fatherhood, much more work remains to be done in these areas. We likely do not seek to have a singular "theory of fatherhood and fathering," but what is greatly needed is a better, more comprehensive conceptualization of fatherhood that addresses both areas of commonality and contexts that lead to distinctions.

Specific Conceptualizations of Fathering

Two additional broad conceptualizations of fathering have emerged over the years. Generative fathering was elaborated as a conceptual ethic of generative work (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), with clear links to Snarey's (1993) four-decade intergenerational study and Eriksonian theories

of lifespan development. From an Eriksonian perspective, childrearing is perhaps the most common way of being generative and contributing to future generations in some meaningful way. These works represent rich conceptual frameworks for theoretical elaboration, although thus far they have received limited direct empirical attention.

A second conceptualization was proposed by Lamb et al. (1987) and further refined by Pleck (2010a). The initial work proposed a tripartite model of father involvement that initially focused on fathers' engagement (direct involvement with the child), accessibility (time available to but not necessarily directly involved with the child), and responsibility (indirect care for the child, like making doctor's appointments). This model has been and continues to be used extensively in fathering research as a way of operationalizing father involvement (e.g., Habib & Lancaster, 2005; Pilarz et al., 2020; Wray, 2020). Pleck (2010a) then refined the original model, changing the components to positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness, and control (to align fathering research more closely with traditional "parenting" research), and breaking responsibility into two components, indirect care and process responsibility. Some research has utilized this newer conceptualization (Weinshenker, 2016), but the earlier model remains more common. Given the problems created by divergent conceptualizations of fathering when wishing to compare or integrate findings, we recommend that more scholars explicitly move to the newer conceptualization proposed by Pleck (2010a).

Future Directions

In addressing the future of theorizing fathering, it is helpful to build upon the current state of the field so that the future is both reflective of and distinct from the foundation established thus far. As such, we have organized this section to reflect the following three recommendations: (a) theoretical frameworks which continue to be relevant when theorizing fathering but that should be used in new and novel ways, (b) perspectives that need

to evolve to better fit contemporary families, and (c) theories that have thus far been un- or underutilized when theorizing fathering but that hold promise and should be explored further.

Theories to Continue Utilizing

Several well-established theories, including family systems theory, feminist and gender theories, and bioecological systems theory, have previously been used as a foundation to explore various aspects of fathers, fatherhood, and fathering. We have presented the contributions these theories have thus far made to the field of fathering and use this section to offer specific suggestions on how each of these theoretical perspectives can be extended further. In addition, recent research using the father-child activation relationship from attachment theory offers a particularly novel approach to theorizing fathering, and we therefore present recommendations on new directions to explore within this framework.

Family Systems Theory

As discussed previously, Family Systems Theory (FST; Cox & Paley, 2003) has been used by scholars to investigate various fathering constructs, including the different roles enacted and rules followed by fathers (and mothers) within families, how nonresident fathers engage with their children, and how systems within families influence fathers' relational quality with mothers, including their co-parenting relationship. We see this work as important for laying the foundation for exploring the complex ways in which the various subsystems within families influence fathers and the relationships fathers maintain with other family members.

In thinking about the future of theorizing fathering, we encourage the use of an FST perspective within co-parenting research, specifically with fathers in married families, so that greater integration of the ways in which the mother-father system interacts in families can be established. The extensive empirical literature on maternal gatekeeping and its relationship to paternal engagement may gain both explanatory

and predictive utility if it is clearly articulated in central FST constructs such as family roles and rules. We also encourage scholars to extend FST research to explore a wider range of family subsystems, including how FST can serve as a theoretical grounding for work investigating fathering in multi-household families, same-sex fathers, transgender fathers, stepfamilies, kin families, and multigenerational relationships within families. Additionally, we suggest that those interested in creating future pathways of theorizing fathering explore how FST can be used to examine nuances in families that have thus far received little attention from fathering research, such as those with open adoption arrangements, the myriad of LGBTQAI+ family constellations, and the aforementioned custodial father/noncustodial mother binuclear families. Each of these families contains systems and subsystems that extend beyond those which have been explored previously and have the potential to offer valuable insights into who fathers are, how fathers interact with their children and partners, and how they impact their children. Finally, as noted earlier, extending beyond the family system to examine the role of suprasystems (e.g., policies, neighborhoods, schools, churches, government agencies, and fathering programs) can further expand our understanding and theorizing of fathering.

Bioecological Systems Theory

Similar to FST, we acknowledge the important foundation established through previous work using bioecological systems theory and, moving forward, encourage the use of novel approaches grounded in this theory. As Cabrera et al. (2014) suggest, bioecological systems theory provides an opportunity to examine the effects of macrosystem-level factors such as the economic, cultural, and political contexts on fathers and fathering, particularly in non-Western cultures. Theorizing how cultural beliefs regarding child rearing, egalitarian parenting, parental leave policies, and nontraditional family formations impact fathers and their children will provide additional understanding of fathering in varying cultural contexts. Additionally, future research could examine how fathers, fatherhood, and fathering