Finding Fathers in Social Work Research and Practice

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Abstract

A comprehensive five-year review of five social work journals and one family-focused inter-disciplinary journal was conducted to examine the prevalence of recent research on fathers. Despite an increase in father-focused research over the past two decades, there continues to be a significant lack of research examining fathers relative to mothers, as well as research that includes fathers as participants. Ethical issues regarding the inclusion of fathers in social work research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: fathers, social work practice, family, research, ethics

1.0 Introduction

Research and social work practice with regard to families and parenting have traditionally focused on mothers, with fathers becoming increasingly recognized over the past three decades (Silverstein, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999). The lack of attention to fathers is inconsistent with social work practice frameworks, e.g., the ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and family systems perspectives (Minuchin, 1974), that are inclusive of all aspects of the family. Fatherhood became a topic of political focus with the Fatherhood Initiative in the 1990s (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999), and has recently become a widely recognized sub-specialty across a number of fields (see Doucet, Edwards, & Furstenberg, 2009). Despite this recent growth in father-focused research, the very conceptualization of fathering as a sub-specialty reflects that fathers are still not considered as central

to parenting as mothers. There remains a great deal we do not know about fathers, particularly with respect to diversity and the effectiveness of father-focused interventions (Bayley, Wallace, & Choudhry, 2009; Doucet, Edwards, & Furstenberg, 2009). This is problematic for social workers, since it is difficult to engage and intervene with fathers without adequate knowledge.

The inclusion of fathers in social work practice and research is of ethical relevance since according to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people…."(Preamble, NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). The NASW Code of Ethics was revised in 2008 to include several provisions facilitating the well-being of people without regard to sex or other aspects of cultural and social diversity. Specifically, "social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status…" (NASW section 4.02, 2008), and "social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex…." (NASW section 1.05 (c), 2008). These ethical guidelines both prohibit discrimination against fathers simply on the basis that they are the male parent, and highlight the importance of research on fathers that informs both social work practice and policy.

The focus of the current paper is not to provide a comprehensive review of the research on fathers, but rather to examine the recent inclusion of fathers in social work research, to review research

evaluating social work practice with fathers, and to discuss barriers related to practice with fathers. It is in the spirit of recognizing the need for equitable representation of both mothers and fathers in research and practice as highlighted by social work's dominant practice frameworks and the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) that this paper calls for the ethical consideration of the inclusion of fathers in family-focused research and practice.

2.0 Literature Review

As recently as 2002, Silverstein argued that due to the bias towards the maternal attachment paradigm, fathers continue to be a population we know little about, and that this is particularly true for fathers from diverse backgrounds including low-income, gay, and ethnic minority fathers. She called for research on fathers overall and qualitative research involving fathers in particular. Silverstein conceptualized the barrier to father inclusion in both research and practice in terms of gender theory, since nurturing is viewed primarily as feminine in U.S. culture. In a recent special issue of *Child Maltreatment* devoted to examining the father's role in child abuse and neglect, Lee, Belamy, and Guterman (2009) also highlighted the lack of research in this area, despite fathers being over-represented in the most severe cases of child maltreatment. Thus, striving towards a better understanding of fathers in nontraditional roles would be consistent with the NASW guidelines regarding cultural and social diversity (2008).

Levine and colleagues identified barriers to father involvement with regard to the social welfare community as well as contributing to the literature on how fathers can become increasingly involved across a number of settings such as early childhood centers and schools (Levine, Murphy, & Wilson, 1993; Levine & Pitt, 1995; Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Social work tends to be a female dominated field, with many agencies being staffed primarily with women. Levine pointed out that many of these women have had negative experiences with men in their own lives that may make them reluctant to reach out to men. Furthermore, social workers and other mental health professionals are often not trained to work with families at the family-level, and to address the inter-parental conflict that is common when more than one parent is involved in dialogue regarding parenting issues. This evaluation of the climate of the social welfare culture is consistent with research indicating that both social work and psychology practitioners are more likely to include fathers in their practice if they are male (Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser, 1991).

As recently as 2006, Lee reported that fathers were rarely involved in psychological services related to their children's difficulties. This appears true for both resident and non-resident fathers (Duhig, Phares, & Birkeland, 2002). Phares, Fields, and Binitie (2006) identified a number of factors that may contribute to the lack of father participation including: therapists not actively inviting father participation, therapists' biases in not considering father participation important, discomfort with inter-parental conflict, fathers' time-constraints, fathers' assessment of therapeutic intervention as unnecessary, and fathers' problem solving or coping styles.

Research indicates, however, that increased father involvement is related to positive child well-being (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Fathers tend to interact with their children in qualitatively different ways than mothers (see Lamb, 2004; Parke & Brott, 1999). Father rough and tumble play with positive affect predicts better child self-control abilities and peer acceptance (Snarey, 1993; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992), and father emotional involvement with pre-school aged children predicts later social competence (Gottman, 1997). Father involvement is related to children's school related success in both middle childhood (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997) and adolescence (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). A combination of high father involvement and increased closeness appeared particularly important for buffering adolescents from distress and engaging in delinquent behavior (Harris, Fustenberg, & Marmer, 1998). Although some authors have described fathers as being essential (Pruett, 1998), and others regard fathers to be important but not essential (Silverstein, 2002), it is clear that fathers make important contributions to their children's lives.

In contrast, negative aspects of fathering and paternal psychopathology appear to be related to negative child outcomes. Father depression is related to child and adolescent internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Kane & Garber, 2004), and punitive parenting by the father is related to externalizing problems in male children (Heaven, Newbury, & Mak, 2004). Since positive parenting appears consistently associated with positive child outcomes, it would make sense for social workers to promote positive father involvement, and to intervene in cases where the father's parenting style appears punitive or harsh. This research also highlights the importance of identifying paternal as well as maternal mental health difficulties, and treating or referring these parents for treatment since their well being appears to have ramifications for the children as well as the parents.

Research evaluating social work practice with regard to fathers indicated father inclusion in permanency planning (Coakley, 2008) and parenting training (Lindahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008) was associated with positive child outcomes, and couple-focused interventions appeared successful in promoting father involvement (Hawkins et al., 2008; Fagan, 2008). Excluding fathers from social work practice not only fails to improve child well-being through positive father involvement, but may also play an unintended role in minimizing father involvement. Research indicates that mothers play a gate-keeping role, moderating father involvement in families with both resident and non-resident fathers (McBride et al., 2005). Engaging mothers but not fathers in outreach and intervention further perpetuates the mother's gender ideology-based role as the primary caregiver, and may have the unintended consequence of excluding fathers.

Not only has the field of fatherhood research changed over the last several decades, there is evidence that the "culture of fatherhood" itself is also actively transforming (LaRossa, 1988). Fathers report that they want to be more involved with their children than their fathers were with them (see Parke & Brott, 1999), and indeed research indicates that contemporary fathers are more involved than those of previous generations (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Although fathers have traditionally been viewed as filling the role of the family breadwinner, they have more recently begun to be viewed as co-parents (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Many fathers have started taking on longer child care shifts corresponding to an increase in maternal employment (Casper & O'Connell, 1998). This ongoing evolution of the face of fatherhood further necessitates continued research on fathers in order to ensure adequate understanding and engagement.

Diverse family compositions bring challenges to the definition of fathers and father figures with regard to both research and practice. Fathers can be biological, social (fictive kin), legal, or step-father, in families ranging from single-parent to married, cohabiting, and re-combined. Despite the difficulties involved in conceptualizing fathering across various family compositions, it is clear that father figures make contributions to their families across the spectrum. A national study of new births reported that even in single parent households, 75% of unmarried biological fathers had some level of ongoing involvement in the lives of their infant children, with 80% paying child support (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). It is also noteworthy that as of 2004, 18% of single parent households in the U.S. were headed by fathers (U. S. Census Bureau, 2004). The active participation of non-resident dads has been related to increased child success in school (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997), and authoritative parenting style among non-resident dads appears positively related to school success and negatively related to child internalizing and externalizing problems (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Most foster children are not living with their fathers when they are removed from their homes (Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006). Non-resident fathers could be an important resource for these children, particularly when these fathers are not implicated in the abuse. Malm and colleagues (2006) found that non-resident fathers are often not located early in the process of investigation, and that engaging with these fathers once located was rarely a stated priority since it was not legally mandated. CPS case workers who were not trained to engage fathers were also less likely to report that non-resident fathers had been identified. This lack of engagement with fathers was related to a decreased likelihood both that these children would be placed with their fathers, and that fathers would have some level of ongoing involvement in the lives of their children through visitation. Child welfare workers are encouraged to identify non-resident fathers early, and to engage with them to facilitate long-term father involvement.

In 1990, Grief and Bailey published the results of a comprehensive review of five major social work journals over a 27-year-period to examine the prevalence of research on fathers. They found only 21 articles focused on fathers, reflecting less than one father-focused article per year across the five journals examined. Furthermore, the articles on fathers focused narrowly on fathers as perpetrators, missing, and embattled. Their conclusion was that if social workers understood fathers, their understanding was not gleaned from their reading of major journals in their field (Grief & Bailey, 1990). How much has the parenting focus of social work journals changed since 1990? In an effort to examine the prevalence of recent research on fathers in social work and related fields, a five-year review of five widely recognized social work journals and one family focused inter-disciplinary journal was conducted. Articles evaluating social work practice with regard to fathers were identified and summarized to provide insight for discussion of ethical issues related to the involvement of fathers in social work practice.

3.0 Method

The social work journals examined were: *Social Work Research, Research on Social Work Practice, Children and Youth Services Review,*

Journal of Social Service Research, and *Social Service Review*. These journals were chosen due to their high citation ratings and clear relevance to social work. The one inter-disciplinary journal examined, *Family Relations*, was selected due to its high social work citation rating and specific focus on family related issues.

Titles and abstracts for each issue from 2004 through 2008 were first examined to identify the inclusion of family or parenting related variables. These articles were then further content analyzed to identify whether mother variables, father variables, or both, were included. If a study reportedly examined father variables whenever possible, for example in all dual-parent homes in a given sample, the article was considered to include a father variable. When research was reported for "caregivers," "parents," or "families," the breakdown of mothers, fathers and other caretakers was examined and recorded when possible. If an article included fathers, the source of the data regarding the father was further recorded to reflect: father inclusion in the study (father self-report or observation of father), and mother, caseworker, teacher or child report of father variables. Review articles were not considered in this examination. In addition to reporting descriptive statistics, t-tests were used to examine differences across groups.

4.0 Results

Across the six journals examined, 24% ($N = 62$) of the 262 family-focused articles included father variables, compared to 53% that examined mother variables, and 43% that generically examined "caregivers" or "parents." There is an overlap in the percentages presented due to most of the articles examining father variables also including mother variables. Specifically, only 2.6% of articles reported on father variables in the absence of mother variables, 21% included both mother and father variables, 31.7% included only mother variables, 42.7% reported on caregiver variables (not specifying a specific parent figure), and an additional 1.9% focused on grandmothers. This breakdown reflects significantly more articles examining mothers ($M = 4.86$) than fathers ($M = 2.86$; $t (29) = 5.28, p < .001$) per year, in an analysis where the N reflects the number of volumes examined across the six journals.

These differences were more distinct when examining only the five social work journals, which included 48% articles with mother variables, 48% with "caregiver" variables, and only 17% with father variables. This reflects more articles with mother variables ($M = 3.8$ per year) than father variables ($M = 1.28$ per year; $t (24) = 4.14, p < .001$). There was a significantly higher percent of articles that included

father variables in the inter-disciplinary *Family Relations* journal ($M = 34.68\%$) compared to the social work journals ($M = 15.05\%$; $t (28) = 4.88, p < .001$).

Investigation of the father variables examined revealed that only 54% employed either father report or observations of fathers. The remaining father variables reflected mother (12%), child (25%), case worker (7%) or teacher report (2%). Thus, although 24% of family-related articles examined fathers across the six journals reviewed, only 12.5% actually included fathers in the research. Within the five journals specific to social work, only 7.26% of the family-related articles included fathers in the research.

In articles where "caregiver" or "parent" variables were examined, a breakdown of the parent or caregiver figures was sought. However, in 43% of these articles, no clear breakdown was given, and thus it was not clear if these articles reflected exclusively mothers, or some combination of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers. The following statistics are reported for the articles where a breakdown of caregiver figures was given. The percentage of caregivers who were mothers or female ranged from 50% to 100%, with the average percent being 82.4%. Although it may be assumed that the remaining 17.6% of caregivers were fathers, not all of these articles gave specific breakdowns for fathers, and when breakdowns were given beyond the percent that were mothers, caregiver also often included grandmothers and foster parents.

Although most of the research examining father variables yielded information with implications for social work practice and policy, only nine of the articles clearly evaluated interventions or social work practice related to fathers. This breakdown does not include a handful of studies that included both mothers and fathers in intervention, but did not report results specific to fathers. A summary of the father evaluation research is presented below.

Davidson-Arad, Peled, and Leichtentritt (2008) examined court petitions for child removal written by child protection workers in Israel. The focus of these petitions was on blaming mothers and virtually ignored fathers. This pattern of mother blame and father absence was also the focus of a Canadian investigation of child protection case files (Strega et al., 2008). Strega and colleagues found that although a number of father-figures were identified, almost 50% of fathers were considered irrelevant to both child and mother. Father engagement by social workers was also low, with 60% of fathers considered a risk to children and not being contacted despite many having unsupervised visits with their children. In the face of this lack of engagement of

fathers by social workers, research by Coakley (2008) found that when African American fathers were involved in the permanency planning of their children in the child welfare system, more children had shorter stays in foster care, and were reunified with their birth families.

In another study, Davidson-Arad and colleagues attempted to predict social workers' decisions to remove children from families based on their early assessments of the children and parents (Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Wozner, & Arieli, 2006). This research found an interaction effect indicating that social workers rated fathers as more cooperative in families where the children were removed than both mothers in those same families and fathers in families where children remained placed in the homes. This result was not surprising given that mother, but not father, mental health difficulties were predictive of child removal. Thus, the mothers in those families may have been difficult to relate to because of their mental health difficulties, requiring the social workers to engage with the fathers. What is not clear from the report is what was going on in the families where the children remained in the homes. Were fathers truly less cooperative, or were social workers less likely to engage them to the same extent as mothers when the mothers were free of mental health difficulties?

Kohl and colleagues found that child welfare may be a gateway to domestic violence (DV) services (Kohl, Barth, Hazen, & Landsverk, 2005). Both identification of DV and having an open child welfare case predicted receipt of DV services. However, the focus of identification of DV and referral for related services was for the mothers only, and not their male partners.

Intervention research indicated that couple-focused (Hawkins et al., 2008) and co-parenting focused (Fagan, 2008) interventions can be successful in promoting father involvement. Finally, an evaluation of a family nurturing program for incarcerated and at-risk participants indicated that men demonstrated increased understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations, empathy, and the impact of corporal punishment (Palusci, Crum, Bliss, & Bolovek, 2008). These combined results reflect the positive potential for including fathers in intervention.

5.0 Discussion

Research on fathers published in social work journals has clearly proliferated, with 62 articles including father variables being evident over the past five years compared to only 21 reported in Grief and Bailey's 1990 review of a 27-year-period. There

continues to be, however, a significant lack of research including fathers relative to mothers in family-related research, with only 24% of family-focused articles including father variables across the six journals examined, and only 12.5% including fathers as participants in the actual research. These results are even more significant for the journals examined specific to social work, with only 17% of family-focused articles including father variables, and only seven percent actually including fathers in the research. This relative lack of father-related research is problematic for social work, since it is this research that is most likely to inform practice and policy. The finding that conclusions regarding fathering in these journals largely come from sources other than the father is also problematic, since these findings could actually be perpetuating the gender biases of female parents and practitioners, resulting in continued inequity in the social welfare system with regard to fathers. This is of particular concern from an ethical standpoint, since it could interfere with the ability of social work practitioners to adequately understand and address the needs of the fathers and the children in the families they serve. Issues prohibiting discrimination against people with regard to sex and advocating the seeking of adequate knowledge across sexes are explicitly addressed in the NASW Code of Ethics (2008).

Why is there only a small percent of articles actually including fathers in the research despite a clear increase in awareness of the importance of examining fathers? One explanation is that a number of the research articles reported secondary analysis of data available from large national studies or administrative databases. In these cases, often only mothers and their families were examined, and only mother report of father variables was available. However, mother and practitioner report of father related issues should not be considered synonymous with father observation or report given research indicating that there can be low concordance between mother and father report even on issues that may overtly seem straightforward, such as report of the father's occupation (Schnitzer, Olshan, Savitz, & Erikson, 1995).

Researchers are encouraged to include fathers as well as mothers in their research designs to the extent possible. Furthermore, granting agencies and grant reviewers are encouraged to consider the inclusion of fathers as well as mothers in the funding of research, particularly when reviewing large multi-site research studies that may be the basis of secondary as well as primary data analyses over the decades to come. Several articles reviewed reported on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (see for example Grogan-Kaylor & Otis,

2006). Unfortunately, this study followed only the families of adolescents who became mothers and did not include the adolescents who became fathers. In contrast, a number of the articles reporting research including fathers came from secondary data analyses of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (see Huang & Warner, 2005). More longitudinal, multi-site studies with rich data being gathered from both mothers and fathers are needed to facilitate further proliferation of research that actually includes fathers in the research.

A sizable 42% of articles with a family focus reported data for caregivers or parents rather than specifically gathering information on mothers or fathers. Although at first glance this may seem like an egalitarian approach, there is evidence suggesting that disparate caregiver figures should not be lumped into one category. Research indicates that fathers make contributions to their children's development independent of mothers (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 1999), and that fathers and mothers tend to provide unique relational settings for child development (Ryan, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Thus, it would be a mistake to view different caregiver figures as synonymous, and this view is likely to carry over into the area of social work practice. In cases where caregivers are examined that include different parent figures, it is critical to include a clear breakdown by gender. Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to examine differences between types of caregivers in cases where sub-groups of caregivers, such as fathers and mothers, are large enough to allow such statistical comparisons. The changing culture of fatherhood also has implications for social work practice. It is one thing to work primarily with the mother in a context where both parents are content with the role of the mother as the primary parent figure, and another more ethically problematic thing to focus primarily on mothers in a context where fathers want to be more involved. Thus, as fathers become increasingly involved with their children, and express the desire to do so, it becomes increasingly important for social workers to make efforts to include fathers in their family-related practice. Overall, intervention research indicates that including fathers in social work practice has the potential to enrich the lives of their children when and if social workers identify, locate, and engage with these father figures.

The relative deficiency of father inclusion in both social work practice and family focused research is also likely to be due to both real and perceived barriers to father participation that are even greater when the father resides apart from the mother and child. (Bayley, Wallace, & Choudhry, 2009; Lee, 2006). Logistical arrangements that facilitate the inclusion of fathers as well as mothers includes actively soliciting father participation and conducting therapeutic appointments and home visits during flexible times, often during evenings and weekends to accommodate the scheduling needs of one or more working parent. Although fathers may not agree to be involved in psychological services as readily as mothers (Duhig, Phares, & Birkeland, 2002), when active efforts are made to include fathers and accommodate their scheduling needs, research indicates they participate to some extent in both intervention and research (Phares, 1996; Phares, Fields, & Binitie, 2006; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005).

Couple conflict regarding parenting issues, along with a wide array of other issues, is not uncommon. Thus, it is not surprising that Levine and colleagues indicated that when fathers are included in social work practice, couple conflict often ensues (Levine, Murphy, & Wilson, 1993; Levine & Pitt, 1995; Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). This couple conflict can result in social workers and other practitioners experiencing feelings of discomfort, and they may even be concerned that they have contributed to an escalation of negativity in the family by including fathers as well as mothers in their outreach. This in turn can lead to practitioners reverting to working primarily, if not exclusively, with mothers. It is important to recognize that inter-parental conflict is an integral part of couple relations and is likely to exist whether or not practitioners are exposed to it. Inter-parental conflict can be viewed as an opportunity for exploration of underlying views and for building conflict resolution skills. Referring families for marital or couple counseling may be appropriate in some cases, but practitioners are cautioned against avoiding the inclusion of fathers in their practice simply due to parental conflict. For parents who have engaged in domestic violence or child abuse or neglect, the tendency may be exclusion, however, there is support that these men may also benefit from an increased understanding of the effects of violence on their developing children. These considerations have implications for the education of social workers beyond what is currently offered.

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