

JAY FAGAN *Temple University*RANDAL DAY *Brigham Young University*MICHAEL E. LAMB *University of Cambridge*NATASHA J. CABRERA *University of Maryland*

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## Should Researchers Conceptualize Differently the Dimensions of Parenting for Fathers and Mothers?

*This article asks whether researchers should seek separate conceptualizations of fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors. We posit that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that the constructs of fathering and mothering are unique. Our argument is based on 3 sets of findings. First, there have been a number of studies showing that fathering and mothering constructs are the same. Second, there is evidence that fathers' parenting behaviors affect children's outcomes in ways that are similar to the effects of mothers' parenting behaviors. Third, fathers and mothers are becoming more similar in terms of their roles, the types of behaviors with which they engage children, and the amount of time they spend with children.*

### STATEMENT OF OVERALL PROBLEM

The specific problem we address in this article is whether the field should continue to seek different gender-based dimensions (i.e., constructs) of fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors or whether the field should adopt a

gender-neutral conceptualization of the dimensions of parenting. Dimensions of parenting have been defined as the features, qualities, and descriptive schemes used to capture the nature of parenting (Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). It is notable that during the past half century some fathering researchers have attempted to conceptualize fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors as separate sets of multidimensional constructs (e.g., Brotherson, Dollahite, & Hawkins, 2005; Gadsden, Fagan, Ray, & Davis, 2004; Halme, Tarkka, Paavilainen, Nummi, & Astedt-Kurki, 2010; Lamb, 1976). In the present article, we historically trace attempts in the research literature to keep fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors distinct. We argue that research on fathering should move away from the view that the dimensions of fathers' and mothers' parenting are *conceptually* different from each other. Instead, researchers should move toward gender-neutral dimensions of parenting (in terms of behaviors, skills, beliefs, attributes, and motivations). Said differently, we struggle to find solid evidence for the argument that the dimensions of fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors are conceptually unique. Our view, as we shall show here, instead focuses on an extensive list of possible parenting behaviors, skills, beliefs, goals, emotions, and attributes from which parents may draw. We refer to these interchangeably as fathers' and mothers'

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School of Social Work, Temple University, Ritter Hall Annex, #583, 13th St. and Cecil B. Moore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19122 (jfagan@temple.edu).

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parenting behaviors or fathering and mothering from this point forward.

At the core of research on fathers' parenting behavior is the way fathering constructs are conceptualized and, consequently, measured. One of the most widely used conceptualizations of fathering is based on the *father involvement* heuristic model. Father involvement has been defined in many ways. Most definitions include some link to Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine's (1985; see also Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1987) typology that includes fathers' direct engagement with children, accessibility to children, and responsibility for children. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers frequently conceptualized father involvement in terms of the amount of time fathers spent in each of these categories of involvement. More recent definitions of father involvement have included references to engagement, warmth and responsiveness, control, and indirect care (Pleck, 2010). In spite of the expanding list of efforts to define and measure the father involvement constructs, or elaborate on Lamb and colleagues' typology, there does not seem to be a general consensus on what the father involvement constructs are, how to measure them, or whether there should even be a separate conceptualization of father involvement that is distinct from fathers' parenting behavior or mothers' parenting behavior. Consequently, the scholarship on fathering remains inconsistent, disjointed, and insular—that is, not integrated across disciplines. The purpose of this article is to encourage the research community to take a step back and to reassess how fathering is conceptualized and measured with an eye toward creating some general consensus about this important research construct.

Over time, other researchers have raised similar concerns about the ways fathering was being conceptualized (Day & Lamb, 2004). More than a decade ago, Palkovitz (1997) suggested that predominant conceptualizations of fathering tended to overemphasize fathers' direct interactions (i.e., behavioral dimension) with children, and as such neglected the cognitive and affective dimensions of fathering. Sayers and Fox (2005) argued that current conceptualizations of fathering (i.e., the model of father involvement conceptualized by Lamb et al., 1987) place too much emphasis on nurturance and as such disregard fathers' provisioning contributions to children. Others have suggested that there may not be a single best way to conceptualize

fathers' parenting behavior and that different conceptualizations of fathering reflect the different types of questions asked by researchers. For example, drawing on parenting models, Cabrera, Shannon, and Tamis-LeMonda (2007) proposed a heuristic model of father involvement; it is a framework from which measurement models can be derived to address research questions of interest.

But to preview our conclusion, we do not find elements of parenting that are essentially and only associated with fathers. Instead, we argue that the field should move toward a more general model of parenting rather than a model that emphasizes separate dimensions of fathering and mothering. There are important cognitive (e.g., father identity) and affective (e.g., self-efficacy) dimensions of parenting as well as behavioral dimensions of parenting. We focus on the behavioral components of parenting in this article because there is currently a larger body of published research on the validity of the behavioral constructs of fathers' and mothers' parenting than on the cognitive and emotional constructs. We also suggest that researchers may want to reconsider use of the term *father involvement*, because underlying the term itself is the assumption that fathers' parenting behavior is conceptually different from mothers' parenting behavior. Our argument is based on three types of findings in the research literature. First, several recent studies have shown that the fathering and mothering constructs are the same (e.g., Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Vermulst, 2004). Second, there is increasing evidence that fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors (including quality and quantity of behaviors) influence children's outcomes in similar ways (e.g., Cabrera, Fagan, Wight, & Schadler, 2011; McDowell & Parke, 2009). Third, fathers and mothers are becoming more similar (i.e., converging) in terms of their roles; the types of behaviors with which they engage children; and the amount of time they spend with children, particularly in North America, Australia, and Europe (e.g., Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012).

It is important to note that our position on these issues does not imply that research on specific father-related issues should diminish. There are many research questions that speak to the need for continued scholarship on fathers, just as there are unique research questions that speak to the need for separate research on

mothers. We are also not arguing here that gender of the parent is inconsequential to the ways in which fathers and mothers interact with their children. Many decades of research have shown that mothers and fathers are socialized to parent differently and that gender socialization may have an effect on the amount and ways fathers and mothers engage with children (Doucet, 2009; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). Fathers and mothers also frequently have different beliefs about what it means to be a good parent (Pedersen, 2012). In addition, children have been found to have different views about the roles of mothers and fathers (Milkie, Simon, & Powell, 1997). Fathers and mothers on average behave differently. However, there are also wide within-gender individual differences among both mothers and fathers that should make us wary of any notion implying unique and separate constructs for mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior. Moreover, much of the evidence available to researchers shows that the dimensions of parenting that affect children's adjustment (e.g., warmth, sensitivity, monitoring, authoritative parenting) are the same for fathers and mothers.

In the same vein, there are important influences on fathers and mothers depending on their cultural background, socioeconomic class, and nationality (Lamb, 2012; Pattnaik, 2013). Berger and Langton (2011) called for taking men's personal histories as fathers into consideration when undertaking culturally sensitive assessments of their fathering. Others have emphasized the community context as a means to examine the cultural influences on fathers (Young, 2011). Culture may also influence the degree to which parents influence child adjustment. For example, in Mexican American families, the level of warmth and discipline in the entire family (including grandparents) may be more important than any one parent's behavior, given a cultural emphasis on respect and familism (White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009). Moreover, to understand fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors with children, we need to understand each parent's behaviors and roles within the context of the other parent (i.e., the family) and the child's developmental period, regardless of whether they live together or not. However, the search for essential or unique paternal constructs, that is, parenting behaviors performed only by men because of their gender, has not yielded much. Our position is that research resources would be better spent

pursuing a different agenda, which we discuss later in this article.

We make our argument in the following way: (a) We summarize the evolution of the father involvement conceptualization because of its strong influence on fathering research, (b) we then examine how fathers' parenting behavior has been conceptualized in recent research studies, (c) we discuss a growing body of evidence showing that fathers' and mothers' parenting constructs are similar, (d) we discuss research showing that mothers and fathers have similar effects on children, (e) we examine the ways in which mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior has converged, and (f) we examine future directions for research.

#### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONCEPTUALIZING FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Researchers' early interest in fathers grew in response to (a) concerns that fathers were largely "invisible" in developmental studies, (b) concerns about the effects of father absence on children due to war-related separation, and (c) studies of father absence showing that children fare better when children reside with their fathers (Mott, 1994; Sears, 1951; Stolz, 1954). The concern with fathers' invisibility coincided with mothers' increasing participation in the paid labor market at the end of the 20th century and pressures on fathers to assume a greater role in the care and socialization of their children (Coltrane, 1996). At the same time, the number of children in child care increased exponentially. Public concerns were also increasingly voiced about the effects of mothers' employment on children and whether fathers could adequately assume some of the responsibilities of families so that mothers were not overly burdened in their worker and parenting roles (Coltrane, 1996). Researchers became increasingly cognizant of the need to study fathers in order to address these fast-growing changes in family life (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Simultaneously, public concern was growing about the effects of father absence on children (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Divorce and births outside of marriage were becoming increasingly common. Nonresidential fathers were often portrayed as having little contact and assuming minimal responsibility for their children. A number of critical reviews suggested that many so-called absent fathers were

in fact involved with their children (Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Danzinger & Radin, 1990; McAdoo, 1985–1986).

The first major attempt to conceptualize father involvement was undertaken by Lamb, Pleck, and others who suggested an *organizational* heuristic of types of father involvement, including three major constructs: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1987). Lamb and Pleck introduced this conceptualization to address inconsistencies in the way that researchers measured father involvement. The Lamb–Pleck tripartite model, as it came to be known, was an important development because it drew attention to the different kinds of paternal involvement associated with caring for and socializing children (Pleck, 2010). Many researchers adopted this framework for conceptualizing father involvement and applied it to studies including but not limited to divorced fathers, low-income fathers, fathers in the military, and fathers' effects on children (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; for a review, see Lamb, 2000). It was also used to frame several major US longitudinal studies that included fathers (e.g., Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—Birth Cohort; Cabrera et al., 2004). This heuristic model has had a significant impact on our understanding of the ways in which fathers are involved in their children's lives, and it has brought about a far richer understanding of men's roles in families. It has also brought a deeper understanding of the ways fathers are involved with their children, and it has gone beyond simplistic notions that focused on dichotomous categorizations such as presence and absence. It has also provided the field with a framework to assess the ways fathers are involved with their children and to track levels of paternal involvement over time.

Despite these contributions, the Lamb–Pleck approach revealed several significant gaps. Of the three types of involvement suggested by Lamb and Pleck, researchers have typically studied paternal engagement more extensively than accessibility and responsibility, largely, perhaps, because engagement was the simpler construct to measure and overlapped the most with traditional notions of parenting. For example, many researchers have focused only on amount of fathers' engagement with children in relation to child outcomes (e.g., Bzostek, 2008; for a review, see Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Pleck (2010) also noted

that overemphasis on engagement (as opposed to accessibility and responsibility) may have occurred, because the engagement construct was more like the types of constructs used in child development research (a research agenda that typically assessed mother's role in parenting).

Another limitation of the Lamb–Pleck model is that there has been little systematic development and testing of measures within each of the heuristic categories. As a result, there are few validated and reliable instruments. Few, if any, researchers have weighed the relative importance of the three categories suggested by the Lamb–Pleck model. We do not know, for example, whether engagement (e.g., direct contact with children) is more or less important than responsibility (e.g., taking a child to the doctor) in predicting key outcomes. In addition, this heuristic model focused on quantity of involvement with little attention paid to quality of involvement. Finally, this tripartite model is only a heuristic framework for organizing paternal activities—whether these parenting constructs are or should be predictively associated with children's outcomes are theoretical and empirical questions.

#### *Positive Father Involvement*

Pleck (2010) suggested that an important shift in the conceptualization of the engagement construct occurred at the end of the 20th century. Some researchers using longitudinal data sets began to focus less on the total amount of time that fathers were engaged with their children and more on fathers' engagement in specific activities, such as amount of time playing with children, frequency of reading to children, and amount of physical care provided to children. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) made similar recommendations based on their meta-analysis of nonresident fathers' effects on their children. Cabrera et al. (2000) argued for a more inclusive approach that would include mothers and fathers if the goal was to understand the role of fathers in children's outcomes and for a focus on positive father involvement. Pleck (1997) referred to these father involvement activities as positive engagement activities. The shift toward assessing positive engagement activities occurred partly because researchers were finding that specific engagement activities, such as amount of time playing or working on projects, were significantly associated with

child outcomes, whereas the overall measures of the amount of paternal engagement were not (Pleck, 2010; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

The shift toward focusing on positive father involvement was important because it brought recognition to the idea that the engagement construct as originally conceived may be too broad or not well defined for understanding fathers' parenting behavior, and in particular, for examining the effects of fathers' parenting on children. Nonetheless, many of the gaps mentioned in relation to the original Lamb–Pleck model have persisted. One problem was that positive engagement was still largely focused on the amount of time (quantity) fathers engage with their children. However, amount of time playing with children, for example, is not positive if the father is intrusive, controlling, or demeaning. In other words, quantity of fathers' positive engagement cannot be equated with quality of their engagement. Additionally, often researchers pick and choose positive father involvement activities without theory informing their selection of father involvement measures.

#### *Revised Conceptualization of Father Involvement*

Pleck (2010) proposed a revised conceptualization of paternal involvement to better reflect the direction of current research studies. The revised model includes positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness, control, indirect care, and process responsibility. Pleck refers to the first three components of the model as the core dimensions of paternal involvement because of the large volume of research showing the importance of these aspects of parenting. Pleck also suggests that there is growing interest in fathers' roles in indirect care of children, defined as participation in activities *for* the child (e.g., arranging for resources to be available for the child, promoting children's community connections) but not involving direct interaction with the child. Process responsibility refers to fathers' use of personal agency such as taking initiative and monitoring what the child needs. As we suggest later, these constructs (e.g., positive engagement, warmth, responsiveness) do not uniquely define what men, as opposed to women, do as they interact with children. Again, it is not clear why this conceptualization exists outside of the parenting literature, which says that mothers

and fathers need to engage in similar parenting behaviors (positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness, control, indirect care, and process responsibility).

#### CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT CONSTRUCTS

Our brief overview of the evolution of one heuristic model of fathers' parenting behavior that has had a major influence on fathering research reveals that quantity of father involvement is still regarded as an important aspect of the conceptualization of fathering (see also Veneziano, 2003). However, we have also seen a move toward greater emphasis on quality of father involvement in this model as well. In this section, we examine the parenting behavior constructs that researchers have included in published studies during the past several years. The purpose of this analysis is to examine whether researchers regard the quantity dimensions of fathers' parenting behavior to be as important as the quality dimensions of fathers' parenting. We recognize that the focus on quantity versus quality may be influenced by the researcher's discipline. For example, developmental psychologists may be more interested in quality of fathers' parenting behavior, whereas sociologists may be more interested in quantity measures. It is also possible that researchers focus on quantity or quality of fathers' parenting behavior because of what is available in existing data sets (Cabrera et al., 2000). Our analysis of the published research does not include a breakdown by discipline or availability of data, and therefore cannot be regarded as a true analysis of researchers' beliefs or values when conceptualizing fathering.

We reviewed all empirical research articles that included measures of fathers' parenting behavior in seven journals that publish articles on parenting; the review covered a 3-year period, including 2009, 2010, and 2011. The journals included *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Family Relations*, *Fathering*, *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, and *Journal of Family Psychology*. We did not include research that focused on fathers' attitudes about being a parent, identity, sense of self-efficacy, parenting stress, or motivation to parent, because we were interested in fathers' actual parenting behaviors rather than fathers' cognitions or emotions.

We identified a total of 115 articles that focused on fathers' perceptions of (i.e., self-reports) or observations of fathers' behavior in relation to children in the seven journals between 2009 and 2011. The first step in conducting this review was to identify whether the measures of behavior used in each article addressed quantity and/or quality of parenting. Next, we developed a list of 32 quantity constructs and 73 quality constructs based on our review of the variables measured in each study. Appendix A includes all articles reviewed as well as the variables included in the study.

Our review shows that 40 out of 115 articles included only measures of the quality of fathers' parenting behavior, 39 articles included only measures of the quantity of fathers' parenting behavior, and 36 articles included measures of both. Of the quality measures, harsh discipline was the most frequently studied variable ( $n = 15$  articles), followed by closeness ( $n = 13$ ), warmth ( $n = 13$ ), support ( $n = 10$ ), and overall relationship quality ( $n = 8$ ). Note that many articles included multiple measures of quality or quantity of fathers' behavior. Of the quantity measures, number of days of contact and/or visits was the most frequently used ( $n = 15$ ), followed by amount of engagement ( $n = 12$ ), child-care tasks ( $n = 12$ ), and overall involvement with the child ( $n = 10$ ).

We noted in our historical overview of conceptualizations of father involvement that the heuristic models of fathering primarily focused on quantity of fathers' parenting behavior. This focus historically made sense at a time when there was a general (but unsubstantiated) view that men were less involved with their children. Our review of articles published recently in major family and developmental journals revealed that more studies included quality measures than quantity measures, and many more quality variables were assessed than quantity measures, even if researchers included both types of variables in their study.

The research literature also reveals that recent studies of mothers included many of the same measures of quality of parenting that were used in studies of fathers, including mothers' use of harsh discipline (Bender et al., 2007; Cabrera et al., 2007, 2008; Miner & Clarke-Stewart, 2008), closeness to the child (Bell & Belsky, 2008; Han, Miller, & Waldfogel, 2010; Vieno, Nation, Pastore, & Santinello, 2009), support (Cabrera et al., 2011), and relationship quality

(Cabrera et al., 2007; Malmberg & Flouri, 2011; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). However, with the exception of time-use studies (Raley et al., 2012), few studies included measures of the quantity of mothers' parenting behavior (i.e., how much time mothers spend in various activities with children). Instead, studies tended to focus on mothers' employment in the labor force (Wills & Brauer, 2012). Variations in mothers' employment were usually assessed by measuring whether the mother worked full-time, part-time, or not at all in a paid job. Huston and Aronson (2005) conducted one of the few studies that examined amount of mother involvement with children, maternal employment, and young children's outcomes.

This partial review of the research literature suggests that researchers frequently include measures of the quality of both fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior with children. Moreover, there appears to be some incongruence between the current heuristic models of father involvement, which tend to emphasize quantity measures, and the large number of studies in which researchers are emphasizing quality. We argue in the remainder of this article that mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior should be conceptualized using the same constructs.

#### PARENTING CONSTRUCTS

The question that we address in this section is whether the constructs of maternal and paternal parenting are structurally different or the same. For example, Adamsons and Buehler (2007) asked whether mothers demonstrate warmth through physical affection, whereas fathers demonstrate warmth through verbal praise and tangible rewards. This question is different from asking how the quantity and quality of fathers' parenting compares to the quantity and quality of mothers' parenting. For example, some studies show that fathers are as sensitive to toddlers as are mothers (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers, & Notaro, 1998; de Falco, Venuti, Esposito, & Bornstein, 2009; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004), but other studies show differences in sensitivity to children (Kwon, Jeon, Lewsader, & Elicker, 2012; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2006). Moreover, if there are differences in the behaviors associated with these constructs on the basis of gender, then how do these father- and mother-specific constructs differentially affect child outcomes?

The play studies have suggested that there may be some fundamental differences in mothers' and fathers' parenting constructs related to play. In some cultures fathers tend to play with their infants and preschool-age children by engaging in physical play (i.e., rough-and-tumble play, or RT), whereas mothers are more likely to engage in toy play (Leavell, Tamis-LeMonda, Ruble, Zosuls, & Cabrera, 2012). Researchers have found that fathers' engagement in high levels of RT play during late preschool coincides with rapid development of the frontal lobe functioning. This area of the brain is associated with self-regulation of behaviors and emotions. Some researchers have thus speculated that fathers may have a unique influence on the development of children's self-regulatory behaviors by engaging in a combination of highly stimulatory play and then setting limits and modeling self-control (i.e., fathers being dominant in dyadic interactions) (Carson, Burks, & Parke, 1993; Paquette, 2004), although the fact that mothers and fathers both engage in RT play, with mothers often engaging in *absolutely* more (though *relatively* less) play than fathers, somewhat weakens this argument (Lamb, 2013; Lamb & Lewis, 2010, 2013). Studies have shown positive relationships between the amount of paternal engagement in RT play and children's self-regulatory behavior among more dominant fathers (Flanders, Leo, Paquette, Pihl, & Sequin, 2009). A longitudinal study of these relationships found that children engaged in more physical aggression when their fathers participated in high levels of RT play and were low in dominance (Flanders et al., 2010).

The play studies may be relevant when attempting to understand whether fathers' and mothers' parenting behaviors are different and have different implications for child development. This is one area of parenting in which there may be meaningful gender differences in parental behavior, at least in some cultures, although there is no evidence that the differences are formatively important. Cross-cultural studies have shown that fathers are more engaged in RT play in some countries but not in others (e.g., Best, House, Barnard, & Spicker, 1994; for a review, see Lamb, 2013), and it is not clear whether fathers' engagement in RT play has significant effects on young children's development that differ from those associated with mothers' engagement in similar play behaviors. Although mothers may engage in proportionately less RT

play, they still engage in this type of play, as noted already, and we are not aware of studies that have examined the effects of both mothers' and fathers' RT play on children. It is possible that both mothers' and fathers' RT play has (or does not have) significant effects on children and that the pathways between mothers' and fathers' play and child outcomes are the same. Moreover, there is a need for research designs that can better isolate the effects of fathers' RT play as well as other types of play interaction on children, by, for example, comparing the effects on children of fathers who engage in low levels of RT play but are highly supportive and warm with their children and fathers who engage in frequent RT play, holding other relevant factors constant.

Remarkably few studies have examined the measurement equivalence (i.e., construct validity) of parenting constructs in mothers and fathers (Adamsons & Buehler, 2007), but a recent qualitative study with 215 fathers used a social constructionist approach to examine the ways in which fathers engage in responsive activities with their children (Asbourne, Daly, & Brown, 2011). The authors concluded that fathers' and mothers' responsiveness were similar, including sensitivity, attunement, joint attention, and adapting to the child's developmental stage. Similarly, Van Leeuwen and Verhulst (2004) examined the factorial validity of the Ghent Parental Behavior Scale (GPBS) among fathers and mothers with children between the ages of 8 and 14 years. The GPBS assesses parents' autonomy, discipline, positive parenting, harsh punishment, monitoring, rules, ignoring, material rewarding, and inconsistent discipline. The authors found no differences in the factor structure among mothers and fathers in a sample of 600 Flemish families. These results suggest that mothers and fathers engage in similar behaviors in an attempt to carry out some of the major functions of parenting (e.g., disciplining children).

Adamsons and Buehler (2007) examined seven types of measurement equivalence (configural, metric, scalar, unique variance, factor variance, factor mean, and functional) on three parenting constructs (acceptance, harshness, psychological intrusiveness) across fathers and mothers of 416 sixth graders. These authors found the measure of psychological intrusiveness demonstrated equivalence at all levels except for the test of unique variance

equivalence. Parental harshness demonstrated equivalence at all levels except for the test of factor variance equivalence. Acceptance demonstrated configural, factor mean, and functional equivalence but not metric, scalar, unique variance, or factor variance equivalence. Adamsons and Buehler concluded that the evidence suggests that measures of harshness and intrusiveness used in their study were equivalent across mothers and fathers. However, this did not seem to be the case regarding acceptance. The authors further concluded that there is a need for future studies to examine the equivalence of parenting constructs across gender, and furthermore to examine whether some constructs are more equivalent than others across gender of parents.

Finley et al. (2008) used confirmatory factor analysis to examine the factor structure of the Nurturant Fathering and Father Involvement Scale and the parallel Nurturant Mothering and Mother Involvement Scale in a sample of 1,714 young adult university students. The findings of this study revealed that the fathering and mothering scales are characterized by isomorphic factor structures, which suggests that the scales address parenting behaviors that are structurally equivalent for fathers and mothers.

Prinz, O'Leary, and Hellmuth (2007) conducted confirmatory factor analysis to examine the psychometric properties of the Parenting Scale (PS) responses of mothers and fathers with elementary school-aged children. The findings of this study revealed that the scale, which assesses parents' disciplinary practices, includes two factors, laxness and overreactivity. The analysis of the father sample ( $n = 559$ ) replicated the factor structure of the mother sample ( $n = 596$ ), which suggests that the PS constructs are structurally equivalent for fathers and mothers.

The studies cited here do not conclusively suggest that the parenting constructs are the same for mothers and fathers. In light of the efforts of researchers to identify separate father and mother parenting behavior constructs over the years, however, we think there is a need for more research to evaluate the extent to which parenting can be conceptualized in similar or dissimilar ways for fathers and mothers. Moreover, researchers who suggest that the parenting constructs are different for fathers and mothers should be explicit in providing theoretical explanations that support their hypotheses that the parenting constructs differ by gender. However,

there does not appear to be sufficient evidence of sufficient variance in the parenting constructs to warrant the development of unique father and mother parenting behavior measures.

#### EFFECTS OF FATHERS' AND MOTHERS' PARENTING BEHAVIORS ON CHILDREN

In this section, we argue that the constructs of fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior are not unique because there is growing evidence that children are similarly affected by the same types of paternal and maternal parenting behaviors. For example, a recent meta-analysis examined fathers' sensitivity and stimulation to determine whether infant-father attachment security is predicted by the combination of these two factors rather than by paternal sensitivity alone (Lucassen et al., 2011). Some researchers have suggested that the combination of paternal sensitivity and stimulation is predictive of child-father attachment, whereas maternal sensitivity is predictive of the child-mother attachment bond (Lucassen et al., 2011). The meta-analysis did not reveal stronger associations between sensitivity and attachment security when it was combined with high stimulation versus low stimulation among fathers. An important implication of this meta-analysis is that the behaviors believed to promote secure child-mother attachments also promote secure child-father attachments. Lucassen et al. (2011) did find that the association between fathers' sensitive interactions with children and attachment security tended to be smaller than is the association between mothers' sensitivity and infant attachment security. The authors suggested that the association between paternal sensitivity and attachment security may be smaller because fathers spend less time with their children than do mothers.

McDowell and Parke (2009) demonstrated that their tripartite model of parenting applies to both mothers and fathers. According to the tripartite model, children's social competence is affected by parent-child interaction (e.g., support), parent advice giving, and parental provision of opportunities to engage in peer interactions. In a recent study of 159 fourth graders, McDowell and Parke showed that mothers' and fathers' engagement in these behaviors predicted children's social competence and social acceptance from peers 1 year later. Malmberg and Flouri (2011) examined

the effects on children's problem behaviors of mother-child and father-child relationship quality using Pianta's (1992) Child-parent Relationship Scale. Mother-child and father-child relationship quality were both related to child behavior, although mothers had larger effects than fathers on their children. Studies have also shown that both mothers' and fathers' average and differential parenting (i.e., parenting received by one child compared with parenting received by siblings) has significant effects on children's oppositional and emotional problems, although the effect sizes for mothers' average and differential parenting tend to be larger than that of fathers (Meunier, Bisceglia, & Jenkins, 2012). Research using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort has shown that the amount of fathers' and mothers' cognitive stimulation of children (e.g., reading, telling stories, singing songs) is positively associated with toddlers' cognitive ability (Cabrera et al., 2011; Fagan & Lee, 2012). This new wave of studies is especially important because researchers are using the same measures to assess parenting by both fathers and mothers (i.e., measuring the same parenting constructs), and as a result, they are able to show the relative formative importance of fathers' and mothers' engagement in the same types of parenting behaviors.

Cross-national studies have also demonstrated that children's and adult offspring's perceptions of parental acceptance are correlated with a wide range of personality dispositions. In their meta-analysis of 50 studies conducted in 18 countries, Khaleque and Rohner (2012) found that offspring (children and adult) perceptions of both maternal and paternal acceptance were significantly associated with each of seven personality dispositions. The mean weighted effect sizes for the associations between maternal acceptance and personality dispositions ranged from .17 to .38. The mean weighted effect sizes for the associations between paternal acceptance and personality dispositions ranged from .21 to .41. These findings suggest very similar effects of parental acceptance regardless of parent gender.

Not all studies show that mothers' and fathers' parenting has similar effects on child outcomes. For example, Martin, Ryan, and Brooks-Gunn (2010) found that fathers' supportive parenting had a positive effect on young children's school readiness only when mothers

scored at or below average on supportiveness. These findings suggest that fathers' supportiveness may sometimes have a buffering effect on the association between low maternal supportive parenting and child outcomes. Regardless of whether studies find main or interactive effects of fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior on children, the recent wave of child outcome studies seems to suggest that the parenting behavior constructs have similar effects on children regardless of the parent's gender, which provides further evidence for our argument that the constructs of fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior are not unique. It is thus important to include the same father and mother parenting constructs when conducting studies of child outcomes. Of course, the specific constructs to be included depend on a number of factors, including the children's ages, the child domain under investigation (e.g., social behavior, cognition), and the theory guiding the study.

#### CONVERGENCE IN ROLES AND AMOUNT OF TIME FATHERS AND MOTHERS SPEND WITH CHILDREN

We have argued thus far for gender-neutral conceptualizations of parenting dimensions, because there does not appear to be evidence of unique father and mother parenting behavior constructs and because studies show that mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior has similar effects on children, although the size of those effects are often larger for mothers than they are for fathers. In this section, we argue that researchers should move toward measuring the same parenting constructs in research studies regardless of the parent's gender in part because there has been much convergence in fathers' and mothers' definitions of their parenting roles and in the amount of time that parents of both genders spend with their children. That is, it is particularly important to include the same quality and quantity parenting constructs for fathers and mothers in research today because both fathers and mothers increasingly assume the same parenting responsibilities and engage in the same parenting activities with their children. In addition to including the same constructs for fathers and mothers, we also think it is becoming increasingly important for researchers to include measures of both quantity and quality of mothers' and father's parenting behavior with children in their studies.

One area of convergence is the amount of time and the types of activities that fathers and mothers engage in with their children when both parents reside together and with their children. Time-diary studies in the United States reveal that fathers in two-parent households tripled the amount of time they spent in primary child care from 2.5 hours per week in 1985 to 7 hours per week in 2000 (Bianchi, Robinson, & Melissa, 2006). A similar trend has been shown for fathers in European countries (Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg, 2004). The 2003–2007 American Time Use Survey revealed that fathers spent slightly more than 7 hours per week in primary child care if the mother was not employed outside of the home (Raley et al., 2012; Wang & Bianchi, 2009). However, if mothers were employed and earned from 60% to 99% of the fathers' earnings, fathers spent 9 hours in primary care per week, and mothers spent 15.3 hours per week in primary child care. The total amount of time that fathers spent with children was 73% that of mothers when mothers worked and earned 60% to 99% of fathers' earnings. Moreover, the ratio of fathers' care to mothers' care increased steadily as mothers contributed more earnings (Raley et al., 2012). Although these findings suggest that mothers still spent considerably more time than fathers with their children in primary child care, there is clear evidence of convergence in the amount of fathers' and mothers' time with children.

There is also evidence from time-diary studies that mothers spend their time with children differently today than they did in past years. Mothers' time spent in engagement activities, such as playing with children, reading to them, or helping with homework, almost tripled from 1.5 hours per week in 1965 to 4.0 hours per week in 2000 (Bianchi, Wight, & Raley, 2005). However, mothers' time spent in routine child-care tasks, such as feeding, clothing, and bathing children, remained constant during this period of time (it should decline as children get older). These changes in mothers' interactive time with children provide further evidence for the need to focus on quantity of mothers' parenting with children.

It is interesting to note that studies that focus on the amount of fathers' parenting with children tend to examine the amount of time spent with their children, whereas studies of the amount of mothers' parenting with children tend to examine mothers' hours of employment (i.e.,

full-time vs. part-time) (Odom, Vernon-Feagans, & Crouter, 2013). There are a few exceptions (i.e., studies that include measures of mothers' time spent with children) (e.g., Gardner, Ward, Burton, & Wilson, 2003; Strom et al., 2003). Mothers' hours of employment do not necessarily translate into hours spent with children, and therefore this is not a good proxy measure of the quantity of mothering (Huston & Aronson, 2005). Although the literature has reported significant associations between mothers' employment status and time spent with children, the associations between these variables are often small to moderate. For example, Buehler and O'Brien (2011) found that mothers employed part-time spent more time engaged in the provision of learning opportunities for their toddlers than did full-time employed mothers; however, the effect size for employment status was small. Similarly, Buehler and O'Brien found a small effect for employment status on mothers' engagement in school activities among school-age children. In light of these recent findings, we think that researchers should include measures of the amount of time mothers spend with their children, which may include measures of engagement and accessibility, in addition to including measures of mothers' employment in the labor force.

The latest economic recession in the United States and other parts of the world provides additional evidence in support of the idea that mothers' and fathers' parenting are converging. Economic recessions and downturns have dramatic effects on parents' involvement in the labor force and on family involvement (Solantaus, Leinonen, & Punamäki, 2004). During the recession that started in 2008, many mothers became the sole or main breadwinner in their families, with fathers spending disproportionately large amounts of time caring for children while their wives or partners worked (Morrill & Pabilonia, 2012). Morrill and Pabilonia (2012) found that, during the latest recession, fathers in the United States spent significantly more time alone with their children in enriching child-care activities, such as reading, homework, and sports, than they did before the recession. Morrill and Pabilonia suggested that parents often try to synchronize their time at work and with children, but this is often not feasible during economic downturns. Such economic pressures may have considerable effects on the quantity and quality of

fathers' and mothers' parenting, as well as on their ability to balance work and family responsibilities. These environmental influences on parents are yet another reason that researchers should include measures of both quantity and quality of fathers' and mothers' parenting, in addition to using the same parenting behavior constructs for fathers and mothers.

Additional evidence for including the same parenting behavior constructs for mothers and fathers (and for including both quantity and quality measures for both) comes from research on divorced families with shared residential custody of children. Nielsen (2011) noted that, in the mid-1980s, from 5% to 7% of children whose parents were divorced in the United States resided at least 33% of the time with their fathers. Dramatic increases in shared residential custody have recently occurred in many US states. For example, from 30% to 50% of divorced couples in Arizona and Washington (George, 2008) and 30% of couples in Wisconsin (Melli & Brown, 2008) reported having shared residential custody (i.e., children spent at least 33% of the time with each parent). Such changes in the living arrangements of children whose parents are divorced point to the need to examine both quantity and quality of mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior with children. For example, a number of researchers have found that children who resided at least 30% of the time with their fathers reported having better-quality relationships with their fathers (Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012).

The parenting literature has shown quite robustly that the quality of fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior matters in regard to child outcomes. This becomes clear when one reviews the growing body of studies that focus on the quality of fathers' and mothers' relationships with children. Few studies have examined whether the effects of the quality of fathers' parenting behavior on children increases when children whose parents have shared residential custody spend more time with their fathers and less time with their mothers. This may be a fruitful area for exploration and provide further justification for including quantity and quality measures of both mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior. Generally speaking, we propose here that there is a need to better capture the complexity in today's families, and this involves assessing the same parenting constructs and including both the quantity and

the quality of fathers' and mothers' parenting. This task should not be conceived as a simple matter, however. Mothers' and fathers' patterns of parenting behavior may change over time depending on factors including, but not limited to, the environment, age of the child, gender of the child, family structure, and socioeconomic status. For example, mothers may initially be the primary care providers, only to switch with fathers who become unemployed.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We believe that there are a number of significant implications for future research based on the arguments presented in this article. One such implication is that researchers interested in examining fathers' parenting behaviors should move toward a more general model of parenting rather than a model that emphasizes separate dimensions of fathering and mothering. We justify this position on the basis of a lack of sufficient evidence suggesting that the parenting behavior constructs are different for fathers and mothers, the growing body of research showing that parenting behavior dimensions have similar effects on children regardless of the parent's gender (though the size of the effects may be different), and increasing evidence of convergence in maternal and paternal roles and levels of involvement with children. At the same time, we think that there is still a need to continue conducting measurement equivalence research on parenting constructs. Researchers can best contribute to our understanding of parenting constructs across gender by including the same measures for mothers and fathers in their studies. There is a great deal of knowledge that can be gained by conducting such analyses. Researchers can help the field to know whether parenting behavior constructs vary by gender. For example, it may be the case that the parenting constructs are the same for mothers and fathers in some societies but not others. It is also possible that some parenting constructs are the same for mothers and fathers but that others are different, as has been suggested in the research findings of Adamsons and Buehler (2007). It is also important to note that few studies have examined the measurement equivalence of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of parenting for fathers and mothers. That is, gender differences in the structure of parenting constructs may be more likely to occur in the cognitive and emotional dimensions

of parenting than in the behavioral dimensions of parenting. This is an important area for future research.

We also think that it is becoming increasingly important for researchers to include measures of the same parenting constructs when conducting studies of the effects of fathers and mothers on child outcomes. For example, researchers should measure quantity of father and mother involvement with children using the same quantity constructs (e.g., accessibility to children). Moreover, comparable instruments should be used to measure these constructs among fathers and mothers. For example, it is not sufficient to assess mothers' sensitivity to children using observational methods and then administer survey questions to fathers about their sensitivity. It is noteworthy that researchers should assess parenting constructs and utilize measures that are appropriate for the age of the children being studied, the types of child behaviors and outcomes being studied, and the theoretical framework guiding the work. Regardless of the conceptual and measurement decisions made, researchers should employ the same constructs and measures to assess the ways in which mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors are related to child outcomes. In addition, we argue that parenting research needs to examine main and interactive effects of mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior on children. When parenting research needs to focus on one parent, then good designs demand that the contribution of the other parent be controlled for.

Another conclusion of our analysis is that researchers should include measures of both quality and quantity of parenting by mothers and fathers. We have attempted to make the case that convergence of maternal and paternal roles in Western societies warrants consideration of quantity and quality of paternal and maternal parenting behavior with children. The fathering literature has made tremendous strides in assessing quantity of involvement through its emphasis on variables such as engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. This template for assessing quantity may be very useful for examining mothers' involvement with children. Researchers should be cognizant of the need to include the same constructs and measures of quantity of parenting behavior with children when collecting data from mothers and fathers. Additionally, researchers should be aware of the need to understand quantity (and quality) of

fathers' and mothers' parenting in the context of children's developmental needs and understand that the relationships between and among parents and children are different across developmental periods. Studies that are undertaken to include assessments of quantity and quality of parenting may lead to a better understanding of how the quantity of higher or lower quality parenting behavior matters to children.

We have also suggested that researchers should work toward addressing the complex arrangements of parenting in today's families. Researchers should not assume that families are always two-parent families living under one roof. Including both quantity and quality measures of parenting will be one positive step toward capturing this complexity. However, this will also require large data sets that can accommodate more variables, as will be the case when quantity and quality measures of mother and father parenting behavior are included. Including multiple mother and father variables may also necessitate using data analysis techniques such as multilevel modeling that are well suited for showing the relationships between parenting constructs among multiple actors (e.g., mothers and fathers) and for assessing the relative effects of each actor on child outcomes. We also think that there may be value in developing profiles of families that can be used to capture complex parenting patterns and arrangements. For example, one pattern may involve parents who switch off with each other in caring for children from week to week. In such families (e.g., divorced families), children may be exposed to a responsive, warm parent one week and a detached, nonresponsive parent the next week. Such profiles may better reflect the realities of today's families. The development of parenting profiles is just one way to examine mothers' and fathers' parenting within the context of the family. Other approaches to understanding fathers' and mothers' decisions about roles and parenting behaviors in the context of the family should be explored as well.

We stated early in this article that we struggle to find solid evidence that the father and mother parenting behavior constructs differ fundamentally. Our argument that the father parenting behavior constructs are not unique could be debated by researchers who would say that the field has given up on trying to identify and define that uniqueness and instead has taken the "lazy route" of just adopting the measures we

use for assessing parenting in general. In other words, just because researchers have switched to studying gender-neutral parenting constructs may not be a strong indicator that men do not do something unique and we have not done the work to find it. Such arguments, however, ignore research studies showing that the parenting constructs are similar for mothers and fathers. The arguments also ignore studies using a variety of measures showing that children are similarly affected by the same types of paternal and maternal parenting behaviors. There are however researchers who propose that fathers' parenting behavior may have features that are connected to children's outcomes in unique ways. Although this may be true, the burden of proof resides with those who make such assertions. We welcome healthy debate about these issues and hope that researchers will take seriously the need to better understand fathers' and mothers' parenting behavior with children.

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#### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

**Appendix A.** Review of parenting dimensions/variables measured in fathering research papers published in seven journals between 2009 and 2011.