Are Fathers Necessary For Positive Child Development?

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“I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well.”
- Alexander the Great

Introduction

Origins and Methodological Criticisms of the Fathers’ Debate

Unlike mothers, popular opinions of fathers appear to vary widely among public consensus. From one extreme, Freud (1930/1961a) notes “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection” (p32). But on the other hand, the very fact that we must ask ourselves “Are fathers necessary?” clearly testifies to the deprived position they have in society in comparison to mothers. The father’s role it seems is considered inferior to that of the mother’s. There are those who of course will argue otherwise and indeed the urgency for involved fathering is a fundamental aspect to the protests of father’s rights activists. What this essay will argue however, is that fathers should not be viewed in terms of their gender. Fathers are restricted by this definition, and just like mothers they should be viewed in terms of parents – a term that eliminates the confines of gender. The essay will begin by first scrutinising the methodological faults of the many studies that preach the necessity of fathers. It will then introduce several studies that might be considered as more reliable to use in the debate about the necessity of fathers. The sociological implications of the discourse of “father” will also be a theme of this essay, highlighting the need to deconstruct this.

Pleck (2004) notes that popular and scholarly discussions of fatherhood have long focused and dwelled on the importance of fathers’ “involvement”. This involvement is often defined in terms of inadequate or absent fathers. When debating over the necessity of fathers for child development, it may indeed first
appear logical to begin by analysing findings of studies that simply deal with levels of father involvement. In other words, by comparing the behaviour of children with or without fathers, we can then directly investigate the influence that fathers have on their offspring. Indeed an overwhelming volume of literature has consistently found that children who are raised with their fathers are far better off than those who are raised without fathers. Studies have shown that the positive involvement of fathers can benefit children’s IQ/cognitive functioning (Pougnet et al, 2011), can lead to less externalising and internalising childhood behavioural problems (Hofferth, 2006), can reduce later substance abuse in children (Goncya & Van Dulmena, 2010), reduce childhood obesity (Wake et al, 2007), reduce later criminal delinquency (Coley & Medeiros, 2007), and even reduce maternal physical child abuse (Guterman et al, 2009). From a socioeconomic standpoint it may also appear that fathers are vital, with the positive involvement of a father associated with better access to health care (Gorman & Braverman, 2008), reduction in household poverty (Edin & Kissane, 2010), and significantly reducing the likelihood of a child repeating a year in school (Nord & West, 2001). At first glance, it may indeed appear that fathers are crucial to ensure the stability of healthy child development - children without a father do worse, children with a father do better. However, it takes much more than a glance to approach this debate in a more logical and reasoned way. The assumption of these studies is, essentially, that it’s possible to compare the behaviour and personalities of children raised with or without fathers, and conclude that the differences these children display are due to their relative disparities in father involvement.

The studies mentioned above all however exhibit one common flaw that leads to the misrepresentation of their results. This flaw is that they, like so many studies on fathers, compare a married two parent family to a single one parent family. The studies may then conclude that fathers are vital because absence of them leads to so many negative consequences. However, as Biblarz & Stacey (2010) argue, our ideas of what fathers do and provide cannot be based primarily on contrasts between married-coupled parents and single-female parents. This is largely an apples-to-oranges exercise that conflates number of parents, marital status, gender and sexual orientations. Biblarz & Stacey (2010) consolidated the available data on the role of gender in child rearing and noted that most of the data falls short of distinguishing between a father and the income a father provides, or distinguishing between the involvement of a father and the involvement of a second parent.

Parent and Father: Examining the Difference
It could be argued that it is not the lack of a loving father that leads to the negative outcomes for the child, but rather the lack of a loving parent. It is this absence of a co-parent that should be viewed as the bigger culprit for the problems found in children raised by a single parent. Possible benefits can clearly be seen from having a partner to help out with child care, perhaps participate in tough decisions, and to relieve the other of the regular demands of child care. The “absent father” must therefore not be viewed in terms of gender, but rather with reference to the roles and duties of a parent that are left vacant due to this absence. Absence of one parent means that all economic, social and emotional parental roles must now be filled by a single, strained parent.

Approaching comparative studies of family structures in this way is crucial to an informed understanding of how fathers may influence child development. In another critique of comparative studies, Lamb (2010) notes how most single parent families stem from divorce. Since divorce is so frequently accompanied by periods of overt and covert spousal hostility, parental conflict may play a major role in explaining the apparent problems of “fatherless” children. Substantial literature supports the links between interparental processes, including marital quality and interparental conflict, and also child and adolescent adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Therefore we cannot assume that children’s behavioural problems are a result of their now “non-residential father”. A hostile, tense environment is much more likely to be the reason for these problems. Marital conflict leads to greater stress for both partners, and as a result they may become less capable of looking after their children.

These detrimental effects of pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict are well documented (Cummings & Davies, 2011; Kelly, 2000). Once again it is not the absence of a father that is a direct cause of childhood problems, but rather the underlying factors that happened to lead to this absence, i.e. marital conflict and divorce. For example children in single parent families whose father has died previous can fare better than those in single parent families directly following a divorce (Rutter, 1971; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). Children tend to suffer when fathers are unsupportive during marital conflict (Cummings & O’Reilly, 1997) and there is also a wide body of marital conflict research that has outlined several possible adverse effects on child development, such as increased risk of substance abuse (Barrett & Turner, 2006), mental health problems (Amato, 2001) and high-risk sexual behaviour (Hetherington, 1999). In addition to this, the perceived and often actual abandonment by one of their parents emotionally affects children (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Thompson & Laible, 1999).
It appears that marital conflict is associated with child maladjustment, while marital harmony is associated with child adjustment. Perhaps we can reference Bandura’s (1977) influential Social Learning Theory to note that if people, especially children, learn within a social context, it is vital for their learning to be facilitated by positive influential models. The positive influence of a parent is somewhat eroded by marital conflict. Behavioural problems arise from this conflict and it is this conflict that can be seen as an underlying factor in the perceived developmental problems of children who do not live with their fathers. Once again, we must not use studies of divorce as a way of advocating the necessity for fathers. Instead we should use them to demonstrate that children simply need a loving, nurturing and hostile-free environment, which is best easily facilitated through a healthy relationship between two loving parents, regardless of gender.

**Essential Father: Fact or Fiction**

Let us now approach this essay’s theme of “parent rather than father” through a different lens. We have seen how it is a flawed idea to compare children of coupled-parents to children of single parents, due to the fact that there are so many underlying differences at play (the absence of a father being just one of many). To argue that fathers are necessary for child development would suggest that fathers exclusively possess unique and essential qualities that mothers do not. The idea that fathers, by virtue of being male, make an essential contribution to child development has been present in the literature since at least the 1940s (Pleck, 1981). Silverstein and Auerbach (1999, p.197) summarise this “essentialist” notion in their critical analysis, “fathers are understood as having a unique and essential role to play in child development, especially for boys who need a male role model to establish a masculine gender identity”. This idea of the essential father is certainly very topical among public discussion, and the idea has several scholarly advocates (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996; Wilson, 2002). These advocates claim that fathers are necessary for children's development due to their unique, and more importantly, male qualities. The essentialist perspective argues that fathering and mothering are distinct biological and social roles, ones that are not interchangeable.

To argue for or against this notion, we must first eliminate the effects of having a male parent or not. Again keeping in mind the methodological need for reliable comparative studies, such comparisons can be made only between pairs of family structures that hold constant the number of parents, but vary in whether they include a male parent. Adequate comparisons include single fathers and single mothers, male two-parent gay families and two-parent lesbian families, and two-parent het-
erosexual families and two-parent lesbian families. Comparisons of the latter provide little support that a male father is necessary for healthy development. Children raised by lesbian mothers do not tend to display a greater number of negative developmental outcomes in comparison to their heterosexual-parented counterparts (Patterson & Chan, 1999; Stacey & Blalarz, 2001; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). Furthermore, boys raised by lesbian couples do not possess fewer male characteristics than others (MacCallum & Golombek, 2004).

Seeing as the concept of lesbian mothers raising a child is relatively new and possibly contentious in society, it could be argued by some that competent lesbian mothers tend to be extremely motivated to simply volunteer for such studies in order to prove their adequacy. Supporters of the essential father debate may therefore argue that the results are biased. However, one set of studies (Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2006, 2008) rigorously drew out a large scale representative sample of adolescents and their families in the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. Children of lesbian couples were contrasted with children of heterosexual couples on many variables such as self-esteem, anxiety, trouble in school, school connectedness, depression and neighbourhood integration. Results showed absolutely no significant differences between the two groups of adolescents. Furthermore, later investigations (Wainright & Patterson, 2008) showed that children of lesbian couples actually exhibited less substance abuse and delinquency than the children raised by a woman and a man. A healthy adolescence clearly stems from a healthy childhood, and it seems that this is perfectly possible without the presence of a father.

As mentioned earlier, we can also use comparative studies of single parents because the number of parents remains constant but the gender of the parent does not. Again the results do not bode well for proponents of the essential father debate. In comparison to single mothers, single fathers display a greater difficulty in monitoring their children’s school progress, friends, and whereabouts (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), display poorer involvement, rule setting and closeness (Hawkins et al., 2006), and have lower educational expectations for their child (Downey, 1994). In addition to this, children of single fathers display worse grades (Downey, 1994; Pike, 2002), worse teacher ratings (Downey et al., 1998) and display a greater likelihood of substance abuse (Hoffmann, 2002). These studies all hold possible variances of socioeconomic attributes constant that may exist between single mothers and single fathers.

The findings above are quite catastrophic for the essentialists, the studies do
not even support popular claims that fathers are somehow better able to keep boys in line or command respect from their children. However, it must be repeated once more that children of single mothers still fare worse than children of coupled heterosexual parents. So even though studies of single parents appear to be detrimental to the essential father, there is still evidence that fathers do play some role in the healthy development of a child. This role however is likely to not be grounded in maleness, but rather on the father’s capacity to act as a responsible, loving and caring parent.

A more reasonable alternative to the essential father hypothesis may be what Pleck (2010) suggests as an “important father” hypothesis. Pleck’s view holds that good fathering is simply one of many factors promoting positive child outcomes, and these outcomes are not necessarily linked to the father’s masculinity. In a large-scaled study based on longitudinal evidence Sarkadi et al. (2008) reviewed 24 publications of father involvement. 22 of these described positive effects of father involvement and the review went on to recommend that policy makers should strive for greater involved fathering. From this evidence we can indeed see how fathers might be deemed “necessary” by essentialists and father’s rights activists. But perhaps the term “involved parenting” would be more suitable than involved fathering. Likewise “important” might be more reasonable to use than essential.

**Deconstructing the Discourse of Father**

Lesbian couples demonstrate that gender does not play an essential role in child development. In fact Biblarz & Stacey (2010) point out that based strictly on the published science, one could even argue that two women parent better on average than a woman and a man. Less is known about male homosexual couples, and Biblarz & Stacey acknowledge that this is a slim body of research. Of the few studies that do focus on gay male parents, results show that the children they raise do not tend to exhibit any significant behavioural problems as a result of having no mother (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002; Stacey, 2006). By analysing the findings from studies of both lesbian mothers and gay fathers, we can demonstrate that the gender of a parent is not a significant factor. Two lesbian mothers should not be viewed in terms of their femininity, much like gay fathers should not be viewed as a “double dose” of masculinity Stacey (2006) notes a “passion for parenthood” (p27) that is seen among gay men, and indeed straight men too. The discourse of a “father” is therefore flawed because it restricts men to their gender. Men and women alike should instead be viewed in terms of their desire to be parents, not their desire to be mothers or fathers. This is summed up nicely in Stacey’s (2006) aptly titled article, “Gay Parenthood and the Decline of Paternity as
We Knew It”. Without ‘masculine’ contributions of boisterous play and ‘feminine’ yearnings for nurture and care, paternity, but certainly not male parenthood, might become obsolete. In their analysis of children’s cognitive outcomes, Martin, Ryan & Brooks-Gunn (2007) also concluded that “among children with one supportive parent, the sex of that parent was inconsequential” (p423). Findings like this heavily erode Popenoe’s (1996) argument that two married, biological parents are the gold standard for childrearing.

Therefore the lack of a female parent is not important for gay fathers, much like the lack of a male parent is not important for lesbian mothers. Mallon (2004) notes how gay fathers can sometimes consider themselves more similar to mothers than to fathers – “As a gay dad, I’m not a mom, but sometimes I think I have more in common with moms than I do with straight dads” (p138). Statements such as this testify to the notion that we must deconstruct the societal discourses that define “fathers”. Articles and arguments about “Are Fathers Necessary?” are unfair because they put men into the same trap that women have been clambering out for years. They reduce us to our biology, and relevant stereotypes are fortified by branding fathers and mothers as opposite entities. Of course in the past, decades ago, the differences between fathers and mothers were more blatant with the traditional nuclear family being dominated by a breadwinning father and a home-making, child-rearing mother. Society had indeed once viewed fathers as all-powerful patriarchs who are entitled to yield unconditional dominance over their families (Knibiehler, 1995), but these roles have since changed. In line with this change, researchers began to realise the newly found potential of the father as a parent. In such a context, it must have been easy for Michael Lamb to entitle his first essay on the subject, “Fathers: Forgotten Contributions to Child Development” (Lamb, 1975). Nowadays researchers do not constrict fathers to their uni-dimensional role of breadwinning. Instead they are recognised in terms of care providers, companions, protectors, moral guides, models, teachers – as well as breadwinners. Mothers play identical roles to those listed above and so it should be important to identify that these are the roles of a parent. Certain roles are no longer exclusive to a mother or to a father and therefore the gender of a parent is a trivial characteristic. In a much more recent essay, Lamb (2010) notes “the differences between mothers and fathers appear much less important than the similarities” (p10).

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the societal forces that may surround and define fathers, the question of “Are Fathers Necessary for Positive Child Development” can be viewed as similar to the question of “Is Gender Necessary for Positive Child De-
development”. The extensive volume of research outlined above would argue that the answer to both of these questions appears to be a resounding no. There is an oversimplified obsession with a masculine rolemodel among public consensus. We should however be looking for good parents, not fathers. Parental warmth, closeness, and nurture are associated with positive child outcomes regardless of whether the parent involved is a mother or a father. Even some past proponents of the necessity of fathers have begun to realise the insignificance of gender. Pruett (2000), a prominent advocate of involved fathering, writes “I also now realise that most of the enduring parental skills are probably, in the end, not dependent on gender” (p18). Perhaps others will follow suit, and maybe in the future the support of the traditional nuclear family will be unanimously considered as an out-dated cultural artefact. At this point no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for children’s well-being. Are fathers necessary for positive child development? Probably not. Are parents? Most definitely.

References


