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Relationships between fathers' attachment, their parenting behaviors and child adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how fathers' attachment in close relationships (as measured by three dimensions--(a) comfort with dependency, (b) comfort with closeness, and (c) relationship anxiety) relates to their observed parenting behaviors, and how the fathers' attachment dimensions are related to their children's adjustment outcomes. Differences in attachment dimensions between Mexican American and Caucasian fathers were also explored. The sample included in the analysis was a subset from the Supporting Father Involvement study based in California. Participants were ninety fathers, predominantly low-income, with two thirds Mexican American and approximately one fourth European American.

The findings indicated that fathers' attachment was related to child adjustment outcomes. Fathers' lower anxiety, higher comfort with dependency, and higher comfort with closeness were associated with *higher* child adjustment. Higher anxiety, lower comfort with dependency, and lower comfort with closeness were associated with *poorer* child adjustment. Fathers' attachment was not associated with parenting behaviors, and no relationship was found between fathers' parenting behaviors and child adjustment outcomes. Fathers' attachment dimensions did not vary based on ethnicity; however, Limit Setting/Expectations were marginally higher for Caucasian fathers than Mexican American fathers. Further examination of these relationships is detailed and the importance of including factors such as the co-parental relationship and marital quality in future studies is emphasized.

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FATHERS' ATTACHMENT, THEIR PARENTING
BEHAVIORS AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT**

A project based upon an independent investigation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Fathers play a unique role in supporting the emotional world of a child. They are not solely “breadwinners” providing monetary resources, but also promote the overall social, emotional and intellectual well-being of their children (Lamb, 2010). In a review of longitudinal studies on fathers’ involvement, Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid and Bremberg (2008) found that father engagement was protective; it related to decreased behavioral and psychological problems, risk of delinquency, and increased IQ and educational attainment in children. Therefore, it is critical to understand the roles that fathers play in their children’s upbringing. However, compared to the extensive literature on the impact of mothers, there is a dearth of studies examining how fathers influence their child’s development. One central vehicle to enhancing the healthy development of children is the father-child attachment relationship (Bretherton, 2010).

Attachment is both a psychological and physiological tie across an entire lifespan. An attachment relationship is an affective bond that one individual has to another individual; “a tie that binds them together in space and endures over time” (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970, p.50). At the first stages of life, both infants and caregivers participate in developing an attachment relationship. In order to survive, infants show behaviors that maintain proximity to the caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). For instance, a baby’s coos and smiles reward the caregiver, ensuring closeness. In turn, when the baby becomes distressed, the caregiver is driven to provide comfort. Hazan and

Shaver (1994) maintain that “any real or perceived obstacle to proximity maintenance results in anxiety, which in turn triggers attachment behaviors designed to establish proximity” (p.3).

Each caregiver serves as a safe haven who provides comfort and reassurance when the infant experiences separation distress. When proximity maintenance is established, the infant experiences security and love. The caregiver then serves as a secure base from which the infant feels comfortable playing and exploring. A caregiver who is repeatedly responsive and sensitive to the infant’s needs becomes an important attachment figure to the infant. Hazan and Shaver (1994) state that through “repeated interactions with the caregiver, the infants learn what to expect, and they adjust their behaviors accordingly” (p.5). As the child and caregiver interact, they form internal working models of themselves and of each other. Ainsworth observed and noted infant-mother interactions and categorized caregiver sensitivity into three categories: consistently sensitive, consistently insensitive or inconsistent. Ainsworth posited that this caregiver sensitivity -- how the caregiver notices, interprets and responds to infant’s cues, is linked to three infant attachment classifications. Secure, avoidant, or ambivalent infants had caregivers who were consistently sensitive, consistently insensitive, or inconsistent, respectively (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Attachment in infants was first measured in the laboratory using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (Ainsworth et al., 1978), which activated the infant’s attachment system by separating the infant from the caregiver in an unfamiliar environment. The behavior of the infant when reunited with the caregiver determined the infant’s attachment style. Ainsworth found that securely attached infants were soothed, stopped crying and resumed exploration during the reunion episode. Infants with an ambivalent attachment resisted comfort, were not soothed and in some instances acted angry. Infants with an avoidant attachment avoided contact with the

caregiver and directed their attention to their toys with little interest. In 1990, Main and Solomon described a fourth pattern of disorganized attachment. This group of infants looked startled and had an approach-avoidance reaction during the reunion episodes with the caregiver. Frightening and harsh parenting behaviors were linked to this attachment pattern. The attachment patterns described are not only seen in infants, but are evident in people of all ages; Hazan and Shaver (1994) assert that “the functions and dynamics of the attachment system” continue throughout the lifespan (p.7).

Couple Attachment Systems

Adult attachment relationships are formed when adult peers satisfy the needs for emotional support and security that caregivers once provided. Adults obtain security through physical comfort and the knowledge that their attachment figures can be readily available if needed (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). As in children, the adult attachment system is activated when an event is perceived as threatening (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Adults form internal beliefs and expectations (mental representations) of how sensitive and responsive their partner will be when they are distressed. These mental representations of attachment figures can “create a sense of safety and security, which helps a person deal successfully with threats” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p.13).

Fraley and Shaver (2000) describe that “as people build new relationships, they rely partly on previous expectations about how others are likely to behave and feel toward them, and they use these models to interpret the goals or intentions of their partners” (p.136). Therefore, patterns of attachment in childhood can influence adult attachment patterns. Bartholomew (1990) maintains that adult attachment styles are defined by an individual’s “model of self” (positive or negative) and “model of other” (positive or negative), and can be placed along avoidance

(discomfort with closeness and depending on partners, preference for self-reliance and emotional distance) or anxiety (fear of separation, abandonment, strong desire for closeness) dimensions.

The different combinations of self and other models along these dimensions form four different adult attachment patterns, as described by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and shown in

Figure 1, with model of self and other added:

Secure- “It is relatively easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.”

Dismissing- “I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.”

Preoccupied- “I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.”

Fearful- “I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I sometimes worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.”

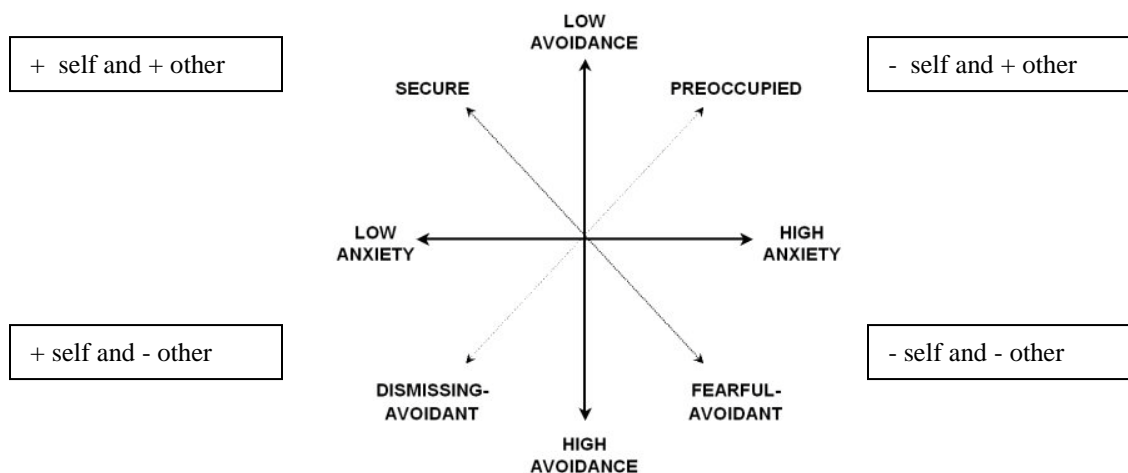


Figure 1 - Diagram of the two-dimensional model including the four different adult attachment styles.

Father-child Attachments

In looking at child development, it is important to consider not only the child's attachment to the father, but the father's adult attachment style. Adult attachment may impact how adults as caregivers relate to their children. A father who has a secure attachment has "trust in partners and expectations of partner availability and responsiveness, comfort with closeness and interdependence, and ability to cope with threats and stressors in constructive ways" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p.27). Thus, a father with a secure attachment style will likely have positive working models of himself and of his child, and may be an effective caregiver as a result. In this way, a father's attachment style is likely to contribute to how the father provides caregiving, which in turn affects a child's overall development.

It has been well established that children form attachment bonds with their fathers (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1969; Lamb, 1977). Studies examining child attachment show that both parents can foster a secure attachment with their child (Grossmann, Grossmann, Kindler, & Zimmermann, 2008). Lamb (1977) maintains that infant-mother and infant-father attachment relationships may play unique roles in the development of the child. Generally, fathers spend a significantly higher percentage of their time playing with the child than the mother (Lamb, 2010). The father-child attachment relationship typically "activates" the child, and serves to satisfy the "child's need to be stimulated, to overcome limits, and to learn to take chances in contexts in which the child is confident of being protected from potential dangers" (Paquette, 2004, p.202). In contrast, the mother-child attachment relationship is typically calming for the child.

When Ainsworth (1967) conducted her observational studies of infant attachment with caregivers in Uganda, she noted that infants seemed to have formed an attachment relationship with their fathers despite seeing their fathers infrequently. Although research is not conclusive on

how the infant-father attachment is formed, studies note that infants are likely to have a secure attachment to fathers when the father is sensitive and responsive to the child's needs (Cohn, Cowan, Cowan and Pearson, 1992; van IJzendoorn, 1995), similar to the mother-infant attachment. Other studies, however, have found no significant relationship between father-infant attachment and paternal responsiveness (van IJzendoorn, Kranenburg, Zwart-Woudstra, van Busschbach, & Lambermon, 1991; Rosen & Rothbaums 1993) and sensitivity (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers, & Wang, 2001). More recent research proposes that a "father's warm, supportive, and sensitive challenges during joint play may best reflect" the father-child attachment quality (Grossmann et al., 2008, p.859).

When children feel secure, they will use their fathers as a secure base from which they will feel comfortable to engage in exploration. Grossmann et al. (2008) note that the "father's functioning as a sensitive, trusted, and dependable companion when the child is faced with challenges seems to be the central marker of a secure relationship" (p.858). Therefore, it is critical to analyze how fathers' attachment styles relate to how they interact with their children, as it can influence how children make gains in their social emotional development. In this study, I will explore how fathers' attachment relates to their parenting behaviors and to child adjustment outcomes.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Various studies have examined how fathers with an insecure attachment style have a more negative view of their parenting role and have difficulty being attuned to their child's needs. For instance, studies have found that insecure parents experience less joy and pleasure in parenting and perceive their infants as having more difficult temperaments than do secure parents (Howard, 2010; Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006). Similarly, Pesonen, Räikkönen, Keltikangas-Järvinen, Strandberg, & Järvenpää (2003) found that parents who were classified in the adult attachment dimensions as high on anxiety and high on avoidance were more likely to rate their infants as more fearful, more easily distressed, and negatively reactive. The study also found that fathers who had an insecure attachment perceived their infants as less attentive than did fathers with a secure attachment. Rholes et al. (2006) studied couples who were transitioning into parenthood, and found that parents who had higher levels of attachment avoidance had less desire to become parents, and felt greater stress and found less meaning and satisfaction in their parental roles after their children were born. They stated that "avoidant people are uncomfortable with the distress of others and may fail to recognize distress or respond to it empathically because doing so makes it more difficult for them to keep their own attachment systems deactivated" (p.282). Thus, it is more difficult for insecurely attached parents to be consistently responsive to their child's needs, as it is taxing to keep the attachment system frequently activated. Howard (2010) also found that fathers with anxious-avoidant or ambivalent attachment styles experienced more parenting stress and were more likely to abuse their children.

IJzendoorn et al. (1991) found no effect of father attachment style (measured by the Adult Attachment Interview) on fathers' sensitivity and infant attachment style. Other studies did find correlations. For example, Cohn et al. (1992) found that insecure fathers' interactions with their children were less warm and structured during play sessions compared to fathers who were classified as secure (measured by AAI). In addition, Newland, Coyl, and Hui-Hua Chen (2010) found that fathers who were more ambivalent and avoidant had less warm involvement (defined as warm, responsive and involved parenting) with their children.

It stands to reason that children's outcomes might also be related to fathers' attachment styles. Compared to children of secure and preoccupied fathers, children of dismissing fathers were rated as more aggressive, less social and less timid by their preschool teachers (van IJzendoorn et al., 1991). Cohn et al. (1992) found that children of fathers classified as insecure on the AAI, which notes current and past working models of close relationship experiences (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984), displayed more negative affect and were less task oriented and warm. Therefore, fathers' insecure attachment style may relate to adverse child outcomes.

Recent research suggests that measuring fathers' play-based interactions with their children, as opposed to using the strange situation protocol, is a more accurate portrayal of the way fathers foster relationships with their children and affect child outcomes (Bretherton, 2010; Grossmann et al., 2008; Paquette, 2004). More specifically, Paquette (2004) maintains that fathers' synchrony in play with their child builds the father-child attachment relationship; "father's help their children modulate intense affect by increasing the intensity level of [rough and tumble play] and then reducing it when it exceeds what their child can tolerate" (p.209). Grossmann et al. (2008) developed the Sensitive and Challenging Interacting Play Scale (SCIP) to guide their assessment of fathers' interactions with children during play. The researchers

measured the degree of supportiveness, encouragement, non-intrusiveness, and age appropriate challenges that fathers provide, as these promote the development of children's sense of efficacy and ability to regulate emotions (Grossmann et al., 2008). Father's ratings on the SCIP scale were correlated with several child outcomes. For instance, according to Grossmann, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Dindler, and Scheuerer-Englisch (2002), fathers who had high SCIP scores during play sessions with their infants were more likely to have 10-year-olds who used developmentally appropriate coping behaviors, had congruent verbal responses to their non-verbal expressions, and had more positive evaluations of the availability of their supportive others. The aforesaid studies offer insight into how fathers' ways of interacting with their children promote the socioemotional development of their children. As fathers rouse their children and set limits during physical play, the child learns how to regulate emotions and builds self-confidence. Additionally, the father's ability to be in synchrony in affect and direction during father-child play interactions may be a reflection of his secure attachment.

Gaps in the Literature

Studies attempting to explain how fathers' attachment dimensions relate to the way they interact with their children have reported contradictory findings. This may be due to the different ways that studies have measured fathers' caregiving behaviors and child outcomes. For instance, van IJzendoorn et al. (1991) and Cohn et al. (1992) used play sessions to code how fathers interacted with their children, but the studies used different measures for assessing attachment and children's response. The study conducted by van IJzendoorn et al. (1991) relied on the SSP, which has mostly been used for assessing mother-child attachment (Bretherton, 2010), while Cohn et al. (1992) analyzed children's behaviors in response to their fathers' behaviors during free play sessions. Other studies used less objective methods to assess how children responded to

their fathers: Newland et al. (2010) studied children's perceptions of their fathers' parenting styles, while Howard (2009) asked fathers to evaluate their children's security and dependency. Some studies (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan & Pearson, 1996; Grossmann et al., 2002, van IJzendoorn et al., 1991) used the AAI to classify fathers' type of attachment (i.e., insecure versus secure "states of mind with respect to attachment") (Bretherton, 2010). On the AAI, adults are asked to recall past childhood experiences and explain their current thoughts on those relationships.

Attachment style can change as dynamics in current relationships shift, people work through their past relationship experiences, and new relationships are formed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus it is important to measure current relationship attachment. Information on how fathers' play interactions influence father-child relationships in poor or working-class families is not available, as most of the aforementioned studies have samples of middle-class Caucasian families. Furthermore, the studies did not address how fathers of different races and ethnicities would engage in parenting and how their attachment styles may vary depending on cultural context. Therefore, investigating fathers' attachment dimensions and parenting behaviors, while also including demographics related to ethnicity and socio-economic status, may help us understand how fathers' internal working models influence their current parenting.

Adult Attachment and Culture

Yu, Lucero-Liu, Gamble, Taylor, Christensen and Modry-Mandell (2008) note that "cultural values affect which social interactions should be expected, accepted, rewarded, or condemned in each context and differentially influence how individuals within a culture recognize, evaluate, and react to behavior" (p. 170). It is reasonable to expect that culture could also impact attachment behaviors. Differences in fathers' attachment styles between cultural

groups may be indicative of cultural differences. This study will examine differences between two groups by comparing Mexican American and Caucasian American fathers.

Mexican Americans. In order to examine how different attachment styles may be expressed by Mexican American fathers, it is useful first to understand some aspects of Mexican American culture. It is impossible to cover all the values and beliefs within a culture, but what follows are several of the core traditional values typically in Mexican American culture. Mexican Americans are known to value interdependence in that they prioritize harmony, obedience, social obligations and social responsibilities over personal choice and exploration (Okagaki, Sternberg, 1993). *Simpatía* follows suit as it entails politeness and agreeable interpersonal relationships (Triandis, Marín, Lisansky & Betancourt, 1984). Another value is *familismo*, strong loyalty to the relationships and roles of the family (Halgunseth, Ispa, Rudy, 2006). Staples and Mirandé (1980) maintain that Mexican American families have an egalitarian pattern of decision making; studies show that both parents take part in household responsibilities, child rearing, and decision making (Baca Zinn, 1975; Sanchez, 1997). The Mexican American value of *respeto* is combined with dignity and emphasizes the deference and respect of people with higher authority such as parents, grandparents and godparents (Valdés, 1996).

The values described have been expressed in fathers' child rearing practices. Toth and Xu (1999) studied racial and cultural diversity in father involvement in the United States. They distributed a survey to a nationally representative sample of African American, Latino and Caucasian fathers to examine their child rearing beliefs and practices. The researchers found that fathers who instilled conformity were more emotionally involved than fathers who endorsed children's independence. Additionally, Latino fathers (Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican American and other Latinos) scored higher on the cognitive (reasoning, planning, evaluating and

monitoring) and behavioral (feeding, talking to, teaching) involvement domains than Caucasian fathers. Latino fathers were more likely to provide guidance and supervision and dedicate time to spend with their children than Caucasian fathers. In another parenting study, Latino fathers placed more emphasis on controlling temper, obedience, and amicable interactions with others than did Caucasian fathers (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994).

Studies propose that because Mexican Americans are collectivistic and value *simpatía*, *familismo* and *respeto*, they are more likely to have anxious or preoccupied attachment styles. Tacón and Caldera (2001) maintain that an anxious or preoccupied attachment style, characterized as being “emotionally needy” by Anglos, may be culturally normative for Mexican Americans. These behaviors may instead represent attachment security, given that Mexican Americans place priority on interpersonal relationships. The researchers investigated attachment styles and parental caregiving history in Mexican American and non-Hispanic white college women. They found that avoidant and ambivalent attachment scores were significantly and negatively correlated with secure attachment scores in the non-Hispanic white female group. However, this was true only for avoidant scores in the Mexican American female group. Additionally, ambivalent caregiving by fathers was negatively and significantly related to security of attachment in only the non-Hispanic white female group. Similarly, studies have found that adult Latinos score high on preoccupation (Fiori, Consedine, Magi, 2009; Matos, 2000) and are more likely to be classified as anxiously attached (Mickelson, Kessler, Shaver, 1997). Harwood (1991) compared Anglo and Puerto Rican mothers’ preferences for child attachment and behavior. Anglo mothers emphasized qualities of personal development (self-confidence, independence) and self-control of impulses (greed, aggression) and described an active, securely attached infant as more desirable, whereas Puerto Rican mothers preferred

qualities of respectfulness (obedience, well-mannered) and lovingness (being kind and friendly), and a quiet and calm securely attached infant as most desirable. Given the values that Mexican Americans espouse, adult attachment styles may be different from the styles of Caucasian Americans.

Caucasian Americans. Although most of the empirical research on parenting and attachment involves middle-class Caucasian families, some mainstream U.S. cultural values will be highlighted to illustrate how certain preferred attachment behaviors may be more culture-specific than universal. Mainstream, non-Latino white culture in the U.S. tends to emphasize individualistic values such as competition, material well-being (Julian et al., 1994), and developing autonomy and creativity (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). Parents belonging to this group are more likely to use praise than Latinos (Julian et al., 1994). Adults are expected to be assertive, independent, and agile at negotiating social obligations (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, Maynard, 2003). Harwood (1991) found that Anglo mothers described the following behaviors as undesirable: clinging to the mother and showing no interest in toys, crying when the mother was absent and not being able to return to play, and showing unhappiness when the mother returned during the SSP. In comparison, Puerto Rican mothers described undesirable behavior as being active and ignoring mother, ignoring the mother during separation and exhibiting disruptive behaviors while she was gone, and - upon reunion - continuing to actively play and not acknowledging the mother's return. Therefore, mainstream non-Latino white American values are in sync with the way attachment theory associates attachment security with autonomous and exploratory behavior. The behaviors and values described illustrate group trends and do not account for the variation and exceptions within each group.

Cultural differences in Adult Attachment

Literature on cultural differences in adult attachment is scarce and inconsistent. Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt and Zakalik (2004) compared adult attachment in African American, Asian American, Hispanic American and Caucasian American college students (mean age= 22). The researchers found that Hispanic American students reported higher attachment anxiety than Caucasian peers, however, no differences in attachment avoidance were found. In a similar study, Lopez, Melendez and Rice (2000) examined current adult attachment orientations among Caucasian (68% of sample), Hispanic/Latino (18%) and Black (14%) college students (mean age=22.25). In contrast to Wei et al.'s (2004) findings, the researchers found that Hispanic/Latino students' avoidance scores were significantly higher than Caucasian students. Other studies found no cultural/racial differences in adult attachment. Schmitt et al. (2004) found that secure adult romantic attachment style was normative across 79% of the 62 different cultures studied. Similarly, Giral (2008) studied adult attachment in Latinos (whose primary language was Spanish) and European Americans and found no significant difference in attachment styles between the two groups. Overall, research on adult attachment and ethnicity/ race is lacking and ambiguous.

Gaps in the Literature

The studies mentioned cannot be generalized to low-income Mexican American families. Most of the studies reviewed on adult attachment and culture are primarily comprised of college students in predominantly White, middle-class undergraduate universities, and did not control for socioeconomic status or for acculturation in students. Although studies show that attachment processes are found to be cross-culturally valid (Schmitt et al., 2004; van IZendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008), it is important to take into account how culture can influence ways that people

express attachment styles, as it can provide a better lens from which to provide effective mental health treatment (Erdman & Ng, 2010).

In summary, the studies described show that adult attachment style is related to the ways that fathers perceive their children. There has been little investigation of how fathers' attachment styles relate to the way they behave with their children, and how their attachment styles are related to child outcomes. Research on attachment and culture is limited and inconclusive; some studies found differences in attachment styles related to culture, while others have not. This study will fill in these gaps by contrasting Mexican American and Caucasian American fathers in three different ways- (1) how their attachment styles differ, (2) how their attachment styles are related to their parenting behaviors, and (3) how their attachment dimensions are related to child adjustment outcomes.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study will focus on how fathers' attachment (as measured by three dimensions (a) comfort with dependency, (b) comfort with closeness, and (c) relationship anxiety) relates to their parenting practices, and how attachment style is related to child adjustment outcomes. Additionally, I examine whether there are differences in attachment styles between Mexican American and Caucasian fathers. More specifically, based on the previous literature, I hypothesize that:

1. Fathers' attachment dimensions will be significantly related to parenting behaviors.
 - a. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, comfort with closeness or lower in relationship anxiety will display more positivity/positive emotion and authority when interacting with their children.
 - b. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, comfort with closeness or lower in relationship anxiety will engage in less negativity/negative emotion when interacting with their children.
2. Fathers' attachment dimensions will be significantly related to children's adjustment.
 - a. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, higher in comfort with closeness, or lower in relationship anxiety will have children with higher adjustment.
 - b. Fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety will have children with lower adjustment.

3. Relationships between parenting behaviors and child adjustment are expected to change based on fathers' attachment style, though the direction of change is unclear from prior research. Therefore, the following questions will be explored:
 - a. For fathers higher in comfort with dependency, higher in comfort with closeness, or lower in relationship anxiety who display lower positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?
 - b. For fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety who display higher positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?
 - c. For fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety who display lower positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?

Additional Exploratory Question:

As data are inconclusive and scarce on whether attachment styles differ across Mexican American and Caucasian American cultures, this study also will explore the following question:

4. Are there differences in the way attachment styles interact with caregiving behaviors and child outcomes between Mexican American and Caucasian fathers?

Procedure

Data for this study were obtained from the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) study based in California (e.g., Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett & Wong, 2009). The SFI study is a randomized clinical trial comparing two variations of a preventive intervention aimed at strengthening fathers' involvement in families and couple and child outcomes. A sample of predominantly low-income families—two thirds Mexican American and one third European American—were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a 16-week intervention group for fathers, a 16-week intervention group for couples or a low-dose comparison condition in which both parents attended one 3-hour group session. The SFI study and staff were located within Family Resource Centers in four California counties (San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Tulare, and Yuba).

At each site, some participants were recruited by project staff through direct referrals from within the Family Resource Centers, while most participants were recruited from other county service agencies, informational talks at community meetings, ads in the local media, local family fun days, and information tables placed strategically at sports events, malls and other community public events where fathers were in attendance (see Cowan et al., 2009 for details). The project sought to enlist parents expecting a child and those with a youngest child seven and younger.

Case managers then administered a short screening interview which assessed if parents met four additional criteria: (a) both partners agreed to participate regardless of whether they were married, cohabitating or living separately; (b) the partners were biological parents of their youngest child and intended to raise the child together; (c) neither the mother or father struggled with a severe mental illness or drug or alcohol abuse problem; and (d) the family did not have a

current open case with Child Protective Services, including both child and spousal cases and no instance of spousal violence or child abuse within the last year. The purpose of this last criterion was designed to bar participants who may amplify the risks for child abuse or neglect should they increase participation in their children's daily life. Screening interviews were administered to 550 couples; 496 (90.2%) of these couples met the criteria for eligibility. Of these eligible couples, 371 completed the initial interview, agreed to accept random assignment to one of the three conditions, and completed the baseline assessments. The initial assessments were administered by a case manager in English or Spanish. After the intervention, assessments were given at 6 and 18-month intervals.

Participants

The present sample was selected from the larger SFI study sample. Selection for this subsample was determined by fathers who had completed the parent-child interaction task as well as the questionnaire measures, and participated in the second phase of the SFI project. The sample consisted of 90 fathers. Mean age of fathers at the time parent-child interactions were videotaped was 35 years ($SD=8.3$), with a range of 20 to 62 years. Fathers had the following ethnic/racial composition: 22 Caucasian (24.4%), 1 Black/African American (1.1%), 62 Latino/Hispanic (68.9), 1 combination (1.1%), 4 other (4.4%). Of the fathers who identified as Latino/Hispanic- American, 60 (96.9%) were Mexican/Mexican-American, 1 (1.6%) was Puerto Rican and 1 (1.6%) was Other Hispanic/Latino. Fathers' highest level of education was as follows: 4.4% no formal schooling, 17.8% 9th grade or less, 27.8% some high school, 20.0% high school diploma, 5.6% G.E.D., 14.4% some college or 2-year degree, 2.2% technical or trade school, 4.4% bachelor's degree, and 3.3% graduate or professional school. Fathers' current yearly income ranged from \$0 to \$100,000 with a median of \$23,000. Fathers' reported their

couple status as: 74.2% married to the child's mother, 1.1% divorced from the child's mother, 22.5% not married to the child's mother, and 2.2% other.

Fathers were observed interacting with one of their biological children (yielding ratings of fathers' parenting behavior) and answered questions about this child's adjustment (yielding scores for child adjustment). Information about the target children belonging to this subsample of fathers was as follows: 97.7% of fathers were legal guardians of their child and the child lived with both their father and mother, 1.1% lived only with the father, and 1.1% lived only with the mother. The child's mean age was 4 years ($SD=2.50$), with a range of 0 to 10 years. The children were divided nearly equally between genders: 48.3% of the children were male and 51.7% were female.

Measures

Data for this study were gathered through two questionnaires--Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI; P. A. Cowan, Cowan, & Heming, 1995) and Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins & Read, 1990)--and through observational measures of videotaped father-child interactions.

Child behavior measure. The Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (P. A. Cowan et al., 1995) is a 54-item adaptation of the 106-item Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory. This instrument contains items selected from a 60-item Adaptive Behavior Inventory (Schaefer & Hunter, 1983), the downward extension of the Quay-Peterson Behavior Problem Checklist (O'Donnel & Van Tuinen, 1979), and Achenbach and Edelbrock's (1983) Child Behavior Checklist (CBL). It contains descriptors of children's competence and problem behaviors in multiple domains. (e.g., "is smart for his/her age," "makes friends quickly and easily," "breaks or ruins things," "has trouble concentrating on what he/she's doing," "often seems lonely", "is

often sad’). Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all like this child) to 4 (very much like this child). To reduce the item-based scales to a manageable number of aspects of adaptation, the researchers composited the scores into six dimensions based on a previous factor analysis of the scale (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 1992): (a) academic competence; (b) social competence; (c) externalizing aggression; (d) externalizing hyperactivity; (e) internalizing social isolation; and (f) internalizing psychological symptoms.

Adult attachment measure. Fathers completed an 18-item Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) (Collins & Read, 1990) that is comprised of three subscales: (a) *Close* measures how comfortable the person is with closeness and intimacy, (b) *Depend* measures how comfortable the person feels depending or trusting on others, and (c) *Anxiety* measures how worried a person is about being abandoned or unloved. Sample items from the comfort with emotional closeness subscale are: “I find it relatively easy to get close to others” and “I am nervous when anyone gets too close.” Sample items from the comfort with depending on or trusting others subscale include: “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others” and “people are never there when you need them.” Sample items from the anxious concern about being abandoned or unloved are: “I often worry about someone getting too close to me” and “I find others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.” Participants were asked to respond in terms of their general experience of close relationships using a 7-point Likert scale from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly.” The first two subscales of the AAS correlate with an avoidance dimension and the latter with an anxiety dimension of most self-report attachment scales (Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998).

Father-child interaction measure. Parent-child interactions (PCIs) were videotaped for coding, yielding observational data. During the father-child interaction sessions, fathers were

instructed to a) read a book together and b) talk with their children about an enjoyable time together and a difficult time together.

The original coding scheme was designed by Cowan and Cowan (1992) and was adapted by Ebling and Kline Pruett (2009) for SFI. Trained coders viewed the videotapes and rated the fathers on the following nine dimensions using 5-point Likert scales (e.g., 1 = *very low* to 5 = *extremely high*): warmth, coldness, limit setting, parent's maturity demands, confidence in parental role, anger, anxiety, sadness, and happiness. Fathers were rated on two additional dimensions using 4-point Likert scales (e.g., 1 = *very low* to 4 = *high*): sensitivity to child's developmental level and collaborativeness. Two dimensions pertaining to the interaction as a whole (rather than one individual's behavior) were also rated: ease of parent-child interaction (rated on a 4-point scale) and playfulness/humor (rated on a 5-point scale). Ratings were made for typical level and highest level observed in the session.

Parent-child interactions were rated using one of three approaches: (1) *consensus*, in which two raters *together* through discussion issued a single set of ratings for the PCI; (2) *composite*, in which the ratings made separately by two raters were later averaged; (3) *single rater*. For all parent-child interactions that were conducted for SFI, 44.9% were rated by consensus, 34.6% by composite, and 20.5% by a single rater.

Inter-rater reliability was estimated using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs; two-way random model, absolute agreement), based on those PCIs rated separately by two raters. Inter-rater reliability estimates across all coded dimensions (overall) and for each individual dimension are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Inter-rater Reliability Estimates for Parent-child Interactions

PCI Dimension	ICC
Overall (all dimensions)	.94
Warmth	.77
Coldness	.53
Anger	.57
Anxiety	.71
Sadness	.61
Happiness	.79
Limit Setting	.71
Maturity Demands	.68
Confidence	.84
Sensitivity to Child's Developmental Level	.77
Collaborativeness	.81
Ease of the Interaction	.81
Playfulness/Humor of the Interaction	.76

Construction of the PCI Scales

A principal component analysis was conducted to reduce the number of ratings of observed parenting behaviors into a smaller number of scales that strung together empirically and thematically. Highest level and typical level ratings were combined, and orthogonal (varimax) rotation was used because it yielded the clearest, more interpretable solution. To

define each factor, an item-to-factor loading cutoff of .35 was adopted. Variables with loadings between .35 and .55 were examined; those that did not fit conceptually with a dimension were eliminated. When a variable loaded onto two dimensions (.35 or higher), the dimension with the best conceptual fit (and typically, also with the higher loading) was selected. This yielded seven parenting behavior scales, each composed of one to three dimensions as follows:

1. Positive Affect (alpha = .89): happiness, ease of interaction, playfulness/humor
2. Limits and Expectations (alpha = .87): limit setting, maturity demands
3. Positive Responsiveness (alpha = .88): warmth, sensitivity to child's developmental level, collaborativeness
4. Anxiety (alpha = .83): anxiety, low confidence
5. Coldness (alpha = .67): coldness
6. Anger (alpha = .61): anger
7. Sadness (alpha = .58): sadness

Scale scores were computed by averaging the raw ratings that composed each scale. Again, both highest level and typical level ratings for a given dimension (e.g., warmth, anxiety) were included in the scale scores.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Hypothesis 1: Fathers' attachment dimensions will be significantly related to parenting behaviors.

- a. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, comfort with closeness or lower in relationship anxiety will display more positivity/positive emotion and authority when interacting with their children.
- b. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, comfort with closeness or lower in relationship anxiety will engage in less negativity/negative emotion when interacting with their children.

There were no significant correlations between fathers' attachment dimension and fathers' parenting behaviors. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2: Fathers' attachment dimensions will be significantly related to children's adjustment.

- a. Fathers higher in comfort with dependency, higher in comfort with closeness, or lower in relationship anxiety will have children with higher adjustment.
- b. Fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety will have children with lower adjustment.

Fathers' attachment dimensions were significantly associated with a range of child adjustment outcomes, as shown in Table 2 below; thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Fathers' lower anxiety, higher comfort with dependency, and higher comfort with closeness were

associated with *higher* child adjustment. Higher anxiety, lower comfort with dependency, and lower comfort with closeness were associated with *poorer* child adjustment.

Table 2
Correlations of Father Attachment and Child Adjustment Dimensions

Dimensions	Father's Comfort with Closeness	Father's Comfort with Dependency	Father's Relationship Anxiety
Child's Academic Competence	.243*	.162	-.213*
Child's Social Competence	.257*	.352**	-.310**
Child's Externalizing- Aggressive	-.152	-.247*	.223*
Child's Externalizing- Hyperactive	-.078	-.177	.210*
Child's Internalizing-Social Isolation	-.328**	-.217*	.429**
Child's Internalizing- Psychological Symptoms	-.176	-.250*	.324**

Notes: Correlations are one-tailed.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis 3: Relationships between parenting behaviors and child adjustment will change based on fathers' attachment style.

- a. For fathers higher in comfort with dependency, higher in comfort with closeness, or lower in relationship anxiety who display lower positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?
- b. For fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety who display higher positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?

- c. For fathers lower in comfort with dependency, lower in comfort with closeness, or higher in relationship anxiety who display lower positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness, will their children display lower or higher adjustment?
- d. Relationships between child adjustment and father's comfort with dependency, comfort with closeness, or relationship anxiety will be affected by lower positive affect, limits and expectations and positive responsiveness.

Interactions between fathers' parenting behaviors and attachment dimensions in the prediction of child adjustment outcomes were tested. Procedures followed those recommended for testing moderated effects with a regression approach (Aiken & West, 1991; Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). First, to eliminate problems of multicollinearity, the predictor variables—parenting behaviors, attachment dimensions—were centered by subtracting the sample mean from all individuals' scores on the variable. Then, the predictor variables were entered in the first step of a stepwise regression, followed by their interaction on the second step. This procedure was repeated for each combination of *one* parenting behavior and *one* attachment dimension.

None of the interactions significantly predicted child adjustment outcomes; thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. There was no significant relationship between fathers' parenting behavior and child adjustment outcomes. Regardless of the type of parenting behavior that fathers displayed, the relationship between fathers' attachment and children's adjustment was the same—fathers' higher comfort with closeness and dependency and fathers' lower relationship anxiety was related to higher child adjustment, and vice versa.

Exploratory Question: Are there differences in the way attachment dimensions interact with parenting behaviors and child adjustment outcomes between Mexican American and Caucasian fathers?

Differences between Caucasian versus Latino/Hispanic fathers in attachment dimensions and observed parenting behaviors were examined with analysis of covariance, controlling for SES indicators (i.e., father's level of education and income). With the effects of father's SES controlled, there were no effects of father's race/ethnicity on father's attachment, and the effect of father's race/ethnicity on father's Limit Setting/Expectations behavior was approaching significance ($F = 3.24; p < .08$). More specifically, Caucasian fathers (mean = 3.36, $SD = .60$) exhibited higher levels of this type of parenting behavior than Latino/Hispanic fathers (mean = 3.01; $SD = .63$).

Next, the interaction between fathers' race/ethnicity (Caucasian vs. Latino/Hispanic) and each of the attachment variables was examined in the prediction of child adjustment outcomes. The same regression-based procedures for testing interactions were used as described above. None of the interactions were statistically significant. Thus, the relationship between fathers' attachment and child adjustment outcomes did not vary by fathers' race/ethnicity.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between fathers' attachment and parenting behaviors and their association to child adjustment outcomes. The study also explored differences between Caucasian and Mexican American fathers. Hypothesis 1 was not confirmed; no relationship was found between fathers' attachment dimensions and their parenting behaviors; these findings support earlier studies on father attachment style and parenting behaviors (van IJzendoorn et al., 1991; van IJzendoorn & De Wolff 1997). Hypothesis 2 was supported, showing that fathers' attachment dimensions were related to children's adjustment outcomes; fathers who displayed higher comfort with dependency and closeness and low anxiety had children with higher adjustment. These findings also are consistent with previous studies (Cohn et al., 1992; van IJzendoorn et al., 1991). The results indicate that Hypothesis 3 was not supported; fathers' attachment dimensions did not change the relationship between parenting behaviors and child adjustment outcomes.

Although fathers' attachment dimensions were linked to child adjustment outcomes, fathers' parenting behaviors were not related to child adjustment outcomes. One potential explanation for these findings is that in the process of mapping out these relationships, a critical moderating variable was missed: the role of the couple. Given that the majority (97.7%) of the fathers in this study lived with the child and the mother, it is reasonable to assume that adult attachment affects the couple dynamics, which in turn will affect parenting and child outcomes. Studies show that adult attachment is associated with relationship satisfaction--with secure

attachment being related to higher marital satisfaction (Banse, 2004; Rholes et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and higher family cohesion and adaptability (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) maintain that secure individuals view themselves as efficacious, are comfortable with intimacy and interdependence, and are able to attend to others in need while also maintaining emotional balance. Therefore, fathers that have a secure attachment may indirectly support their child's development by being cognizant of their partner's needs and supportive of their spouse, which can contribute to the creation of a cohesive family system.

In addition to couple satisfaction and cohesion, a key aspect of couple functioning is co-parenting. Co-parenting uniquely affects fathers' engagement. In other research, families that had high quality co-parenting relationships--mothers who were perceived as highly encouraging and had more progressive beliefs about the fathers' roles--had fathers who felt more competent in their parenting, and were more involved with their children's care (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf & Sokolowski, 2008). In addition, Pruett, Cowan, Cowan and Diamond (in press) found that effects of fathers' parenting are particularly relevant within the context of the co-parenting relationship. Mothers are often the gatekeepers of families with young children; they influence the quality of fathers' involvement with children (Pruett, Arthur & Ebling, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). It may be that fathers who are less anxious and avoidant are better able to form a high quality co-parenting relationship with the mother, and thereby foster a secure father-child relationship. For instance, a father who feels secure may be able to elicit help from the mother in enforcing rules with the child, collaborate with the mother in setting structure, and be proactive in making decisions and plans, because he feels confidence that the mother will be responsive and supportive, rather than critical. This link between co-parenting and parenting

has been found to apply to mothers: Cohn et al. (1992) found that insecure mothers married to secure husbands were more supportive and helpful toward their children than insecure mothers married to insecure husbands. Fathers who have a more secure attachment may have supportive co-parenting relationships, which in turn might affect how the mother supports the father in his parenting role, and vice versa. Therefore, future research should seek to identify how parents cooperate and support each other's roles, as it may inform the process that influences father attachment and child adjustment outcomes.

Another possibility for the lack of findings is that the type of attachment measured in the present study (i.e., attachment with close relationships) is not as relevant to fathers' parenting as other types of attachment relationships. For example, a father's attachment to his own parents may affect his parenting more than his attachment to his spouse. Previous studies have found evidence that early childhood attachment is related to parenting behaviors (Cohn et al., 1992) and child outcomes (Cowan et al., 1996). Even though a father's attachment to his spouse may be important, a father's attachment style with respect to his parents may have stronger influence on his parenting behavior. In the future, various attachment relationships within the family should be taken into account to have a more context-specific view of the factors influencing the child's adjustment.

Two factors that provide a wider perspective of the ecosystem in which the child lives are race, culture and socio-economic status. The bulk of research on adult attachment and cultural differences has been conducted with middle- to upper-class Caucasian college students. In contrast, this study examined differences between Caucasian and Latino low-income fathers. The majority of the participants in this study were Mexican American (66.66%) and most of the participants had a two-year college degree or less. When income and education were controlled,

no differences in attachment dimensions were found between Caucasian and Mexican American fathers; thus, we were able to investigate if there were any pure cultural differences, with influences of some related variables removed. Additionally, fathers' attachment and child adjustment outcomes did not differ based of fathers' race/ethnicity. These findings are congruent with studies that have found similarities in attachment styles and dimensions across cultures (Giral 2008; Schmitt et al. 2004). However, one aspect of parenting behavior approached statistical significance; Caucasian fathers displayed higher levels of Limit Setting/Expectations than Latino fathers. Mexican Americans are known to value *respeto*, *simpatía*, and *familismo* and are likely to inculcate these values in their children early on. Given that these values are an inherent part of Mexican American culture, parents are likely to expect children to demonstrate behaviors that are congruent with these values, and may not have to set rules and limits as frequently. Smith and Krohn (1995) found that family involvement in Latino families rather than parental control was influential in determining adaptive adolescent behavior. Therefore, Latino fathers may not need to set as many limits and expectations explicitly, because they are implicitly maintained within the culture and family norms.

Future research should look at the factors that influence differences in parenting behavior between ethnicities, such as the level of acculturation and parental generational status. Parenting behaviors of Mexican American fathers that were born in the U.S. may look more similar to Caucasian fathers than first-generation immigrant fathers. Studies indicate that values such as *respeto* and interdependence change with different levels of acculturation. Delgado-Gaitain (1993) examined parenting in Mexican American families and found that both immigrant and first generation Mexican families emphasized the value of respect in their daily activities and with family members; however, in first-generation families children entered into more

negotiation with their parents. Other differences in acculturation are noted by Okagaki and Sternberg (1993), who found that Mexican American parents rated autonomous behaviors as more important, while Mexican immigrant parents gave greater importance to conforming to external standards. Investigating variables such acculturation and parental generational status can allow for further examination of differences and similarities between cultures.

There are several limitations to this study that must be considered. The data gathered for this study on father attachment and child adjustment outcomes came from fathers' self-reports. Previous studies show that fathers' attachment style influences their views of parenting and their children (Howard, 2009; Rholes et al., 2006). Therefore, fathers' reports on their child's adjustment outcomes could be biased; fathers that were more avoidant may have rated their children as more withdrawn. Thus, to better understand the influence of fathers' attachment dimensions on child outcomes, using multiple reporters (such as a teacher or mother), could provide a more objective perspective of how the child is adjusting. Although fathers reported on their attachment and their child's outcomes, parenting behaviors were observed by trained coders, which granted reliable information on fathers' actual behavior. The inter-rater reliabilities of the parent-child coding scales used in this study were acceptable, but a few were on the low side (Coldness .53, Anger .57), indicating that the raters had some difficulty agreeing on the range of each emotion that was showed by parents on the parenting dimensions studied. Lower reliabilities on these parenting dimensions could impact how the relationship between the aforementioned parenting behaviors and child adjustment outcomes is understood. This argument does not hold for the scales with higher reliabilities.

Another limitation of this study is that convenience sampling was used to obtain the data, possibly making the sample unique from fathers not participating in the SFI study. In the larger

SFI study, families who participated were interested in the study's aims to increase the quality of fathers' involvement in family life; therefore, this study may include fathers that were more motivated and invested in the intervention. With nearly 900 families in the program, it is important to replicate this sub-study with the larger SFI sample.

This study provides insights that clinicians can use to facilitate father engagement as it describes how fathers may influence the development of their children. For instance, this study replicates previous findings that father attachment is related to child adjustment outcomes. Importantly, however, this study did not find any relationship between fathers' parenting behaviors and child outcomes; again, given previous research, the co-parenting relationship plays a role in influencing father involvement. Child and family social workers play a critical role in supporting parents to optimize the social and emotional development of the child. When child and family social workers involve fathers in treatment, it is important to focus on the couple relationship, as it may produce a bigger effect on parenting and child adjustment outcomes than parent training alone. In carrying out parent guidance, couples therapy and family therapy, social workers can help fathers gain more insight about their own internal world; by building insight in fathers, social workers can empower them to have more control over how they impact their child's overall growth.

This study emphasizes that it is important to look at fathers' attachment; social workers can help fathers learn how their own attachment styles and patterns of interacting impact their relationships and world views. In becoming more aware of their different relational patterns, fathers can better understand how they are both impacted by and impact the family. Assessing fathers' attachment and the co-parenting relationship can illuminate new ways to engage fathers in therapy to ultimately obtain the best treatment outcomes for children. Clinicians can use this

information to create parent training programs focused around promoting the development of a functional family system, rather than target individual parents.

Lastly, the larger SFI study (Cowan et al., 2009) shows the importance of considering that children's development occurs within multiple systems. Solely studying the unidirectional father-to-child relationship is insufficient for illuminating why a child might have adjustment difficulties. A strength of this study is that it incorporates several of the systems that interact with the child and encourages further analysis of factors such as the co-parental relationship, marital quality, and cultural perspectives. It is critical that future work continue to focus on looking at multiple systems of interaction. For instance, a child that has an easy-going temperament, lives in an organized and structured home environment, attends schools that are well funded, and has parents working in well-paying jobs will probably have a different relationship with parents than a child who lives in a chaotic home environment, attends poorly-run schools, and has few supportive figures. Therefore, it is critical to take into account how multiple systems interact to affect individual change. Bronfenbrenner (1977) notes that

The understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place; it requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject (p. 514).

Fathers are continuously influenced by the internal working models they have formed from their early childhood experiences as well as by present-day interactions. Their internal worlds change as the patterns of interaction in the dynamic ecosystems in which they live transform. As fathers become cognizant of these interactions and work with their families to form a safe haven, they will take new risks, leading to a richer involvement in their families' lives, to the benefit of the entire family system.

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