

THE ROLE OF MOTHER-FATHER RELATIONSHIP: PATHWAYS TO PARENTING
AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT

A Dissertation Presented

by

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF MOTHER-FATHER RELATIONSHIP: PATHWAYS TO PARENTING AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT

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The marital relationship plays a central role in parenting and child development. This dissertation investigated the roles of the mother-father relationship in parenting processes and children's social-emotional adjustment. Using 1,423 mother-father dyadic data from the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* (FFCWS), Study 1 examined how positive and negative mother-father relationships were associated with maternal and paternal parenting and the moderating role of parents' participation in early childhood education (ECE) programs (e.g., workshops). Results showed the joint contributions of mothers and fathers to parenting processes by influencing their own and partners' parenting. Parents' ECE

participation was beneficial equally for both mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors, although no moderating effects were found in Study 1.

Study 2 extended the investigation by testing whether the effects of the mother-father relationship on parenting served as a mediating mechanism through which the mother-father relationship comes to influence children's later social-emotional outcomes. I conducted a longitudinal mediation analysis using three waves of data collected from 1,438 mother-father dyads and their common children in the FFCWS. The pattern of results showed that both positive and negative dimensions of the mother-father relationship influenced children's social-emotional development, and some of the influences were carried by affecting paternal and maternal coparenting and maternal parenting stress.

Using three waves of data from the *Panel Study of Korean Children*, Study 3 investigated how marital relationships were linked to changes in children's social-emotional skills from 4 to 7 years of age through maternal and parental parenting among Korean families (family $N = 1,970$). Results showed that maternal and paternal parenting were predicted by their own and partner's perceptions of marital satisfaction and conflict. Also, maternal warmth, paternal warmth, and paternal coparenting mediated the links between marital relationships and changes in children's social-emotional skills. Further, the mediational processes were moderated by social support from extended family, friends, and neighbors.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of Need and Purpose for the Study

Supportive family relationships can serve as valuable assets and resources for parents and children (Buehler, 2020). According to Belsky's process of parenting model (1984), the mother-father relationship is a primary source of social support and stress, having significant influences on parents' resources (i.e., cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and psychological) for effective parenting (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Studies have also shown the close link between the mother-father relationship and many aspects of children's social-emotional development.

The daily experience of coresident couples with young children involves various emotional and behavioral interactions, such as supporting one another, sharing affection, communicating, respecting, aggression, conflict, and conflict resolution (Noller, 2006). However, much of the literature has examined the mother-father relationship unidimensionally, and less is known about the relative importance of different dimensions. To more precisely understand *which* dimensions have stronger influences and *how* they spread to affect the adaptation of parents and children, it would be beneficial to examine the positive and negative dimensions (Parkes et al., 2019).

In addition, traditional mother-focused models are still prevalent in much of the literature (Cabrera et al., 2018). Studies have relied on data collected from a primary parent (i.e., mostly mothers), and thus fathers are invisible in research (Cabrera et al., 2018). This mother-focused approach may limit the applicability of parenting research to policy and practices targeting fathers (Fagan et al., 2014). Also, by nature, couples establish dyadic patterns of support, coordination, opposition, and detachment, which are mutually interdependent processes (Durtschi et al., 2017). Therefore, it would be beneficial to incorporate both parents' perspectives to examine the interdependent nature of the couple relationship and how each of the parents responds to parenting responsibility and exerts an impact on children's social-emotional adjustment.

1.2 Overview of Research

This dissertation was grounded in family systems models, social support perspective, and bioecological systems theory and examined three overarching research questions:

1. How are positive and negative mother-father relationships reported by mothers and fathers associated with maternal and paternal parenting?
2. Do the effects of the mother-father relationship on parenting explain the longitudinal associations between the mother-father relationship and children's social-emotional adjustment?
3. Are the pathways from the mother-father relationship to parenting and child outcomes are valid in a non-western culture?

This dissertation comprises three papers, each addressing one of these questions. Specifically, *Study 1* examined the effects of positive and negative mother-father

relationships on parenting from a dyadic perspective. Using 1,423 mother-father dyads from the *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* (FFCWS), I estimated the actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework. *Study 2* extended the investigation and tested whether the mother-father relationship's influences on parenting were the mediating pathways through which the mother-father relationship comes to influence children's social-emotional outcomes. A longitudinal mediation analysis was conducted using three waves of data collected from 1,438 mother-father dyads and their common children in the FFCWS. *Study 3* tested whether the same mechanisms from the mother-father relationship to parenting processes and children's social-emotional adjustment are valid in a non-western culture. According to previous research (Pudasainee-Kapri & Razza, 2015), how the mother-father relationship influences parenting and child outcomes might be culturally universal. However, most studies were conducted in the U.S., and thus questions remain about whether consistent findings are found in non-U.S. samples. *Study 3* utilized a nationally representative sample of Korean families to address this gap. I recognized that there are diverse contemporary family types, and studying family processes in each family type would require different family contexts to be considered in research designs (Carlson & Berger, 2013). For the current dissertation, I limited the study sample to two-biological cohabiting heterosexual parent families.

1.3 Contributions to Policy and Practice

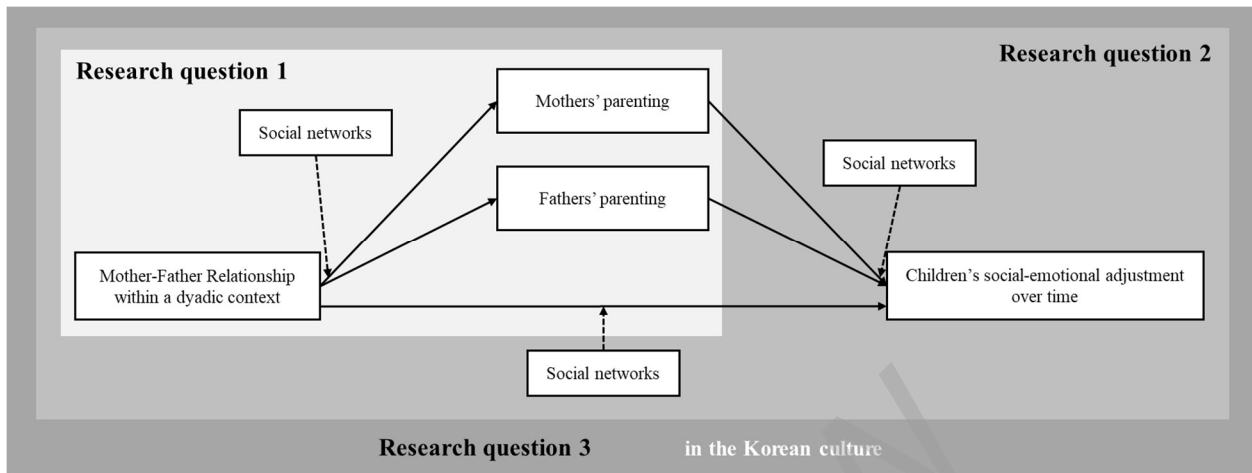
The mother-father relationship has been viewed as a promising and modifiable target for interventions (Le et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Recent studies support the notion that strengthening couple relationships can be a promising approach to yield benefits

for parental well-being and children's social-emotional development (Pruett et al., 2017). Findings from the present study would be informative for developers, researchers, and practitioners to design effective preventive intervention programs.

Furthermore, the integration of fathers in the current analyses may provide insights to increase and maintain fathers' positive involvement in their families and their children's lives (Cabrera et al., 2018). Lastly, the present study would offer valuable insight into whether the same mechanisms from the mother-father relationship to parenting processes and children's social-emotional adjustment are valid in a non-western culture, especially in the most collectivistic societies. Specific dimensions of the mother-father relationship that are universally important and culturally specific could be informative in designing more effective parenting support systems to meet the needs of families and children from diverse cultural groups (García Coll et al., 2000).

Figure 1.1

Conceptual Overview of the Dissertation and Research Questions



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CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review theories and empirical studies to explain how the mother-father relationship comes into play as a cornerstone of family functioning and child social-emotional development. First, I review three theoretical frameworks, namely family systems models, social support perspective, and bioecological systems theory, used to conceptualize the mother-father relationship and its role in parenting effectiveness and children's social-emotional development. Second, I provide definitions and constructs of the mother-father relationship. Third, I discuss studies that, to date, have examined the effects of mother-father relationships on parenting and children's social-emotional outcomes. Finally, I discuss the major gaps in the existing literature and directions for future research on this topic.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives

2.2.1 Family Systems Perspective

The family can be viewed as a system composed of mutually interdependent subsystems that maintain various dynamic, ongoing interactions within and between

subsystems. This family as a system metaphor emphasizes that the development and adaptation of every individual may be better understood within the larger family unit (Anderson et al., 2013). Family systems theory posits a few principles for understanding how mother-father relationships influence parents and children (Cox & Paley, 1997). The principles include the followings: (a) the family unit comprises of smaller subsystems, (b) subsystems are inextricably interconnected, exerting a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another, and (c) relational dynamics in the family are central to understanding individual behavior and adaptation.

First, families are an integrated system comprised of smaller subsystems, such as parental, marital, sibling, parent-child, and parent-child-sibling subsystems. Roles and rules determine the boundaries of these subsystems within subsystems (Cox & Paley, 1997). According to Cox and Paley (1997), the boundaries between subsystems must be clear, and family members must be allowed to function within subsystems without interference from other members for effective family functioning. In the context of repeated interactions within subsystems, family members establish relationships with one another, and the perception of the relationships exerts a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another (Anderson et al., 2013).

Also, as part of a larger whole, subsystems are inextricably interconnected. The interconnectedness means that changes in one subsystem can subsequently lead to changes in other systems. For example, relational dynamics within the marital subsystem (i.e., mother and father as a romantic partner) are likely to spill over to influence parents' functioning in the child-rearing role, spreading to affect the nature of the parent-child relationship. The

interconnectedness across subsystems explains how relational resources and conflicts within smaller subsystems can be carried over from one subsystem to the other, affecting the family at multiple levels (Walsh, 2016).

Finally, family systems theory emphasizes the importance of looking at family relationships as the primary forces of human development. Family relationships are central to developmental processes and outcomes of children as well as adult adaptation (Davies & Cicchetti, 2004). The relational environment in the family can determine the patterns of interaction within and across family subsystems (Masten & Monn, 2015). This relationship-centered perspective provides strong support for the notion that the behavior of individuals can be better understood when relationship aspects are considered. It highlights the prominent role of social relationships in understanding individual adaptation (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Additionally, taking a family systems view underlines the importance of including fathers in research. Although family systems theory has called for taking the whole family as a primary unit of analysis, most research has focused on the mother-child dyad (Cabrera et al., 2018). Given fathers' increasing participation in childrearing tasks in contemporary families, omitting fathers from research might not represent the reality of the experiences of families and children today (Teubert & Martin, 2010).

2.2.2 Social Support Theory

Social support refers to providing information, advice, and tangible aid (e.g., help with routine tasks and childcare), and verbal and non-verbal interactions with social intimates, including spouse, family members, friends, and neighbors (Armstrong et al.,

2005). Social support theory posits that affectionate and supportive relationships with social intimates can serve as a source of social support (Geens & Vandenberg, 2014). Through the close relationships and social connections families have, emotional (e.g., esteem, encouragement), informational (e.g., advice), and instrumental (e.g., financial assistance) supports become accessible to families and children (Armstrong et al., 2005; Lutz et al., 2012). In the context of parenting, various forms of positive relationship experiences are valuable resources, particularly when parents face challenges and stress in childrearing (Taraban & Shaw, 2018). High levels of support from family, friends, and neighborhoods are likely to reduce the burdens of parenting and increase parental engagement with children, promoting the positive adaptation of all members and strengthening the family unit (Lutz et al., 2012).

According to this theory, the marital relationship serves as the most immediate and principal support system for parenting (Belsky, 1984). Parents' emotional closeness and ability to communicate effectively are linked to promoting supportiveness to each other in rearing children (Taraban & Shaw, 2018). Lack of spousal support or conflict, on the other hand, has been conceptualized as undermining effective parenting by negatively affecting self-esteem, psychological well-being, and parenting behavior of themselves and their spouse in the parenting role (Lavee, 2013).

Belsky (1984)'s process model of parenting indicates two pathways through which social support influences parenting. The first pathway involves the direct effects of social support on parenting behaviors (Taraban & Shaw, 2018). When parents are praised and receive emotional support from significant others, it could promote parents' warmth,

sensitivity, and parental involvement and engagement in their children's education. Another pathway is by ameliorating stressors' impact on parents (Bonds et al., 2002; Lavee, 2013). This stress-buffering mechanism has been found to play a more salient role in the context of stress, such as poverty and discrimination (Gard et al., 2020). Importantly, Taraban and Shaw's recent review (2018) indicates that social support does not function similarly for all parents. Instead, some studies suggest that the association between marital relationship quality and parenting may differ between mothers and fathers (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Child characteristics, such as temperament and gender, were also found to moderate the effects of the marital relationship quality on the parenting of mothers and fathers. There has been a call to identify for whom or under what conditions specific associations exist so that interventions and supports could be designed to provide more relevant services and better meet the needs of parents.

2.2.3 Bioecological Systems Theory

The current investigation is grounded in the bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A hallmark of this theoretical framework is embracing the complexity and specificity in children's development and family life. Children's learning and developmental trajectories are the product of complex interactions between the developing child and the persons, objects, and symbols in the proximal (i.e., family, school, and neighborhood) and distal environments (i.e., broader societal, cultural, and political contexts) of the child (Wachs & Evans, 2010). This section describes a few important points of the bioecological systems theory considered in the current investigation.

According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), an individual's development is embedded in various ecological environments, some of which are more proximal and direct (e.g., the home or classroom), and others which are more distal (e.g., culture). Although all levels of the environmental contexts affect an individual's development, ongoing interactions occurring in the child's proximal environment are most impactful as the major driving force for development (Neal et al., 2013). For children, particularly in early childhood, the home is the most proximal setting for development. Particularly, the social and physical environments of the home, such as the quality of daily interactions in close relationships in the family and activities of daily living, are the most salient aspects that play an important role in shaping children's developmental trajectories and well-being.

Importantly, child development unfolds under the multitude of influences of internal and external factors of the child, and thus different developmental processes often emerge as a result (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). First, the developing person's characteristics can be a major influence on early development (Wachs & Evans, 2010). The person characteristics (e.g., genetic factors, gender, temperament, and medical conditions) can influence how proximal processes come into play in child development.

Another major force is the multiple spheres of the social and physical environments (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Broadly, it encompasses four levels of ecological environments: (a) the immediate settings children inhabit (e.g., home, school, and neighborhood), (b) the capacity of an immediate setting to influence proximal processes in another immediate setting (e.g., the dynamics of interparental interactions), (c) immediate environments of

significant social figures that indirectly influence a child's development (e.g., parents' social networks could help reduce burdens of parenting and enhance parents' capacity to engage in optimal and sensitive parenting), and (d) the outermost layer of settings, such as social, cultural, political, and natural context, that surrounds all proximal and distal settings mentioned above (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Lastly, time is also identified as a key aspect of variability. It includes various aspects of time, such as chronological age, duration, continuity, the timing of exposure, and historical period (Wachs & Evans, 2010).

The process-person-context-time model in the bioecological systems model of human development also provides insights into how multiple internal and external factors jointly contribute to variability in children's growth and parenting processes (Swick & Williams, 2006). The roles of the mother-father relationship in parenting and child development suggest that salient dimensions and the underlying mechanisms may vary based on contextual factors. For example, marital conflict may have a stronger influence on fathers' parenting than mothers' parenting. The size of the effect of marital conflict on parent and child outcomes could also vary by the broader community of which the family is a part. Identifying such specific conditions and important contextual factors (e.g., under what conditions specific associations exist) could help education researchers and practitioners develop more targeted supports that meet the diverse needs of children and their families.

2.3 Definitions and Constructs of the Mother-Father Relationship

2.3.1 Positive and Negative Dimensions

The mother-father relationship can be conceptualized and measured in positive and negative dimensions—marital satisfaction and marital conflict (Taraban & Shaw, 2018).