The Dynamics of Parental Involvement and Family Interaction Patterns: Influences on Maternal Well-Being and Child Development

Xinhe Yang
Department of International Economics and Trade, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

Abstract: In contemporary Chinese families, parental involvement patterns reflect both reduced paternal initiative in child-rearing and limitations on fathers' participation within the family. Combining sociology, psychology and family systems theory, this study investigates how fathers lose the mechanism of raising children and how this affects mothers' emotional strain and children's growth. The result of the investigation is that the reason why Dad didn't see me was the gender convention since ancient times, the quarrel between husband and wife, the unclear boundaries of himself in the group, and the emotional strain conveyed by the mother unconsciously, which would hurt his self-esteem and leave to raise children. If my father is away, my mother will have too much work, and emotional strain will become stronger. On the contrary, if dad helps, the family will regain balance. Children will encounter the following problems: rigid thinking, unable to sort out their emotions well, unable to get along well with friends, and difficult to develop a clear sense of identity. If the mother is not at ease, the children will not be able to rely on their parents at ease, or the role of the family will become strange, and these problems will be even greater. As practical suggestions, it is important that dad should become a "bridge to the world" and mom should raise a "just right" child, so that mom and dad can work together to form a virtuous circle of "returning from exploration". This study fills the theoretical gap by paying attention to the internal process of father's exclusion, and points out the way for us to reduce the pressure on mothers, promote the common parenting and create a fertile society.

Keywords: Parental Involvement Patterns; Paternal Absence; Maternal Well-being; Child Development; Family Systems Theory

1. Introduction

In today's China families, uneven parental involvement patterns are becoming more and more common. This is a phenomenon that dad deliberately evades the responsibility of raising children and is gradually rejected by other families. In this way, the mother has a lot of parenting work, and parenting stress will be strengthened. At the same time, children are in obvious danger because of the growth of cognitive growth, emotional regulation and social skills. Although the national policy has put forward many methods to advocate equality between men and women and share parenting, and explicitly suggested that fathers should take part in parenting, it is still the previous gender concept. Men are considered as "breadwinners" and women are considered as "homemakers". Compared with the previous concept, this study combines sociology, family systems theory and other ideas to establish a multi-angle analysis framework to systematically analyze the deep psychology of fathers' active withdrawal and reduced involvement, mothers' emotional strain and children's growth. Up to now, most studies have focused on the results of fatherless, but this study emphasizes the internal mechanism of the father's reduced participation. The purpose of this study is to fill the theoretical gap and provide practical evidence and practical methods for reducing the pressure on mothers, helping fathers to return to parenting, improving the environment for children to grow up and creating a fertility-prone society.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1 Active Withdrawal and Passive Exclusion of Fathers in Parental Involvement Patterns

Parsons' functionalist theory says that male roles are instrumental, and that means men provide

economic support, and female roles are expressive, so women provide emotional care. This kind of division is very close to the Chinese cultural idea of "men outside, women inside." Then through family socialization, boys get taught to be independent and rational, but girls get encouraged to be nurturing and pay attention to others. Public discussion often treats paternal absence as normal, and it sees child-rearing as mainly the mother's job. So these cultural attitudes make fathers more likely to step back from parenting [1].

When marital relationships become bad, children are often pulled in as third parties, and this creates a triangular structure inside the family system. Some fathers want to avoid direct fights with their spouse, or they want to escape emotional pressures at home, so they voluntarily step back from parenting. This kind of withdrawal might reduce immediate arguments, but it also makes mothers more stressed, and then children end up feeling confused. So by pulling away, these fathers protect their own emotional balance, but they do it by disturbing the whole family's stability.

Markus's self-schema theory makes a distinction between independent self-construal, which is typical in Western cultures, and interdependent self-construal, which is typical in Eastern cultures. In collectivist and family oriented Eastern contexts, people have relatively fluid self-boundaries, so this makes it easier for fathers to give up parenting responsibilities. When mothers show strong controlling or dominant tendencies, fathers often give in because they want to prevent conflict. Then this erosion of boundaries slowly reduces fathers' perceived presence in parenting, and eventually it forms a pattern of active withdrawal [2].

2.2 Psychoanalytic Perspective: Maternal Well-being and Passive Exclusion of Fathers

Drawing on Klein's object relations theory, mothers often project their own anxieties, expectations, and fears of parenting failure onto the father, and they do this without really thinking about it. They may quietly believe that the father is "incompetent" or that he will "only make things worse," so they reject his participation. In these kinds of negative interactions, the father experiences a narcissistic injury, and that means his sense of competence and value gets damaged. Then he starts to distance himself from parenting so he can protect his self-esteem, and this leads to a situation where he is passively excluded [3].

3. Impact of Paternal Absence on Maternal Well-being

3.1 Social Learning Theory and Gender Role Socialization

Society puts very demanding expectations on "good mothers," and these expectations require unlimited devotion, emotional stability, and high caregiving competence. These cultural pressures are a big reason for mothers' emotional strain. Fathers who put child-rearing work together can reduce the actual burden on mothers. Moreover, their actions violate the traditional gender roles, so children can see a more equal division of work. Through the effect of this example, mothers' concerns about their children's future will be indirectly reduced. Moreover, mothers will become more confident about their role [4].

3.2 Family Systems and Interpersonal Dynamics

In the family structure, the relationship of raising children is the connection of emotions and actions that affect each other. When the father is away, the mother has to make up for the lack of raising children, so there is always a lot of work. As a result, I often become uneasy, tired, and feel that I can do it. On the contrary, if the father actively supports and participates in child-rearing, the family structure will be balanced, the pressure on the mother will be reduced, and the mother's spiritual freedom will be restored. The quality of raising children by two people plays a very important role in the mental health of mothers. Raising two people has both good things of respect and cooperation and bad things of criticism, indifference and domination. In psychoanalytic thinking, the bond between mother and baby soon after birth is often too close. Having a father can untie the strong combination of these two people, reduce the burden that the mother feels that she must bear all the responsibilities alone, and let her find herself again. Moreover, the parenting supported by the father will improve the mother's mood of "I can do it myself". If the father recognizes the mother's decision, considers the parenting plan together and helps her in an unimpeded way, the mother will feel that she can do better and control herself [5]. On the contrary, excessive criticism and father's excessive rule will destroy

mother's self-confidence and aggravate emotional strain. Therefore, whether to alleviate or aggravate the mother's pain depends not only on whether the father is present, but also on the quality of the father's participation-the nature of special cooperation, recognition and perseverance.

3.3 Evolutionary Psychology Perspective

From the perspective of evolutionary thought, parents have different natural qualities. Mothers are more committed to nurturing and protecting children, while fathers are more committed to letting children face challenges and explore their surroundings. When the father is away, the mother must bear all the "action-making roles" by herself. That is to say, while taking care of children, we should urge them to take risks, which goes against the mother's natural instinct. Therefore, this kind of internal entanglement between roles will produce maternal emotional strain and complicated mood [6].

4. Impact of Paternal Absence on Child Development

4.1 Ecological Systems Theory: Imbalance in the Family System

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory says that human development is formed in the interaction of different environmental classes. Therefore, not having a father is not only reducing the number of family members by one, but actually disturbing the ecosystem of the whole family. After that, the mother has to raise all the children by herself, so she will feel more pressure. In this case, it will become unstable and emotional parenting, and the quality of interaction with children will be reduced. At the same time, household income may decrease and social support networks may become smaller. So all these things together, children get fewer resources for cognitive, emotional, and social development.

4.2 Attachment Theory: Loss of a Secure Base for Exploration

Attachment theory usually pays attention to the bond between mother and baby. But dad plays a special role in children's investigation of all kinds of things. Dad likes to exercise and encourage children to take risks and challenges. This can help children build self-confidence when facing the outside world. This "activating relationship" gives children a secure stronghold and helps them to be more independent and brave. Without his father around, children will lose the source of such encouragement. In doing so, children may become timid or too dependent on others. Moreover, in the scene of talking with people, I have no confidence in myself, and it is difficult to deal with things that I don't quite understand [7].

4.3 Social Learning Theory: Absence of a Male Role Model

Social learning theory in Bandura says children learn behaviors and values by seeing and imitating important people around them. Dad is the most important male role model for children. So when dad is not around, children will lose important samples that can be imitated. Boys have no male role models to imitate, so it is sometimes difficult to understand their developing identity and their own role. Girls can't get a model of healthy contact with men in the early days, and their feelings of trusting men will be affected in the future. This kind of influence often lasts until you grow up.

4.4 Cognitive Development Theory: Homogenization of Interaction Styles

Piaget's cognitive development theory emphasizes that children will establish their own cognitive mechanisms in various interactions with their surroundings. Parents generally treat their children in different ways: Dad likes cognitive challenges, language communication skills, regular play and adventure. When dad is not around, children only treat their mothers in the same way and have no chance to get all kinds of opinions. This will reduce the way children solve problems, reduce the flexibility of thinking and hinder the growth of creativity.

4.5 Psychoanalytic Perspective: Obstacles to Superego and Identity Development

Freud said. When I was about 3 to 6 years old at the phallic stage, boys learned gender roles and moral rules in order to be similar to their fathers. With his father around, boys can cultivate their ability to control themselves and their inner good values. Without his father, superego will be weak, and it is difficult for boys to cultivate the mood of obeying the rules. Girls can get an important way to understand the connection with the opposite sex by playing and talking with their fathers. Therefore, without a father, it may

be slow for girls to cultivate trust and realistic expectations in their intimate relationship with men when they grow up.

5. Impact of Maternal Well-being on Child Development and Parenting Recommendations

5.1 Attachment Theory: Instability of the Secure Base

Attachment theory interprets mother as a "safety foundation" for children, saying that it will bring children spiritual security. However, very upset mothers often have different reactions to their children's signals (such as crying and exploring). Sometimes you overreact, sometimes you don't respond. This kind of ignorance will undermine the stability of attach. Children will become unstable anxious attachment (always sticky and afraid of adventure) or avoidant attachment (seemingly leaving to protect themselves). Once secure base is shaken, the child's heart will be full of anxiety.

5.2 Social Learning Theory: Imitation and Internalization of Anxiety

Children watch and take care of important people, imitate and remember emotional reactions and behavior patterns. For children, mothers are the most important role models. If the mother often experiences emotional strain, nervousness and concerns under pressure, the child will have the same reaction to the world around him. As time goes by, children will integrate their mother's uneasy pattern into their own hearts and feel that the outside environment is very dangerous. As a result, children may become uneasy. When encountering difficulties, instead of trying to solve the problem, it is better to react with painful feelings.

5.3 Family Systems Theory: Emotional Involvement and Role Distortion

This family works as a very sensitive emotional system. The child will clearly feel the mother's uneasiness. Moreover, my thinking ability is still immature, and sometimes I feel that "mom is my fault and unhappy" and blame myself for my mother's pain. In this way, there is a feeling of guilt and the need for extra responsibility. Children will soon be burdened with the feelings of adults and disrupt normal psychological development.

Mothers experiencing parenting stress sometimes unconsciously treat their children as "emotional spouse" or "little adult" and give them the job of adjusting their mood. This phenomenon is called parentification, and children must deal with adult emotional problems at an early stage. As a result, children will suppress their desires, often pay close attention to their mother's mood, and cannot concentrate on developing themselves and trying new things. This role distortion has brought great problems to healthy social development. Even when they grow up, these people often work hard to establish their own boundaries.

5.4 Psychoanalytic Theory: Projection and Internalization of Anxiety

Object relations theory says that the mother's emotional state directly shapes the child's inner world through unconscious projection. If the mother is too worried about her child's safety, the child will unconsciously put this anxiety on herself and think that the world is dangerous. This uneasy internal relationship is the basic framework for children to understand themselves and others, and it will remain when they grow up, which is manifested as anxiety and avoidance patterns in interpersonal relationships [8].

5.5 Father Role: Becoming a "Bridge" to the World and a "Secure Base"

Dad doesn't have to teach children all the time. Energetically exercise and play, explore outside and challenge some dangerous things, and children will experience difficulties and unexpected things. This kind of communication can cultivate inner self-confidence and prepare children to challenge new things in unknown fields. Dad's time with me is a very important driving range for children to go from their family's world to the outside world.

Dad treats his mother differently when he is around. Usually more direct, more focused on rules, and more focused on results. When children are exposed to these two ways of treatment, they will experience all kinds of differences and learn how to adjust their behavior flexibly according to the place and situation. Such a different experience is the basis for summing up the ways of communication with all kinds of people and cultivating a clear idea of what kind of person you are.

For adolescent children, it is very important for dad to admit that "you are fine". Dad must learn to "let go". Words and actions convey "I trust

that you can handle this". Such trust will become a great force for children to decide things independently. Letting go is not abandoning, but respecting the child's growth as another person.

5.6 Mother Role: Becoming a "Holding" Container and a Promoter of Separation

Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott said that mothers don't need to be perfect, "good enough" is enough. Patience with just the right anxiety-don't correct the problem immediately, allow the child to cry and get angry-let the child experience the gap between what he wants and reality and understand his own boundaries. "60-point mother" can unexpectedly cultivate children's perseverance and self-reliance.

When a child is in trouble, it is easy for an uneasy mother to solve it at once. But, "What do you think you should do?" Rather than "doing this", it is better to say that the power to solve problems has returned to the children themselves. Therefore, children will find their own strength and value when facing difficulties. It is the deepest respect for children's growth that mothers endure not to start work.

Children need to feel that as long as they are here, they deserve to be loved, not because of good grades or perfect behavior. This is the basis of not losing to the "hypocritical self". Children don't need to lie in front of their mothers, so they have the opportunity to show their true selves and gradually form a healthy self-awareness.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the mechanism and results of the absence of father in "parental involvement patterns" by the families in modern China. The survey results show that the father's absence comes not only from the father's voluntary withdrawal, but also from the negative exclusion of his mother and other families, which is formed by the projection of traditional gender norms, husband-wife quarrels and mother's emotional strain. Father's absence may increase maternal parenting stress, leading to inner fatigue and a decline in her sense of what she can do. On the contrary, if the father participates in child-rearing in a helpful way, the family will regain balance and the pressure on the mother will be reduced. Children also face the risks of growth, such as not being able to change their minds flexibly, not being able to control their moods, not being able to play well with others, and not being able to develop a clear sense of identity. Maternal emotional strain will weaken her ability to communicate with others with peace of mind, and also make the role of the family strange, making these problems worse. Practical suggestions include: father's active communication and becoming a "bridge to the outside world"; Mother accepts the role of "imperfect parenting" with unconditional positive attitude; Parents cooperate to establish a balanced family triangle. To cope with uneven parental involvement, we need to change gender norms, improve family education, implement the policy of promoting parents to raise children together, and create a fairer and easier-to-have-children society.

References

[1] Novianti R., Putri A. N., Maria I., & Mpolomoka D. Father absence in long-distance marriage and early childhood self-confidence in Indonesia: A qualitative phenomenological study integrating attachment and ecological systems theory. Al-Athfal: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak, 2025, 11(2): 303-319.

[2] Reis L., Lunkes L., Bandeira P. F., et al. Parental gatekeeping and parenting in families with children: A network analysis. Current Psychology, 2026, 45: 702.

[3] Verhagen C., et al. A cross-lagged panel model examining the longitudinal associations between maternal emotion regulation difficulties, parenting stress, and child socio-emotional problems in toddlerhood. Infant Mental Health Journal, 2026, 47(1): e70051.

[4] Riem M. M. E., & van der Straaten M. Grandmothers matter: how grandmothers promote maternal perinatal mental health and child development. Frontiers in Psychology, 2024, 15: 21335.

[5] Park S., Barnett M. A., & Mastergeorge A. M. Dual trajectories of supportive coparenting and father involvement: Parental predictors and influences. Family Relations, 2025, 74(1): 44-62.

[6] Jin Z. The influence of paternal absence during childhood on women's self-esteem and self-efficacy: A perspective paper. Journal of Psychology and Behavior Studies, 2024, 4(1): 57-61.

[7] Almeida R., et al. Predictors of father-infant attachment security in a Portuguese sample.

Early Human Development, 2025, 210: 106374.
[8] Rocha A. C., et al. Do mothers' and fathers' parental stress differently relate to child adjustment? A mediated dyadic approach. Children and Youth Services Review, 2025, 166: 107982.