

## Fathers' work experiences, the father-child relationship and children's behaviour<sup>1</sup>

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### SUMMARY

The effects of fathers' subjective work experiences on their children's behaviour have been largely neglected, despite increasing recognition accorded to the fathers' role in all aspects of child development. The present study redresses this issue by assessing whether (a) fathers' work experiences are related to children's behaviour, (b) the father-child relationship moderates the effects of fathers' work experiences on children's behaviour, and (c) specific child behaviours are associated with paternal work experiences. One hundred and forty two fathers (*M* age = 39.55 years) and their eldest child (*M* age = 9.2 years; 66 boys, 76 girls) participated. Moderated multiple regressions demonstrated that fathers' job satisfaction was related to specific child behaviours, *viz.* conduct problems and hyperactivity. More importantly, the father-child relationship moderated both these relationships: Where fathers were dissatisfied with their jobs, conduct problems and hyperactivity were significantly greater when the father-child relationship was of a higher quality. Implications for studying the effects of both mothers' and fathers' work experiences on their children's behaviour are drawn.

### INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of research and theorizing on the effects of the working mother on children (Hoffman, 1983), yet a paucity focusing on fathers' work and children behaviour. One reason could be the predominant methodology used: Children of employed and non-employed mothers are typically contrasted on a variety of indices, and it would be difficult indeed to obtain comparable groups of employed and non-employed fathers. The existing research relating fathers' work to their children's behaviour focuses mainly on the association between objective characteristics of the fathers' occupation and their children's occupational choice. Although boys tend to choose occupations similar to those of their fathers (Barclay, Stillwell and Barclay, 1972), no information is provided from such data on how fathers' *subjective* work experiences (e.g. job satisfaction) influence their children's behaviour.

<sup>1</sup>Portions of this research were completed while the author was on Sabbatical leave in the Department of Psychology, SUNY at Stony Brook.

A number of questions emerge. First, which specific paternal work experiences are associated with the child's behaviour? Since mothers' job satisfaction is related to diverse child behaviour (Barling and Van Bart, 1984), the association between fathers' job satisfaction and child behaviour is investigated. A further work experience of some interest is work/job involvement, as there is frequent speculation that excessive paternal work involvement exerts a negative influence on children.

A more intriguing issue involves an understanding of the processes moderating any such associations. It has been suggested that the quality of the parent-child relationship buffers the negative effects of marital distress on children (Emery, 1982). Consequently, it is hypothesized that in situations of job dissatisfaction, there would be no adverse influence on children's behaviour *if* the father-child relationship remains adequate. A favourable perception by the father of the organization's climate may also buffer the individual against any negative effects of organizational stressors (Kobasa and Puccetti, 1983). Consequently, fathers with unsatisfactory work experiences who retain a favourable perception of the organizational climate may not exert a negative effect on their children's behaviour.

A final issue concerns the child behaviours related to paternal work experiences. While conduct problems are often related to marital dissatisfaction (Emery, 1982), hyperactivity is not in clinically diagnosed hyperactive children (Prinz, de Rosset Myers, Holden, Tarnowski and Roberts, 1983). Thus, only specific child behaviour problems (such as conduct problems) may be associated with fathers' work experiences; and this is investigated in the present research.

## METHOD

### Subjects and procedure

All children's ( $N = 380$ ) fathers at a middle-class elementary school in Johannesburg, South Africa, were asked to participate. However, only fathers who were (a) employed full-time (b) not self-employed (since some of the questionnaires would not have been relevant) and (c) from intact marriages (as divorce may be a moderating factor) were eligible to participate. In addition, data was only obtained on the eldest child in each family to eliminate possible birth order confounds.

Initially, 161 fathers (42 per cent) participated. However, the above selection criteria could not be applied before the questionnaires were distributed. Consequently, the *relevant* sample is less than 380, and the real response rate greater than 42 per cent. Incomplete questionnaires further reduced the sample to 142 fathers ( $M$  age = 39.55 years,  $S.D.$  = 5.86;  $M$  years of education = 12.32,  $S.D.$  = 2.25). The mean age of their eldest child was 9.2 years ( $S.D.$  = 1.79; 66 boys, 76 girls).

### Assessment

Data on fathers' general job involvement, self-esteem arising from work and work specialization was obtained from Jans' (1982) 16-item Job Involvement Questionnaire. Information on satisfaction with work, people at work, supervision,

pay and promotion was generated by fathers' self-completion of the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Smith, Kendall and Hulin, 1975). Taylor and Bowers' (1973) 13-item Perceived Organizational Climate questionnaire assessed the role of organizational climate perceptions as a moderator variable. Five subscales are yielded *viz.* decision-making, human resources primacy, communication, technological readiness and motivation. All these questionnaires are reliable and valid.

To assess the quality of the father-child relationship, Harrell and Ridley's (1975) five-item Parent-Child Interaction Questionnaire was completed by all fathers. This scale assesses the extent to which the parent plays or laughs with, reads, explains or teaches things to, and hugs or holds the child. All items deal with observable behaviours, and are rated on a five-point scale. Although no reliability information was reported by Harrell and Ridley, its psychometric nature was acceptable in this study (KR 20 = 0.78;  $M = 18.27$ ,  $S.D. = 3.53$ ;  $\text{min} = 7$ ,  $\text{max} = 25$ ; skewness = 0.13, kurtosis = 0.39).

To provide a comprehensive analysis of child behaviour, two questionnaires were completed by teachers rather than the fathers to reduce possible auto-correlations (Emery, 1982). Data on conduct and personality problems, immaturity and subcultural delinquency were obtained from the Behaviour Problem Checklist (Quay, 1977). An index of hyperactivity was derived from the Abbreviated Teachers Rating Scale (Conners, 1973). Both these scales have been shown consistently to be reliable and valid across scores of studies.

## RESULTS

The effects of the various main and moderating variables on the five dependent variables was analysed with moderated multiple regression analyses. For this purpose, 48 MMR's would be required for each dependent variable, generating 720  $F$  tests. To achieve a more parsimonious strategy the 13 work experiences were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. Item loadings  $\geq 0.40$  were accepted as contributing significantly to a factor. Three factors emerged and were labelled (with items and their loadings in parentheses) *perceived organizational climate* (technological readiness = 0.95, communication = 0.59, pay satisfaction = 0.54, human resources primacy = 0.51), *job involvement* (self-esteem arising from work = 0.71, job involvement = 0.62, work specialization = 0.57) and *job satisfaction* (work satisfaction = 0.60, promotion satisfaction = 0.58, pay satisfaction = 0.47).

However, the multicollinearity assumption was violated: Correlations between job involvement and both perceived organizational climate and job satisfaction were 0.50, while that between job satisfaction and perceived organizational climate was 0.76 (all  $p$ 's < 0.001). It was necessary, therefore, to reduce the number of predictor variables. Job satisfaction was subsequently selected as (a) only job satisfaction did not violate the assumption of a linear relationship between dependent and independent variables and (b) mothers' job satisfaction is related to their daughters' behavioural problems (Barling and Van Bart, 1984). Similarly, the father-child relationship was chosen as the moderator variable as it is of greater conceptual importance than perceived organizational climate to the present study.

Table 1. Father-child relationship as a moderator of fathers' job satisfaction on conduct problems and hyperactivity

	Conduct problems				Hyperactivity			
	Beta	F	R <sup>2</sup>	Increase in R <sup>2</sup>	Beta	F	R <sup>2</sup>	Increase in R <sup>2</sup>
Educational level	-0.09	0.84	0.01	0.01	-0.10	0.99	0.01	0.01
Job satisfaction (A)	1.59	4.78	0.01	0.00	1.83	6.45	0.02	0.01
Father-child relationship (B)	1.19	3.99	0.02	0.01	1.40	5.86	0.02	0.00
A × B	-2.25	4.72	0.07	0.05	-2.69	7.02	0.10	0.08

In computing the MMRs, fathers' educational level was partialled out as it correlated significantly with job satisfaction ( $r = -0.21, p < 0.05$ ). Job satisfaction then predicted both hyperactivity ( $F = 6.45, p < 0.01$ ) and conduct problems ( $F = 4.78, p < 0.01$ ), but not personality problems, immaturity or subcultural delinquency. The father-child relationship moderated the effects of job satisfaction on hyperactivity and conduct problems significantly. Specifically, the father-child relationship  $\times$  job satisfaction interaction accounted for 7.28 per cent of the variance in teachers' ratings of children's hyperactivity ( $F = 7.02, p < 0.01$ ) and 5.32 per cent of the variance in conduct problems ( $F = 4.88, p < 0.01$ ) (see Table 1). Although it was hypothesized that the direction of the interaction would be such that conduct problems and hyperactivity would be reduced where the father-child relationship was close, this was not so. Rather, a close father-child relationship coupled with paternal job dissatisfaction is associated with *increases* in children's hyperactivity and conduct problems. Where a close father-child relationship and paternal job dissatisfaction were evident, both hyperactivity ( $M = 8.42$ ) and conduct problems ( $M = 6.47$ ) were significantly higher than when poorer relationships were evident (hyperactivity:  $M = 3.28, t(42) = 3.36, p < 0.01$ ; conduct problems:  $M = 2.72, t(42) = 2.84, p < 0.01$ , both two-tailed).

The father-child relationship did not moderate the influence of fathers' job satisfaction on personality problems, immaturity or subcultural delinquency.

## DISCUSSION

As was the case with mothers' (Barling and Van Bart, 1984), fathers' work dissatisfaction was associated with children's behaviour problems, specifically conduct problems and hyperactivity. The present results extend previous findings on maternal work experiences in specifying one psychological process through which this relationship is moderated. In situations of paternal job dissatisfaction, any negative influences on conduct problems and hyperactivity occurs *through* the father-child relationship rather than being buffered by it (*cf.* Emery, 1982). It is not surprising that a close father-child relationship (as manifested here by the behavioural activities shared by father and child assessed in the Harrell and Ridley

questionnaire) must be evident. It is in such situations that the child will have the opportunity (a) to realize that the father is dissatisfied with his work, and (b) to realize what the negative effects on the father might be from this negative emotive state.

Other possible explanations need to be assessed empirically. For example, if a compensation hypothesis concerning the work/life satisfaction relationship were appropriate, dissatisfaction at work would result in the father actively searching for life satisfaction away from the work context. In addition, attention should be directed to (a) the influence of acute work stressors such as stressful daily work events, (b) other potential moderating variables (such as perceived organizational climate or spouse support) and (c) the applicability of these results to samples of clinic-referred children. Direct observation of the father-child relationship might also be appropriate.

Both practical and research implications emerge from these results. Parents could be made more aware of the specific child behaviours that might be influenced adversely where fathers are experiencing job dissatisfaction. Should problems emerge in these child behaviours, early intervention might well reduce any negative effects. On a research level, since there are diverse behaviours that together comprise the father-child relationship, future research might first identify, and then focus on, the specific components through which any negative effects are transmitted, and subsequent intervention attempts could be structured accordingly. Indeed, research on executive stress and health suggests that it is feasible to focus on moderator variables (e.g. the hardy personality) rather than the stress itself in reducing any negative consequences (Maddi and Kobasa, 1984).

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