Trends in Academic Attention to Fathers, 1930-2006

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This systematic analysis of 1115 articles in five child development and family journals was conducted to: 1) examine whether academic attention to fathers has increased over time, and 2) describe temporal changes in content areas relevant to fathering and child development. Each article was coded for type of family structure, dimension of fatherhood, and type of child outcome. Percentages of articles per year were the dependent measures and analyses were conducted using regression curve-estimation techniques. Considered together, journals increased their father-relevant publications over time, but there was individual variation by journal. Content analyses showed increased attention to diverse types of fathers and to a wide range of areas of fathering and child outcomes. Both linear and non-linear trend lines fit these data. Results indicate that the “culture of fatherhood” is alive and well in academic journals, although the historical patterns of academic attention to fathers are often complex.

Keywords: historical perspectives, research trends, family structure, characteristics of fathers, father involvement, child development

The last two decades of the twentieth century have been distinguished by the amount of attention from social scientists and policymakers to the roles that fathers play in the lives of their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). There have been many assertions that scholarly interest in fathers increased over the course of the last century, but there is scant evidence upon which to base that assertion (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993). It is the intent of the current analysis to address this omission by reviewing the pattern of academic attention to fathers...
in child development and family studies journals from as early as 1930 to the present day.

Fatherhood has been studied not only in relation to the parenting of minor children but also in terms of its place in men’s own development and relations with others. Studies and reviews of the literature have examined the impact of the transition to fatherhood on men’s psychological well-being, social connections, family relations, and work (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001), the effect of multiple roles in relation to men’s psychological distress (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992; O’Neil & Greenberger, 1994), fathers’ relative contributions to the division of household and childcare tasks (Himsel & Goldberg, 2003), marital quality and father-child relations (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Rogers & White, 1988), fathers and family relations across generations (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Suitor & Pillemer, 1988), and adult parent-child relations (Lye, 1996). These studies reveal a wide range of ways that being a father influences men’s well-being and their relationships with family members and others in their lives.

Changing Conceptualizations of Fathers

Perspectives on the role of the father in the family system have ranged from conceptualizing the father as patriarch, moral teacher, and economic provider, to a gender-role model, to viewing fathers as nurturing parents (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). In her classic 1981 article, Jessie Bernard reflected upon the rise and fall of the father in the role of the “good provider.” Bernard chronicled the association of men with the traditional gender roles of “head of household” and “provider” and described the psychological consequences for men of such gender-limited roles. These roles prioritized men’s activities outside the home and did not include a warm, nurturing component to fathering or a shared role in family labor. Modern fathers are expected to be providers and be involved with their children (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). Over the course of the last half-century, we have developed a more complex appreciation of fathers and fathering, which led to a multifaceted conceptualization of fathers’ roles and fathers’ contributions than those articulated by Bernard decades ago. Several comprehensive reviews describe increased sophistication in the conceptualizations about fathers and father involvement (e.g., Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2002; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Social changes, such as downward shifts in fertility rates and family size, delayed parenthood, divorce rates, and the number of single-parent households, have contributed to the changing roles of fathers in families (Parke). The women’s movement and wives’ greater participation in the labor force are often credited with increasing husbands’ participation in household tasks and child care (Bianchi et al., 2006). However, there has not been a commensurate shift away the cultural tendency to view childcare as primarily the domain of mothers (Coltrane, 1996). During the 1970s, studies of fathers and father-child relationships were often conducted to examine how they thought or behaved in contrast to mothers (e.g., Parke & Sawin, 1976). From these studies, we have seen that fathers’ time with
their children remains low when compared to mothers’ (e.g., Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, & Sayer, 2002; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001); for example, fathers’ engagement and accessibility are about three-quarters that of mothers’ (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). When measures of parental involvement emphasize direct interaction, accessibility, and responsibility, mothers still consistently outpace fathers (McBride & Mills, 1993; Pleck, 1997).

There is good evidence that fathers today are more involved with their children than were fathers in the past. In their review of several time diary and time estimate studies conducted from the 1970s/80s to the end of the last century, Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) cite evidence to show that modern fathers are spending more absolute and relative time with their children than were fathers of years before, even after controlling for maternal employment status (Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001). Fathers also have increased their rate as primary caregivers in two-parent families (Pleck & Masciadrelli).

Father involvement in contemporary times has come to mean much more than breadwinning; it extends to physical care of children and the socialization of children in the realms of cognitive, social, moral, development (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Fathers most commonly engage their children in play and companionship activities, with physical care, child care, household work, social activities, didactic interactions, and management and supervision of activities also describing their time with their children (Cabrera et al., 2000; Hofferth et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2001). Yet to be documented are the patterns over extended periods of time in research attention to fathering behaviors or to the child outcomes associated with father involvement. A primary aim of the current analysis is to characterize content areas in the study of fathers and track changes over time in the foci in research studies with and about fathers, and in child outcomes related to fathering.

Increasing Representation of Fathers in the Media

From the entertainment industry to the social policy arena, we have witnessed fathers moving to the forefront of American life. Over the years, the visibility of fathers has increased in television, comic strips and other media outlets (Coltrane & Parke, 1998; LaRossa, 2004; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000). The variability of the paternal role has been reflected in the range of roles for fathers in film, with portrayals of fathers in traditional and non-traditional roles, as malevolent and compassionate patriarchs, as wise and as foolish men, and as close to and as estranged from their wives and children. Analysis of family cartoons in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the last century revealed fluctuations in the percentage of articles about fathering, with fluctuations also in the focus on fathers as providers versus fathers as nurturers (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991).

A comparative analysis of popular magazine articles, representative childrearing manuals, and Neilsen ratings of prime-time television shows in the 1950s revealed a “traditional strain of patriarchal fatherhood” (LaRossa, 2004, p. 48), especially toward the close of the decade. However, La Rossa points out that commentary about fathers
was at times contradictory and did not tell a consistent story. For example, in 1946, Dr. Spock explained that fathers were not unimportant and should engage with their children from babyhood onward; later in the same section, Spock referred to fathers as occasional helpers. Magazine articles contained similarly contradictory tales of fathers as partners in child care and as people who should feel “free to ignore infants” if that was their preference. Extrapolating from LaRossa’s review of the components of culture in a single decade, we should not expect the pattern of academic attention to fathers over many decades to be simple or necessarily linear.

The Current Study

Research evidence points to men’s behavioral change in the fathering role: they have expanded their involvement beyond the good provider and are directly and indirectly involved in fathering activities and in the lives of their children. On a cultural level, media attention to fathers has increased as well. The objective of the current study is to examine whether academics are in the throes of rising attention to fathers and child outcomes associated with fathering, or whether research attention has already peaked and is now ebbing. We examine whether academic attention to fathers and fatherhood has increased over the decades in leading child development and family studies journals, and we test whether the patterns of attention are linear or nonlinear. We also investigate the content areas in these articles and characterize temporal changes in those areas. The coding scheme that we developed reflects a multifaceted conceptualization of fathers in families.

Method

Search Strategies

The present review systematically reviewed five high visibility journals that were expected to include articles about fathers because of their focus on children and/or families. The journals were official journals of academic societies and divisions in developmental psychology and family studies. The included journals, and their impact factors (from the Thomson Institute for Scientific Information, using the number of articles published in a given period that were cited in indexed journals) were: Child Development (journal of the Society for the Research of Child Development; impact factor 3.9; established 1930), Developmental Psychology (journal of the American Psychological Association, Division 7; impact factor 3.6; established 1969), Journal of Family Psychology (journal of the American Psychological Association, Division 43; impact factor 1.8; established 1987), Family Relations (journal of the National Council of Family Relations; impact factor .73; established 1952 as The Coordinator [1952-1959], then The Family Life Coordinator [1959-1967], and The Family Coordinator [1968-1979]) and the Journal of Marriage and Family (journal of the National Council of Family Relations; impact factor 1.8; established 1939 as Living [1939-1940], then Marriage and
Family Living [1941- 1963]). The online computerized database PsycInfo was searched as it indexes these five journals. Both the JSTOR and Blackwell Publishing websites were used to access online versions of the articles (PDFs), which were downloaded and used for coding. The time frame for the search was from the date of each journal’s inception through 2006.

Using multiple search techniques, a list of all potentially informative studies was compiled. For each of the five journals, we searched abstracts, titles, and keywords, using “or” operators. Entered were the search terms “father* and “pater*”, which produced variants such as fathers, fatherhood, fathering, and paternal. The search yielded 1287 articles, to which inclusionary/exclusionary criteria were applied.

**Inclusionary/exclusionary criteria.** To be included in the present review, the articles had to: (a) be empirical; (b) examine fathers or fatherhood, and (c) be published no later than 2006. Articles were excluded if they: (a) did not focus on fathers but simply controlled for a paternal status variable (e.g., occupation, income); (b) were non-empirical reviews; or (c) were replies to empirical articles. Of the initial 1287 articles identified in the search, 13.4% (172) of the articles were excluded for one or more of these reasons, yielding a final pool of 1115 articles (86.6% retention). The number of usable articles by journal was: *Journal of Marriage and Family* (n = 324), *Child Development* (n = 282), *Developmental Psychology* (n = 209), *Family Relations* (n = 151), and *Journal of Family Psychology* (n = 149).

**Coding**

A coding sheet was devised by the authors to capture salient features of each study. Each article was assigned an ID number and was coded for type of research design, type of family structure, major foci concerning fathers and fatherhood, and major foci concerning child outcomes. Of the 1115 articles that were coded for research design, 64% were within subject designs. Each of the articles was assigned up to three codes for the family structure, dimension of fatherhood, and child outcomes. For example, codes allowed for single articles to include more than one type of family structure (e.g., fathers in two-parent families and divorced fathers). Coders assigned a primary content code in each focal area and up to three codes in descending order of salience.

The possible codes for family structure were: two-parent families, non-resident/unmarried fathers, divorced fathers, step-fathers, and single primary caregiver fathers. The possible codes for dimension of fatherhood were: quality of father-child interactions (e.g., sensitivity, conflict, communication); father care and involvement (e.g., availability, responsibility); fathering behaviors and attitudes (e.g., differential treatment of children, perceived competence in the parenting role, childrearing attitudes); abusive fathering (i.e., child abuse); fathers’ employment (e.g., work hours, occupational characteristics); fathers’ well-being and other individual characteristics (e.g., psychological well-being, personality, substance use); marital relations (e.g., marital quality, division of labor), fathers as reporters of children’s behavior (e.g., reliability and
validity of fathers’ reports of behavior). Many of the 1115 articles included more than one dimension of fatherhood; up to three codes were assigned to each article, with the primary focus noted. Because of the high correlations among the three most commonly coded dimensions of fatherhood (rs > .79 between father-child interactions, father care and accessibility, and parenting attitudes and behaviors), we created one composite variable for parenting for use in trend analyses. Articles that covered any of the three commonly coded dimensions of fatherhood were counted in the composite parenting variable.

Articles also were coded for up to three child outcomes: behavior problems (e.g., drug use, antisocial behavior); prosocial behavior (e.g., moral development, empathy); gender issues (e.g., gender roles, gender identity); peer relations (e.g., status, quality of relationships); cognitive development/achievement (e.g., intelligence, academic achievement); biological and physical development (e.g., genetic factors, pubertal status, sexual behavior); socio-emotional/personality development (e.g., emotional expression, security of attachment, autonomy strivings), and adult child’s parenting and life (e.g., relationship with their own children). The authors and a trained team of students coded the articles. The first two authors resolved questions and discrepancies regarding codes.

Plan of Analysis

The search of the two developmental psychology journals (*Child Development, Developmental Psychology*) and three family studies journals (*Journal of Family Psychology, Family Relations, Journal of Marriage and Family*) yielded actual counts of empirical articles about fathers. These counts also were converted into proportions by dividing the actual number of articles about fathers in a year by the total number of empirical articles published by the journal in that year, and then those numbers were multiplied by 100 to produce percentages. The proportions utilized in the regression analyses for content areas were based on all the relevant codes assigned to each article (not just the primary code).

The percentages of articles about fathers for each year were utilized in regression analyses to examine change in each journal’s attention to fathers, starting with the journal’s date of inception, and to test for change in content areas for all five journals combined. The regression analyses for content areas were conducted with data from 1956 forward. The start date of 1956 was selected as the point when the total number of empirical articles per year about fathers rose above 100. The comparatively sparse number of articles at low end of the data points (the years prior to 1956) would be problematic for the interpretation of polynomial regressions (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

Analyses were conducted for linear and non-linear trends using regression curve-estimation techniques in SPSS version 16.0. Curvilinear trend lines were either quadratic (i.e., a parabolic arc was at least partially descriptive of the regression) or cubic, which provides a two-bend function to describe the regression (Cohen et al., 2003).
The coefficients from linear trend lines were compared to one another using SUEST in STATA 9.0. The counts and percentages for articles about fathers in all five journals were plotted on one figure. The percentages for articles with father-relevant data in each journal separately were plotted on another figure. Changes over time in major content areas are displayed in three separate figures.

Results

Changes in Journals’ Attention to Fathers over Time

Results are presented first for all five academic journals considered together, and subsequently for each journal separately. The counts and percentages of articles devoted to research about fathers in all five journals are depicted graphically in Figure 1. The y-axis on the left side of the figure shows the percentages of empirical articles about fathers and the y-axis on the right side of the figure shows the actual number of articles about fathers. Regressing time on the percentage of articles about fathers produced a significant linear relationship ($F(1, 75) = 198.43, p < .001; b = .14, p < .001$). With time, there was a significant increase in the attention to research about fathers presented in the developmental psychology and family studies journals considered together: Attention to fathers in research articles increased by an average of .14% per year.

Figure 2 presents the percentages of articles with father-relevant data per year for each journal separately, starting with the journals’ respective year of inception. Descriptively, the Journal of Family Psychology, the Journal of Marriage and Family, and Family Relations at times devoted more than 20% of journal articles to studies that included fathers whereas peak percentages for articles with fathers in Child Development and Developmental Psychology remained under 20%.

The percentage of articles about fathers presented in Child Development from 1930 to 2006 yielded a positive, linear relationship with time ($F(1, 75) = 23.02, p < .001, b = .07, p < .001$); attention to fathers in this journal increased on average by .07% each year. In contrast, the research interest in fathers from 1969-2006 in Developmental Psychology produced a significant negative, quadratic relationship with time ($F(2, 35) = 5.29, p < .01; b_1 = .37, p < .01; b_2 = -.01, p < .01$). An initial rise in articles about fathers appeared to peak in the 1990s, and subsequently decline. Articles about fathers in the Journal of Family Psychology from 1987 to 2006 also produced a negative, quadratic relationship with time ($F(2, 17) = 9.68, p < .01; b_1 = 3.66, p < .01; b_2 = -.12, p < .05$). The rise in the percentage of articles about fathers and fathering seemed to rise steeply and peaked about 2000 before declining slightly with each passing year. Attention to studies about various dimensions of fatherhood in Family Relations from 1952 to 2006 produced a significant positive, linear association with time ($F(1, 53) = 37.47, p < .001, b = .26, p < .001$), increasing by about .26% each year. In publications about fathers and fatherhood from 1939 to 2006 in the Journal of Marriage and Family, a positive quadratic result had the best fit with the data. Attention to fathers in ar-
Figure 1. Percentage and actual counts of articles about fathers in all five academic journals by year, 1930 – 2006.
Figure 2. Trend analysis of percentage of articles about fathers presented separately for each journal by year, beginning with journal’s year of inception.
articles in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* stayed low until the 1950s, after which it began to grow exponentially ($F(2, 65) = 93.90, p < .001, \beta_1 = -0.06, \text{ns}; \beta_2 = 0.01, p < .001$).

Changes in Content over Time

Before presenting results for each content area over time, the broader context of research attention to fathers is addressed through presentation of data for all journals for all years. Table 1 provides descriptive information on the proportion of the total number of articles about fathers published in all journals since their individual dates of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Percentage of Articles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Two-Parent Families</td>
<td>76.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Resident Fathers</td>
<td>14.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced Fathers</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step-Fathers</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single Fathers (not included above)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fathering/Fatherhood</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ Employment</td>
<td>9.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Relations</td>
<td>21.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Composite</td>
<td>75.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Father-Child Interactions</td>
<td>33.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father Care and Involvement</td>
<td>26.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Behaviors and Attitudes</td>
<td>42.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abusive Fathering</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ Well-Being/Individual Characteristics</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ Report of Children’s Behavior</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child Outcomes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive Development/Achievement</td>
<td>11.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioral Problems</td>
<td>17.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-Social Behaviors</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Relations</td>
<td>5.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-Emotional/Personality Development</td>
<td>32.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Identity and Roles</td>
<td>6.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biological and Sexual Development</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<td>Adult Child’s Life</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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inception by: (a) family structure, (b) dimension of fatherhood, and (c) child outcome. Categories were not mutually exclusive and within each category (e.g., family structure) articles could receive codes for more than one topic.

Most studies of fathers drew participants from two-parent families (76.2%), with the examination of non-resident fathers a distant second at 14.2%. Comparing percentages for the dimension of fatherhood, the majority of research focused on fathers’ parenting. Attention to the specific aspects of parenting in the composite variable was apparent in 75.4% of the coded articles. In terms of subareas of the composite parenting variable, fathering behaviors and attitudes were coded in 42.1% of the articles, the quality of father-child interactions in 33.0%, and father care and involvement in 26.1%. The three areas of children’s development that garnered the most attention by researchers in studies with or about fathers were children’s socio-emotional/personality development (32.5%), behavior problems (17.5%), and cognitive development and achievement (11.2%).

Because the coding scheme allowed for multiple codes from a single article, analyses were rerun, using only the primary content code for each article. When analyses were restricted to the primary code for family structure, dimension of fatherhood, and child outcome, the rank order for the most common codes was replicated. In the analyses that follow, proportions are derived from all codes given to articles, i.e., proportions represent the number of articles that included a particular topic per year and topic codes were not mutually exclusive.

**Family structure.** Trend lines for the three most frequently coded types of family structure in articles from 1956 to 2006 are depicted in Figure 3. Attention to fathers in two-parent families did not have a significant association with time ($F(1, 49) = .04, ns$). Attention to non-resident fathers was best characterized by a cubic trend line ($F(3, 47) = 6.18, p < .01; b_1 = 3.83, p < .001; b_2 = -.16, p < .01; b_3 = 0.00, p < .01$). The percentage of academic articles that included non-resident fathers increased in the 1960s, declined during the next two decades, and experienced resurgence from the 1990s through 2006.

Significant positive linear trends were detected in relation to the attention given to divorced fathers ($F(1, 49) = 30.12, p < .001; b = .26, p < .001$) and step-fathers ($F(1, 49) = 35.50, p < .001; b = .22, p < .001$). The percentage of articles that included samples of divorced fathers increased by about .26% and those that included step-fathers increased by an average of about .22% each year. The coefficients for these linear trend lines did not differ significantly from one another ($\chi^2(1) = .64, ns$). Attention to single fathers not included in other categories has not changed significantly since 1956 ($F(1, 49) = .75, ns$).

**Dimension of fatherhood.** Positive linear trend increases from 1956 to 2006 were found for academic research that focused on fathers in relation to marital issues and on fathers’ well-being and other individual characteristics ($F(1, 49) = 38.81, p < .001, b = .54, p < .001$, and $F(1, 49) = 16.74, p < .001, b = .35, p < .001$). Increases per year averaged .54% for marital content and .35% for individual characteristics of fathers. The
Figure 3. Trend Analysis of Percentage of Articles with Three Major Types of Family Structure Using All Codes, 1956 – 2006
coefficients for these two linear trend lines fell short of being significantly different from one another ($\chi^2(1) = 2.98, p < .10$). The best fit trend line for studies that examined abusive fathering also was positive and linear, with an increase of about .22% per year ($F(1, 49) = 5.51, p < .05; b = .22, p < .05$). Comparison of coefficients indicated that the rate of increase in attention to marital issues, and in attention to individual characteristics of fathers, was each significantly greater than the rate of attention to studies about abusive fathering ($\chi^2(1) = 49.64, p < .001$ and $\chi^2(1) = 10.48, p < .01$, respectively).

Non-linear trend lines best characterized empirical interest in fathers’ parenting, broadly defined. Interest in fathers’ parenting, the composite variable that included father-child interaction, father involvement, and paternal attitudes and behaviors, demonstrated a cubic trend: After a rise in interest in the area, there was a slight decrease from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, and then an upswing through 2006 ($F(3, 47) = 3.11, p < .05; b_1 = 3.97, p < .05; b_2 = -.16, p < .05; b_3 = .00, p < .05$). Scholarly attention to fathers’ employment and fathers’ reports of children’s behaviors did not change significantly over time ($F(1, 49) = .18, ns$ and ($F(1, 49) = .32, ns$). Figure 4 displays trend lines for the three most frequently coded content areas for dimensions of fatherhood: parenting, marital relations, and own well-being/individual characteristics.

**Child outcomes.** Attention to the following areas of inquiry concerning child development and functioning demonstrated significant linear associations with time: gender identity and roles, peer relationships, and behaviors and characteristics of the adult child. Research articles with fathers that included the outcomes of children’s gender identity and roles declined from 1956 to 2006 by about .34% per year ($F(1, 49) = 13.77, p < .01, b = -.34, p < .01$). In contrast, the association was positive and linear between content that focused on the adult child and time, $F(1, 49) = 6.42, p < .05, b = .10, p < .05$, increasing .10% on average. Coefficients for these two trend lines, one negative and the other positive, differed significantly ($\chi^2(1) = 17.32, p < .001$).

Non-linear trend lines best characterized empirical interest in the following areas of child development and functioning: behavior problems, prosocial behaviors, and cognitive development/achievement. A positive quadratic curve best fit attention over time to children’s behavior problems ($F(2, 48) = 3.48, p < .05; b_1 = -2.00, p < .05; b_2 = .04, p < .05$). Following declining interest in children’s behavior problems through the 1980s, there was a shift toward increased attention that has continued to the present. Best fitting the inclusion of children’s prosocial behaviors was a cubic trend line: attention increased through the 1970s, then decreased, then saw renewed interest from the late 1990s to 2006 ($F(3, 47) = 3.39, p < .05; b_1 = 1.48, p < .01; b_2 = -.06, p < .05; b_3 = .00, p < .05$). Articles that included children’s cognitive development/achievement also demonstrated a cubic relationship with time, ($F(3, 47) = 5.77, p < .01; b_1 = 3.50, p < .001; b_2 = -.14, p < .01; b_3 = .00, p < .01$). The proportion of articles about children’s cognitive development/achievement appeared to increase through the mid-1970s, decline over the next two decades, and resurge in the mid-1990s.
Figure 4. Trend Analysis of Percentage of Articles with Three Major Dimensions of Fatherhood Content Areas Using All Codes, 1956 – 2006
Empirical attention to fathers and children’s socio-emotional/personality development and biological/sexual development did not significantly change with time ($F(1, 49) = .03, \text{ns}$ and $F(1, 49) = 1.10, \text{ns}$, respectively). Attention to peer outcomes fell below conventional levels of significance for a positive, linear trend ($F(1, 49) = 3.63, p < .10; b = .10, p < .10$). Figure 5 displays the trend lines for the three most frequently coded content areas for child outcomes: behavior problems, cognitive development/achievement, and children’s socio-emotional/personality development.

Discussion

The current study was conducted to provide a systematic review of academic attention to fathers in empirical articles published in journals deemed likely to feature men as parents. The aim was to understand the relationship between academic attention to fathers and time. The coding of 1115 articles published in leading child development and family social science journals was the source of data that were subject to trend line analyses. Historical analyses of fathers in popular culture outlets (e.g., magazines, family cartoons) reveal fluctuating interest over the last century and do not support a steady, linear increase in interest (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; LaRossa et al., 1991). Our systematic review of 1115 articles in key developmental psychology and family studies journals from their date of inception in the last century to 2006 indicated increased attention to fathers through much of the last century in all five journals, but found waning interest in recent years in two journals. Analyses of content areas, dating from 1956 forward as available, often revealed non-linear patterns.

Before presenting results for specific content areas, the broader context was described using codes for all journals on all topics. Results from the trend analysis for all five journals considered together demonstrate that fathers have not been forgotten, and indeed, have been receiving more academic interest through the last century. When data on the percentage of articles that included fathers or father-relevant content from all journals were examined together, a significant increase in attention to fathers was detected. The average increase was .14%, the increase was greater in some years than in others. Overall, even at their peak in the 1990s, father-relevant articles never occupied much more than 15% of journal space, although peaks for individual journals sometimes exceeded 20%.

More refined analyses revealed differences by journals. When the data for each journal were examined separately, the Journal of Family Psychology had the highest percentages for articles with or about fathers. Significant linear increases in articles that studied fathers were found in the separate trend line analyses for Child Development and Family Relations; linear and quadratic lines fit the pattern demonstrated by the Journal of Marriage and Family. However, both the Journal of Family Psychology and Developmental Psychology have been including fewer articles with or about fathers in recent years as indicated by the significant fit of negative quadratic trend lines.

The fit of a quadratic trend line for some of the journals reminds us that linear models of change do not always apply to academic interest in specific topics, such as fathers. The recent decline in two psychology journals may reflect the reallocation of
Figure 5. Trend Analysis of Percentage of Articles with Three Major Child Outcomes in Relation to Fathering Using All Codes, 1956 – 2006
space in these journals to articles that features studies in newer frontiers, such as neuroscience. Steinberg (2008) commented that federal funding in recent years has favored studies with strong neurobiological components and has placed less emphasis on normative development. At one time, showcasing father-child interaction or comparing mothers and fathers was new. As studies of fathers and fatherhood have become more expected and less novel, they compete for journal space with other established topics of inquiry. Marsiglio et al. (2000) observed that there has been an overall increase in scholarly activities and additional outlets that reflect the growing interest in fatherhood. This increase in publication and dissemination channels may explain why the rising interest in fatherhood has not been uniformly reflected in the journals reviewed for this study. The lack of increasing attention by some journals may be offset by greater breadth in the number of outlets for academic research about fathers and by the increased attention to fathers in other journals, including some new men’s studies journals and parenting journals.

The two family studies journals with the longest history of active publication (Family Relations and Journal of Marriage and Family) grew in their attention to fathers by a small, but significant, factor. The newest family journal, the Journal of Family Psychology, in publication only since 1987, had a steep rise in attention to fathers until recently, with fewer articles about fathers in recent years. The increasing attention to fathers in two of the three journals with “family” in the title (Family Relations, Journal of Marriage and Family) could reflect in part the interactive nature of the academic publication process. Researchers select and submit manuscripts to what they perceive to be a suitable outlet and reviewers and editors serve a gatekeeping role. “Family” in the journal name may signal a welcome audience for authors of studies about fathers. Changing editors and special issues may alter the direction that a journal takes and may be responsible for the fluctuations and peaks in articles about fathers, such as observed for the Journal of Family Psychology. Flurries of publications during particular periods also may reflect national funding initiatives and national data bases becoming publicly available and accessible.

Close analysis of content areas indicated that in many instances, research has expanded its scope of interest in types of fathers and in dimensions of fathering and fatherhood. Although the vast majority of studies included fathers in two-parent families, fathers in non-traditional family structures have been getting more attention over time. The pattern for non-resident fathers showed first an increase, then decrease, then increase again whereas the lines for divorced and step-fathers increased in a linear fashion. These findings indicate that the diversity in actual family structure in the U.S. is reflected in the types of fathers who participate in academic studies and increasingly in the articles that get published. In addition to having more representative samples, studies also use different types of family structures as predictor variables, comparing, for example, child outcomes in families with divorced fathers and married fathers (e.g., Carlson, 2006).

In the selected journals, articles about fathers most commonly concerned parenting attitudes and behaviors, father-child interactions, and father care and accessibility.
These aspects of parenting were highly correlated and one composite parenting variable was used in analyses. The tendency for the studies to include several facets of fathering is consistent with the elaboration and enumeration of the fathers’ role that researchers have observed (Cabrera et al., 2000; Hofferth et al., 2002; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Yeung et al., 2001). LaRossa (2004) used the adjective “textured” to describe change in the culture of fatherhood during the 1950s and that term seems to apply to later decades as well. In their précis of scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s, Marsiglio et al. (2000) observed that, “Throughout the decade [of the 1990s], interest in fatherhood grew, the number and diversity of fatherhood researchers expanded, and efforts to promote the study of fatherhood intensified” (p. 1173). The fit of quadratic and cubic trend lines for several content areas consistently supported increased attention to fathers in the 1990s. With time, we may look back on the 1990s as the “decade of the father.”

Across journals, positive, linear increases were evident in the attention given to fathers and marital issues and to individual attributes of fathers such as their age, well-being, and personality. These trends support a shift toward a more ecological view of fatherhood. The influence of fathers on children is not limited to father-child interaction and parenting behaviors, but has increased over time in attention to include characteristics of the men themselves and the functioning of the marital relationship in relation to parenting and/or child functioning.

Unexpectedly, attention to fathers’ employment did not change over time. Although maternal employment has been an active topic of debate and study in academia for decades (Goldberg, Prause, Lucas-Thompson, & Himsel, 2008), fathers’ employment beyond simple description of the sample and as a “researchable” dimension of fatherhood was included in only 10% of the articles coded and did not change over time. Employment is the non-discretionary role for fathers, even for “new” fathers who are active, involved parents. As Bianchi et al. (2006) concluded from time diary evidence, U.S. fathers are adding increased child care responsibilities to their busy work lives, not replacing one with the other.

In our analysis of child outcomes in studies with fathers, only attention to gender identity and gender roles declined linearly over time. The early interest may have paralleled the development and testing of scales to measure concepts of masculinity and femininity (e.g., The It Scale for Children, Brown, 1956; Bem Sex-Role Inventory, Bem, 1981), with waning interest once the excitement about androgyny and the rearing of androgynous children subsided (Morawski, 1985). Linear, increased academic attention over time characterized father-relevant studies with children’s peer relations as the outcome and studies that focused on the adult child. We noted when coding that the family social science journals tended to feature studies with adult children’s reports about their fathering experiences more so than the journals in developmental psychology. We did not have a separate code for the source of information about fathers, but sometimes, the child, particularly the adolescent or adult child, was the supplier of information about fathers’ characteristics and behaviors. Sometimes, mothers reported the information about fathers or children and the aim of some studies was to compare
accounts from the different sources. Other times, fathers were directly asked or their behavior was observed by the researchers. The informant and methodology could be important variables to consider in future syntheses of research about fathers.

Several of the child content areas saw fluctuations in attention over the years. Those that are currently experiencing an upswing are behavior problems, prosocial behaviors, and cognitive development/achievement. Perhaps the upward changes in the cognitive/achievement domain reflects increased attention to educational achievement of American children in a global context and calls for greater parental investment in children’s schooling (Hill & Taylor, 2004). The area of child functioning that was most commonly coded was socio-emotional and personality development. Attention to this broad category of child outcomes remained comparatively high and did not change significantly with time. Overall, the results concerning attention to child outcomes in articles that included fathers reflect the perceived importance of fathers for both adaptive and maladaptive aspects of children’s functioning.

Limitations of the current study include the lack of coding for the quality of fathering beyond the inclusion of a code for abusive fathering, which applied to about 2% of the studies in the journals reviewed for this analysis. Thus, we cannot fully address whether the study of nurturing aspects of fathers reveals men to be “good fathers” (Palkovitz, 2002) or “idealized” new nurturers (Coltrane & Parke, 1998), or insensitive fathers. It could be that research focusing on non-resident and divorced fathers exposes more of the limitations of fathering than studies of fathers in two-parent families. Also, studies with single and divorced fathers, as well as studies about fathers who abuse their children, may be more likely to be published in specialty journals. We also did not code for changes in the ethnic and cultural composition of the samples of fathers who participated in the studies to see whether changes in the diversity in the population is reflected in the study samples.

The results from the current study indicate that the “culture of fatherhood” is alive and well in academic journals. Analyses of trend lines over the decades reveal that patterns of academic attention to fathers are often complex. It would be interesting to compares the “bends” in trend lines for academic journals’ attention to fathers to changes in public policies concerning families and to depictions of fathers in other media.

References


