

## Parent Involvement: Voices of Taiwanese Fathers.

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In recent decades Taiwan's dynamic socioeconomic growth and political transformation have brought changes to a number of Chinese traditions giving rise to a more liberal middle class advocating for gender equality in Taiwanese society. Parenting responsibilities are becoming less gender-bound and fathers are becoming more involved in raising children. Studies examining parenting roles and practices in Taiwan, however, are limited. This paper provides a review of father involvement in historical and contemporary contexts in Taiwan as well as government and corporate policies that promote father involvement. Using Attride-Stirling's thematic network model the paper presents results of thematic content analyses of structured interviews conducted with fifteen Taiwanese fathers ages (30-61 years) and education levels (high school to Master's degree). The study addresses ways that fathers are involved in the lives of their young children. Major themes of father involvement to emerge were the importance of: 1) Being a positive role model; 2) Engagement with children in outdoor activities; 3) Education as a means to children's socioeconomic advancement; and 4) Evolving nature of socially-constructed father roles in Taiwan. Results indicate that Taiwanese views about father involvement and engagement with children are slowly shifting from traditional beliefs associated with a patriarchal society toward more egalitarian beliefs with respect to gender roles and parenting responsibilities.

*Keywords:* Father involvement, Parenting responsibilities, Gender roles, Taiwanese society, Generational changes, Qualitative research.

### Parent Involvement: Voices of Taiwanese Fathers.

*My own father was seldom involved in children's matters. We really had little interaction. He was always busy with his work and constantly played the stock market at home after work. There was no role model for me to learn to be a father. I learned to rear children from other approaches such as from watching TV. (Wang, M. K., personal communication, May 23, 2010).*

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Parental involvement is a subject of discussion and study in contemporary Taiwanese society. According to Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985), paternal involvement consists of three components: *interaction* with the child (actual engagement with the child); *availability* to the child (presence and accessibility to the child); *responsibility* for the child (ensure the care of the child). The present study adopts this definition and focuses on the role of fathers in Taiwan. A social constructivist framework provides the basis for the present analysis and asserts that "father behavior is shaped by social networks within a local culture" (Roggman, Fitzgerald, Bradley, &

Raikes, 2002, p. 3). Fathering consists of a negotiation of roles within the familial structure, and the roles can be shaped by a range of sociocultural factors (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). The concept of fatherhood across cultures has changed over time along with changes in ideologies that are shaped by cultural contexts (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). In addition to economic factors, other contextual factors, such as the family, community, culture, and history all contribute to the shaping of fatherhood (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Fathers in Taiwan today grew up with few paternal role models who were actively engaged and involved in the everyday lives of their young children. Today's fathers find themselves in new territory, navigating through a modern society with dynamic changes in views regarding gender and parenting roles. The delineation of gender roles in Taiwan reflected by the traditional saying "men take care of the outside; women take care of the inside" has been challenged in contemporary Taiwanese society. Taiwan's dynamic socioeconomic changes (from a labor-intensive to a technology-intensive economy) and political transformations (from authoritarianism to democracy) over the last several decades have given rise to a more liberal-minded middle class, particularly with respect to gender roles and women's status in society (Beckert, Strom, Strom, & Yang, 2006; Ho, Chen, & Kung, 2008). Concomitant with these changes are an increase of women in the workforce (from 39% in 1979 to 50% in 2008; National Statistics, R.O.C., 2009) and decrease in birthrates (38.33 childbirths per 1,000 persons in 1961 to 8.54 in 2008; Directorate General of Budget, 2010) to among the lowest in the world.

With an increasing number of dual-earner nuclear families in Taiwan, traditional parenting divisions by gender are being reconsidered (Beckert et al., 2006). Multi-generation households are declining in occurrence, with many young couples now choosing to live apart from grandparents. With changes in social attitudes and the support networks of extended family in the household, parenting responsibilities are becoming less gender-bound in this traditionally patriarchal society and fathers are becoming more involved in the everyday lives of their children.

### **Government and Corporate Policies/Programs that Promote Father Involvement**

#### **Promoting parent involvement in schools.**

Due to strong deference to and respect for educator's expertise and authority, parent involvement in schools has been uncommon until recent years. In 2006, the Ministry of Education enacted the "Regulations for Parental Involvement in Compulsory Education School Affairs" requiring parent involvement programs in elementary and junior high schools (Ministry of Education, 2006). Participatory activities include parent-teacher conferences, workshops and associations, school volunteering opportunities, and supervising children's learning inside and outside of school. Funds have been provided for workshops to increase communication among principals, teachers, and parents. While generally father participation in schools has lagged behind that of mothers (Ya, 2009), the institutionalization of parent involvement in schools should nevertheless promote father involvement.

#### **Parental leaves**

Recent policy and practice changes in Taiwan regarding parental leaves may also impact father involvement. In 2002, the Gender Equality in Employment Act began requiring companies to allow their employees (both mothers and fathers) up to two years of unpaid parental leaves for each child until that child reaches the age of three (Council of Labor Affairs, 2008). A 2008 survey, however, found that less than 3% of the Taiwanese workforce actually utilized such policies, due to fear of losing their jobs or other professional repercussions (Lin, 2008).

More recently in 2009, the Employment Insurance Act required employees who ask for parental leaves (and who have paid into Taiwan's basic labor insurance program for at least one year) to be eligible for a subsidy equal to 60% of their salary for up to six months (Council of Labor Affairs, 2009). Employers who fail to offer employees these privileges, moreover, are subject to stringent fines (Taipei Times, 2010).

#### **Research Studies on Parent Involvement in Taiwan**

Among the few studies addressing fathers' and mothers' evolving roles in contemporary Taiwanese society, one study by Chiang, Huang,

and Lin (2005) examined gender differences in the participation of parents in elementary schools. Their results indicated that fathers were more likely to participate in school policy decisions while mothers were more apt to be involved in parent-teacher communications. In a 2005 study, Chern investigated the relationship of father involvement with academic achievement (Chern, 2005). Results of the study showed that 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade students with highly involved fathers who also engaged in discussions of career development had higher levels of academic achievement.

Huang and Wang (2007) conducted a large-scale study of fathers of primary school students in Taiwan. Results showed fathers with younger children had higher levels of involvement; fathers with more children had lower levels of father involvement; fathers with lower perceived expectations from spouses had more traditional gender roles; and fathers who perceived their own father's involvement as high held more egalitarian gender role beliefs and higher levels of fatherhood commitment and involvement.

In a study on gender differences in parental involvement on a sample of second-grade students, Ho and her colleagues (Ho, Chen, Ko, & Tran, 2010) found a general trend for mothers to be more frequently engaged than fathers in activities such as making visits with their child to a library or bookstore. Interestingly, however, Taiwanese fathers in this sample reported a greater tendency to be more engaged than mothers in discussing their family history/ethnic heritage with their child, though this difference was not statistically significant. Mothers were also more engaged in academic matters such as attending school programs and motivating children to succeed. In the area of parental role beliefs, Ho and her colleagues reported mothers to have significantly higher mean scores on this survey than fathers suggesting that mothers generally held more liberal/egalitarian beliefs regarding the parental role when compared to the participating fathers.

Since cultural media influences as well as reflects society's beliefs and attitudes, Ho and her colleagues examined Taiwanese textbooks for progressive portrayals of father involvement (Ho, Ko, Tran, Phillips, & Chen, in press). They found examples of such portrayals in lessons on gender education, gender roles, and gender equity in the elementary curricular domains of Language Arts, Life Education, Social Studies, and Health and Physical Education (Ho et al., in press). It is

noteworthy that the examples depicted fathers taking an equal role (not secondary to mothers) in household/family responsibilities. While such progressive portrayals may not reflect the majority of current Taiwanese households, these lessons encourage young students to recognize various possible models of parent roles, instilling change among future generations of parents.

The present study expands the research by providing voices from fathers in today's Taiwanese society and addresses research questions regarding their parenting roles, activities, values, beliefs, and reflections about their own fathers as role models.

## Method

### Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a convenience sample of fifteen male participants in Taiwan with varying age, education, and occupational levels. Fathers' ages spanned 30 to 61 years, and educational attainment ranged from senior high school to the Master's degree level. The interviews with each participant were translated and transcribed, and patterns in interviewees' responses were examined. As Green and Dixon highlight, discourse is always "socially constructed in and through actions and interactions of members of a social group [and] therefore...not solely of an individual" (Green & Dixon, 2002, p.136). Given a social construction framework, the authors analyzed interviewees' experiences while considering social, cultural and historical influences expressed in the data. It should be noted that the interview data actually comprise two datasets. The first set of interviews was conducted with seven fathers (ages 30-55; educational levels ranging from high school to Master's degree; professions including four educators, two insurance agents and one employee of a plastics manufacturer). To verify the themes represented in the first dataset, a second set of interviews were conducted with eight additional fathers (ages 33 to 61) with a similar range of educational (high school to Master's degree) and occupational levels (four educators in addition to professionals in security, storekeeping and engineering, and one unemployed father). The themes did not significantly differ between the two sets of interviews and hence the two datasets were combined for a thematic content analysis.

### Analysis

To examine the parallels in our interviewees' responses, Attride-Stirling's (2001) Structure of a Thematic Network was utilized. Attride-Stirling proposes there are three types of themes that can emerge from interviews: *basic themes*; *organizing themes*; and *global themes*. *Basic themes* are of the lowest order, and consist of patterns derived from textual data. They are simple theses, which say little about the texts on their own, and must be interpreted in the context of other *basic themes* to make sense. *Basic themes* may then be grouped into *organizing themes*, which provide a more encompassing explanation of the text. Lastly, these can be grouped into *global themes*, which incorporate the most powerful messages of the text and form the "core of the thematic network" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Using the Attride-Stirling model, themes were extracted from our interviewees' responses, with two or more similar answers constituting a theme.

### Results

Our results analyzed the responses to questions that were common to both sets of interviews, which included fifteen fathers in total. Additionally, responses to further probes from the second set of interviews were also included in our thematic analysis. The first major theme to arise in the interviews was that of fathers being a positive role model in Taiwanese society with a sub-theme of fathers adopting a "protector role" in the family. Fathers' replies often aligned with traditional Taiwanese ideologies supporting the belief that fathers should financially provide for and protect their families. Thus, when fathers were asked what roles they saw themselves playing in Taiwanese society, the most common response was "financial provider," offered by the majority of fathers. One school teacher in the group explained, "Traditionally, Taiwanese fathers have been the main financial resource for families; a father without a job might cause negative attention in society." The role of protector meant different things to different fathers and included making decisions for the family, providing emotional support to children, acting as a disciplinarian, supplying rides for children/family (including "driving the family around on holidays"), fixing things around the house, and being a general caretaker (See Figure 1).

A second major theme of father engagement in outdoor activities emerged in response to what specific activities fathers do with their children. Many fathers expressed an interest in being involved with their children through outdoor activities such as mountain climbing, going to the park, bicycle riding, and "joining in sports." Embedded in these responses are roles of fathers being companions in outdoor activities and teaching their children to appreciate nature. Participation in such events not only has positive health benefits for fathers and their children, but conveys an important message to children that nature can be enjoyable. Given that traditional Taiwanese culture has long delegated indoor activities to females and outdoor activities to males, it is not surprising that outdoor duties would fall more heavily with fathers.

A third major theme to emerge was the importance of education as a means to children's socioeconomic advancement. The fathers want their children to have promising futures, lead successful lives and "do as well or better" than the parents themselves. In order to try to accomplish these goals, fathers indicated the importance of teaching them skills to "survive in society [and to build on parents'] experiences and achievements to decrease their own failure while increasing opportunities." Other roles fathers deemed important to their children's success were to teach them appropriate morals/manners, help them lead a healthy life, assist them in understanding safety measures, train them in vocational skills, and encourage their school-related performance as measured by grades. Fathers indicated that economic support for education was an important means for providing for their children's socioeconomic advancement. Some examples of financial support included providing children with private after-school tutoring for academics (including "cram schools"), extracurricular enrichment, and donations to the children's schools. In addition, several fathers responded that helping children to study and reviewing homework were important ways for fathers to be engaged. Communication between teachers and parents was also a common form of paternal involvement. One interviewee pointed out that fathers also serve as presidents of parent-teacher associations. Another father noted, "filling out the communication book between teachers and parents and checking children's homework" are common aspects of paternal involvement in Taiwan. Such values and practices not only benefit

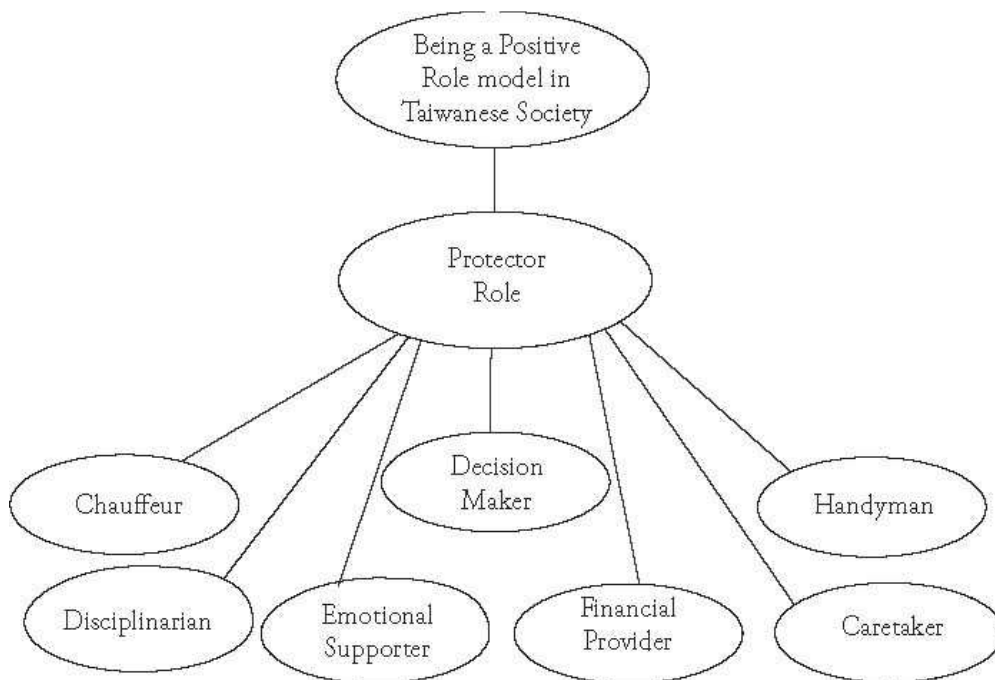


Figure 1. Themes as modelled through Attride-Strling’s (2001) structure of thematic network.

children’s learning opportunities, but assist the nation-state as well and help in maintaining Taiwan as a strong competitor in the global economy.

The fourth major theme to emerge was the evolving nature of socially-constructed father roles in Taiwan and the factors that influence the construction of such roles. Interviewees’ responses conveyed that explicit messages from popular media, teacher-parent communications, employers, and national policies on paternal involvement support and/ or constrain what are viewed as socially-acceptable roles for fathers. One frequent response from fathers was that the expectations of their wives heavily influenced their family involvement. Hence, mothers may serve as cultural brokers in home-based familial roles, responsibilities and practices. Other factors cited as influencing the shifting social-construction of father roles included the neighbourhood in which the family lives, the educational level of the father, the parenting style the father himself received as a child, nuclear vs. multi-generational family structure, and values promoted by the children’s schools. The majority of fathers indicated that economic barriers associated with work also influenced their family role. For example, one father discussed the difficulty he faced balancing his work schedule with

responsibilities towards his child, noting the possibility of being “laid off” for too much time out of work. Fathers indicated that either work or having a restricted amount of time (presumably due to work) were barriers to their involvement. Sociocultural values in Taiwan still clearly influenced fathers’ primary role as “breadwinners,” and placed pressure on fathers to prioritize work over family.

When asked whether they saw any generational changes between their own parenting and that of their fathers, the majority of fathers believed that paternal involvement had indeed changed from the time they were children. One father noted, “Since I hold a higher education [than my father], my parenting skills are better.” Another responded, “Fathers in the past were very, very harsh. Now I am more indulgent with my children.” With respect to educational involvement, one father also stated “My father seldom taught me, but I participate in my children’s education a lot.” Together, these are representative of the cultural and socio-political changes Taiwan is witnessing. Aspects of parental involvement once considered the sole responsibility of mothers are now becoming more socially acceptable for fathers as well.

### Discussion

The present investigation of Taiwanese paternal involvement explored and identified common beliefs and practices held by fathers about engagement with their children. Major themes of father involvement to emerge were the importance of: 1) Being a positive role model; 2) Engagement with children in outdoor activities; 3) Education as a means to children's socioeconomic advancement; and 4) Evolving nature of socially-constructed father roles in Taiwan. The study has implications for home-school-community partnerships. As shown from our interviews, some fathers are directly involved in the educational aspects of their children's lives, such as helping with homework, involvement in school-related activities (e.g., PTA), and communicating with teachers (e.g., the communication book plays a role in strengthening home-school communication). However, fathers identified work responsibilities as a common barrier to fulfilling their fathering role. Schools and communities in Taiwan creating father involvement programs/activities need to consider the various ways fathers are currently involved in their children's education and try to make programs more accessible to working fathers. Factors identified in Young's (2007) study as ideal for encouraging father participation included: holding fathering education activities on weekends or weekday evenings; keeping the duration of activities between one and two hours; and providing details regarding programs offered by the school. Therefore, schools and community programs need to schedule activities at convenient times for parents and communicate with parents to strengthen home-school-community partnerships. Government policy changes with regard to parental leaves, parental leave subsidies, and parent involvement in schools, as well as the provision of parent education centers, worksite daycare centers, and community programs all serve to promote and support father involvement. However, support for such policies from the larger society is still limited and father involvement will likely increase as these policies become more accepted.

An unanticipated consequence of the interview process was that three mothers contributed their views regarding father involvement. Many of their responses echoed those offered by the fathers. The mothers noted that their expectations played an important role in their husbands' family

involvement. One mother suggested that in order to promote father involvement, "the government should hold more free exhibitions and activities in art museums, as well as carnivals in parks near homes." This response not only highlighted support for informal learning opportunities in Taiwan, but also shed light on two possible obstacles - finances and transportation - that may act as impediments to father involvement. In his article for a Taiwanese parenting magazine, Hsu points to the need for mothers to be supportive of fathers in their new parenting roles and avoid criticizing or controlling fathers (Hsu, 2009). Hsu encourages mothers and fathers to respect and value one another in their co-parenting roles.

Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) believe that fathering must be considered in relation to mothering and mothers' social expectations for fathers and that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the children, community, and institutions are influential. Future research needs to include the expectations and values of mothers regarding father involvement. Further studies are also needed to examine the changing roles of fathers and mothers as partners in contemporary Taiwanese society.

### Conclusion

Fathers in modern Taiwanese society are adapting to the rapid social, economic, and political transformations that are challenging the traditional gender-bound roles and beliefs long associated with a patriarchal society. Fathers in contemporary Taiwan are beginning to shift their roles as parents. No longer just breadwinners, today's fathers are also important authoritative figures, role models, parenting partners with their spouses, and companions for their children, and they play an important role in their children's socialization and development.

While young fathers today may not be able look to the generation before them for answers, as in the case of Wang quoted at the beginning of this paper, it will be critical that they find this balance between career and familial responsibilities. This hope for the future of father involvement in Taiwan is reflected by the following voice:

*I think nowadays fathers in Taiwan are more willing to participate and satisfy children's emotional needs, especially the younger fathers. They care less about their*

careers and are willing to spend more time with their children. They're also generally less authoritarian or strict and more approachable. I think more and more fathers are willing to be responsible for child-rearing and to be involved in their children's education. (Yan, R-L., personal communication, January 31, 2010).

The quote from this father reflects a liberal attitude with regard to the role of today's father in Taiwanese society. It is clear that he promotes father involvement in the everyday lives of children, attending to developmental needs. Little is known about the gender/parenting role beliefs of young children who have highly-involved fathers. Further research needs to investigate the new roles fathers take on and the impact of father-child relationships on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children.

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