



Work characteristics and fathers' vocabulary to infants in African American families[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Fathers' vocabulary to infants has been linked in the literature to early child language development, however, little is known about the variability in fathers' language behavior. This study considered associations between fathers' work characteristics and fathers' vocabulary among a sample of employed African American fathers of 6-month-old infants who were living in low-income rural communities. After controlling for family and individual factors, we found that fathers who worked nonstandard shifts and reported more job flexibility used more diverse vocabulary with their infants.

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Research on early language development has increasingly recognized fathers as key figures in the ecology of children's development (Duursma, Pan, & Raikes, 2008; Kelley, Smith, Green, Berndt, & Rogers, 1998; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). Studies suggest that fathers' language, specifically fathers' vocabulary, is associated with language development for children from low-SES and mid-SES families from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006; Pancsofar, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2010). As more mothers have entered the workforce when their children are very young, research has grown on the contributions that fathers make to children's early environments. Studies exploring factors that contribute to variation in fathers' behaviors have reflected a growing awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity in the United States (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Gottman, 1998; Parke, 1996; Roopnarine, 2004). The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998)

suggests that interactions between parents and their children are influenced by external systems including the parents' work environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Parents' work environments impact child development through their influence on family processes including the interactional contexts in which children learn much of their earliest language. Though numerous studies show that characteristics of parents' work impact individual well-being and parenting behaviors (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007; Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom, & D'Souza, 2006), we know very little about variability in work characteristics and fathers' language input, particularly among African American fathers with young children. In the current study we examine possible links between work characteristics and the language used by African American fathers in interactions with their young children.

Links between fathers' work characteristics and language input

Job hours

Research investigating the work–family interface suggests that work conditions may be particularly important for understanding early interactions between fathers and children (Corwyn & Bradley, 1999; Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Goodman, Crouter, Lanza, Cox, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2008; Menaghan, 1991; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). It has been hypothesized that

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among employed fathers, job hours may restrict fathers' time interacting with children; however, studies in this area have yielded mixed results. There is some evidence that fathers' job hours may be negatively associated with the amount of time fathers participate in childcare and reading activities (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998; Marsiglio, 1991; Yeung et al., 2001). For example, Yeung et al. (2001) found that fathers' work hours were negatively associated with the time they spent with their children on weekdays, but not on weekends. However, most studies in this area have been conducted with Caucasian, middle-class families, and Goodman et al. (2008) found no effect of work hours on the quality of parent–child interactions in an ethnically diverse, low-income sample.

Nonstandard shift work

Whereas it is important to consider the overall amount of time fathers spend working, the time of day the fathers work may also be linked to their parenting behaviors. "Shift work" is used to describe work hours that fall outside of the traditional "9-to-5" workday (e.g., working evenings, nights, or rotating shifts; Beers, 2000). Men are more likely than women to engage in nonstandard shift work, and African Americans are more likely than Caucasians or Latinos to work alternative shifts (Beers, 2000; Presser, 2003).

Prior research of employed men and women found that nonstandard shift work is associated with a host of negative outcomes, including less time in family roles (Staines & Pleck, 1984), lower marital quality (White & Keith, 1990), greater marital instability (Davis, Goodman, Pirretti, & Almeida, 2008; Presser, 2000), more hostile parenting (Strazdins et al., 2006), and higher levels of parental stress and depressive symptoms (Daniel, Grzywacz, Leerkes, Tucker, & Han, 2009; Joshi & Bogen, 2007; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007). However, some literature suggests that nonstandard shift work may have a differential impact on family relationships for mothers and fathers, and that in some cases, nonstandard shift work may support positive father–child interactions (Mills & Taht, 2010; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007). Mills and Taht (2010) found in a study of Dutch families that fathers with young children who worked nonstandard shifts had less relationship conflict and spent more time with their children. Their quantitative and qualitative analyses suggested that fathers' nonstandard shift work was a strategic choice made by families to build more flexibility into their schedule and for fathers to engage in more childcare and household tasks. Similarly, Wight, Raley, and Bianchi (2008) found that parents who worked nonstandard shifts had more time alone with children than parents who worked standard day shifts. In a sample of two-parent families of 10 10- to 14-year-old children, Han and Waldfogel (2007) found that mothers' and fathers' nonstandard work schedules were positively associated with some aspects of parenting, such as monitoring, yet negatively associated with other aspects, such as closeness. These results showed that when parents were working nonstandard shifts, it was more likely that one of the parents would be present in the home during after school hours. In contrast, it was less likely that children would eat dinner with both parents and parents were more likely to miss important events.

Whereas parents' nonstandard shift work has garnered substantial recent attention in the literature, the mixed findings make it difficult to draw meaningful inferences about the associations between nonstandard shift work and fathering. Nonstandard work schedules may play a more supportive role in fathering at the transition to parenthood as compared to later childhood, but research has yet to illuminate these associations during infancy. For very young children who are not yet in school, nonstandard work schedules may allow fathers to participate more fully in childcare activities and support more optimal father–child interactions. Emerging research on fathers' shift work during early childhood has suggested that nonstandard work schedules may actually support fathers' caregiving and engagement (Brayfield, 1995; Rosenbaum & Morett, 2009). In a nationally representative study of dual-earner households, Brayfield (1995) found that fathers were

more likely to be the primary caregiver for a preschool-aged child when they worked a non-day shift as opposed to a day shift. In a more recent study, Rosenbaum and Morett (2009) found that father–child engagement in cognitively stimulating activities significantly reduced the negative association between parents' work in nonstandard shifts and infant behavior problems. This limited research suggests that fathers' nonstandard work hours may afford fathers of infants greater opportunities to engage in social interactions, and positively influence the way they talk to their young children. However, there have been no studies to consider this association between fathers' nonstandard work hours and fathers' talk to young children.

Job flexibility

Supportive work environments have been linked to more positive father–child interactions during infancy for families across SES groups (Goodman et al., 2008; Volling & Belsky, 1991). One specific aspect of supportive work environments, job flexibility, has been associated with lower levels of work–family conflict and better work and family life balance for mothers and fathers (Allard, Haas, & Hwang, 2007; Byron, 2005; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Job flexibility may grant fathers of young children the ability to manage family and work responsibilities, particularly when challenges related to childcare arise (Hill et al., 2001). However, as a group, African Americans are less likely to have flexible work schedules and family-friendly job benefits than are Caucasians (McLoyd & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, 2005). Very few, if any, studies have looked at the associations between fathers' job flexibility and the characteristics of father–child interactions during infancy, a developmental period when flexible parental work conditions may be particularly important for supporting optimal language environments for children.

A growing body of research has looked at the links between fathers' work conditions and father–child interactions, however, no study to date has considered how work conditions relate to fathers' talk to their children. Fathers' work conditions may be particularly important in understanding parenting interactions for African American men (Bowman & Sanders, 1998). African American men have the lowest labor force participation rates compared to men from other racial groups in the United States (McLoyd & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, 2005) and when they are employed, their work conditions tend to be less than ideal. Literature suggests that fathers' employment may be associated with involvement with young children in African American families, with employed fathers demonstrating more involvement with their infants than unemployed fathers (Gavin et al., 2002). However, certain work characteristics like shiftwork and job flexibility, that allow African American fathers to be home during the day may be positively associated with high quality verbal interactions with their infant children.

Demographic factors and parent characteristics associated with fathers' vocabulary

The association between fathers' work and fathers' vocabulary should be understood while accounting for other meaningful characteristics of fathers and families, including family socio-economic status, the mother–father relationship and individual parent characteristics.

Socioeconomic status

The literature consistently links parental language to family socio-economic status and parental education. Research suggests that mothers from higher-SES families talk and interact more with their children in ways that are related to more advanced child language development as compared to mothers from lower-SES families (Hammer & Weiss, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). Research on fathers within low-SES and middle-SES communities suggests that higher paternal education is associated

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