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# Parents' interest in their child's education and children's outcomes in adolescence and adulthood: Does gender matter?



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## ABSTRACT

There has been a dearth of research utilising interactional models of parent and child gender to investigate whether there are gender-specific effects in relationships between parent engagement and children's cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. This study drew upon data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, and used adolescents' reports of the interest shown by their parents in their education as well as parents' retrospective reports of the interest shown by their own parents when they were growing up. We found no evidence of gender-specific effects for the outcomes of academic achievement, educational expectations or educational attainment in adulthood. Mothers' and fathers' interest was associated with the self-concept of their children, and these associations were stronger in opposite-gender children.

## 1. Introduction

The benefits of education for individuals' outcomes across the life course are numerous and well documented (Hatch, Feinstein, Link, Wadsworth, & Richards, 2007; OECD, 2013). Also well documented is the persistence of educational trajectories within families (Chesters & Watson, 2013; Hancock, Mitrou, Povey, Campbell, & Zubrick, 2016; Minello & Blossfeld, 2016). Understanding the mechanisms through which educational advantage is transmitted can inform interventions aimed at closing persistent gaps in child outcomes. Strong evidence has accumulated over the past three decades for parent engagement as a mechanism in the transmission of educational advantage and, as such, a potential means for overcoming disadvantage (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Hango, 2007; Sime & Sheridan, 2014). With Governments around the world attempting to increase levels of parent engagement in a bid to reduce educational inequalities (Council of Australian Governments, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), it is important that a thorough understanding of the subtle variations in the relationships between parent engagement and child outcomes are examined and understood. In this paper we define 'parent engagement' in the broadest sense as the attitudes, values and behaviours of parents that promote their child's learning and educational outcomes. Such a broad definition encompasses several related constructs in the literature, including parent involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Fan & Chen, 2001), academic socialisation (Hill & Tyson, 2009) and concerted cultivation (Carolan, 2015; Lareau, 2003, 2011), and is consistent with the Australian Government's definition of parent engagement (Department of Education and Training, Australian Government, 2015).

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Despite the impressive accumulation of evidence on the positive effects of parent engagement, gaps in our knowledge remain. For example, we know little about the role of gender in the relationships between parent engagement and child outcomes. In particular, *interactional models* (Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2004) that investigate relationships across the four different parent-child dyads (i.e. mother-daughter, mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son) have rarely been used. It is possible that mothers' and fathers' engagement in their child's education have different effects on child outcomes depending on the child's gender. The small number of studies that have explored this question have produced mixed results. Furthermore, these studies have focused overwhelmingly on children's cognitive outcomes, and the possibility of gender-specific effects in the context of non-cognitive outcomes has not been explored. If such gendered effects do exist then they need to be better understood.

The aim of this research is to investigate the potentially gendered nature of relationships between one measure of parent engagement, namely children's perceptions of parents' interest in their learning and education, and a range of children's outcomes. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), we utilise adolescents' reports of the interest currently shown by their mothers and fathers, as well as mothers' and fathers' retrospective reports of the interest shown by their own parents growing up. This allows us to test interactional models with longer-term outcomes (parents' educational attainment) as well as shorter-term outcomes (adolescents' academic achievement, self-concept and educational expectations) – all of which may be important in shaping future educational trajectories.

## 2. Literature review

Several studies have investigated whether mothers' and fathers' engagement differentially affect child outcomes. The results have been mixed. For example while some studies found stronger effects for mothers (Hsu, Zhang, Kwok, Li, & Ju, 2011), others found fathers to be more important (Hango, 2007), and yet others found little difference between the two (Kim & Rohner, 2002; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005). However, none of this research considered how the effects of mothers and fathers might differ depending on characteristics of the child. As Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) argued, *Parent X Child* models are relevant to the consideration of the 'whom' of parent engagement. Mothers' and fathers' attitudes and behaviours may have differential impacts according to the child's characteristics, including gender. Pomerantz et al. (2004) termed these *interactional models*.

There is no single, over-arching theory predicting the contexts in which we would or would not expect to see evidence of interactional models based on parent and child gender. It has been argued that children may be more likely to model the attitudes, values and behaviours of their same-gender parent (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 2004; Pomerantz et al., 2004), and support for this has been found with regards to the transmission of academic values (Gniewosz & Noack, 2012) and gender role attitudes (Platt & Polavieja, 2016). However, Richards, Gitelson, Petersen and Hurtig (1991) argued that in certain situations parents' modelling is less important than their reflected appraisals, defined as the attitudes toward the child that are communicated via parent-child interactions. They proposed that, during adolescence at least, reflected appraisals from the opposite-gender parent may be more influential for a child's emotional wellbeing and non-cognitive attributes than the role-modelling of the same-gender parent. Thus, differing models have been proposed to explain how parent and child gender interact to shape parents' effects on their children. Distinguishing between different child outcomes may assist in understanding which model, if any, we would anticipate to see evidence of. As such, what Pomerantz et al. (2007) referred to as the 'whys' (the anticipated benefits) of parent engagement may be the key.

For researchers and policymakers concerned about persistent educational inequalities across the life course the 'whys' of parent engagement are numerous, and include both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. An adult's level of educational attainment has wide-ranging implications for their lifetime health, wealth and wellbeing and is thus a distal outcome of primary interest. Flouri (2006) examined the effects of mothers' and fathers' interest in their child's education at age ten on the educational attainment of sons and daughters at age twenty-six. On the one hand, Flouri found that mothers' interest positively predicted the educational attainment of both boys and girls. On the other hand, fathers' interest was a significant predictor for girls only. Flouri hypothesised that the fathers who showed high levels of interest in their daughters' education in 1980 may have been those with less traditional gender schemas. In turn, their daughters may have had less gender-typed cognitions about themselves leading them to attain higher levels of education in adulthood. Thus, the impact of fathers' interest (or lack of) on children's educational attainment was limited to opposite-gender children. This is the only research that we are aware of to date that used interactional models of child and parent gender to investigate the relationship between parent engagement and adult educational attainment.

A small number of studies have explored interactional models with proximal cognitive outcomes (that is, measures of children's learning outcomes and academic achievement). In a recent meta-analysis, Kim and Hill (2015) synthesised the findings of eleven studies that had looked at the effects of mothers' and fathers' engagement on the academic achievement of boys and girls ranging in grade level from kindergarten to 12th grade. No evidence for same-gender or opposite-gender effects was found, with both mothers' and fathers' engagement positively impacting sons and daughters equally. While cognitive attributes are highly correlated with future educational attainment and undoubtedly an outcome of interest, it would be erroneous to assume that they are the only important predictors of an individual's ultimate level of educational attainment. This is especially so for children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, who not only tend to have lower levels of school achievement than their more advantaged peers but who also, given a comparable level of academic achievement, are significantly less likely to expect that they will complete post-secondary qualifications (Yu & Daraganova, 2015). Even when these children do hold high expectations, they are less likely to maintain these expectations into adulthood and realise them (Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). This highlights the importance of considering non-cognitive factors that may be related both to parent engagement and children's educational trajectories.

Reviewing non-cognitive factors that are positively associated with educational attainment, one set of closely related concepts are

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