



Being a father during the space career: Retired cosmonauts' involvement

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ABSTRACT

The space career requires numerous absences from the cosmonaut's family during training and spaceflight. Such absences mean missing important milestones, events, and celebrations in the lives of their children. This study assesses retired cosmonauts' views of actual and desired involvement with their children during their spaceflight career. The Father Involvement Scale (adapted from Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2002), translated into Russian, was answered by 17 retired cosmonauts. The 20 domains in the scale included 10 Expressive (e.g., intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual development; sharing activities and interests) and 10 Instrumental (e.g., providing income, being protective, discipline, school/homework, and developing responsibility, independence, and competence). The cosmonauts' ratings of actual involvement with their children's lives was between *Sometimes involved* and *Often involved* ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.42$). None of the cosmonauts indicated *Never involved* for any of the Expressive domains or for seven of the ten Instrumental domains. Within the Expressive domains, the majority of cosmonauts said they were “often” involved in their child's spiritual development and in sharing activities/interests. Within the Instrumental domains, they were “often” involved in discipline and “always” involved in providing income. The areas in which they wished they had been “much more involved” than they had been were Expressive, rather than Instrumental: intellectual, spiritual, and physical development; sharing activities/interests, and companionship. This is the first study to measure retrospective assessments of father involvement during spaceflight careers. Space agencies should consider how Family Support personnel can enhance the parental involvement of future spacefarers.

1. Introduction

Fathers may be away from their family for many reasons – temporary work assignments, relocation or emigration pending reunion elsewhere, missions for government, NGOs, or military service, incarceration, marital divorce or separation, and so on [1]. Although much of the research on father absence still focuses on how such absences affect the family, and especially children [e.g. [2–4]], in recent years there has been increasing attention paid to “fathering”. This includes not only the absent parent's behavior toward the family, but also to his own feelings of involvement despite physical distance.

Conceptualizations of fathers being involved with their children have expanded beyond the traditional role of providing income, and have also moved from a primary focus on the amount of time spent with children [5]. One reason the definition and measurement of father involvement expanded beyond the time spent in direct interaction is the recognition that many absent fathers do remain involved economically, cognitively, spiritually, and psychologically in their child's life [6,7].

Current approaches include direct and indirect interactions with children, in domains encompassing a range of traditional and expanding roles of fathers [6–11].

Researchers have realized that for fathers who are absent from their child's life due to work-related travel and extensive work hours, maintaining the father identity – in terms of self-concept, importance, cross-situational awareness, and commitment [12] – may be especially problematic. Archival data of early astronauts indicate that family (children, spouse, and other relatives) were often mentioned in their autobiographical writings, indicating that they were thought about during the absences and recognized for the support they provided during the astronaut's career. Specific themes identified by Johnson [6] and of relevance to this paper are: 1) family events were missed, 2) family was thought about routinely during spaceflight, and 3) the space career affected marriage and family. Specifically, the astronauts' intensive training meant missed family events, and missing events became the routine not the exception. Retired astronauts thought it important to spend time with their adult children to make up for time and

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family events missed earlier. Yet, as stated by one astronaut, if he had to make the decision to “go to the Moon” or forgo that experience to spend more time with his child, he would have chosen the space career. Retired cosmonauts in looking back at their space career may have seen similar effects of their career on family, although there may have been cultural differences in their expected involvement as a father during their space career.

The social and behavioral sciences of space deal with an interesting and unique group of people, albeit a very small one compared to the samples and populations of other research areas. Because many cosmonauts and astronauts have military backgrounds, the most appropriate comparison group for their experience of fatherhood would be military personnel on remote deployment. As in the literature over all, the focus has been mostly on the family left behind; but some facts regarding the deployed father have been described.

Deployments – like training for and flying in space – span long periods. Thus, direct physical access and influence are at best sporadic, although most recently, and currently, new technologies of communication make contact much easier and more frequent, and thus generally facilitate the father's involvement [13]. Focus group interviews [14] with returned servicemen found that U.S. military fathers were highly concerned with the relationship with their children. The authors identified three major areas of involvement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. These categories covered a range of specific concerns, ranging from planning how to celebrate events such as birthdays from afar to advising, encouraging, and facilitating schoolwork and devising ways to share warm and affectionate bonding.

In developing the study reported here, we adapted the general framework reported in Ref. [14]. As far as we are aware, the study described here is the first to systematically investigate the retrospective perceptions of spacefarers as to their relationship with their children before, during, and after their space missions.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sample and data collection

Data are from a retrospective study with 20 retired cosmonauts. Personal interviews, questionnaires, and a computer simulation, all translated and administered in Russian, were used to assess their pre-, during, and post-career experiences. Recruitment and data collection were done by The Institute of Biomedical Problems (IBMP), Moscow. The retired cosmonauts ranged in age from 45 to 74 years. All were married and had at least one child. About half had their last flight before 2000 and half after, indicating experience on *Mir* as the main category, followed by on both *Mir* and the International Space Station (ISS).

2.2. Measure of father involvement

Father involvement, one of the family variables in the larger study, is defined as the retired cosmonauts' retrospective assessment of their level of involvement with their children during the space career, and what they would have liked that involvement to have been.

The Father Involvement Scale followed the format and categories of involvement used by Finley and Schwartz [8] in their study of young adults' retrospective rating of their father's involvement in their development. Their scale incorporated the domains of father involvement previously identified by Hawkins and Palkovitz [9] and assessed by Hawkins and colleagues [10] in a pilot study of fathers' current, but not retrospective, involvement with their children. The cosmonauts were asked how involved they were during their cosmonaut career in 20 aspects of their children's lives, that is, 10 expressive domains and 10 instrumental domains (see Tables 1 and 2 for the list of domains). Response options were 1 = *never involved* to 5 = *always involved*. Bilingual native Russian speakers translated and back-translated the scale,

focusing on translating the meaning of each of the domains, to ensure understanding of the concepts.

They were then asked to indicate what they had wanted their level of involvement in each of those domains to be, compared to what it actually had been. Response options ranged from 1 = *much less involved* to 5 = *much more involved*, with the middle response option being *it was just right*. Response options 1 and 2 indicate they thought they were too involved; response 3, that they were satisfied with what they had done; and response 4 and 5, that they were not involved enough. Thus, all but response 3 indicate dissatisfaction with their level of involvement as a father. The response options were recoded to reflect level of satisfaction, with 0 = desired level of involvement as *he was* or *satisfied*, and +1 and +2 were a *little more* or *much more* involvement desired, and –1 and –2 were a *little less* or *much less* involvement desired.

The interviews had some questions about the effect of the space career on their children, and this information provides additional insight on the cosmonauts' responses to the Father Involvement Scale.

3. Results

3.1. Father involvement during his space career

Of the 20 subjects, 17 completed the scale about father involvement. The retired cosmonauts' actual rated involvement with their children's lives was between *sometimes* and *often* involved ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.42$). There were no differences in the scale's mean score as a function of number of children, age of cosmonaut, or space career variables (number of flights, flights pre- or post-the year 2000, *Mir* only, ISS only, or *Mir* and ISS).

As shown in Table 1, based on frequency data, *never involved* was not indicated by any of the cosmonauts for the 10 Expressive domains, nor by any of the cosmonauts for 7 of the 10 Instrumental domains: the three domains on which 1 or 2 fathers said they were not involved were ethical/moral development, career development, and providing income. The latter reference to providing income suggests a narrow definition of the domain, e.g., he had not been the one giving money to the children for their expenses, or in the case of one subject, his family did not receive his income during his spaceflight because of an administrative error.

The most endorsed domains, defined as at least 10 out of 17 subjects replying that they were *often* or *always* involved, are: 1) Expressive domains: child's emotional, spiritual, and physical development; sharing activities and interests, caregiving, and companionship; and 2) Instrumental domains: child's ethical/moral development, developing responsibility, providing income, being protective, advising, discipline, and school/homework.

3.2. Desired involvement compared to what it was

As shown in Table 2, the specific areas in which the majority (at least 10 out of 17 subjects) wished they had been *much more involved* were: intellectual, spiritual, and physical development; sharing activities or interests; and companionship. Thus, on 5 out of 20 domains of involvement, the cosmonaut fathers wished they had been *much more* involved. These five items fit into the factor of expressive rather than instrumental activities [8].

The middle category, “as he was” involved, suggests that in thinking back that half of the subjects (8 and 9) were satisfied with the level of their involvement as a father in two Instrumental domains: developing independence and discipline. A different story is shown for the Expressive domains: 0 to 5 of the cosmonauts were satisfied with their involvement, with two domains (caregiving and companionship) rated as just right by only 4 and 5 subjects.

Wishing they had had additional involvement, assessed by at least 10 subjects reporting they desired “a little or much more” involvement, identified six Instrumental domains: moral/ethical development,

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