

The Differential Impacts of Shame, Guilt, Avoidance and Compensation on Father Involvement in Families with Disabled Children: A Report of Mixed Methods Research

Kai Chung Lo

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong

Abstract

Background and Aims: This study examines the emotions, involvement and mental health of fathers in rearing children with disabilities. It aims to explore the meaning and experiences of fathers in different stages of rearing, develop and validate measurement scales for shame, guilt, avoidance, compensation involvement, and masculine norms, and identify the mechanisms linking these variables.

Methods: The study uses a mixed-methods research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 fathers of 2-12-year-old children with disabilities to understand their emotional experiences and behavioral reactions. A cross-sectional online questionnaire was used to collect data from 437 fathers to develop and validate the measurement scales. Path analysis was employed to examine the relationships between variables and test the mediating role of emotions and behaviour.

Results: The qualitative analysis facilitated the development of a conceptual model highlighting the distinctive and inclusive roles of fathers and men in the upbringing of children with disabilities. This analysis also delineated five stages of emotional responses experienced by fathers throughout various phases of child-rearing. The quantitative analysis contributed to the creation and validation of measurement scales assessing shame, guilt, avoidance, involvement, and adherence to masculine norms. Findings revealed significant correlations among the examined variables, except for a minimal negative association between shame and paternal involvement. Path analysis indicated that masculine norms and the dialogistic developmental period of children exerted differential effects on fathers' emotional experiences: masculine norms were associated with reduced shame, whereas the dialogistic period was linked to increased guilt. These relationships were mediated by avoidance and compensatory behaviours, which in turn influenced the degree of father involvement.

Conclusions: The study's findings are anticipated to have broader societal implications by elucidating the roles of shame and guilt emotions, along with their reciprocal dynamics, in shaping paternal involvement in the care of children with disabilities. These insights carry significant relevance for social work practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, underscoring the necessity to acknowledge and address fathers' emotional experiences to enhance their engagement in caregiving activities.