

The Differential Impacts of Shame and Guilt on Father Involvement in Families with Special Needs Children

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Abstract : Fathers in the family of disabled children play a crucial role in fostering child development. Previous studies addressing emotions of father involvement in rearing children with special needs have been rare. With reference to the cultural orientation and masculine idea of Chinese fathers, shame and guilt are probable causal emotions that affect fathers' psycho-behavioral reactions and, thus, father involvement. Based on the findings of our earlier qualitative studies, the current study aims to develop and validate a multi-item scale of guilt or shame and explore their relations with and fatherhood in families with children with special needs. A model is proposed to understand the roles that shame and guilt play in affecting fathers' involvement in their family system. The severity and type of the child's special needs are regarded as independent variables affecting the father's emotional responses - shame and guilt. It is hypothesized that shame and guilt, under the influence of masculinity, lead to avoidance and compensation, respectively, which subsequently decrease and increase father involvement with children with special needs. A cross-sectional online questionnaire survey of fathers with children with special needs recruited by convenience sampling was conducted. Potential participants were reached by bulk emails, related groups on the Internet and education/social services providers. Totally 537 valid sets of online questionnaires were collected from fathers of children with special needs. EFA on the items pool of shame and guilt was performed, resulting in an x-item single-factor solution and y-item single-factor solution, respectively. Further path model analysis revealed that shame and guilt, under the influence of masculinity, showed differential avoidance and compensation responses and resulted in a decrease and increase in father involvement with special needs children. Demographic and key confounding variables were controlled in the analysis. The shame and guilt scales developed show good psychometric properties. Furthermore, they showed significant differential impacts, under the influence of masculinity, on avoidance and compensation behaviours, consequently resulting in a decrease/increase in father involvement in the expected directions. The findings have important theoretical and practical implications. At the community and policy level, the findings inform the design of strategies for strengthening the role of men in families with special needs children.

Keywords : emotions, father involvement, guilt, shame, special needs

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