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Envisioning Fatherhood: Indian Fathers' Perceptions of an Ideal Father

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Abstract

The image one forms in his mind about an ideal father may often affect the way he fathers his children. The present paper therefore aims to study the behavioural and psychological characteristics that define an ideal father. Responses were gathered regarding attributes of an ideal father through both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Urban Indian fathers (N=350) who had at least one child aged 10 years or younger were asked what it means to be an ideal father. Seven dimensions of the fathering role were identified: (a) Caretaker, (b) Surety, (c) Economic Provider, (d) Playmate and friend, (e) Role model, (f) Family head, and (g) Resource. The findings revealed that caretaking was viewed as one of the most important attributes of an ideal father. Nevertheless, a noticeable proportion of men believed ideal fathers to be surety, economic provider, and/or role model. The study further attempted to find out whether these men viewed themselves as an ideal father and the problems faced by them in being an ideal father. The relationship of fathers' characteristics with their perception of themselves as an ideal father has also been examined.

Keywords

Ideal father, fatherhood, India

Introduction

Fatherhood is not just an abstract ideal that is constructed in different social, economic and political milieus but is also a part of everyday lifecycles. It thus has both theoretical and practical connotations. Fatherhood is a cultural construct based upon a man's relationship to the children borne by a woman with whom he has sex relations (Mead, 1962). Fatherhood [thus] reflects a normative set of social practices and expectations which become institutional within the family, religion, law and general culture (Coltrane and Adams, 1999).

Fatherhood as social phenomena has long been an integral aspect of population studies. Importance of paternal status was emphasized long ago by Margaret Mead, a well-known anthropologist (1962). Subsequently, the significance of father participation in infant care was accentuated by West and Konner (1976). Barry Chevannes (1995), a sociologist at the University of West Indies, observed that male participation in the family is one primary characteristic of the human species, the corner stone of civilization. A good man is a caring, loving father who stands up to his responsibility whether in the home or outside, stands up for his woman during and after her pregnancy, lending her support for everything (Johnston-Pitt and Jiji, 1996).

Fatherhood, like motherhood, was defined socially rather than biologically through the ages. In every culture and historical period, men's family roles are shaped by social, economic, and cultural pressures, resulting in unique fatherhood ideals and practices. The ideal of fatherhood was essentially a set of implicit rules about what constituted a good father. Historically these ideals meant the standards of respectability, rectitude, proper thought, and deed, expected of men (Pleck and Pleck, 1997).

The father's roles in the family have traditionally been defined as instrumental. That is to say, fathers were to be the primary breadwinners and source of authority in the family, while mothers were to fulfill the emotional needs of family members (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Spiegel, 1983). Mothers provided most direct care for infants and young children, while men tended to be active in the training and tutoring of children, and most parental advice was addressed to fathers. Because they were moral teachers and family heads, fathers were thought to have greater responsibility for, and influence on, their children than mothers (Pleck, 1987; La Rossa, 1997; Coltrane and Adams, 1999). According to Lamb (2000), fathers have historically been cast in one of four main roles: moral guide, breadwinner, sex-role model, and, most recently, nurturer.

The rapid cultural shifts of the last decades have produced still other ideals of fatherhood (Pleck and Pleck, 1997). A new fatherhood ideal surfaced in popular culture, but family research began to report that fathers were indeed capable of participating in the routine aspects of parenting, like feeding infants and changing diapers, even if they did less than their wives and remained in a helper role (Lamb, 1976; Fein, 1978; La Rossa and La Rossa, 1981; Parke, 1981; Coltrane and Adams, 1999). Studies conducted in the United States reveal that many fathers today are playing a much greater role in the daily care of their small children than fathers normally did a generation ago reflecting a change in the attitudes and active choices that males make nowadays, revealing perhaps the new mindsets that are a result of decades of struggle for equal rights for men and women both in all spheres of life. In particular, we have witnessed the appearance of the images of the *new father* who shares household work with the mother.

As said earlier, 'father' can encompass a variety of beliefs and behaviours in different cultures. Suppal and Roopnarine (1999) have reviewed quite a few publications which help us develop an understanding of fatherhood in India. Citing Kakar (1992), they observed that the contemporary roles of Indian men and women have their roots in the prescriptions of family life based in the Shastras (e.g., the Laws of Manu), and other ancient Sanskrit texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, the Upanishads, and the Puranas. The authority of these texts combined with the persistence of regional, local, and religious traditions have contributed in shaping present day male-female roles. While some of the ancient texts portray men in a superior role, others depict women as the embodiment of spirituality, strength, and power. However, most of the legends, myths and moral fables emphasize upon the traditional responsibilities of men and women; as such, women are portrayed as nurturers and caregivers while men as providers and protectors of family honour and prestige.

Researchers maintain that there has been a shift from traditionally stereotyped roles toward quasi-egalitarian roles particularly among urban, higher-income, better educated dual-earner families (Rajgopalan, 1989; Shukla, 1987; Sinha, 1988; Verma, 1995). Indian society is experiencing significant social change associated with modernization, although cultural and normative codes continue to exert their influence on marriage and the family (Ramu, 1988). Newer data demonstrate differences in paternal involvement among Indian men attributed in part to movement away from traditional ideological beliefs about child care (Jain and Belsky, 1997). The argument is that greater opportunities for employment and education, challenges to patriarchy, and techno-economic changes may have contributed to an improvement in women's status in India and to possible increases in men's participation in childcare (Suppal and Roopnarine, 1999).

Conceptualization of the study

This study consists of two major research interests. The primary research interest is to explore the perceptions of Indian fathers regarding ideals of fatherhood. The secondary research interest is broadly concerned with examining whether the fathers included in the study consider themselves as an ideal father and the problems they face in fulfillment of their duties as an ideal father.

As social change is an inevitable process, Indian society is no exception in this regard. Since the past several decades, our society is undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, which has resulted in a change in the domestic system of production. This phenomenon, along with the rising cost of living, has induced an increase in the female work participation throughout the country. Also, there is a greater acceptance of women working outside of the home and an increase in nuclear family structure in India (Kandiyoti, 1988; Verma, 1995). However, its influence is being felt more in the urban areas compared to the rural areas.

As a consequence of the above-mentioned changes, women are forced to take up the dual responsibility of breadwinners as well as caretakers. Women have moved into what is called the "men's domain" but men have not equally reciprocated. This has given rise to an increase in the workload for women. In view of the prevailing situation, it has become necessary for the men folk to extend their cooperation and support to their spouses in day-to-day activities. Engle and Breaux (1994) rightly observed that as a result of very rapid economic and social changes, increases in women's work for family subsistence, and the inundation of western messages, new expectations are appearing for fathers.

The available literature on fatherhood show that the father himself and his entire family derive great benefits from father's participation in the rearing of children (e.g., Park et al., 1989;

UNICEF, 1995; Phares, 1996; Silverstein, 1996; Brase et al., 1997). Relevant research carried out in some of the developed countries have shown that men who actively share the traditional female task acquire a greater understanding of what women do at home; hence, they are more willing to participate in childcare activities. Studies have also revealed that fathers' involvement in day-to-day care of their children makes them more egalitarian, more caring of their partners and exhibit improvement in the quality of father-child relations. Population scientists have now begun to accept that men's distance from child-rearing made them resist women's family planning use (Greene and Biddlecom, 1997). A study conducted in Ghana found that a more egalitarian marriage (i.e., flexible division of domestic tasks) and a reduction of shared responsibilities with kin meant more costly parenting for men and hence a greater desire among men for fewer children (Oppong, 1987). Research shows that fathers who care for their children from infancy enhance children's cognitive and social development (Lamb, Pleck and Levine, 1985) and improve employed mother's mental health (Ross and Mirowsky, 1988; Roopnarine and Suppal, 2000).

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) programme of action has stressed male involvement in family matters stating that "Special efforts should be made to emphasize men's shared responsibility and to promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood." (United Nations, 1995). Other than the ICPD, male responsibilities with respect to domestic tasks are articulated in various other international fora and declarations such as Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), UNICEF and UNFPA. Mention has also been made in India's National Population Policy (2000) for the active male participation in the family and responsible fatherhood.

Ideals [of masculinity] contribute to a fuller understanding of the behaviors of men and what society expects of them (Chevannes, 2006). Men's fathering visions often reflect the way men think they would interact with their children. These visions sometimes reflect men's parenting philosophies and values. Men's visions may reflect how they want to orient themselves toward their children while also allowing them to project themselves into involvement fantasies that place them and their children at later life stages. When men begin to have fathering visions, they are often aware, at least in a rudimentary sense, of the standards they respect and aspire to achieve as fathers. These fathering ideals also provide opportunities to assess the quality and extent of their current involvement with their children (Marsiglio, 2004).

The need for studying men's participation has been felt over the decades. Though such studies have been done mostly in the countries of the United States of America and Europe, little has been done in this area in the developing countries, particularly in India. It may be expected that the developing countries would, sooner or later, undergo similar changes and that too, within a smaller span of time. Researches carried out in this field have identified various determinants of paternal involvement, perception of ideal fatherhood being one of them. Fatherhood, being a multidimensional concept, may have various meanings for each individual and these different visions of fatherhood may affect men's involvement with their children. Though the conclusions drawn from the study are not without limitations, nevertheless it offers a modest contribution to the understanding of fatherhood ideals.

Data and methods

The study is based on interviews conducted with 350 fathers residing in Mumbai, the largest city of India. Mumbai has a cosmopolitan population with representatives of virtually every linguistic and religious group of India. The city is characterised by steadily growing population through in-

migration (on-line database) and it was for this reason that the city was selected for the study. The men in the sample are biological fathers to at least one child aged 10 years or below. Equal number of fathers from single-earner and dual-earner families has been included in the study. Fathers have been selected by purposive quota sampling procedure. This work is a part of a larger study wherein both fathers and mothers were interviewed and data regarding fathering was collected for the youngest child of the respondent father-mother pair; henceforth, referred to as the "Focal Child." Quantitative as well as qualitative techniques have been adopted for the present study. Each interview averaged close to two hours. The researcher made efforts to interview most informants in their homes, although a few had to be conducted in public places or in offices. Quantitative study has been carried out using semi-structured interview schedules. Data gathered from the close-ended questions gave information on the various components of fathers' involvement along with socio-economic, demographic and other relevant information. The interview schedules included a few qualitative questions that probed fathers' own perspectives on the meaning of fatherhood.

The analysis of data has been done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) package. Univariate and bivariate techniques have been used for the analysis of data. Results have mainly been explained through contingency tables. Chi-square test has been applied to explore significant differentials. Statistical significance of Chi-square test has been presented by *p*-values. Qualitative data collected through open-ended questions have been cited in relevant sections to support some of the findings that emerged out from quantitative data.

Description of Participants

The median age of fathers was 35 years. Sixty-seven percent of fathers were in the age group 30-39 years. Three-fourths of respondents were married by the age of 29 years. There was a median age gap of five years among the spouses and most of the fathers (60 percent) were married for four to 10 years. A majority of the respondents were educated up to high school or above (76%), and a fairly large proportion of the respondents (31%) reported their level of education to be graduation or above. The occupational distribution of the fathers was as follows: professional/technical/ managerial jobs (15%), clerical and related jobs (13%), sales activity (22%), unskilled manual workers (15%), skilled manual workers (12%), and services (23%). With regards to income of the fathers, analysis revealed that a majority of them had an average monthly income between Rs.3000 to Rs.7000. Twenty-two percent of the fathers belonged to the lowest income category while average monthly income above Rs.7000 was reported by the same percentage of fathers. The classification of fathers by standard of living is as follows: low (21%), medium (61%) and high (18%). Twenty-eight percent of fathers were migrants out of which 35 percent had migrated from urban areas. With regard to the characteristics of the focal child, it was found that a higher proportion of children was males and was mainly second-born children. Minor variations in the distribution of male and female children by birth order was observed while hardly any difference was noticed by child's age-group according to sex of the child.

Residing in nuclear family households was more widespread (58%) compared to residence in joint or extended families (henceforth, referred to as non-nuclear households). The sample consists of predominantly Hindu fathers (72%). With regard to the distribution of the fathers by caste and tribe, it is seen that nearly 26 percent belonged to scheduled castes, less than two percent to scheduled tribes and 17 percent to other backward classes.

Measures

Standard of living index (SLI)

This 21-item summary household measure was used as a proxy to assess the economic condition of the households of which fathers were the members. The standard of living index was worked out in a manner similar to that of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) – 1998-99. It was calculated by adding up scores given to the dwelling pattern of the respondents, facilities available to the household and possession of various durable items. Higher score meant higher standard of living.

Availability

This measure is one of the five components of **Paternal Involvement in Child Care Index (PICCI)**, constructed by Radin (1982). Responses were gathered on 8 items from fathers on their availability to their children. The fathers were asked, “how much available are you to the child?” and they were expected to reply in terms of “frequently”, “sometimes” or “rarely”. Examples of items of this measure are as follows: away from home on weekends, out in the evening at least two nights a week, has breakfast during the week with children and family. The scores given to individual items were added to obtain the final score. The score ranged from zero to 12, the median being eight. Scores of eight and above were considered as “high” availability and scores below the median as “low” availability.

Results

Perception about ideal fatherhood

Fathers in the study were asked what does being an ideal father mean to them. Individual responses to the perception of ideal fatherhood were broadly categorized under seven heads: (a) Caretaker, (b) Surety, (c) Economic Provider, (d) Playmate and friend, (e) Role model, (f) Family head, and (g) Resource (Table 1(a)).

The accounts of the fathers obtained through open-ended questioning highlighted the fact that scarcely any of them saw ideal father as a ‘resource,’ that is, one who involves himself in day-to-day care of the child or spends time with children or helps his wife in household chores. A substantial number of fathers (59 percent), however, perceived that taking care of children is an attribute that an ideal father should possess. Such fathers have been designated as ‘Caretaker’ in the present study. A considerable proportion believed in the traditional role of fathers where the father is a surety (19 percent), economic provider (15 percent), role model (12 percent) and/or family head (5 percent). It is interesting to note that providing good treatment to the child’s mother is considered to be the responsibility of an ideal father by one of the respondents. One of the fathers believed that:

“It is of utmost importance for an ideal father to ensure that he does not pass to his child any loan and/ or debt that he might have borrowed during his lifetime.”

Another father replied:

“An ideal father is one who is always there for the child. An ideal father makes it a point to spend more and more time with the child, especially when the child is young as this is the age when the child is in his/her formative years. Ideally, fathers should be doing small little things – all odd jobs – for the child.”

On the whole, it can be said that men as egalitarian partner is even now not a popular viewpoint.

Table 1(a) Percentage of the fathers according to their perception about attributes of an ideal father.

Perception	Percentage	Number of fathers
Caretaker *	58.6	205
Takes care of child	25.1	88
Takes care of child's needs	20.0	70
Is aware of child's needs	2.9	10
Take care of child's health	4.0	14
Proper bringing up of children	14.6	51
Surety *	19.1	67
Plans child's future	14.3	50
Is concerned about child's studies	8.9	31
Economic Provider *	15.1	53
Fulfills requirements of family	15.1	53
Playmate and friend *	14.6	51
Understands child	8.0	28
Child's friend	4.9	17
Loves child	2.0	7
Does not discriminate among children	0.6	2
Keeps child happy	4.6	16
Role Model *	12.3	43
Role Model for the child	0.9	3
Make them well-cultured	12.0	42
Family Head *	5.1	18
Those who take responsibility in all family matters	5.1	18
Resource *	0.6	2
Treat child's mother well	0.3	1
Gives time to child	0.3	1
Doing odd jobs for them	0.3	1
* The items in each of the category may not add up to the total for that category because of multiple responses.		

An issue that is important to mention here about the responses given by fathers is that fathers spoke mainly about intangible (abstract) dimensions of fatherhood. Not even a handful of fathers – more precisely, just one respondent – mouthed participation in concrete activities (activities which require participation on one-to-one basis) as something expected of an ideal father. Few child-care activities which would require attention on a one-to-one basis without being engaged in a separate activity was included among the attributes of ideal fathers by fathers in the present study.

However, when probed, the picture did not seem to be that grim. Around eighty percent of the fathers said that helping in household work, and doing other jobs around the house is the role of an ideal father (Table 1(b)). All fathers perceived that responding to the desirable demands of the

child is what an ideal father needs to do. Contrary to the expectation, not all respondents said that a father should ideally be the primary breadwinner. Almost all fathers agreed that awareness about the child’s need, taking care, and being a friend, teacher and guide to the child is expected of an ideal father.

Table 1(b) Percentage of the fathers by their perception of an ideal father.

Perception*	Percentage
An ideal father:	
(a) Is the main breadwinner	76.3
(b) Takes care of his children	98.9
(c) Is aware of child's needs	99.7
(d) Responds to their desirable demands	100.0
(e) Helps his wife in housework	80.3
(f) Does other jobs around the house	79.1
(g) Is his child's friend, teacher and guide	98.3
(h) Any other	2.0
Total	350
*Multiple response	

The responses obtained in the category ‘any other’ (an ideal father is one who can understand problems at home, make the child understand what is wrong, make him a good person, keep the child away from problems or helps the child to progress) once again confirmed that childcare activities which required devotion of time without being engaged in any other task was not considered among the ideals of fatherhood.

As it is clear from the previous table that almost all fathers responded positively to four out of the total seven statements about what ideal fatherhood is, these statements were excluded from further analysis. Taking account of the statements in which there are variations in responses, ideal fatherhood role was grouped into the following three categories:

- 1) Breadwinner,
- 2) Homemaker,
- 3) Both breadwinner as well as homemaker.

Those fathers who responded positively to the first item, viz, is the main breadwinner of the family, and negatively to statement (e) and statement (f), were put under the head ‘breadwinner role’. Homemaker role includes those respondents who said ‘yes’ to either statement (e) or statement (f) and ‘no’ to statement (a). Those who responded positively to both the categories explained above were the ones put in the third category, breadwinner and homemaker.

It is clear from Table 2 that seven out of every 10 fathers believed that an ideal father was one who performed both the roles, that of breadwinner and of homemaker. The findings surprisingly revealed that lesser proportion of fathers (12 percent) perceived breadwinning as a role for ideal father as compared to the homemaker role (19 percent).

Among the various predictors of perceived fatherhood, current age of father, family type and religion have shown no significant association. It is seen that fathers with the following characteristics were less likely to perceive ideal fathers only as breadwinners: fathers who were better educated, had a higher standard of living, whose wives were working, and those who belonged to scheduled castes/ scheduled tribes/ other backward classes.

Table 2 Percentage distribution of the fathers by selected background characteristics according to their perception of an ideal father.

Background characteristics	Breadwinner	Homemaker	Breadwinner and Homemaker	Number of Fathers
	(N=38)	(N=64)	(N=229)	
Current Age of father (in years)				
Young fathers: 30 and below	11.9	13.1	75.0	84
Middle-aged fathers: 31-40	11.2	20.9	68.0	206
Old fathers: Above 40	12.2	24.4	63.4	41
Educational level of father***				
Illiterate/ <= primary/ Middle school complete	15.2	(5.1)	79.7	79
High school/higher secondary complete	14.8	16.1	69.1	149
Graduate and above	(3.9)	35.0	61.2	103
Mother's Work Status*				
Working	10.2	24.6	65.3	167
Non-working	12.8	14.0	73.2	164
Standard of living***				
Low	14.5	(2.9)	82.6	69
Medium	12.6	18.9	68.4	206
High	(3.6)	41.1	55.4	56
Family type				
Nuclear	11.7	16.8	71.4	196
Non-nuclear	11.1	23.0	65.9	135
Religion				
Hindu	13.2	19.6	67.2	235
Others	7.3	18.8	74.0	96
Caste**				
SC/ST/OBC	8.4	13.6	77.9	154
Others	14.1	24.3	61.6	177
Total	11.5	19.3	69.2	331
Excludes 19 cases who perceive fathers to be neither homemaker nor breadwinner.				
Figures in parentheses represent cell frequency of less than 5.				
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$				

A significant proportion of fathers (a difference of 30 percent points when compared to those educated upto middle school or below) who were graduates and above perceived ideal fathers as homemakers. Further, it was observed that fathers whose wives were working, who had a higher standard of living and who belonged to other castes were more likely to perceive ideal fathers only as homemakers.

Perception of oneself as an ideal father and its determinants

The researchers attempted to find out whether fathers in the present study considered themselves to be ideal fathers. “Do you consider yourself to be an ideal father?” was the question put to them and the response categories were “ideal”, “average”, “not ideal” and “cannot say”. Only seven percent of the respondents felt that they were not ideal fathers, the rest perceiving themselves to be at least average if not ideal fathers. Though a majority of the respondents placed themselves in the category ‘average’, a substantial proportion (32 percent) believed that they were ideal fathers (Table 3).

Table 3 Percentage distribution of the fathers by selected background characteristics according to their perception about whether they consider themselves as ideal father.

Background characteristics	Not Ideal/ Cannot say (N=26)	Average (N=213)	Ideal (N=111)	Number of Fathers
Current Age of father (in years)***				
Young fathers: 30 and below	8.0	69.3	22.7	88
Middle-aged fathers: 31-40	5.9	63.6	30.5	220
Old fathers: Above 40	14.3	28.6	57.1	42
Educational level of father				
Illiterate/ <= primary/ Middle school complete	7.3	70.7	22.0	82
High school/higher secondary complete	6.3	60.0	33.8	160
Graduate and above	9.3	54.6	36.1	108
Standard of living***				
Low	(5.6)	81.9	12.5	72
Medium	5.6	61.9	32.6	215
High	15.9	33.3	50.8	63
Father’s Average Monthly Income***				
Upto 2999	(3.9)	77.6	18.4	76
3000-4999	5.0	72.5	22.5	120
5000-6999	11.0	38.4	50.7	73
7000+	11.8	44.7	43.4	76
Total	7.5	60.3	32.2	345⁺
Family type				
Nuclear	6.9	61.9	31.2	202
Non-nuclear	8.1	59.5	32.4	148
Religion***				
Hindu	5.5	56.1	38.3	253
Others	12.4	73.2	14.4	97
Caste***				
SC/ST/OBC	5.7	74.1	20.3	158
Others	8.9	50.0	41.1	192
Number of living children				
1	5.7	60.3	34.0	141
2	10.1	60.8	29.1	148
3 and above	(4.9)	62.3	32.8	61
Total	7.4	60.9	31.7	350
Figures in parentheses represent cell frequency of less than 5.				
⁺ Missing cases include 5 unemployed fathers.				
*** <i>p</i> <.001				

Some fathers tried to justify why they considered themselves as ideal/ not ideal fathers; some of their responses are as quoted below:

One Father Said:

“If wife is earning and husband looks after home, only then he can be an ideal father.”

Another father’s viewpoint was:

“I try to do as much as I can for my child. I even read books on childcare.”

Regarding the determinants of perception of oneself as an ideal father, it is noteworthy that there is a positive relationship between age of the father and their perception of their being an ideal father, that is to say, as age increases, the proportion of fathers perceiving themselves as ideal fathers increases. The reason behind the effect of age may be that younger fathers are unsure whether they are being able to fulfill the responsibilities of fatherhood. Moreover, being in the career-building stage, they might not be satisfied with the time they are giving to their child’s care. Table 3 further depicts that standard of living and average monthly income also have a positive association with the fathers’ perception of themselves as ideal fathers. Though most of the fathers have said that breadwinning is not the primary role of the father, it may be possible that they might feel they would make ideal fathers only when they have been able to fulfill the needs of their children. In other words, fathers have a low standard of living might have a feeling that they are unable to meet the needs of their children and thus do not report themselves as ideal fathers. When this perception of fathers is analyzed by religion and caste, it is clear that Hindus and other caste fathers are more likely to consider themselves as ideal fathers. Educational attainment of the fathers, family type and number of living children do not show any significant relationship with fathers’ perception of themselves as ideal fathers.

Ideal father versus availability

An attempt was made to find out if there is any relationship between availability of fathers to their children and their perception about themselves as ideal fathers. It may be presumed that fathers who are more available are more likely to report themselves as ideal fathers. The results in Table 4 confirm that this presumption holds true for the present study. In other words, it is clear that fathers who perceived themselves as ‘ideal’ were comparatively more available to their children than fathers who perceived themselves as ‘not ideal’ (50 percent as compared to 27 percent). It may be noted that the relationship was found to be statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Table 4 Percentage distribution of the fathers by their perception of themselves as ideal father by availability.

Ideal father or not***	Availability of father		Number of Fathers
	Low	High	
Not ideal/Cannot say	73.1	26.9	26
Average	38.0	62.0	213
Ideal	50.5	49.5	111
Total	44.6	55.4	350

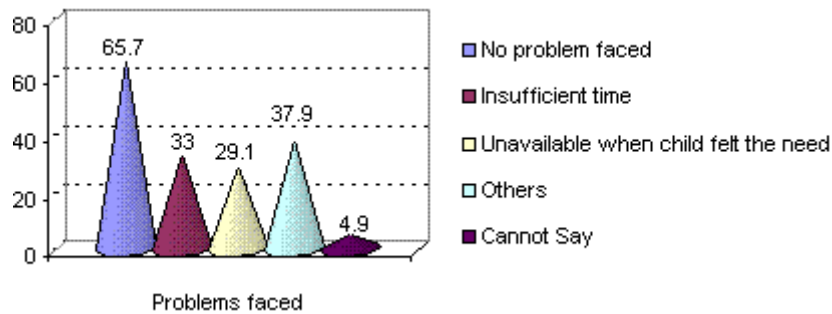
*** $p < .001$

Problems faced in being an ideal father

It is worth mentioning the contradiction found in fathers’ responses when they were asked if they faced any problem in being an ideal father. While 32 percent of fathers referred to themselves as ideal fathers, double the proportion (66 percent) of fathers claimed they had no problems in being ideal fathers (Figure 1). This could be a result of some of the ‘average’ fathers also reporting that they had no problems in fulfilling the duties of fatherhood. Five percent of fathers were unsure and could not tell if they faced any problems in being an ideal father.

Amongst those fathers who agreed they faced one or the other problem, about one-third replied that lack of sufficient time was the most important problem faced by them. Twenty-nine percent of fathers reported their unavailability to the child when needed as their most important problem (Figure 1). Various other deterrents mentioned by the fathers were: difficulty in remembering the petty needs of the child, unable to fulfill their needs, compulsion to return home early though the job demanded more time, unable to devote time to children after office because of tiredness or office tensions (over-burdened with official matters), lack of knowledge regarding the proper manner to handle children and difficulty faced due to generation gap.

Fig.1: Percentage of the fathers by the most important problem faced in being an ideal father.



Conclusion and implications

The attempt by and large in this study is to understand the different ideals of fatherhood prevalent in an urban locale of India. Though the sample size of the study is relatively small, yet, it does present an important insight into the perceptions of fatherhood along with its determinants. Ideals of fatherhood in the traditional sense continues to be dominant with one third of the fathers surveyed considering themselves to be ideal fathers, whereas, the rest two thirds consider themselves to be average. This perception has significant socio-economic, cultural and demographic determinants. Except for the caretaker role, the ideal of fatherhood is viewed primarily within the roles of 'surety' and 'economic provider' without having one-to-one attention lavished on the child. Traditional female childcare tasks such as feeding the child and cleaning the child etc. are not considered within the purview of 'ideal' fatherhood. Much effort is required to remove the cultural barriers and bring a change in men's attitude to prepare them for the new fathering role.

Lack of sufficient time has been found to be the most important problem reported by the fathers. Also, availability of fathers to their children has shown a positive relationship to their perception of their being an ideal father. Both these aspects, when looked in conjunction to each other, bring out the need for father-friendly workplace policies.

Future research examining male participation in childcare should include men's visions of fathering and assess the impact it would have on paternal behaviour. This would provide thrust required for the success of the various policies and programmes emphasizing the need for paternal involvement.

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