

Understanding the Roots of Mothers' Expectations for Fathers



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Abstract:

Although research in areas of father involvement, maternal gate-keeping and transition to parenthood all appear to agree that maternal beliefs and expectations are important predictors of paternal involvement in the home; there seems to be little research looking at where mothers' beliefs and expectations for fathers originate. Through interviews with new mothers, this study develops a model for understanding how maternal expectations develop, identifying two forms of mother's expectations, "Expressed Expectations" and "Enacted Expectations". The Expressed Expectations are influenced by Socio-Cultural Influences, while the Enacted Expectations are more in line with Family of Origin Influences. This model begins to explain why women may express one expectation and then react in a contradictory way when fathers act on those expressions. The model also indicates that the impact of immigration and acculturation can alter mothers' enacted expectations to be more closely aligned with the socio-cultural influences of the country to which they have immigrated rather than their family of origin.

Literature Review

Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998 – Responsible fathering; highlights the important role that mothers have in promoting father involvement and responsible fathering.

Transition to parenthood:

Johns & Belsky, 2007 McBride et al, 2005; Schultz, Cowan & Cowan, 2006 - Transition to Parenthood the changes that occur within and between couples as they adjust to their new roles as parents; cites the importance of gendered beliefs and expectations of possible changes as factors that can mitigate negative effects of the transition.

Father involvement:

LaRossa, 1988 - Two aspects of fatherhood: "culture" and "conduct"

Marsiglio, 1995; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000 - "father" is just one of the many role identities that a man assumes as part of his "self", placed in a hierarchy based on salience and centrality.

West & Zimmerman 1987 - "Doing Gender"; the role that an individual chooses to play in any given situation is defined not only by the situation but also by their gender

Coltrane, 2007; Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997 - Society provides multiple understandings of fathers, from the traditional breadwinner and disciplinarian father to the new age nurturing father and Mr. MOM.

Maternal Gate Keeping Behaviours:

Coltrane, 1996; Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Walker et al, 2000 - Wives resist more collaborative arrangements of family work through the use of conscious or unconscious maternal gate-keeping behaviors.

Beitel & Parke, 1998 – Maternal Gate-keeping Behaviours have become one of the most recognized barriers to father involvement and is related to how competent the father is perceived to be with the tasks or children.

Influences:

Socio- Cultural: Schreiber, 1999; Fleming & Tobin, 2005; Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2003 - Media and society often contradict feminist ideals about fatherhood, portraying fathers negatively or secondary to mothers in children's lives.

Family of Origin: Barber, 2000; Daly, 1993; Gupta, 2006; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988 - Family of origin influences from one's own family are evident in both fathers and mothers

Immigration: Adams, Coltrane & Parke, 2007; Anisef, Killbride, Ochacka & Janzen, 2001; Zadeh, Geva & Rogers, 2008 – highlight the many impacts of culture, immigration and acculturation on families.

Method:

- Modified Grounded Theory Methodology.
- Purposive Sampling of participants.
- 16 Participants recruited all of whom:
 - Mothers over the age of 21 years old.
 - Have only one child and that child is younger than 4 years old.
 - Live with the father of the child.
- Completed a 1 hour semi-structured interview

Research Questions:

1. What messages do women receive about the fathering role?
2. Where do women feel they get most of these messages from?

3. What impacts do women feel such messages have on their own expectations for the fathers of their children and what are their specific expectations?

Expressed Expectations

- The more aligned the enacted and the expressed expectations were, the more content the mothers seemed to be and the more she praised her partner in his role, describing her partner as unique compared to other fathers:
- Regardless of socio-economic statuses, family backgrounds, culture, current situations and childhood experiences, most of the mothers expressed similar expectations for fathers:
- Few of the participants could actually describe what words like ‘actively involved’, ‘engaged’ and ‘integral part of raising the children’ meant and spoke of playing or looking after the child when the mother was busy or being a role model for the child.
- Good fathers are expected to provide emotional support by validating their partners’ roles as mothers. A good relationship between the parents had the power to help the mothers overlook what they felt was a lack of involvement.
- Fathers must “do their share”, but descriptions of ‘their share’ tended to be vague, focusing on household chores and not childcare chores; bath time was the one task that the father was expected to do, and was considered father’s bonding time, equivalent to breastfeeding was for mothers.
- The greatest challenge to father involvement was lack of initiative
- Some believed that there was a biological difference between men and women that prevented fathers from initiating tasks and preparing ahead of time for up-coming tasks. Others felt it was due to their own inability to stop doing everything or some form of social conditioning of women.

“Girls grow up thinking about babies, thinking about babies and wanting a baby, wanting a husband to have babies with. So we have been conditioned into it whether it is evolution or social conditioning is bred into us and men don’t have that same breeding. So, I think it is different.” (Andrea)

“I often wonder if I was to just not pack a bag or not make up a snack and not buy clothes or milk or whatever, I’m interested what would happen... I don’t know if that’s a gender thing, the way women feel more controlling over the house or if they really believe that that is their job, just like for how ever many centuries we felt vacuuming was our job, maybe this is the same thing. Or maybe we’re just hardwired to think that the child is our responsibility.” (Alex)

“I expect him to do things for her and with her without me having to tell him to do it.” (Sara)

“He will do anything tell him to do, but I have to tell him, he won’t just remember to do it or think about what may need to be done.” (Maddy)

“I expect him to do half of everything” (Jane)

In the beginning, he always did the bath, and that was his thing and it was a great bonding thing for them (husband and son).” (Susan)

“When she was younger, bath time was something that was actually his because it was something, because I breast-fed. And even when she got older, that was his thing, that time with her.” (Alex)

“To start with a good father is also a good husband, providing a safe and secure home and a loving relationship within which to raise a child. If the relationship between the mother and the father isn’t good, then it’s going to impact on the child. So that’s the first primary thing a good father is also a good husband.” (Maddy)

“He needs to also be here for the wife. Like, yes he needs to be there for her (the child) but she goes to bed at seven or eight o clock as night, right? Then he needs to also let the mother know that she’s doing a good job.” (Natalie)

“Expresses to their children, how much they are cherished and cared for, participates in the day-to-day needs of the child, so the child doesn’t always have to just go to mom.” (Maddy)

“Playing. And then I guess as the kids get older. It’s more being that role model, you know, how a man should be and how a man should treat women and treat his wife, and that sort of thing.” (Susan)

“Um, doing the chores or spend time with the family and the baby especially. I don’t know; spend some quality time with them. Plays with them and talk to them. I don’t know, gives them what they need to because mom cannot be around all the time.” (Pava)

“A good father is also somebody who takes an active interest in their children.” (Maddy)

“Well, the first would be interest. And obviously if there is no interest than everything else falls a part as far as I’m concerned. If there is interest, then they have the love, they have the edge to play a part in their child’s life. They make time, time for them. And of course being integral part of raising them.” (Melanie)

Socio-Cultural Influences

- Socio-cultural messages seemed to be very mixed, containing messages about getting fathers involved but not why it is important or how to do it

- Messages from Social Service Professionals were confusing because the expressed messages would promote father involvement but was often paired with surprise at seeing an involved father indicated that perhaps these social services professionals did not really expect father involvement to happen.
- Child-rearing books and parenting information on the internet was either androgynous information using language such as ‘as a parent you should’ or solely aimed at mothers with little or no relevant information about the role of fathers or the importance of father involvement; also portrayed fathers as unwilling participants and the mother is the primary caregiver.
- Television both reflects and influences how society sees issues. Most felt that overall, television was unrealistic or idealistic, was not a reliable source of information about fathers. Some felt that television, caused unrealistic expectations pre-baby and confirmed beliefs that fathers are incompetent and unwilling to participate.
- All of these societal messages, from books, media and social service and medical professionals, echo the expressed expectations of the participants with ‘catch phrases’ such as *active involvement*, *engagement* and *participation in day to day childcare*.

“You look at kind of a Hollywood type of scenario where the baby is crying, and the man runs in at the end of the day and takes the baby, runs a bath and says to you “go and have a warm bubble bath”, you know in your head, you kind of expect that, especially in those early days, that he will be there and confident, especially when you’re home all day. I guess in my head I expected that at the end of the day and he would be there. I would have a break...It’s stereotypical, what we see is the woman doing the child rearing and the men, you know, usually in a comedic way; they make fun of how men can’t get it right. So he is on the couch watching a football game, while chaos is going on all around him. So I think it is influencing me because in some ways, it reinforces what you might be nagging about. And although you laugh along, you start to think that maybe it’s normal for the mother to have to do everything.” (Alex)

“But I don’t think any of the books give you any expectations of what a father should be... Well... yeah like how to get them to help you change diapers and things like that, but... that’s all...Yeah, they (the books) give you the impression of how to get them (the fathers) to help you but not how they help the child. Yeah...like a supportive role and moral support for the mother and things like that.” (Jane)

“They (the books) were more geared towards mothers reading them and would encourage you to try and get the father involved - so that they can attach or have a good attachment with their children early on, and I seem to remember them saying that I should try to back off so that my husband can do it and don’t take over completely.” (Susan)

“I remember when we went to have an ultrasound and my husband and I were both so excited to finally see the baby. But when we got there, the technician literally told my husband to sit quietly in the corner and like he was not part of the event or even welcome in the room, we were both very hurt by that. Later when I was telling friend of mine who is a public

health nurse, she told me that that was quite a common reaction in public health and that the focus is on mother and child and not on the father. It actually seemed like he was just an extra; he is simply the sperm donor.” (Maddy)

“If we go to the doctor, I think he (the doctor) tends to direct more of the questions and that sort of thing at me and I think, now that I think about it, I probably do that as well in my practice. As much as I try not to, when I’m asking things, I guess I do focus on the mother.” (Sarah)

“We would take him (to day-care) after I had worked a 15 hour overnight shift. So my husband would drop him off so I could stay home and sleep, and we would write, there’s a place on the daily form, where they have all your contact information so there we would write that they must call my husband today and they would call me 15 minutes later and I would find it really upsetting and I would say you need to call my husband and they would say we don’t want to bother him at his work, so either it wasn’t important enough to call either of us or you’re being sexist.” (Jane)

Enacted Expectations

- Expectations through actions (Enacted Expectations) are those expectations that are expressed through the actions of the mother. It is a way of ‘doing’ gender. Through her actions, what she does in the home, what she refuses to do and what she complains and does not complain about, a mother gives her partner non-verbal messages about what she expects from him, how he should be involved and what his role is in relation to her own role as a mother.
- Some parents expressed expectations of active involvement, equal or almost equal childcare loads and engaged participating fathers, yet according to their own descriptions they enact traditional roles.
- Many of the participants explained that if both parents were home then the childcare tasks fell to the mother while the father did more household chores, despite the level of engagement the father may have normally.
- Some described their partner’s role as a kind of back-up for times when the mother cannot be present.
- While some mothers’ actions contradicted their expressed expectations, other mothers seemed to act in ways that were very much in line with what they expressed. Almost half of the participants described a home life in which they and their partner had almost completely shared parental roles, although it seems that when both parents are in the home, mothers seem to lead the childcare.

“My husband does the grocery shopping, that’s his thing...I expect him to empty the dehumidifier... I expect that if I am unable to get home in time for dinner that it is done... I expect that if I’m not there in the morning, because I have taken the dog out for a walk or run, something like that, that she gets, I expect him to get her up.” (Alex)

“Well, when we are both working, if we both have a day and we both get home at the same time. Then it is my duty to do my son stuff and settle him down. And my husband will come home and do the cooking and I will come home and do the cleaning of the kitchen and putting my son to bed so we have kind of split the tasks.” (Lisa)

“But usually what happens is he looks after himself. And I have to look after my son and I don’t think he, I don’t know how the two of them leave in the morning to go to daycare because I have never seen them get themselves ready without me doing me and my son. He (husband) just kind of yeah, it’s amazing he puts his stuff on and then says ‘Will you guys hurry up, what is taking you so long?!’ So if I am around then definitely it seems to be my job.” (Lisa)

Family of Origin Influences

- The participants in this study seem to have Family of Origins that can be divided into three main categories:
 1. Those from traditional families in which their own fathers were mainly providers, with limited involvement with their children
 - Equal parenting was an expressed expectation and but they seem to live very traditional lives, and despite the difference between what their expressed expectations and their enacted roles, the women felt that their partners were good fathers. One of the most noticeable aspects of their described situation was the strong parallel between their own fathers and their husbands.
 2. Those whose own fathers were involved in childcare and all aspects of their childhood
 - Those who describe their situations as equal in terms of parenting and house-hold chores also describe equality amongst their parents, noting that their own fathers were very involved in their day to day care.
 3. Those raised by one or other parent with little or no involvement from the other parent, due to divorce or death of the other parent.
 - The influences of these women’s families of origin can also be seen in their current situations, they describe having some kind of ‘ideal’ situation of what their lives ‘should’ have been like if they had had both parents, a kind of dream scenario that they seem to enact with their own children.

- In cases where participants were raised by single parents, remarriage of the parent provided an opportunity for a new father or mother role model and for two participants, their current spouses had been with them since their young adolescent years and they describe their spouse family of origin as equally influential to their own

“You know from what I’ve seen, the mothers always seem to be really close to their kids, always. And some fathers are but I think that starts to fall away as the kids get older, unless they actively work on continuing it ... I think what is really important, especially with her being a girl and this has crossed my mind as far as my dad versus my husband is that it can be awkward as they grow and being opposite sexes and stuff and I don’t ever want that to happen, like I want it to be an open, natural, you know, no weirdness in the family and I never want her to be uncomfortable with him and he needs to be comfortable with her.” (Natalie)

“(My husband) wants to teach him. I mean, for everything, for a well-rounded child, I mean like he’ll sit down and read with him, he’ll play with him, he’ll let him do stuff around the house, I mean, he’s only 17 months old, but he will allow him to help out, to pass him tools and you know, I mean, everything we don’t limit him whatsoever. My husband is great with him ... (my father) was there in the day-to-day all the time, I mean, he was older. I mean, he wasn’t going to go ice skating with me or something, because he was 55 at the time.” (Mary)

“He (her husband) used to always do bath but he has always done sports in the evening. So I’m trying to think how it (their roles) changed. I guess he used to do it before he went before he went out. But now things are later, because our son is getting older and he no longer naps in the afternoon. So, usually he’ll go to bed a bit early. And so that cuts out some of the time they can spend together, because my husband not home from work until about seven, and so we might start bath at 7:30. So there’s not a lot of time, for the two of them ... My dad went out to work and you know, was very traditional in terms of, my mom did everything and she had dinner on the table as soon as he got home. We would have dinner, and I don’t know. I don’t know what we did. I know he used to go out and play sports and things, a couple of nights a week he would play badminton.” (Susan)

Immigration and Acculturation

Immigration and Acculturation

- Four of the participants had immigrated to Canada before their first child was born. They described their own childhoods as quite traditional in that their mothers dealt with the children while their fathers worked to provide for

the family. Their fathers were involved with them, but not on a day to day basis, rather through family holidays and vacations or special activities.

- Despite having been raised in quite traditional homes, these participants were living significantly less traditionally than their parents had before them. They believed that had they remained in their home countries to have their children that they would have ended up in more traditional roles similar to those of their families of origin. In fact for these women, the act of immigration and the lifestyle in Canada was the greatest influence on how they divided up the parenting roles.
- Two noted factors in Canada affected their parenting roles:
 1. The lack of social support, thus needing their spouse's involvement just to cope and different societal expectations.
 2. The lack of social support, thus the pressure to acculturate into their new society.

“I think that men in Canada are, well, more of a family role is expected, it is the norm. That’s the way it is. So being here, that is what I expect too, and I think that if I had stayed in South Africa, I would not expect as much help and support as I do now. So I guess I think the cultural thing is quite huge.” (Lisa)

“I think that life in Canada is hard work, you work much harder than you ever did in South Africa, and I think it is harder to make money and harder to get ahead. Also because here you do not have servants, because maids were the norm in SA and very cheap. I think that that’s changed, the cultural dynamic, because there was always someone there to look after the children if you want to go out. Where as here you don’t have that option, so I think you are forced to make more of an effort with both parents. You are forced into teamwork.” (Lisa)

“Of course in Iran, mostly the children are raised by families by grandparents, you know, and that’s quite normal. So they wouldn’t be bothered so much by having a child. But I guess, being alone. My mom was here, but I expected my husband, I did not want my mom to do it I expected my husband to do it and to be more involved.” (Zohra)

“I think if I was back home, and I was close to my mom, she could take care of the baby even when I’m not around, but here it is me or my husband.” (Pava)

Conclusion:

The model developed highlights how specific messages about fatherhood influence women’s expectations for the fathers of their children. The model shows that women’s expectations are expressed both verbally and through the actions and reactions that they have as mothers in their families. This duality of expectation is similar to the concepts of culture versus conduct defined by LaRossa in relation to fatherhood in 1988.

The expressed expectations may or may not be in direct conflict with the enacted expectations but the enacted expectations are the ones that would most likely impact father involvement. The conflict between enacted and expressed expectations seems to be an indicator of the level of satisfaction for these women's current living situation and their partner's level of involvement as fathers.

The model shows that the societal and media messages influence the expressed expectations that women have for fathers. The confusion in messages from society, between culture and conduct or between the expressed messages promoting father involvement and the non-verbal reactions implying fathers should not be involved, is heard in the difficulty that mothers have when trying to explain in concrete terms how an active, engaged and involved father would behave.

The model also shows that the enacted expectations match most closely with the participant's experiences from their family of origin. This means that participants' are ultimately living the same kind of lives that their parents lived before them. While their level of traditionalism may not be as extensive as their parents, women from traditional families, despite expressing egalitarian views on fatherhood, live more traditional lives than those women who come from egalitarian families. Interestingly, in the cases of women from families where one or other parent is missing, the power of their own dreams and wishes of what their family of origin should have been like or what they felt that they had missed was powerful enough to override societal messages. The participants without involved mothers wanted to be the mothers that they missed themselves; while those without fathers are determined to have involved and engaged fathers for their children. Even in these situations, the messages relating to the culture of fatherhood do not have as powerful an influence on the actions and expectations of these women as the power of the imagined conduct of the parents of their childhood dreams.

Finally, for those who move from another country, the effects of their own family of origin and the conduct messages of their childhood are *not* powerful enough to override the culture of fatherhood in the new society. These effects mirror those of other studies looking at the impacts of immigration and acculturation, in that the family becomes more and more like the culture in which they live.

Looking at the model as a whole, one can start to see that the messages that women receive both from society and throughout their lives from their families impacts both the verbal expressions that they make about their expectations for the fathers of their children and the way that they enact their own roles as mothers and in turn how their expectations come through in their actions and reactions.

Mother's Expectations for Fathers

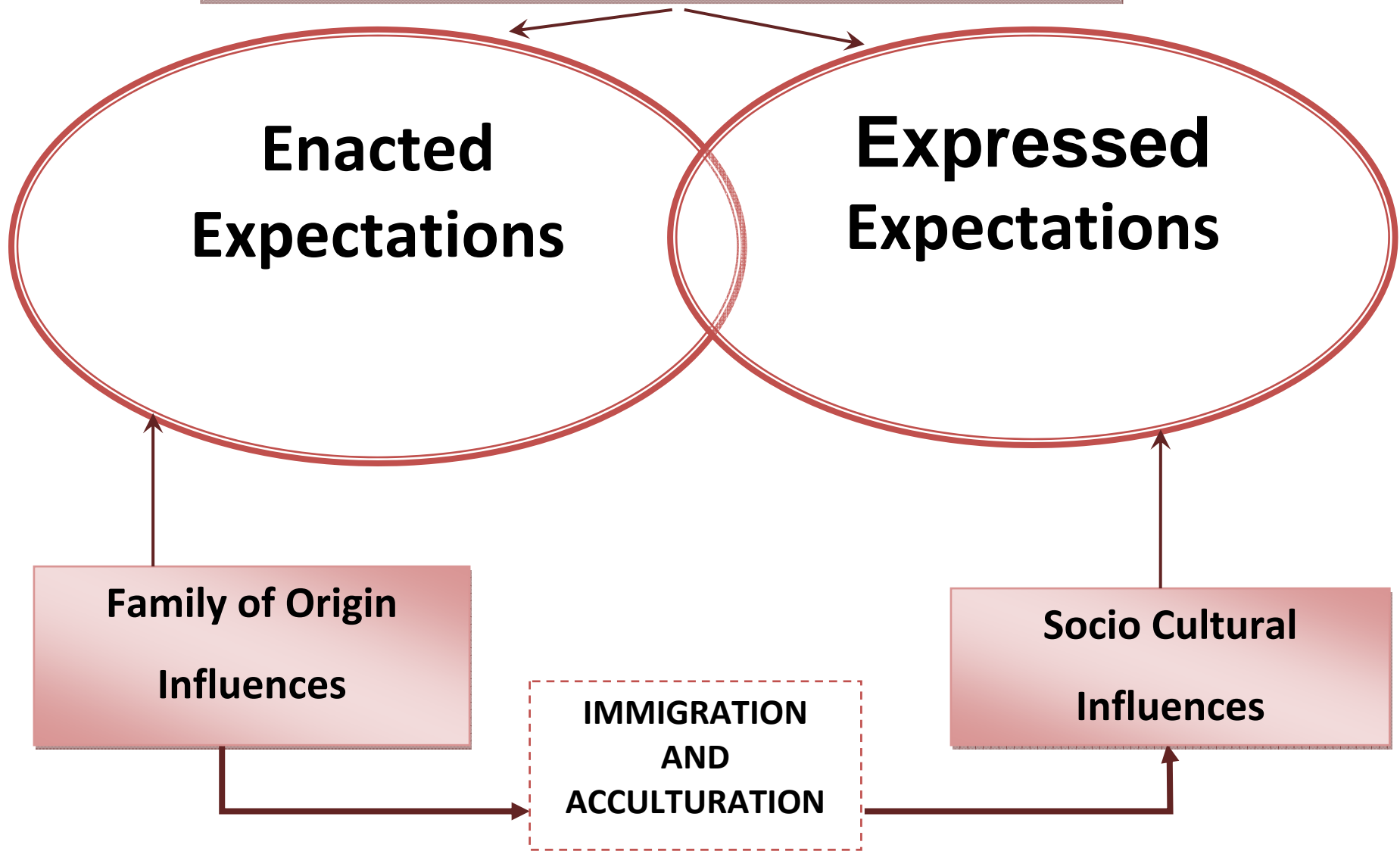


FIGURE: Model of the relationship between mothers' expectations for the fathers of their children and the potential influences on their expectations.