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Mother–Father–Child Triadic Interaction and Mother–Child Dyadic Interaction: Gender Differences Within and Between Contexts

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Abstract Differences in mother and father behavior during a triadic interaction session, and differences in mothers' behavior across triadic and dyadic interaction, were examined in 60 two-parent families with an 11- to 15-month-old child (30 boys, 30 girls). Results revealed that mothers were less involved, less sensitive, and more negative during triadic than during dyadic interaction. Mothers of sons displayed more emotion during triadic interaction than mothers of daughters did. Mothers were more involved with children than fathers were during triadic interaction, whereas fathers displayed more emotion than mothers did during triadic interaction. Fathers were more supportive of mothers, and mothers were more intrusive toward fathers, during triadic interaction. The results are discussed in terms of the role that context plays in gender-typed patterns of family interaction.

Keywords Parent–child triad · Mother–child · Gender-typed parenting · Gender socialization

Questions concerning parents' role in the socialization of differences in boys' and girls' behavior have been a topic of empirical research for decades (see Leaper, 2002, for a review). The majority of research on gender socialization in the family has focused on the parent–child dyad; less attention has been given to the mother–father–child triad. For example, in their meta-analysis of research on mothers' and fathers' use of language with their children, Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders (1998) found that the number of studies focused on the parent–child dyad was almost double the number of studies that included the mother–father–child triad, and even fewer studies included both dyads and triads. Comparisons of these studies revealed that gender differences in certain aspects of language use were more pronounced in triadic than in dyadic observations (Leaper et al., 1998). Because children are likely to spend as substantial an amount of time in mother–father–child triadic interactions as they are in separate dyadic interaction with mother and father (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Clarke-Stewart, Gruber, & Fitzgerald, 1994), it seems reasonable to speculate that gender differentiated patterns of interaction in the mother–father–child triadic context may play a role in children's gender socialization. Given the discrepancies in the number of studies of dyadic, triadic, and both dyadic and triadic interactions, existing research may have underestimated the family's role in children's gender development. Consistent with arguments from the family systems literature for the need to move beyond a focus on the parent–child dyad to other subsystems in the family (e.g., Belsky & Volling, 1987; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003), Leaper et al. (1998) recommended that additional research be conducted on gender differences in parent–child interactions in both triads and dyads.

The uniqueness of mother–father–child triadic interaction is that it encompasses multiple subsystems of the family, namely the mother–child, father–child, and mother–father relationships (McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1999). In this regard, triadic interaction affords a more diverse and complex emotional environment than do individual dyadic

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partnerships. For example, interaction settings with both mother and father allow the child to encounter and elicit recurring patterns of interadult turn-taking, capitulation, and dispute (Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Johnson, 2001). It seems likely that children may acquire information about gender roles and norms via their exposure to gender-typed behavior in their mothers' and fathers' interactions with one another. Such settings also serve as a medium for parents to display clashing interpersonal styles and to send mixed messages to children, some of which may be based on gender roles (Kitzmann, 2000; McHale, 1995). Moreover, during triadic interactions children are more directly exposed to differences in mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior or differential treatment (Belsky et al., 1995; Clarke-Stewart, 1978), which allows children to compare parental gender role enactment more directly. In these ways the experiences afforded by mother–father–child triadic dynamics differ from those of mother–child or father–child dyads and may be uniquely important in shaping children's views of gender schemas.

A family systems perspective also highlights the importance of studying a child's relationship with one parent in the context of her or his relationship with the other parent (Minuchin, 1985). From a systems perspective, in order to understand how families work in socializing children, it is essential to study how the component parts of the system are mutually influential (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), in this case, how children's experiences with their mothers are affected by those with their father and vice versa. Further, systems theorists view the family as an emergent phenomenon, not reducible to its component parts (Minuchin, 1985). Properties of families, such as gender-typed interactions, cannot be understood as the behaviors or activities of an individual member or even as dyadic processes (Kerig, P. A. Cowan, & C. P. Cowan, 1993; Maccoby, 2003). Rather, gender roles in families are best understood in terms of the transactional patterns of the family as a whole (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Consistent with this perspective, evidence suggests that parenting patterns look very different in the context of whole family interaction than they do in the context of dyadic interaction (Buhrmester, Camparo, Christensen, Gonzalaz, & Hinsaw, 1992; Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Gjerde, 1986). Important behaviors by parents may not be organized in the same way across dyadic and family group contexts.

The existing research on differences in parent–child behavior during triadic and dyadic interactions indicates that both the quantity and quality of parent–child interaction tends to be less when children interact with both parents than when they interact with each parent alone. For example, Clarke-Stewart (1978) found that the overall frequency of mothers' conversation and play, as well as mothers' engagement and responsive behavior, with children declined in the fathers' presence. More recently, Goldberg, Clarke-Stewart, Rice, and Dellis (2002) found that fathers vocalized less, displayed less affection, and engaged in less physical play with their children in the presence of mothers than they did during dyadic father–child play. Similar results indicative of more positive interactions in dyadic settings than in triadic settings have been reported in families with preschoolers (Lytton, 1979), school-age children (Johnson, 2001), and adolescents (Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, 2000; Smetana, Yau, Restrepo, & Braeges, 1991). However, the overall decline in quality across triadic and dyadic settings does not appear to be uniform for both parents. For instance, Lytton (1979) noted that fathers' initiation of task specific behaviors with their children remained fairly constant from dyadic to triadic contexts, whereas mothers' initiation behavior with their children declined in frequency. Moreover, findings of a general decline in the quality of parent–child interaction in triadic contexts vary depending on the gender of the child. For example, Gjerde (1986) found that mother–son interaction was more positive in a triadic context than in a dyadic context, whereas mother–daughter interaction was more positive in a dyadic context than in a triadic context. These findings suggest that additional investigation of gender differentiated patterns of behavior between triadic and dyadic parent–child interaction may provide information concerning how gender of parent and child shape family dynamics.

Within triadic interaction contexts behavioral differences between mothers and fathers may increase and intensify due to the enhancement of complementary parental role orientations (Gjerde, 1986; Johnson, 2001). Specifically, given that traditional gender role stereotypes assign parenting to the domain of mothers (C. P. Cowan & P. A. Cowan, 1987; Thompson & Walker, 1989), it has been suggested that mothers may regulate the extent to which fathers interact with children, possibly due to the mothers' perceptions of the father as less competent in the parenting role (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), or because of mothers' reluctance to relinquish authority in a domain of family life where they hold predominate sway (DeLuccie, 1996). Alternatively, fathers may defer parenting responsibility to the mother when she is present, regardless of the mothers' own behavior (Pleck, 1997). Empirical evidence concerning differences in parents' behavior during triadic interaction settings is mixed. A number of studies indicate that there are few, or no, gender differences in mothers' and fathers' behavior during triadic interaction (Buhrmester et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2002). Other studies support the notion that mothers assume the primary parenting role, in that mothers were found to be more intrusive toward father–child interaction, whereas fathers were more supportive of

mother–child interaction in triadic settings (Belsky et al., 1995; McHale, 1995). Still other studies show a contradictory pattern, whereby mothers are more supportive of fathers (DeSalvo & Zurcher, 1984), and fathers are more engaged with children than are mothers (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001), during triadic interaction. Given these discrepancies, additional investigation of possible differences between mothers and fathers during triadic interactions is needed to discern whether or not parents may model gender-typed patterns of behavior to children.

Evidence suggests that parents of daughters and sons may display different patterns of behavior in triadic interaction settings. For example, researchers have found that within the family boys are more likely than girls to be exposed to interparental conflict and quarreling (Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Likewise, McHale (1995) found that boys from maritally distressed families were more likely to experience competitive interaction between parents during triadic play, whereas girls were more likely to experience discrepancies in mother and father involvement. Differences in parents' behavior toward sons and daughters during triadic interaction also have been found. For example, Smetana et al. (2000) found that mothers of sons were more supportive than mothers of daughters during triadic interaction. Together this evidence suggests that it is important to consider the role that child gender may play in the behaviors that mothers and fathers display toward one another, and toward their child, in triadic interaction contexts. Consequently, in the present study we examined differences in triadic interactions of families with sons and daughters.

It is also important to note that the specific context of parent–child interaction, in terms of what activity the parent and child are engaged in, may play a role in gender typed behavior. Contextual interaction models of gender-typed behavior (Beall, 1993; Deaux & Major, 1987) suggest that the salience of gender as a determinant of behavior varies from one situation to another. According to such models, parents' differential treatment of boys and girls may depend upon the particular context of parent–child interaction. Empirical support for this proposition comes from studies in which gender based variations in parent and child behavior were observed during certain play activities, but not others, and during play with particular toys (Caldera, Huston, & O'Brien, 1989; Leaper & Gleason, 1996; Leaper, Leve, Strasser, & Schwartz, 1995). In addition, in a meta-analysis focusing on studies comparing mothers' and fathers' use of language with their children (Leaper et al., 1998) found that the magnitude of gender differences observed in parents' use of language varied as a function of the toys available to parent–child dyads across studies. This evidence suggests that it is important to consider the role that context may have in gender-differentiated patterns of parent–child interaction. In the present study, mother–child dyadic interaction occurred in the context of five different teaching/problem-solving activities, whereas mother–father–child triadic interaction occurred in the context of play.

Ecological perspectives on family functioning direct attention to how forces in the larger social environment may impact inter-individual differences in parents' gender socialization efforts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). One such factor is parental, or specifically maternal, employment outside the home. Evidence suggests that discrepancies between mothers' and fathers' involvement in child caregiving responsibilities are less pronounced in dual-earner than in single-earner families (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; Pleck, 1997). There is also some evidence that children spend more time in triadic than in dyadic interactions with parents in dual-earn vs. single-earner families (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; Greenberger & Goldberg, 1989). In terms of the quality of parent–child interaction, evidence suggests that parents, particularly fathers, from dual-earner families are less sensitive and responsive in their interactions with children (Volling & Belsky, 1992; Grych & Clark, 1999). Few researchers have examined the role of parental employment on parent–child interaction in triadic settings. In a notable exception, Goldberg et al. (2002) found that when fathers and mothers worked more hours and experienced more time pressure on the job, fathers were less sensitive toward their child in a triadic play session. Because the authors' focus was on the quality of father–child interacting, findings for mothers were not reported. Additional research on the role of parental employment on both mother and father behavior in triadic interaction is needed.

The second year of life is an important developmental period for children's gender role development. Although children are not able to label themselves or others by gender at this age, evidence indicates that they can distinguish between the two sexes and that they begin to engage in gender-linked conduct (Blakemore et al., 1979; Fagot, 1974). Consequently, during this developmental period children's level of gender understanding already involves abstraction of a set of gender attributes that are integrated into a more general knowledge structure. This ability to differentiate the two sexes and to link them to different activities is all that is necessary for children to begin to learn gender-role stereotypes. Research also suggests that this age may be a time when children are exposed to gender stereotyped patterns of parenting behavior. Specifically, evidence indicates that compared to mothers, fathers tend to be less involved with children during infancy. Moreover, longitudinal evidence indicates that fathers are less involved with children during the infancy years than in the toddler and preschool years. Moreover,

even at this early age mothers and fathers display different patterns of interaction with children. Thus, to the extent that children form gender-linked stereotypes from observations mothers' and fathers' performance of certain activities, early gender typed patterns of parent–child may influence children's gender role development. For this reason, the present study focuses on dyadic mother–child and triadic mother–father–child interaction during children's second year of life.

In summary, the present study was designed to examine the role of context in gender-typed patterns of interaction between mother and child. Specifically, observations of mother–child interaction were conducted in both a mother–father–child triadic play session and a mother–child dyadic play session. Mothers' involvement, sensitivity, and expression of positive and negative affect were assessed across the two contexts. It was hypothesized that mothers would be more involved, more sensitive, more positive, and less negative in dyadic play than in triadic play. It was also hypothesized that these differences would be more pronounced among mothers from dual-earner families than among mothers from single earner families. Differences also were examined in relation to child gender, although no specific hypotheses were formed. In addition, we examined differences between mothers' and fathers' behavior in the triadic play session. Focus was given to behavior parents directed toward one another, as well as behavior that each parent directed toward the child. Based on evidence that traditional gender roles relegate parenting to the domain of women, it was hypothesized that mothers would be more intrusive than fathers, and that fathers would be more supportive of mothers and less actively involved with children than mothers would. Mothers were also expected to be more sensitive and to display more positive and less negative emotions toward children than fathers would.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample was recruited from participants in another study, families with children attending a University-sponsored Infant Study Center, and families identified by child care providers. A total of 70 parents, 63% of those contacted, agreed to participate. The majority of families who declined to participate cited lack of time as the reason. Data collected from ten families were lost due to equipment failure or to parents' failure to complete questionnaires.

The final sample of participants were 60 married couples with children from 11.3 to 15.0 months in age (M=13.7 months). There were 30 girls and 30 boys. Twenty-six of the children in the study were firstborns, the remaining 34 had one or more siblings. Preliminary analyses indicated no group differences as a function of age or birth order. Mothers ranged in age from 21 to 41 years (M=30), and fathers ranged in age from 24 to 42 years (M=32). All couples were married; the length of their marriages ranged from 2 to 17 years (M=3.8). The mean education for husbands was 16.3 years and for wives 15.9 years. There were 18 single-earner households and 42 dual-earner households. Twenty-one percent of the study participants were African American, 6% were Asian American, 8% were Hispanic, and 65% were Caucasian.

Procedure

After they agreed to participate in the study and scheduled a home visit, parents were sent a set of standardized questionnaires. For the purpose of the present study only data from a family history survey were used; thus other questionnaires that were completed by the parents are not described. Parents were asked to have the questionnaires completed by the date of the home visit.

At the start of the home visits the researchers explained the procedures and asked parents to sign a consent form. Next, mother–child dyads were videotaped in a structured task, divided into four activities, each with a set time limit: (1) putting seven cubes in a cup (1-m), (2) block stacking (30-s), (3) puzzle completion (2-m), and (4) book reading (3-m). Mothers were instructed to have the child perform each task for the specified duration of time, repeatedly if necessary (i.e., if the child stacked all of the blocks before the 30 s were up, the mother was instructed to spread blocks out again and repeat the task). The time period chosen allowed most children easily to stay engaged with the task without losing interest. Due to concerns about child fatigue, we did not conduct assessments of father–child interaction.

Next, mothers–fathers–child triads were videotaped while playing for 15 min with toys that the researchers provided. Parents were asked to play together with their child with the toys in any way that they wished.

Measures

Family demographics Mothers completed a demographic questionnaire designed to obtain information such as parental age, education, and employment.

Mother–child interaction A trained research assistant who was blind to all other information about the families coded the videorecords of the mother–child interactions. To establish reliability, a second, independent coder watched 25% of the videotapes. Reliability was calculated by computing interclass correlations between the ratings of the two coders (Suen & Ary, 1989). Mothers' behavior was

rated on eight behavioral scales during each of the four activities. For the purpose of the present study, only the four scales that mirror behavior assessed in the mother–father–child triad session were analyzed. A 5-point Likert-type scale, that ranged from never (1) to always (5) was used to code the following maternal behaviors: (1) involvement (M=3.13, SD=0.69; r=0.82; i.e., the extent to which the mother helped the child), (2) sensitivity/responsiveness (M=3.72, SD=0.76; r=0.62; i.e., how often mother responded to what child was doing, or how appropriate her instructions were for her child's age), (3) positive affect (M=2.54, SD=0.67; r=0.88; i.e., how often mother displayed positive emotion during the interaction session), and (4) negative affect (M=1.26, SD=0.36; r=0.81; i.e., how often mother displayed negative emotion during the interaction session). An average score for each scale was created by summing ratings across the activities and dividing the total by the number of activities (4).

Observational measures of mother–father–child triadic play session interaction Videorecords of the mother–child–father interaction session also were coded by trained research assistants who were blind to all other information about the families. Reliability was calculated by computing intraclass correlations between the ratings of the two coders on 25% of the videotapes (Suen & Ary, 1989). After watching the 15-min interaction session twice, coders rated parents' behavior during the triadic play session on 18 behaviorally anchored rating scales. Only 14 scales were examined in the present report, thus the four excluded scales are not considered further. Each behavior was rated on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from (1) "highly uncharacteristic of interaction" to (5) "highly characteristic of interaction." Two scales were dyadic in nature, in that they were based on an assessment of mothers' and fathers' coparenting relationship: (1) cooperative coparenting (M=2.85, SD=0.95; r=0.77; i.e., parents are working toward a goal of enhancing play), (2) competitive coparenting (M=1.52, SD=0.57; r=0.77; i.e., parents attempt to engage the child in different activities at the same time and appear to vie for the child's attention). The remaining 12 scales focused on each individual parent's coparenting behavior and behavior directed toward their child: (3) Supportive coparenting by mother (M=2.31, SD=0.94; r=0.77; i.e., mother makes positive or neutral comments about what the child and father are doing, and mother follows father's lead); (4) Supportive coparenting by father (M=2.67, SD=1.06; r=0.81; father makes positive or neutral comments about what the child and mother are doing, and father follows mother's lead); (5) Intrusive coparenting by mother (M=2.10, SD=1.06; r=0.84; i.e., mother introduces new toy when father and child are playing with another toy; calls out to child when father and child are playing; attempts to direct child's attention away from the father); (6) Intrusive coparenting by father (M=1.90, SD=0.87; r=0.80; i.e., father introduces new toy when mother and child are playing with another toy; calls out to child when mother and child are playing; attempts to direct child's attention away from the mother); (7) Involvement with child: mother (M=2.31, SD=0.85; r=0.88; i.e., mother and child are focused and involved in the same activity, with limited or no involvement on the part of the father); (8) Involvement with child: father (M=1.99, SD=0.75; r=0.87; i.e., father and child are focused and involved in the same activity, with limited or no involvement on the part of the mother); (9) Sensitivity toward child: mother (M=3.44, SD=0.81; r=0.75; i.e., mother manifests an awareness of the child's needs, moods, likes, or dislikes, follows the child's lead, and allows the child appropriate independence); (10) Sensitivity toward child: father (M=2.89, SD=1.09; r=0.72; i.e., father manifests an awareness of the child's needs, moods, likes or dislikes, follows the child's lead, and allows the child appropriate independence); (11) Positive affect towards child: mother (M=3.35, SD=0.77 r=0.83; i.e., mother displays positive feelings toward the child, in the form of warm tone of voice, physical affection, laughter, smiles, or praise); (12) Positive affect towards child: father (M=3.72, SD=1.71; r=0.88; i.e., father displays positive feelings toward the child, in the form of warm tone of voice, physical affection, laughter, smiles, or praise); (13) Negative affect towards child: mother (M=1.72, SD=0.81 r=0.81; i.e., mother displays negative feelings toward the child, in the form of a raised voice, negative verbal tone, signs of irritation, frowns, or criticism); (14) Negative affect towards child: father (M=1.88, SD=0.83; r=0.86; i.e., father displays positive feelings toward the child, in the form of a raised voice, negative verbal tone, signs of irritation, frowns, or criticism). The involvement, sensitivity, positive affect, and negative affect scales mirrored the scales used to code the observations of mother–infant interaction.

Results

We analyzed the data in three steps. First, we used correlational analyses to explore associations between family demographic variables and mother, father, child behavior in the interaction sessions. Second, we used analyses of variance to compare mothers' behavior in the dyadic play session to mothers' behavior in the triadic play session to examine differences between mothers from dual earner and single earner families, and to examine differences between mothers of sons and mothers of daughters. Third, we also used analyses of variance to compare

mothers' and father' behavior in the mother–father–child triadic play session, to examine differences between parents from dual earner and single earner families, and to examine differences between parents of sons and parents of daughters.

Preliminary analyses

Associations between family demographic characteristics and the primary variables of interest were examined for the purpose of discerning possible confounding associations, however, no specific hypotheses were linked to these analyses. Pearson correlations revealed that in families with more educated fathers, mothers were more sensitive to children in dyadic play, r=0.22, p<0.05, and both mothers and fathers were more sensitive to children in triadic play, r=0.24, p<0.05 and r=0.27, p<0.05, for mothers and fathers, respectively. In addition, fathers who were younger were more involved with children, r=0.26, p<0.05, were more sensitive, r=0.23, p<0.05, and displayed more positive emotion, r=0.31, p<0.01, during triadic play. Mothers who were younger displayed more positive emotion, r=0.24, p<0.05, and more negative emotion, r=0.22, p<0.05. No other significant results involving demographic characteristics were found.

Mother and child behavior in the dyad and triad

In order to examine the hypothesized contextual and gender differences in mother–child play, measures of mother–child interaction were subjected to a 2×2×2 (sex of child × play context × employment status) repeated measures multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). Play context (dyadic vs. triadic) was a within-subjects variable, whereas employment status and child sex was a between-subjects variable, and both father education and mother age were covariates. This MANCOVA revealed significant main effects for play session, Wilke's λ=0.44, F(1, 59)=22.3, p<0.01, and employment status, Wilke's λ=0.71, F(1, 59)=16.2, p<0.05, as well as a significant sex of child×play session interaction, Wilke's λ=0.77, F(1, 59)=14.8, p<0.05. The results revealed modest associations between play session, partial η^2=0.14, employment status, partial η^2=0.11, and the interaction between sex of child and play session, partial η^2=0.10, and mother–child interaction.

Follow up, one-way ANOVAs indicated that mothers were more involved, F(1, 59)=6.82, p<0.05 (M=3.13, SD=0.69), η^2=0.12, more sensitive, F(1, 59)=4.33, p<0.05 (M=3.72, SD=0.76), η^2=0.09, and less likely to display negative emotion F(1, 59)=4.05, p<0.05 (M=1.26, SD=0.37), η^2=0.08, in the dyadic play session than in the triadic play session (M=2.31, SD=0.85; M=3.44, SD=0.81; M=1.72, SD=0.81, for involvement, sensitivity, and negative emotion in triadic play, respectively). However, mothers were more likely to display positive emotion in the triadic play session, F(1, 59)=4.22, p<0.05 (M=3.30, SD=0.76), η^2=0.09, than in the dyadic play session (M=2.54, SD=0.67). In addition, in both play sessions, employed mothers were more involved, F(1, 59)=6.33, p<0.05 (M=3.12, SD=0.81), η^2=0.11, and displayed more positive affect, F(1, 59)=5.82, p<0.05 (M=3.08, SD=0.73), η^2=0.10, than unemployed mothers did (M=2.11, SD=0.75 and M=2.05, SD=0.70, for involvement and positive affect, respectively). These results were qualified by the interaction between sex of child and play session that indicated that: (a) mothers of sons displayed more positive affect in triadic play, F(1, 59)=5.01, p<0.05 (M=3.52, SD=0.75), η^2=0.10, than mothers of daughters did (M=3.18, SD=0.80); (b) mothers of sons displayed more negative affect in triadic play, *$F(1, 59)= 4.25$, $p< 0.05$ ($M= 1.83$, $SD= 0.87$), $\eta^2= 0.08$, than mothers of daughters did ($M= 1.61$, $SD= 0.75$); (c) mothers of daughters were more sensitive in dyadic play, $F(1, 59)= 6.82$, $p< 0.01$ ($M= 3.85$, $SD= 0.90$), $\eta^2= 0.13$, than in triadic play ($M= 3.40$, $SD= 0.69$); and (d) mothers of sons displayed more positive affect in triadic play, $F(1, 59)= 6.82$, $p< 0.01$ ($M= 3.52$, $SD= 0.75$), $\eta^2= 0.13$, than in dyadic play ($M= 2.48$, $SD= 0.76$).*

Mother, father, and child behavior in the triad

In order to examine hypotheses concerning differences in mother and father behavior toward each other during the triadic play session, a three-way sex of child×sex of parent (mother vs. father)×parent employment status (dual vs. single earner) MANCOVA, with parent age and father education as covariates, was conducted. Results revealed a significant main effect for sex of parent, Wilke's λ=0.30, F(1, 59)=26.5, p<0.01, and for parents' employment status, Wilke's λ=0.83, F(1, 59)=2.31, p<0.05, but no significant main effect for sex of child, Wilke's λ=0.95, F(1, 59)=0.49, p=ns. The main effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction between sex of parent, sex of child, and parent employment status, Wilke's λ=0.85, F(2, 57)=2.01, p<0.05. The results revealed weak to modest associations between sex of parent, partial η^2=0.11, employment status, partial η^2=0.09, and the three-way interaction term, partial η^2=0.06, and mother and father behavior.

Follow-up univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) indicated that the main effect for sex of parent because fathers were more supportive, F(1, 59)=4.32, p<0.05 (M=2.67, SD=1.06), η^2=0.07, than mothers (M=2.31, SD=0.93), and mothers were more intrusive, F(1, 59)=4.65, p<0.05 (M=2.10, SD=1.06), η^2=0.08, than fathers (M=1.91, SD=0.88). The parent employment status main effect was because mothers from dual-earner families were more

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for mothers' and fathers' behavior in triad and mothers' behavior in dyad.

	Mothers						Fathers					
	Girls (n=30)			Boys (n=30)			Girls (n=30)			Boys (n=30)		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
Mother–father in triad												
Cooperation[a]	2.90	0.92	1.0–4.0	2.81	0.98	1.0–5.0						
Competition[a]	1.57	0.63	1.0–3.0	1.48	0.51	1.0–2.0						
Support	2.43	0.85	1.0–4.0	2.19	1.01	1.0–5.0	2.57	1.01	1.0–4.0	2.77	1.12	1.0–5.0
Intrusiveness	2.03	0.93	1.0–4.0	2.16	1.19	1.0–5.0	1.97	0.89	1.0–4.0	1.84	0.86	1.0–4.0
Parent behavior in triad												
Involvement	2.23	0.82	1.0–4.0	2.39	0.88	1.0–5.0	2.07	0.74	1.0–4.0	1.90	0.75	1.0–4.0
Sensitivity	3.40	0.68	2.0–5.0	3.48	0.93	1.0–5.0	3.03	0.96	1.0–4.0	2.74	1.21	1.0–5.0
Positive affect	3.18	0.80	1.0–4.0	3.52	0.75	1.0–5.0	3.57	0.86	2.0–5.0	3.87	0.85	2.0–5.0
Negative affect	1.61	0.75	1.0–3.0	1.83	0.87	1.0–3.0	1.81	0.82	1.0–3.0	1.94	0.84	1.0–3.0
Mother behavior in dyad												
Involvement	3.27	0.71	2.0–4.5	2.99	0.66	1.6–4.0						
Sensitivity	3.85	0.90	1.0–5.0	3.58	0.65	2.3–5.0						
Positive affect	2.60	0.58	1.0–4.0	2.48	0.76	1.5–4.0						
Negative affect	1.17	0.29	1.0–2.25	1.34	0.44	1.0–2.8						

[a] Dyadic codes based on the assessment of mother and father coparenting behavior, thus only one score was given to each mother–father dyad.

supportive, $F(1, 59)=4.51$, $p<0.05$ ($M=2.85$, SD=0.29), $\eta^2=0.17$, than mothers from single-earner families ($M=2.02$, SD=0.26). The interaction effect between sex of child, sex of parent, and parent employment status was because mothers of daughters from single-earner families ($n=11$) were more intrusive, $F(1, 59)=3.73$, $p<0.05$ ($M=2.71$, SD =0.31), $\eta^2=0.06$, than mothers of daughters from dual earner families ($n=19$; $M=2.44$, SD=0.33).

A second MANCOVA was conducted to examine variables of mothers' and fathers' behavior toward child in the triadic session. Results revealed significant main effects for sex of parent, Wilke's $\lambda=0.42$, $F(1, 59)=13.95$, $p<0.01$, and sex of child, Wilke's $\lambda=0.73$, $F(1, 59)=7.05$, $p<0.05$, but no significant main effect for parent employment status, Wilke's $\lambda=1.21$, $F(1, 59)=1.27$, p=ns. There were no significant interactions. The results revealed modest associations between sex of parent, partial $\eta^2=0.12$, and sex of child, partial $\eta^2=0.09$, and mothers' and father's behavior toward child.

Follow-up univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) indicated that the main effect for parent sex was because mothers were more involved with children, $F(1, 59)=6.82$, $p<0.01$ ($M=2.31$, SD=0.85), $\eta^2=0.13$, than fathers were ($M=1.99$, SD=0.75). In addition, fathers displayed more positive emotion, $F(1, 59)=4.85$, $p<0.05$ ($M=3.72$, SD= 0.86), $\eta^2=0.11$, than mothers did ($M=3.30$, SD=0.93) and fathers displayed more negative emotion, $F(1, 59)=4.17$, $p<0.05$ ($M=1.93$, SD=0.83), $\eta^2=0.12$, than mothers did ($M=1.72$, SD=0.81). The main effect for child sex was because parents of sons displayed more positive emotion, $F(1, 59)=4.51$, $p<0.05$ ($M=3.55$, SD=0.95), $\eta^2=0.08$, than parents of daughters did ($M=3.30$, SD=0.83), and parents of sons displayed more negative emotion, $F(1, 59)=3.57$, $p<0.05$ ($M=1.89$, SD=0.86), $\eta^2=0.06$, than parents of daughters did ($M=1.71$, SD=0.78) (Table 1).

Discussion

The results of the present study join a growing body of evidence from a family systems perspective that suggests that children experience different patterns of parenting behavior in dyadic and triadic interaction settings (Johnson, 2001; McHale, 1995). Specifically, consistent with previous evidence (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Gjerde, 1986; Lytton, 1979), mothers demonstrated a significant change in their parenting behavior when fathers were present. Moreover, as in previous studies, this change was not solely the result of a decline in quantity of interaction, as might be expected given the addition of a third participant, but also included qualitative differences in mothers' parenting behavior. That is, not only were mothers less involved with children, they were also less sensitive, and expressed more negative emotion toward their child in the presence of fathers than they did during dyadic mother–child interaction. At the same time, however, and contrary to expectations, mothers' expression of positive emotions increased in triadic play over what they expressed in dyadic play. Together, these findings support the family systems theory proposition that what occurs in dyadic family subsystems in isolation may

be qualitatively different from what we would see of these same family relationships in the context of the whole family (Minuchin, 1985). To the extent that children are able to discern these changes in behavior from one context to another, they may garner relevant information concerning family gender roles.

It has been suggested that there is considerable variability in parents' tendency to treat boys and girls differently across interaction contexts (McHale et al., 2003). Gjerde (1986) suggested that triadic interactions are one setting that may increase and intensify parental role orientation because the presence of both parents enhances complementary parental roles. Thus, the extent to which parents treat girls and boys differently may increase from dyads to triads. Consistent with this argument, mothers displayed more positive and negative affect toward boys than toward girls in the triadic play session, whereas there was no difference in mothers' negative or positive affect with boys and girls in mother–child dyadic interaction. Although it is important not to over interpret these findings given that no differences were observed in mothers' involvement or sensitivity with boys and girls in triadic play, it may be that mothers' expression of emotions is particularly influenced by the presence of the father. That is, fathers displayed more positive and negative emotions than mothers did during triadic play and they displayed more positive emotions with boys than with girls. Thus, the difference in mothers emotional expressions across the dyadic and triadic play session may reflect the mothers' effort to match the fathers' emotions, or provide a mirrored response to father's emotions. The findings are in need of replication before assigning significant weight to them, but they are consistent with theoretical and empirical arguments for a contextual-interactive model of the socialization of gender-typed behavior (Beall, 1993; Deaux & Major, 1987; Leaper et al., 1998) that views the incidence of gender differences in parent–child behavior as a complex interaction of context and sex of partner.

Another question examined in the present study was whether there are differences between mothers' and fathers' behavior with their child in the triadic play session. We expected that fathers would interact less with children than mothers in the triadic play session given that traditional gender roles relegate parenting to women's domain (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; C. P. Cowan & P. A. Cowan, 1987). This hypothesis was supported in that mothers were rated as more involved with children than fathers in the triadic play session. In contrast, however, fathers displayed more positive and more negative emotion toward children than did mothers in the triadic play session. This finding is consistent with evidence that fathers may have a more intense play style with children than mothers have (Buhrmester et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2002). From a family systems theory perspective, the manifestation of these distinct and complementary behaviors of mothers and fathers during triadic interaction may be uniquely important to children's formation of gender schemas (Kitzmann, 2000; McHale, 1995). Cognitive theories of gender role development offer explanations for mechanisms that may account for how children learn gender typed behavior from triadic interaction contexts. For example, social learning explanations of gender-typed behavior (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1999) suggest that triadic interaction may be especially salient and conducive to children's learning of the social relational behaviors and roles of their same-sex parent. In a similar vein, cognitive theories of gender development suggest that children observe and compare the roles and activities of their mothers and fathers during triadic interaction and use these experiences to construct their own schemas about gender roles. Future researchers should examine cognitive mechanisms that might explain how mothers' and fathers' behavior in triadic play may be linked to children's gender-typed behavior.

A noteworthy feature of the present study is the inclusion of information concerning how mothers and fathers related to each other as coparents during the triadic play session. During dyadic parent–child interaction, parents can focus on their relationship with their children without also having to pay attention to their relationship with their spouses. In contrast, because triadic interactions involve multiple family systems, marital partners must simultaneously mange their relationship as a couple and their relationship with their children, thereby exposing children to dynamics of the marital relationship. Such information is relevant because it may present children with a model of gender role enactment that shapes their gender schemas. In the present study fathers were found to display more supportive coparenting behavior than mothers did, whereas mothers were found to be more intrusive than fathers. This pattern is similar to that observed in previous studies (Belsky et al., 1995; DeSalvo & Zurcher, 1984). This pattern of gender-typed parenting behavior in triadic interaction is consistent with the proposal that parents may contribute to children's formation of gender schema regarding family gender roles. That is, to the extent that children use the different frequencies of fathers' and mothers' behavior as examples of what constitutes "appropriate" gender-typed behavior, parents may be teaching children that parenting is the primary domain of mothers and that the fathers' role is to support the mother. However, it is important to note that others have found mothers to be more supportive of fathers during triadic play (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Schoppe et al., 2001). Discrepancies across studies may be accounted for by individual differences in parents' adherence to traditional gender roles. Although some parents may follow gender-typed parenting roles,

others may be less gender typed in their views of parenting. Thus, it would seem plausible that the gender-typed division of parenting behavior would be more pronounced in families with more gender-typed parenting roles and less pronounced in families with less gender-typed parenting roles. Future researchers should consider parents' gender roles in relation to parenting behavior in triadic contexts, and should also examine how gender-typed parenting behavior may be related to children's gender schemas concerning parenting roles.

Consistent with ecological systems perspectives on family functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), parent gender also interacted with other contextual characteristics to produce variation in mothers' and fathers' behavior toward each other. Specifically, mothers from dual-earner families demonstrated more supportive behavior toward fathers than mothers from single-earner families did, although mothers of daughters in dual earner families demonstrated more intrusive behavior toward fathers than mothers of daughters in single-earner families did. These findings join with other research evidence that suggests that employed mothers are more involved in parenting daughters than sons (Crouter, Helms-Erikson, Updegraff, & McHale, 1999; Goldberg, Greenberger, & Nagel, 1996), perhaps due to the mother's beliefs concerning the importance of gender role socialization. The findings also are consistent with evidence that employment has a significant effect on family group processes and the interparental relationship (Crouter et al., 1999; Volling & Belsky, 1992). It is important to note, however, that the simple distinction between dual versus single earner families approach taken in the present study does not adequately address the role that employment plays in shaping family interaction patterns. Mothers and fathers attitudes toward employment, time management issues, and expectations concerning the sharing of household and parenting tasks, are all factors that likely play a role in determining what effect employment has on family relationships. It will be worthwhile for future researchers to move beyond the rather broad contextual factor of parental employment status to focus more specifically on what it is about parents' employment that is linked to gender-typed patterns of interaction within the family.

It also is important to note that, although the dyadic and triadic parent–child observations in the present study took place in the families' homes, they were contrived settings, and thus the parent–child behavior observed may not represent natural patterns of parent–child interaction. Moreover, the specific context of interaction differed across the two contexts, with the dyadic interaction session focusing on teaching activities, and the triadic interaction session focusing on play. Thus, differences, or the lack thereof, in mothers' behavior across the two contexts may have been the result of nonequivalence in the interactive setting. Results of previous naturalistic investigations do suggest that parents and children spend substantial amounts of time in dyadic and triadic interactions (e.g., Belsky et al., 1995; A. Russell & G. Russell, 1987) and that additional research on such naturalistic interactions may shed light on the gender-differences in parent–child interaction observed in our study. However, it will be important for future research to consider a variety of interactive contexts in the examination of gender typed patterns of behavior within and across dyadic and triadic family systems. Future research should also include larger and more heterogeneous samples in order to improve the power of analyses and the generalizability of findings.

Another major limitation of our study was the fact we did not observe father–child dyadic interaction. Thus, we could not address questions concerning how context affects fathers' parenting behavior or similarities and differences in mothers' and fathers' behavior across both triadic and dyadic contexts. In addition, the measures used to operationalize coparenting and parenting behavior in the present study were limited in that they focused on relatively global indices of behavior. Similarly, the assessments may not accurately have captured important processes in the triadic play session. Researchers have suggested that focus on behavioral categories that have traditionally been applied to dyadic parent–child interaction may not be well suited for triadic interaction (McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1999; A. Russell & G. Russell, 1987). For example, sensitivity in a triadic setting may not have the same meaning as sensitivity in dyadic parent–child interaction. The development of codes that are more suitable for triadic mother–father–child interaction may assist in uncovering important patterns of gender-typed behavior that contribute to children's gender-role socialization. Finally, due to time constrains and limited resources for coding observations of parent–child interaction, we did not consider children's behavior toward mothers and fathers in the present study. Given increasing evidence that children's behavior may play an important role in shaping gender typed patterns of family interaction (Maccoby, 2003; McHale et al., 2003), it will be important for future research to include children's behavior toward parents in both dyadic and triadic contexts.

In conclusion, the present study joins a growing body of evidence that supports a contextual-interactive model of the socialization of gender-typed behavior (Beall, 1993; Deaux & Major, 1987; Leaper et al., 1998). The observed contextual differences (dyadic vs. triadic) in mothers' behavior suggest that boys and girls may be exposed to different socialization settings, which contribute to gender-typed behavior or cognitive schemas. Clearly, dyadic interactions with parents contribute to children's gender stereotypic patterns of social responses (Leaper et al., 1998) and children's gender schemas (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

However, an emphasis on dyads within the family obscures the role that triadic, family-level processes may play in socializing young children's gender-typed behavior and gender schemas. Moreover, a dyadic setting does not accurately represent the family system in which a parent interacts with a child. A major implication of our study is that research that focuses on only one context of parent–child interaction may overlook an important component in the determinants of gender differentiated patterns of behavior between parents and children.

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