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ABSTRACT

It is clear that the impact of paternal participation on children is overwhelmingly positive. Despite the benefits, men still lag behind women as equal and responsible contributors in childcare although their participation is increasing. This paper focuses on why men are not more involved in childcare and recognizes the ways in which "dominant discourses" influence men's participation in parenting. To understand the choices men make about their involvement in childcare, it is necessary to understand the impact of the predominant attitude that men and women are essentially opposite from one another. The themes that grow out of the dominant discourse of "men and women as opposites" are examined and challenged as they relate to men and women defining their roles as parents. A model is provided which conceptualizes the relationship between dominant discourses and men's participation in parenting. This model uses dominant discourses as its basis to explain how men are discouraged from being equally participatory parents, how fathers' decisions about their involvement affect the perpetuation of these discourses, and how alternate discourses can be used to challenge the dominant discourses. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/EMK)

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Disrupting Dominant Discourses about  
Paternal Participation

Chris Brownson

The University of Texas at Austin

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[cbrownson@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:cbrownson@mail.utexas.edu)

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Abstract

This paper recognizes the ways in which dominant discourses influence men's participation in parenting. In order to understand the choices men make about their involvement in childcare, it is necessary to understand the impact of the predominant attitude that men and women are essentially opposite from one another. The themes that grow out of the dominant discourse of “men and women as opposites” are examined and challenged as they relate to men and women defining their roles as parents. A model is provided which conceptualizes the relationship between dominant discourses and men’s participation in parenting. This model uses dominant discourses as its basis to explain how men are discouraged from being equally participatory parents, how fathers’ decisions about their involvement affect the perpetuation of these discourses, and how alternate discourses can be used to challenge the dominant discourses.

## Disrupting Dominant Discourses about Paternal Participation

It is clear that the impact of paternal participation on children is overwhelmingly positive. In Pleck's (1997) recent review of this literature, he found that although in some instances fathers' participation might be a mediating factor on childhood outcomes through its influence on the mother, marital relationship, or sibling relationships, high paternal participation is related to higher levels of cognitive competence, internal locus of control, less gender stereotyping, higher IQ, greater academic achievement, and increased levels of self-esteem and social competence in children. It is less clear, however, how researchers define paternal participation. Many researchers of paternal involvement have used Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine's (1987) distinction between interaction, availability, and responsibility. Interaction is the father's engagement in direct activity with the child, while availability is merely being accessible to the child at a given time. The responsibility component, which is the most difficult to define and measure, concerns remembering, planning, and scheduling child care activities. Most research using this conceptualization emphasized the quantity of the involvement rather than the content, as dependent measures were usually related to time measured in absolute terms or in proportion to the mother. There has been some exciting progress made in the past few years in the creation of measures which consider participation in terms of content, such as Radin's (1994) Paternal Index of Child Care Involvement and Palkovitz's (1997) preliminary work on an expanded view of involvement which challenges researchers to think beyond traditional conceptions of involvement by considering the many different ways that fathers can be involved, such as

communication, affection, and teaching, as well as the important aspects of involvement such as time invested, degree of involvement, observability, salience, directness, and proximity, all co-existing on continua (Day, Evans, and Lamb, 1998). These new conceptualizations have been termed “positive paternal involvement” because of the emphasis on examining the quality of the involvement in addition to the quantity (Pleck, 1997).

Despite all of the benefits of paternal participation, men still lag behind women as equal and responsible contributors in child care, although their participation is increasing. In a review of the research conducted between 1981 and 1994, Pleck (1997) found that on average fathers spent about 44% as much time as mothers in direct interaction with their children and 66% as much time being accessible to their children. These numbers are slightly higher than a previous review of the literature by Lamb et al. (1987) ten years earlier which reported 33% and 65% respectively. In the responsibility component of paternal participation, Barnett and Baruch (1987) determined that 71% of the dual-earner fathers in their study were responsible for no child-care tasks, 22% were responsible for only one, and 8% were responsible for two or more. Pleck’s review (1997) did not find one child care task for which the father was primarily responsible. And although fathers spend proportionally more time with their children when the mother is employed, their absolute time spent interacting with their children remains the same (Day, Evans, and Lamb, 1998).

This paper will focus on why men are not more equal participants in child rearing. The literature reveals some determinants of paternal participation, such as Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine’s (1985) categorization of motivation, skills and self-confidence,

social support, and institutional practices, but there are underlying dominant discourses that need to be identified which influence these determinants and perpetuate the discrepancy between maternal and paternal involvement.

A dominant discourse, defined by Hare-Mustin (1994) is “a system of statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common values. A discourse...is the medium that provides the words and ideas for thought and speech, as well as the cultural practices involving related concepts and behaviors.” Dominant discourses give voice to and influence only certain phenomenon, making them seem self evident, which perpetuates the dominant discourse even further (Gilbert and Scher, 1999, Gilbert and Brownson, 1998). This makes it difficult for alternate discourses to be heard because they appear to be contrary to experience, when in reality this experience is shaped by the societal view reflected in the discourse. The associated behavior then reinforces the discourse, making it stronger and more accepted.

This model (see Figure 1) uses dominant discourses as its basis to explain how men are discouraged from being equally participatory parents, how fathers’ decisions about their involvement affect the perpetuation of these discourses, and how alternate discourses can be used to challenge the dominant discourses. This model is an incidental model, not a characterological model, meaning that it is not meant to dichotomize fathers as “involved” or “not involved,” but rather to deconstruct men’s daily decisions about involvement and understand how they perpetuate or challenge the dominant discourses. This model supports the recent conception of positive paternal involvement that focuses on the content of the involvement in addition to the quantity because it places the level of

involvement on a continuum and allows for involvement in any parenting domain so that it characterizes each parenting decision rather than each parent.

This model is attempting to understand *men's* behavior, and it could be interpreted as implicitly making the assumption that all women are equally willing to be involved in child care, although this is obviously not the case. This model also uses as its basis dominant discourses that are largely relevant to a white, middle-class culture, and additions and deletions would undoubtedly be necessary to apply this model cross-culturally since dominant discourses are largely cultural constructions. What follows is an explanation of the dominant discourses used in the model and examples from popular culture, parenting books and magazines, religion, and the media which influences society's beliefs and practices about men's participation in parenting.

The organizing dominant discourse presented in the model is the "men and women as opposites" discourse. In *Gender and Sex in Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Gilbert and Scher (1999) explain that it is the basic assumption "that one set of characteristics, abilities, and interests belongs to one sex, and that another set belongs to the other or 'opposite sex.'" This is despite the fact that men and women are overwhelmingly more similar than they are different (Gilbert and Scher, 1999; Gilbert and Brownson, 1998). The phrase "Mister Mom" exemplifies this discourse, implying that a man who is a competent care-taker must be given the title "mother" rather than "father" because fathers are not care-takers. Inherent in the application of the "men and women as opposites" discourse to parenting are several sub-discourses, or themes, each of which will be discussed.

The “men as leader, advisor, and provider” theme is based on the myth that men are the sole providers for their families, and as such assume the leadership position in the family. Although women earn 76 cents for every dollar that men earn (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998), the reality is that they are significant providers for their family as well. Approximately 71% of married women with children under the age of eighteen are in the labor force (U.S. Department of Labor, 1996) and on average a working wife employed full-time contributes at least 40% of the family’s income (Gilbert and Brownson, 1998). Even though it is no longer the case that men are the sole providers for the family, dominant discourses lead people to believe that they are. For example, thirty-five years ago the Southern Baptists adopted the “Baptist Faith and Message” in order to articulate their religious and moral beliefs. No changes to that declaration had been made until the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City where they added an article on the family (Bowman, 1998). The article states that:

a husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She...has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation. (p. 1)

Although this statement serves to maintain the patriarchal power structure in the family by equating the man’s role to Jesus Christ’s, it does a great disservice to men. This dominant discourse presents itself as a mandate from God supporting the traditional notion that men should not participate in the nurturing and care of their children, but



rather should leave that to their wives and provide for the family instead. This distances men from being emotionally connected to their family and encourages overidentification with their role as a breadwinner.

The converse of the “men as leader, advisor, and provider” discourse is the “women as solely and uniquely nurturing” discourse. Bain (1994) identified a theme of “women naturally nurture” in her study analyzing the role-sharing negotiations of spouses about family work. This discourse conveys the idea that women are naturally able to be nurturing parents, but men are unequipped to do so. This discourse perpetuates itself in attachment theory and research which is almost exclusively done with mothers (Gilbert and Brownson, 1998). A recent example of the effect of this discourse comes from an article in *Parents* magazine entitled “Make room for daddy” (Spencer, 1998) written by a father baffled by his children’s preference for their mother until they became school aged. He ponders:

perhaps little children seem to love their mothers more because moms are physically softer than dads...The little ones are drawn to mothers because their voices issue forth in tones as cool and soothing as a high Alpine stream in May. Their touch is Olay slick and Pampers soft; their skirts, billowy curtains to rest behind in between acts of childish play...I’ve got mitts rough as a trench digger’s, a three-day growth coming in, and the stench of some WD-40. (pp. 128-131)

By making essentialist claims about men’s and women’s ability to nurture, he tries to explain his children’s preference for their mother. But these socially constructed ideas undoubtedly contribute to the barricade against his being a nurturing father and his children’s attention. He goes on to explain that his children are beginning to favor him

because there are things that he can do which his wife can't such as getting down on the ground to play, giving airplane rides, making a slap shot, catching bugs, and being imaginative and outlandishly funny. The effect of the "women solely and uniquely nurture" discourse cuts himself out of much of the joy of parenting and perpetuates the notion that men and women are truly "opposite sexes."

Another theme put forth in this model is "men as uninterested caregivers." Certainly, there are men that are less interested in providing a care-giving role to children, just as there are less interested women. But this dominant discourse applies that characteristic to all men, and that assumption excludes men from conversations about care-giving, books and advertisements about parenting are not targeted to them, and they miss out on practical opportunities and learning experiences. As a result, fathers broach parenthood with less information, anticipation, and expectations that they will participate, which makes it difficult to create alternate discourses. In a popular pregnancy book for women entitled *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy*, author Vicki Iovine purports to tell women everything they need to know about pregnancy that their doctor will not tell them. In a chapter about husbands, she writes:

Pregnancy, to many husbands, is just not a big enough deal to create such emotional chaos. They simply don't get it...Naturally, there are exceptions to this description of pregnant husbands. For every ten men I give you who feel that the defensive position is the best one to take throughout their wife's pregnancy, you will give me one who has never felt more closely bound to his wife than during her pregnancy. We have all heard the myth about the exceptional man who says that his wife's pregnancy is *their* pregnancy, and that he wants to share as much

of it with her as he can...I have to wonder about these guys. Does it seem to you that maybe they have too much time on their hands?

Although men were not necessarily intended to read this book, they still feel the ramifications of the “men as uninterested caregivers” discourse. It reinforces the idea to women that men are uninterested, and regardless of the father’s real level of interest, her expectations for paternal involvement are lowered which influences all her thoughts and actions related to role-sharing, and ultimately the father might be discouraged from being as involved as he would like to be.

Some sub-discourses do not blatantly discourage men’s involvement, but rather minimize its importance and inhibit full and equal participation. One such discourse presented in the model is informed by Biernat and Kobrynowicz’s conceptualization of shifting standards. This discourse says that “any participation from men is acceptable” and that the standards which define being a good father are less than those for being a good mother. In a study by Kobrynowicz and Biernat (in press) they found that a “very good” mother and an “all right” mother were objectively judged by participants to have performed significantly more parenting behaviors than “very good” fathers and “all right” fathers. Furthermore, a “very good” father was rated as objectively performing the same parenting behaviors as an “all right” mother. This discourse places more demands on the mother and is seemingly satisfied with less participation from the father. One father interviewed in *Becoming the Parent you Want To Be* (Davis and Keyser, 1997) expressed his frustrations with the influence of this discourse:

People loved seeing my son and I together. People who wouldn’t give me the time of day otherwise would talk to me if I had my kid with me...It was strange.

And it kind of pissed me off. Sometimes I'd say to them, "I'm just a parent. Why are you making such a big deal out of this? How many women do you give this kind of juice to?" And they'd say, "Men don't usually do this." And I'd say, "this one does." It just didn't feel right to me. This was my kid. Why was everybody congratulating me for doing what I was supposed to do? (pp. 74-75)

This father provided an alternate discourse to "any participation from men is acceptable." His anger stemmed from the attitude that he was going above and beyond the duty of father by being an involved parent, a discourse that casts him as somehow different or exceptional.

Another sub-discourse which discourages full paternal involvement is the "men as mother's helper discourse." This discourse conveys the message that men should assume the role of helper or aide rather than an equal participant who shares in planning, responsibility, and decision-making. This is a common theme in books written about parenting. One such book, *Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Newborn* (Simkin, Whalley, & Keppler, 1991) contains a section on parenthood. One paragraph of that section is entitled "A Note to Partners," implying that the rest of the section on parenthood applies only to the mother. In the paragraph the authors advise:

It may seem to you that the baby's mother is better able than you to soothe your baby and meet her needs...But if this is her first baby, she is as new at parenthood as you are. She may feel the burden of a new baby is too great if she does not have your daily support and help with baby care. (p. 235)

The authors intention, no doubt, is to encourage men to participate, but the dominant discourse is evident that the participation is limited to a supporting role. The idea is

conveyed that fathers are supposed to help and support the mother so that she has the energy and resources requisite for the real parenting. By referring to the child as “her first baby” it reinforces the idea that the father is the secondary caregiver. He is encouraged to be involved, but his role is as supporter because he is somehow less able to give his own emotional resources to the child.

The last theme presented in the model, “men as incompetent caregivers,” is based on the myth that men do not have the innate capacity to competently care for a child. This contradicts bodies of research that demonstrate that men are competent in child care (Silverstein, 1996). The result of this discourse is the preservation of traditional family roles which perpetuates the idea that it is the duty of the woman to nurture her children, and the existence of a more non-traditional situation in which childcare roles are shared between mother and father are deemed detrimental (Gilbert and Brownson, 1998). An example from the Dateline NBC news program from April 14, 1998 entitled “Two for the Money” (Singer, 1998) is emblematic of this discourse. They present the case of a dual-earner couple with two children who stagger their work hours, enabling them to both be equally participatory parents. Because she makes less than her husband, Home Economist Linda Kelley analyzes the mother’s income to see if it is really cost effective for her to be working. The program fails to point out that on average women make 25% less than men (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998), which means that it will usually be the woman who is scrutinized as to whether or not she should be working. By judging the economic situation in this manner, it relegates child care responsibilities back to the woman and breadwinning to the man, restoring traditional family roles where women are assumed to be competent caregivers and men are not. As Kelley proceeds to analyze the

mother's income, she calculates how much it is costing her to work, although most of her costs are questionable and many are charges she would incur regardless of whether or not she worked. The dominant discourse does not manifest itself by overtly stating that the husband is an incompetent caregiver, but rather points out that if he didn't have the burden of raising his children he would have time for more important things like overtime and car maintenance. This discourse subtly implies that raising the children is the mother's job, and the husband is more competent in other areas. As the journalist reports to the mother that her salary and work is actually costing the family money, the ramifications of the discourse are in full swing. She feels ashamed for breaking traditional role assignments and ultimately apologizes for the damage she has done. The message was clear for the viewing public and future mothers and fathers that would someday have to negotiate their own roles.

These dominant discourses imprint on varying levels of consciousness the message that men do not want to and are not supposed to be equally participatory caregivers, but the discourses are not so tyrannical that they strip men of their choices about their behavior. Fathers choose differing levels of involvement on a daily basis, and less involved choices often serve to reinforce the original dominant discourses. More involved choices can spur the reaction that this man or this behavior is exceptional, and most men aren't like that. But a more involved behavior can also create alternate discourses that directly challenge the pervasive dominant discourses.

These themes are the bases underlying all of the determinants that affect men's level of participation, such as their motivation, skills and self confidence, social support, and institutional practices (Lamb et al., 1985). Men are also individually influenced by

these discourses in their cognitive construction of their role as fathers. This conception of their paternal role along with the other determinants of paternal involvement influence men's behavior, which can be dissonant to or congruent with the dominant discourses. Less involved paternal behavior perpetuates the original discourses, as does more involved behavior which is explained away as an exception to the rule, as the *Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy* does. But the dominant discourses which discourage full and equal participation can be eroded by creating alternate discourses. It takes both more involved behavior on the part of men combined with the creation of alternate discourses in order to challenge the dominant discourses which inhibit paternal participation. In the popular parenting book *What to Expect: The First Year* (Eisenbert, Burkoff, and Hathaway, 1996) the chapter entitled "Becoming a Father" begins:

Now that the cord's been cut, the rules of the game have changed. No longer do you need special biological equipment for the job of child care. You don't even need experience. All you need is the will to chip in and parent. Not as your wife's chief assistant and bottle washer, but as her partner in the wonderful, unpredictable, exhausting, exhilarating, enlightening, ever-challenging business of parenting.

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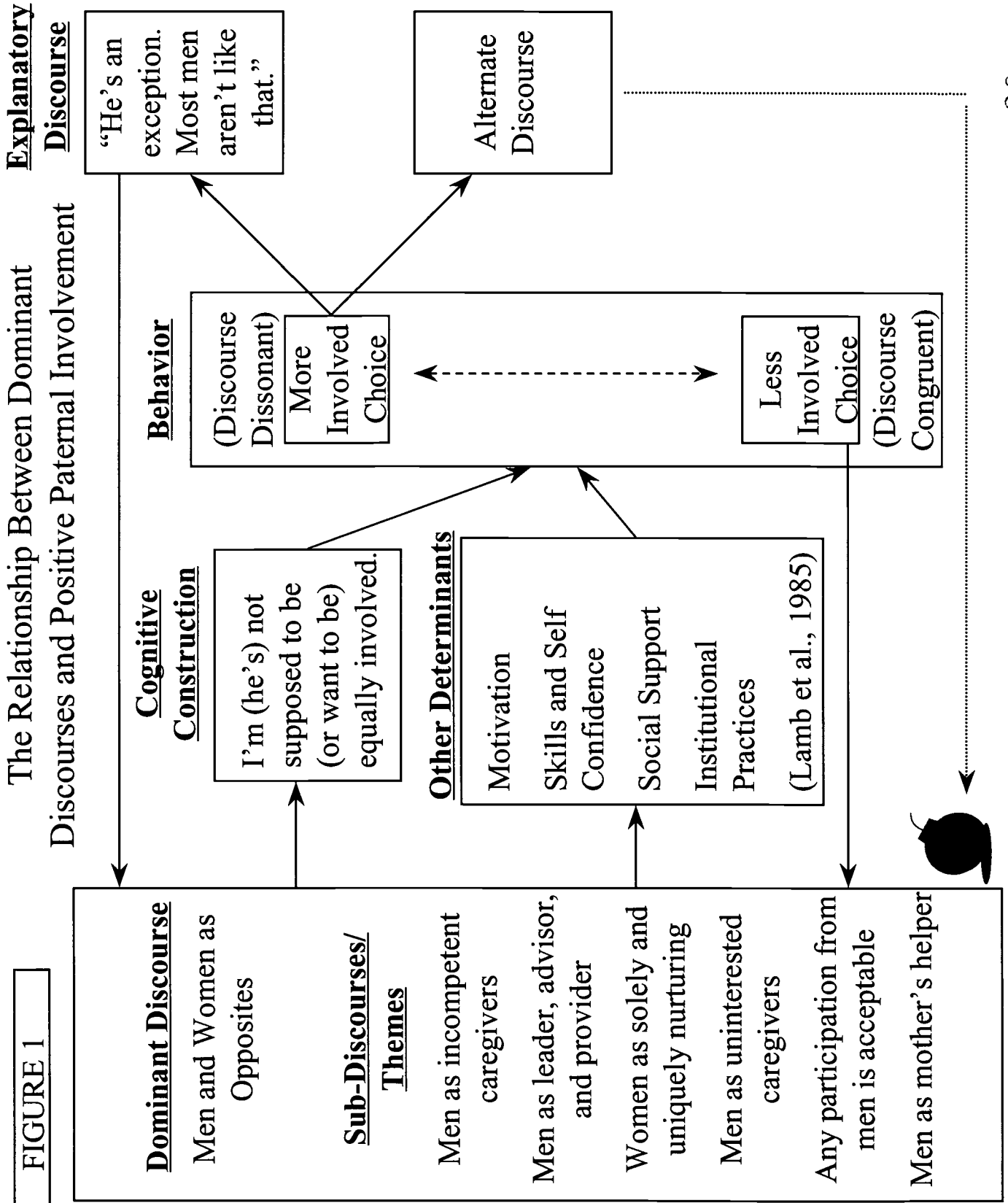
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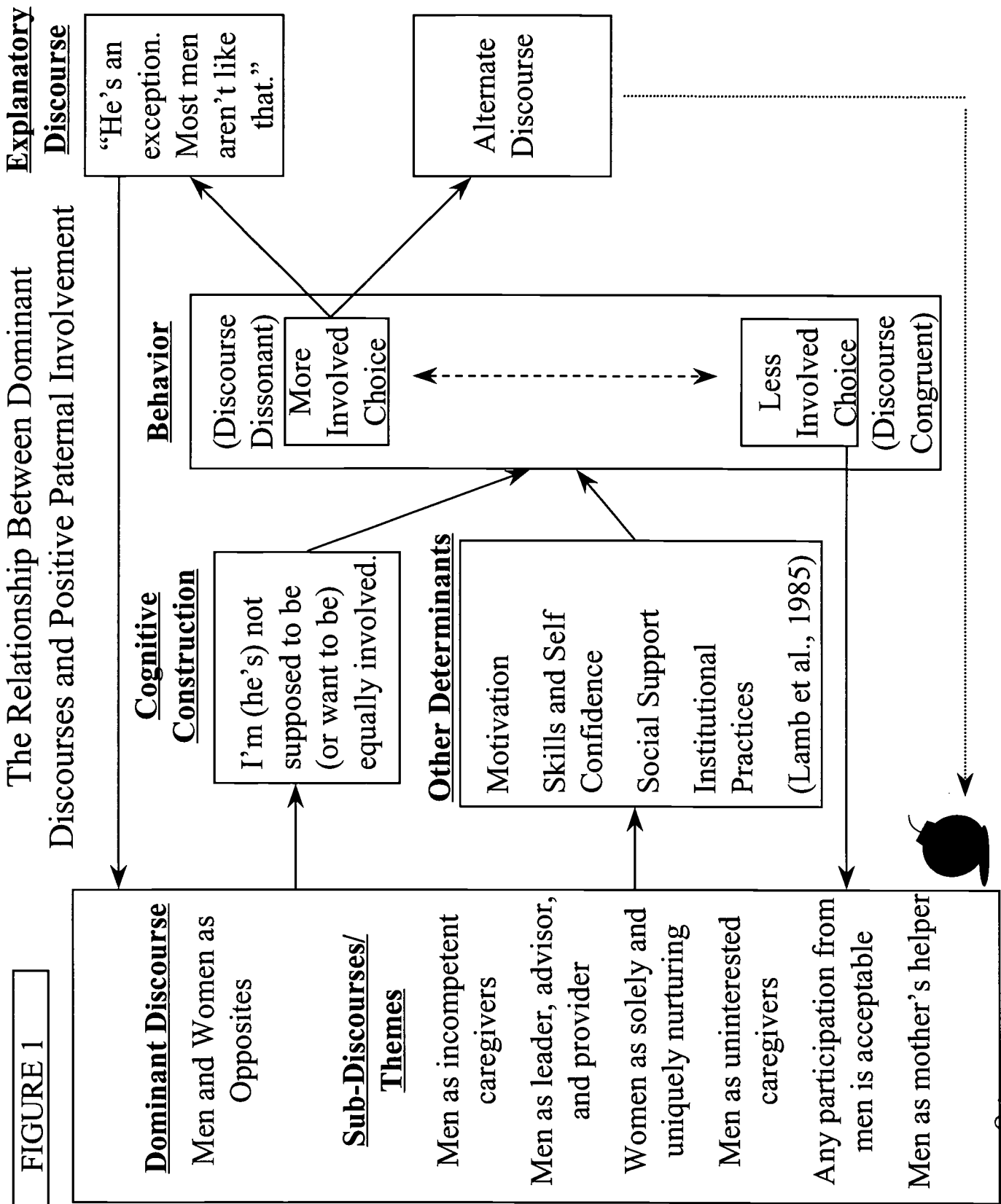
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