

Mattering: The Role of Adolescent Attributions

Melinda E. Baham

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## ABSTRACT

Fathers play an important role in a child's development. One aspect of the father-adolescent relationship that would benefit from investigation is that of how much an adolescent feels supported by, loved by, and important to his father, in other words, how much the adolescent feels he matters to his father. Prior research has found that a sense of mattering leads to positive mental health and behavioral outcomes, but has failed to focus on how one develops a sense of mattering to another. One potential explanation for the way in which a sense of mattering might develop could be the conclusions, or attributions, the adolescent reaches about his father's positive and negative behaviors. Attribution theory suggests that individuals explain behavior along several dimensions, one of which concerns how stable the underlying cause may be. Stable attributions made about positive father behaviors were predicted to increase feelings of mattering, whereas stable attributions made about negative father behaviors were predicted to decrease feelings of mattering. In order to test these hypotheses, adolescents, responded to a questionnaire that asked them to report on how much they feel they matter to their fathers, and also to think of four situations that involve negative and positive behaviors exhibited by their fathers, and report on why they thought their father had exhibited that behavior. Consistent with the hypotheses, stable attributions for positive behaviors led to greater feelings of mattering, whereas stable attributions about negative behaviors led to less mattering. Unstable attributions made about either positive or negative behaviors did not predict mattering in the overall sample. In addition, adolescents in step families displayed a larger relationship between stable attributions about positive behaviors and mattering than those in intact families. Also, males did not have an association between unstable attributions for negative behaviors, whereas females indicated the more they endorsed unstable attributions, the less they felt that they mattered to

their fathers. Implications for future research involving attributions and the relationship with mattering are discussed in the context of the literature of positive psychology and fathering.

## Mattering: The Role of Adolescent Attributions

Parents and families are a critical aspect of the context in which children develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Additionally, the parent-child relationship is one of the most important and influential relationships in a child's entire life. Parents act as early agents of the socialization process in which children learn the proper values, attitudes, behaviors, and responsibilities for interaction within their society and culture (Parke & Buriel, 1998). Parents influence their children's socialization processes via several mechanisms: the parent-child interaction, parental instruction, and parental selection of child activities and encounters (Parke & Buriel, 1998). Parents provide guidance and support for children as they learn about the world, and parents act as monitors and regulators of their children's social lives (Parke, 2004), especially early on. Even in adolescence, parents typically monitor aspects of their children's lives.

Numerous researchers have investigated the relationships between parent-child interaction and child-peer relationships and outcomes (Maccoby, 2000). In one such study, Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (2000) concluded that family environments characterized by marital conflict, stress, maternal hostility and harsh disciplinary practices led to peer victimization for children who did not have many friends. Similarly, Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (1998) found that parents who engage in parenting practices that include few responsive behaviors and many intrusive and demanding behaviors have children who are more likely to be victimized by their peers than parents who engage in more responsive practices. Other research has explored the connections between parenting behaviors and child outcomes. For example, Mounts (2002) discovered that parenting styles moderated the relationship between parenting behaviors and drug use in adolescents such that more monitoring led to less drug use for parents

with authoritative parenting styles, but led to more drug use for parents with uninvolved parenting styles. Several studies have found that adolescents spend less time and feel less close with their parents than younger children, and that the increases in parent-child conflict can have an impact on mental health outcomes (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Taken together, this research strongly suggests that the parent-child relationship is critical in the development of the child as an individual within a social group. Given the impact that the parent-child relationship has on child outcomes, it becomes imperative to investigate specific aspects of these parental relationships. One such aspect could focus on the specific role that the father-child relationship has on child outcomes separate from the mother-child relationship.

### *The Importance of Fathers*

Fathers are important to child outcomes and they should not be neglected (Phares & Compas, 1992; Grace, Kelley, & McCain, 1993) when studying adolescents and family relationships. Until recently, however, fathers have been nearly completely overlooked as viable avenues of research in their own right. Phares and Compas report that only one percent of the articles from 1984-1991 in eight clinical and developmental journals consisted solely of fathers, and only twenty-six percent of the articles included fathers and mothers and analyzed them separately. Although many more studies now routinely include fathers as participants, there is much to be learned about the impact that fathers have on their child's outcomes. Additionally, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) have found that fathering makes a substantial difference in child outcomes over and above the influence of mothering. These findings indicate that fathering is both an important and neglected aspect of child development. Given previous research findings with regards to the importance of fathers in a child's outcome, specific aspects of the father-child

relationship deserve further research. One particular key aspect of the father-child relationship concerns how much the child feels important, loved, and cared for by the father; in other words, how much the child feels he/she matters to the father.

### *The Concept of Mattering*

*Mattering* is an emerging psychological concept receiving newfound interest in the literature. Mattering is a concept that is defined in relation to other individuals. Specifically, mattering involves the idea that a person is important to, and is cared about by, another individual. That other individual provides the context in which one can feel as if he/she matters. Promoted by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), the concept of mattering involves the extent to which one feels as though one is important in another's life, that the other person thinks of one often, and that one perceives one counts in another person's life. Rosenberg and McCullough suggested three aspects of mattering: attention, importance, and dependence. Attention involves the idea that the other person notices and is interested in a particular person and that person's actions. Importance involves the idea that the other person is concerned about and interested in a person's outcome or fate. If one is important to another person, then the other person is concerned about one's actions, and that other person cares about what one wants, thinks, feels, and does. Finally, the aspect of dependence is primarily concerned with the idea that other people depend on a person, just as that person depends on other people. When other people depend on a person, attend to that person, and are concerned about that person, that person perceives that he/she matters to the other individuals.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) examined adolescents' convictions that they matter to their parents by using several large-scale surveys. Although none of these surveys had a scale

specific to the concept of mattering, each survey included related items, such as those that dealt with feelings of importance to one's parents, being wanted by one's parents, and being an object of a parent's interest. The authors concluded that mattering to one's parents related to levels of self esteem, depression, and anxiety, such that the less adolescents feel they matter to their parents, the lower self esteem they will have, and the higher levels of depression and anxiety they will have. These findings remain true even when global self-esteem has been controlled for, suggesting that mattering is not entirely encompassed by measures of self-esteem. Rosenberg and McCullough also found that lower feelings of mattering related to more juvenile delinquency, including delinquency from school as well as theft and vandalism. These findings seem sensible because if adolescents feel as though they do not matter to their parents or their parents do not care about them, they may be likely to look for that acceptance elsewhere, and in turn be negatively influenced by their peers. Research has shown that adolescents from families that are not closely connected to one another are more likely to rely on peers than adolescents from close families (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Additionally, adolescents may act out in delinquent ways in order to gain attention from their parents, and these delinquent behaviors may be more likely to occur if adolescents perceive that their parents do not care about them.

In order to extend the work of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), Marshall (2001) focused on determining the construct validity of a scale specifically designed to measure perceived mattering to mothers, fathers, and friends in high school and college-age participants. Marshall found that subjects have higher perceived mattering ratings for their mothers than their fathers or friends, and that females perceive themselves as mattering more to their mothers and friends than males. However, no gender difference was found for perceived mattering to fathers. Additionally, adolescents' perceptions of mattering to parents were positively related to parental

support and joint decision-making and negatively related to negative parental behaviors (i.e., parental rejection).

Several other studies have focused on the various outcomes of mattering. Rayle and Myers (2004) found that for adolescents, mattering to others significantly predicted overall wellness, which consisted of spirituality, self-direction, schoolwork, leisure, love, and friendship. Taylor and Turner (2001) found that differences in mattering predicted symptoms of depression in women, but not in men. Mak and Marshall (2004) investigated perceived mattering to a romantic partner in young adults and found that the greater the feelings of mattering, the higher the reported satisfaction with the relationship and the more investment in the relationship. Finally, Marshall (2004) found that perceived mattering to both parents and friends helped to explain adolescent outcomes of self-concept and behavioral misconduct.

Since the sense that one matters to others has been shown above to be highly predictive of important child outcomes, this immediately begets the question of how does this sense of mattering arise? What are the processes by which one child comes to feel he/she matters to the father, and the next child does not? What are the predictor variables, when we consider sense of mattering as an outcome variable? That is, the majority of mattering research to date examines the impact of mattering as a predictor for various outcomes such as psychological wellness (Rayle & Myers, 2004), relationship satisfaction (Mak & Marshall, 2004), depression (Taylor & Turner, 2001), self-concept and behavioral misconduct (Marshall, 2004). Relatively little research examines the psychological phenomena that may influence mattering. Given the importance mattering seems to have, at least initially, on behavioral and mental health outcomes, it becomes imperative to determine the factors that might lead to and influence mattering.

One potential explanation for how a child determines that he matters to his father could be the reasons he gives for his father's behaviors. Different children may interpret a similar parent behavior in very different ways. For example, if a child's father works many hours a week (parent behavior), one child might interpret his father working all the time as occurring because the father does not care about him. Another child might interpret this same behavior as occurring because the father cares for him so much that the father works long hours. The different causes, or attributions, the child uses to explain the father's behavior may impact the child's perceptions of how much he matters to his father. Children spend cognitive energy thinking about their parents; these thoughts can be important factors in understanding the child's relationship with the parent as well as important influences on the child's outcome and the parent-child relationship itself. It therefore becomes important to investigate how attribution theory, with its focus on the causes used to explain different events, might elucidate differences in adolescents' perceived mattering to their fathers.

### *Attribution Theory*

Humans have been questioning the causes of events for centuries (Weiner, 1986). The causes, or explanations, that one gives for why a particular behavioral event occurred have been labeled *attributions* by researchers (Weiner, 1986). Attributions look at causes of goal attainment or lack thereof (Weiner, 1985) and can be applied to positive or negative behavioral events and outcomes in a variety of circumstances.

Many examples exist of situations in which individuals try to reason why certain behaviors occurred. Although there would be numerous causes given for the variety of behaviors, the causes have similar properties. Even in the diversity of situations, the attributions

people make are similar along several different dimensions. According to attribution theorists, such as Heider (1953) and Kelley (1967), the most important causal dimension of a behavioral event is that of locus. Does the specified cause come from an internal source (within the person), or an external source (outside the person)? For example, a student who responded to being asked why he failed a math test with 'because I'm stupid' would be assigning an internal cause to the behavior. A student answering with 'because the test was hard' would be assigning an external cause. Another causal dimension of a behavioral event is that of stability. Causes can have stable or unstable aspects to them. Using the previous example, stupidity (or lack of aptitude), is seen as a stable cause since it is not likely to change. The student is most likely not going to increase his intelligence before the next exam. However, a student who had responded that he failed the exam because he did not get any sleep the night before would be giving an unstable reason for failure. The student could get a full night's sleep before the next exam, thus the cause of the failure (lack of sleep) is very easily changed. The final causal dimension proposed by Weiner (1985) is that of control. This dimension concerns the ability the individual has to manipulate, or change, the cause. Using the student example, not sleeping before the exam is a cause that the student has control over. However, if the student attributed his failure to being unlucky, he does not have much control over this cause; therefore, the cause would be considered uncontrollable.

Other researchers have proposed two additional dimensions of attributions: intentionality (Weiner, 1979; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) and globality (Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998; Brody, Arias, & Fincham, 1996). Intentionality is concerned with the purpose behind the cause: did the person intend for a particular outcome to occur? For example, if a student fails an exam because he did not study, his lack of effort can be seen as intentional (Weiner, 1985), since the outcome from not studying is failure. However, if the student used an ineffective method of

study, he did not purposely choose a bad strategy, which indicates lack of intent. One of the problems with the intentionality domain is that it correlates highly with the controllability domain ( $r=.90$ ; Weiner, 1985). The high correlation brings into question the empirical uniqueness of the two domains. Although one could imagine certain instances in which someone would intend to do something but not be able to control an opposing behavior, these distinctions have not been demonstrated in the literature. Additionally, the dimension of intentionality has another difficulty: certain causes do not seem to be as applicable to the intention dimension as others (Weiner, 1985). For example, poor ability cannot easily be thought of as intentional, because one does not purposely choose to be deficient in some aspect of life. Ability seems to fit better in the control dimension than in the intentional dimension. However, given the high degree of similarity between control and intention, most researchers choose one dimension or the other to include, depending on the goal of the study (Weiner, 1985; Meyer, 1980; Passer, Kelley, & Michela, 1977).

In addition to intentionality, globality is another dimension that has emerged in the attribution literature. Globality refers to how global or specific a cause is to a certain situation (Fincham et al., 1998; Brody et al., 1996). For example, stupidity (or a lack of intelligence) is a global cause that is likely to influence many different situations, whereas a lack of spatial reasoning ability is specific to situations in which one needs to interact with his environment spatially, such as reading a map. Another example of the distinction between specific and global causes occurs when an individual feels unlucky in one aspect of his life (e.g., his love life) versus feeling unfortunate in all aspects of his life (Munton, Silvester, Stratton, & Hanks, 1999). The globality dimension distinguishes itself from the stability dimension in that if a cause is seen as global, then that cause is likely to have an effect on other situations (Munton et al., 1999) which

may, or may not, be similar to the situation in which the cause was attributed. For example, if a student decides he failed an exam because he was stupid, his lack of intelligence is likely to affect other situations, such as the jobs he can receive and the people with whom he can interact. These aspects are attributable to the globality of the cause, whereas stability refers to the idea that the student will always be stupid (stupidity is not likely to change), and thus when he encounters the same situation again, will perform poorly on every test he takes. In other words, stability refers to causal attributions that are consistent across time, whereas globality refers to causal attributions that occur in a variety of domains or different situations. For purposes of this study, however, the researcher will focus on the domain of stability because stability and globality seem to overlap somewhat (it is difficult to think of a global cause that is also unstable) and also because the locus dimension is difficult to elucidate within the context of a relationship.

Regardless of the dimensions that are used in a particular study, causes are explained simultaneously by aspects of each dimension (Weiner, 1985). Low math ability and physical unattractiveness are both characterized as internal, stable, and uncontrollable attributions. Physical unattractiveness and low math ability are both unlikely to change, but physical unattractiveness is likely to be more global as opposed to poor math ability, which is more specific (Weiner, 1985). Task difficulty and luck are both external causes, but task difficulty is stable and controllable because it is likely to be the same level of difficulty again, but its difficulty is controllable by the researcher or teacher. Luck, on the other hand, is considered unstable and uncontrollable, because luck varies and is not the same in similar situations, and luck is controlled by 'the powers that be', and not by the individual. As is obvious by now, very different causes may be characterized as having the same set of underlying dimensions, and these

dimensions characterize each cause in a certain way that allow researchers to compare causes across a wide variety of domains.

Because attribution theory was initially supported and utilized in the domain of academic achievement and outcomes (Weiner, 1985; Fincham et al., 1998), it did not initially focus on relationships that have significant meaning (e.g., parent-child or husband-wife relationships). Many of the early studies focused on causes of one's own achievement outcomes (Meyer, 1980; Meyer & Koelbl, 1982; Passer et al., 1978) or parents' attributions of children's academic outcomes (Turk & Bry, 1992). Until recently, few studies have applied attribution theory to familial contexts (Fincham et al., 1998), and much of the work that has been done is in the marital satisfaction domain.

Research completed with couples has found that certain attributional styles (a tendency to explain behaviors with regard to specific causal dimensions, e.g., the tendency to attribute behaviors to internal, stable, and global causes) lead to less marital satisfaction and more negative interactions than other attributional styles. Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, and Nelson (1996) investigated spousal attributions of negative partner behaviors, and found that wives who made 'maladaptive' (internal, stable, and global) attributions engaged in more negative behavior towards their spouse. Interestingly, husbands who made maladaptive attributions about their wives' behaviors did not engage in more negative interactions than husbands who did not make negative attributions. Bradbury and Fincham (1992) found that spouses who made maladaptive attributions for marital difficulties engaged in less successful problem-solving skills, had higher rates of negative behaviors, and for wives, had a greater likelihood of mirroring their husband's negative behavior. Bradbury and Fincham (1990) found that unhappy spouses were more likely than happy spouses to have maladaptive attributional patterns. Bradbury and Fincham (1990)

also found that attributions predicted marital satisfaction. In these studies, when participants were asked about negative behavioral events, attributions that were internal, stable, and global led to higher levels of dissatisfaction and negative outcomes. The research with couples has shown that individuals are successfully able to explain the reasons behind the behaviors and actions of another individual, and that these attributions of another's behavior can impact the manner in which the two individuals interact, and the satisfaction that one has with the relationship. These findings suggest that it would be useful to research children's attributions about their parents' behaviors, and examine the impact that the child's attributional style has on the parent-child relationship.

Unfortunately, although understanding children's cognitions about parents' behaviors would likely shed light on aspects of the parent-child relationship, only a few studies have investigated children's attributions about parents and parental behaviors, and these studies focus only on hypothetical negative behavioral events. In one such study, Grace et al. (1993) focused on how attributions related to adolescent-mother conflict. Both mothers and adolescents read several hypothetical scenarios involving conflict events and were asked to answer why their adolescent or their mother acted in a particular manner. Mothers and adolescents were given six reasons for the negative behaviors, which were aimed at capturing several dimensions including external locus, stability, globality, and intentionality, and were asked to respond on a 6-point Likert scale the degree to which the reason reflects the cause of negative behavior. Overall findings suggest that maladaptive attributional patterns were related to more conflict in the adolescent-mother relationship. Specifically, adolescents' external, stable, and global causal attributions of their mother's behavior were associated with higher levels of maternal conflict. Additionally, the more intentional the behavior was rated by the adolescent, the more conflict

reported in the relationship. For both adolescent-reported and mother-reported conflict, the best predictor of conflict was found to be the attributional dimension of globality. This indicates that the more the adolescent (or the mother) attributed the mother's (or adolescent's) negative behaviors to global causes, the more frequent and intense the conflicts became, and the more conflict was reported in the relationship. In general, negative attributions made by mothers and adolescents, specifically global attributions, were related to greater mother-adolescent conflict, and increases in maladaptive attributions were related to increased mother-adolescent conflict.

In another study, Fincham et al. (1998) investigated children's attributions of their mother's and father's behaviors, and the connection between children's attributions and aspects of the parent-child relationship. Specifically, Fincham et al. studied the ways in which children's attributions of parent behaviors were related to children's feelings toward the parent-child relationship, and actual behaviors that occur during an interaction with their parents. Children were asked to respond to hypothetical negative parent behavioral events (e.g., Imagine your mom[dad] yelled at you; Imagine your mom[dad] criticized you) and rate the extent to which they attributed their parents' behaviors to several types of causes, including internal, stable, global, and intentional causes. Other variables measured included the amount of positive affect between parent and child (self-report and observed), as well as the amount of parent-child conflict (both self-report and observed levels). Children also responded to symptoms of depression; and parents rated attributions of hypothetical negative spousal behaviors. Fincham et al. found that children's "conflict-promoting" attributions (i.e., attributions that are internal, stable, global, and intentional) of parent behaviors were negatively correlated with positivity in the father-child and mother-child relationships as rated by the child, and were negatively correlated with positivity in the parent-child relationship as rated by the father, but not the

mother. Also, children's conflict-promoting attributions were positively related to conflict in the parent-child relationship as rated by child, father, and mother. Specific to the father-child interaction, children's attributions of fathers' behaviors were significantly related to observed behaviors between child and father, such that the more a child endorsed negative, or conflict-promoting, attributions of the father's behavior, the less positive the observed interaction between father and child. This association between observed parent-child interaction and child's attributional pattern was not detected for the mother-child interaction. However, children's conflict-promoting attributions of parents' behaviors (both mothers and fathers) were found to correlate significantly with reports of symptoms of depression, and to significantly add to the prediction of relationship positivity and conflict, over and above what was accounted for by depression alone. Maladaptive attributional patterns were associated with children's observed interactions with their fathers and children's attitudes about the parent-child relationship. Overall, the results of this study are consistent with those of Grace et al. (1993) in that children's negative attributions of parent behavior are related to the amount of parent-child conflict, as well as, in the case of Fincham et al., parent-child positivity.

Similarly, Brody et al. (1996) studied the connections between attributions about the marriage and parenting behaviors on children's attributions of the parent's behaviors, and the ultimate impact on ineffective parent-child communication. As in the Fincham et al. (1998) study, children responded to two hypothetical negative parent behaviors (e.g., parent yelled at you, parent criticized you) and rated, among other things, the extent to which those behaviors occurred because of something internal, stable, global, or intentional about the parent. Parents rated the causes underlying their spouse's hypothetical behaviors, as well as the type of parent-child communication during arguments. Children rated each parent's communication style,

which measured the amount of parent-involved parenting (e.g., parent talks about the good things the child has done, the parent talks about school with the child) as well as each parent's harsh parenting practices (e.g., physical punishment, parental criticism, and guilt tactics). In addition to the self-report measures, behavioral observations were also made of both negative and positive parenting behaviors during a parent-child interaction. Both mother's and father's negative (i.e., internal, stable, global, and intentional) marital attributions were significantly associated with higher levels of marital negativity, which was then related to less parent-child communication in parenting, more harsh punishment practices in parenting, and overall more ineffective parent-child communication. Negative marital attributions also led directly to harsher parenting and less parent-involved parenting. Parent-involved parenting negatively related to child's attributions about parent's negative behaviors, whereas harsh punishment practices were positively related to children's attributions. Finally, children's maladaptive (i.e., internal, stable, global, and intentional) attributions of parental behavior related to ineffective communication between the child and the parent.

These studies, which have examined children's attributions of hypothetical negative parent behaviors, have primarily been concerned with the relationship between children's attributions and ineffective parent-child communication (Brody et al., 1996; Fincham et al., 1998) or maternal-child conflict (Grace, et al., 1993). Few studies have investigated the impact of child attributions of parent behaviors on other outcomes within the parent-child relationship. Fincham et al. (1998) did examine positive affect in the parent-child relationship, and found children's conflict-promoting attributions of both father's and mother's behaviors significantly predicted less father-child and mother-child (respectively) relationship positivity. This finding

suggests that a legitimate application of children's attributions of parents' behaviors is that of the relationship between such attributions and positive aspects of the parent-child relationship.

Overall, these studies found that adolescents' internal, stable, global, and intentional attributions of negative parent behaviors led to negative outcomes, such as more parent-child conflict and more ineffective communication. These types of attributions also led to less parent-child positivity (Fincham et al., 1998). Although none of these studies investigated attributions of positive parent behaviors, it seems reasonable to suggest that that internal, stable, and global attributions made about positive behavioral events may lead to higher levels of positive aspects of the parent-child relationship, given that internal, stable, and global attributions of negative behaviors lead to higher levels of conflict. However, empirical research must be conducted before such claims can be made.

#### *Types of Events Used to Elicit Attributions*

In the literature reviewed so far, the events, behaviors, and outcomes of which attributions have been made have varied along two dimensions: whether the event is real or hypothetical, and whether the event is positive or negative. One study that used real events was that of Gretarsson and Gelfand (1988), which looked at mother's attributions of desirable and undesirable child social behaviors. Mothers were asked first to recall child behaviors that fell into specific categories (such as prosocial or oppositionally defiant), and were then asked the reasons why the child engage in those behaviors (their reasons were then coded according to attribution theory). Gretarsson and Gelfand suggest that they included real child behaviors, instead of hypothetical behaviors as is often done in the literature, to increase the authenticity of the study's findings. The other studies reviewed here all used hypothetical events or behaviors,

although some (e.g., Mazur et al., 1992; Fincham et al., 1998; Brody et al., 1996) chose behaviors that occurred often in pilot studies or prior research. The second dimension of type of attribution concerns the types of behaviors or events the attributions were made about, and if those events are positive or negative. Several studies used both positive and negative events or behaviors (see Gladstone & Kaslow, 1995; Turk & Bry, 1992; Gretarsson & Gelfand, 1988; and Johnston & Freeman, 1997). However, the most relevant studies, those which focused on child attributions of parent behaviors, used only negative behavioral events. Brody et al. (1996) used negative events exclusively, “because they are more likely to elicit attributions, attributions for them are more reliably related to relationship distress than are attributions for positive events, and they are most relevant in clinical contexts,” (p. 414). This reasoning suggests that if the researcher is not working in a clinical setting, and is not studying an outcome related to distress in a relationship, then perhaps negative events or behaviors may not be as likely to elicit attributions than if those conditions applied to the researcher’s study.

### *The Present Study*

In reviewing the literature, it becomes clear that several issues warrant further research. Prior research has investigated the importance that mattering appears to have for adolescent mental health and behavioral outcomes, yet has failed to examine the factors that may lead to one developing a sense of mattering. With a phenomenon as influential on adolescent outcomes as mattering seems to be, it is essential to thoroughly probe the potential explanations of how mattering comes about. One possible explanation might be found in children’s attributions of parents’ behaviors. The few studies conducted on children’s attributions of parents’ behaviors suggest that children’s cognitions about the reasons behind their parents’ behaviors could

significantly influence their outcomes. Furthermore, given that only two of the studies that investigated child's attributions of parents' behaviors included fathers, more research needs to be completed that focuses on the father-child relationship. Finally, attributions are rarely made in research about real events and positive events. Studies should be conducted that make attributions about real events, because there could be differences in the findings based on whether the attribution is made about a real or hypothetical event. Studies should also include positive events, as well as negative events, for eliciting attributions, because that too might cause the findings to differ, particularly if the outcome variable is positive.

Therefore, the present study will examine adolescents' attributions about positive and negative father behaviors, and the impact that this attributional tendency has on the adolescent's perceptions of mattering to one's father. Specifically, adolescents will be asked to recall an incident in which their father said or did something nice to them, as well as said or did something mean to them. Adolescents will then be asked to explain the reasons behind their fathers' behaviors along several attributional dimensions. Adolescents will also be asked to respond to how much they perceive they matter to their fathers. Consistent with the literature on attribution theory as discussed above, it is hypothesized that for positive parental actions (the father said or did something nice for the adolescent), attributions that are stable regarding the father will lead to the adolescent reporting that they matter more to their father. Following Fincham et al.'s (1998) findings for parent-child positivity, it is also hypothesized that for negative actions (the father said or did something mean to the adolescent), stable attributions will lead to less mattering. Since it is unclear how unstable attributions might influence mattering, no a priori hypotheses are made about how unstable attributions for positive behaviors and unstable attributions for negative behaviors will relate to mattering.

## Method

### *Participants*

All participants were part of a larger study investigating the role of fathers in adolescent development. For purposes of this study, participants consisted of 393 adolescents (205 girls, 188 boys) and their residential fathers (fathers or step-fathers living in their household). Adolescents were in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at the time of the interview, and ranged in age from 11 to 14 years old ( $M = 12.46$  years). Participants were sampled from one of two sites in the southwest region of the United States to include both Euro-Americans and Mexican-Americans (49.36% Mexican-American). Slightly more than half of the participants came from intact families (218), whereas the other 175 adolescents came from families with a step-father. The median income of the families was \$55,000, with a mean income of \$63,762, and with a range of \$4,200 to \$430,000. The modal income was \$40,000.

### *Design and Procedure*

Researchers employed a specific procedure aimed at ensuring that the desired sample size was reached across the two sites. Researchers wanted 100 families from each of the four groups (European-American intact families, European-American step families, Mexican-American intact families, and Mexican-American step families) in the overall study. Intact families were seen as those in which the adolescent and both biological parents lived together in the same house. Step families were seen as cases in which the adolescent lived with his biological mother and a non-biologically related man who was 'acting in the father role'. The mother and the 'step-father' need not be married, but the 'step-father' needed to have lived with the child for at least a

year prior to participation in the study. Additionally, all family members needed to be of the same ethnicity, such that mixed ethnicity families and families that were not European-American or Mexican-American were not allowed to be included in the sample.

In order to obtain these families, two distinct procedures were followed, one for each site (as required by different laws governing the two states). The procedures discussed are those for the state of Arizona and, although different, the procedures followed in California are in the same spirit for sample collection. Ten schools that each had a 30% or higher rate of Mexican-Americans were initially contacted for participation. Eight of those schools agreed to participate. The sample was recruited from two cohorts, one cohort in the spring of their 7<sup>th</sup> grade year and the other that same calendar year, but in the fall of their 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. All adolescents were asked to respond to a five-item questionnaire that asked only about their ethnicity and their household status (intact, step, or other) in order to determine eligibility to participate in the study. These questionnaires were then examined by a school administrator to determine if the students fit into one of the desired categories or not. The school administrator then contacted the families of randomly selected students that fit the desired categories, and asked if the family would like to participate in a multi-year psychological study about families and explained that each family would be financially compensated (\$120) for their participation. The administrator continued to contact randomly selected families until the desired sample size had been achieved. Families that agreed to participate were then contacted by the research staff at the university and of those, approximately 20% refused to participate (in addition to families that were later deemed not eligible and those families that were unable to be contacted again when it came time to complete the survey). This resulted in a response rate of somewhere between 41.4% and 48.9%, the

ambiguity being due to the unknown eligibility status of those families that were unable to be contacted.

Once consent was received and the family was deemed eligible to participate, families were contacted about arranging an appointment for an interview. Three interviewers arrived at the home for each family so that all family members could be interviewed separately and simultaneously. Interviewers were bilingual to ensure that participants were comfortable with the language.<sup>1</sup>

### *Measures*

Among many other measures used in the larger study, this study focuses on two measures: one which examines adolescents' attributions of their father's behaviors, and the other which examines the adolescents' perceived mattering to their fathers.

*Attributions.* To assess the adolescent's attributions about their father's behavior, a new questionnaire was administered (see Appendix A). Adolescents were asked to think of real situations in which their father said something nice, did something nice, said something mean, and did something mean. If adolescents could not think of a specific example, interviewers patiently encouraged participants to try to think of something, even if it seemed somewhat minor. If adolescents were still unable to think of an example, they skipped that set of questions.<sup>2</sup> Adolescents were asked to recall a specific incident, in this case of a time in which their father said something nice, using the following script:

Think about a time in the last few years when [name of dad/step-dad] SAID SOMETHING NICE TO YOU. Maybe something like, he told you that you did a good job on something at home, in school, in sports, or other activities. Or maybe he told you that you looked nice. He might even have told you something like you are a really good

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty-four adolescents (6.1%) completed their interviews in Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> 109 adolescents skipped at least one of these sets of questions.

kid, or that you are special. If you can think of lots of times like this, tell me about the one that was especially important to you. So tell me something your [dad/step-dad] said to you in the last few years.

After adolescents recalled an incident that fit the specified criteria, they were provided with six reasons that their father might have engaged in that particular behavior. Adolescents were asked to respond to how much they attribute each potential reason or causal explanation to their father's behaviors on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "exactly" to "not at all". Given both the findings of prior research, specifically noting that in both the marital context and in the familial context, internal, stable, and global attributions led to negative outcomes such as relationship conflict and lower levels of positivity, and the theoretical foundations of attribution theory, potential explanations were designed to tap the causal dimension of stability. Three of the six possible explanations were stable causes (i.e., He's a positive person, He likes to make you happy, he cares about you for positive behavioral events) and the other three reasons were unstable causes (i.e., You really deserved it, He happened to be in a good mood, Someone else told him to or wanted him to; for positive behavioral events). The usage of real, and not hypothetical, events to measure adolescents' attributions of their fathers' behaviors is a distinct advantage of this questionnaire. Additionally, adolescents were responding to both negative and positive father behaviors, which adolescents have not done previously in the literature. This questionnaire allows for a better understanding of adolescents' actual attributions about real behavioral incidents that have both positive and negative outcomes, which provides researchers a clearer view of the entire range of adolescent attributions.

*Mattering.* In order to investigate adolescents' perceptions of mattering to their fathers, a questionnaire was designed to examine the adolescents' perceptions of feeling loved and treasured by their fathers. The mattering questionnaire (see Appendix B) consisted of eight

items, all of which were responded to on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “strongly agree” and 5 indicated “strongly disagree”. Items indicative of the questionnaire include “my dad/step-dad really cares about me” and “I am one of the most important things in the world to my dad/step-dad”. Initial analyses suggested that one item, “I sometimes wonder if my dad/step-dad wants me around”, be dropped in order to increase the scale’s reliability. The final seven-item scale had high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .86). After several items (questions 1, 2, 7, and 8) were reverse-scored, all seven items were summed to create a scale score for each adolescent such that the higher the value of the mattering scale variable, the more the adolescent feels important to his father. The highest possible value was 35, and the lowest possible value was 7.

### *Data Reduction for Attribution Measure<sup>3</sup>*

Before the main analyses were conducted, the attribution measure was reduced to produce four variables that represent stable and unstable attributions for positive and negative father behaviors. For positive behaviors, two variables were created from the attribution questionnaire.<sup>4</sup> First, the three stable causes (He’s a positive person, He likes to make you happy, He cares about you) were averaged across both verbal (said something nice) and behavioral (did

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<sup>3</sup> The attribution scales can be thought of as similar to a life event measure, in which several variables, taken together, indicate stable positive attributions (for example). These individual items would not necessarily need to have high correlations to be combined into a single scale. See Bollen & Lennox, 1991, for a complete discussion of causal indicators.

<sup>4</sup> The attribution scale for positive behaviors and the mattering scale include the same item: “He cares about me”. Although it can be argued that this item, when included in the mattering scale, is tapping a global sense of caring, and when included in the attribution questionnaire is tapping the specific reason for a specific behavior, it is reasonable to run the primary analysis twice, once with the duplicate item and once without, in order to examine if the duplicate item is unfairly bolstering the effect of attributions on mattering. After running the analyses twice, no important differences were found between the relationships of the four attribution variables to the mattering variable (see Table 5). Therefore, all future analyses used the full attribution scale (all items) and the mattering scale as previously described.

something nice) events in order to create a single variable that measured the extent to which each child endorsed stable reasons for any type of positive father behavior.<sup>5</sup> Second, the three unstable causes (You really deserved it, He happened to be in a good mood, Someone else told him to or wanted him to) were averaged across both verbal (said something nice) and behavioral (did something nice) events in order to create a single variable that measured the extent to which each child endorsed unstable reasons for any type of positive father behavior.

For negative behaviors, two new variables were also created from the attribution questionnaire. First, the three stable causes (He's a mean or difficult person, He's ALWAYS down on you, He doesn't care if something he says bothers or hurts you) were averaged across both verbal (said something mean) and behavioral (did something mean) events in order to create a single variable that measured the extent to which each child endorsed stable reasons for any type of negative father behavior. Second, the three unstable causes (You really deserved it, He happened to be in a bad mood, It was just one of those times that he really got upset) were averaged across both verbal (said something mean) and behavioral (did something mean) events in order to create a single variable that measured the extent to which each child endorsed unstable reasons for any type of negative father behavior.

## Results

Initial analyses indicate that of the 393 participants, only 366 adolescents could think of examples of their fathers' behaviors. Twenty-six adolescents could not think of an example of a negative behavior in which their father either said or did something mean, whereas only one

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<sup>5</sup> Eighty-two adolescents recalled only one example (either a verbal statement or an action) of their fathers' positive (or negative) behaviors, but could not think of the other example. In these instances, the combined attribution variables are the average of the 3 verbal (or action) variables as opposed to all 6 variables.

individual was unable to think of a time that his father said or did something nice.<sup>6</sup> All future analyses include the 366 individuals that were able to remember an example of both a negative and a positive father behavior. Means and standard deviations for each variable in the analyses for all 366 adolescents are displayed in Table 1.<sup>7</sup> Overall, adolescents feel that they matter to their fathers ( $M = 31.40$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ). Also, adolescents seem to strongly endorse stable attributions for positive behaviors ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), whereas adolescents only moderately endorsed unstable attributions for either positive or negative behaviors ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 0.61$  and  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ , respectively). Overall adolescents did not appear to strongly endorse stable attributions for negative events ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ).

#### *Relation Among Attribution Variables*

The primary analysis, using attributions about father behaviors to predict mattering to fathers, required the creation of several new variables as previously discussed. These variables represented stable attributions made for positive father behaviors, unstable attributions made for positive father behaviors, stable attributions made for negative father behaviors, and unstable attributions made for negative father behaviors. Upon initial consideration, the four attribution variables are moderately correlated (see Table 1). Most notably, stable attributions for positive behaviors and stable attributions for negative behaviors were strongly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the more an adolescent endorsed stable attributions for positive

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<sup>6</sup> Twenty-six adolescents could not think of either a negative verbal statement or a negative behavioral action from their fathers, and one adolescent could not think of either a positive verbal statement or a positive behavioral action from his father. Upon inspection, it does not appear as though the 26 adolescents differ in their mattering scores ( $M = 31.88$  for the 26 missing cases,  $M = 31.40$  for other 366 people). These 26 individuals are slightly higher than the rest of the sample on mother mattering ( $M = 33.58$  for 26 kids,  $M = 32.87$  for others); slightly lower than the rest of the sample on child depression ( $M = 8.92$  for 26 kids,  $M = 9.97$  for others); and these individuals do not seem to differ from the rest of the groups for stable positive attributions ( $M = 4.30$  for 26 kids,  $M = 4.28$  for others) or for unstable positive attributions ( $M = 2.72$  for 26 kids,  $M = 2.76$  for others).

<sup>7</sup> This table also includes information from the Child Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1985). The scores could range from 7 to 21, with 7 indicating no symptoms of depression and 21 indicating a high level of depression.

events, the less he endorsed stable attributions for negative events. Future analyses, however, suggest that although moderately correlated, stable attributions for positive behaviors and stable attributions for negative behaviors are unique constructs that taken together provide a more complete story than if each was considered separately.

### *Primary Analysis*

The primary analysis investigated if the extent to which adolescents endorsed stable and unstable attributions for positive and negative events could predict perceived mattering to fathers.<sup>8</sup> In order to conduct this analysis, an hierarchical OLS regression analysis was conducted in which the four attribution variables (stable attributions for positive behaviors, unstable attributions for positive behaviors, stable attributions for negative behaviors, and unstable attributions for negative behaviors) were entered in two blocks. The first block consisted of the stable and unstable attributions for positive behaviors, whereas the second block consisted of the stable and unstable attributions for negative behaviors. This allowed for comparison of the amount of variance that attributions for negative behaviors could account for, over and above the contribution of the attributions for positive behaviors.

Firstly, the results indicated that the four attribution variables significantly predicted perceived mattering<sup>9</sup> to father,  $F(4, 361) = 81.60, p < .001$ . In other words, the extent to which adolescents endorse various attributions for positive and negative events did in fact predict how

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<sup>8</sup> Additional analyses that controlled for mattering to mother and for adolescent depression (CDI; Kovacs, 1985) were also conducted. These analyses indicated that stable attributions for both positive and negative behaviors significantly predicted mattering to father, even when mattering to mother and adolescent depression were controlled for. The nature of the relationship between adolescent attributions and mattering to father was not importantly altered, so these additional analyses are not discussed in further detail, as they would detract from the main findings of the study.

<sup>9</sup> The mattering variable is skewed (see Figure 1), but no transformations were completed on the variable because OLS regression is relatively robust against violations of skew. This allowed for more interpretable data.

much adolescents perceive they matter to their fathers. These four attribution predictors accounted for 47.5% of the variance in mattering. Secondly, when examining each predictor, it becomes evident that stable positive attributions and stable negative attributions are significant predictors of mattering (see Table 2). Stable attributions for positive events had a strong positive association with mattering ( $t(361) = 9.79, p < .001$ ), such that the more an adolescent endorsed stable attributions for positive behavioral events, the more that adolescent perceived he mattered to his father. Conversely, stable attributions for negative events had a strong negative association with mattering ( $t(361) = -7.10, p < .001$ ), such that the more an adolescent endorsed stable attributions for negative father behaviors, the less that adolescent felt he mattered to his father. In the overall sample, unstable attributions for either positive or negative events did not significantly predict mattering, although both variables had a slightly negative coefficient, indicating that the more one endorsed unstable attributions, the less one felt he mattered to his father, although not significantly less.

Thirdly, the stable and unstable attributions for negative behaviors significantly added to the prediction in mattering over and above the variance in mattering accounted for by stable and unstable attributions for positive behaviors,  $F(2, 361) = 29.86, p < .001$ . This indicated that attributions about negative events add to the explanation of feelings of mattering beyond what had already been explained by attributions about positive events. This suggests that attributions about positive events and attributions about negative events are unique concepts that should be studied independently.

Finally, since there was no theoretical reason that attributions made about positive events should precede attributions made about negative events in the analyses, a second hierarchical OLS regression analysis was conducted, again using the four attribution variables to predict

matterings. Instead of the attributions for positive behaviors being entered first, the second analysis entered attributions for negative behaviors first, and then added attributions for positive behaviors to discover if attributions for positive behaviors significantly added to the prediction of mattering over and above that which was accounted for by attributions for negative behaviors. Results indicated that attributions for positive behaviors do indeed account for variance in mattering over and above variance accounted for by attributions for negative behaviors,  $F(2, 361) = 50.31, p < .001$ .

#### *Secondary Analysis – Interactions with Gender<sup>10</sup>*

Given the age of the adolescents in the sample, there is reason to wonder if girls and boys of this age might differ in the ways in which attributions about their fathers' behaviors explain mattering to their fathers (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations of variables separate for boys and girls). To investigate this question further, three separate regression analyses were performed. The first two analyses examined the relationship between attributions and mattering separately for boys and girls. For boys, the four attribution variables together significantly predicted mattering,  $F(4, 172) = 43.71, p < .001$ , and accounted for 50.4% of the variance in mattering. For girls, the four attribution variables together significantly predicted mattering,  $F(4, 184) = 37.49, p < .001$ , and accounted for 44.9% of the variance in mattering. For boys, stable positive attributions, unstable positive attributions, and stable negative attributions were significant predictors of mattering, whereas for girls, stable positive attributions, stable negative attributions, and unstable negative attributions were significant predictors of mattering (see Table 4).

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<sup>10</sup> Gender was coded 0 for boys and 1 for girls.

Interestingly, unstable attributions of negative behaviors had a negative relationship with mattering for girls, and a positive (although not significant) relationship with mattering for boys. The third regression analysis examined the attribution by gender interaction variables (created by multiplying each attribution variable by the gender variable), to discover if boys and girls were significantly different in the ways in which the attribution variables related to mattering. The predictor that captured the interaction between unstable negative attributions and gender was significant,  $t(356) = -2.31, p < .05$ , which indicates that boys and girls have significantly different relationships between unstable negative attributions and mattering. For boys, unstable negative attributions are positively, but not significantly, related to mattering, which would indicate that the more boys endorse unstable attributions for negative behaviors, the more they believe they matter to their fathers. For girls, however, unstable negative attributions are significantly negatively related to mattering, which indicates that the more girls endorse unstable attributions for negative behaviors, the less they perceive they matter to their fathers. This difference can be visualized in Figure 2, which illustrates that the more girls endorse unstable attributions for negative behaviors, the less they perceive they matter to their fathers, whereas the more boys endorse unstable attributions for negative behaviors, the more they perceive they matter to their fathers.

Additional analyses were conducted to further consider this unpredicted and puzzling gender by attribution interaction. These additional exploratory analyses predicted mattering from the stable positive attribution, unstable positive attribution, and stable negative attribution variables as previously described, and three additional variables that consisted of the average of the verbal statements and behavioral actions for each of the three individual unstable negative attribution items. In other words, these three variables represented each individual item of the

unstable negative attribution scale (You really deserved it; He happened to be in a bad mood; It was just one of those times that he really got upset). A regression analysis was performed that predicted mattering from these six attribution variables, the gender variable, and the six attribution by gender interaction variables (created by multiplying each attribution variable by the gender variable). This analysis discovered that the gender by unstable negative attributions interaction appeared to be driven by just one the three unstable negative items: “It was just one of those times that he really got upset” ( $t(352) = -2.69, p < .01$ ). For girls, the more they endorse that particular item, the *less* they feel that they matter to their fathers, although only marginally significant (standardized beta coefficient =  $+.12, t(182) = -1.83, p = .07$ ) while for boys, the more they endorse that item, the *more* they feel they as though they matter to their fathers (standardized beta coefficient =  $-.12, t(170) = 1.98, p = .05$ ).

Further evidence that the interaction between gender and unstable negative attributions is being driven by a single item comes in the form of one final regression analysis. A new variable was created that represented the average of two unstable items (You really deserved it; He happened to be in a bad mood) made about negative events (eliminating the item that appeared to be driving the interaction). This unstable negative attribution variable (without the “it was just one of those times he really got upset”) was used as a predictor of mattering, along with the three other attribution variables, gender, and the gender by attribution interaction variables. Once that particular item had been removed, there was no longer a significant interaction between gender and unstable negative attributions ( $t(356) = -1.18, p = 0.24$ ). This provides even further support that the interaction between gender and unstable negative attributions was being driven by a single item.

### *Secondary Analysis – Interactions with Family Type<sup>11</sup>*

Similar to the analyses conducted with gender, it is also of interest to investigate if children from intact families, reporting about their only father, might differ from children from step families, who reported about their step father<sup>12</sup>, in the manner in which attributions about the father's behaviors impact the feelings of mattering to one's father (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations of variables separate for intact families and step-families). To investigate this question further, three separate regression analyses were performed. The first two analyses examined the relationship between attributions and mattering separately for intact families and step-families. For intact families, the four attribution variables together significantly predicted mattering,  $F(4, 201) = 33.12, p < .001$ , and accounted for 39.7% of the variance. For step-families, the four attribution variables taken together significantly predicted mattering,  $F(4, 155) = 48.11, p < .001$ , and accounted for 55.4% of the variance. For intact families, stable positive attributions, unstable positive attributions, and stable negative attributions were significant predictors of mattering, whereas for step-families, stable positive attributions and stable negative attributions were significant predictors of mattering (see Table 4). Interestingly, stable positive attributions had a positive relationship with mattering for intact families, and an extremely strong positive relationship with mattering for step-families. The third regression analysis examined the attribution by family type interaction variables (created by multiplying each attribution variable by the family type variable), to discover if adolescents from intact families and adolescents from step-families were significantly different in the ways in which the attribution variables related to mattering. The predictor that captured the interaction between stable positive attributions and family type was significant,  $t(356) = 3.46, p < .002$ , which indicates that intact families and

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<sup>11</sup> Family type was coded 0 for intact families and 1 for step families.

<sup>12</sup> On average, adolescents had lived with their stepfathers for 6 years prior to participating in the study.

step-families have significantly different relationships between stable positive attributions and mattering. For adolescents from intact families, stable positive attributions are positively related to mattering, which would indicate that the more adolescents from intact families endorse stable attributions for positive behaviors, the more they believe they matter to their fathers. For adolescents from step-families, stable positive attributions are also significantly positively related to mattering, but the relationship is much stronger in step-families than in intact-families. This indicates that the more adolescents from step-families endorse stable attributions for positive behaviors, the more they perceive they matter to their fathers (see Figure 3). It appears as though making stable attributions for positive behaviors is more important (as it relates to mattering) for step families than for intact families.

#### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the attributions adolescents make about their fathers' behaviors and the adolescents' perceived mattering to their fathers. Overall, the results of the study support the hypotheses by accounting for a large percentage of the variance in mattering. As adolescents increased their endorsement for stable attributions for positive father behaviors, the more those adolescents perceived they mattered to their fathers. Conversely, as adolescents increased their endorsement for stable attributions for negative father behaviors, the less adolescents perceived they mattered to their fathers. Although adolescents generally perceive that they matter to their father, the observed differences in mattering across adolescents can be explained by the types of attributions they make about their fathers' behaviors. When adolescents attribute their fathers' positive behaviors to causes that are likely to remain true in the future, they report feeling as though they matter more to their fathers. When adolescents attribute their fathers' negative behaviors to causes that are likely to remain

true in the future, they report feeling as though they matter less to their fathers. These findings suggest a partial explanation for how feelings of mattering to one's father might come about.

Additionally, the current study investigated how the relationship between attributions and mattering might change between adolescents in intact families and adolescents in step families. The results indicated that although adolescents from both intact and step families demonstrated a positive relationship between stable attributions for positive behaviors and mattering, endorsing stable attributions for positive behaviors led to more mattering in adolescents from step families as opposed to adolescents from intact families. This finding could be due to a potential bias in children from intact families, such that they inherently assume that their father cares about them, and so attributing stable reasons to his positive behavior has less of an impact on explaining perceived mattering. Children from step families, however, would have no such inherent belief, because their step-father is an entirely new person to them, and may or may not truly care about the child. Therefore, the adolescent may depend more on clues from the step-father's behaviors, such that positive behaviors exhibited by the step-father that the adolescent perceives are due to stable factors might be more likely to have a stronger impact on the adolescents' perception of mattering to their fathers. These ideas are entirely speculative, and will need to be further examined in future research.

Another issue examined in this study was the potential differences between males and females and the relationship between attributions and perceived mattering. Results showed that although stable attributions about positive behaviors and stable attributions about negative behaviors explain mattering in both males and females, males and females differed when it comes to unstable attributions about negative behaviors. For males, unstable attributions about negative behaviors did not significantly explain differences in mattering. In females, however,

unstable attributions about negative father behaviors were negatively related to mattering, such that the more that females endorsed these unstable attributions, the less they feel they matter to their fathers. Upon further investigation, it appears as though males and females respond differently to the item that concerns their father getting really upset from time to time. . For girls, the more they endorse that particular item, the *less* they feel that they matter to their fathers, while for boys, the more they endorse that item, the *more* they feel that they matter to their fathers. Thus females appear to view their father's tendency to get upset as having negative implications for their relationship, while male adolescents appear instead to entirely excuse fathers' negative behaviors if arising from this tendency. Perhaps implicated here is gender differences in adolescents' understanding of how controllable a male's tendency to "getting really upset" is. This line of reasoning is complete speculation, and should be thoroughly investigated in future research.

Overall, this study has shown that differences in mattering can be explained by attributions of fathers' behaviors, and above that, stable attributions about either positive or negative behaviors explain much more about mattering than do unstable attributions, across gender and family type. Also, attributions made about positive father behaviors seem to have a slightly stronger relationship with mattering than attributions made about negative father behaviors. Although this goes against claims made in the literature that negative behaviors elicit more accurate attributions (Brody et al., 1996), it does not need to be seen as contradicting the literature. On the contrary, the relevant literature included only negative outcome variables, such as parent-child conflict. Perhaps when the outcome variable is negative, then attributions about negative behaviors are more relevant, or explain more of the outcome, than attributions about positive behaviors. However, when the outcome variable is positive, it appears as though

attributions made about positive behavioral events are slightly better predictors of the outcome than attributions made about negative behaviors. This highlights the need to include both positive and negative behaviors when eliciting attributions, because, as this study illustrates, both types of attributions can be important and unique predictors of outcome variables such as perceived mattering.

Previous research has found that adolescents who report more stable causes for negative behaviors engaged in more mother-adolescent conflict (Grace et. al, 1993) and that children who endorsed stable causes for negative parent behaviors engaged in less positive interaction with their fathers (Fincham et al., 1998). The findings of the current study are related to those of prior research and contribute to the attribution literature in that this study's results indicated that adolescents who report more stable causes for negative parent behaviors perceive themselves as mattering less to their fathers than adolescents who do not endorse stable causes for negative parent behaviors, as similar to the Fincham et al. study. Additionally, the finding that adolescents who report more stable causes for positive father behaviors perceive themselves as mattering more to their fathers adds to the attribution literature, because this type of connection between attributions about positive behaviors and a positive aspect of the father-child relationship has not been thoroughly conducted thus far.

Previous research on mattering had shown it to be an important predictor of behavioral and mental health outcomes (e.g., Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Taylor & Turner, 2001) but has not thoroughly examined mattering as an outcome itself, and what variables might lead to mattering. This study adds to the literature on mattering because it examines mattering as the result of attributions, and finds that perceived mattering can indeed be explained in part by the attributions made about positive and negative father behaviors. This research also adds to the

body of knowledge about the importance of fathers in that it investigates the adolescent-father relationship in detail, and attempts to explain the manner in which some aspects of that relationship are developed. This research also included step fathers, and so highlights some of the similarities and differences between how adolescents in step families relate to their step-fathers compared to how adolescents in intact families relate to their fathers.

Several strengths of this study include: examining aspects of the father-child relationship in further detail, examining particular precursors that might help explain perceived mattering, using real events to elicit attributions, and using positive events to elicit attributions. As previously mentioned, one of the strengths of this study is the addition to the body of knowledge concerning father-child relationships. Although fathers are starting to be more routinely included in research projects, there is still much to be learned about the intricacies of the relationship a father has with his children. Another advantage of the current study, also mentioned previously, concerns the inclusion of mattering as an outcome variable, such that mattering can be explained or predicted by other variables. Research conducted on mattering so far mostly includes mattering as a predictor of other outcomes, but it is also important to investigate the origins of mattering itself.

Additionally, including real and positive events in the elicitation of attributions comprise two more strengths of the current study. Most prior research used hypothetical behavioral events, instead of real ones, to elicit attributions. However, hypothetical behaviors may not capture what occurs in each child's everyday life, and may unfairly boost or hinder the researcher's aims. The present study included real behaviors in order to elicit attributions, which better allowed the child to respond to events that were meaningful to him and that occurred in his normal, everyday life, which allowed the researchers the opportunity to better glimpse how the adolescent typically

reacts to his father's behaviors. Finally, the inclusion of positive behaviors, in addition to negative behaviors, in order to elicit attributions was a distinct advantage over prior research. As can be seen when examining the results of this study, both attributions made about positive events and attributions made about negative events explained levels of perceived mattering. Specifically, both attributions for positive behaviors and attributions for negative behaviors contributed over and above the other when predicting mattering. This emphasizes the importance of including both positive behaviors and negative behaviors when eliciting attributions, because both, taken together, have the potential to explain more in outcome variables than either one taken alone.

Another strength of this study involves the study's contribution to the positive psychology movement. The focus in psychology over the last 50 years has primarily focused on psychopathology and negative mental health outcomes (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, over the last several years, a focus on positive aspects of health and psychology has taken hold (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This focus on positive aspects of individual's life is an important one, and the current study adds to this movement by focusing on a positive aspect of the father-adolescent relationship, specifically mattering. So far, attributions in relationships have focused primarily on attributions of negative behaviors, and in some cases, the connection between those attributions and negative outcome variables (e.g., maternal-child conflict). However, this study adds to the positive psychology movement by including attributions made about positive behaviors, and how the attributions relate to a positive aspect of the father-adolescent relationship.

This study is not without limitations, however. One limitation with this study concerns the directionality of the relationship between attributions and mattering. Although attribution

theory suggests that the attributions lead to the differences in mattering, because the data used are all cross-sectional in nature, it is entirely possible that the relationship goes the other way. In other words, it could be that differences in perceived mattering lead to the observed differences in attributions made about paternal behaviors. This limitation is rampant throughout the attribution literature. Despite the fact that the data in this study necessitated such an assumption, because they did not provide a way to test that possibility, future research should investigate the directionality of the relationship, and could do so by changing adolescents' attributions using an intervention technique, and then testing if the changes in attributions caused changes in perceived mattering. Additionally, researchers could utilize longitudinal designs that examine attributions and mattering across several time points, and test models that used attributions at the first time point to predict mattering at later time points. Although beyond the scope of this study, future research should consider such experiments and alternative designs that could allow for determinations of cause and effect within the attribution-mattering relationship.

Another limitation of the study concerns the possibility that some adolescents respond to all situations, including ambiguous ones, with a negative perspective. This phenomenon is known as the hostile attribution bias (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1980). When presented with an ambiguous situation, some individuals typically respond in a hostile manner, and blame the other person even if no one is at fault. For individuals with this bias, this tendency is prevalent throughout a variety of situations. It is possible that some of the findings of this study are confounded by the fact that some individuals who have a hostile attribution bias always responded negatively to the behaviors, regardless of the reasons they occurred. This would blur the 'real' reason that the father acted a certain way, because the adolescent would automatically answer that the father had acted negatively because of something stable about the father. This

might bolster the relationship between stable attributions of negative behaviors and mattering, because individuals with a hostile attribution bias might also assume that they do not matter to their fathers. One way to possibly detect this bias would be to investigate if the attributions made about fathers' behaviors correlated to attributions made about mothers' behaviors. For individuals with a hostile attribution bias, we would expect that they would rate both their mothers' and their fathers' behaviors similarly, because they had a hostile outlook on life. Unfortunately, this data set does not allow for such a test, however, research in the future should control for a hostile attribution bias.

Future research should take several issues into consideration. First, future research should continue on the path set forth in this study, specifically using positive and negative behaviors to elicit attributions, and to continue focusing on positive outcomes, such as perceived mattering to fathers. Additionally, directions that deserve further exploration include the causal direction of attributions, gender differences, and ethnicity. As previously discussed, future researchers should test the direction of the causal relationship between attributions and mattering. Since very few studies have examined the causal direction, such an investigation would add significantly to the literature. Also, potential gender differences should be explored further to help illuminate the possible differences between males and females and the way in which they make attributions. In future studies, researchers should examine these gender differences fully by including measures that may explain why males and females differ in the relationship between attributions and relationship outcomes. If not primarily interested in gender differences, researchers should carefully choose items that will be interpreted similarly by males and females, in order to limit findings that reflect nuances of the questionnaire and not an actual relationship between the constructs of interest.

Finally, future research should explore potential differences between ethnic groups. To date, very little research in the attribution and mattering literatures has been conducted that includes ethnicity as a variable of interest. There are a wide variety of ways in which ethnicity may influence these results, including the possibility that adolescents of different ethnicities may perceive mattering differently, and may not have similar relationships between attributions and mattering. Specifically, Mexican-Americans and European-Americans might have different experiences with their fathers, and therefore might be more likely to differ in the ways in which attributions impact mattering. Mexican-Americans who have fathers who work a lot might be more likely to say that their father works so much because he cares about them, perhaps because they might see the direct impact their father's work habits have on the family's well-being, whereas European-Americans who have fathers who work a lot might be more likely to say that their father doesn't care them because their father works so much. Additionally, European-Americans might say that their fathers' strictness indicates that he does not care about them, whereas Mexican-Americans might say that their father is strict because he does care about them. In sum, future directions should take the knowledge gained from this study, that stable attributions about positive and negative behaviors can explain feelings of perceived mattering to fathers in adolescents, and continue forth investigating the relationship between attributions and mattering and the variables that might influence that relationship.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Relevant Variables*

	Mean (SD)	Stable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	Unstable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	Stable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	Unstable Attributions for Negative Behaviors
Stable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	4.28 (0.70)	--	--	--	--
Unstable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	2.76 (0.61)	0.24***	--	--	--
Stable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	1.57 (0.72)	-0.46***	0.20***	--	--
Unstable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	2.50 (0.76)	0.01	0.24***	0.31***	--
Mattering to Father	31.40 (4.53)	0.59***	-0.02	-0.57***	-0.15**
Mattering to Mother	32.87 (3.28)	0.28***	-0.01	-0.32***	-0.13**
Adolescent Depression	9.97 (2.35)	-0.20***	0.08	0.29***	0.22***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ \*\*  $p < .01$ 

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses; N = 366.

Table 2

*Regression of Mattering on Adolescent Attributions*

	Unstand. B	Standardized BETA	t
Regression Intercept	23.92		16.28***
Stable positive attributions	2.95	0.46	9.79***
Unstable positive attributions	-0.46	-0.06	-1.45
Stable negative attributions	-2.14	-0.34	-7.10***
Unstable negative attributions	-0.20	-0.03	-0.83
R Square	.48		

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Critical Variables for Boys, Girls, Intact families, and Step families*

	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Intact Family</b>	<b>Step Family</b>
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Stable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	4.21 <sup>+</sup> (0.73)	4.35 (0.67)	4.35* (0.61)	4.19 (0.80)
Unstable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	2.77 (0.63)	2.76 (0.60)	2.82* (0.62)	2.68 (0.60)
Stable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	1.69** (0.80)	1.46 (0.62)	1.52 (0.64)	1.64 (0.81)
Unstable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	2.62** (0.73)	2.40 (0.77)	2.50 (0.75)	2.51 (0.77)
Mattering to Father	30.71** (4.63)	32.05 (4.35)	32.72*** (3.08)	29.71 (5.45)
Mattering to Mother	32.65 (3.14)	33.16 (3.26)	33.02 (3.05)	32.78 (3.40)
Adolescent Depression	9.95 (2.07)	9.87 (2.57)	9.62* (2.07)	10.26 (2.60)

Note: Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. For Boys, N = 177, for Girls N = 189. For Intact families N = 206, for Step families N = 160. Mean differences between boys and girls or between adolescents from intact families and adolescents from step families are indicated using the following scale: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ .

Table 4

*Regression of Mattering on Interactions of Gender and Family Type Variables with Attribution Variables*

	Interaction term: Attribution By Gender	Boys	Girls	Interaction term: Attribution By Family Type	Intact Families	Step Families
Stable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	-0.27	0.50***	0.40***	0.93***	0.37***	0.56***
Unstable Attributions for Positive Behaviors	0.29	-0.13*	-0.01	0.00	-0.14*	-0.08
Stable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	-0.11	-0.33***	-0.36***	0.07	-0.41***	-0.24***
Unstable Attributions for Negative Behaviors	-0.34*	0.08	-0.12*	-0.16	0.01	-0.07
R Square	0.49	0.50	0.45	0.56	0.40	0.55

Note: all values are standardized beta coefficients.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*  $p < .05$

Table 5

*Regression of Mattering on Adolescent Attributions (shortened version)*

	Unstand. B	Standardized BETA	t
Regression Intercept	27.70		20.40***
Stable positive attributions	2.14	0.36	7.72***
Unstable positive attributions	-0.27	-0.04	-0.82
Stable negative attributions	-2.64	-0.42	-8.78***
Unstable negative attributions	-0.14	-0.02	-0.55
R Square	.43		

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1. Frequency distribution of adolescents' ratings of perceived mattering to fathers.

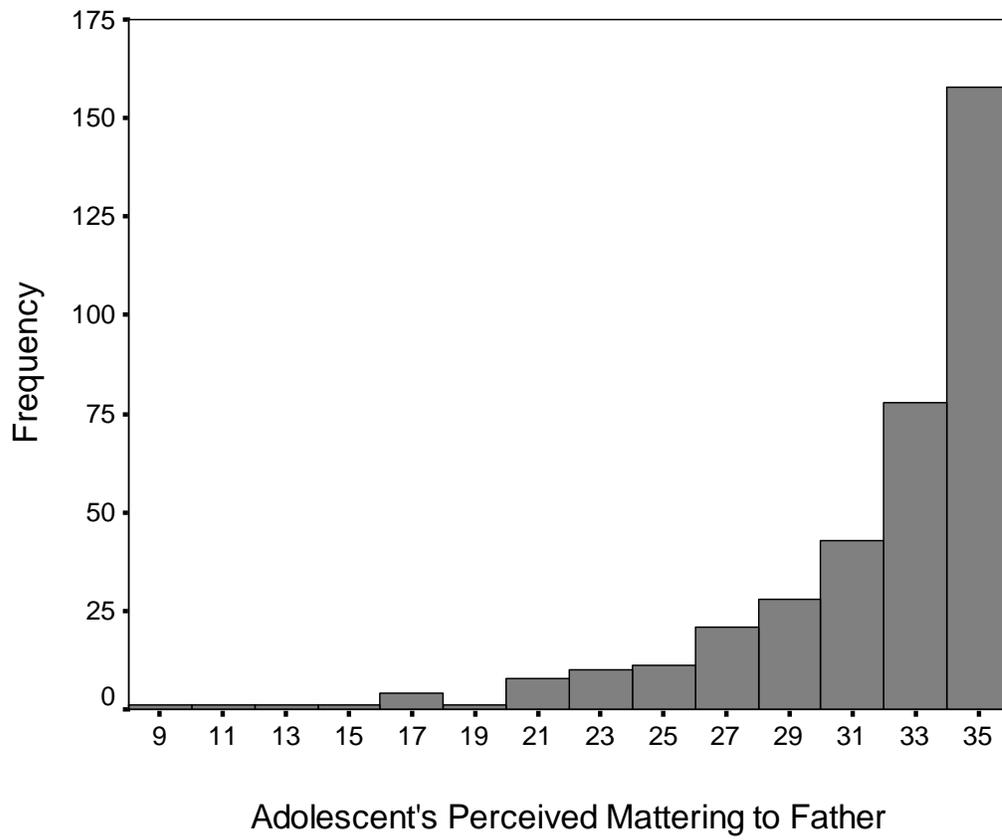


Figure 2. Regression of Mattering to Fathers on the Interaction between Gender and the Extent to Which Adolescents Endorsed Unstable Attributions for Negative Behaviors.

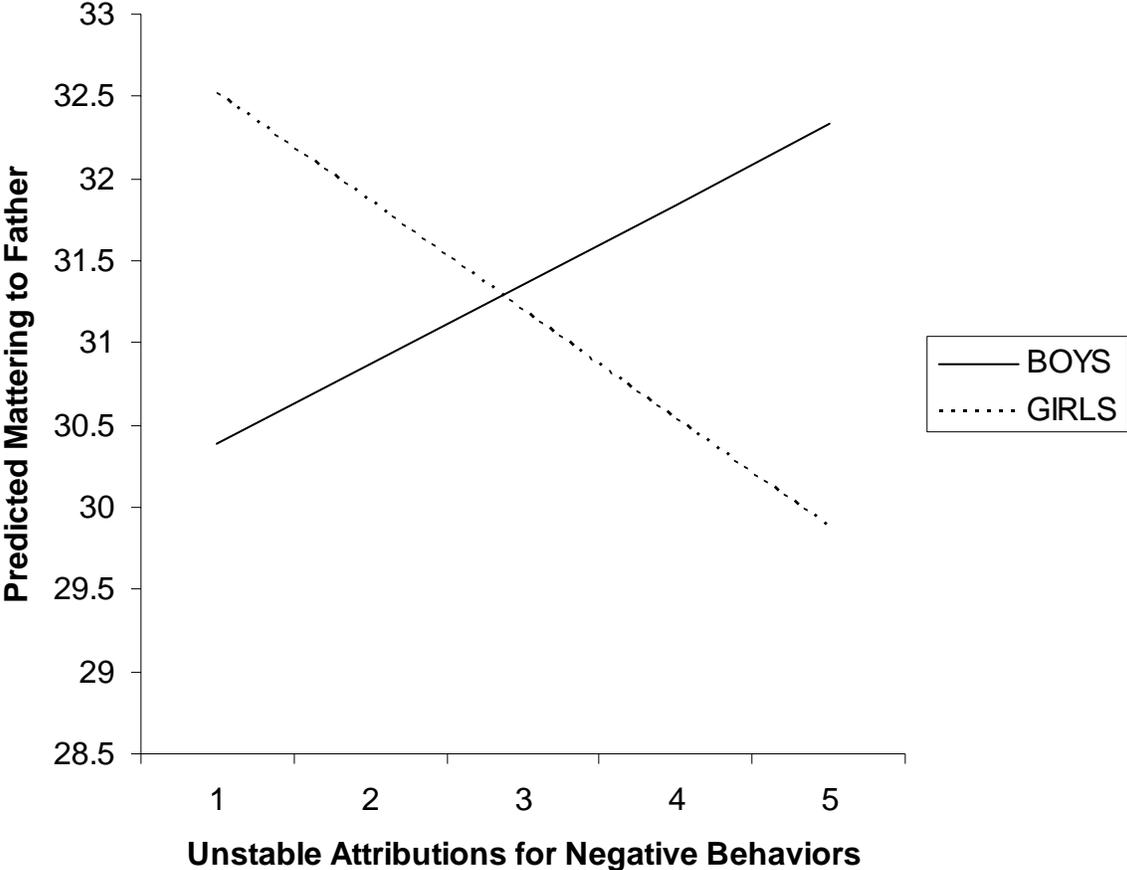
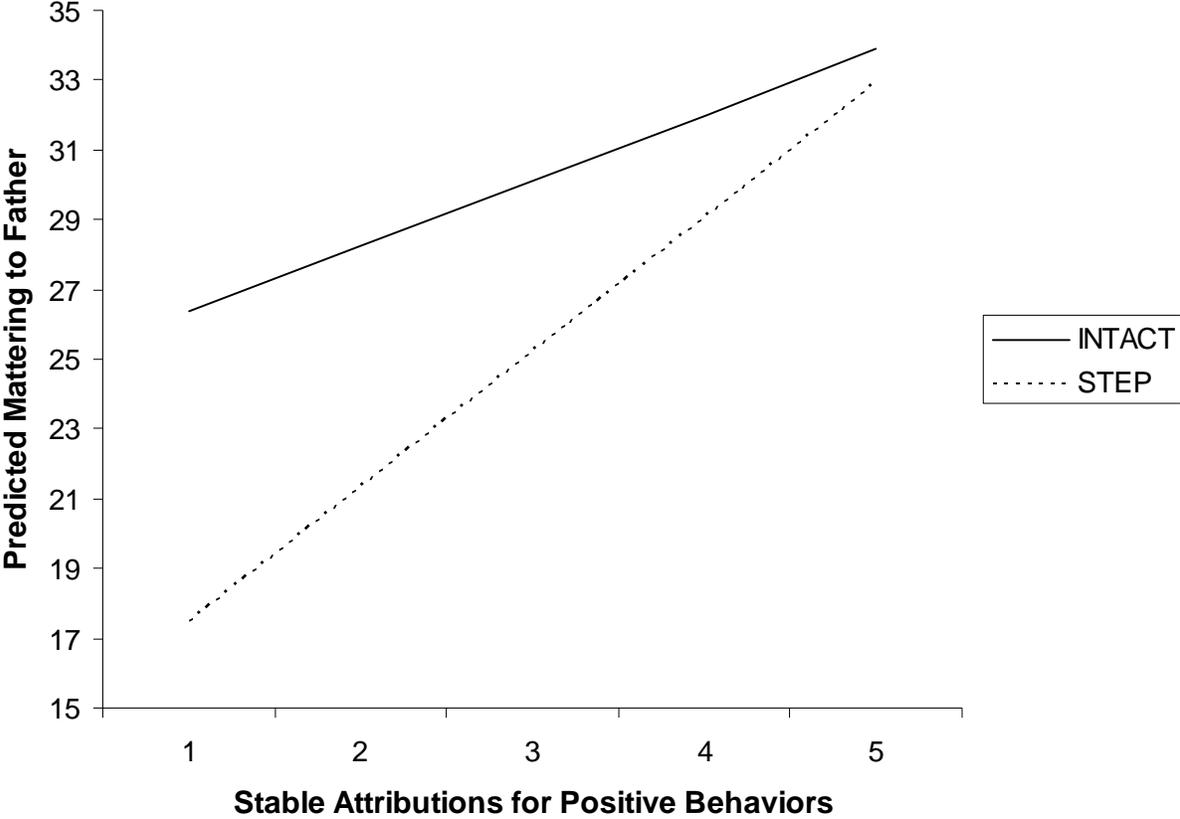


Figure 3. Regression of Mattering to Fathers on the Interaction between Family Type and the Extent to Which Adolescents Endorsed Stable Attributions for Positive Behaviors.



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APPENDIX A  
ATTRIBUTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Think about a time in the last few years when [name of dad/step-dad] SAID SOMETHING NICE TO YOU. Maybe something like, he told you that you did a good job on something at home, in school, in sports, or other activities. Or maybe he told you that you looked nice. He might even have told you something like you are a really good kid, or that you are special. If you can think of lots of times like this, tell me about the one that was especially important to you. So tell me something your [dad/step-dad] said to you in the last few years.

1. I'm going to read a list of reasons why your [dad/step-dad] may have said this. Tell me how much each thing I say EXPLAINS WHY YOUR [DAD/STEP-DAD] SAID WHAT HE SAID, or give me the REASONS for his behavior. Look at the following list and tell me how much each thing I read gives THE REASON for what he said.

When [name of dad/step-dad] [INSERT CHILD'S EXAMPLE], How much was it because...

	Exactly	Mostly	Some- what	A little	Not at all
a. He's a positive or nice kind of person?	1	2	3	4	5
b. You really deserved it?	1	2	3	4	5
c. He likes to make you happy?	1	2	3	4	5
d. He happened to be in a good mood?	1	2	3	4	5
e. Someone else told him to or wanted him to?	1	2	3	4	5
f. He cares about you?	1	2	3	4	5

Now I'd like you to think about a certain time in the last few years when [name of dad/step-dad] DID SOMETHING NICE TO YOU, OR FOR YOU. It could be anything he did that was nice, like he got you something you wanted, or that he thought you would like. Maybe he took you

someplace great, helped you in some way, or did some other really nice thing for you. If you can think of lots of times like this, tell me about the one that was especially important to you. So tell me, what was the nice thing your [dad/step-dad] DID?

2. Again I'm going to read a list of reasons why your [dad/step-dad] may have done this.

Tell me how much each thing I say EXPLAINS WHY YOUR [DAD/STEP-DAD] DID WHAT HE DID, or gives the REASONS for his behavior.

When [name of dad/step-dad] [INSERT CHILD'S EXAMPLE], How much was it because...

	Exactly	Mostly	Some- what	A little	Not at all
a. He's a positive or nice kind of person?	1	2	3	4	5
b. You really deserved it?	1	2	3	4	5
c. He likes to make you happy?	1	2	3	4	5
d. He happened to be in a good mood?	1	2	3	4	5
e. Someone else told him to or wanted him to?	1	2	3	4	5
f. He cares about you?	1	2	3	4	5

Okay, we've talked about the nice things your [dad/step-dad] might have done. Most [dads/step-dads] also sometimes get angry or upset with their children. Now I'd like you to think about a time in the last few years when your [dad/step-dad] got mad at you, said something mean to you or hurt your feelings, or yelled at you or got upset with you. If you can think of lots of times like this, tell me about the one that was especially important to you. Tell me what he said.

3. I'm going to read a list of reasons why your [dad/step-dad] may have said this. It's a

different list than before, so please listen carefully. Again, I want you to tell me how much each thing I say EXPLAINS WHY YOUR [DAD/STEP-DAD] SAID WHAT HE SAID, or gives the REASONS for his behavior. Look at the following list.

When [name of dad/step-dad] [INSERT CHILD'S EXAMPLE], How much was it because...

	Exactly 1	Mostly 2	Some- what 3	A little 4	Not at all 5
a. He's a mean or difficult person?	1	2	3	4	5
b. He's ALWAYS down on you?	1	2	3	4	5
c. He doesn't care if something he says bothers or hurts you?	1	2	3	4	5
d. You really deserved it?	1	2	3	4	5
e. He happened to be in a bad mood?	1	2	3	4	5
f. It was just one of those times that he really got upset?	1	2	3	4	5

Now, I'd like you to think about a time in the last few years when [name of dad/step-dad] DID SOMETHING THAT WAS KIND OF MEAN OR UPSETTING. For example, he might have punished you, taken away a privilege or grounded you, spanked or hit you, or didn't keep a promise he had made. If you can think of lots of times like this, tell me about the one that was especially important to you. So tell me, what was the upsetting thing your [dad/step-dad] DID?

- Again I'm going to read a list of reasons why your [dad/step-dad name] may have done this. Tell me how much each thing I say EXPLAINS WHY YOUR [DAD/STEP-DAD] DID WHAT HE DID, or gives the REASONS for his behavior. Look at the following list one more time.

When [name of dad/step-dad] [INSERT CHILD'S EXAMPLE], How much was it because...

	Exactly	Mostly	Some- what	A little	Not at all
a. He's a mean or difficult person?	1	2	3	4	5
b. He's ALWAYS down on you?	1	2	3	4	5
c. He doesn't care if something he says bothers or hurts you?	1	2	3	4	5
d. You really deserved it?	1	2	3	4	5
e. He happened to be in a bad mood?	1	2	3	4	5
f. It was just one of those times that he really got upset?	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B

PERCEIVED MATTERING TO FATHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Next I'll read some statements about your relationship with your [dad/step-dad]. Look at the following list and tell me how much you agree or disagree with each one.

1 = Strongly agree

2 = Mildly agree

3 = Unsure

4 = Mildly disagree

5 = Strongly disagree

1. My [dad/step-dad] really cares about me.
2. I believe I really matter to my [dad/step-dad].
3. I think my [dad/step-dad] cares about other people more than me.
4. I sometimes wonder if my [dad/step-dad] wants me around.\*\*\*
5. I'm not that important to my [dad/step-dad].
6. There are a lot of things in my [dad/step-dad]'s life that matter more to him than I do.
7. I know my [dad/step-dad] loves me.
8. I am one of the most important things in the world to my [dad/step-dad].

\*\*\*This item was eliminated from all analyses in order to increase reliability.