Father absence and academic engagement among Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults

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Abstract

The literature on father absence is criticized for its lack of cross-cultural perspectives and failure to take into account potential mechanisms that are related to associations between father absence and offspring well-being and development. To counter these limitations, the present study investigated whether father absence was linked to adolescents' and young adults' academic engagement by examining their behavioral and emotional (dis)engagement in school. In doing so, we included a large sample of students from Curaçao ($n = 564$; 62% female; M age = 18.30, $SE = 1.97$) and the Netherlands ($n = 652$; 57% female; M age = 17.42, $SE = 1.57$), two cultures that differ substantially in the prevalence of father absence. Due to measurement variance, we estimated regression models for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately. Whereas father absence has often been linked to problems in offspring social, emotional, and academic development, we did not find an association between father absence and offspring academic engagement in the data at hand. It is important to continue studying father absence across demographic characteristics and measures to advance understanding of whether, when, and how this family form might affect offspring well-being and development.

Father absence and academic engagement among Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults

Over the past few decades, the decline in the number of children growing up in households with both biological parents, specifically with biological fathers present, has been profound (United Nations, 2017). ‘Father absence’ is usually defined as significantly reduced contact between father and offspring and decreased father involvement in providing care and education due to parental divorce or separation, and has been portrayed as disadvantageous for offspring well-being and development (East, Jackson, & O’Brien, 2006; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). That is, literature on predominantly Western societies has linked biological father’s absence to a broad range of negative effects on young people’s social, emotional, and academic development. Studies on academic achievement of father-absent offspring have assessed test scores, likelihood of high school graduation, and number of years of schooling (East et al., 2006; McLanahan et al., 2013). This has enhanced our knowledge about antecedents of father absence in terms of performance indicators, but provides little information about *processes* through which father absence might relate to offspring academic achievement. Academic engagement, on the contrary, reflects behaviors and emotions that are associated with student performance and informs about achievement mechanisms (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009).

We also still poorly understand why some adolescents and young adults are more negatively affected by their father’s absence than others. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and culture are linked to variations in effects of divorce and separation on individuals’ adjustment (Amato, 2000). The ‘incidence and acceptance hypothesis’, for example, suggests that cultural differences in rates and social stigma attached to certain family structures are associated with observed variations in child outcomes (Erman & Härkönen, 2017, p. 272). This would mean

that father-absent offspring might feel more accepted and less out of the ordinary and social networks might be more supportive in cultures in which father absence is more common. Unfortunately, cross-cultural perspectives on father absence are still scarce (East et al., 2006; McLanahan et al., 2013).

Here, we examined the association between father absence and academic engagement among adolescents and young adults from two cultural contexts that differ substantially in the prevalence of father absence. That is, we included Curaçaoan adolescents and young adults living on the Caribbean island of Curaçao; a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands with approximately 150,000 inhabitants with an Afro-Caribbean majority (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek Curaçao; CBS, 2014). On Curaçao, fathers are absent in approximately 40% of families and single mothers are supported by extended families (Abraham-van der Mark, 2013). We also included Dutch adolescents and young adults living in the Netherlands. The Netherlands counts approximately 17 million inhabitants and although 30% of Dutch youth under age 18 have divorced or separated parents, father absence occurs in only 10% of Dutch families (Bakker, 2015; CBS, 2020).

Academic engagement

Academic engagement refers to the quality of a student's connection or involvement with school and the people, activities, goals, values, and place that compose it (Skinner et al., 2009). Engagement is a multidimensional construct consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and is linked to academic careers: the more engaged students are, the better they perform (Alrashidi, Phan, & Ngu, 2016). Because engagement is considered malleable and responsive to contextual features, it is important to understand aspects that influence engagement as these might be associated with academic retention, achievement, and resilience (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002).

Engagement-research has adopted multiple perspectives, but most conceptualizations capture the quality of students' participation in learning activities in the classroom. This is congruent with a motivational conceptualization of engagement and consists of both behavioral and emotional engagement and disengagement (i.e., disaffection) (Skinner et al., 2009). Behavioral engagement refers to students' attention, effort, and persistence while initiating and participating in learning activities. Emotional engagement focuses on students' emotional involvement during learning activities, such as enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment. In contrast, behavioral and emotional disaffection – which signify more than the absence of engagement – include behaviors such as withdrawal, distraction, and unpreparedness and emotions like boredom, disinterest, and frustration (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). As academic engagement is a multidimensional construct and all four engagement dimensions may have different academic outcomes, it is important to investigate both behavioral and emotional as well as positive and negative dimensions of engagement (Engels et al., 2017).

Father absence and academic engagement

Research demonstrates the impact of students' social context on their participation in learning activities in the classroom (Skinner et al., 2009). Typically, relationships with parents, teachers, and peers are studied with regard to students' academic motivation and performance, with relatedness to parents being linked to all four indicators of student's engagement. Students who feel unimportant or rejected by parents are more often frustrated, bored, and alienated from learning activities and are therefore at greater risk for emotional disaffection (i.e., disengagement). Students' relationship with parents is also associated with their behavioral engagement and disaffection (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

At least two reasons are considered for the relationship between parental involvement and offspring engagement and motivation. First, the association between parent-offspring

relationship quality and offspring adaptation and psychological and relational well-being underlines the importance of parental involvement for offspring behavioral and psychological development, including engagement with school. Second, caring and supportive relationships with parents are relevant for social competence and other developmental outcomes. As parents are their primary guides through their schooling experiences, they might buffer or compound risk factors for disengagement and low achievement. Therefore, affective and instrumental relational support, such as through parent involvement with homework, an authoritative parenting style, or transmission of educational values, might be essential to student motivation and engagement (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012).

Father-absent offspring may have less supportive relationships with their parents due to significantly reduced contact with fathers and decreased father involvement in providing care and education and because of exposure to inter-parental and loyalty conflict, less effective parenting, economic hardship, moving, and changing schools. Such stressful circumstances are associated with a reduced capacity to function in school (Amato, 2000, 2005).

Culture as a moderator

Overall, father absence has often been linked to problems in offspring social, emotional, and academic development, but individual differences are observed. Socioeconomic factors might have a mitigating role (DeBell, 2008; Lang & Zagorsky, 2001) and cultural context might influence the link between father absence and offspring outcomes (East et al., 2006; McLanahan et al., 2013). In line, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective suggests that parental divorce or separation need to be placed within a greater socio-demographic framework to investigate associations with offspring adjustment differences (Amato, 2000). In groups where certain family structures are more common, these family forms are less stigmatized and more institutionalized which might relate to lower psychological distress and

better coping mechanisms among those affected (Erman & Härkönen, 2017). To illustrate, cultural context related to the impact of father absence on student well-being across several OECD-countries (Chapple, 2013) and among African, Caribbean, and Latin-American migrant compared with native students in four European countries (Kalmijn, 2017). Associations were weaker in groups where father absence was more common and cultural differences in social stigma attached to father absence were linked to observed variations in student well-being.

The current study

The overall aim of this study was to add a cross-cultural perspective to the father absence literature and focus on a potential mechanism of the association between father absence and offspring academic development. Specifically, we elucidated to what extent father absence is linked to adolescents' and young adults' behavioral and emotional engagement and disaffection and aimed to examine whether culture moderated these potential relationships among Curaçaoan and Dutch participants.

Based on previous research (East et al., 2006; McLanahan et al., 2013), we expected a negative association between father absence and offspring academic engagement, such that students with absent fathers would show lower levels of engagement and higher levels of disaffection than students with fathers present. We also hypothesized that culture might moderate the link between father absence and academic engagement such that engagement and disaffection should be less negatively affected by father absence among Curaçaoan compared with Dutch participants, because of cultural differences in the incidence and acceptance of this family form (Erman & Härkönen, 2017). As some previous studies found that boys were more negatively affected by their father's absence than girls (Doherty, Willoughby, & Wilde, 2016), we also explored the link between father absence and academic engagement among Curaçaoan boys and girls, and Dutch boys and girls separately.

Method

This study is part of a larger project on associations between father absence and adolescents' and young adults' development carried out on Curaçao and in the Netherlands and was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Curaçao and the University of Groningen. Here, we used data collected in a computer-based questionnaire that participants filled in once. Data collection began in the fall of 2018 and continued for approximately one calendar year, with identical procedures and materials in both countries.

Participants

The project's full sample consisted of 2,222 participants. We included here 564 Curaçaoan (62% female; M age = 18.30, SE = 1.97) and 652 Dutch participants (57% female; M age = 17.42, SE = 1.57) between 16 and 23 years old, from 17 schools on Curaçao and 20 schools in the Netherlands. We recruited a broader age range than initially planned (16-20 years) to facilitate subgroup sizes and to be in concordance with partial compulsory education regulations in the Netherlands (Onderwijs Consumenten Organisatie, 2019). Fifty-eight percent of participants completed the questionnaire in Dutch (9% on Curaçao, 100% in the Netherlands) and 42% in Papiamentu (91% on Curaçao, 0% in the Netherlands). Most participants were enrolled in (pre)vocational education (62%); see Table 1 for details.

Procedure

We recruited schools through active contact and word-of-mouth and provided school boards and school heads with an information letter about the purpose of the study. We asked teachers to inform students and their parents one week in advance of the scheduled data collection at their school. After a short introduction in the classroom, the questionnaire first included an online-informed consent form and continued with a range of instruments on family structure, parent-offspring relationships, and academic and psychosocial development. After completing the questionnaire, a voucher worth 30 Antillean guilder (ANG) or €15 was raffled among the

students that participated. The instruments were piloted before schools were recruited into the study.

Measures

Father absence. We examined father absence by asking participants at what points their biological father had lived with them in the same household during their 1st to 15th year of life using bars for each year. For instance, if their father had lived with them from their 1st to 15th year, they placed the bar from the first to the last box. They could also use multiple bars, for example if their father had lived with them from their 1st to 5th year, then left, and then had lived with them again from their 10th to 15th year. The variable “father absence” contrasts participants who had lived without their biological father present in the household at some point before age 8 ($n = 532$, 44%), an often-proposed age cut-off (see for example Gaydos et al., 2017), to participants who had lived with both biological parents ($n = 684$, 56%). Father absence had to be due to parental divorce or separation and not due to, for instance, paternal death or labor migration.

Academic engagement. We measured participants’ engagement in school using a 20-item measure based on the Student Report on Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning questionnaire (Skinner et al., 2009) and the Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS) (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 1998). Specifically, we used the same version as in the ‘Careers in Secondary Education’ project (van den Branden, Struyve, Dockx, Denies, & De Fraine, 2018), translated to Papiamentu by the bilingual third author of this manuscript. Four dimensions were assessed: behavioral engagement (5 items, $\alpha = .87$; e.g., “I try hard to do well in school”), behavioral disaffection (5 items, $\alpha = .72$; e.g., “When I’m in class, I just act like I’m working”), emotional engagement (4 items, $\alpha = .83$; e.g., “Class is fun”), and emotional disaffection (6 items, $\alpha = .75$; e.g., “When we work on something in class, I feel bored”). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from

one (*not true*) to five (*true*). Mean scores were computed for each dimension, with high values on engagement dimensions referring to higher levels of behavioral and emotional participation in learning activities in the classroom. High values on disaffection dimensions reflect behavioral and emotional withdrawal from learning activities.

Cultural context. To code participants' cultural context, we used information on their country of birth and residence and their parents' country of birth. Curaçaoan participants were born and lived on Curaçao and their parents were also born on Curaçao ($n = 564$, 46%). Dutch participants were born and lived in the Netherlands and their parents were also born in the Netherlands ($n = 652$, 54%).

Sex. We identified sex by asking participants: "*When I was born, I was registered as...*" where they could answer "*boy*" (1) ($n = 497$, 41%) or "*girl*" (2) ($n = 719$, 59%).

Covariates. We included participants' socio-economic status (SES) as a latent variable, consisting of parents' mean educational level, household possessions, and the number of books in their house. Participants were asked to report their father's and mother's highest educational level completed, ranging from one (*primary education*) to nine (*university*), which we averaged across parents, $r(809) = .51, p < .001$. To measure home possessions, participants reported the availability of several household items at home including three country-specific household items that were seen as appropriate measures of family wealth within the country's context (for Curaçao: alarm system, piano, and dishwasher; for the Netherlands: alarm system, piano, and energy regulator) (OECD, 2017). To measure the number of books in their house, participants were asked to choose between 0-10 books, 11-25 books, 26-100 books, 101-200 books, or 201-500 books (OECD, 2017).

We also included household composition from age 1 to age 15 by asking participants who, and up to what age, had lived with them in the same household during those years. Similar to examining father absence, participants used bars to show from when to when

potential others had lived with them in their house. We contrasted participants who had lived with other adults present (i.e., stepparents, aunts/uncles, or grandparents) ($n = 342$; 28%), to participants without other adults present in their household ($n = 874$, 72%).

Analytic strategy

To investigate whether we could statistically compare father-present and -absent Curaçaoan and Dutch participants regarding their academic engagement, we tested for measurement invariance across culture using multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) in Stata/SE 16.1 (Lee, 2018; Milfont & Fischer, 2010). Before doing so, we examined whether the hypothesized model fitted the data well by conducting confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for each dimension of academic engagement and separately for the two comparison groups (see Table 2). We evaluated model fit based on the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). We considered TLI and CFI values of $\geq .95$ and RMSEA values of $\leq .06$ as acceptable criteria for a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; West, Taylor, & Wu, 2012). We dealt with missing data by using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML).

To assess whether Curaçaoan and Dutch participants interpreted the four dimensions of academic engagement in a conceptually similar (invariant) or different (variant) way, we followed a progressive analytic strategy in MGCFA which involved three steps corresponding to the conditions of configural, metric, and scalar invariance (Xu & Tracey, 2017). In the configural invariance model (Model 1), we tested whether the basic model structure was invariant across groups and constrained the factorial structure to be the same across groups. In the metric invariance model (Model 2), we tested if the strengths of the relations between specific scale items and their respective underlying construct were similar across groups and constrained all factor loadings to be the same across groups. In the scalar invariance model (Model 3), we tested whether observed scores were related to the latent scores and constrained

the intercepts of items to be the same across groups (Milfont & Fischer, 2010). We used a χ^2 -difference test to compare the fit of the sequential models.

Since measurement invariance on the (metric and) scalar level was not supported (see Table 3), and therefore multiple-group comparisons of factor means were not justified, we estimated regression models of all four dimensions of academic engagement for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately in Stata/SE 16.1. We included SES and household composition as covariates, corrected for clustered data at class level, and accounted for multiple testing using Bonferroni correction.

Exploratorily, we tested whether associations between father absence and academic engagement changed when we excluded participants whose father had only *temporarily* been absent in their household in their first 8 years of life (i.e., participants whose absent father came back after having left their home). In addition, we explored whether father absence was associated with participants' educational level as a more objective indicator and we examined the link between father absence and academic engagement among Curaçaoan boys and girls, and Dutch boys and girls separately.

Results

Model fit of academic engagement dimensions

We performed confirmatory factor analyses to investigate the factorial structure of behavioral and emotional engagement and disaffection for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately. Results showed a poor fit for all four academic engagement dimensions for both cultural groups. As can be seen from Table 2, model fit indices of the baseline models of all four dimensions improved significantly for both groups after we included a number of residual correlations, as suggested by modification indices.

Measurement invariance across culture

To assess whether Curaçaoan and Dutch participants interpreted the four dimensions of academic engagement in a conceptually similar (invariant) or different (variant) way, we conducted measurement invariance tests (see Table 3). Within the first step (Model 1), we tested for configural invariance, which was confirmed by the fit indexes of all four dimensions of academic engagement (i.e., all TLI and CFI values $\geq .95$ and all RMSEA values $\leq .06$). Secondly, we tested for metric invariance (Model 2), which could not be established for behavioral engagement and disaffection, but for emotional engagement and disaffection, acceptable fit indices were obtained. Scalar invariance (Model 3) was not supported for any of the four dimensions of academic engagement.

Descriptive statistics

As shown in Table 1, father absence was more common among Curaçaoan compared with Dutch participants in our sample; $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,216) = 163.33, p < .001$. Educational level did not significantly differ among Curaçaoan ($M = 5.36, SD = 0.07$) and Dutch participants ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.10$); $t (1,212) = -0.87, p = .384$. Considering indicators of SES; parents' mean educational level ($t (807) = 3.92, p < .001$), household possessions ($t (1,214) = 17.54, p < .001$), and number of books ($t (1,210) = 12.79, p < .001$) were higher amongst Dutch compared with Curaçaoan participants. An extended household composition was more common among Curaçaoan ($n = 231, 41\%$) compared with Dutch ($n = 111, 17\%$) participants in our sample, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,216) = 85.69, p < .001$.

Father absence and academic engagement

We estimated structural equation models (SEM) for all four dimensions of academic engagement for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately (see Table 4 and Appendix 1). Correlations between father absence and household composition, father absence and SES, and SES and household composition were included in the model.

Among Curaçaoan participants, father absence and household composition were not linked to behavioral engagement and emotional disaffection, but we found a small negative association between SES and behavioral engagement and a small positive association between SES and emotional disaffection. Neither held after Bonferroni correction ($p < .0125$), calculated by dividing the alpha-level by the number of comparisons ($p = .05/4$). Among Dutch participants, father absence and SES were not linked to behavioral engagement, but we found a small negative association between household composition and behavioral engagement, which held after Bonferroni correction ($p < .0125$). None of the predictor variables were linked to behavioral disaffection nor emotional engagement among Curaçaoan and Dutch participants in our sample.

Exploratory analyses

To test whether our conceptualization of father absence had affected the results, we examined whether results changed when we excluded participants whose father had only *temporarily* been absent in their household during their first 8 years of life (see Table 5 and Appendix 2). In doing so, we compared Curaçaoan and Dutch participants whose fathers had been fully absent from their 1st to their 8th year of life ($n = 434$, 39%) with participants whose fathers had been fully present during this period ($n = 684$, 61%). Full father absence was also not associated with any of the academic engagement dimensions.

To account for the possibility that academic engagement is not an optimal measure to assess academic outcomes, we also explored the link between father absence and participants' *educational level* (see also Table 5 and Appendix 2). Father absence was not associated with educational level among Dutch participants, but for Curaçaoan participants we found a small negative association between father absence and educational level.

Finally, we estimated regression models of all four dimensions of academic engagement for boys and girls separately for each cultural group (see Table 6 and Appendices

3-4). Neither for Curaçaoan boys and girls nor for Dutch boys and girls, was father absence associated with any of the four dimensions of academic engagement.

Discussion

This study examined whether father absence was linked to behavioral and emotional engagement and disaffection among Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults. In doing so, we included two cultures that differ substantially in the prevalence of father absence and took a rigorous cross-cultural perspective. By focusing on academic engagement instead of achievement, we looked into a potential mechanism through which father absence might affect offspring academic development. The major finding that emerged from this study is that among Curaçaoan and Dutch boys and girls in our sample, father absence was not associated with offspring academic engagement.

For Curaçaoan adolescents and young adults, our findings corroborate the hypothesis that the relatively high incidence and acceptance of father absence on Curaçao might buffer against compromised offspring academic engagement (Erman and Härkönen 2017). Originating from slavery and throughout history, many fathers on Curaçao still play a marginal role in the upbringing of their children and many single mothers accept this, are proud to raise their children alone, and are supported by extended families consisting of grandmothers, aunts and other (female) relatives (Abraham-van der Mark, 2013). Under such circumstances, it is plausible that reduced contact with father and decreased father involvement would not have influenced Curaçaoan youth's school engagement and motivation. Of note, we did find a small negative association between father absence and educational level among Curaçaoan participants. Because father absence was unrelated to academic engagement, other characteristics might underlie this association among Curaçaoan youth.

Based on previous investigations suggesting negative effects of father absence on offspring well-being and development (East et al., 2006; McLanahan et al., 2013), we expected a negative association between father absence and offspring academic engagement among Dutch adolescents and young adults. However, we did not detect this link, also not for the more objective measure of educational level among Dutch participants. A potential explanation for this discrepancy between hypothesis and our data might be that the social, cultural, and economic circumstances into which children are born are linked to the association between father absence and offspring development (Shenk, Starkweather, Kress, & Alam, 2013). Specifically, as previous studies mainly focused on US samples, differences in national laws, for instance regarding receiving income assistance or alimony, may have contributed to the link between father absence and offspring academic development in these samples compared with our sample (DeBell, 2008). In the Netherlands, social security rights such as the child benefit and budget may have served to make the (economic) disadvantages of father absence less severe than in US samples. The Netherlands also commonly applies the co-parent principle where both parents care for offspring 50% of the time following a separation.

Alternatively, it is possible that we did not find an association between father absence and offspring academic engagement because father-absence effects had already played out over time (Amato, 2000; McLanahan et al., 2013). As we included participants between 16 and 23 years old and educational aspirations and orientations toward schooling may form at younger ages, we might have ‘missed’ father-absence effects on academic engagement. Besides, *if* these effects had existed, relationships with teachers and peers might already have compensated as these are also linked to all four indicators of students’ engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). If father-absent offspring felt special and important to other key social partners (i.e., teachers, peers), this might have dampened potential negative emotions

regarding their absent father, and still have promoted their academic engagement. Notably, as development of social and personal identity and building of interpersonal relationships intensifies through the teens and early- to mid-20s, peers might even have become more important than parents (Arnett, 2014).

Finally, father-absent participants studied here may not have experienced reduced contact, decreased involvement, or stressful circumstances such as economic hardship due to their father's absence. Even though father-absent participants did not *reside* with them, they might still have had involved fathers. For Curaçaoan participants, for instance, though common stereotypes portray their fathers as being largely absent from their families, some continue to parent through visitation, providing caretaking, financial, and other support (Coles, Coles, & Green, 2010). Also in the Netherlands, many fathers stay closely involved in the upbringing of their children after separation (Bakker, 2015). Therefore, as a recent study into effects of father's presence-absence and quality of behavior emphasized, it is important to move from the mere presence in, or absence from, the home to examining paternal behavior *quality* (DelPriore, Brener, Hill, & Ellis, 2021).

Limitations

This study adds important knowledge about associations between father absence and adolescents' and young adults' academic development and responded to the evident need to go beyond the study of Western middle-class families and examine father absence across cultures (Diniz, Brandão, Monteiro, & Veríssimo, 2021). Although this is the first study of its kind, some limitations need also be mentioned. First, despite we aimed to examine whether culture influenced the relationship between father absence and academic engagement, we could not conduct multiple-group comparisons of regression models due to measurement variance across culture. Because several studies suggest that demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and culture might moderate the link between father absence and offspring

development (Erman & Härkönen, 2017; Kalmijn, 2017), future research should identify or construct measures that are invariant across groups to be able to examine the influence of such aspects.

Second, as we included participants between 16 and 23 years old and potential father-absence effects might be stronger during earlier stages of the life course (Amato, 2000; McLanahan et al., 2013), future studies should consider including a younger age group. In addition, as we recruited a school sample, we missed adolescents' and young people between 16 and 23 years old that were no longer enrolled in school. Since this might be a specific group with particularly low levels of academic engagement, it is important for future research to also expand their sample to include participants already out of school.

Finally, we operationalized father absence by focusing on *quantity* (i.e., at what points a biological father had lived with his offspring in the same household) instead of paternal behavior *quality*. By moving beyond a binary distinction between father presence and – absence and examining the quality of father involvement instead of its quantity, future studies might become better able to understand whether, when, and how the absence of a biological father in the household might affect offspring well-being and development (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018; Parke, 2000). In doing so, future research should also look into potential other pathways through which father absence might or might not affect offspring adjustment, to explore processes that give insight in (differences in) effects of father absence.

Conclusion

This study offers important contributions to the father absence literature by providing a cross-cultural perspective on links between father absence and adolescents' and young adults' academic development. Although it has been found repeatedly that father absence is linked to disadvantages for offspring well-being and development, we did not detect associations between father absence and offspring academic engagement among Curaçaoan and Dutch

458 adolescents and young adults. Though the absence of effects does not mean that father
459 absence is not a potential risk factor anyway, our data suggest that effects might be more
460 subtle and less systematic than existing literature suggests. By testing culture-specific links
461 between father absence and offspring adjustment, this study took an important step towards
462 examining the universality of father-absence effects but further research across demographic
463 characteristics is required to fully understand whether, how, and when father absence affects
464 offspring well-being and development.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics of Curaçaoan and Dutch participants

Variables	Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 564)	Dutch (<i>n</i> = 652)
Sex		
Boys (%)	215 (38.12)	282 (43.25)
Girls (%)	349 (61.88)	370 (56.75)
Father absence before age eight (%)	357 (63.30)	175 (26.84)
Educational level (%)		
University	44 (7.80)	58 (8.90)
Higher vocational education	33 (5.85)	65 (9.97)
Vocational education	267 (47.34)	232 (35.58)
(Higher) general secondary education	51 (9.04)	181 (27.76)
Pre-vocational education	164 (29.08)	86 (13.19)
Special/practical education	3 (0.53)	30 (4.60)
Academic engagement		
Behavioral engagement (<i>SD</i>)	3.84 (0.81)	3.73 (0.78)
Behavioral disaffection (<i>SD</i>)	3.15 (0.71)	3.34 (0.61)
Emotional engagement (<i>SD</i>)	3.56 (0.90)	3.65 (0.81)
Emotional disaffection (<i>SD</i>)	3.62 (0.84)	3.71 (0.71)
SES		
Parental education	3.62 (0.97)	3.90 (0.99)
Household possessions	5.54 (2.02)	7.03 (1.75)
Number of books (<i>n</i> = 562, <i>n</i> = 650)	2.19 (1.22)	3.19 (1.47)
Household composition		
Other adults present (%)	333 (59.04)	541 (82.98)

Note. Missing values were excluded for educational level (0.16%), behavioral and emotional engagement (1.81%), behavioral disaffection (1.97%), emotional disaffection (2.14%), parental education (33.47%), and number of books (0.33%).

Table 2

Model fit indices of academic engagement dimensions

Model	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% C. I.	SRMR
Behavioral engagement								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 550)								
Baseline model	97.06	5	<.001	.94	.87	.18	[.15, .22]	-
Residual correlations (item1*item2)	36.06	4	<.001	.98	.94	.12	[.09, .16]	-
Residual correlations (item1*item2 item2*item3)	3.18	3	.364	1.00	1.00	.01	[.00, .07]	-
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 644)								
Baseline model	188.90	5	<.001	.90	.80	.24	[.21, .27]	.07
Residual correlations (item4*item5)	40.33	4	<.001	.98	.95	.12	[.09, .15]	.04
Residual correlations (item4*item5 item1*item2)	6.23	3	.101	1.00	.99	.04	[.00, .09]	.01
Behavioral disaffection								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 548)								
Baseline model	16.85	5	.005	.97	.94	.07	[.03, .10]	.04
Residual correlations (item10*item11)	4.53	4	.339	1.00	1.00	.02	[.00, .07]	.02
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 644)								
Baseline model	250.87	5	<.001	.82	.64	.28	[.25, .31]	-
Residual correlations (item13*item14)	17.85	4	.001	.99	.97	.07	[.04, .11]	-
Residual correlations (item13*item14 item11*item12)	4.89	3	.180	1.00	1.00	.03	[.00, .08]	-
Emotional engagement								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 549)								
Baseline model	44.29	2	<.001	.96	.86	.20	[.15, .25]	-
Residual correlations (item6*item8)	3.39	1	.066	1.00	.99	.07	[.00, .15]	-
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 644)								
Baseline model	41.55	2	<.001	.96	.87	.18	[.13, .22]	.04
Residual correlations (item6*item8)	0.03	1	.860	1.00	1.01	.00	[.00, .06]	.00
Emotional disaffection								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 548)								
Baseline model	155.36	9	<.001	.82	.69	.17	[.15, .20]	-
Residual correlations (item19*item20)	55.68	8	<.001	.94	.89	.10	[.08, .13]	-
Residual correlations (item19*item20 item16*item17)	38.06	7	<.001	.96	.92	.09	[.06, .12]	-

Father absence and academic engagement among Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults

Residual correlations (item19*item20 item16*item17 item15*item17)	16.10	6	.013	.99	.97	.06	[.02, .09]	-
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 642)								
Baseline model	237.17	9	<.001	.77	.62	.20	[.18, .22]	.10
Residual correlations (item19*item20)	34.13	8	<.001	.97	.95	.07	[.05, .10]	.04
Residual correlations (item19*item20 item15*item17)	19.63	7	.006	.99	.97	.05	[.03, .08]	.04

Note. Residual correlations were included, as suggested by modification indices. SRMR is sometimes not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML.

Table 3

Multiple group comparisons for measurement invariance across culture

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	<i>p</i> -value	Δ CFI	Δ RMSEA
Behavioral engagement (<i>N</i> = 1,194; <i>n</i> = 550 Curaçaoan, <i>n</i> = 644 Dutch)												
Model 1	11.28	6	.080	1.00	1.00	.04	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	44.67	10	<.001	.99	.98	.08	Model 1 vs. Model 2	33.39	4	<.001	.01	.04
Model 3	89.24	15	<.001	.98	.97	.09	Model 2 vs. Model 3	44.57	5	<.001	.01	.02
Behavioral disaffection (<i>N</i> = 1,192; <i>n</i> = 548 Curaçaoan, <i>n</i> = 644 Dutch)												
Model 1	10.98	6	.089	1.00	.99	.04	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	31.76	10	<.001	.99	.98	.06	Model 1 vs. Model 2	20.78	4	<.001	.01	.02
Model 3	360.48	15	<.001	.80	.74	.20	Model 2 vs. Model 3	328.73	5	<.001	.19	.14
Emotional engagement (<i>N</i> = 1,193; <i>n</i> = 549 Curaçaoan, <i>n</i> = 644 Dutch)												
Model 1	3.42	2	.181	1.00	1.00	.04	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	6.78	5	.237	1.00	1.00	.02	Model 1 vs. Model 2	3.36	3	.340	.00	.01
Model 3	73.60	9	<.001	.97	.95	.11	Model 2 vs. Model 3	66.81	4	<.001	.03	.09
Emotional disaffection (<i>N</i> = 1,190; <i>n</i> = 548 Curaçaoan, <i>n</i> = 642 Dutch)												
Model 1	33.01	12	.001	.99	.97	.05	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	44.29	17	<.001	.99	.97	.05	Model 1 vs. Model 2	11.27	5	.046	.00	.00
Model 3	74.13	23	<.001	.97	.96	.06	Model 2 vs. Model 3	29.85	6	<.001	.01	.01

Note. Model 1: configural invariance, Model 2: metric invariance, Model 3: scalar invariance. SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML.

Table 4

Regression analysis (SEM): Academic engagement and father absence, SES, and household composition

Variables	Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 454)			Dutch (<i>n</i> = 642)		
	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value
Behavioral engagement						
Father absence	.04	.06	.472	.01	.06	.909
SES	-.12	.06	.048	.01	.06	.818
Household composition	-.01	.05	.853	-.12	.05	.009
CD		.752			.528	
Behavioral disaffection						
Father absence	-.05	.07	.509	-.04	.06	.455
SES	-.03	.11	.794	-.04	.08	.584
Household composition	.04	.05	.394	.02	.04	.637
CD		.707			.521	
Emotional engagement						
Father absence	.01	.06	.802	-.03	.06	.585
SES	-.10	.06	.097	.12	.08	.153
Household composition	-.02	.04	.655	-.01	.05	.842
CD		.710			.526	
Emotional disaffection						
Father absence	.05	.05	.338	.04	.05	.447
SES	.13	.06	.026	.09	.07	.238
Household composition	-.06	.04	.201	-.03	.05	.593
CD		.638			.524	

Note. Model was fit with clustered classes, except for emotional disaffection among Curaçaoan participants (*n* = 564). SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML. CD = Coefficient of Determination. See Appendix 1 for details on model fit indices.

Table 5

Exploratory analyses: Full father absence and educational level

Variables	Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 454)			Dutch (<i>n</i> = 642)		
	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value
Behavioral engagement						
Full father absence	.05	.06	.372	.04	.06	.488
CD		.770			.535	
Behavioral disaffection						
Full father absence	-.04	.07	.595	-.01	.06	.880
CD		.727			.527	
Emotional engagement						
Full father absence	.04	.06	.544	-.02	.06	.694
CD		.726			.532	
Emotional disaffection						
Full father absence	.02	.05	.648	.03	.05	.621
CD		.645			.531	
Educational level						
Father absence	-.12	.05	.021	-.03	.05	.594
CD		.689			.554	

Note. Model was fit with clustered classes, except for emotional disaffection among Curaçaoan participants (*n* = 564). SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML. CD = Coefficient of Determination. See Appendix 2 for details on model fit indices.

Table 6

Exploratory analysis: Father absence and academic engagement among boys and girls

Variables	Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 454)						Dutch (<i>n</i> = 642)					
	Boys (<i>n</i> = 172)			Girls (<i>n</i> = 282)			Boys (<i>n</i> = 280)			Girls (<i>n</i> = 362)		
	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value	β	<i>SE</i> β	<i>p</i> -value
Behavioral engagement												
Father absence	.03	.10	.781	.06	.07	.356	.03	.09	.763	.03	.07	.602
CD		.582			.914			.548			.527	
Behavioral disaffection												
Father absence	-.01	.12	.921	-.15	.08	.071	-.10	.09	.250	-.05	.06	.439
CD		.575			.837			.547			.522	
Emotional engagement												
Father absence	-.07	.11	.536	.13	.07	.057	-.05	.09	.540	-.00	.07	.984
CD		.596			.807			.552			.530	
Emotional disaffection												
Father absence	-.09	.09	.306	.14	.08	.077	.09	.09	.317	-.01	.07	.873
CD		.487			.920			.547			.526	

Note. Model was fit with clustered classes, except for behavioral disaffection among Curaçaoan girls (*n* = 349) and emotional disaffection among Curaçaoan boys (*n* = 215). SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML. CD = Coefficient of Determination. See Appendices 3-4 for descriptive statistics and details on model fit indices.

Appendix 1

Model fit indices of regression analysis (SEM): Academic engagement and father absence, SES, and household composition

Model	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% C. I.	CD
Behavioral engagement								
Curaçaoan ($n = 564$)	58.47	29	.001	.98	.97	.04	[.03, .06]	.618
Dutch ($n = 652$)	55.81	29	.002	.99	.98	.04	[.02, .05]	.536
Behavioral disaffection								
Curaçaoan	52.78	30	.006	.96	.93	.04	[.02, .05]	.554
Dutch	28.70	29	.481	1.00	1.00	.00	[.00, .03]	.530
Emotional engagement								
Curaçaoan	47.23	22	.001	.98	.96	.05	[.03, .06]	.561
Dutch	48.94	22	.001	.98	.96	.04	[.03, .06]	.535
Emotional disaffection								
Curaçaoan	60.48	37	.009	.97	.96	.03	[.02, .05]	.638
Dutch	71.66	38	.001	.97	.96	.04	[.02, .05]	.532

Note. Model was fit *without* clustered classes. Residual correlations were added corresponding Table 2. SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML.

Appendix 2

Model fit indices of exploratory analyses: Full father absence and educational level

Model	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% C. I.	CD
Behavioral engagement								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 564)	59.90	29	.001	.98	.97	.04	[.03, .06]	.633
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 652)	50.79	29	.007	.99	.98	.03	[.02, .05]	.543
Behavioral disaffection								
Curaçaoan	52.64	30	.007	.96	.93	.04	[.02, .05]	.566
Dutch	24.91	29	.683	1.00	1.00	.00	[.00, .02]	.536
Emotional engagement								
Curaçaoan	46.87	22	.002	.98	.96	.05	[.03, .06]	.573
Dutch	46.12	22	.002	.98	.96	.04	[.02, .06]	.540
Emotional disaffection								
Curaçaoan	59.54	37	.011	.98	.96	.03	[.02, .05]	.645
Dutch	63.853	38	.005	.98	.97	.03	[.02, .05]	.538
Educational level								
Curaçaoan	16.85	6	.010	.89	.74	.06	[.03, .09]	.548
Dutch	11.67	6	.070	.97	.93	.04	[.00, .07]	.561

Note. Model was fit *without* clustered classes. Residual correlations were added corresponding Table 2. SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML.

Appendix 3

Descriptive statistics of boys and girls

	Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 564)		Dutch (<i>n</i> = 652)	
	Boys (<i>n</i> = 215)	Girls (<i>n</i> = 349)	Boys (<i>n</i> = 282)	Girls (<i>n</i> = 370)
Father absence before age eight (%)	145 (67.44)	212 (60.74)	89 (31.56)	86 (23.24)
Educational level (%)				
University	18 (8.45)	26 (7.45)	10 (3.55)	48 (12.97)
Higher vocational education	13 (6.10)	20 (5.73)	15 (5.32)	50 (13.51)
Vocational education	84 (39.44)	183 (52.44)	87 (30.85)	145 (39.19)
(Higher) general secondary education	23 (10.80)	28 (8.02)	101 (35.82)	80 (21.62)
Pre-vocational education	73 (34.27)	91 (26.07)	49 (17.38)	37 (10.00)
Special/practical education	2 (0.94)	1 (0.29)	20 (7.09)	10 (2.70)
Academic engagement				
Behavioral engagement (<i>SD</i>)	3.62 (0.87)	3.97 (0.75)	3.56 (0.89)	3.86 (0.67)
Behavioral disaffection (<i>SD</i>)	3.07 (0.76)	3.20 (0.68)	3.21 (0.69)	3.44 (0.52)
Emotional engagement (<i>SD</i>)	3.45 (0.96)	3.63 (0.86)	3.55 (0.89)	3.73 (0.73)
Emotional disaffection (<i>SD</i>)	3.63 (0.87)	3.62 (0.82)	3.74 (0.70)	3.70 (0.72)
SES				
Parental education	3.86 (0.86)	3.48 (1.00)	3.93 (0.99)	3.88 (0.99)
Household possessions	5.11 (2.01)	5.12 (1.72)	6.95 (1.89)	7.08 (1.63)
Number of books	2.25 (1.33)	2.16 (1.15)	3.19 (1.55)	3.20 (1.41)
Household composition				
Other adults present (%)	82 (38.14)	149 (42.69)	52 (18.44)	59 (15.95)

Note. Missing values were excluded for educational level (0.16%), behavioral and emotional engagement (1.81%), behavioral disaffection (1.97%), emotional disaffection (2.14%), parental education (33.47%), and number of books (0.33%).

Appendix 4

Model fit indices of exploratory analysis: Father absence and academic engagement among boys and girls

Model	Residual correlations	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% C. I.	CD
Behavioral engagement									
Curaçaoan boys (<i>n</i> = 215)	item4*item5	46.00	30	.031	.97	.96	.05	[.02, .08]	.487
Curaçaoan girls (<i>n</i> = 349)	item1*item2	61.97	30	.001	.96	.95	.06	[.04, .08]	.739
Dutch boys (<i>n</i> = 282)	item4*item5	56.89	30	.002	.97	.95	.06	[.03, .08]	.555
Dutch girls (<i>n</i> = 370)	item4*item5	45.17	30	.037	.99	.98	.04	[.01, .06]	.533
Behavioral disaffection									
Curaçaoan boys	-	35.99	31	.246	.97	.96	.03	[.00, .06]	.486
Curaçaoan girls	item13*item14	36.42	30	.195	.98	.97	.03	[.00, .05]	.837
Dutch boys	item13*item14	35.82	30	.214	.99	.99	.03	[.00, .05]	.553
Dutch girls	item13*item14	43.03	30	.058	.98	.97	.03	[.00, .06]	.529
Emotional engagement									
Curaçaoan boys	-	33.93	23	.066	.98	.96	.05	[.00, .08]	.491
Curaçaoan girls	item7*item9	31.55	22	.085	.98	.98	.04	[.00, .06]	.662
Dutch boys	-	26.66	23	.271	.99	.99	.02	[.00, .06]	.558
Dutch girls	item7*item9	43.91	22	.004	.96	.94	.05	[.03, .07]	.538
Emotional disaffection									
Curaçaoan boys	item15*item16, item19*item20	55.27	38	.035	.96	.94	.05	[.01, .07]	.487
Curaçaoan girls	item19*item20, item16*item17	55.36	38	.034	.97	.95	.04	[.01, .06]	.745
Dutch boys	item19*item20, item15*item17	50.83	38	.080	.97	.96	.04	[.00, .06]	.553
Dutch girls	item19*item20	59.04	39	.021	.97	.96	.04	[.02, .06]	.532

Note. Model was fit *without* clustered classes. Residual correlations were included, as suggested by modification indices. SRMR is sometimes not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML.