

Exploring Nigerian Fathers' Perceptions and Cultural Barriers towards Active Involvement in Their Pre-school Age Children's Daily Routines

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ABSTRACT: Paternal involvement in early childhood routines is internationally recognized as a critical determinant of children's executive functioning, emotional self-regulation, and long-term academic success. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa—and Nigeria in particular—traditional paternal roles have historically been restricted to financial provision and authoritarian discipline. This empirical study utilized a descriptive survey design to explore the perceptions, engagement levels, and cultural-structural barriers regarding active involvement in pre-schoolers' daily routines among fathers who are young academic staff in public Nigerian universities (N = 280).

This demographic represents a unique socioeconomic status (SES) nexus: high intellectual exposure to global child development paradigms paired with severe institutional "publish-or-perish" time poverty, economic strain, and deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural expectations. Data were collected using the validated *Paternal Involvement in Early Childhood Routines Scale (PIECRS)* and the *Perceived Cultural and Institutional Barriers Scale (PCIBS)* across six federal and state universities in South-Western and North-Central Nigeria. Descriptive statistics, relative importance index (RII), and multiple regression analysis revealed that while young academic fathers demonstrate significantly high

cognitive endorsement of egalitarian co-parenting ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.54$), their actual physical execution of daily caregiving routines (e.g., bath times, feeding, school drop-offs) remains low to moderate ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.72$).

Multiple regression analysis established that institutional work volume ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$) and internalized patriarchal role expectations ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$) were the strongest negative predictors of active paternal caregiving. Grounded in Pleck's Conceptualization of Father Involvement and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model, this paper highlights the gap between intellectual awareness and practical execution among educated African men, offering policy recommendations for family-friendly academic policies and father-inclusive early childhood interventions.

Keywords: *Paternal Involvement, Pre-schoolers, Early Career Academics, Cultural Barriers, Public Universities, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

The role of fathers in early childhood development (ECD) has undergone a profound global paradigm shift over the past decade. International best practices—such as the WHO/UNICEF Nurturing Care Framework and global initiatives like Program P (MenCare)—emphasize that paternal participation in early caregiving routines (including feeding, bathing, bedtime reading, and emotional co-regulation) directly enhances children's cognitive development, social-emotional competence, and stress-resilience (WHO, 2018)

In the Nigerian cultural landscape, however, paternal identity has historically operated within an explicit patriarchal framework. Rooted in indigenous cultural ethno-theories (across Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani traditions), the father's primary domain is financial provision (*the breadwinner*) and the maintenance of external moral authority, while the direct, hands-on physical and emotional caregiving of pre-schoolers is designated almost exclusively as a maternal responsibility.

In contemporary urban Nigeria, this traditional dynamic is encountering friction due to rapid economic shifts, expanding female labour force participation, and the rise of dual-earner households. This cultural friction is nowhere more visible than among young

academic staff in public Nigerian universities (typically holding ranks from Assistant Lecturer to Senior Lecturer, aged 28–42).

Selecting young academic fathers in public universities as the target sample provides a critical socio-economic and demographic lens:

1. **High Educational Attainment vs. Cultural Socialization:** Young academics possess advanced postgraduate degrees (M.Sc./Ph.D.) and engage daily with global scientific literature. This intellectual exposure fosters a strong cognitive endorsement of gender equality, emotional intelligence, and modern child psychology. However, they were raised in traditional Nigerian homes governed by strict gender roles.
2. **Dual-Career Household Pressures:** Young male academics are predominantly married to educated, career-oriented women (e.g., fellow academics, corporate professionals, healthcare workers, or civil servants). In these dual-income households, maternal employment necessitates increased paternal assistance at home.
3. **Severe Academic Workload ("Publish-or-Perish"):** Public universities in Nigeria present an unusually taxing work environment. Early-career academics face immense pressure to conduct empirical research, write journal articles for promotion, grade large undergraduate classes, handle administrative duties, and pursue doctoral degrees.
4. **Socio-Economic Strain and Side-Hustling:** Due to public sector salary delays and inflationary pressures, young Nigerian academics frequently engage in secondary income-generating activities. This compounding institutional and economic burden creates acute time poverty, directly competing with the time required to participate in a pre-schooler's daily routines.

Global empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that active father involvement during the preschool years (ages 3–5) yields distinct developmental benefits. The WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank Group (2018) Nurturing Care Framework identifies responsive caregiving by both parents as a foundational requirement for brain development and socio-emotional

regulation in early years. International studies across diverse cultural settings demonstrate that children whose fathers participate directly in daily routines display higher language competence, stronger executive functioning, and fewer externalizing behavior problems. Cabrera et al. (2018) emphasize that paternal contributions are not merely additive to maternal caregiving, but qualitatively distinct—fathers engage in unique stimulating play and verbal interactions that foster self-esteem, boundary testing, and social resilience. Furthermore, cross-national analyses by Dufur et al. (2020) show that institutional policies such as paid paternal leave and flexible working arrangements normalize male caregiving, transforming societal expectations of fatherhood from passive financial breadwinning to direct co-caregiving.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, literature on fatherhood is undergoing a major conceptual shift. Historically, sociological accounts framed African fatherhood around financial provision, lineage continuation, and moral discipline. However, contemporary African family scholars highlighted the emergence of "New African Fatherhood"—a growing demographic of urban, educated African men who actively reject distant authoritarianism in favour of emotional closeness and direct physical caregiving (Ratele et al., 2018).

In a qualitative assessment of Nigerian paternal caregiving, Awopetu et al. (2019) identified a developmental typology of fathers—categorizing them as traditional fathers, fathers in transition, and modern fathers. While traditional fathers delegate caregiving entirely to mothers and restrict their role to income generation, "fathers in transition" acknowledge shared responsibility but restrict their physical execution to conditional, ad-hoc circumstances ("if I am free," "if I am at home"). Modern fathers, who remain a minority in qualitative surveys, fully embrace shared caregiving from infancy to adulthood.

Despite this evolving awareness, empirical studies in West African contexts highlight significant structural hurdles. Makusha and Richter (2019) observed that while African men increasingly voice a desire to participate in early childhood routines, maternal gatekeeping, social ridicule from extended family elders, and rigid gender roles create substantial barriers. Recent Nigerian investigations by Makinde et al. (2021) and Adeyinka et al. (2020) show that although husbands are gradually participating more in family health and educational decisions, physical caregiving (bathing, feeding, diapering) remains predominantly designated as maternal responsibilities. Furthermore, Awopetu et al. (2019)

revealed that entrenched cultural expectations and information gaps leave many Nigerian fathers reliant on secondary information passed on by their spousal partners, creating persistent barriers to direct paternal engagement in daily routines.

In Nigeria, empirical research examining work-life integration among university staff demonstrates acute occupational conflict. Studies by Bruck et al. (2022) and Pradhan et al. (2021) established that high occupational stress, heavy administrative burdens, and conflicting temporal demands severely undermine employees' personal and family functioning.

Within Nigerian higher education institutions, academic staffs face intense "publish-or-perish" requirements alongside teaching overcrowded undergraduate classes. As documented by Hyder and Anbar (2025) and Epstein et al. (2018), when parents experience extreme temporal and cognitive exhaustion from work, their capacity to maintain active, high-quality engagement in early learning and daily routines at home is compromised. Empirical evidence from Awopetu et al. (2019) confirmed that when Nigerian fathers do engage in childcare, their involvement is highly selective—predominantly favouring play and financial provision, while routine physical maintenance (such as bathing, feeding, and medical immunization visits) remains heavily conditional on maternal availability. For young male academics balancing doctoral studies, teaching loads, and side businesses to combat economic inflation, the resulting "time poverty" directly limits their physical availability for their pre-schoolers' morning and evening care routines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Pleck's Conceptualization of Father Involvement and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. Pleck (2020) expanded the conceptualization of father involvement into three primary operational dimensions:

1. Positive Engagement: Direct, one-on-one interactions with the child that are developmental or caring in nature (e.g., playing, reading, feeding, or bathing).
2. Warmth and Responsiveness: The emotional quality of the father-child bond during routines.

3. Control and Responsibility: Taking ownership of the child's care management (e.g., scheduling paediatric appointments, purchasing clothing, arranging preschool logistics).

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model posits that human development is shaped by five environmental systems. For the purpose of this study, we selected three relevant ones:

Microsystem: The direct interaction between the young academic father and his pre-schooler during morning or evening routines.

Exosystem: Settings that the child does not enter directly but that profoundly affect them—specifically the father's university work environment (grading burdens, department meetings, research deadlines).

Macrosystem: Overarching cultural norms regarding masculinity, fatherhood, and traditional Nigerian views on male authority.

This study addresses the empirical gaps through the following objectives:

1. To measure the cognitive endorsement versus actual physical execution of pre-schoolers' daily routines among young academic fathers in public Nigerian universities.
2. To identify and rank the primary institutional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers hindering young academic fathers from participating in daily caregiving.
3. To examine the influence of demographic variables (e.g., academic rank, wife's employment status, weekly work hours) on paternal involvement levels.
4. To test a predictive regression model explaining paternal involvement based on institutional workload, cultural stigma, and spousal employment.

To achieve the stated objectives and to guide the empirical investigation, the following research questions were asked and hypotheses tested:

RQ1. What is the mean difference between young academic fathers' cognitive endorsement of shared parenting and their actual physical execution of daily caregiving routines?

RQ2. What are the most significant institutional and cultural barriers hindering active paternal involvement as ranked by the Relative Importance Index (RII)?

H1. Institutional work burden will negatively predict actual physical caregiving execution, controlling for academic rank and cultural stigma.

H2. Spousal full-time employment will positively predict paternal involvement in daily routines.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A quantitative survey approach was selected as it allows for the systematic gathering of standardized data across a geographically dispersed sample of young academic staff, measuring both their cognitive perceptions and self-reported frequencies of caregiving routines.

The target population comprised young male academic staff (ranks of Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer II, Lecturer I, and Senior Lecturer, aged ≤ 45 years) who have at least one preschool-aged child (ages 3–5) currently living in their household and attending a preschool/nursery school.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed across six public universities in South-Western and North-Central Nigeria (3 Federal Universities and 3 State Universities):

1. Stage 1 (Institutional Stratification): Public universities were selected to represent both Federal institutions (e.g., University of Lagos; University of Ibadan; University of Ilorin) and State institutions (e.g., Lagos State University; Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ogun State; Kwara State University).
2. Stage 2 (Purposive Sampling): Academic staff directories and faculty data were accessed to identify young male lecturers fulfilling the age and child-age inclusion criteria.
3. Stage 3 (Simple Random Sampling): A total of 320 structured survey questionnaires were administered electronically and in person. A total of 280 valid, fully completed questionnaires were retrieved (87.5% response rate).

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire titled the “Academic Fathers’ Caregiving and Cultural Inventory” (AFCCI). To establish construct and content validity, the instrument underwent formal evaluation by a panel of three senior experts in Early Childhood Education, Family Sociology, and Psychological Testing prior to field deployment. The instrument comprises four sub-sections:

1. Demographic Profile: Age, academic rank, university type, spousal employment status, number of children, and average weekly work hours.
2. Paternal Involvement in Early Childhood Routines Scale (PIECRS): A 15-item scale adapted from Pleck’s framework measuring physical execution across five specific caregiving domains: Morning Grooming/Bathing (3 items), Feeding/Meal Prep (3 items), School Transport (3 items), Bedtime Stories/Play (3 items), and Emotional Comforting (3 items). To control for social desirability bias (where fathers over-report involvement), items required concrete frequency counts over the preceding 7 days (1 = Never / 0 days, 2 = Rarely / 1–2 days, 3 = Sometimes / 3–4 days, 4 = Often / 5–6 days, 5 = Daily / 7 days, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).
3. Perceptions of Paternal Role Scale (PPRS): A 10-item scale measuring cognitive endorsement of egalitarian co-parenting versus traditional breadwinning. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$).
4. Perceived Cultural and Institutional Barriers Scale (PCIBS): A 12-item scale quantifying factors restricting paternal participation across three domains: Institutional Academic Workload (4 items), Socio-Cultural Stigma & Elder Pressure (4 items), and Domestic Competence & Gatekeeping (4 items). Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

1. Demographic Profile

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 280 young academic fathers.

Table 1: Demographic and Professional Profile (N = 280)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age Range	28–34 Years	84	30.0%
	35–40 Years	142	50.7%
	41–45 Years	54	19.3%
Academic Rank	Assistant Lecturer / Lecturer II	118	42.1%
	Lecturer I	104	37.1%
	Senior Lecturer	58	20.8%
Wife's Employment Status	Full-time Employed (Corporate/Academic/Civil Service)	212	75.7%
	Self-Employed / Business	52	18.6%
	Unemployed	16	5.7%
Average Weekly Work Hours	40–49 Hours/Week	62	22.1%
	50–59 Hours/Week	148	52.9%
	≥ 60 Hours/Week	70	25.0%

Objective 1/RQ1: Cognitive Endorsement vs. Actual Physical Execution

Mean scores for cognitive perception (PPRS) were compared against actual physical execution (PIECRS).

Table 2: Comparison of Cognitive Endorsement vs. Actual Physical Execution (N = 280)

Caregiving Domain	Routine	Cognitive Endorsement Mean (SD)	Physical Execution Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
1. Morning Bathing & Grooming		4.32 (0.61)	2.12 (0.81)	36.12	< .001
2. Feeding & Meal Preparation		4.15 (0.58)	2.05 (0.74)	37.45	< .001
3. School Transport (Drop-off/Pick-up)		4.45 (0.52)	3.28 (0.92)	18.20	< .001
4. Bedtime Reading & Play		4.38 (0.55)	2.65 (0.88)	27.34	< .001
5. Emotional Comforting/Sick Care		4.52 (0.48)	3.10 (0.82)	24.15	< .001
OVERALL COMPOSITE MEAN		4.36 (0.42)	2.64 (0.65)	38.80	< .001

In response to RQ1, a significant gap exists ($t = 38.80$, $p < .001$). While young academic fathers exhibit high cognitive endorsement of shared fatherhood ($M = 4.36$), their actual physical execution of daily pre-school children routines remains low to moderate ($M = 2.64$). The lowest physical participation occurs in morning bathing/grooming ($M = 2.12$) and meal preparation ($M = 2.05$).

Objective 2/RQ2: Relative Importance Index (RII) Ranking of Barriers

RII analysis ranked the perceived barriers restricting paternal involvement.

Table 3: Relative Importance Index (RII) Ranking of Barriers (N = 280)

Identified Barrier Item	Category	Mean (SD)	RII	Rank
"Publish-or-Perish" Academic Promotion Demands	Institutional	4.58 (0.54)	.916	1
Heavy Teaching, Grading & Administrative Load	Institutional	4.42 (0.61)	.884	2

Identified Barrier Item	Category	Mean (SD)	RII	Rank
Economic Pressure to Engage in Side-Hustles	Socioeconomic	4.28 (0.68)	.856	3
Fear of Extended Family / Elder Stigma	Cultural	3.85 (0.82)	.770	4
Maternal Gatekeeping & Spousal Perfectionism	Domestic	3.62 (0.88)	.724	5
Lack of Father-Inclusive Pre-school PTA Programming	Institutional ECE	3.41 (0.92)	.682	6

Objective 4 / Hypotheses Testing: Multiple Regression Model

A multiple linear regression predicted Actual Paternal Involvement based on Institutional Work Burden, Cultural Stigma, Wife's Employment Status, and Academic Rank.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Model Predicting Paternal Involvement

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	4.12	0.35	--	11.77	< .001
Institutional Work Burden	-0.45	0.05	-.42	-9.00	< .001
Cultural Stigma Perception	-0.32	0.06	-.31	-5.33	< .001
Wife's Employment (Full-time=1)	0.38	0.08	.22	4.75	< .001
Academic Rank	0.15	0.06	.11	2.50	.013

Hypothesis 1: Supported: Institutional work burden significantly and negatively predicted physical caregiving execution ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2: Supported: Having a full-time employed spouse significantly and positively predicted paternal caregiving involvement ($\beta = .22, p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a profound cognitive-behavioural disconnect among young academic fathers in public Nigerian universities. Professional exposure to global scientific literature leads them to endorse egalitarian caregiving in theory ($M = 4.36$). They explicitly reject harsh authoritarian discipline and agree that fathers should be emotionally accessible to pre-schoolers. However, when evaluated on physical execution ($M = 2.64$), their daily practice mirrors traditional gender divisions. They participate selectively in "public" or flexible routines (such as school drop-offs or emotional comforting when a child is ill) while avoiding repetitive domestic labour like morning bathing and meal preparation. This aligns directly with Pradhan et al. (2021) and Awopetu et al.'s (2019) classification of "fathers in transition," who endorse shared caregiving but make their actual physical execution heavily conditional on time availability or maternal absence. The young academic fathers in this study function predominantly as 'fathers in transition'—they cognitively endorse egalitarian parenting yet restrict their physical execution to flexible, conditional activities like school drop-offs rather than consistent daily maintenance routines such as bathing and feeding.

While cultural stigma remains a factor ($R^2 = .770$), the regression analysis proved that institutional work burden ($\beta = -.42$) is the single most powerful deterrent. Public university academics in Nigeria operate under extreme structural strain. The pressure to publish in indexed journals to secure tenure, combined with massive undergraduate teaching ratios, administrative demands, and economic side-hustles, leaves young lecturers with severe time deficit. The observed negative impact of university workload on paternal caregiving ($\beta = -.42$) corroborates the work-family strain models established by Bruck et al. (2022) and Pradhan et al. (2021), who demonstrated that heavy occupational demands directly undermine domestic family domain involvement. In the Nigerian higher education context, this reinforces Chenube's (2024) observation that early-career academics experience severe 'time poverty' (which is also known as time deficit) driven by tenure and publication pressures.

The study also revealed the psychological impact of Maternal Gatekeeping ($R^2 = .724$). In urban, dual-career Nigerian households, educated mothers often retain high domestic standards rooted in maternal identity. When young academic fathers attempt caregiving routines (such as bathing or preparing school meals), mothers may criticize their methods or re-do the task. For a father already experiencing severe work exhaustion, spousal perfectionism creates a psychological disincentive, prompting him to retreat into passive non-intervention and leave caregiving to maternal authority. The identification of maternal gatekeeping and spousal perfectionism as a significant barrier aligns closely with the African regional findings of Makusha and Richter (2019), who demonstrated that maternal gatekeeping frequently deters men from hands-on caregiving when their domestic competency is critically evaluated by spousal partners. While dual-career economic realities compel young academic fathers to assist in domestic management—supporting Adeyinka et al. (2020) and Makinde et al. (2021) regarding increased paternal presence in working households—maternal gatekeeping creates a countervailing psychological barrier. As Bello and Mustapha (2023) noted in urban Nigerian settings, despite wives' full-time employment, early childhood care routines remain heavily tied to maternal identity, causing tired fathers to retreat into passive non-intervention when faced with spousal criticism.

In alignment with Chenube's (2024) and Awopetu et al. (2019) observations, who emphasized that parenting interventions in Nigeria must be targeted to fathers' specific readiness stages, the following proposed Three-Pillar Framework provides practical mechanisms to transition "fathers in transition" into fully engaged "modern fathers":

Pillar 1: University Institutional Reforms (Public Higher Education)

1. Formalization of Paid Paternity Leave: University Governing Councils across Nigerian federal and state institutions should amend condition-of-service regulations to grant 4 weeks of fully paid paternity leave upon the birth or adoption of a child. This institutionalizes male caregiving as a legitimate professional right.
2. Implementation of "Tenure-Clock Extensions": Early-career lecturers (Assistant Lecturers to Lecturer I) who are primary or equal co-caregivers of children under

age 5 should be eligible for a 1-year promotion clock extension. This reduces the immediate "publish-or-perish" panic during peak early childhood years.

3. Flexible Hybrid Work Schedules: University Senate committees should mandate that non-teaching administrative duties (e.g., departmental board meetings, project supervision, office hours) offer hybrid/virtual options 2 days per week for staff with preschool-aged children.
4. Establishment of On-Campus ECE Centres: Public universities should establish subsidized, high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) facilities on campus grounds, allowing academic parents to handle drop-offs and pick-ups without disrupting their lecture schedules.

Pillar 2: Early Childhood Education (ECE) & School-Level Reforms

1. Mandatory Dual-Parent Communication Channels: Pre-school administrators must update school portals, report cards, and instant messaging groups to send all academic and behavioural updates to *both parents simultaneously*, eliminating the default practice of contacting only mothers.
2. "Father-Child Saturday Discovery Workshops": ECE centres should host quarterly weekend interactive sessions (e.g., LEGO building, story-telling, basic science experiments) specifically structured to engage fathers in early literacy and numeracy activities.
3. Gender-Neutral School Documentation: Early childhood centres should audit enrolment forms, consent slips, and promotional materials to remove gender-stereotyped phrasing (e.g., changing "Mother's Signature" to "Parent/Caregiver Signature")

Pillar 3: Public Policy & Gender Advocacy (National Level)

1. Contextualizing Program P (MenCare) Modules: The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Education should partner with civil society organizations to adapt the global *Program P* framework into local languages, distributing media modules across public university campuses.

2. National Media Campaigns on Modern Fatherhood: National campaigns should actively reframe hands-on caregiving (bathing, feeding, reading) not as "assisting the wife," but as an essential expression of responsible, strong African fatherhood (*Ọmọlúàbí / Tarbiya*).

8. Conclusion

Young academic fathers in public Nigerian universities occupy a pivotal transitional space in African family sociology. They possess the intellectual awareness to recognise the developmental importance of early paternal involvement, yet they remain constrained by severe institutional work pressure, economic fatigue, and lingering cultural gender norms. Addressing this disconnect requires moving beyond personal goodwill to structural reform. By institutionalizing family-friendly university policies, promoting father-inclusive pre-school environments, and encouraging dual-career co-parenting, Nigerian society can empower young fathers to play an active, transformative role in the daily lives of their preschool children.

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