

'I DON'T WANT TO HATE HIM FOREVER': UNDERSTANDING DAUGHTER'S EXPERIENCES OF FATHER ABSENCE

Leah East, RN, BN(Hons), Doctoral Candidate, School of Nursing, Family and Community Health, College of Social and Health Sciences, University of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

Debra Jackson RN, PhD, Professorial Fellow, School of Nursing, Family and Community Health, College of Social and Health Sciences, University of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

debra.jackson@uws.edu.au

Louise O'Brien RN, PhD, Chair of Mental Health Nursing, Sydney West Health Service, School of Nursing, Family and Community Health, College of Social and Health Sciences, University of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

Accepted for publication January 2007

Key words: Family, father absence, adolescent health, parenting, phenomenology, narrative

ABSTRACT

Objective:

Father absence is associated with negative child and adolescent outcomes, including early sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, behavioural difficulties and life adversity. However there is a lack of literature that explores the lived experiences of daughters who grew up in father absent environments. This study aimed to generate insights into the lived experience of being a girl-child growing up in a father absent environment through the perspectives of daughters who experienced father absence during their childhood and/or adolescent years.

Design:

Van Manen's phenomenological research approach informed this study. Participants were recruited through the news media and took part in phenomenological interviews. Narrative was transcribed and analysed using Van Manen's thematic approach.

Participants:

Nine women aged between 22-46 years who had been raised by their biological mothers and who had experienced father absence due to parental relationship breakdown participated in the study.

Results:

Four themes that captured the participants lived experiences of father absence were revealed. These are: *He always let me down: a constant source of hurt; I have no feelings of closeness: father as a stranger; All men are*

bastards: negotiating relationships with men; and, I don't want to hate him forever: reconstructing the relationship.

Conclusions:

Nurses and other health workers are challenged to meet the needs of increasing numbers of father absent children and young people and to develop supportive strategies to ameliorate the effects of father absence so as to contribute to the best possible outcomes for young people and their families.

BACKGROUND AND AIM OF THE STUDY

Increasing numbers of children and adolescents are growing up in father absent homes and this has created a need for nurses and other health workers to develop understandings about the experiences of the children and young people who grow up in father absent environments. Father absence is associated with difficulties including; health and welfare related problems, such as early sexual activity, greatly increased rates of adolescent pregnancy (Ellis et al 2003), poor school performance (Ackerman et al 2002), lowered self-esteem, increased risk of incarceration (Harper and McLanahan 2004) and an increased in likelihood of demonstrating adverse behaviours compared to adolescents of intact dyadic families (Spruijt et al 2001) (see East et al 2006a for a comprehensive review). These problems may be deleterious to health and well-being when considering health in broad terms.

The literature suggests a link between father absence and life adversity in both male and female children, though some literature suggests that it is the social factors (such as poverty, lack of resources) associated

with single female-headed families that may cause negative well-being in father absent children, rather than the father absence itself (McMunn et al 2001).

The discourses around father absence and its effect on young people are incomplete. Rohner and Veneziano (2001) note that the literature fails to elucidate precisely why and how fathers influence childhood development and psychological wellbeing, and why the absence of fathers can possibly lead to unfavourable outcomes. No previous literature could be found that explored the lived experiences of women who grew up in father absent environments. Furthermore, most of the literature emanates from the psychological literature with few other perspectives visible.

Defining father absence

The term 'father absence' is ill defined, being variously referred to as a father simply not being present in one's life, a father being deceased, or a father being lost through family and or social circumstances (Spruijt et al 2001; Silverstein and Auerbach 1999; Phares 1993; Jensen et al 1989). This lack of clarity can result in shortcomings of research findings. Furthermore, the ambiguity around father absence also extends to the issue of contact between father and child; 'contact' could be infrequent or daily (Phares 1993) and could be in person or through letters and phone calls. For the purpose of this study, father absence was defined as a father being absent from the family home because of parental relationship breakdown.

THE STUDY

Aim

This paper is drawn from a study that aimed to develop insights into the lived experience of growing up in a father absent environment through the perspectives of women who have experienced father absence during their childhood and/or adolescent years. Elsewhere we have reported findings about these women's perceptions of their relationships with their fathers since the time of family breakdown (see East et al 2006b). This current paper focuses on the women's experiences of father absence and aims to reveal the feelings and meaning this had on the lives of participants as girl-children and young women.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This study was informed by Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological research approach which aims to gain insight and understanding of human experience through retrospective reflection and describing and interpreting these experiences through the exploration of emerging themes (Van Manen 2006; Van Manen 1990).

The participants

Nine women were recruited into the study. Inclusion criteria required participants be able to converse fluently in English, be women aged 21 years or older who had

lived in a father absent environment for a minimum period of four years during their childhood and/or adolescent years due to parental relationship breakdown. Participants were required to be at least 21 years old as the authors wanted the participants to reflect and elucidate on their father absence from their childhood as well as adult life experiences.

All nine participants were raised by their biological mothers and seven of the nine daughters described having on-going strong and loving relationships with their mothers. None of the participants identified as being socially disadvantaged – a number had academic qualifications, all were in employment, engaged in home-making or studying, with none being welfare dependent.

The age of onset of father absence also varied among the participants. One participant did not know her father until she was approximately 11-12 years of age, six of the participants' fathers left the family home before 9 years of age, and two of the participants' fathers left when they were aged 13-14 years. At the time of the study, participants ranged in age from 22-46 years and all experienced some form of contact with their fathers throughout their lives although the frequency of contact varied greatly from weekly to very infrequent contact. This contact declined with age and independence and at the time of the study the majority of participants had infrequent contact with their fathers.

Data collection

During 2005 participants engaged in phenomenological interviews lasting between 60-120 minutes focusing on their lived experience of father absence. A range of specific techniques were used to elicit information, including use of initial open-ended and trigger questions, followed up by use of probing, specific, and interpreting questions (Kvale 1996). Interviews were audio taped and transcribed into written text.

Ethical considerations

All ethical considerations were addressed to the satisfaction of the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee including informed consent and confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities. FINDINGS

Father absence was experienced as a sad and traumatic aspect of life that cast a shadow over the childhood and lives of these women and had caused ongoing distress, not only affecting their relationships with their fathers, but also the emotional relationships they developed with others. Their narratives revealed four main themes that captured the participants lived experiences of father absence. These are: *He always let me down: a constant source of hurt; I have no feelings of closeness: father as a stranger; All men are bastards: negotiating relationships with men; and, I don't want to hate him forever: reconstructing the relationship.* Each of these themes is discussed in detail below.

He always let me down: a constant source of hurt

Participants described feeling let down by their fathers. The narratives were replete with descriptions of abandonment, hurt, resentment, anger, and feelings of being deceived and unloved. Despite the very young age of some participants when their fathers left the family home, they were still able to recall their feelings when they realised their fathers were not coming home.

Participants did not experience their fathers leaving the family home as being an issue between their parents; rather they felt as though their fathers leaving home was a statement about not wanting to be around them or not wanting to parent them. Louise (whose father left when she was aged 13-14 years) felt that in comparison to her siblings, she missed out on having her father participating in her life:

It was almost as if, he thought that his job of raising me had ended when he left the family home and that really sort of hurt me deeply. Like I saw my sister and my brother being raised with two parents in the home and then Dad sort of left the home ... It was just another source of hurt for me really, yeah just felt totally abandoned then ... he didn't have any desire to spend any time with me or even really get to know who I was.

Narratives revealed that feelings of betrayal and being let down went beyond the immediate period in which their father left – rather, these feelings continued to mark the relationships between them and their fathers. Kate described her feelings toward her father and the feeling of being let down by him. Her father's suggestion of taking Kate's brother to live with him, while not showing any inclination to take Kate as well, was a source of hurt for her. Being let down in this way affected Kate's feelings and attitudes toward her father:

My dad, letting everybody down ... it was like he just took the easy way out. ... Then when he decided that he was, that was it, there was no more, he couldn't work it out, he got us all in the kitchen and said, "OK I am leaving, I would like John [participants brother] to come and live with me" and that made me feel absolutely second class. That definitely, that was the catalyst of, things just became really crystallised from then. I really hated my dad. He was a very selfish person.

I have no feelings of closeness: father as a stranger

Participants felt that growing up with an absent father affected the relationships they held with their fathers. Rather than feeling the intimacy and closeness that normally defines relationships between parents and children, these daughters described relationships with their fathers as being diminished by their own feelings of hurt. The notion of their fathers being a stranger to them was reinforced by irregular contact, a lack of communication and perceived disinterest (East et al 2006b). Because of these feelings, participants stated that they developed little respect for their fathers. These feelings stood in the way of the development of a 'father and daughter bond' (East et al 2006b) and were contrary to the expectations and

fulfillment of what participants felt a father figure should be. Amy explained what she expected from her father:

I expect a father to ... take us out on weekends and do stuff with us even if it's taking us to the swimming pool... I have no memory of doing anything with dad.

Participants had a lack of shared history with their fathers and there were whole chunks of their lives that did not include any shared memories between these daughters and their fathers. Cheryl's only memories of her father are in photographs; she has never shared closeness with her father:

I can't remember my father except from what I see in photos. ... My paternal grandmother; she showed me photos of times when we were young and he [father] was mucking around giving us piggybacks and I just thought I was actually shocked, and thought oh my goodness- there was a photo of him cuddling me and I just thought that's really - it just really shocked me - a foreign concept that my father could actually have that close relationship with me and I have no feelings of closeness.

All men are bastards: negotiating relationships with men

Participants expressed difficulties constructing relationships with men and they linked these difficulties to their experiences of father absence. Participants expressed a range of feelings and difficulties around their relationships with men including; having distrust in men; fear of abandonment; having negative feelings toward men; and not knowing or understanding the relationship dynamics between men and women, which they attributed to not seeing this type of relationship while they were growing up.

The narratives also revealed a sense of 'craving' male attention and male affection which participants linked to the lack of affection received from their fathers. This made these daughters vulnerable to male attention in which they were potentially exploited by any male who showed them any positive interest. Participants attributed some of the perceived poor decisions they had made around relationships with men to this vulnerability.

Sue stated that her relationship with her father affected both her and her sister's relationships with men. Sue gives an account of her first sexual relationship and stated that this encounter with a friend's father arose due to her seeking affection and attention from a father figure:

My first sexual encounter... I felt that I had seduced a friend's father ... And I thought, no I'm not punishing father by sleeping with someone else's father. Dad will never know this. Why did I do this?

Cheryl did not have contact with her father from approximately the age of 7 until she was 21 years of age. She felt resentful toward her father for leaving and having no contact with her. Cheryl attributes this to her holding the same negative feelings about men that she previously held for her father. Cheryl's experience of father absence had greatly affected her views on men generally and her

life path. On reflecting on some of the attitudes she had as a much younger woman, Cheryl stated:

I was never going to be married ... never going to be tied down. All men are bastards ... every other guy I had in my life were bastards ... so every guy that came into my life has lived up to the expectation of all men are bastards. ... I suppose I had no other role models ... I still don't trust men, I don't really respect them, I always think the worst of them and they have to prove themselves.

Sarah had a pessimistic view of males and intimate relationships with men. She felt that this was a consequence of her parent's relationship breakdown and her father's absence from her life and the poor quality relationship she shared with him. Sarah felt that she developed negative feelings toward relationships.

When I got seriously involved with someone and that added to my prior experiences, it really convinced me that there aren't really good men out there. ... So unfortunately, instead of having a rosy expectation of relationships, I developed another one, which was wrong; which was expecting people to do wrong by you. So, if you're in love with someone you can go along and be in love with them, but not expect them to be good to you...I just felt that love and commitment were not real. ... In my head, somehow I couldn't accept a good relationship.

I don't want to hate him forever: reconstructing the relationship

These daughters related stories of their hopes for a meaningful relationship with their fathers; meeting and having contact with their fathers; and the challenges of initiating and maintaining relationships with them. Although the women in this study had experienced hurt and pain related to both the absence and the subsequent relationships they have held with their fathers, they all spoke of the importance of having a relationship with their fathers and at some point, each daughter had aspired to build a positive relationship with their father.

However building a relationship with their fathers meant that these daughters had to be prepared to let go of the past and suspend the expectations they had held of a father/daughter relationship. Belinda feels she no longer needs a father figure and this has helped her to let go of her own needs and expectations and accept what her father can give her, even though this means that her own needs for the relationship will never be fulfilled.

I have kind of a little bit, come to terms, now that I don't need a daddy anymore... if you saw us together now, you would go: 'wow they are close'. Because we talk about whatever he wants to talk about. I have let go of that kind of need for him to hear me...

Kate expressed the importance to her of establishing and maintaining a meaningful relationship with her father. Kate stated that she will continue to give her father chances to establish and maintain their relationship, despite the hurt and pain inflicted on her by her father. Kate does not want to hate her father for the rest of her life:

Purely and simply just he is my dad and he brought me into the world and I do want to make him proud and I want to be proud of him and I do want things to work out in the long run, despite all the pain and shouting and things like that. ... I don't want to hate him forever, I don't want to have to go to his funeral and go, I wasted the last 30 years of my life hating this person, I don't want that. I don't expect us to be best mates and I know that is not possible but it would be nice to have some sort of dialogue with him and for him to respect me.

DISCUSSION

Narratives from these daughters suggest that their experience of father absence strongly influenced their life path. This finding resonates with Wade's (1995) assertions that children of absent parent/s can experience feelings of abandonment that can shape their lives. Seven of the nine daughters in this study described having loving and nurturing relationships with their mothers. However despite this, the absence of their fathers and the feelings associated with this were not overcome by and through the mother/daughter bond (East et al 2006b). This finding concurs with Wade (1995) who states that having loving, nurturing and supportive relationships with others does not fill the void associated with the feelings of abandonment, loss, grief and unworthiness felt by children who experience the absence of a parent.

Furthermore, findings of this study support Wade's (1995) suggestion that individuals experiencing parental absence and the ensuing feelings of abandonment can also develop negative views of others. The participants in this study felt abandoned and let down by the fathers and subsequently developed negative attitudes and feelings toward their fathers and at times, these feelings were extended to males in general. These negative feelings included: feelings of mistrust; lack of respect; and not being able to believe that a supportive, loving intimate relationship with a man was possible. These findings support the suggestion by Hetherington et al (1998) that youths of divorced and remarried families experience greater difficulty in establishing intimate relationships than those of intact families.

Rohner and Veneziano (2001) emphasised the importance of father love and recognised that the father of a child potentially contributes to its healthy development. They acknowledge that the quality of a parent and child relationship (or the lack of) does shape the life of an individual, both as a child and as an adult (Rohner and Veneziano 2001). One consequence of having an absent father was the difficulty in holding the type of close and intimate relationship with their fathers that is usually associated with a parent and child. The daughters in this study voiced this, through describing their relationships with their father as that of a stranger or acquaintance, rather than family.

Furthermore, many disclosed having little or no memorable childhood experiences, having lack of communication, having little involvement with their fathers and in a sense not knowing their fathers; their fathers were ultimately strangers.

Although the relationships the participants held with their fathers were not characterised by warmth, love and affection, this was something participants wanted and their relationship with their father was something deeply valued (East et al 2006b). Findings thus concur with Rohner and Veneziano's (2001) assertions of the importance of father love.

Ellis et al (2003) suggests that father absence is a significant risk factor for teenage pregnancy and early sexual activity. The daughters in this study experienced vulnerability and difficulty in constructing relationships with males and felt that these difficulties were closely associated with their experiences of father absence. They held pessimistic views of men which they attributed to their experiences with their fathers. These negative views were perceived to have had a deleterious impact on the development of their intimate sexual relationships.

It must be noted that the findings of this study do not conclude that the participants of this study were disadvantaged or had poorer academic achievement or maladaptive behaviour through growing up without their father as Govind and Stein (2004), Lang and Zagorsky (2001) and Pfiffner et al (2001) have suggested is associated with father absent children. A number of the daughters in this study had gained academic qualifications or were pursuing graduate qualifications at the time of their participation in this study. None of the participants identified themselves as being socially disadvantaged and none were welfare dependent.

CONCLUSIONS

Implications for practice

The research literature clearly identifies the implications of father absence to the health and well-being of girls and young women, so it is important that health care professionals have insight and understanding of what it is like to experience father absence. Such understandings could contribute toward enabling health care professionals to better provide for the needs of father absent girls, adolescents and young women. Nurses and other health workers could provide opportunities for father absent girls, adolescents and young women to discuss their feelings about having an absent father. In this way, issues could be clarified, feelings validated, and young women encouraged in reflecting on and exploring safe and healthy ways of dealing with their feelings and experiences. This could be particularly important in reducing father absent young women's vulnerability to early sexual activity.

There is also a need to support parents experiencing relationship breakdown and to assist them to continue to strive for the maintenance of loving and nurturing family relationships. Nurses and other health workers are ideally placed to support families experiencing parental relationship breakdown and may be able to reinforce the importance of strong and loving relationships with both parents to child and adolescent well-being.

Implications for further research

The findings raise a number of areas for further research. It would be of interest to explore experiences of father absence for reasons other than parental relationship breakdown, for example, absence due to incarceration, death or long periods of working away from home. Further research needs to identify the factors that can facilitate father-child relationships when the father is no longer resident in the family home and to identify and test supportive strategies that could be introduced to ameliorate the effects of father absence on children and adults. In situations where the father-child relationship is not possible, for instance in situations of abuse or domestic violence, research to explore how children can be protected from the negative consequence of father-absence is needed.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, B., Brown, E., D'Eramo, K. and Izard, C. 2002. Maternal relationship instability and the school behaviour of children from disadvantaged families. *Developmental Psychology*, 38(5):694-704.
- East, L., Jackson, D. and O'Brien, L. 2006a. Father absence and adolescent development: a review of the literature. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 10(4):283-295.
- East, L., Jackson, D. and O'Brien, L. 2006b. Disrupted relationships: adult daughters and father absence. *Contemporary Nurse*, 23(2):252-261.
- Ellis, B.J., Bates, J.E., Dodge, K.A., Fergusson, D.M., Horwood, J.L., Pettit, G.S. and Woodward, L. 2003. Does father absence place daughters at special risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy? *Child Development*, 74(3):801-821.
- Govind, P. and Stein, R.E.K. 2004. Contrast between behaviour and academic achievement for kindergarten children living in single parent families. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 25(5):346.
- Harper, C. and McLanahan, S. 2004. Father absence and youth incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 14(3):369-397.
- Hetherington, M.E., Bridges, M. and Insabella, G.M. 1998. What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53(2):167-184.
- Jensen, P.S., Grogan, D., Xenakis, S.N. and Bain, M.W. 1989. Father absence: effects on child and maternal psychopathology. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28(2):171-175.
- Kvale, S. 1996. *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. California: Sage.
- Lang, K. and Zagorsky, J.L. 2001. Does growing up with a parent absent really hurt? *Journal of Human Resources*, 36(2):263-273.
- McMunn, A.M., Nazroo, J.Y., Marmot, M.G., Boreham, R. and Goodman, R. 2001. Children's emotional and behavioural well-being and the family environment: findings from the Health Study of England. *Social Science and Medicine*, 53(4):423-440.
- Pfiffner, L.J., McBurnett, K. and Rathouz, P.J. 2001. Father absence and familial antisocial characteristics. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 29(5):357-367.
- Phares, V. 1993. Father absence, mother love, and other family issues that need to be questioned: comment on Silverstein (1993). *Journal of Family Psychology*, 7(3):293-300.
- Rohner, R.P. and Veneziano, R.A. 2001. The importance of father love: history and contemporary evidence. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4):382-405.
- Silverstein, L.B. and Auerbach, C.F. 1999. Deconstructing the essential father. *American Psychologist*, 54(6):397-407.
- Spruijt, E., DeGoede, M. and Vandervalk, I. 2001. The well being of youngsters coming from six different family types. *Patient Education and Counselling*, 45(4):285-294.
- Van Manen, M. 1990. *Researching the lived experience: human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. United States of America: The State University of New York.
- Van Manen, M. 2006. Writing qualitatively, or the demands of writing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(5):713-722.
- Wade, B. 1995. Fear of abandonment. *Essence*, 25(12):79-86.