Disrupted relationships: Adult daughters and father absence

ABSTRACT
Changes in family structures have resulted in many children growing up in non-traditional families, where their father is not resident in the family home. Father absence that occurs as a result of the breakdown of the parental relationship is associated with life adversity and less than optimal outcomes for children and adolescents. However, little research exists that explores this phenomenon from the perspective of the father absent young person. This phenomenological study was conducted in 2005 and aimed to explore women’s perceptions about relationships with their fathers within the context of a father absent childhood. Nine women participated in this study. Findings revealed that growing up without their father present in the family home disrupted the relationship these daughters held with their fathers. Due to the perceived lack of interest these daughters felt from their fathers, they expressed feelings of hurt and diminished respect for their fathers. Furthermore, participants felt that their fathers were unable to provide them with the father–daughter relationship that they sought. The findings of this paper provide insights that can help nurses and other healthcare professionals to recognise the emotional impact that father absence can have on young women. Findings suggest a need for further research to gain greater insights into the experiences of family members who undergo disruption of relationships due to family breakdown.

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LEAH EAST
Doctoral Candidate
School of Nursing, Family and Community Health
College of Social and Health Sciences
University of Western Sydney
Penrith South NSW, Australia

DEBRA JACKSON
Professorial Fellow
School of Nursing, Family and Community Health
College of Social and Health Sciences
University of Western Sydney
Penrith South NSW, Australia

LOUISE O’BRIEN
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
Penrith South NSW, Australia
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Single parent families are among the fastest growing family types in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2003a). These families are typically headed by women; hence there is an increase in the number of children and adolescents who are growing up in father absent homes (ABS 2003a). The growing number of single parent families indicates an increase in the number of children experiencing parental breakdown (ABS 2004). In Australia in 2003, 50% of divorces involved families with predominately young children, and just under 50,000 children were affected (ABS 2003b). Following parental relationship breakdown variable contact between the non-custodial parent (usually the father) and the child occurs. According to the ABS (2000), in 1997 of 978,000 children living in single parent homes, 36% had direct contact with their absent parent only once annually or less and 42% had at least fortnightly contact which usually declined with age.

Health workers have long recognised the importance of close and supportive family structures and their powerful influence on healthy growth and development. So too is there recognition that family adversity can impact all individuals both positively and/or negatively. Children are greatly affected by divorce and family breakdown. The stressors that are often associated with family breakdown, such as parental emotional turmoil, new living arrangements and separation from one parent, all contribute to the stress and emotional turbulence that is frequently felt by children (Wong et al. 2002). Children often feel confused, frightened, abandoned, angry, hurt, and lonely, and may blame themselves for their parent’s separation. These emotions can influence both the physical and psychological wellbeing of children (Wong et al. 2002). Further, previous research has posited that children of single parent families demonstrate greater maladaptive behaviour and have poorer academic achievement compared with children and adolescents from dyadic families (Govind & Stein 2004; Hetherington et al. 1998). Additionally, it has been reported that the female children of father absent families (children and adolescents whose fathers do not reside in the family home) have higher rates of teenage pregnancy and earlier sexual activity than father present girls and may be more vulnerable to peer influences that can lead to adverse behavioural choices (Ellis et al. 2003; Farrell & White 1998). However, it must also be acknowledged that family breakdown and separation between a child and parent may be positive, if factors such as violence and abuse were present prior to the parental separation.

Nurses are at the front line of family support and in order to provide effective care for children, young people and families it is important to have understanding of the lived experience of those people who are directly affected by family breakdown. Yet, despite the existence of a number of studies that explore various aspects of children’s outcomes in the context of father absence, little is known about the experiential aspects of father absence from the perspective of young people themselves. This study sought to explore the perspective of women that experienced father absence due to breakdown of the parental relationship during their childhood and/or adolescent years.

AIM OF THIS STUDY

This paper reports part of a larger study that aimed to develop deep understandings into the meanings and experiences of father–daughter relationships, from the perspectives of a group of young women who experienced father absence due to the breakdown of their parental relationships during their childhood and/or adolescence. This paper explores the perceptions and experiences of a group of adult daughters about their relationships with their absent fathers from the time of the separation (which occurred in their childhoods/adolescence) to the present time.
METHODODOLOGY

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was achieved through word of mouth, a media release in local papers and poster advertisement in which women meeting the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in this study. The participants needed to be healthy women aged 21 years or older residing in the local community, have the ability to converse fluently in English, and had lived in a father absent environment due to parental discord for a minimum period of four years during their childhood and/or adolescent years. Nine women aged between 22–46 years participated in this study. All the participants are independent successful women employed in their desired careers or devoting their time to their valued activities.

Data collection

Data were collected through non-structured phenomenological participant guided interviews that lasted between 1–2 hours. Interviews were conducted in a suitable private location convenient for the participants. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

This study focussed on the lived experience and so a phenomenological approach was selected. The participants’ narratives were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, which was guided by Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology. According to Van Manen (1990), thematic analysis is achieved via three different approaches, including the wholistic approach involving reflecting on the obtained data and identifying narrative that captures the essence of the experience as narrated by the participant. The selective approach, involving the on-going engagement with the text and highlighting excerpts of narrative that articulate aspects of the phenomenon, and the detailed approach, which involves exploring each sentence and phrase being questioned to discover underlying themes and insights about the phenomenon (Van Manen 1990). The utilisation of these three approaches in this research project enabled the phenomenon under study to be expressed as an authentic reflection of the lived experience.

FINAL ISSUES AND RIGOUR

All the participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the study’s purpose. The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time and were not offered materialistic incentives for participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and ethics approval was obtained through the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, all participants were given contact details to local free counselling services in the event that participation in the interview invoked powerful emotions that could cause psychological distress. However, no ethical issues arose in the study and although some participants expressed sadness and tearfulness in the interviews, all the participants expressed a sense of valuing the process. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant privacy.

The rigour of this study was enhanced through credibility, dependability and confirmability (Polit et al. 2001). This was achieved through using participants’ narratives within the report of the findings, utilising investigator triangulation to interpret the data, members of the research team independently reaching the same conclusions, and providing information on how the data analysis was conducted (Polit et al. 2001).

FINDINGS

The women in this study expressed the desire to have a close loving relationship with their fathers. However, due to the lack of and/or inconsistent contact these daughters had with their fathers during their childhood and adolescent years, they had experienced disruption in
these relationships, resulting in difficulties establishing close and bonded father–daughter relationships. This in turn, resulted in the women perceiving their fathers as distant and disinterested, and impacted on the daughters’ behaviours and the views they held about their fathers. Four dominant themes emerged from the data, these are ‘A bond that wasn’t there’, ‘Wanting father to make an effort’, ‘Wanting father to show he cares’ and ‘Struggling to respect’. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

A BOND THAT WASN’T THERE

The participants of this study all had varying degrees of contact with their fathers. The lack of contact, inconsistency of visits and quality time spent together, strongly influenced and shaped the relationships the daughters had with their fathers. Although some women disclosed having relatively frequent contact with their fathers, participants continued to feel that the closeness and a sense of paternal care were still lacking from these relationships. Amy saw her father frequently because he lived in close proximity to the school she went to. However, despite this frequency of contact, Amy did not experience it as quality time spent with her father, and did not feel any sense of closeness in their relationship:

Because Dad lived across the road from school, we used to see him a couple of days a week, but it would only be ‘Hi, how are you?’ … [Now] I probably get one letter a year and maybe two phone calls.

Lucy revealed that after her parents had separated, her father moved interstate for a couple of years. During this period, Lucy had relatively infrequent contact with her father. Upon his return, Lucy felt forced to see her father due to his insistence. However, despite her father’s insistence on regular and frequent visitation, she felt he did not really care about her, she did not experience the time they spent together as quality family time. Eventually Lucy became resentful and no longer desired to spend time with her father:

So in that period of time when he was interstate, I mean we [siblings] would get the occasional letter or phone call I think, not that I can remember but we got the occasional letter and stuff like that and then he came back and we went from not seeing him to we were forced, well I feel we were forced to go and spend every weekend with him. … Every Friday my father would be on the doorstep at 4 o’clock, you know and we had to go with him, you know, and we were with him but he was off working and we were just left at home … So you know he was very pig headed and wanted his access rights and stuff like that. … So we had to go but he didn’t care whether he was there to see us or not and stuff like that and even when he was there we didn’t really do things as a family … I suppose at the time I know I was resentful …

Louise experienced a desire to establish a bond with her father however; she felt her father was not interested in her. She described feeling hurt that her father did not initiate contact and communication with her once he left the family home:

Occasionally like, because my Mum, and where my Dad lives, it is about 15 to 20 minutes away, occasionally he would sort of pop in and say hello, but it wouldn’t be like, ‘come out and we will do something together’ like that, it was more like he would make his presence felt for 20 minutes and then take off again. … Like Dad moved out and that was it, pretty much, like if I wanted to see him, I would have to ring up or when I was at, like he didn’t call me and say, ‘would you like to come out for lunch’ or whatever, it was always me that was making the effort. So I mean that hurt in itself, I didn’t really feel that Dad had any desire to be part of my
life, I suppose and I was, making this futile attempt to establish a bond between us that just wasn’t there. So you know that was pretty hard to deal with.

Debbie reported a sense that she never shared closeness with her father. Debbie’s narrative reveals that she did not see her father as a relative but a stranger whom she would not consider inviting to a significant celebration, her 21st birthday:

I don’t remember Christmas or birthdays with my Dad it was just promises of things to come but never really did. ... I had a 21st and there was never a thought that I would invite Dad. ... I never stopped loving him as a father [but] I didn’t have a relationship with him. He wasn’t a part of my life.

Debbie’s narrative reveals that she loved ‘him as a father’, though there was no paternal relationship to speak of – he was a stranger to her. Though this may seem contradictory, it could be understood that Debbie had strong family values and had a willingness to have a more traditional loving relationship with her father. However, that close relationship had not eventuated. For the first 11–12 years of her life, Sam had been led to believe her father was deceased. When she eventually met her father, Sam did not view him as her father. Rather, he was someone she had not met before – someone she did not know. Sam did not find it necessary to acknowledge him as her father through calling him ‘Dad’, but instead by his Christian name:

I don’t even think I called him Dad or father; I think I called him Jeff.

WANTING FATHER TO MAKE AN EffORT

The women of this study frequently expressed wanting to establish a bond with their fathers, although this was hindered by the lack of contact and shared quality time spent with their fathers. Because of this, these daughters felt that their fathers did not make an adequate effort in maintaining contact and in establishing the quality relationship they sought. This created feelings that the fathers did not care and/or were not interested in their daughters and their lives.

In the following excerpts, Belinda explains her relationship with her father as featuring a lack of communication and being argumentative in nature. Belinda suggested that this is due to the inability or unwillingness of her father, to provide her with the relationship she sought from him. Belinda also explained how she tried to cope with pain that the relationship had caused her by not initiating contact with her father:

We didn’t really have a great basis for knowing each other, which became clearer as I got older. That sort of manifested in the inability to communicate at all. ... I spoke to him a couple of times in the last two weeks, but it was probably about 6 months before that, and he sort of does the grand gesture of ‘How are you?’ ‘Have you got a boyfriend?’ ‘Where are you living?’ ‘How is your work?’ ‘What can I possibly do to help you?’ and then disappears again. ‘Why don’t you call me more often?’ and then never returns phone calls, and just isn’t there ... and now he kind of broadly asks, but he doesn’t listen at all. ... I kind of finally went, this hurts too much, I am not even going to call and I just tested it and went, hmmm my life is quite pleasant and then he started calling again because he must have had some bizarre [need] to, I don’t know, to feel like a father. So I just kind of slowly let him back into my communication ... I don’t know what you call, skating level, so that is sort of where we are at. ... The only real arguments came from me really at that period where I still did need a Daddy, or thought I did and wanted one,
more to the point. That we argued badly because I wanted that relationship and he couldn’t give it, so that was what the arguments came from.

Kate’s relationship with her father is affected by what she perceives as her father’s disinterest in her. Kate holds the view that her father did not respect his marriage and the responsibility that is associated with having children:

Dad, without a doubt his lack of interest in me and lack of respect for … the institution of marriage and his lack of respect for having had children and responsibilities that go with it.

Sue discussed how she felt her father did not acknowledge her as his daughter, this deeply affected Sue and her attitude toward her father, and continues to shape the relationship she has with her father. The excerpt of narrative below illustrates Sue’s perception of her father as a stranger to her because of the disinterest Sue felt her father had in her, and her belief that her father did not know about her life:

For years there was that ‘we were never wanted’ attitude. … Between [ages] 16 and 24, I didn’t speak to him at all, nothing. I would get an occasional card from him but I would get it and just toss it in the bin it was like well if you can’t be bothered. … Why was he good buddies with everybody and he was so nice to my friends but why was he a total shit to me, why didn’t he have a clue? … Because he has never asked about what I’ve done, he will never know what I have done and what I’m proud of.

WANTING FATHER TO SHOW HE CARES

These adult daughters very much wanted a relationship with their fathers yet felt their fathers were not interested in them or their lives. Because of this perceived disinterest, some participants felt that enacting certain behaviours would gain the attention they sought from their fathers. Furthermore, some other participants were deeply affected by the perceived disinterest of their fathers, and felt that this hurt was the factor that influenced and exacerbated detrimental behaviour on their part. Sue described her desire to connect to her father and states that she did things in the hope of forming a connection, as well as engaging in activities she thought he might disapprove of, as a way of gaining his attention:

I wanted to do things that he wouldn’t have approved of. … I think I picked jobs he purposefully wouldn’t like … I know I got into drinking because I thought that was the way to connect to him.

Sarah felt her father was a stranger due to feelings of not being cared for by him. These feelings caused Sarah to perceive herself negatively, and take measures to gain acceptance from her father, although she felt she could never be close to her father because he had left her:

Dad doesn’t care about me; bad things happen to me, people are going to leave me. … When I was 13 I had anorexia, which was partly because Dad told me I needed to lose weight … and for him to say that, it had a bigger impact. It’s very hard to get acceptance from someone especially when they are not there and left you, so it was, how do I get you to care about me?

Amy revealed that although she perceived her relationship with her father as one of friendship rather than close relatives, Amy valued the relationship and sought her father out as an adult just to spend time with him:

I always would go and see him and hang out with him, we would go to the pub for drinks but it would be a friend’s thing, not a father–daughter thing.
STRUGGLING TO RESPECT

Due to the inconsistency and lack of quality that characterised the relationships the daughters had with their fathers, the women expressed having diminished respect for their fathers. Further, these daughters had continued to desire a close father–daughter bond, however because of a sense that the fathers were unable to fulfil these desires; the daughters respect for their fathers and their relationships was further diminished. Indeed, in several cases the fathers were not viewed as fathers, but strangers that did not deserve the respect that a daughter might normally hold for her father. As stated by Cheryl:

No I’ve got no respect for my father I think you got to earn respect, you can’t just have respect because you’ve been given the title ‘Father’.

Amy described how she had diminished respect for her father due to his lack of effort in her and her sibling’s upbringing:

I suppose it would have given me a bit more respect for him if he had made an effort on our upbringing but it used to be Mum’s job not his job. … I love him because he is my Dad but I don’t have that respect like most kids do for their fathers, because he has never made any effort … and never that support in what we do.

Louise described how the respect for her father was diminished through the lack of support he provided her, and the feeling of abandonment she felt when he left the family home. She stated that in being let down by her father, he lost respect in her eyes:

…The respect was a little bit diminished … I think he lost all right and control when he left, that is how I felt about it, like if he was willing to walk out and not really be a part, an active part of my life, I wasn’t going to give him the respect and that sort of thing. I don’t know whether he deserved it or not, I just wasn’t going to give him anything back, because I felt that he abandoned me.

Louise continued to give an example of her father intervening in her life and how she did not feel he deserved her respect. She felt that in leaving her as a child, he had relinquished his right to criticise her as a young woman:

Someone had seen me, having a drink or having a cigarette or something like that, even though I was about 16 or whatever. You know that is the only time Dad would sort of intervene in my life and say, ‘well listen here, you have got to cut out that smoking’ or whatever, and I just thought oh well you are not interested in the good things that I am doing. So I didn’t really care, when he sort of said it, I didn’t respect it. I didn’t respect him coming to me and saying, you know, ‘cut out your smoking’ or whatever because he wouldn’t come to me and say well I am really proud of you for the 90% you got in your exam or whatever. It was always I might have been embarrassing him or something. … I can’t really imagine adhering to any boundaries that were imposed on me by someone who is not even living with me. Yeah I just do not, I don’t think I would have respected it anyway, sort of thing. It was just for the simple fact that he wasn’t there, so, what right does he have to sort of tell me how to live my life, even though I was so young.

Sue described a conversation she had with her father when she was a young 12-year-old girl, and how it made her feel resentful. The resentment Sue felt toward her father arose through Sue feeling her father did not acknowledge that he was a father. Sue continued to explain how she called her father ‘Dad’ only out of respect for her mother, not because she wanted to and nor because she felt he had adopted a fatherly role with her:
We were talking about something and I said what do you want me to call you now, now that I’m getting older. It was one of those important conversations like do you want ‘Dad’ or do you want ‘Daddy’ or do you want ‘Jack’, what do you want? ‘Oh you can call me Uncle Jack’. That’s a very strange thing to say to a 12-year-old daughter, so I wrote him a letter to say I hate you I never want to speak to you again. ... I don’t see him as Dad. I do call him Dad, I have to say I don’t like calling him Dad I would rather call him Jack, but out of respect for Mum I do.

DISCUSSION

The narratives presented have revealed that the absence of their fathers from their everyday lives have generated relationships that are lacking in closeness and intimacy, despite the desire of the participants wanting to establish a close father–daughter bond with their fathers. These narratives reveal that through the fathers leaving the family home and the hurt and pain felt by participants; emotional barriers were created, and these barriers have effectively blocked the establishment and maintenance of close relationships. Findings of this paper support Rohner and Veneziano (2001) who acknowledged that father love and the presence of a loving father in a child’s life offers both a positive influence on the child’s life path, as well as the establishment of a father child bond that is as important as the maternal child bond. The women in this current study viewed the relationships with their fathers as not being ideal, in that there was a perceived lack of effort and care on their father’s part. However despite the flaws, these women placed value on their relationships with their fathers. This was shown through their continuing to seek father–daughter relationships despite the difficulties and hurt this caused them. This also resonates with Mackey (2001), who acknowledged that there is a unique independent bond that exists between a father and child.

Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) argue that although previous research has concluded that father absence has a negative impact on children’s wellbeing it is not father absence that in itself is necessarily negative. Rather, they conclude that a biological parent is not significant to childhood development. However, this current study suggests that the presence of a biological father is important, and the adult daughters in this study valued the love and relationships with their fathers despite the pain and hurt these relations may have caused. Findings of this study have suggested that having a meaningful and fulfilling father–daughter relationship, was actively sought and desired by the participants of this study. This was made apparent through the participants continuing to seek relationships with their fathers over years and decades, despite experiencing continuing disappointments and setbacks. Moreover, this study found that although the women of this study had other nurturing relations in their lives (such as with custodial parents, data not presented here), these relations did not deflect the distress felt by the participant’s as a result of their father absence. Therefore, resonating with past suggestions positing that the absence of a parent and the associated negative psychological impact is not overcome through other loving nurturing relationships (Wade 1995).

Furthermore, Flouri and Buchanan’s (2003) research found that father involvement during childhood and adolescence promoted positive psychological wellbeing, and was a protective factor for negative psychological wellbeing in adult life among females. The findings of this current study suggest that not having a nurturing, strong bond with their fathers was experienced by these women as the catalyst for emotional distress and pain. In keeping with assertions made by Flouris and Buchanan’s (2003) some of the participants in this current study expressed the pain they felt resultant of father absence and the lack of a fulfilling father–daughter relationship, by enacting potentially detrimental behaviours to gain attention from their
fathers. Additionally, although the findings presented here suggest a desire to pursue a relationship with their fathers, it could be posited that over time the women became increasingly distant from their fathers. This is postulated through the women’s realisation after numerous failed attempts that the desired relationship was not possible. This supports Guttman and Rosenberg’s (2003) conclusions that children of divorced families feel distant from their fathers, with this distance widening with increasing age.

The significance of this study to the healthcare professions is associated with the increasing number of children and young people growing up in father absent environments. The findings of this study illuminate an aspect of family life that is not clearly understood despite the fact that many thousands of Australian children and young people are directly affected by parental relationship breakdown. The majority of these children and young people will experience some degree of father absence. Findings suggest that father absence can disrupt the development of satisfying relationships between daughters and their fathers. The experiences of the women in this study highlight the distress that this can cause. Furthermore, the literature indicates that negative outcomes can include early sexual activity, decreased self-esteem and problem behaviours (Ellis et al. 2003; Hendricks et al. 2005; Taanila et al. 2002), although examination of these adverse behaviours is beyond the scope of this paper. Findings of this study provides insights that have the potential to aid in the provision of appropriate and sensitive care of individuals and families experiencing father absence.

Nurses are challenged to support children and young people who may suffer because of the breakdown in the relationship of their parents. Though this study focussed on the experiences of women, a similar study exploring issues for boys and young men experiencing father absence would also be valuable and could raise a different range of issues and concerns. Further research is needed to gain greater insights into the experiences of family members who undergo distress and disruption of relationships due to family breakdown.

**CONCLUSION**

Many Australian children live in families that experience trauma because of the breakdown of the parental relationship. This is known to place children and young people at risk of negative sequelae and life adversity. Nurses and other health and community workers must be well equipped to meet the needs of these children and young people. The findings of this paper provide insights that can help nurses and other healthcare professionals to recognise the emotional and impact that father absence can have on young women.

**References**


