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College Daughters' Relationships with Their Fathers: A 15 year study

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Abstract

Data collected from 1990 until 2004 from 423 college women show that, although the majority felt they had a loving relationship with their fathers, the vast majority felt that the mother-daughter relationship was more communicative, more emotionally intimate, and more comfortable. Daughters and mothers knew one another better and were more involved in one another's lives than were fathers and daughters. Especially when the parents were divorced, the father-daughter relationship was more distant and more strained than the mother-daughter relationship. Daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their fathers and the issues or situations that created the most stress were remarkably consistent throughout the fifteen year period of this study.

College Daughters' Relationships with Their Fathers: A 15 year study

What kind of relationship do most college women have with their fathers? How do these relationships differ from their relationships with their mothers? Have college daughters' relationships with their fathers changed significantly over the past fifteen years? That is, were there noteworthy differences between 1990 and 2004 in how daughters in a college course perceived their relationships with their fathers?

In order to answer these three questions, I began gathering data from female students in 1990 when I created a college course that focused exclusively on father-daughter relationships. The course and its impact are described on my web site (wfu.edu/~nielsen) and in my articles and book (Nielsen, 2001; 2004 & 2005). The present article describes daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their fathers, identifies the major sources of stress and determines whether father-daughter relationships have changed significantly for female students taking my course during the past 15 years.

Biased College Curriculum

Let's begin with a disturbing reality: Most college textbooks tend to focus more on father-son and mother-daughter relationships than on fathers and daughters – and even then, to focus more on the father's shortcomings than his strengths (Booth & Cruter, 1998; Dienhart, 1998; Griswold, 1998; Lamb, 1997; Pruett, 1999). Similarly, while a number of colleges offer courses on mother-daughter relationships, to my knowledge I am still the only professor in the country who offers a course exclusively devoted to father-daughter relationships.

Given this bias in the curriculum, it is not surprising that college educated professionals who work with families often pay less attention to fathers' relationships with the children than to mothers' relationships – especially when the children are

daughters (Baker & McMurray, 1998; Beale, 1999; Carr, 1998; Fagan & Hawkins, 2003; Long, 1997; Phares, 1999; Walters, 1997). Excluding or ignoring fathers is even more likely when the parents are divorced (Amato & Booth, 1997; Brott, 1999; Nielsen, 1999; Warshak, 2002). While college courses need to focus more on father-daughter relationships in order to prepare students for their future jobs and to give young adults a more balanced, more informed perspective on their own fathers (Nielsen, 2005 a), public schools also need to pay more attention to the father's involvement in his daughter's life. (Nielsen, 2005 b).

One reason why father-daughter relationships receive less attention in the college curriculum and in many professions can be traced to the early part of the twentieth century when there was growing concern about the loss of "manliness" in our society. Throughout the 1950s there was a growing concern that boys were becoming too feminine as a result of being raised by overly protective mothers. Give this fear, fathers were urged to be more involved with their sons as a way of protecting the "manhood" of the next generation (Bederman, 1995; Griswold, 1993). But as we will soon see, the idea that fathers are more important and more necessary to their sons than to their daughters may not yet have disappeared.

Father-Daughter Relationships: How good, how bad?

The good news is that most married fathers are spending more time than married fathers in previous generations with their children. On average married, employed fathers spend a little over two hours each week day and six hours on weekends with their children, while married employed mothers - 80 of whom spend less time at work and less time commuting than their husbands - spend a little over 3 hours each weekday and 8 hours on weekends with the kids (Galinsky, 1999; Milke, 2004). And the more hours the mother works outside the home, the more hours the father generally spends with the kids (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Brayfield, 2003; Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001).

More good news is that the most fathers and daughters say they love one another and get along well most of the time. Even during the teenage years, fathers and daughters usually argue less than mothers and daughters and have a less competitive, more affectionate relationship than fathers and sons (Nielsen, 1996; Shulman et al., 1996; Snarey, 1993).

But the bad news is that too many dads seem to feel that they are not as important to their daughters as to their sons. Even today fathers still tend to spend more time with their sons than with their daughters (Lamb, 1997; Phares, 1999; Pleck, 1997; Updegraff et al, 2001). Dads also tend to talk more, share more and give more advice to their sons (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Larson & Richards, 1994; Shulman & Krenke, 1996, Snarey, 1993). And in one recent study only thirty of the fathers believed that their active involvement in their daughter's life was vital to her health and well being (Roper Poll, 2004).

More bad news: When parents divorce or when they are unhappily married, the father-daughter relationship is more easily damaged than the father-son relationship. Because mothers and daughters tend to confide more in each other, daughters are more likely than sons to turn against dad and form an alliance with mom when things are not going well in the marriage. And if the daughter becomes her unhappy mother's friend, counselor, and confidant, the father-daughter relationship usually suffers (Booth et al.,

1998; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996). Given this, the father-daughter relationship is usually more damaged than the father-son relationship when the parents divorce (Ahrns, 2004; Fabricius, 2003; Hetherington, 2003; Knox, 2004; Nielsen, 1999).

Regardless of whether the parents are still married, *throughout their lifetimes* daughters and fathers generally do not communicate as comfortably, spend as much time with each other, feel as close to each other emotionally, or get to know one another as well or talk about as many personal things as mothers and daughters (Amato et al., 1997; Lamb, 1997; Nielsen, 1996; Nielsen, 2004; Way & Gillman, 2000). While bonds between mothers and children usually grow stronger over time, those between fathers and children usually do not (Bengtson & Roberts, 2002). In other words most fathers and daughters are not getting as much as they could from their relationship

Benefits of Positive Father-Daughter Relationships

So what? Why does it matter if fathers and daughters generally do not have as communicative, as involved, or as close a relationship as mothers and daughters? It matters because fathers generally have as much *or more* impact than mothers on many aspects of their daughters' lives. For example, the father has the greater impact on the daughters' ability to trust, enjoy, and relate well to the males in her life (Erickson, 1998; Flouri, 2005; Kast, 1997; Leonard, 1998). And well-fathered daughters are usually more self confident, more self-reliant, and more successful in school and in their careers than poorly fathered daughters (Lamb, 1997; Morgan & Wilcoxon, 1998; Perkins, 2001). African American daughters benefit in these same ways from having a loving, supportive relationship with their fathers (Barras, 2000; Coley, 2004; Gayles, 1997; Taylor, 2003). Daughters with good relationships with their fathers are also less likely to develop eating disorders (Botta & Dumlao, 2002; Maine, 2004). In short, a father has a far reaching, lifelong impact on his daughter.

Given the importance of the relationship, how do young adult daughters in a college Fathers and Daughters course perceive their relationships with their fathers? What do these well educated young women consider to be the major sources of stress and what would they most like to change in their relationships with their fathers?

SAMPLE AND METHODS

From 1990-2004 423 female students ages 20-23 enrolled in a college course on father-daughter relationships in a private university in North Carolina. Roughly 70 percent of the daughters were majoring in social sciences and 30 percent were Women's Studies minors. Nearly 85 percent were from white, upper middle class families where both parents were college educated. And 60 percent were from the Southeast. Twenty percent had parents who were divorced. Less than 50 percent of the students said they enrolled in order to improve their relationships with their fathers. Another 20 percent were taking the course to prepare for future professions in social science, while roughly one third enrolled because "it sounded interesting".

According to the confidential data provided by each student at the beginning of the course, none of these daughters had been physically or sexually abused by her father or been the victim of other severe family problems such as a parent's drug abuse, criminal behavior or untreated mental disorders. None of these daughters had been physically

abandoned by her father or spent any part of their childhood in poverty. Only five daughters had parents who had never been married to one another; and only one daughter had never met her father. Except for those whose parents were divorced, the majority came from the kinds of families in which the best father-daughter relationships are generally created.

The daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their fathers were assessed throughout the fifteen weeks of the course by papers and written questionnaires. Students completed 22 written questionnaires which I developed and eventually incorporated into the course textbook *Embracing Your Father* (Nielsen, 2004). As Table 1 illustrates, each questionnaire required students to assess some aspect of their father-daughter relationship or to identify what they wished were different in the relationship. In order to determine whether there were noteworthy differences between one semester's class and the next, the average class score on each of the 22 questionnaires was compared to the average class score of the next semester's class. If a class had an average score that was more than 10 percent lower or higher than the previous semester's class score on that quiz, it was considered as noteworthy difference.

Table 1

Are You An Equal Opportunity Daughter?

Use 0 for "never," 1 for "rarely," 2 for "usually" and 3 for "almost always."

- I spend as much time alone with my father as I do with my mother.
- I talk directly to my dad instead of going through mom to communicate with him about important or emotional matters.
- I go to my father for advice and for comfort about personal things.
- I ask my father as many meaningful questions about his life, his feelings and his ideas as I ask my mother.
- I share important parts of my life as much with my father as with my mother.
- I make as much effort to get to know my father as I do my mother.
- I encourage my father to ask me questions about my life rather than acting as if he is prying or interfering when he does ask.
- I am as open and honest with my dad as I am with my mom.
- I invite my father to do things alone with me so we have time to talk privately.
- I show my father that I appreciate his skills as a parent, especially when he does things differently than my mother does them.
- I let my father know that he has had and still does have as much impact on my life as my mother does.
- Your score (30 possible)

The higher your score, the more opportunities you have given your father to create as personal, comfortable and communicative relationship as you have probably given your mother.

Students were also required to write three papers analyzing the interviews which they had with their fathers at the beginning, middle and end of the 15 week course. For each interview the students were given a list of questions to discuss with their fathers. The students' papers were used to assess the changes that were taking place in their relationships and to identify which aspects of the relationship daughters were hoping or trying to change.

RESULTS

Regardless of which semester's data were analyzed from 1990 until 2004, the daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their fathers and which aspects of the relationship they would most like to change were remarkably consistent. Consistent meant that the ratings they gave to various aspects of their relationships with their fathers did not vary by more than 10 percent from any one semester to the next. From the daughters' perspectives, not much has changed during the past 15 years in regard to the quality of their father-daughter relationships.

Feeling loved and getting along The good news is that nearly 60 percent of the daughters rated their relationship with their father as "good" or "excellent". Data from questionnaires showed that these daughters felt loved and got along well with their fathers. Regardless of how they rated their relationship with their dad, more than 90 percent felt that they were getting along better with their fathers now than they did during the teenage years.

But as Table 2 demonstrates, the bad news is that 20 percent rated their relationship as "pretty bad" or "terrible". And another 21 percent felt it was merely "alright". In contrast only 6 percent gave their relationships with their mothers such low ratings. That is, almost four times as many daughters gave their relationship with their father a more negative rating than they gave their mothers.

Table 2

Quality of Relationship with Mother and Father		
Rating Scale: 1= terrible 2= pretty bad 3= alright 4= good 5= excellent		
My relationship with dad is....		With mom is...
Excellent	15%	30%
Good	43%	49%
Total Positive	(58%)	(79%)
Alright	21%	15%
Pretty bad	11%	5%
Terrible	10%	1%
Total negative	(21%)	(6%)

More bad news – at least for those of us who want daughters to get as much out of their relationships with their fathers as with their mothers: 75 percent of the daughters gave their relationships with their mothers higher ratings in terms of communication, knowing one another well, and having a more personal way of interacting (Table 3). More than half of the daughters who rated their relationship with their father as “good” or “excellent” gave him a “poor” or “alright” rating on communication and on how well they knew each other. In contrast nearly 70 percent felt mother and daughter communicated better and knew one another better than father and daughter. Only 10 percent felt they communicated better with their father and only one third communicated equally with both parents.

Table 3
Communicating and Knowing One Another

How well do you communicate with your father?		Your mother?
Very well	23 %	40%
Fairly well	28 %	35%
Not too well	39 %	15 %
Poorly	10 %	6%
How well do you know your father?		Your mother?
Very well	16 %	38%
Fairly well	35 %	42%
Not too well	20 %	13%
Not well	29 %	7%
How well does your father know you?		Your mother?
Very well	23 %	50%
Fairly well	42 %	36%
Not too well	20 %	10 %
Not well	15 %	4%

Throughout childhood *and their college years* 80 percent of the daughters said they spent more time talking to and being with their mothers than with their fathers – especially private time with just the two of them together. Roughly 15 percent spent equal time with both parents during their college years, while a mere 5 percent spent more time with their fathers. Given this disparity, it’s no wonder that most of these daughters and fathers did not know one another as well, communicate as comfortably, or share as much with one another as did the mothers and daughters.

Equal Opportunities for Dad Unfortunately the vast majority of these young adult daughters were treating their fathers in ways that reduced the chances of their having a more personal, comfortable, meaningful relationship. On the “Equal Opportunity Daughter” quiz (Table 1) nearly half of the daughters scored below 17 on the 30 point scale. Only 10 percent scored above 25, meaning that they were doing an excellent job giving their fathers equal opportunities. As was true in 1990, in 2004 the daughters’ scores indicated that most were behaving in ways that inadvertently push their

fathers away from the kind of comfortable, personal relationship that the daughters said they wanted.

Areas for Improvement What aspects of their relationships did most daughters want to change? Put differently: what issues created the most tension from the daughters' perspectives? In all years between 1990 and 2004, daughters most wanted changes in three areas: communicating, giving advice, and resolving issues related to money or her personal lifestyle – which meant her not waiting until marriage to have sex or to live with her boyfriend. Nearly 80 percent wanted to communicate more comfortably, more honestly, and more personally with their fathers and to get to know one another better. And more than half said they wanted to spend more time alone with their father without other family members around.

Most daughters wished they could talk more and talk more comfortably with their fathers about personal things. These personal topics include: divorce, ongoing marital unhappiness, alcohol or drug problems, depression, eating disorders, adultery, financial issues, and conflicts with extended family members. The majority also wanted to hear more about their father's romantic experiences and his ideas about love and marriage.

Even though the majority wanted to communicate better with dad, most were still going through their mother to communicate with him about personal or emotional matters. Despite their age and education, more than half were still using mom as the communications satellite who beams messages to dad about the daughter's life. Only one third tell their fathers as much as their mothers about what's going on in their lives or go to him for advice on personal things like boyfriends, depression, or troubling situations with female friends. Although almost 75 percent go to their fathers to discuss non personal things such as money, school, cars, or future careers, only 10 percent are more open and honest with their fathers than with their mothers about personal things.

Daughters with Divorced Parents The feedback from the daughters with divorced parents reflected what other researchers have generally found. These daughters generally had more difficult, more emotionally distant relationships with their fathers than those whose parents were still married. Slightly more than 45 percent described the relationship as "poor" and 80 percent felt they had problems communicating comfortably – especially about matters related to the divorce. Only one third felt that they and their fathers knew each other "very well" or "fairly well." Those who had spent the most time with their fathers after the divorce gave their relationships higher ratings than those who had rarely seen their fathers. What nearly 80 percent wanted most was more affirmation that their fathers loved them and more time alone with him – time without anyone else around.

CONCLUSION

Especially since the fatherhood movement emerged in the 1990s, our society has been urging fathers to become more involved with their children. Yet the feedback for the past 15 years from these well educated, young adult daughters leads to several discouraging conclusions. First, most of these fathers and daughters do not communicate, share personal things, or get to know one another as well as mothers and daughters. When they were growing up and still now in college, these fathers and daughters have not spent nearly as much time together as mothers and daughters – especially private time for just the two of them.

Second, most daughters want more from the relationship with their father—more comfortable communication, more time together, more emotional sharing, more knowledge of one another. Even though the majority feel that they have a loving relationship with their dads, these young women want a more meaningful, more personal relationship. They feel something *is* missing from their adult relationship with dad. Despite this, most of these young women are not “equal opportunity daughters” when it comes to giving their fathers the chance to create a more personal, deeper relationship.

So as professors or college counselors, what can we do with this information? The first step is focus more on father-daughter relationships in the curriculum. This might help young adult women become better equipped to get more of what they want from their father-daughter relationships. More information can also help social science students strengthen father-daughter relationships in their future careers. As college counselors, we can also involve fathers more in any counseling that directly involves parents. We can do more to help daughters strengthen their relationships with their fathers as part of their journey toward better mental and emotional health.

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