

Impact of Father Absence During Childhood on the Psychological Adjustment of College Females

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In the present study, daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had not remarried demonstrated greater insecurity and more negative self-evaluations than daughters who had either not lost their fathers or had lost their fathers but their mothers had remarried. Contrary to the findings of Hetherington (1972), neither reason for father loss (i.e., death or divorce) nor age of daughter at time of father loss was found to affect the psychological adjustment of the college-age daughters who served as subjects in this study.

The literature regarding the effect of parental loss during childhood has indicated that such loss can markedly affect subsequent psychological adjustment. Children and adolescents who have experienced parental death have tended to display withdrawal behaviors (Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975; Hetherington, 1972) and anxiety neuroses (Tuckman & Regan, 1966). Adults who during childhood experienced parental death were reported as overrepresented among depression patients (Beck, Sethi, & Tuthill, 1963; Dennehy, 1966; Forrest, Fraser, & Priest, 1965; Wilson, Alltop, & Buffaloe, 1967) and successful suicide victims (Dorpat, Jackson, & Ripley, 1965). These individuals also more frequently reported that they encountered marital difficulties than their norm group counterparts (Jacobson & Ryder, 1969).

Similarly, children who have experienced parental divorce have also tended to demonstrate an abnormally high frequency of various psychological disturbances. For instance, Felner et al. (1975) and Tuckman & Regan (1966) found that children were more aggressive if they had experienced parental divorce. Adolescents, too, have tended to engaged in more assertive, extroverted behaviors (Hetherington, 1972) and delinquent behaviors (Glueck & Glueck, 1950) if they had previously undergone parental loss through divorce. Finally, adults who had experienced parental divorce during childhood tended more often than their control counterparts to display psychoneurotic disorders

(Brill & Liston, 1966; Ingham, 1949; Oltman, McGarry, & Friedman, 1952), psychotic disorders (Brill & Liston, 1966), psychopathic personalities (Oltman et al., 1952), and attempted suicides (Dorpat et al., 1965).

The above findings tend to suggest that parental loss is frequently associated with disturbances in children's subsequent social and emotional development. Many of the studies, however, failed to investigate the sex of the child (e.g., Bratfos, 1967; Felner et al., 1975; Oltman et al., 1952) and/or which parent was absent as the child was growing up (e.g., Bratfos, 1967; Felner et al., 1975; Tuckman & Regan, 1966). Furthermore, inadequate control groups have been the rule rather than the exception. For instance, in the Oltman et al. (1952) study subjects were patients with neuroses and psychopathic personalities, while the control group was composed of hospital employees. In many other studies (e.g., Forrest et al., 1965; Munro, 1966) institutionalized subjects were compared to nonpsychiatric inpatients or outpatients who were afflicted with various physical illnesses. The inadequacy of this comparison has been previously attested to by Barry, Barry, and Lindemann (1965), who suggested that individuals who have lost a parent in childhood may remain more dependent and therefore seek medical help more readily, thus biasing such a sample for any investigation on parental loss.

Given these limitations on previous research, two general themes still appear to emerge from the studies noted above. First, aggressive, assertive behaviors have been most frequently found among children of divorced parents and withdrawn, anxious, depressed behaviors have been most frequently found among children who lost a parent through death. Second, the earlier the separation from the parent, the more detrimental it was found to be on the social and emotional adjustment of the child.

While the themes noted above may seem to be broad, sweeping statements, they tend to be particularly applicable in the case of how father loss affects daughters' subsequent psychological development. For adolescent girls, Hetherington (1972) reported that daughters separated from fathers by parental divorce responded quite differently in interaction with males than daughters separated from fathers by paternal death. Differences in coping mechanisms toward males could be interpreted as impulsive assertiveness versus a shy, inhibited, reflective approach to heterosexual contact. Daughters of divorcees tended to engage in impulsive approach and attention-seeking behavior, early heterosexual behaviors, and openness and responsiveness to males. Daughters of widows, on the other hand, tended to be more reflective and inhibited and showed more avoidance and restraint toward males. Notably, the extent of disturbances in the heterosexual behaviors and attitudes that was reported by Hetherington (1972) was greater if father loss was experienced by the daughters early in their lives (i.e., before age 6) rather than later.

These disruptions in social and emotional interaction were found by Hetherington (1972) in adolescent girls from 12 to 17 years old. The present

study will attempt to answer the question, Are the same effects to be found in older daughters who have lost their fathers? It has been suggested that in the adolescent male, many disruptions in personality development are attenuated and compensated for by interaction with peers (Hetherington, 1972). If a similar process is operative for older adolescent girls, then the difficulties in social and emotional development that have been reported to occur among younger adolescent girls (Hetherington, 1972) should be reduced in older adolescent girls.

In Hetherington's study (1972) the daughters who had lost fathers had no male figures living in the house since father loss. Had the mother remarried, it is quite possible that many of the detrimental effects of father absence could have been compensated for by the stepfather. This will also be investigated in the present study.

METHOD

Subjects

The students were three groups of female volunteers from introductory psychology classes at Oklahoma State University. The three groups were (1) females separated from their fathers by paternal death, (2) females separated from their fathers by parental divorce, and (3) females who had not experienced the loss of their fathers.

Prior to the collection of data, a questionnaire was distributed in the introductory psychology classes in an attempt to identify students in the above categories and to request their participation. Approximately 1,150 females filled out the questionnaire.

From the 1,150 questionnaires, a total of 75 daughters who had lost fathers agreed to participate in the experiment and 6 who were eligible refused to participate. Of the students who originally agreed to participate, 2 later refused. Over 400 daughters who had not lost fathers volunteered to participate, and a total of 50 were randomly selected. Of these, 39 actually kept their appointments. Consequently, data was collected on a total of 112 students. Of these, 2 students who had lost fathers through divorce were eliminated: one because of failure to finish the questionnaires and one (a foreign exchange student inadvertently included) because of language and cultural differences. Also, 12 students who had not experienced father loss were randomly selected to be eliminated. Altogether, data from 98 students was used in this study. Their age range was from 17 to 22 years old, and 2 students were married and 2 were Blacks. See Table I for number of subjects in each group. Daughters who had lost fathers because of divorce and whose mothers had remarried were overre-

Table I. Subjects Used in This Study

Group	(N = 98)
Widows' daughters, mother unmarried	16
Widows' daughters, mother remarried	12
Divorcees' daughters, mother unmarried	17
Divorcees' daughters, mother remarried	26
Control group (father present)	27

presented in the sample. No student was found who had lost her father through death before she was 6 years old and whose mother had not remarried.

Instrumentation

The study was composed of three sets of measurements: the adult version of the Matching Familiar Figures Test (MFF) developed by Kagan (1965a), the Adjective Check List (ACL) by Gough (1952), and the Security–Insecurity (SI) Inventory by Maslow (1952).

For Phase I the MFF test, which requires individually timed responses, was used. This test purports to measure individual differences in decision time along a stable psychological dimension called reflection–impulsivity.

The tendency to reflect over several possible alternatives before choosing or to impulsively make a choice without considering all possible alternatives seems to be somewhat stable over periods as long as a year (Kagan, 1965a) and predicts performance on reading recognition (Kagan, 1965b), serial learning (Kagan, Pearson, & Welch, 1966b), and inductive reasoning (Kagan, Pearson, & Welch, 1966a).

As mentioned before, Hetherington's research (1972) implied (and she suggested) a difference in coping mechanisms between widows' and divorcees' daughters. The use of the MFF test is a pilot effort to attempt to explore relationships between reflective–impulsive cognitive styles and personality variables. In this test the subject is shown a single picture of a familiar object (the standard) and eight similar variants, only one of which is identical to the standard. The subject is asked to select the one variant that is similar to the standard. The mean response time to the subject's first choice and the total number of errors for the 12-item test were recorded. Girls who scored below the group median of 30.75 seconds for response latency and above the group median of 10 errors were classified as impulsive. Those who scored above the group median for response latency and below the group median for errors were classified as reflective (see Table II).

The instruments used for Phase II were the ACL and the SI inventory. The ACL as a measure of well-adjustment has a wide range of application in person-

Table II. Reflective—Impulsive Subjects as Determined by the Matching Familiar Figures Test

Group	Reflective	Impulsive	Unclassified	Critical proportions
Neither death nor divorce	10	8	9	7 20
Death, no remarriage	5	9	2	3 13
Death, remarriage	4	5	3	2 10
Divorce, no remarriage	6	6	5	4 13
Divorce, remarriage	8	10	8	7 19

ality assessment research (Gough, 1960). It gives 24 scores, among which are favorable adjectives checked, unfavorable adjectives checked, and heterosexuality (willingness to associate with the opposite sex). It has been used to predict both counseling readiness and college dropouts (Heilbrun, 1962), and as a valid personality assessment technique with children (Scarr, 1966). In the present study the ACL was used as a measure of self-criticism. Level of self-criticism was operationally determined by the number of unfavorable self-descriptive adjectives checked.

The SI inventory purports to measure feelings of security, which has been judged by Maslow (1952) to be one of the most important determinants of mental health. It is composed of 75 items such as "Do you have enough faith in yourself?" and "Do you lack self-confidence?" Psychologically insecure females, compared to secure females, were found by White and Kernaleguen (1971) to dress in a more deviant direction (wear extremely short skirts) and to use deviant dress as a means of seeking rewards and being different from others. Secure individuals were also found to be less likely to engage in aggressive responses to frustration (Bennett & Jordan, 1958) and to be more dominant and willing to take chances (Morris, 1957) than insecure individuals.

Procedure

As noted above, all the participants in this study experienced both Phases I and II. During Phase I each student was asked to fill out the MFF test. Subsequently, in Phase II the students were administered both the ACL and the SI inventory. The order of presentation of the latter two questionnaires was counter-balanced. Every effort was made to enable to complete all three of the above mentioned questionnaires in an individual, isolated area. To accomplish this, no more than three students were allowed in the experimental room at one

time. Furthermore, each student was allotted approximately 25 minutes to complete these questionnaires.

RESULTS

Daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had not remarried checked significantly more unfavorable self-descriptive adjectives than daughters who had not lost fathers (father absence by divorce: $t = 2.49$, $df = 42$, $p < .01$; father absence by death: $t = 1.71$, $df = 41$, $p < .05$; one-tailed t tests). Also, daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had not remarried tended to be significantly more insecure, as indicated by their scores on the SI inventory, than daughters who had not lost fathers (father absence by divorce: $t = 1.77$, $df = 42$, $p < .05$; father absence by death: $t = 2.59$, $df = 41$, $p < .01$; one-tailed t tests).

While daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had remarried tended to check more unfavorable adjectives, the difference between them and daughters who had not lost fathers was not significant (father absence by divorce: $t = .63$, $df = 51$, $p > .05$; father absence by death: $t = 1.15$, $df = 37$, $p > .05$; one-tailed t tests). These daughters of remarried mothers also indicated more insecurity than daughters who had not lost fathers, but the difference once again was not significant (father absence by divorce: $t = .75$, $df = 51$, $p > .05$; father absence by death: $t = .86$, $df = 37$, $p > .05$; one-tailed t tests).

Comparison of daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had remarried with daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had *not* remarried revealed no significant difference between these groups on either the number of unfavorable adjectives checked (father absence by divorce: $t = 1.65$, $df = 42$, $p > .05$; father absence by death: $t = .36$, $df = 27$, $p > .05$; one-tailed t tests), or their scores on the SI inventory (father absence by divorce: $t = 1.06$, $df = 42$, $p > .05$; father absence by death: $t = 1.12$, $df = 27$, $p > .05$; one-tailed t tests).

Statisticians (Hays, 1963; Kirk, 1968) have cautioned about the use of multiple t tests in examining data. It is well to note, however, the consistency of the findings. Of the 12 tests performed, 4 were significant, and these were comparisons involving daughters whose mothers had not remarried. Even with the dangers inherent in multiple t tests, this consistency lends credence to the findings.

Since no student whose father had died before she was 6 years old had a mother who had not remarried, no test could be made for this category. However, one-tailed t tests indicated no difference in divorcees' daughters who had lost fathers either before or after age 6, whose mothers had not remarried either in unfavorable adjectives checked ($t = 1.22$, $df = 13$, $p > .05$) or in SI inventory

scores ($t = .59, df = 13, p > .05$). Further, the groups were extended to include daughters whose mothers had remarried and a two-way analysis of variance for unequal N s, with type of father absence (death or divorce) and age of separation (0 to 6, 7 to 16) as the factors, was performed. There were no statistically significant findings with regard to age of the daughter at time of father loss or reason for father absence for unfavorable adjectives checked (age: $F = .10, df = 1/34, p > .05$; reason: $F = .81, df = 1/34, p > .05$) or for SI scores (age: $F = 1.91, df = 1/34, p > .05$; reason: $F = .60, df = 1/34, p > .05$).

To further test for the time element involved in separation from the father figure, Pearson product-moment correlations were performed on number of years without a father figure and scores on the SI inventory and unfavorable adjectives checked. The number of years without a father figure for daughters whose mothers had not remarried was determined by subtracting the students' present age from their age at time of father loss. For daughters whose mothers had remarried, the number of years without a father figure was determined by subtracting their age at time of father loss from their age at the time of their mother's remarriage. The correlations between number of years without a father figure and scores on the SI inventory and unfavorable adjectives checked were all low and nonsignificant, ranging from .01 to .39.

No significant differences were found between divorcees' daughters and widows' daughters on the SI inventory ($t = .52, df = 31, p > .05$) or unfavorable adjectives checked ($t = .46, df = 31, p > .05$) when the mother had not remarried. When groups were extended to include daughters whose mothers had remarried, there were still nonsignificant differences between the groups in SI scores ($t = .84, df = 69, p > .05$) or unfavorable adjectives checked ($t = .31, df = 69, p > .05$).

Tests of proportions (Walker & Lev, 1969) found no significant differences in the proportion of impulsive or reflective students among the widowed, divorced, or no-father-loss groups of daughters. These tests were made on unmarried widows' and divorcees' daughters first, and then extended to include those whose mothers had remarried, with no change in significance (see Table II).

As indicated on the heterosexual scale on the Adjective Check List, divorcees' and widows' daughters demonstrated no significant differences in willingness to associate with the opposite sex ($t = .80, df = 31, p > .05$). These tests were made on daughters whose mothers had not remarried. When the groups were extended to include daughters whose mothers had remarried, there were still no significant differences between the groups ($t = .10, df = 42, p > .05$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study suggest that father loss, especially when the mother has not remarried, has definite detrimental effects on personality de-

velopment for older adolescent daughters. Girls who had lost fathers and whose mothers had not remarried tended to think much more unfavorably of themselves, as indicated by the significantly greater number of unfavorable self-descriptive adjectives checked, when compared to girls who had not lost fathers. This was indicated regardless of whether father loss was by death or divorce.

Daughters who had lost fathers and whose mothers had not remarried also saw themselves as being more insecure, as indicated by the SI inventory, than daughters who had not lost fathers. Once again this was true regardless of whether father loss was by death or divorce.

These statistically significant findings were only for girls whose mothers had not remarried. Girls who had lost fathers and whose mothers had remarried tended to check more unfavorable adjectives and indicate more insecurity than girls who had not lost fathers, but the difference was not significant. This suggests that a male father figure in the home attenuates and compensates for at least some of the detrimental effects caused by loss of the father.

As suggested by Caplan (1961) and Felner et al. (1975), effective means are needed to help children cope with father loss. Essentially, the findings of the present study indicate that the presence of stepfathers may help children overcome some of the problems surrounding father loss and/or absence. While only a few investigations (e.g., Santrock, 1970, 1972) have dealt with the effects of remarriage and the presence of stepfathers on children's subsequent psychological development, their findings have not tended to be in agreement with the findings of the present study. Therefore, future research will need to determine the exact ways that remarriage and the presence of stepfathers serve to either facilitate or retard the psychological development of children who have experienced father loss.

It has been suggested by Hetherington (1972) that daughters of divorcees have a lower self-concept or sense of self-esteem than daughters of widows. The reasoning has been that the divorced mother has more negative attitudes toward herself, her marriage, and life in general than the widowed mother. This is reflected in the divorcees' daughters and widows' daughters in the number of unfavorable self-descriptive adjectives checked, a measure of self-criticism.

While it seems that the loss of a father had detrimental effects on daughters, this study suggests that the reason for father absence and the age at time of father loss are not important factors after the daughters reach college age and enter college. Perhaps, while the daughter is still hindered by the lack of a nurturant father figure, maturity and experience may make the reason for father absence and the age of father loss less relevant. That is, while the daughter may still suffer psychologically from separation from her father, "why" and "when" she was separated from him assumes less importance as she grows older.

The present study has investigated one cognitive coping mechanism, that of impulsivity—reflectivity. More specifically, this study has asked: Do impulsive—reflective behaviors correspond well with what Hetherington (1972) described as

the assertiveness of divorcees' daughters and the withdrawn nature of widows' daughters? Kagan (1966) has listed several behavioral manifestations of reflective and impulsive dispositions in children and has described the reflective child as demonstrating a tendency to avoid peer group interaction and to be initially phobic in a strange social situation with peers and adults. While the reflective child often prefers solitary tasks over peer group interactions, the impulsive child was described by Kagan (1966) as being more likely to seek out and enjoy social interactions. Notably, the results of the present study have indicated that widows' and divorcees' daughters were not different in their impulsive—reflective measures.

It is difficult to pinpoint why these impulsivity—reflectivity results were obtained in this study. Perhaps these coping mechanisms can not be simply defined by a paper-and-pencil test. Perhaps there are no unitary traits of impulsivity and reflectivity, since both are described in terms of different cognitive, social, and personality characteristics. Of course, impulsivity and reflectivity are heterogeneous constructs. It is quite possible that impulsivity and reflectivity, as measured by the MFF, are not mediated by the same variables as the differential behavioral responses toward males tested by Hetherington (1972). Apparently, this is an area that needs further exploration.

In heterosexual behavior the widows' or divorcees' daughters showed no difference in stated willingness to associate with the opposite sex. This indicates at least an equal desire on the part of both groups to interact with the opposite sex. This equal willingness is only a test measure, which may or may not be carried out in overt behavior. Notably, the differences found by Hetherington (1972) were mostly observations of behavioral interaction. As mentioned earlier, however, there is the possibility that after the daughter enters college and has the opportunity to interact with and model from her peers, some of the detrimental effects due to father loss may be attenuated. That is, the shy, inhibited widow's daughter may become more responsive in heterosexual interaction, and the divorcee's daughter may have the same opportunity to learn appropriate roles for heterosexual interaction; thus the two groups could become more similar.

Dennehy (1966) has reported that most studies investigating the effects of father loss have generally compared psychiatric patients with (1) nonpsychiatric patients, (2) general population groups variously selected, and/or (3) actual controls. The present study, in contrast, has simply compared college females who have experienced father loss with college females who have not experienced father loss. Thus, the present study has managed to avoid many of the threats to internal and external validity which have detracted from many previous studies' findings regarding the effects of father loss.

Interestingly, Hetherington's study (1972) investigated girls who tended to be from lower- and lower-middle-class backgrounds. In contrast, the girls employed in the present study were mostly from middle-class backgrounds. It

would seem quite likely that there could be definite social class differences in life styles and possible differences in heterosexual interaction patterns between these two groups of girls. Thus, researchers need to consider variables like these before they attempt to generalize from the findings of the present study to groups of females who are not found in appreciable number on college campuses.

In summary, while prior research has indicated that reason for and age of separation from father may affect daughters' subsequent personality development, the present study did not find this. Rather, age of the daughters when tested and whether or not their divorced or widowed mothers remarried were found in this study to have a significant impact on the psychological adjustment of daughters who had lost their fathers.

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