

A Psychotherapeutic Exploration of the Effects of Absent Fathers on Children

Dave O'Dwyer

Student No: 10032134

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Supervisor: Gráinne Donohoe

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This work is dedicated to the children who woke up this morning without a father present in their lives.

Abstract

The importance of a father in the lives of children is often underestimated, yet studies consistently show that fathers play a central role in many aspects of a child's development, including emotional well-being, educational achievement and social interactions. At the same time as fathers are assuming a more active role in child rearing, however, many children find themselves without a father present in their lives. This paper will study the importance of the father's role in a child's upbringing and the effects his absence has on them. Through semi-structured interviews with four psychotherapists and one counseling psychologist, all of whom work in the field of child and adolescent psychotherapy, the study will explore the effects of father-absence on children, the different ways both genders experience father absence, the differing impacts of father absence through death, divorce and work commitments, and the place of the father in contemporary society.

Chapter 1: Introduction

For centuries the view of the father was that of head of the household, the unquestioned authority of the family. This began to change with the social and economic changes of the 20th century, which brought about a change in the family structure and saw the role of the father change from that of disciplinarian to that of caregiver. Fathers, instead of being a remote presence in their children's lives, became actively involved in their upbringing.

This, however, occurred alongside a decline in the prevalence of the traditional family unit. In 2015, of all births recorded in Ireland, 35.4% were registered as outside marriage, whilst 87,770 marriages were dissolved in the divorce courts (CSO, 2011). With the majority of children of single-parent homes living with their mothers, fathers have often, once again, found themselves on the periphery of family life and their children often find themselves having sporadic contact or no contact at all with their fathers.

The aim of this study is to explore the importance of the father in children's lives and to investigate the impact his absence has. To this end the study will examine the existing literature and published studies available on the role of the father in children's lives and the effects that his absence can have. The findings that arise from this review will inform a series of interview questions that will be put to four psychotherapists and one counseling psychologist who specialise in the field of child and adolescent counseling. The interviews will explore the participants' experience of the effects of father-absence on their clients' lives. The data that emerges from these interviews will then be reviewed and analysed and compared with the findings of the literature review. This will enable a conclusion to be drawn from the research and suggestions for further research to be made.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The role of the father in the lives of children is one that has received little attention in psychotherapeutic literature. Indeed, the father has been termed “The Forgotten Parent” (Ross, 1979 p.317-327) because of this lack of discourse. Concerns about sexism have often meant that the role of fathers has been sidelined in discussions about children, in favour of emphasising the mother's perspective (Greif and Bailey, 1990 p.88-92). With more children living apart from their biological fathers – a quarter of Irish families are headed by one-parent, with this being the mother in 86.5% of cases (CSO, 2016) - there is a need to understand how the absence of a biological father impacts on children. This literature review will begin by looking at the role of the father in children's lives from both a psychoanalytic and societal perspective. It will then view the impact of the loss of a father at different stages of childhood development. The mental health effects of the lack of a father on children will be looked at next, followed by the differing effects of a father's absence on both sons and daughters, the impact of father absence on sexual behaviour and, finally, the role that psychotherapy can play in helping children of absent fathers to deal with their loss. But first we turn to the role of the father.

2.2 Role of the Father

From the mid-1800s, fathers came to be seen principally as economic providers for their families rather than active members of it (Griswold, 1993). Consequently, the role of the father has changed from that of a nurturing, present figure in the family to that of a physically, often emotionally and psychologically, absent figure (Pleck, 1987, p.83-97). The father's role has frequently been viewed as a supporting one, which suggests a certain distance from direct caring (Thomas, 2010, p.61-75).

Sigmund Freud, however, stated that the father plays an important role in both the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal stages of child development. For Freud, a loving attachment to the father, particularly for boys, was essential for healthy development and resolution of the oedipal stage (Freud, 1921, p.67-143). Freud saw the father as a protector who is idealised by the small child (Burlingham 1973, p.23-47), while Lacan (1980, p.218-219) viewed the father as the personification of the law. In more recent times the father has been seen as an attachment figure in his own right (Lamb, 1997, p.104-120), an internalised other (Davids, 2002, p.67-92) and as a container for projected anxiety that

originates within the mother-child relationship (Davids, 2002, p.67-92).

The father is seen as a distinct entity in his own right, who encourages the child's autonomy and sense of independence (Greenacre, 1966, p.46-48). The loss of a father can have particularly profound effects on boys. According to Osherson (1986, p.4) a boy without a father has to separate from his mother without having a model on whom to base his emerging male identity. Indeed, a boy may retreat from assuming a man's role because, without a father figure in his life, such a role is unavailable to be internalised by him (Ott, 1997, p.37-51). Winnicott (1944, p.82-86) posits that a father ensures love from one parent while there may be hate towards the other, while Muir (1989, p.47-52) sees the father as a buffer between the projective distortions that can impair a mother-child relationship. Ross (1977, p.327-347) sees a father in a mentor-like role, determining a boy's readiness for tenderness as well as his acquiring the means for work and productivity, while Pruett (1989, p.389-405) sees closeness between father and son as opening the boy to feelings that could have been associated with being too feminine. An absent father gives a boy less chance of channelling his aggression, which then needs to go toward combatting any feminine identification (Ross, 1977, p.327-347). Loss of a father is suggested to increase the risk of ego deficits, such as impaired intellectual functioning, poor frustration tolerance, inability to delay gratification and susceptibility to learning disabilities (Abelin, 1971, p.229-252). Furmen (1991, p.221-234) sees the father as another source of love who heightens self-esteem and whose absence leads to poorer self-image and higher levels of aggression. The age of the child when the father ceases to be a part of their lives can play a critical part in how it is experienced.

2.3 Loss of the Father at Different Stages of Childhood

The loss of the father in infancy and early childhood can have deep effects on narcissistic development. This can include fears involving abandonment and object loss as well as a heightened need for maternal closeness according to Burgner (1985, p.311-320). Burgner further believed that paternal absence could interfere with the separation-individuation process and leave children fixated at the pre-Oedipal development stage. Father loss during the Oedipal period can lead to distortions of the normal competitive feelings, fears and humiliations with which a child must learn to cope, due to the lack of the father figure with whom to work them out (Neubauer, 1960, p.286-309). Father loss during the latency period can deprive a child of a sense of mastery and industry which comes from development of skills and talents through modelling and identification with the father

(Gauthier, 1965, p.481-494). Loss of the father during adolescence may result in over-idealisation of him which prevents later de-idealisation and can result in a narcissistic fixation in addition to delayed entry into the peer group (Kohut, 1971, p.83-83).

2.4 Mental Health

Researchers have found higher rates of depression (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985, p.518-530; Servaty, 2001, p.311-330) and negative feelings (Carlson, 2006, p.137-154) in children from single-parent homes. Young people from fatherless homes are 63% more likely to commit suicide and 85% more likely to have behavioural problems (U.S. Divorce Statistics, 2008; Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund & Rosen, 2003 p.274-276). Indeed, behavioural problems often stem from the child's emotional anguish at being abandoned (McMillan, Feigin, DeAngelis, and Jones 2006, p.141-158). The absence of a father can lead to lack of confidence and feelings of low self-worth (Mancini 2008, p.32).

McLanahan, Tach & Schneider found that there is strong evidence that father absence negatively affects children's social-emotional development, particularly by increasing externalising behaviour. Social-emotional effects persist into adolescence and often account for risky behaviour, such as smoking or early childbearing. There is also evidence for a causal effect on adult mental health, suggesting that the psychological harm of father absence experienced during childhood can persist throughout life (McLanahan, Tach & Schneider, 2013, p.399-427). Other problems typically include low self-esteem, identity problems, depression, difficulties in peer relationships, and aggression (Sinkkonen & Keinänen, 2008, p.38-49). Father absence can also have a profound developmental and emotional consequence for children (Lamb, 1997; Sills 1995, p.33-34) as well as behavioural, educational and legal consequences (Arendell, 1993, p.562-586; Blankenhorn, 1995). A 2016 study has found that adolescents living in father-absent families are significantly more likely to suffer from depression than adolescents living in father-present families (Mitra Ghosh, 2016, p.79-81).

Children of absent fathers can view themselves as unworthy of being loved and as deserving to be abandoned (Herzog and Sudia, 1971, p.30), which can lead to feelings of shame and worthlessness, which, in turn, can lead to them repressing their needs or emotions (Schenk and Everingham, 1995) and often resorting to expressing their sadness through anger and violence (Balcom, 1998, p.287). A study by Pougnet, Serbin, Stack and Schwartzman (2011, p.173-182) found that children whose

fathers were absent from the home displayed a higher propensity to internalise problems, such as sadness, social withdrawal and anxiety. Jablonska and Lindberg (2007) emphasised the link between adolescents in single mother homes and substantially increased risk behaviours, victimisation and mental distress. Lack of father engagement in childhood was found to result in more psychological morbidity in later adulthood (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid & Bremberg, 2008, p.153-158) and the negative psychological effects of father absence during childhood can persist throughout adult life (McLanahan, Tach & Schneider, 2013 p.399–427). The loss of contact with a father can also lead to insecure attachments in intimate relationships later in life, with men particularly prone to engaging in distancing behaviours, and women likely to be more demanding of partners (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). The loss of paternal contact can also impair trust in intimate relationships (Franklin, Janoff- Bullman & Roberts, 1990, p.743-755).

In a study of 131 children between the ages of 2 and 18 years at the time of marital separation, children aged 5 to 8 years experienced moderate levels of depression, a preoccupation with the loss of the father and an intense grieving and longing for his return (Wallerstein, 1987, p.199-211). Children aged 9 through 12 years showed intense anger at one or both parents and were more likely to have a shaken sense of identity and to develop somatic symptoms. The normative separation-individuation of adolescents was greatly altered as were their perceptions of family structure and parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). A ten year follow-up study found that the 5 to 8 year group had experienced intense emotional pain, neediness, acute separation anxiety and fears of abandonment, while the older age groups displayed increased psychological adjustment problems (Wallerstein, 1987, p.199-211). A 25 year follow-up found that participants carried intense anxiety into adulthood, had significant issues in regard to relationships and intimacy and displayed anger at parents (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000 p.353-370).

Researchers have found lower educational scores, attainment and success (Amato & Keith, 1991 p.43-58; Pong, Dronkers, & Thompson, 2003, p.681-699; Shinn, 1978, p.295-324) in children from single-mother homes. Higher rates of behavioural difficulties (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, p.309-320) including youth incarceration (Harper & McLanahan, 2004, p.369-397) and delinquency (Carlson, 2006, p.137-154) have been found in children from single-mother homes. A significant number of children of absent fathers have also reported an inability to become attached to any subsequent stepfather that entered the family, often due to the internalised preservation of the “good” father and the projection of the “bad” father onto each stepfather (Jones, 2007, p. 43-58).

2.5 The Effects of Gender

For a boy, identification with the father fosters a sense of masculinity and confidence (Tyson, 1989, p.1051-1069), while a boy who lacks this often lacks the ability to contain his aggression (Galenson, 1994). He is deprived of his father's assistance in modulating his aggressive drives (Herzog, 1980, p.219-233) and, in the father's absence, he defends himself against feared passivity and homosexuality by being aggressive (Sugarman, 1997, p.227-243), thus proving that he is 'straight'. Such boys often exhibit exaggerated masculinity, which can be an over compensation for their insecure masculine identification (Holman, 1998, p.101-113). This can result in rejection of authority, particularly when imposed by females, increased aggression and an exploitative attitude toward females (Draper and Harpending, 1982, p.257). Sinkkonen & Keinänen (2008, p.46-49) give the story of a young boy whose father had little involvement in his life and who, therefore, had few positive or constructive internal images of masculinity. He was lonely, depressed and began to have suicidal ideas. During psychotherapy it emerged that he was deeply saddened by, and resentful of, his father's lack of engagement in his life and felt abandoned and worthless.

Adolescent boys without a father in their lives lack the natural role model they need as they engage in the process of forming their own identity (Josselson, 1989, p.142) and can end up doing so with no positive male influence (Lee, 1994, p.36). In forming their identity, boys become influenced by their peer groups (Erikson, 1980). Boys from father-present families can balance the influence of their peers with their father's continuing presence, while boys from father-absent families lack this balance and become particularly susceptible to peer influence (Biller, 1993, p.214).

According to Balcom (1998, p.283-296), men who were abandoned by their fathers often have problems establishing self-worth and developing secure emotional attachments with both partners and children. Without their fathers modelling positive behaviour in relationships, such men often have difficulty developing and sustaining intimate relationships (Bartholomew, 1990, p.147-178); (Byng-Hall, 1991, p.199-215).

Father-absence for girls is associated with early pubertal maturation (Tither & Ellis, 2008, p.1409-1420) which is associated with a variety of negative mental and physical health outcomes, including an increased risk of 4.7% of contracting breast cancer (Decarli, La Vecchia, Negri, & Franceschi, 1996, p.187-189). Girls specifically have a high risk of developing depression (Culpin, Heron, Araya, Melotti & Joinson, 2013) and low self-esteem (Mancini, 2010) where a father is absent in early childhood. Levine Coley (2003, p.867-875) found that daughters of absent fathers were more

likely to experience symptoms of depression and externalising behaviours than those in father-present families, while Pougnet, Serbin, Stack and Schwartzman (2011) showed significant associations between father absence and increased internalising behaviour in girls. A further study by Cheyne (1989) found that girls who had grown up in father-absent households were more likely to experience insecurity, anxiety, depression and difficulties in relationships with men.

2.6 Sexual Behaviour

Children raised without a biological father in the household have earlier average ages of first sexual intercourse than children raised in father-present households (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985, p.825–855), (Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson Horwood & Pettit, 2003 p.801–821), (Mendle *et al.*, 2009, p.1463-1480). Compared to children raised by both biological parents, children who are raised in households without their biological father present also exhibit significantly increased rates of teenage pregnancy (Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997, p.41-55; Newcomer & Udry, 1987, p.235-240; Quinlan, 2003, p.376-390; Wight, Williamson, & Henderson, 2006, p.473-494). Father absence can play a large part in determining the amount of sexual partners a child will have later in life (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991, p.650). Father absence is particularly influential on female reproductive behaviour (Belsky *et al.* 1991, p.650; Draper & Harpending, 1982, p.255–273; Ellis, 2004, p.920–958; Ellis & Garber, 2000, p.485-501). In a study of 11,406 adolescents aged 14-21, the mean age of first sexual intercourse was 15.28 for children from father-absent homes compared to 16.11 for children whose fathers were present throughout their childhood (Mendle *et al.*, 2009, p.1471), suggesting, that father-present homes are the ideal structure for children and that any deviation from this must be considered “inherently damaging to children” (Mendle *et al.*, 2009, p.1477).

In a study of 12,686 young men and women aged between 14 and 22 years, those whose fathers were always absent reported a significantly lower ideal age at childbirth, while only 60% of youth from father-absent homes reported an ideal age at marriage younger than their ideal age at childbirth, as against 87% of youth from father-present homes (Ryan, 2015, p.211-223). This research also suggested that father absence leads to earlier sexual experimentation for girls than boys (Ryan, 2015, p.221). As adolescents reared in single-parent households may have parents engaging in sexual behaviour with partners with whom they have no long-term commitment, the children may be more likely to view sexual intercourse outside a committed relationship as normative (Wu & Thomson, 2001, p.682-696).

Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper's (1991 p.647-670) psychosocial acceleration theory suggests that father absence implies to children that a committed relationship isn't necessary for propagation, while socialisation theory suggests that father absence implies weak commitments therefore modelling riskier sexual behaviour (Amato & DeBoer, 2001, p.1038–1051). Social control theory advances the claim that father absence facilitates earlier sexual behaviour because of reduced parental supervision (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985, p.825-855; Newcomer & Udry, 1987, p.477-485).

2.7 The role of psychotherapy

At the centre of psychotherapy is the relationship between client and therapist (Rogers, 1957). This relationship, according to Kareem (1988, p.57) is everything - the therapist tries to help their client to understand past relationships while helping them to foster good relationships in the present. The therapeutic relationship, in addition to helping the client to develop the ability to cultivate healthy relationships, can model to the client what a healthy, trusting relationship with boundaries is like (Thomas, 2010, p.64).

The child of an absent father may have confusion about who his father is and why he is not around (Holman, 1998, p.108). The more information he has, the better his social and emotional well-being is (Owusu-Bempah, 1995, p.266). Father-absent children often fantasise about their father (Rose, 1992, p.21-23), frequently believing that the absence is their own fault (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976, p.20-32). In such cases, one of the roles of psychotherapy is to create a more realistic appraisal of the father (Rose, 1992, p.32).

Children of absent fathers often struggle with feelings of grief, hurt and anger (Fenichel, 1954, p.246). Dealing with these emotions allows them to mourn the relationship and give it context within their lives (Rose, 1992, p.26-28). Children often idealise the absent father and may be reluctant to admit anger towards him (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976, p.20-32). This anger can be turned on themselves, resulting in low self-esteem (Biller, 1993, p.228-232) and vulnerability to depression in adulthood (Amato, 1991, p.543-556).

Identification with the absent father is common and can help alleviate feelings of anxiety and anger the child may be experiencing (Holman, 1998, p.109). While identification with a benign father can be a positive experience, identification with a father with a negative image can have detrimental emotional and social consequences (Holman, 1998, p.110). The mother's feelings about the absent

father have a strong influence on the child's inner representation of him (Marks & Lovestone, 1995, p.157-168). Often, the mother's feelings about the father will be negative ones and re-establishing the father in the child's life in therapy can arouse those feelings in her again (Vincelet, 1982, p.715-719). This can impact the therapeutic work adversely if not handled tactfully (Holman, 1998, p.112-113).

Clients may feel disloyal to their absent father when engaged in therapy, particularly if the therapist is male (Holman, 1998, p.112). There are huge possibilities for transference and the therapist should always be aware of what they might be representing for the client (Thomas, 2010, p.62-65), as clients may often be sitting in the therapy room with their father rather than their therapist (Thomas, 2010, p.69). An absent father is a recurring role in the lives of many psychotherapists (Stephenson & Loewenthal, 2006, p.436), and it is this absence that often leads to them becoming therapists, having often taken on the role of family carer (Maeder, 1989, p.74). This increases the possibilities for countertransference and the prospect of the therapist playing out their own unresolved issues in the therapy room (Satir, 2000 p.117-119). A study by Stephenson & Loewenthal (2006, p.442-446) found that therapists with an absent father struggled in the therapeutic relationship with, among other things, endings, boundaries and over-responsibility. To this end, supervision is a vital element of the therapist's work (Stephenson & Loewenthal 2006, p.447).

2.8 Summary

Children with absent fathers would seem to be at a disadvantage on almost every level researched. The father, when viewed as a distinct entity in his own right, provides a second source of love and attachment. He facilitates and encourages a child's autonomy and sense of independence and his role, particularly in shaping a boy's identity, is significant. The loss of a father at different stages of childhood can have far reaching impacts, particularly in the areas of mental health and general well-being. The absence of a father is linked to depression, negative social-emotional development and increases in externalising behaviour. Father absence has a negative impact on educational attainment, and can lead to behavioural problems and trouble with authority figures. The influence of father absence on sexual behaviour is also significant, being linked with both lower age of first sexual activity and, in girls, in early pubertal maturation.

An overview of the literature in this field shows that the majority of studies have been international, with very little Irish research on the subject. With this in mind, it would be beneficial to view the

topic from an Irish perspective and see how the results compare to previous studies. There is also little available literature on whether the reason for father absence - divorce, death or work commitments – affects outcomes or, indeed, if the effects of a psychologically absent father are any different from those of a physically absent one.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will set out the research methodology used in order to explore the effects of absent fathers on children. It will outline the reasons for choosing a qualitative research method and will demonstrate how the information was obtained, how the participants were selected and the ethical considerations that were involved in the study.

3.2 Research Design

Due to the explorative nature of the topic, a qualitative approach was considered the optimum method of analysis. According to McLeod (2001), qualitative research can be seen as an inquiry into the meaning people give to their experiences. Effectively, it is describing how they understand what they experience. The aim of this research is to explore the underlying themes in children's experience of father-absence, through their psychotherapists' experiences of them, and to describe and understand them.

3.3 Sampling

The research involved semi-structured interviews with four psychotherapists and one counselling psychotherapist with at least five year's experience working with children and adolescents. The therapists work with both genders, allowing the research to evaluate the different experiences of father absence for both boys and girls. It was hoped that these interviews would provide the details to allow for the depth of analysis necessary to answer the questions.

Each interview lasted for between 25 and 45 minutes and covered the following topics:

- The therapist's experience of clients with absent fathers.
- An exploration of whether the reason for the father's absence matters.
- An exploration of whether the age of the child when father absence occurs affects how they experience it.

- An exploration of whether the gender of the child affects how they experience father absence.
- An exploration of issues with transference or countertransference specific to the relationship with father absent children.
- A consideration of the difference between outcomes when a father is completely absent and when there is some contact.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis: Thematic

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports patterns or themes in the data and is a method for organising and describing the data set in rich detail. The data set was searched to find repeated patterns of meaning. Themes or patterns within the data were examined and recorded. The coding process was comprehensive and included familiarisation within the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among the codes, reviewing the themes and naming and defining them.

3.5 Ethical Issues

This research was carried out under the fundamental principles of a person's right to privacy and protection from harm and abided by the IACP Code of Ethics in terms of client confidentiality. In advance of any interviews taking place, the participants were provided, both verbally and in writing, with information regarding the nature of the interviews and the purpose of the research being undertaken. They were also informed of their rights as research participants, which includes the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage up to a specified date.

The participants were further assured of anonymity regarding both their identities and any identifiable material discussed in relation to any of their clients. Accordingly, pseudonyms were used on all submitted documents and similarly, identifiable features in transcripts were modified to protect the privacy of those involved. The recordings are stored on the researcher's personal computer in a password protected file.

The participants each signed a consent form in advance of the interviews commencing, confirming their willingness to partake under the conditions set out.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the data collected from the interviews that took place. Each participant, four of whom were psychotherapists and one who was a counseling psychologist, was accorded a pseudonym as follows:

Participant 1: Nora

Participant 2: Martha

Participant 3: Stephen

Participant 4: Paula

Participant 5: Sarah

The interviews explored the therapists' experiences of the effects of father absence on their clients. In the course of these interviews several themes emerged. These have been organised into three main themes:

- A loss narrative
- Gender differences
- The role of the contemporary father.

4.2 Theme One: Loss Narrative

The participants were asked questions about how the loss of a father impacts children at different stages of development. They were also asked about their experiences of the differing effects of father loss through death, separation/divorce, or work commitments. A recurring thread in their answers was that of loss – loss of identity, loss of the primary male role-model, loss of a loving parent. This can lead to feelings of sadness, anger and abandonment, often compounded by the child feeling responsible for the father's absence.

In Nora's experience, a child who has never known their father has no memories or experiences of

him, which can “*create a hole, a gap. The kid knows the father isn’t around but it can’t put any references to the father*”. The child can struggle with their feelings because “*it’s much harder to come to terms with, or to acknowledge and value the feelings that are there if the person has never been around*”. This same therapist speaks of a child whose father becomes absent at around the age of six or seven, as experiencing it very differently. “*It’s very painful, but at least the kid has memories ... it’s much more concrete, you have something to go and work with and think about*”.

In Sarah's view, the age at which a child experiences the loss of a father increases the likelihood of them not completing the tasks associated with that particular developmental stage:

“they miss developmental bits and if you don’t catch up on that by the time they get to adolescence they are really struggling, so that’s the adolescent you are getting in ... you are starting to kind of see where the gaps are in the development. That’s something that you see quite a lot.”

Father loss in adolescence can often be compounded by the turbulent changes a child is experiencing at this stage of their development. Martha notices a divide between children who have experienced the loss of a father before the age of ten and those who experience it after:

“when you move into puberty and you are dealing with questions of sexuality and the moving out of the family into the social bond, there is a necessity then for the other to split, just as a psychosis, you need to have split transferences, you need to have, if possible, two transferences when you are working with a psychology. In the same way when you move into puberty you actually need to have two parents. So the difference and the significance of an absent father is very different for those I would say, post pubertal or pubertal and pre-pubertal”.

Stephen, however, sees the teenage years as also bringing an opportunity to strengthen the bonds between children and their absent fathers:

“as the teens get towards the end of that 12 to 18 age range, they take much more responsibility for maintaining the relationships and travelling. Whereas the younger teens, they are not so aware or conscious of maybe their role in trying to maintain those relationships, so if the adults aren’t really managing it it’s less likely to happen”.

According to Paula, for teenagers in the identity-seeking phase of their lives, “*it becomes really important for them to know who their father was, who they are really*”. However, at this stage of development:

“teenagers will often not want to be with their parents in a place where they don’t have friends around, as they get older, because they are pushing for more independence. Sometimes parents take this as rejection, it’s not

rejection, what it is is them doing what they are supposed to be doing to develop, to grow up”.

The reasons for the absence of the father also impacts on the child’s experience of it. Death, although traumatic, has a certainty and a sense of clarity. It also involves a grieving process, which, for Nora, means that *“the rest of the family can grieve the person that has died for whatever reason and can include the little person in that process”.*

Stephen observes that:

“there is a little bit more public acceptance of the grief process when someone dies ... so in some respects though death is obviously ... one of the worst things that can happen to a kid ... it appears simpler to try and work with the loss than the loss of a parent in an uncertain kind of separation or absence”.

In Sarah’s experience, a child who has experienced the loss of a father through death:

“doesn’t have the abandonment stuff, she doesn’t have the rejection ... it’s just pure sadness, that’s the only word I can use for them. I had one of those girls today and it just, she cries a lot, she just misses him”.

The loss of a father as a result of marital breakdown can, however, have more complications.

Children often feel responsible for the father’s absence. Nora states:

“they usually assume that it has been their fault, even if they are told it’s not, they just do. And again it’s depending on the adults around, how are they going to manage that, how can they help the kid to understand that they have not done anything wrong whatsoever?”

Stephen says of separation:

“I am continually shocked at how impactful that is for young people and to the parents too, just what a horrendous experience it is ... for a lot of people it’s an absolutely horrendous renegotiation of relationships and then there is all the practicalities that go in the financial and housing and maybe young people being taken out of their sort of friendship zones where they’ve grown up as result of having to find a new accommodation ... it’s very, very unique really, there are lots of factors, the family, the make of the family, new partners, there is the geography, the situation, say the mother’s and the father’s relationship with each other or, you know, the animosity”.

In a separation, how the parents interact and how the mother speaks of the father has a large bearing on how the child deals with it. Nora says:

“separation isn’t easy, it can cause a lot of tension, a lot of conflict between the two adults involved and what we do know is the more conflict between

the two adults, the more hostile, the less successful the good outcomes for the kid ... the higher the conflict and the war they create among each other, the higher likely is that kid at adolescence will struggle. It is a rough predictor and I see over and over again how kids start doing drugs, alcohol, self-harm, all that stuff and all that stuff helps to self-regulate feelings that are too big and because parents are caught up in the war zone they haven't really got the capacity and the emotional presence to help their developing child, or even more so, developing adolescent with their own feelings".

In Paula's view, "if there is manipulation or back biting or anything going on between the parents, that really causes a difficulty". Sarah concurs, stating:

"what I notice is the difference between parents who can work it out and work out the details or whatever needs to be worked out without getting [the children] involved. That makes a big difference, the parents who are fighting or ... in and out of court or dissing each other in front of the child ... and they are bringing it home ... you will see a huge difference in those types of children I think. I think they are the children that struggle the most".

Martha talks of a child whose mother is reluctant to talk about the absent father:

"there is no narrative around when her father is absent, there is simply a void. And there is also a prohibition against speaking the words of the father's absence".

Nora notes that where there is a reluctance to speak about the father:

"some children who ... pick it up from the environment that these questions aren't really welcomed, they tend to maybe not ask anything or say anything and it will be communicated in direct ways. It's always there, the questions are there no matter what, whether they are expressed or not, but they may be communicated in different channels, indirect or direct".

Unlike the grieving process when a parent dies, Stephen feels that:

"The grief process in separation is not terribly well acknowledged by us generally, we sort of expect kids to get on with it and it's very kind of normalised often and you can forget that that's what kids are going through and people kind of think we are a modern country and that's just part of the fabric of society and it's easy to forget just how much grieving goes on for kids in that situation".

Paula says:

"separation and divorce is much more difficult because the object of their grief is still there ... no matter what way you look at it that's a huge rejection in any person's life, that their parents are absent ... that's just such an indictment and this is the perception that the teenager has of parents not caring really, that it's a rejection".

While Sarah notes that, *“the kids with the dad who has left for whatever ... they are just raging, they are really angry and rejected”*.

All the participants agreed that where a father is absent due to work commitments, the impact on the child is quite different. Nora says that in this situation:

“You can provide the kids with a story - this is your father’s profession ... he goes away, he goes around the world, in whatever way you want to create a story, a narrative that makes sense. And dad will be back but it will be in a long, long, long time ... but we can still stay in communication ... it’s about how do adults create a narrative that helps the kid to understand why it’s happening ... there is a definite beginning, a middle and an end”.

Paula notes that:

“When dad is away for work ... while they might be upset a lot the first time they would get used to the routine of dad goes away but he comes back, and there is a security in it when dad comes back and as long as dad pays them good attention while he is there, they get on with their routine lives and then dad is coming back and they are excited and enjoy the fact that dad is coming back. It becomes what their lives are”.

However, Sarah speaks of a client whose father worked in the Cayman Islands:

“She was raging with him ... just so angry. And they used to go to the Cayman Islands, like it wasn’t that he wasn’t her dad, what happened was when he would come home he would start enforcing rules that weren’t there because they had their own setup, her and her brother and her mom. And the father would come in and start rail-roading over and they resented that hugely, so I think she was a very resentful girl. It wasn’t as much about the rejection for her, it was resenting him for choosing to live aside from them and then coming back and imposing himself on them”.

The father’s absence often leads the child to engage in fantasies. Sarah has noticed that children often:

“only believe in the Disney thing, the Disney princess thing, the boy meets the girl and they all get back together again and they really believe that will still happen, and in the teenage girls you will find that that’s there also, they still believe that maybe it can work out, maybe, maybe, and they hold on to that, you know, he will come and sweep her of her feet again ... and it’s quite devastating for them when they actually accept ... that is not going to happen, they’ve moved on ... and really they find that very hard, even though it’s a natural part of life, but they do find it very difficult”.

Similarly, Nora notes that:

“all the kid ever wants is having mom and dad back together, that’s the

fantasy and it takes quite a while for that fantasy to ... break down or be disillusioned ... but the fantasy, I was very surprised that the fantasies can be there up till mid, late adolescence, even though cognitively they know this is probably not gonna change. But the need, yeah, it's very strong".

The transference in the therapeutic relationship with these children can often be quite strong. Nora says that:

"I am often pulled into enmeshed relationships by kids in terms of mommy functions. And that's the pull of the kid, they want you in a certain position where they know that's familiar. And as a therapist it is my job not to get enmeshed, to pull myself right out of that position and go back into neutral".

She can find herself placed in the paternal role too:

"the daddy function, the paternal metaphor, the law, that's me too, I have extremely clear boundaries when I set up the therapy and the kids will meet the 'no' very quickly. So one of the 'no's is like 'I am not going to get enmeshed with you, I can empathize with you but I am not going to agree with you that mommy is a bad mommy or daddy is a bad daddy because that's just me being enmeshed with you, that is not good' ... I am taking the function of the father into transference, I am taking up the more object relation beyond the container, Winnicottian kind of nurturing function".

For Stephen:

"I think as a male therapist, the clients, teens with absent fathers can be sometimes very enthusiastic about the relationship, about the therapy and about the counseling, not really counseling itself but just you as a person, just being an older male and maybe being able to express frustrations with their mom or whatever, the family. So I think it can be helpful being a male therapist in that situation, that can be positive transference".

4.3 Theme Two: Gender Differences

In each interview the participants were invited to explore the experiences of both boys and girls in relation to father absence in order to ascertain any similarities or differences in how father absence is experienced by each gender. While acknowledging that the absence of a father deeply affects both sexes, the participants often saw them dealing with it in quite different ways.

Nora sees the father as an essential figure in the lives of both boys and girls:

"He is equally important, don't get me wrong, super important, but it is a different type of relationship and that's just because of the gender ... an adolescent boy needs to sort of figure out what it is like to be a man and sort of identify with male figures", [while for girls] "the father is sort of one of

the first close role models how to relate to the opposite sex, so fathers are super important to sort of settle the good role model of the opposite sex". [An absent father] "very much has the potential to really confuse a girl for example, and then she enters maybe not so healthy relationships until she has figured out what she really needs".

Paula notes that:

"sometimes there is more underage sexual activity with kids who have no father figure there, like girls looking for father's approval or fellas looking to act out in a macho way and they really don't have the modeling there".

In general, the participants noted that when girls lose a father, they tend to internalise the loss. Paula sees them as:

"more likely to withdraw and become depressed", although, "they are more likely to be able to express what they are feeling once they begin to trust you".

Sarah has observed that:

"with girls it's more emotional, it's all about the feelings and they do link rejection and abandonment and those things that they feel with the dad having left, they can see the links, just with a little bit of work you can get that working".

Boys, in the view of the participants, are less likely to be able to name their feelings and are more likely to act them out. Paula notes the likelihood of aggressive behaviour in boys: *"Boys, they are more likely to act out and be angry ... they are generally not as emotionally literate as girls are".*

In Sarah's experience, with boys:

"it's like 'I don't care ... why would I care', and you get lots of attitude around it which is why you know they care. So yeah, I think boys find it harder to show it and express it and name it ... I might say something, kind of going 'what's it like not having a dad growing up?' 'I don't care about that, he is just a ___' ... but you know how angry they are, but just that's how they present it".

While Martha says:

"For boys, I see a lot of aggression going on at the moment and a lot of self-aggression, self-directed aggression because without having that solid father there is nothing to rebel against and so they are rebelling, it becomes masochistic or melancholic, they do a lot of self-harm, a lot of suicidality, it's an annihilation of the self because there must be another to say that word and against whom they fight".

In Stephen's view:

"I think maybe the boys are more at a loss, just the lack of a role model and maybe the girls are better able to discuss it with their moms or with their peers and have the emotional capabilities younger to kind of process it ... I just have a sense that maybe it's tougher for the boys".

Stephen has also noticed that there is often a difficulty with authority figures for both genders:

"Maybe its harder really to care about authority structures, maybe the home authority structure has become looser with the absence of dad and the whole kind of male authority has disappeared, so when young people encounter it in the school setting or maybe the community setting, it's just foreign and maybe there is a reaction to it or a resistance to it and in a justice setting too with policemen and that sort of environment. So I think yeah, there would be greater difficulty to accept male authority figures".

4.4 Theme Three: The Contemporary Father

What is the role of the father in contemporary society? Each of the participants had their own views on this. The importance of fathers and how they can sometimes be undervalued was stressed, as was the need of a child to find someone else to fulfil the paternal role if the father is not around. The idea of gender fluidity was explored, as well as the changing role of the father and, indeed, masculinity in contemporary society.

Nora stressed the importance of fathers:

"I suppose for me it's so often underestimated how important fathers are, it really, really is. And yes a single mother can do both, it can do the father function and the mother function, the nurturing function and the law function, but in the end it asks a lot of the single parent and it asks a lot of the kid because in the end the flesh and blood dad is still not around and it will take, these children in this situation have to sort of work through, additional challenges as they grow old at different developmental stages. And it cannot be underestimated, from my point of view, it has an impact."

Martha sees children of absent fathers as searching for someone who will fulfil the father's function:

"There are lots of ways in which a child will make the father present and not to completely identify the father with the name of the father. But usually what we see is an acting out which is about producing a law, producing a response from the mother which is particular in that way ... there are lots of ways in which a person would try to reinstall a father, other people will go

and join the civil service or join the army or whatever. But what they are looking for is they are looking for the consistent other to take that position. It is absolutely necessary for us to have that”.

The absence of a father will often see the child seeking out another male to step into the paternal role. In Paula's view, when a child has never had a relationship with their biological father:

“depending on the stage that happened, if they were very young quite often a stepdad or grandfather or whatever is their parent figure they can be very happy with that ... some step parents do fantastic job with their kids and the kids, I mean some of the kids that I've seen, they say, 'well. he is really my dad, the other guy only, you know, he gave me, he is only my biological dad but this is my real dad', and that's the way they put it. They are very copped on and very appreciative of the father they do consider to be their father, so stepdads do it well. They are deliberate in the fact that they are taking on these children”.

Stephen notes that:

“learning from male authority figures too ... whether it's a teacher or a coach or an uncle or a cousin or some older guy who's got a bit of nous or a bit of savvy, is just an appealing prospect and where possible, really, it can be really helpful ... a stepdad can kind of play that role or it can also play the anti-role where he is the authority figure that they resist and despise”.

For Stephen, enabling fathers to be involved with their children following a separation:

“it's a very important topic. I think frequently dads feel - parenting is difficult for everyone - dads can feel removed when people hit their teens, particularly if it is a separation, typically teens will end up with the mother and I think it's very important work to continue to reassure dads about their importance, regardless of how minor their communication is, that it would be continued ... any promotional work for that relationship, because it's such an important relationship, I think it's well worth it”.

The nature of fathers and fathering is part of a bigger picture of gender identity and masculinity in general, in Martha's view:

“This question of the father is all the more relevant at the moment because of the question of masculinity and the question of fluidity and of gender. And I would see that as this question of what has become of men, you know, there is a need for a new myth, I mean the whole totem of the man killing the father ... it's like we need to give your child a set of beliefs and when they get old enough they can become atheists or humanists or whatever, it doesn't matter, but they need to start out with a set of signifiers. And unfortunately what we are doing at the moment is we are not giving them that initial set of signifiers, that initial narrative. We need to do that, we can see what's happening out of this whole question of gender fluidity.”

The place of the father in society is undergoing change. As Nora says:

“now have very different kind of families, we have all sorts of combinations of families, so it’s not just absent fathers, we have also merged families and adopted families and fathers who have only been sperm and it’s, you know IVF ... it’s just additional challenges for children to try to figure out and create a narrative of who they are and how they have come into this world and develop a good sense of self. It’s a minefield in that way”.

Martha sees that:

“all of us who are dealing with human assisted reproduction point to this role of the father as the function of the father; which is, whether you call it a male or a female, it’s just the function of the father, and so at those times you would simply be symptomatic in relation to the absence or presence of the father”.

4.5 Summary

While all five participants had different experiences of the effects of father absence on their clients, there were several recurring themes. All the interviewees noted that children who lose the presence of a father in their lives experience a sense of loss and sadness. They also observed that those whose fathers are still alive but not a part of their lives can feel rejected and angry. While all participants agreed that father absence impacts boys and girls equally, it was acknowledged that they can each process it in different ways. Although there was a variation of views on the role of the father in contemporary society, all participants stressed the importance of the father to children and how those deprived of one will seek out another person, usually male, to fulfil the paternal role.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This research set out to explore the effects of absent fathers on children. This chapter will discuss the findings of the research and will compare and contrast them with the relevant existing literature.

5.2 A Loss Narrative

The loss of a father at any age has been seen to have a profound effect on children, but at different stages of development it can impact in different ways. Burgner (1985) believed that paternal absence could interfere with the separation-individuation process and leave children fixated at the pre-Oedipal development stage, while Neubauer (1960) stated that father loss during the Oedipal period can lead to distortions of the normal competitive feelings, fears and humiliations with which a child must learn to cope. Father loss during the latency period, according to Gauthier (1965) can deprive a child of a sense of mastery and industry which comes from development of skills and talents through modelling and identification with the father, while Kohut (1971) felt that the loss of the father during adolescence may result in over-idealisation of him which prevents later de-idealisation and can result in a narcissistic fixation in addition to delayed entry into the peer group.

While none of the respondents examined the psychoanalytic aspects of father absence to any great extent, there was a sense that different developmental stages required different aspects of a father's presence. Sarah noted that children can miss out on the tasks of the developmental stage that they were at when the father's absence occurred, creating a struggle for them later in life, while Nora distinguished between children whose fathers were absent from birth and those who experienced the loss of a father at six or seven years of age, observing that those who never knew a father struggled with their feelings around him, while those who had known one had the benefit of memories on which to pin their feelings.

Although a study of 131 children by Wallerstein (1987) found that children aged 5 to 8 years experienced moderate levels of depression and an intense grieving and longing for their father's return, and a previous study by Wallerstein & Kelly (1980) revealed that children aged 9 through 12 years showed intense anger at one or both parents and were more likely to have a shaken sense of identity, none of the participants observed a link between such feelings and behaviours and the age at which the child lost their father.

Ghosh (2016) found that adolescents living in father-absent families are significantly more likely to suffer from depression than adolescents living in father-present families, while Harper & McLanahan (2004) and Carlson (2006) noted higher rates of behavioural difficulties in teenagers of absent fathers. Of the participants, Martha viewed adolescence as a particularly turbulent time in which to lose a father, noting that the teenage years bring up issues of sexuality, independence and the transition in the child from being family-centered to being peer group oriented. This, in turn, necessitates split transferences, highlighting the significance of having both parents at this stage. Paula, found that father-absence can be problematic for teenagers as they seek their identity, although it often alternates with their desire for more independence and a wish to be away from their parents.

While there was a paucity of literature on the differing effects of death, separation/divorce or work commitments on children, all participants found that the reason for the father's absence impacts greatly on how the child experiences it. Nora and Stephen both felt that the grieving process of death allows the child to feel included rather than isolated, while the public acceptance of this grief enables the child to mourn their loss at their own pace. All respondents saw the finality of death as bringing a certainty and clarity that separation or divorce does not, while Sarah noted that a child who has lost a father through death does not have the added burden of dealing with issues of abandonment or rejection.

When a father is absent through work commitments there is an expectation that he will return and family life can continue in the same way it had previously. In Nora's experience, a child can feel comforted by having a narrative that explains why the father is absent and when he will return, while Paula noted that children can find security in the father's coming back and may not be unduly perturbed as long as the father pays attention to the child on his return.

The most common cause of father-absence is separation or divorce, which most of the literature found to have a particularly detrimental effect on children. U.S. Divorce Statistics (2008) and Weitoft *et al* (2003) found such children to be overwhelmingly more likely to be suicidal and to have behavioural problems, which McMillan *et al* (2006) ascribed to their emotional anguish at being abandoned. Mancini found such children to be lacking in confidence and self-esteem, while McMillan *et al* (2006) attributed behavioural problems to a child's emotional anguish at being abandoned.

Sarah found that children who have lost a father through divorce feel angry and rejected, while

Paula noted the added difficulty of dealing with the absence while the object of their grief is still there but not within reach. Nora, meanwhile, acknowledged the guilt that a child can experience, feeling responsible for the father's absence. For Martha, the reluctance of a mother to talk about the absent father creates a bigger void for the child, which further compounds the sense of loss, while Stephen observed that children are often expected to overcome their grief and accept it as part of life.

Although Sarah and Nora noted the propensity of children of separated or divorced parents to fantasise, particularly about their parents getting back together again, this was something that was not picked up in the literature, with only Rose (1992) and Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) alluding to fantasy.

Marks & Lovestone (1995) spoke of the mother's feelings about the absent father exerting a strong influence over how the child viewed him, while Vincelet (1982) and Homan (1998) noted that a mother's negative feelings about the absent father can have a negative effect on the child's wellbeing. This is something that the participants concurred with, with Nora and Paula noting the negative impact on the child of parental discord and Sarah drawing a clear distinction between the outcomes for children of parents who can get on amicably and those who cannot.

5.3 Gender Differences

The loss of a father has a negative impact on both genders though its effects may emerge in different ways.

Josselson (1989) noted the risks attaching to a boy forming his identity without the benefit of a positive male influence, while Erikson (1980) and Biller (1993) cautioned that boys from single-mother families lack a father's presence to balance the influence of peer groups. Of the participants in the study, Stephen was particularly concerned about boys lacking a role-model, which he felt, in a sense, makes it even more difficult for them to deal with father-absence.

Ott (1997) observed boys retreating from assuming a man's role because, without a father figure in his life, such a role is unavailable to be internalised by him, while Ross (1977) and Pruett (1989) saw closeness between father and son as opening the boy to feelings that could have been associated with being too feminine and the loss of him as giving the boy less chance of channelling his aggression, which then needs to go toward combatting any feminine identification. Aggression in

males without a father in their lives is a persistent theme of the literature, with Galenson (1994), Herzog (1980), Sugarman (1997), Homan (1998) and Draper and Harpending (1982) all commenting on it. Many of this study's participants also noticed boys engaging in aggressive behaviour. Paula views boys as more likely to act out and be angry, which she attributes to their lack of emotional literacy, while Sarah observes them as being angry but adopting a posture of not caring. In Martha's experience, too, boys behave aggressively, although often it is turned inwards in acts of self-harm or suicidality, which accords with Biller's (1993) finding that children of absent fathers often turn their anger inwards and act it out on themselves.

For girls, the literature was particularly concerned with the risk of developing depression (Culpin *et al.*, 2013), (Coley, 2003) and low self-esteem (Mancini, 2010). This correlates with Paula's observation that girls who lose a father often withdraw and become depressed and Sarah's view that girls link rejection and abandonment with their father's absence. As well as depression, Cheyne (1989) found that girls who had grown up in father-absent households were more likely to experience insecurity, anxiety and difficulties in relationships with men. This concurs with Nora's experience that a father is a girl's first role model on how to relate to the opposite sex and of the possibility of her entering into unhealthy relationships without a father present to model a healthy bond. Paula, meanwhile, noted that underage girls from father-absent homes can engage in sexual activity as a means of looking for male approval.

5.4 The Role of the Contemporary Father

In the past, the roles of both parents were well defined and clearly demarcated. The mother had her function in the family system and the father had his. In contemporary society, however, there is a lot more fluidity to these roles and the role of the father is not so well defined.

Ross (1979) termed the father "the forgotten parent", while Griswold (1993) saw him as being viewed as principally the economic provider for the family. For Pleck, the father's role was viewed as physically and emotionally absent and Thomas (2010) noted that the father's role is often seen as a supporting one, suggesting a distance from direct caring.

Nora picked up on this theme, stating that the importance of fathers is frequently underestimated. She felt that no matter how much a single mother tries to perform the functions of both parents, the child benefits much more from having their father as an active presence in their lives. Similarly,

Stephen noted that fathers can feel removed and spoke of the importance of reassuring fathers of their importance.

Greenacre (1966) saw the father as a figure who encourages a child's autonomy and sense of independence, while Burlingham (1973) spoke of him as a protector who is idealised by the child. While these themes were not picked up to a large extent by the participants, there was some agreement with Lacan's (1980) view of the father being identified by the child as the personification of the law. Martha found that children, without the father present to fulfil this role, will often behave in a way that will make the mother perform the function of the law, while Stephen saw the lack of this function of the father as leading to a child being less likely to care about authority structures and being resistant to authority figures of any kind. This correlated with Draper and Harpending's (1982) view that a child of an absent father is more likely to reject authority.

With almost 22% of children in Ireland living without a father present in their home (CSO, 2011) it often falls to other males in a child's circle to fulfil the role of the father. While Jones (2007) noted that a significant number of these children fail to become attached to any subsequent stepfather that entered the family, the literature is quite limited in its exploration of how children relate to other adult males and how they might engage one as a surrogate father. Paula, however, saw many stepfathers and grandfather as providing good, stable figures for children to use as male role models, noting that children can be very appreciative of the work stepfathers, in particular, do in taking on the role of father. For Martha, adults who grew up without a father present may often look to their working environment to provide the function of the father that they never experienced. In Stephen's view, the adult male a child will use as a father substitute can vary widely and can include an uncle, a cousin or even a coach or teacher. If a child is in psychotherapy, they can often engage in transference that engages the therapist in the role of father. Stephen sees father-absent children as often being very enthusiastic about the therapeutic relationship, particularly, in his experience, with an older male, while Nora notes that children can often push at the boundaries of the relationship to try to produce the paternal metaphor of the law.

As society progresses, not only the role of the father, but the family itself is in a constant state of change. The literature did not touch on assisted conception or gender fluidity but some of the participants viewed them as making the changing role of the father more uncertain. Martha views the role of the father as emblematic of the wider role of the male in general, while she sees human assisted reproduction as changing further the function of the father. Nora, too, notes the changing nature of conception and families and sees them as a further challenge for children to create a

narrative of who they are and to develop a good sense of self.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore the effects that absent fathers have on children. While the role of the father may be somewhat undervalued, and can often be viewed as secondary in importance to the mother, there is little doubt from the research that it is of enormous value in the lives of children. An engaged father has a powerful and positive influence on a child's happiness and development and the absence of one is linked to increased psychological, emotional and social problems in childhood and later in life.

A number of findings arose from the research. Among them was the finding that losing a father at different stages of development can have different outcomes for children. On one end of the spectrum, children who have never known a father have nothing concrete to associate their feelings with, while, at the other end, teenagers have to deal with the absence of a father while coping with the turbulence of adolescence. This was consistent with the literature, which found that the loss of a father at pre-oedipal, oedipal and post-oedipal stages of development can have different impacts on children.

It is clear from the research that the reason for a father's absence has a large bearing on how the child comes to terms with it, with death, separation/divorce and work commitments all being experienced very differently. This was not apparent in the literature, with only parental separation/divorce being expressly referred to in the studies reviewed.

Although a father is equally important to both genders, his absence is processed in different ways by boys and girls, with girls more likely to internalise their loss while boys are more inclined to externalise. The literature emphasised the greater likelihood of girls suffering from depression and anxiety and boys having behavioural problems. The research supported that view, with most respondents experiencing these issues with their clients.

In the absence of a father, children often look to another person to adopt the role of a surrogate father. Usually, though not always, this person will be another adult male. This can also lead to transference in the therapeutic relationship with a therapist of either gender often being cast in the paternal role.

6.2 Limitations

The main limitation of this study was its scope. With four psychotherapists and one counseling psychologist interviewed, the breadth of the study was quite narrow. A broader set of participants may yield a different set of results. An interview of adults who had experienced father-absence in childhood might also be beneficial in affording a first-hand view of the subject.

6.3 Further Research

The findings of the research have demonstrated the importance of fathers in the lives of children and the impact that their absence can have. In the course of the research, some inadequacies in the literature emerged. The causes of father-absence and the impact of these causes could be studied further, with more comprehensive research being conducted into the effects of paternal death and father-absence through work commitments. Outside of the present study there have been very few studies exploring the different reasons for father-absence and the impacts of them.

The area of transference in the therapeutic relationship could also be studied in more detail. There is insufficient information on whether or how much such transference is a factor in the relationship between the therapist and children of absent fathers.

Such areas of exploration in any further studies could increase our understanding of the effects of absent fathers on children.

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Appendix One: Interview Guidelines

1. Can you tell me about how you became a psychotherapist? How long have you been practising as one? What was it that drew you to the profession?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about clients who present to you whereby the father has been absent? What is your experience of this?
3. Does the stage of childhood development at which the father becomes absent have an impact on the effects of the absence?
4. Is there a difference between children whose father's absence is caused by death, separation/divorce or work commitments (in the army, etc.)?
5. Can you tell me about any differences you have noticed between how boys and girls experience father absence?
6. Are there any behavioural problems that are unique to, or more pronounced in children of absent fathers?
7. Can you tell me about any differences in relation to sexual behaviour that you have noticed in father absent adolescents?
8. Can you tell me generally why these individuals present to psychotherapy in the first place, and what has been your experience of the impact of father absence on their lives?
9. Have you encountered any issues with transference or countertransference specific to the relationship with father absent children?
10. Is there anything else relevant that you feel is worth mentioning in relation to this topic?

Appendix Two: Consent Form

Dear xxxxx

I am a 4th Year student who is currently studying at DBS School of Arts, Dublin, doing a BA in Counselling and Psychotherapy. I am in the process of writing a thesis on A Psychotherapeutic Examination of the Role of Father Absence in Children's Lives.

Therefore I am looking for you to participate in a short interview lasting no more than 40 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. You can request a copy of this interview, once transcribed.

Please note that the information from the interview that you provide will be shared among my colleagues and with anyone who wishes to read this thesis. However your personal information will remain anonymous and no one will be able to trace the information back to you. Your name will not be requested during the interview.

You can also freely withdraw from this research at anytime. All information provided will be stored securely under the Data Protection Act. Please sign below if you give consent for the interview to occur and we can arrange a time and date that suits you.

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

• • •

I, xxxxx, give permission for Dave O'Dwyer to use the relevant information in her/his research. I am aware that I can withdraw at anytime and that all information will be protected under the Data Protection Act. I am also aware that I will remain anonymous throughout this process.

Signed

Date: