

## IMPACT OF FATHER LOSS ON THE FAMILY<sup>1</sup>

---

THOMAS S. PARISH

BRUNO M. KAPPES

*Kansas State University*

*In this study, 421 undergraduate students evaluated their natural mothers, natural fathers, and stepfathers (where applicable) by rating them on the Personal Attribute Inventory. The findings from this study indicated that parents from families broken by divorce were consistently more negatively evaluated than were parents from either intact families or families where the father had died. These findings held regardless of whether or not the mother had remarried and regardless of the sex of the students doing the evaluations.*

The absence of the father figure in the family is becoming a common occurrence in America today. Not only are fathers more likely to die than mothers while the children in the family are still young (Beck *et al.*, 1963), but fathers are often separated from the family unit as a result of divorce. If the number of divorces continues to increase at a rate of 10% a year as it has during the last 5 years (Conger, 1977), it may not be long before the majority of children under 18 years of age will at some time in their childhood or early adolescence experience father loss.

For each member of the family there are certain problems associated with father loss. Children in fatherless homes, for example, have been extensively investigated in recent years and have been found to be affected in various ways by father loss. Those children who had experienced separation from their father through death were found to more frequently demonstrate more introverted behaviors like withdrawal, shyness, and timidity than those children who either had not experienced father loss or who had experienced father loss as a result of divorce (Hetherington, 1972; Felner *et al.*, 1975).

In contrast to being introverted, the children from divorced families have tended to demonstrate more antisocial and aggressive behaviors during their childhood (Tuckman and Reagan, 1966; Felner *et al.*, 1975). As adolescents, these children from divorced homes have tended to adopt more sex-appropriate ways of expressing their aggression and assertiveness. More specifically, Hetherington (1972) has reported that females from divorced homes tended to assert themselves through being sexually promiscuous, while males from divorced homes have tended to demonstrate more delinquent actions as a means of expressing their assertiveness (Black *et al.*, 1963; Tuckman and Reagan, 1966).

One explanation which has been offered to account for findings like those mentioned above is that fatherless children are actually indirectly affected

---

<sup>1</sup>Special thanks need to be extended to Dr Gerald Eads for his assistance in conducting this survey.

by father loss through the mother, her personality, attitudes and behaviors (Tiller, 1958). While the authenticity of this explanation may be somewhat questionable since other factors may also play an important part in affecting these children, this explanation is particularly noteworthy since it points out that the mother is also affected in various ways by the loss of her husband. For example, the mother in a fatherless family is often required to fulfill multiple roles like homemaker, child-rearer and breadwinner. Her role as the solo parent is made even more difficult by the fact that she needs to function many times on a reduced income, lowered social status, and diminished confidence in herself (Herzog and Sudia, 1973). Besides her own feelings of resentment, isolation and self-doubt, the mother in the father-absent family is frequently struggling with feelings of doubt regarding how she should raise her children (Kadushin, 1970). Since the solo mother is continually without the psychological and physical support of her husband and is continually expected to be fulfilling her children's needs, it is little wonder that these mothers frequently experience low health and energy levels (Schorr, 1964; Strodtbeck, 1964; Glasser and Navarre, 1965).

While the mother in the fatherless family has undeniably paid a price both psychologically and physically in order to be a solo parent, the absent father, too, frequently sacrifices something by leaving the family unit. For instance, the mother's attitudes and behaviors toward her divorced husband are frequently reported to be less than favorable, and these attitudes and behaviors are often communicated by the mother and by the community at large to the children of the absent father (Herzog and Sudia, 1973). The father removed by death, however, has been found to have a better chance of being remembered favorably. In fact, according to Herzog and Sudia (1973) and Hetherington (1972), the father removed by death is frequently remembered by his widow, children and others as a veritable paragon of virtue.

Most of the research regarding the assessment of children's attitudes toward their absent fathers has been primarily with younger children (Bach, 1946; Tiller, 1958; Baker *et al.*, 1967) or adolescents (Hetherington, 1972). In the present study, however, an attempt will be made to assess college students' attitudes toward their natural fathers, natural mothers and, if applicable, their stepfathers too. The aim of this study is to determine whether there are any long-term "stigmas" associated with parents from homes broken by divorce and/or whether there is a greater propensity for "halo effects" to be associated with parents from families where the father died.

## METHOD

### SUBJECTS

A total of 421 undergraduate students volunteered to participate in the present study. Each of these students was enrolled in one of ten sections of Educational Psychology I at a midwestern university. In all, there were 375 students (105 males and 270 females) from intact homes, 30 students (13 males and 17 females) from homes of deceased fathers, and 16 students (3 males and 13 females) from homes where fathers were absent due to divorce.

### PROCEDURE

Each subject was asked to fill out either two or three copies of the Personal Attribute Inventory (Parish *et al.*, 1976). At the top of each copy was noted either "mother", "father", or "stepparent" (*i.e.*, stepfather). The order of these forms was counterbalanced. From the 50 positive and 50 negative adjectives listed on these inventories, the subjects were asked to select 30 that were most descriptive of each of the individuals noted on the top of the sheets. Subjects' scores on these inventories were the number of negative adjectives checked on each sheet. Once the questionnaires were completed, subjects were asked to answer questions regarding their sex, age, marital status, and whether they were from unbroken or broken homes.

## RESULTS

Two multiple regression analyses of variance for unequal sample sizes were employed to analyze students' evaluations of their natural mothers and natural fathers, respectively. The two factors that were investigated in each analysis were "cause of father loss" (*i.e.*, father death, father divorce, or no father loss) by "sex of student".

As indicated in Table 1, ratings of natural mothers ( $F = 7.64$ ,  $df = 2,415$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and ratings of natural fathers ( $F = 24.13$ ,  $df = 2,402$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were found to vary significantly across categories of father loss. As predicted, least significant difference *post hoc* comparisons showed the mean ratings of natural mothers by the students who had experienced father loss through divorce ( $\bar{X}_{\text{divorce}} = 8.21$ ) to be significantly more negative ( $p < 0.01$ ) than their ratings by students who had not experienced father loss ( $\bar{X}_{\text{no loss}} = 3.14$ ) or who had experienced father loss through his death ( $\bar{X}_{\text{death}} = 2.67$ ). No significant difference was found between the latter two groups of students regarding how they had evaluated their natural mothers. Ratings of natural mothers ( $F = 3.98$ ,  $df = 1,405$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), however, were found to vary significantly as a function of the sex of the students ( $\bar{X}_{\text{males}} = 5.68$ ,  $\bar{X}_{\text{females}} = 3.66$ ).

TABLE 1: COLLEGE STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF THEIR NATURAL MOTHERS, NATURAL FATHERS, AND STEPFATHERS BROKEN DOWN BY TYPE OF FAMILY BACKGROUND

	<i>Intact Family</i>	<i>Father Absent Due to Divorce</i>	<i>Father Absent Due to His Death</i>
Natural mother	M = 3.14 SD = 0.23 n = 375	M = 8.21 SD = 1.30 n = 16	M = 2.67 SD = 0.75 n = 30
Natural father	M = 3.34 SD = 0.29 n = 374	M = 13.79 SD = 1.61 n = 14	M = 0.50 SD = 1.13 n = 20
Stepfather		M = 15.00 SD = 10.46 n = 7	M = 4.00 SD = 4.18 n = 8

Regarding evaluations of natural fathers, similar findings to those mentioned above were demonstrated. Specifically, the mean ratings of natural fathers by the students who had experienced father loss through divorce ( $\bar{X}_{\text{divorce}} = 13.79$ ) were significantly more negative ( $p < 0.01$ ) than their ratings by students who had not experienced father loss ( $\bar{X}_{\text{no loss}} = 3.34$ ) or who had experienced father loss through death ( $\bar{X}_{\text{death}} = 0.50$ ). Interestingly, evaluations of fathers, unlike the evaluations of mothers, were not found to vary significantly as a function of the sex of the students ( $F = 1.53$ ,  $df = 1,402$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

Looking at it from another perspective, two analyses of variance were employed to analyze the ratings of natural mothers and natural fathers only by those students who had experienced father loss through either death or divorce. In both instances the following factors were analyzed: (1) cause of father loss, (2) sex of student, and (3) whether or not the mother had remarried.

Using only students who had experienced father loss, then, evaluations of natural mothers were not found to vary significantly as a function of the sex of the students doing the ratings ( $F = 3.37$ ,  $df = 1,38$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or whether or not she (*i.e.*, the mother) had remarried ( $F = 0.96$ ,  $df = 1,38$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). As noted earlier, however, mothers from homes of deceased fathers were

significantly more favourably evaluated than mothers from homes of divorced fathers ( $F = 8.03$ ,  $df = 1,38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Similarly, evaluations of natural fathers were not found to vary significantly as a function of the sex of the students doing the rating ( $F = 0.09$ ,  $df = 1,26$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) or whether or not the mother of these students had remarried ( $F = 2.89$ ,  $df = 1,26$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The only factor of any apparent consequence was that the fathers who had died were far more favorably evaluated than the fathers who had left their families through divorce ( $F = 23.34$ ,  $df = 1,26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Interestingly, no interaction effects were found to be significant in any of the abovementioned analyses.

Finally, ratings of stepfathers were also investigated. A  $t$  test for independent samples demonstrated that stepfathers who had replaced deceased fathers ( $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ) were significantly more favorably evaluated than stepfathers who had replaced divorced fathers ( $\bar{X} = 15.00$ ) by their college-age stepchildren ( $t = 2.75$ ,  $df = 13$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 1 tail).

## DISCUSSION

College students in the present study who were from families divided by divorce rated their natural fathers significantly more negatively than college students who were either from intact families or from families where the father had died. One possible explanation for these findings could be that fathers who were separated from their families because of divorce have frequently been associated with friction and hard feelings both before and after their departure. Fathers from families divided by divorce also frequently encounter the social stigma attached to their separation that they have voluntarily deserted their families (Herzog and Sudia, 1973). In contrast, fathers from intact families or deceased fathers have generally avoided leaving behind a family disrupted by marital strife and instability (Herzog and Sudia, 1973). In particular, the wife of the husband who has died tends to recall to her children the favorable memories of the deceased, while not mentioning — for the most part — the frailties he may have possessed (Hetherington, 1972).

Given these different types of background it is little wonder that the natural fathers from divorced families are evaluated more negatively than their deceased counterparts. It appears from the findings of the present study, however, that the natural mothers and stepfathers also suffer from their association with divorce. Owing to the *ex post facto* nature of the data it is not possible to pinpoint the exact cause(s). Divorce, however, appears to have associated with it a kind of long-term stigma that comes to negatively affect all those in the family that play a parental role. In contrast, the loss of the father through death actually appears to have associated with it a long-term halo effect, particularly for the deceased father and the stepfather who has replaced him.

The strength of these stigmas associated with divorce and of halo effects associated with death is attested to by the following findings: First, it did not matter in this study if the family had or had not been reconstituted. In other words, parents that had been associated with divorce — regardless of whether or not the mother remarried — continued to be very negatively evaluated. In contrast, the widowed mother and the deceased father continued to be very favorably evaluated by their college-age children — regardless of whether or not the mother had remarried.

Second, except in one instance (*i.e.*, evaluations of mothers by daughters across family constellations), males and females alike evaluated their parents from divorced families very negatively, while the students evaluated very positively parents from intact families or from families where their father had died. Thus, these findings indicate that there are unquestionable lingering negative consequences from divorce that are unable to be diminished either by the mother's remarriage or by one's sex and/or one's sex roles.

In summary, the findings in the present study indicate that parents can be thought of very differently as a function of whether or not they have been associated with father absence through either his death or divorce. While general explanations for these findings are offered here, it is beyond the scope of this paper to cite either specific causes or specific methods of remediation. Hopefully, however, once researchers are made aware of the findings reported in this paper they will endeavor to find specific explanations for these findings and specific strategies that will help us overcome problems like the stigma described in this paper that has been associated with divorce.

## REFERENCES

- Bach, G., 1946: Father fantasies and father-typing in father separated families. *Child Development*, 14: 63-80.
- Baker, S.; Fagan, S.; Fischer, E.; Janda, E.; Cove, L., 1967: Impact of father absence on personality factors of boys: An evaluation of military family's adjustment. Paper presented at the Orthopsychiatric Association Meeting, Washington, D.C. (March).
- Beck, A.; Sethi, B.; Tuthill, R., 1963: Childhood bereavement and adult depression. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 9: 295-302.
- Conger, J., 1977: *Adolescence and Youth: Psychological Development in a Changing World* (2nd edit.). Harper and Row, New York.
- Felner, R.; Stolberg, A.; Cowen, E., 1975: Crises events and school mental health referral patterns of young children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 43: 305-10.
- Glasser, P.; Navarre, E., 1965: The problems of families in the AFDC program. *Children*, 12: 151-6.
- Herzog, E.; Sudia, C., 1973: Children in fatherless homes. In B. Caldwell and H. Ricciuti (Eds.), *Review of Child Development Research, Volume 3*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 141-232.
- Hetherington, E., 1972: Effects of father absence on personality development in adolescent daughters. *Developmental Psychology*, 7: 313-26.
- Kadushin, A., 1970: Single parent adoptions: An overview of some relevant research. *Social Science Review*, 44: 263-74.
- Parish, T.; Bryant, W.; Shirazi, A., 1976: The Personal Attribute Inventory. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 42: 715-20.
- Schorr, A., 1964: The non-culture of poverty. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 34: 907-12.
- Strodtbeck, F., 1964: The poverty-dependency syndrome of the ADC female-based Negro family. Paper presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Chicago (March).
- Tiller, P., 1958: Father absence and personality development in children of sailor families. *Nordisk Psykologi's Monographs*, Series No. 9. Bokhjrnet, Oslo.
- Tuckman, J.; Reagan, R. A., 1966: Intactness of the home and behavioral problems in children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 7: 225-33.

## FURTHER READING

- Brill, N.; Liston, E., 1966: Parental loss in adults with emotional disorders. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 14: 307-14.
- Dennehy, C., 1966: Childhood bereavement and psychiatric illness. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 112: 1049-69.
- Dorpat, T.; Jackson, J.; Ripley, J., 1965: Broken homes and attempted and completed suicides. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 12: 213-6.
- Glueck, S.; Glueck, E., 1950: *Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency*. Harvard University Press, Boston.
- Grandville-Grossman, K., 1966: Early bereavement and schizophrenia. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 112: 1027-34.

- Hill, O.; Price, J., 1967: Childhood bereavement and adult depression. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 113: 743-51.
- Ingham, H., 1949: Statistical study of family relations in psychoneurosis. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 106: 91-8.
- Oltman, F.; McGarry, F.; Friedman, S., 1952: Parental deprivation and the "broken home" in dementia praecox and other mental disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 108: 685-94.
- Young, E.; Parish, T., 1977: Impact of father absence during childhood on the psychological adjustment of college females. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 3: 217-27.

*Reprints of this paper are available from Dr Thomas S. Parish, Associate Professor, Department of Administration and Foundations, College of Education, Kansas State University, Holton Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506, U.S.A.*