
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of Paternal Absence During Childhood on Women's Self-esteem and Self-efficacy: A Perspective Paper

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential impact of paternal absence on women during their childhood by examining literature and contemporary theories. Paternal absence refers to children lacking paternal love and care due to factors such as illegitimate birth, divorce, or death. In today's society, diverse marriage concepts have led to an increase in single-parent families, resulting in a growing prevalence of paternal absence. This paper comprehensively examines the influence of paternal absence on female self-esteem using theoretical frameworks from psychoanalysis, social learning, social comparison, cognitive development, and attachment. Additionally, it highlights the significance of fathers' presence during childhood in establishing women's sense of competence through Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. The results of the study revealed that the absence of a father figure may exert detrimental effects on women's self-perception, interpersonal bonding, and development of emotional and creative competence.

| KEYWORDS

Paternal absence; women's childhood; self-esteem; self-efficacy

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With societal development, the concept of marriage has become more progressive and inclusive. According to Article 7 of China's Household Registration Regulations and Article 107 of the Civil Code, children born out of wedlock have equal rights as those born within wedlock. This is expected to lead to an increase in single mothers in the future. Additionally, due to China's two-child and three-child policies, families with four or five members are becoming more common. However, it is important to note that divorce rates in China have significantly risen in recent years. Data from the seventh census (2020) shows a divorce rate of 3.09 per thousand individuals—a nearly 50% increase compared to the rate of 2.00 per thousand during the sixth census (2010). This trend suggests a growing number of children being raised by single parents who may experience various psychological impacts due to parental absence, requiring increased attention.

1.2 Literature Review

As these children from single-parent households gradually integrate into society, the long-term effects of the unique circumstances they experienced during childhood will become increasingly apparent. Childhood and adolescence are critical periods for social development (Su, 2023), wherein both parents play distinct roles that significantly influence a child's future social development. Traditionally, it has been believed that mothers have a more substantial impact on raising children than fathers (Dai, 2016). However, an American study revealed that children who received high levels of support from both parents at age 2 exhibited higher scores in psychological development tests at age 3 compared to those raised in single-parent or parentless families. Conversely, children growing up without their fathers generally scored lower on psychological development tests (Song, 2014).

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This demonstrates the significant role fathers play in a child's growth, not only influencing language development and physical strength training but also impacting emotions, social skills, and self-identity.

1.3 Problem Statement and Objective

To date, numerous studies have primarily focused on the influence of fathers on children's development, overlooking gender differences. Research consistently shows that adverse childhood experiences significantly impact women's self-esteem and other aspects while having a lesser effect on men. Therefore, investigating the consequences of a father's absence during female upbringing is an important topic for further exploration.

According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Mental Health Survey, depression rates are generally higher in women compared to men, with women being approximately twice as likely to experience depression. (Fu et al., 2021) High self-esteem and low self-efficacy are key characteristics observed in individuals with depression. Studies indicate a close association between father-daughter relationships' quality and women's sense of identity and mental well-being. Consequently, the objective of this study is to examine whether paternal absence during female growth contributes to an increased risk of depression among women, particularly regarding their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

2. The Impact of Childhood Paternal Absence on Women

2.1 The Impact of Childhood Paternal Absence on Women's Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's assessment of their own capabilities and values, encompassing their self-acceptance, self-respect, and self-worth. It constitutes a crucial facet of an individual's emotional well-being, exerting influence on their emotional state, interpersonal relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Individuals with elevated levels of self-esteem typically possess a favorable perception of themselves and perceive themselves as deserving of respect and care. Conversely, individuals with diminished levels of self-esteem may harbor doubts regarding their abilities, exhibit susceptibility to external evaluations, and display a propensity for self-criticism.

From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, Freud emphasized the crucial role of fathers in childhood experiences, particularly in relation to the "Oedipus complex". Firstly, females' identification and imitation of their fathers can facilitate the development of self-concept. The "Oedipus complex", also known as the "Electra complex", represents a unique emotional bond that women form with their fathers during this stage. They may harbor feelings of resentment towards themselves for being inferior to men, leading to a sense of inadequacy (Su, 2023). Jung's viewpoint suggests that fathers serve as counterparts to the superego, representing rationality and order while symbolizing authority within the family structure. They often establish rules and oversee their implementation during parent-child interactions. When daughters succeed in these interactions, fathers provide recognition and support, which contribute to building female self-esteem and fostering positive self-image (Dai, 2016); conversely, when failures occur, fathers utilize their power appropriately for discipline purposes, thereby enabling women to become more courageous and comfortable when facing challenges (Polletta, 2010). Consequently, an absence of fatherhood during childhood may instill fear towards authority figures among women during their developmental process, which can potentially lead to low self-esteem and self-doubt. Furthermore, the quality of the father-daughter relationship has a significant impact on the development of intimate relationships during adolescence. The absence of paternal presence is particularly evident in women's emotions and attitudes towards the opposite sex. Research indicates that girls who lack paternal love tend to marry at an earlier age compared to those who have a nurturing father figure, and they are more likely to become unmarried or single mothers (Valge et al., 2022). Additionally, individuals raised in an environment devoid of paternal love are more prone to criminal behavior and depression when compared to those who experienced paternal affection during childhood (Song, 2014). By fostering a healthy bond with their fathers, women can acquire valuable skills for navigating relationships with men and experiencing emotional security within intimate connections. Conversely, growing up without paternal love may leave women ill-equipped to manage interactions with the opposite sex and lacking the sense of security that accompanies such relationships throughout their growth process. This absence of security not only intensifies women's desire for attention from men but also plays a pivotal role in shaping their self-esteem formation. Ultimately, the dearth of unconditional positive attention and recognition resulting from a lack of paternal love during childhood hinders the cultivation of robust self-esteem among women, often leading them to feel disregarded and insignificant. Such neglect becomes detrimental as it undermines their self-identity by perpetuating feelings of unworthiness – ultimately acting as a major obstacle impeding healthy self-esteem formation.

Psychoanalytic theory underscores the significance of childhood experiences and early family relationships in the psychological development of individuals, with particular emphasis on the pivotal role played by father-daughter relationships in shaping daughters' development. The absence of paternal influence during childhood may engender feelings of inferiority, hinder the formation of healthy intimate connections, and contribute to a sense of unworthiness, thereby impacting the cultivation of robust self-esteem. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that psychoanalytic perspectives are not devoid of controversy within the psychological community; thus, a comprehensive examination from multiple vantage points is warranted.

(1) According to Bandura's social learning theory, individuals acquire their understanding of society through childhood observation and learning, subsequently forming their own behavioral patterns and values through imitation (Zhang et al., 2023). As a significant role model during his daughter's early life, the father's behavior, attitude, and interaction with her will be internalized into her cognitive framework. A positive, supportive, and encouraging father can assist in establishing a positive self-concept and self-esteem for his daughter (Dai, 2016). Conversely, the absence of paternal influence may result in a lack of cognitive experiences in this domain, consequently having a negative impact.

(2) According to social comparison theory, individuals assess their abilities and values by comparing themselves to others. Positive feedback and recognition from fathers serve as benchmarks for social comparison that aid daughters in developing self-worth and self-esteem. Conversely, the absence of paternal influence may lead to a lack of feedback, which could potentially instill doubt regarding one's abilities.

(3) According to cognitive development theory, individuals acquire gender roles through the process of socialization. The way a father interacts with his daughter and expresses his views on female roles can significantly influence her identification with gender roles. A father who promotes equality and respects gender diversity can contribute to his daughter's development of self-esteem that is not constrained by gender stereotypes.

(4) According to attachment theory, early bonding with parents has profound implications for an individual's mental health and self-esteem. Paternal absence may result in women developing insecure attachment styles, such as anxious or avoidant attachments, which can affect their self-esteem and lead to distrust towards men or intimate relationships. The effects of paternal absence on women's self-esteem are multifaceted, influenced by their upbringing, personal experiences, and coping mechanisms when faced with this absence. (Xie et al., 2021) In addition to the aforementioned negative effects, there may also be positive outcomes such as increased independence, adaptability, problem-solving abilities, compassion, and understanding.

The impact of inadequate fathering on a woman's self-esteem can vary depending on her upbringing, personal experiences, and coping mechanisms. In addition to the aforementioned negative effects, there may also be positive outcomes such as enhanced autonomy, heightened problem-solving abilities, and increased empathy and comprehension.

2.2 The Impact of Childhood Paternal Absence on Women's Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, a concept proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura (1995), pertains to an individual's belief in their competence to accomplish specific tasks or achieve particular goals. Diverging from the notion of self-esteem, self-efficacy focuses on ability rather than value judgment (Bandura, 1977). Individuals with high self-efficacy maintain confidence in effectively executing necessary actions to attain their objectives even when confronted with difficulties and challenges. Research indicates that boys exhibit higher scores in general self-efficacy, perceived social support, and positive coping dimensions compared to girls (Luo et al., 2023). Consequently, it is crucial to prioritize the cultivation of female self-efficacy. The level of self-efficacy not only influences the development of psychological resilience and emotional self-efficacy among adolescent females (Zheng, 2023) but also impacts their performance and establishment of creative self-efficacy within their careers (Wang, 2021).

Bandura posits that self-efficacy is shaped and developed through various sources, including individual success experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physical and emotional states. In the process of female growth, observing their father's behavior can provide substitute experiences. The BBC conducted a 50-year study tracking 11,000 babies to explore the biological significance of fathers and produced a documentary titled "Biology of Dads" (Polletta, 2010). This documentary highlights the crucial role played by fathers in every stage of child development, from infancy to adolescence. According to the findings presented in the documentary, compared to mothers, fathers are more inclined to engage children in adventurous and exciting activities. Through these interactions with fathers, children acquire qualities such as courage and resilience, which contribute positively to their frustration tolerance and psychological well-being (Paquette, 2004). Father-child interactions offer diverse stimuli that evoke positive emotions in children while also providing emotional support that fosters courage when facing challenges. As women are inherently perceived as weaker in terms of strength, courage, and emotional support compared to men, they can gain direct or indirect experience through father-daughter interactions (Zhang et al., 2023). For instance, fathers teach their daughters how to bravely confront difficulties and calmly solve problems during parent-child interactions. However, throughout their developmental journey, due to an absence of positive demonstrations of desirable traits resulting from paternal absence, women may miss out on valuable learning opportunities, which could negatively impact the formation of self-efficacy. Research has demonstrated that a positive father-daughter relationship enhances daughters' learning self-efficacy and self-control, whereas negative relationships hinder this progress (Li, 2019). In the face of challenging problems requiring analysis and solutions, the father-daughter relationship during childhood exhibits a greater power dynamic in favor of the father, resulting in a lower probability of feeling helpless. As the family's provider and protector, the presence of the father serves as a source of security for the family; however, his absence can render women more vulnerable to helplessness when confronted with pressure and

difficulties. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced during adolescence, when females are more susceptible to experiencing depression.

According to the creative self-belief model established by M. Karwowski et al., the family environment is identified as a fundamental factor influencing individuals' creative self-efficacy. (Cheng et al., 2023) In another research, M.A. Easterbrooks highlighted that fathers, in contrast to traditional maternal caregiver roles, often assume the role of playmates during children's development and engage in more innovative and challenging parenting practices within parent-child interactions. These creative and stimulating activities can provide greater cognitive stimulation for children's language acquisition and physical movements. Positive parent-child interaction fosters divergent thinking and innovation among children when confronted with specific tasks and goals. O.M. Razumnikova (2005) investigated hemispheric activities in men and women during the process of creative thinking, revealing that women possess advantages in language processing but may face challenges regarding creativity compared to men. (Ding, 2015) Thus, it appears that fathers play a crucial role in promoting female creativity self-efficacy. However, the absence of paternal influence during childhood may result in insufficient stimulation for women who already exhibit lower levels of innate creativity, further hindering the formation of their creativity self-efficacy.

According to the theory of self-efficacy, individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to select challenging tasks that align with their abilities. They not only exhibit positive self-confidence in academic and professional settings but also effectively harness their creative problem-solving skills (Liao, 2023). Conversely, individuals with low levels of self-efficacy demonstrate a contrasting pattern. They gravitate towards easier tasks, harbor doubts about their capabilities, and hesitate when faced with difficulties. Such individuals often experience a sense of helplessness and emotional distress, primarily characterized by grappling with personal shortcomings and potential obstacles while exhibiting reduced behavioral efficacy. It is evident that the presence of paternal support during childhood plays a pivotal role in shaping women's problem-solving aptitude in educational and occupational domains, as well as fostering belief in successfully accomplishing specific tasks and goals (i.e., self-efficacy).

3. Conclusion

According to the mentioned literature and contemporary theoretical analysis, the absence of a father during childhood indeed has detrimental effects on women's self-esteem and self-efficacy. This study reveals that the lack of a father figure in early life leads to low self-esteem among women, making them susceptible to feelings of self-doubt, self-denial, and inferiority complex. Furthermore, it hampers the development of their self-efficacy by causing hesitation when faced with challenges and increasing vulnerability to emotional lows due to a lack of confidence. Consequently, there exists a positive correlation between low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority, while low self-efficacy is negatively associated with confidence. The absence of a father during childhood results in an unfavorable upbringing experience for women characterized by feelings of inferiority and diminished confidence.

Currently, many studies primarily focus on parental influence on children but often overlook gender differences within parent-child relationships, specifically how men and women are differentially affected by fathers versus mothers. Existing research lacks sufficient literature exploring the impact of fathers on women's personal development. Therefore, this paper addresses an important gap in family education research, which opens up new avenues for future investigations.

However, this literature review does have some limitations: firstly, there is insufficient empirical evidence supporting the viewpoint regarding female self-esteem research due to limited relevant literature; secondly, this paper solely relies on a literature review approach without utilizing quantifiable research methods which could be more advantageous if feasible conditions permit.

In future research, it is imperative to consider controlling for the extent of paternal absence. The term "paternal absence" discussed in this study refers to the lack of a father figure resulting from single-parent families, divorced families, and paternal death (Gan, 2021). Other potential degrees include complete family structures with insufficient father involvement and inadequate child care due to paternal illness or other limitations. Different levels of paternal absence may lead to varying degrees of impact on women.

To summarize, through an analysis of literature and contemporary theories, this paper examines the influence of paternal absence on women during childhood, particularly in terms of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Considering existing research gaps within this novel perspective, one limitation lies in the scarcity of quantifiable literature support. Therefore, future studies should place greater emphasis on assessing the degree of paternal absence as it would contribute towards drawing more precise conclusions.

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