

Daughters and their Relationship with their Non-Resident Fathers

**Eva C. Haldane
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Literature Review

According to the US Census, 63.2 percent of Black families and 26 percent of White families are headed by a single parent (Fields and Casper, 2001). Many Black adolescents in single-parent families maintain close relationships with their non-resident fathers and such relationships are associated with fewer internalized and externalized behaviors and lower levels of emotional distress and delinquency (Amata & Gilbreth, 1999; Carlson, 2006). Attachment to fathers is also predictive of daughter's sexual behavior. Peterson (2006) found that feelings of closeness shaped daughter's sexual expectations.

Thomas, Krampe and Newton (2008) found that black children in single-parent homes rated stronger feelings of closeness to their nonresident father than white children. In my quantitative study on daughters and nonresident fathers, I also found that the African American daughters felt closer to their nonresident fathers than their White peers. Thomas et al. were unable to explain why African American children felt closer to their nonresident fathers than their White peers, even when the child lived with a stepfather, but speculated that this might be because having another man in the household relieved nonresident fathers of the burden of provider and allowed them to focus more on their relationship with their child or because Black mothers were more likely to support a relationship between the child and nonresident father.

The consideration of nonresident father involvement as a predictor of child well-being is fairly new to the field. Early research on father involvement focused on divorced fathers, but as family structure has changed over the years (increasing rates of divorce, decreasing rates of marriage), more attention is being paid to never-married nonresident fathers. Previously father involvement was measured by the frequency of visits. The connection between child support

payments and child well-being has been also widely researched. The logic followed that the additional income increased the child's standard of living also improved the child's health and academic performance, but that a father's actual visitation did not affect a child's well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Although there has not been much research on the effects of child support payments on adolescent behavior, Huang and Han (2007) found that stronger child support was associated with fewer sexual partners, less frequency in sexual activity and a higher likelihood of contraceptive use in non-White males. They did not find an association between child support payment and timing of sexual debut.

More recently, attention has been paid to what the fathers do when they spend time with child – the focus is more on the quality of the visits instead of the frequency. Two popular measures of quality are authoritative parenting and emotional closeness between fathers and children. Activities such as talking with the child about problems, helping with homework and enforcing rules are considered authoritative parenting. Miller, Forehand and Kotchick (1999) found that family processes, as opposed to family structure, influence adolescent sexual decision making. Specifically, monitoring and communication were important processes that parents employed to influence their children. The article specifically focused on mothers, but one can imagine these processes working for fathers as well. Even though a lot has been written about nonresident fathers and their relationship with their children, none of these articles can explain how what African American fathers are doing is creating these close relationships.

There is still much work to be done. To date, this author has not found an article that asks African American children directly about their relationship with their father or what enables them to feel close. Because what constitutes closeness has not been studied, the project provides an opportunity to explore the relationship these women have with their fathers and how they

maintained a relationship through her life. Additionally this study will explore how fathers influence their daughter's decisions regarding dating and sex.

This study will build upon a quantitative paper I am currently working on that examines the relationship between father closeness and daughter's number of sexual partners in young adulthood using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) dataset. Fortunately for me, this dataset that directly asks adolescents how close they feel to their father, the answer is a Likert scale (1 meaning not close at all and 5 meaning extremely close) (Harris et. al., 2009). However, since it is a quantitative dataset, I am unable to understand what a close relationship between a father and child looks like and how these are created and maintained. The paper did find that father involvement was negatively associated with number of sexual partners. Additionally the paper found the Black nonresident daughters felt closer to their fathers than their white and other race peers. This study can help shed light on the relationship between nonresident fathers and daughters and fill a gap in the literature.

Research Questions

What kind of relationships do daughters have with their nonresident (biological) fathers? and How does this relationship affect their romantic and sexual relationships?

Research Design

This is a hermeneutical phenomenology study that will explore the experience of being the daughter of a nonresident father (the experience of growing up in a separate household from a biological father). This type of phenomenology involves interpreting the meaning of the experience (Creswell, 2007). This topic is perfect for phenomenological research because the relationships between African American nonresident fathers and their children is not well

understood, especially the reasons behind the closeness that African American children feel for their nonresident fathers. [This section needs more]

Methods

Participants

To date, I have only been able to interview one person. Carol¹ is an African American woman who is 28 years old. She is currently working on a dual graduate degree in social work and education. She has never lived in the same household as her biological, but she has lived in the same household as her stepfather for many years.

My next two interviewees are also African American women. One of the women lived with her father until she was five. I am unsure of the father story of the second woman but she asked to be in the study when I mentioned that I was conducting interviews with nonresident daughters. Both women are highly educated and both are in serious relationships. One of the participants was born in a foreign country but came to the United States as a teenager.

Procedure

The participant is a peer and current student at the university I attend. I already knew she grew up in a different household from her father as we had spoken about it before. I asked her if she would be willing to participate in my study and she agreed. For this study I conducted an in-depth semi structured interview. Although I did not compensate her financially, I did make her brunch.

¹ Name changed to protect the participant's identity.

I used this same approach to recruit the other two participants. I will conduct the interviews at a location of their choosing.

Instrument

I created an interview protocol for this study (see Appendix). The interview begins with some ice breaker questions that also provide some background about the participant. Next there is a section about the father followed by a section about her relationship with her father. This section has questions about their relationship at different points in her life. The last section is about her romantic relationships – past and present. The interview itself lasts approximately an hour and a half.

Results

The purpose of this paper was to explore nonresident father and daughter relationships, to understand how these relationships were maintained and examine if and how these relationships affected the daughter's romantic and sexual relationships. I learned many things from this single interview.

Father/Daughter Relationship

Carol's relationship with her father has always been rocky. While her mother was pregnant with her, her parents broke up. They were active in the Church and not married. Carol's mother's pregnancy was a scandal in the Church and the consequent falling out left harsh feelings between her parents that remain to this day. Her father subsequently married a woman from his new Church but remained in the same city as Carol and her mother. About ten years

ago, they eventually moved to a southern state. Carol's father has two sons with his wife. He is a pastor and mailman and mentors children in his community.

Carol has never felt close to her father. She could not tell me a favorite memory that included her father. Carol told me that she had been the one to reach out to her father ever since she was younger. When describing how it felt to always be the one pursuing her father, she described it as

Carol: Uhm, it was frustrating. Because you kinda, I remember that being a teenager and thinking that like, ok so women are supposed to chase after men. Like is that how it's supposed to be? You know, like, ok I'm supposed to be that way. You know and it's frustrating. And it's like always, you know, like your father never flat out rejects you, you know? But it's like a uhm, like a cat and mouse game.

Carol's mother married and had two sons with her husband. He began to use drug and physically abuse Carol and her mother. From the time she was 8 until she 10, her step father also sexually abused her. She reached out to her father, but he did not return. She became very angry with him and stopped speaking to him. When I asked about her relationship as a teenager, Carol explained that there was none.

Carol: Oh there was no relationship. There was none. He uhm, I was like pretty much all my life I would see him once a year, once every oth.. once every two years? Uhm, and he would be around for like ... (laughs (at train) and train sound²) for like two or three months and then he would disappear.

Eventually they began to talk again but she did not want to chase her father any longer. When she was younger, she tried to make her father be a father. She tried to keep him up to date with her life and she tried to see him a lot. Although she said she no longer chases him, she still keeps him current with what she is going through. Describing her current relationship with her father:

Carol: Uhm, you know I think it's, we are uhm... like I don't hide things from him. You know like when I do talk to him and he's like oh what's going on you know I tell him like

² Throughout the interview, we could hear the subway outside.

these are the things that are going on, uh, but I think. I wouldn't even say it's like friends. It's kinda just like we're like people that know each other. You know? [...] So it's kinda like that's really all he's gonna be is an ear to listen to. So it's like, you know. It's just like, I really feel like, you know he is who he is and he's not who he's not. And that's, I so don't even want to waste the energy and like try to make him be a father for me if he can't do that.

Throughout the interview she said her father “is who he is and is not who he is not.” It appears as if she is accepting her father for who is he, even though he is not who she wanted him to be. This may have been particularly difficult because he is a good father to his children with his wife. Where he was “hands on” with his sons, he was a “spectator” to her life. Her mother provided for her and took care of her, her father provided for his family and took care of her sons.

When asked if she would change anything about her relationship with her father, she replied:

Carol: I wish he was there, you know when I would think about when I would have my own kids, like, it'd be nice if they could see, you know, my relationship with my father, have a relationship with their grandfather, you know that kind of thing. [...]

Her answer was reflective. She was not talking about changing her current relationship with her father. Surprisingly, most of her answer was all about her future children and what their familial experience could be.

Closeness and Relationships

One major theme is that even though the daughter does not feel close to her father, and has never felt close to him, he still influences the way that she dates. Her behavior in her relationships mimicked her behavior with her father, specifically being the one to initiate conversations and seeing each other. Carol described her relationship with her father as “a cat

and mouse game.” She would be the one to reach out him and essentially chase him to get his attention. This behavior rubbed off on her dating behavior.

Carol: And so then like, I remember kinda thinking that like when I was like young and dating that that whole cat and mouse game was the way it was supposed to be. [...] Yeah. It's a game, it's a cat and mouse game. You know, they'll call you sometimes, then they won't, but like you always gotta be there gotta keep pushing and stuff like that. But uh, you know, the older I get the more wiser I get the more experiences I have the more comfortable I am with myself, I think. You learn that's not how it is.

It took Carol a long time to figure this out. She had been on and off with an older man for twelve years and most of their relationship was her chasing him and also being “ride or die” (completely faithful and willing to do anything for him) for him. She told me that her relationship with her father prepared her for these types of romantic relationships. She knew how to handle a boyfriend not calling back, or standing her up. But her relationship with her father left her completely unprepared for a healthy and functional relationship. Although she is happy with her current boyfriend, she is anxious about when the good time is going to end.

In addition to how she acted in relationships, her father also influenced the type of men she dated.

Carol: Yeah. Exactly. And I don't look at him and expect him [her boyfriend] to be my father or fill that role. I don't look at that. [...] Well I have a tendency to date, like, older men. And I think it's exhibited that way. Within a relationship? No, not that way. Come take care of me! But uhm, just the fact that I look at older men probably plays into that, the current guy I'm dating, he's older. Uhm, he's 40. So, yeah.

Eva: And you're 27?

Carol: 28.

Eva: Oh yeah.

Carol: so in that respect I can see that playing out that way.

Throughout the interview, Carol discussed her future children and the kind of life she wanted them to have. Many times, especially in the discussion after the interview, she discussed

not wanting to be a single mother and not wanting her children to grow up without a father. She wanted her children to have a positive male role model in their lives. When she dates, she wants to make sure she is dating men who will be good fathers to their children.

Carol: Well, I think, I've dated some guys who have kids. Uhm I've dated some guys who have kids and have bad relationships with the kid's mothers and I see how that plays out. And I've dated guys who have good relationships with the kid's mothers and I see how that plays out. Uhm, the guy that I'm currently dating is super family oriented, like he's the second to last of 8. [...] And like his parents are still married. [...] You know, and so he believes in like family, like he doesn't know anything else other than two parents being together raising their kids together in a family. You know, so it's like those are the things that I look at. I really kinda look at what the guy's relationships are like with the parents and uhm what the relationships are with the kids that they have.

An interesting aside is that her last two boyfriends have known her father. In one case, her father knew he was cheating on Carol before Carol found out and told her. Her current boyfriend is also involved in the Church and knows her father from Church (and has known Carol since she was a child).

Changing Communication Patterns

Another theme is the change in communication patterns over the life course. As she gets older, the modes of communication become more distant. When she was younger she would actually see her father and occasionally spend the night at his house.

Carol: I would call him. There was one point where he lived like 15 blocks from me and that's the time, I would like show up at his house throughout the summer, like randomly. I would like show up and like I'm staying here for the weekend. I didn't ask him, I'd tell him.

Her father later moved to Florida and then their communication turned to phone calls. When she was 15, she became angry with her father and wrote him a letter. He responded with a phone call. After the phone call, she stopped talking to her father for a while.

Currently, Carol's stepmother facilitates their communication as she is Facebook friends with the Carol and tells her father what is happening.

Carol: Like sometime's he'll call, once in a while he'll call, like a couple of months now and say "oh what's going on with you?" [inaudible] one time he was calling cause I was so, cause he had like texted me about something and was like call me and I called him and he sounded concerned because I was having problems with one of my brothers and he uhm, and I had like posted stuff on Facebook and his wife reads my Facebook and like his wife reads it and she's really active on there and she like told him like "something's going on with Carol and you need to call her" So he called me and like I told him. Uh, at that point he, you know, he tried to offer support or whatever.

At the time of the interview, she had not had a phone conversation with her father in a few months and they had communicated within the last month in text messages. Her current focus is remaining in contact with her stepbrothers from her father.

Discussion

This interview suggests that African American nonresident fathers are more likely to remain in contact with their children because their children initiate and maintain the contact. While the literature mentions the mother's role in assisting communication between child and father, this interview illustrates that children will remain in contact without assistance from the mother (and even in spite of mother's objections). More interviews are needed to support this finding.

Carol's father influences her relationship behavior and decisions even though she does not feel close to him. Her relationship with her father set the stage for future relationships. She chased boyfriends the same way she chased her father, and she did not realize that relationships were not supposed to work that way until she was older. Her mother's relationship with her stepfather also played a role in this misconception. Now that she has an understanding of what a healthy and functional relationship should look like, she wants to date and eventually marry a

man who will raise children with her. She spoke at length about not wanting her children to have the experiences that she did. She also did not want her children learning these difficult lessons at a young age as she had. Another way to interpret this result is that her future children are influencing her dating behavior. It is entirely possible that now that she is close to an age when women have children, she is switching her priorities and now that she is thinking of her children she changed her behavior.

As Carol's relationship with her father weakened, their modes of communication became more distant. Initially they spent time together, then they spoke on the phone and sent letters and there was a period where they did not speak at all. Now they speak on the phone with month long intervals in between or text message each other. Her stepmother keeps in more frequent contact because they are Facebook friends and therefore her stepmother is better able to see what Carol writes about in her status updates. The fact that Carol does not speak regularly with her father did not appear to bother her much. She is currently more focused on staying in touch with her half-brothers.

It is possible that as Carol got older and recognized what healthy relationships look like, she decided to stop chasing her father, like she stopped chasing boyfriends. Their current relationship may be the most healthy this way even though they are distant towards each other. By this point, Carol recognizes what her father will and will not do and has accepted that "he is who is and not who he's not."

The Process (Bracketing)

Separating my father story from Carol's was difficult. While there are some similarities, there are also many important differences – specifically how and why our fathers left, the fact

that she grew up with a stepfather and what happened to us while our fathers were away. I had to keep reminding myself that even though we say we feel the same way about a situation we might not feel the same way for the same reasons. I think it is particularly difficult now because I do not have anyone else to compare our stories to. I think as I conduct more interviews, interpreting what my interviewees are (and are not) saying will become easier. Also as I interview more women, I will be able to see what is the common experience compared to my hypothesized experience.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. This project is exploring daughter's relationships with their nonresident fathers. By nonresident fathers, I mean fathers that do not live in the same household as their children. I would like to ask you a few questions about your relationship with your father.

Do you have any questions? Let's begin.

Ice Breakers

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Do you have any siblings?
3. What was your favorite childhood memory?

Fathers

4. Tell me about your father?
 - a. What's your favorite memory of your father?
5. Were there any major changes in his life?

Relationship with Father

6. When you were 15, how would you describe your relationship to your father?
 - a. Did you work on homework together? Did you talk about your personal problems?
 - b. Do you spend time together now? What do you do together?
 - i. If not, talk on the phone? Email? Write letters?
7. How has your relationship changed as you got older?
 - c. If not, how has it changed?
 - d. Why do you think it has changed?
 - e. If so, how have you managed to maintain it in spite of not living together?
8. Do you feel close to your father?
 - f. If not, have you ever felt close to your father?
9. How do you feel about your current relationship with your father?
 - g. What would you like to change about your relationship?

Personal Romantic Relationships and Fathers

Let's talk a little bit about your previous relationships.

10. Tell me about your first relationship?
 - a. How old were you?
 - b. Did your father know about this relationship?
 - i. If so, how did your dad react to your relationship?
 - ii. If not, why did you decide not to tell him?
 - c. Did your father know about your later relationships?
11. Are you currently in a relationship?
 - a. Do you talk to your father about this relationship? What do you talk about?

- b. If not, do you ask your father for advice about getting a boyfriend?
12. Is there anything else you would like to say about your relationship with your father?

Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to talk with me.