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### Fathers and Daughters: A Needed Course in Family Studies

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#### ABSTRACT

Father-daughter relationships should receive more attention in family studies' courses. A review of the literature shows that fathers have a lifelong impact on their daughters, yet receive too little attention from educators, mental health and social service workers, and researchers. Especially in families where the parents are unhappily married or divorced, father-daughter relationships need more attention from professionals working with families. By offering a course on Fathers and Daughters similar to the one described in this article, faculty can help students recognize their own biases and misconceptions about fathers, become familiar with recent research and its practical applications in working with fathers and daughters, and often create more meaningful relationships with their own fathers. This college course incorporates a unique variety of teaching techniques: student interviews with their fathers, the completion of more than fifty self-assessment questionnaires, tests that require application of research, critiques of web sites, and assigned questions that encourage more focused class discussions.

#### INTRODUCTION

As a powerful force in shaping the attitudes and behavior of social and mental health professionals, family studies' courses need to focus more on father-daughter relationships. While many colleges offer courses devoted exclusively to mother-daughter relationships, almost none offer courses exclusively focused on father-daughter relationships. Moreover, it is difficult to present a balanced, accurate portrait of families when research and college textbooks tend to focus more on father-son and mother-daughter relationships than on fathers and daughters – and even then, to focus more on the father's shortcomings than his strengths (Booth & Crouter, 1998; Dienhart, 1998; Griswold, 1998; Lamb, 1997; Pruett, 1999).

Few mental health practitioners and social service workers are well prepared to work with fathers and daughters. Consequently, professionals working with families often pay less attention to fathers' relationships with the children than to mothers' relationships – especially when the children are daughters (Baker & McMurray, 1998; Beale, 1999; Carr, 1998; Fagan & Hawkins, 2003; Long, 1997; Phares, 1999; Walters, 1997). Excluding or ignoring fathers is even more likely when the parents are divorced (Amato & Booth, 1997; Brott, 1999; Nielsen, 1999; Warshak, 2002).

The reason for father-daughter relationships receiving less attention in both research and practice can be traced to the early part of the twentieth century when there was growing concern about the loss of “manliness” in our society. Throughout the 1950s, concerns over boys' becoming too feminine as a result of being raised by overly protective mothers led to fathers being urged to become more involved with their sons in an effort to enhance the “manhood” in the next generation

of men (Bederman, 1995; Griswold, 1993). But as we will soon see, the idea that fathers are more important and more necessary to their sons than to their daughters has not altogether disappeared.

Father-daughter relationships merit more attention in the curriculum as we can see by examining these three questions: What is the status of most father-daughter relationships today? How does the parents' unhappy marriage or divorce affect fathers' relationships with their daughters differently than with their sons? And how do daughters benefit from a meaningful, loving, communicative relationship with their fathers?

### **Father-Daughter Relationships: How good, how bad?**

The good news is that most married fathers are spending more time than married fathers in previous generations with their children. On average married, employed fathers spend a little over two hours each week day and six hours on weekends with their children, while married employed mothers - 80 percent of whom spend less time at work and less time commuting than their husbands - spend a little over 3 hours each weekday and 8 hours on weekends with the kids (Galinsky, 1999; Milke, 2004). And the more hours the mother works outside the home, the more hours the father generally spends with the kids (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Brayfield, 2003; Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001).

But the bad news is that fathers still tend to spend more time with their sons (Lamb, 1997; Phares, 1999; Pleck, 1997; Updegraff et al, 2001). Dads also tend to talk more, share more and give more advice to their sons (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Larson & Richards, 1994; Shulman & Krenke, 1996, Snarey, 1993). If fathers feel that they are less important or less necessary to their sons than to their daughters, it might help to explain why only 30 percent of the fathers in a recent survey believed that their active involvement in their daughter's life was "vital" to her health and well being (Roper Poll, 2004). Or why, when adults were asked what gender they would prefer *if they could only have one child*, most men said sons and most women said daughters (Dahl & Moretti, 2004). Likewise, 80 percent of adoptive parents request a girl mainly because the driving force in most adoptions is the wife (Pertman, 2000).

The good news is that the majority of fathers and daughters say they love one another and get along well most of the time. Even during the teenage years, fathers and daughters usually argue less than mothers and daughters - and have a less competitive, more affectionate relationship than fathers and sons (Nielsen, 1996; Shulman et al., 1996; Snarey, 1993). Unfortunately though, *throughout their lifetimes* daughters and fathers generally do not communicate as comfortably, spend as much time with each other, feel as close to each other emotionally, or get to know one another as well or talk about as many personal things as mothers and daughters (Amato et al., 1997; Lamb, 1997; Nielsen, 1996; Nielsen, 2004; Way & Gillman, 2000). While bonds between mothers and children usually grow stronger over time, those between fathers and children usually do not (Bengtson & Roberts, 2002). In short, most fathers and daughters are not getting as much as they could from their relationship

### **Unhappy Marriages and Divorce**

Father-daughter relationships also merit more attention because, generally speaking, they are more easily damaged than father-son relationships when the parents are unhappily married or divorced. Because mothers and daughters tend to be closer and to confide more in each other, daughters are more likely than sons to turn against dad and form an alliance with mom when things

are not going well in the marriage. And if the daughter becomes her unhappy mother's friend, counselor, and confidant, the father-daughter relationship usually suffers (Booth et al., 1998; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996). Given this, it is not surprising that father-daughter relationships are usually more damaged than father-son relationships when the parents divorce (Ahrns, 2004; Fabricius, 2003; Hetherington, 2003).

### **Benefits of Positive Father-Daughter Relationships**

Unless students in Family Studies courses gain a better understanding of fathers' lifelong impact on their daughters lives, they cannot function as effectively in their future professional roles working with families. Our students need to know that fathers generally have as much *or more* impact than mothers do on many aspects of their daughters' lives. For example, the father has the greater impact on the daughters' ability to trust, enjoy, and relate well to the males in her life (Erickson, 1998; Kast, 1997; Leonard, 1998). And well-fathered daughters are usually more self confident, more self-reliant, and more successful in school and in their careers than poorly fathered daughters (Lamb, 1997; Morgan & Wilcoxon, 1998; Perkins, 2001). Daughters with loving, comfortable, communicative relationships with their fathers are also less likely to develop eating disorders (Botta & Dumlao, 2002; Maine, 2004). In short, a father's impact on his daughter's life is far reaching and lifelong.

## **The Course Design**

### **Course Goals**

The Fathers and Daughters course has four main goals. One, to familiarize students with current research and statistics relevant to father-daughter relationships. Two, to show students how to apply the research in practical ways. Three, to recognize their own biases that might limit their effectiveness as professionals. And four, to motivate them to changes some aspect of their relationships with their fathers.

The course is divided into seven major segments. One: Stereotypes, negative beliefs and unfounded assumptions about men that limit or damage father-daughter relationships. Two: The ways in which the father's work, issues related to money, and the daughter's school and career decisions affect the father-daughter relationship. Three: Effective and ineffective ways of communicating between fathers and daughters. Four: Ways in which daughters can get to know their fathers on a more meaningful, more adult, more honest level. Five: The impact of mothers on father-daughter relationships. Six: Ways to deal better with issues related to sex, dating, and marriage that create tension between most fathers and daughters. Seven: How divorce and remarriage affect the father-daughter relationship and ways to deal with problematic issues and situations.

### **Reading assignments, Grading, Format**

The students are required to read *Embracing Your Father* (Nielsen, 2004) *Throwaway Dads* (Parke & Brott, 1999), *Cutting Loose* (Halpern, 1990), and selected chapters from *Working Fathers* (Levine & Pitinsky, 1998) and *Men can't hear what women don't say* (Farrell, 2000). The grade is based on two written tests, three papers based on interviews with their fathers, seminar participation, and the completion of fifty written questionnaires from *Embracing Your Father*.

The class is conducted as a seminar and enrollment is limited to sixteen students. The class meets once a week for two and a half hours. This lengthy block of time enables the instructor to use the first hour to focus on research data and still have 80 minutes to discuss the personal implications

and applications of the data. The course assignments and activities, however, can also be used with larger classes or in courses where the students meet several times a week for shorter periods of time. To keep the discussion focused, students are required to prepare answers every week to these two questions: (1) What research or ideas surprised or upset you in the assigned reading? Why? (2) What information in this week's reading was most relevant for understanding your relationship with your father or for explaining father-daughter relationships in general? The students then share their answers during class discussion.

### **Media and Web Sites**

Instead of lectures, various media are used to convey and to personalize the research: *Father-Daughter Relationships* a one hour interview with me and my responses to listeners for NPR (Stasio, 2004), the Academy Award winning animated film *Father and Daughter* (Dudok De Wit, 2000), and the documentaries *Fathers Juggling Families and Work* (Lipschutz & Rosenblatt, 1999), *All Men Are Sons* (Badalmet, 2002), *Going Home: Family Triangles* (James, 1990), and *Fathers and Daughters: Journeys of the Heart* (Lerner, 2005).

Web sites also provide students with research and resourceful ideas. Students are required to submit a ten sentence critique of each of these web sites: Center for Successful Fathering (fathering.org), Dads and Daughters (dadsanddaughters.org), Father and Child Society (fatherandchild.org), Father's Direct, (fathersdirect.com), National Men's Resource Center (menstuff.org), Men's Voices Magazine (menweb.org), National Center for Fathering (fathers.com), National Fatherhood Initiative (fatherhood.org), National Fathers' Resource Center (fathers4kids.org), National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (npnff.org), and Divorced Fathers Network (divorcedfathers.com).

### **Interviewing Their Fathers**

The most powerful assignments are the three interviews with their biological fathers. Fewer than 5 percent of the students have relationships with their fathers that are so distant or so damaged that they are unable to do these interviews. I create alternative assignments for those students. For example, if the student no longer has any contact with her physically abusive father, she might do a research paper on the effects of physical abuse on children. Or if she has never known her father, she might do a research paper on the effects of father absence.

For the 95 percent of students who are able to conduct the interviews, after the first class each student mails her father the list of 150 questions that she will be asking him in three separate interviews during the semester. Also included in the mailing is an explanation of the assignment as it appears on the course syllabus.

The first interview includes the least personal questions, such as: "What are some of your favorite childhood memories? What kind of relationship did you have with your father? How are you like and unlike each of your parents?" The second interview advances to more personal questions such as: "How do you generally express your anger and how do you usually feel afterwards?" "Tell me about a time when you were unable to forgive someone." The final interview includes the most personal questions, such as: "What are some of the worst decisions you ever made? What do you wish we had more of in our relationship? What are some lessons you learned the hard way? How have your spiritual beliefs changed over time? What do you wish you had known when you were my age?"

The three interviews serve several purposes. Spending time alone with their fathers and asking him certain questions that have never been asked before can help both get to know one another on a more meaningful and more adult level. The assignment provides an opportunity to explore certain topics that have been awkward or impossible for them to discuss in the past. Regardless of how many questions the father is willing to answer or how open he is in answering them, spending several hours talking privately and focusing on the father's life creates an opportunity for more honest, more emotionally intimate communication.

Roughly one third of the students are anxious initially about doing the interviews. This is not surprising since, most fathers and daughters do not spend much time alone discussing anything meaningful or personal (research cited earlier in this paper) In order to allay their anxieties, the instructor meets with students individually to discuss their concerns and help them prepare for the interviews. Trying to help students overcome their anxieties, however, would not be appropriate in cases where the father had been physically or sexually abusive, or in any other way posed a physical danger to family members.

On average there have been three students a year who are estranged from their fathers for reasons related to their parents' divorce. By meeting individually with these students, the instructor can design a plan for initiating contact with her father. This is only an option, however, if the daughter makes clear that she wants to renew the relationship with her father and wants the instructor's help in reaching this goal. Although the course is not designed as therapy, the results are therapeutic, especially for those students with the most distant or troubled relationships with their fathers.

### **Self Assessment Quizzes**

Students are required to submit 46 written self-assessment quizzes and worksheets from *Embracing Your Father*. Students are assured that their answers are confidential, although most students choose to share personal information from these assignments in class discussions. Each questionnaire is designed to help students explore their own biases and misconceptions about fathers or to explore their own family relationships. Further details on the classroom activities, assignments, weekly calendar, and test questions are available in *Embracing Your Father* and the accompanying instructor's manual (Nielsen, 2004).

### **SAMPLE AND METHODS**

From 1990-2004, 340 female and 6 male students ages 20-24 have taken the course. Roughly 70 percent were majoring in social sciences and 30 percent were Women's Studies minors. Nearly 85 percent were from white, upper middle class families, and 60 percent from the Southeast. Twenty percent had parents who were divorced.

During the first three weeks of the course students completed fifteen self-assessment quizzes and questionnaires from *Embracing Your Father*. Nearly 70 percent reported having a "good" relationship with their father, while 30 percent reported a "poor" relationship with him. . While only 5 percent gave their relationships with their mothers the lowest rating possible, (1 on a 5 point scale), almost 20 percent gave their fathers the lowest rating. Nearly 60 percent said they had a closer, more personal relationship with their mother, communicated better with her, and knew more about her than they knew about their father. Only 10 percent felt they were closer to and communicated better with their father than with their mother. Thirty percent said their relationships with each parent were

equal in these respects.

More bad news for fathers and daughters: Throughout childhood *and during their college years*, nearly 90 percent of the daughters spent more time talking to and being with their mothers than with their fathers – especially private time with just the two of them together. Roughly 5 percent spent equal time being with and talking to both parents during their college years, while a mere 4 percent spent more time being with or talking to dad than mom.

With respect to students' expectations in their relationships with their fathers, 80 percent want to communicate better – especially about personal things, 60 percent want to get to know him better and be more open in their relationship, 25 percent want to spend more time together, and 20 percent want their father to treat them more like grown-ups. The first topic most would like to be able to talk comfortably and honestly about is related to something unpleasant going on in the family - or something that happened in the past but still hasn't been discussed or resolved. These topics include: divorce, ongoing marital unhappiness, alcohol or drug problems, depression, eating disorders, adultery, financial issues, and conflicts with extended family members. A close second is a desire to hear more about their father's experiences or get his advice on personal relationships such as his ideas on what it takes to create a good marriage, (or why his marriage ended in divorce) his opinions of her boyfriend, or his feelings about her cohabiting with a man instead of getting married.

Given that the majority of students say they want a more communicative, more comfortable, more meaningful relationship with their fathers, their answers on the questionnaires are especially sad. Nearly 40 percent go through their mother to communicate with their father about anything personal or "really important." As they have done throughout childhood, this 40 percent relies on their mother to be the family's communications satellite - beaming messages to dad and deciding which information will and will not be relayed to him about the daughter's life. Only 30 percent of the students tell their fathers as much as they tell their mothers about what's going on in their lives or go to him for as much advice about personal issues. Although 80 percent go to their fathers for advice on non-personal issues such as school or car problems, 50 percent admit they are more open and more honest with their mothers. Only 10 percent are more open and honest with their fathers.

Many students initially have sexist beliefs and negative misconceptions about men as parents – beliefs that may limit their own relationships as well as limit their effectiveness in their future work with families. For example, on written homework quizzes, half of the students initially believe that fathers are less stressed than employed mothers trying to balance work and family – a belief that is not supported by recent research (Levine et al., 1998; Parke et al., 1999; Milke, 2004). And nearly half initially believe that children benefit most socially, academically and psychologically when the father is the only wage earner and the mother stays home to raise the kids - a belief that is not supported by recent research on employed mothers (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Geiger, 1996; Lamb, 1997).

## **RESULTS**

The impact of the interviews and the self-assessment quizzes are assessed from the students' comments on the anonymous final course evaluations, the three papers, and their written weekly assignments. Based on these three sources, 90 percent of the students achieve all four course goals. They become familiar with the most current research, learn how to use the research in applied

settings, recognize their personal biases and societal beliefs that may limit their effectiveness as professionals, and change some aspect of the relationship with their own fathers. Moreover, 80 of the students earn at least a B on the tests, demonstrating that they have become well acquainted with the research.

The single biggest change is that 82 percent of the students say that their relationships improved and their understanding of father-daughter relationships grew as a consequence of the three interviews with their fathers. Only 10 percent say they “got nothing out of the interviews”. Likewise, in their papers nearly 60 percent of the students write about positive changes in how they perceive their fathers. And nearly half write about their growing awareness of the negative impact their mothers have had on certain aspects of their father-daughter relationships.

The students with divorced parents generally make the biggest changes in terms of how they perceive and how they treat their fathers. Most become more forgiving, more understanding, and more open minded about events that have damaged or detracted from their relationship. All of the students who were estranged from their fathers for reasons related to their parents divorce ended up either speaking to or getting together with their father by the end of the semester.

According to an old maxim, “Nature didn’t make us perfect so it did the next best thing by making us blind to our own faults.” But as a result of this course, many students become more aware of their own shortcomings as daughters. In their papers nearly 80 percent of the students mention ways in which *they* - not their fathers – have been limiting or preventing the relationship from becoming more meaningful, more personal and more adult.

### CONCLUSION

By paying more attention to father-daughter relationships in family studies, we provide future professionals with the kind of knowledge and attitudes that will make them more “father friendly” in their careers. More fully appreciating the lifelong impact that fathers have on their daughters, students will inevitably pay more attention and work harder to strengthen father-daughter relationships in their future careers. Students must be made more aware of their own demeaning misconceptions or inaccurate information about men as parents to daughters, as well as be provided with the most current research relevant to father-daughter relationships.

Although the interviews with their fathers and the fifty self-assessment quizzes have the most powerful impact, the web site assignments, documentaries, and seminar format also engage and challenge students. Including seminar participation in the final grade and assigning the same two questions to prepare for seminars each week keeps most students from meandering, repeating themselves, or focusing only on personal storytelling. Likewise, creating exam questions that require students to support their answers with specific research and to explain ways in which they could actually apply the research takes test-taking beyond the traditional exercise of merely memorizing facts.

The impact of the course goes beyond preparing students to be more effective in their future professions. Having developed a more accurate and compassionate perspective on fathers and a deeper appreciation for the way our society too often demeans, demoralizes and disenfranchises dads, almost every student ends up with a more comfortable, communicative, meaningful relationship with her own father. It has been said that people would rather have one good soul satisfying *emotion* than consider any of the *facts* when making up their minds about anything

important. But in the case of this Fathers and Daughters course, most students *do* change their minds as well as their emotions as a consequence of looking at the facts.

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