

Gender identity and self-esteem of boys growing up without a father

Geertje de Lange

Abstract

A consequence of the currently high divorce rate is that lots of children grow up without their father. In this article the question of whether such fatherless children develop a less masculine gender identity and a more negative evaluation of self-image (lower self-esteem) is explored. The focus in this article is exclusively on male children. Based on available research, it is concluded that father-absent boys show a more feminine or less masculine gender identity and report lower self-esteem than father-present boys. Future research should control for confounds such as SES and family unhappiness, in order to make sure that it is actually the father absence that causes the developmental outcomes that have been obtained.

Keywords: Father absence, divorce, gender, gender identity, masculinity, self-esteem, self image, paternal influence, male parenting, developmental outcomes.

Introduction

Due to rapid social change, the divorce rate has risen exponentially in the past three decades. As a consequence, in modern Western society it is not unusual for children to grow up without their father. There has been an explosion of research on how father absence affects children. This article focuses on the influence of father absence due to divorce on two aspects of male child developmental outcomes. These aspects are gender identity and the evaluation of self-image, in other words: gender identity and self-esteem. The term gender refers to a socio-cultural construct distinct from sex. Gender identity is one's own categorization of one's individuality as male, female, or ambivalent as experienced in self-awareness of one's own mental processes and one's own actual behavior (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972, in Diamond, 2004). In other words, gender identity concerns whether and to what extent you feel like a boy or a girl. Self-image is conceptually similar to gender identity, since this term also concerns how a person perceives oneself. Self-image is, however, much broader than gender identity. It could be stated that gender identity is a part of self-image. This article focuses on how father-absent boys evaluate their self-image. In other words, the focus is on the self-esteem of these boys. The main question that will be answered in this article is: Does father absence due to divorce have an influence on the gender identity and self-

esteem of boys? First, an outline of the historical views on fatherhood will be provided. Then it will be argued that male parenting is sometimes the sole significant predictor of child outcomes. Next, an overview of existing research will be presented that shows that father absence is associated with boys developing a less masculine or more feminine gender identity. Subsequently, it is shown that father absence due to divorce is associated with a more negative evaluation of self-image (lower self-esteem) in boys. The article ends with a conclusion/discussion in which it is argued that the majority of the influences of father absence on identity and self-image as found in prevailing research could actually be due to other circumstances, such as socioeconomic status. Finally, recommendations for future research are made.

History of societal views on fatherhood

The main question this article attempts to answer is whether father absence affects male children. This question in and of itself implies that fathers have unique parenting abilities that mothers, by being biologically female and/or by exerting their feminine gender role, do not possess. It took a long time before scientists started to investigate the existence of unique paternal abilities, because of the dominating societal view that the role of mothers was pre-eminent and that the importance of fathers in child outcomes hardly mattered. One reason for this view was

that both psychologists and anthropologists argued that fathers in contrast to mothers are not genetically equipped to be parents. For example, psychologist-primatologist Harlow (1971, in Mackey, 2001) proposed that, just as with adult male rhesus macaques, men's association with children is a derivative effect. Harlow wrote: "Men like women and like to be around them. Women like children and like to be around them. Therefore, men are around children, because women are around children." This reasoning is contradicted by the finding of Mackey (2001), who did field research in which, across cultural boundaries, men were found with their children, in the absence of women, in large proportions. Social anthropologist Mead (1949, in Mackey, 2001) wrote "human fatherhood is a social invention." The behavior of men taking care of children is learned behavior, according to Mead. Being a mother, on the contrary, is inherent to being a woman. The views of Harlow and Mead helped generate a high degree of attention on the mother-child relationship, at the expense of the father-child relationship. In addition to the highly influential views of Harlow and Mead, the dearth of literature with regard to male versus female parenting could be due to the societal view- based on traditional gender roles- that the mother is the primary caretaker. Scientific theories regarding child development thus focused on the influence of the mother. The large amount of research on mothers and the finding that mothers were very important to child development amplified the idea that fathers must not be that important in child development (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

However, in the 1970's a shift in beliefs about fatherhood occurred, a shift that coincided with the emergence of the feminist movement. The growing number of mothers entering the workforce led to increased attention on the role of fathers in childcare. Social scientists began to explore the influence of fathers in their research. Researchers came to the conclusion that fathers' influence on specific developmental outcomes was as great as that of mothers. It was, however, statistically not yet possible to examine what part of developmental outcome fathers were uniquely responsible for, independently from mothers.

Male parenting as sole significant predictor in specific child outcomes

Measurability became possible in the 1990s when multivariate statistical packages became available and easily accessible. The availability of statistics like multiple regression allowed researchers to control simultaneously for the influence of different variables. Now researchers discovered that father care is sometimes the sole significant predictor of specific child outcomes after removing the influence of mother care (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). An example is a 6-year longitudinal study by Brody, Moore, and Glei (1994, in Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). This study showed that paternal but not maternal warmth had a significant long-term effect in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward social issues such as marriage, divorce, sex roles and child support. This result was found by means of a regression analysis. Since one's attitudes are a part of one's identity, this result is a first indication that father absence has an influence on the identity of (male) children.

Father absence is related to a less masculine/more feminine gender identity in boys

Gender identity development has been a subject of research since the 1940s. One of the studies concerning the association between father absence and boys' gender identity will be elaborated on here, to gain insight not only into the findings but also into the methods used to measure gender identity. After the discussion of this study, done in 1973 by an anthropologist, a meta-analysis done in 1988 by two psychologists is discussed. Research findings from different disciplines will be discussed in order to provide a full picture. The studies discussed were performed some time ago. However more recent empirical research on this specific topic (father absence due to divorce) was not found. Recent literature on the relationship between father absence and child development outcomes does no more than cite the results of earlier research. For example, the article "Father absence and adolescent development: a review of the literature" which was published in 2006 by East, Jackson, and, O'Brien, extensively cites an

article published by Rohner and Veneziano (2001). This article from Rohner and Veneziano, in turn, only describes empirical research from the seventies through nineties. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) also noted the lack of research, stating that “surprisingly few studies examined how gender, as distinct from number, marital status, sexual orientation, or the biogenetic relationship of parents, affects children. No study attempted to isolate the variable of parental gender by holding constant these other factors.” More recent research with regard to gender identity has focused more on the implications of gay parenting. The outcomes of some of this research will be described, since it is relevant to the issue of father absence due to divorce.

The anthropologist D’Andrade (1973) examined the gender identity of children aged 5-15 using three psychological tests. He compared children who always had a father around to children who either never or only briefly had a father present in their lives. The first test used by d’Andrade was the Franck Test (1949), a projective drawing test measuring unconscious gender identity. A series of incomplete drawings had to be completed, and scoring was based on characteristics that typically differentiate between male and female drawings. Although currently projective tests are usually not considered the most valid and reliable tests, in the area of gender identity they are still considered applicable. For example, Daoud and Breik (2009) investigated the relationship between

family structure variables and sexual identification by using the Draw-A-Person Test (Machover, 1949, in Daoud & Breik, 2009). The assumption behind the Draw-A-Person Test is that the sex of the figure drawn reflects the gender identity of the individual producing the drawing. So this test is very similar to the Franck test.

The second test used by d’Andrade concerned conscious assessment of gender characteristics, and is a semantic differential method. The child was asked to choose where his position lies, on a scale between two bipolar gender-typed adjectives. The adjectives were hard-soft, heavy-light, and fast-slow. These

adjectives were supposed to measure potency, which is thought to be strongly related to masculinity.

The third test was a role preference task in which the children were asked: “If you were playing a game, would you rather pretend to be the mother or the father or the sister or the brother? Which would you prefer to be?” This test was used to assess the child’s conscious preference for gender. These three tests were chosen because they are applicable across different cultures.

The results were as follows. When unconscious gender identity was measured, a feminine response pattern was shown by boys whose father had always been absent. Boys who only had a father present in the first year of their lives and no paternal surrogate showed a feminine response pattern when conscious gender identity and gender identity preference was measured. It is important to note that the presence of older brothers and masculinity of the mothers was taken into account by d’Andrade. The findings indicate that father absence due to divorce results in a greater chance that boys will develop a more feminine gender identity.

D’Andrade’s research has some limitations. For instance, only black working class households were studied. Thus, although social status was a factor that was held constant, the results only apply to a limited population. In addition, the group sizes within the study varied greatly. Furthermore, d’Andrade (1973) did not create different groups for different ages. Therefore, no information is available about the differences between the gender identity of 5 year-olds, 10 year-olds and 15 year-olds. What’s more, children older than fifteen were not studied at all, even though it would be interesting to know how the identity of the boys was at 25 years, when gender identity would have been expected to consolidate, since brain development has then finished. All in all, then, the significance of d’Andrade’s (1973) results should be questioned, because of the limitations listed above. It should be noted, however, that d’Andrade (1973) did control for the presence of a paternal surrogate and for social class.

Pleck (1975) points out that many studies failed to replicate the findings of d'Andrade (1973) with respect to a relationship between boys' masculinity and the presence or absence of a father (1973). However, a psychological meta-analysis of the research on the effects of father absence on gender identity development of male children indicates that father-present boys, especially those of preschool age, were significantly more stereotypically gender-role typed than boys whose father had been absent. This effect is significant, but small (Stevenson & Black, 1988, in Barber & Eccles, 1992). In this meta-analysis several confounding factors were controlled for. The finding that there is a small but significant relationship between father absence and a less masculine gender identity is very important, since meta-analytical research is considered the highest level of evidence in psychological research.

Research on gay parenting shows that 12-year-old boys in mother-only families (whether lesbian or heterosexual) did not differ from sons raised by a mother and father on masculinity scales but scored over a standard deviation higher on femininity scales (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004, in Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Thus in this case, growing up without a father did not harm masculine development, but instead enabled boys to achieve greater gender flexibility (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). The Dutch researchers Bos, van Balen, Sandfort, and van den Boom (2006, in Biblarz & Stacey, 2010) however, reported contrary results. In this study, sons raised by lesbian parents did not differ from boys raised by heterosexual parents, on gender identity. Although in these studies the cause of father absence was not divorce, the results are relevant to the topic.

In summary, older research on father absence due to divorce shows a relationship between father absence and boys reporting a more feminine gender identity. A more recent meta-analysis indicates that father absence is associated with a less masculine gender identity of boys. Recent research on gay parenting, however, shows that fatherless boys feel just as masculine as father-present boys, and sometimes

more feminine. In this research, the constructs "masculinity" and "femininity" were measured using two different scales, rather than one continuum. An important difference between research on father absence due to divorce or gay parenting is the presence or absence of divorce. Therefore, the finding of the gay parenting research that father absence does not lead to boys feeling less masculine indicates the following: The cause for the relationship between father absence due to divorce and boys reporting a less masculine gender identity might actually be the family unhappiness accompanying the divorce and not father absence itself. The fact that both types of research (divorce and gay parenting) found a relationship between father absence and boys reporting a more feminine gender identity, indicates that this finding is actually due to father absence and not other factors. In order to attain more certainty with regard to causality, all confounding factors, such as age of the children, the presence of a paternal surrogate, socioeconomic status, and parental conflict, should be controlled for in future research on father absence due to divorce.

Evaluation of self-image: self-esteem

In addition to studies examining the effects of father absence on gender identity development, there have been a large number of studies focusing on the association between father absence and self-esteem in children and adolescents. Self-esteem is the evaluation of self-concept (the psychological equivalent of self-image) along a like-dislike dimension. More specifically, self-esteem is defined as the extent to which one perceives oneself as relatively close to being the person one wants to be and/or as relatively distant from being the kind of person one does not want to be, with respect to personal qualities one positively and negatively values (Block & Robbins, 1993, in Larsen & Buss, 2008).

The outcomes of the studies with regard to father absence and evaluation of self-image vary greatly. Some researchers found a relationship between father absence and lower self-esteem in children and adolescents, especially in the short term. However they also

found that this relationship declined over time (Parish & Wigle, 1985). Kinard and Reinherz (1984, in Barber & Eccles, 1992), on the other hand, failed to find this association for children. Other researchers subsequently failed to find such a relationship among college students (Long, 1986, in Barber & Eccles, 1992) and adults (Amato, 1988, in Barber & Eccles, 1992). In an effort to explain the different outcomes obtained, one of the studies will be discussed in more detail.

The psychologists Parish and Wigle (1985) examined 639 children in a 3-year longitudinal study. The evaluation of self-image (self-esteem) of each child was assessed in 1979 and then again in 1982. Based on the family circumstances before and during this period, the children were divided into three groups. The “intact-intact” group lived in an intact family both at the time of the two assessments as well as during the interval between the two assessment periods. The “divorced-divorced” children experienced father absence due to divorce prior to 1979 and still in 1982. The “intact-divorced” group consisted of children whose parents had divorced during the interval between the two assessments (conducted in 1979 and 1982).

At both assessment periods, the children in the intact-intact group evaluated their self-image significantly more positively (i.e., they indicated a higher degree of self-esteem) than the children in the divorced-divorced group. The children in the intact-divorced group evaluated their self-image significantly more negatively (lower self-esteem) after the divorce than before. Furthermore, the self-esteem of the children in this group in 1982 was significantly lower than the self-esteem of all other groups in 1982.

The happiness or unhappiness within any family structure was taken into consideration as a confounding factor in this study. It became clear that this factor is related to evaluation of self-image in the same way as the factor of divorce. Therefore it cannot be concluded with certainty that father absence due to divorce, rather than the corresponding family unhappiness, is responsible for the more negative evaluation of self-image. In addition, comparing the self-esteem of children whose parents had

recently divorced with the self-esteem of children whose parents had been divorced for a longer time showed that the effect of divorce on the evaluation of self-image was strongest shortly after the divorce. This supports the assumption that it is the unhappiness in the family rather than an absent father that results in negative evaluation of self-image.

Looking at the issue from a different angle, Barber and Thomas (1986, in Rohner & Veneziano, 2001) examined which elements of paternal and maternal parenting can be associated with self-esteem in girls and boys. They found that the self-esteem of boys was best predicted by fathers’ sustained contact (e.g., picking up the boy for fun and safety), and by mothers’ companionship (defined as spending time with the boy and participating in activities with him). The finding that fathers’ sustained contact plays a role in boys’ self-esteem indicates that father absence could be associated with negative evaluation of self-image (low self-esteem) in boys.

In summary, research on the association between father absence and negative evaluation of self-image (low self-esteem) is not consistent, with some studies finding an association and some not. Future research should focus on distinguishing father absence due to divorce, on the one hand, from unhappiness in the family, on the other, as factors contributing to low self-esteem of children.

Conclusion

The main subject explored in this article is the influence of father absence due to divorce on the gender identity and evaluation of self-image (self-esteem) of male children and adolescents.

Father absence due to divorce can be associated with a less masculine gender identity in boys. However the fact that research on lesbian parenting did not find this effect indicates that the factor causing the less masculine gender identity is not father absence, but instead might be the parental conflict that accompanies a divorce. It is noteworthy that research showed that both father absence due to divorce as well as father absence due to lesbian parenting was associated with boys feeling more

feminine. This means that father absence does not necessarily lead to a less masculine gender identity, but that it is likely to lead to a more feminine gender identity. Furthermore, it is recommended that future research focus on the gender identity of 25 year-old men, and not on younger boys, since identity in younger children is not fully developed.

With regard to the evaluation of self-image, some studies find an association between father absence and negative evaluation of self-image (i.e., low self-esteem) in boys. However, it remains unclear whether the main predictor of negative evaluation of self-image is indeed father absence or some other factor (namely, unhappiness in the family accompanying divorce).

Overall, although father absence seems to be associated with a more feminine gender identity and more negative evaluation of self-image in boys, it may be that father absence in itself is not necessarily negative, as suggested by Silverstein and Auerbach (1999). These researchers point out that other factors may be responsible for the negative outcomes found in father-absent boys. For example, the fact that single mother households are overrepresented in lower socio-economic groups indicates that poverty rather than father absence may be the key predictor that accounts for negative developmental outcomes in children. In addition, the difficult relationship between father and child after a divorce (perhaps accompanied by a legal battle) could also play a role (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Finally parental conflict prior to divorce could be the decisive factor that affects children. Because of this, confounding factors such as SES and parental conflict should be controlled for carefully in future research, in order to ascertain the lines of causality between father absence and “negative” child outcomes.

References

Ainsworth, M.D.S. & Bowlby, J. (1991). An ethological approach to personality development. *American Psychologist*, 46(4), 333-341.

Baker, S. (1980). Psychosexual differentiation in the human. *Biology of Reproduction*, 22, 61-72.

Barber, B.L. & Eccles, J.S. (1992). Long-term influence of divorce and single parenting on adolescent family- and work-related values, behaviors, and aspirations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 111(1), 108-126.

Biblarz, T.J. & Stacey, J. (2010). How does the gender of parents matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 3-22.

D’Andrade, R.G. (1973). Father absence, identification and identity. *Ethos*, 1(4), 440-455.

Daoud, F.S. & Breik, W.D. (2009). Relationship between family structure variables and sexual identification as measured by the Draw-A-Person Test. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 37(4), 545-554.

Diamond, M. (2004). Sex, gender, and identity over the years: A changing perspective. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 13, 591—607.

East, L., Jackson, D., & O’Brien, L. (2006). Father absence and adolescent development: A review of the literature. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 10(4), 283-295.

Larsen, R.J. & Buss, D.M. (2008). *Personality psychology. Domains of knowledge about human nature*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Mackey, W.C. (2001). Support for the existence of an independent man-to-child affiliative bond: Fatherhood as a biocultural invention. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 2(1), 51-66.

Parish, T.S. & Wigle, S.E. (1985). A longitudinal study of the impact of parental divorce on adolescents’ evaluations of self and parents. *Adolescence*, 20(77), 239-244.

Pleck, J.H. (1975). Masculinity – femininity. Current and alternative paradigms. *Sex Roles*, 1(2).

Rohner, R.P. & Veneziano, R.A. (2001). The importance of father love: History and contemporary evidence. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 382-405.

Silverstein, L.B. & Auerbach, C.F. (1999). Deconstructing the essential father. *The American Psychologist*, 54(6).