Fathers, Daughters, and Anorexia Nervosa
A Literature Review

J. Carol Elliott, PhD
PMHCNS-BC, CNE, RN
Objectives: The participants will:

- Identify the influence that the father has on his daughter’s anorexia nervosa (AN)
- Select the areas of developmental importance in the father-daughter relationship for their nursing practice
- Discuss the application of this information in their nursing practice
Fathers are often overlooked in developmental and nursing research. Evidence of fathers’ potential influence on eating disorders (ED) is limited in existing family research. Purpose - Review the ED literature about the father-daughter relationship in anorexia nervosa (AN) to describe the state of the science.
But before that......

Pre-test questions

- In adolescence, paternal distance is beneficial for both sons and daughters. True or False?

- Daughters who suffer from AN describe family functioning more accurately than either fathers or mothers. True or False?
Family members of anorectics, especially fathers, have significant mental health problems. True or False?

For daughters to recover from anorexia nervosa, the father must be involved in treatment. True or False?
Fathers are significant in daughters’ development from birth until maturity.
Responsiveness not gender-based; depended on age, social status, time with infant, developmental phase, & level of child care

Secure attachments predicted more sociable, empathetic, emotionally responsible, & improved cognition that lasted throughout development

Quality interactions more important than the quantity

More playful & physical

Preferred to interact with sons.
Involvement varies
Peak time in public
Differential sex-role shaping
More physical & exacting play that improved social & cognitive development
Less adept on language development but encouraged communication
Success in academics, athletics, morals & social interests, higher self-esteem with internal locus of control

Better long term psychological adjustment & sibling relationships; improved self-actualizing activities

Physical play important

Withdraw affection as discipline
Moral control to maintain innocence, & protect from influence of men
Demonstrate empathy, altruism, & socially responsible behaviors
More tolerant, esp. in sex-role actions
Successful heterosexual contacts & careers
Background - Adolescent

- Less time with fathers
- Less egalitarian
- More recreational activities, but fathers’ agendas dominated
- Availability important;
- Encouraged independence & separation-individuation
Daughters specifically

- Unique blandness & low interaction
- Distance different & longer
- Lower quality than with sons;
- Less approachable; inattentive to emotional needs
- Lack of support impaired confidence & independence throughout lives
- Puberty increased distance, uneasy sexuality
- Distance perceived as rejection.
Father-Daughter Problems

- Clinicians have documented anecdotal evidence of problematic relationships between fathers and daughters with AN

- Investigators lagged
Fathers’ Personalities and Their Function

- Personality is one’s characteristics that make person who she/he is.
- The personality’s function is effect personality style has on others.
- Differences significant in types of EDs; style not correlated with ED type.
- ED sx severity significantly correlated to personality function.
Fathers’ Personalities and Their Function

- Fathers of anorexic daughters were harshly judgmental of others
- Strong association between daughter’s eating problems & paternal narcissism
- Two types of fathers
- Traits influenced paternal ability
Paternal Pathology

- Mental & physical health problems
- Substance abuse
- Some researchers maintain psychology not a factor in AN families
Perceptions

- Majority of empirical literature is based on family members’ perceptions about relationships, communication and functioning
- Anorectic daughters’ perceptions
- Fathers’ perceptions
Daughters’ Perceptions

- Overprotective, less empathetic, alienating, distant
- Less emotionally involved & less caring
- Less understanding, nurturing, comforting
- Affectionless control - Low paternal care scores & high paternal control scores
- Ineffectual father & role reversal
- Paternal rejection
- Overprotection might undermine development of autonomy
Daughters’ Perceptions

- strong attachment
- fathers more admired & influential
- greater need for approval from fathers
- push-pull pattern in ED subgroups
- pathology significantly associated with a daughter’s feelings of guilt, anxiety, responsibility, resentment, anger with father
Daughters’ Perceptions

- Fathers endorsed traditional M/F roles
- Supported attractiveness & perfectionism
- Also academic achievement, competitiveness, & athletic involvement
- Fathers’ messages as contradictory and confusing
Fathers’ Perceptions

- exhibited more empathy, congruence & regard than daughters perceived
- less aware, did not experience and/or admit to any family dysfunction
- Daughters’ perceptions more accurate than either the fathers’ or the mothers’ perceptions
Identification

- AN daughters – conflicted identification with fathers
  - Acutely aware that fathers viewed them disapprovingly
  - Had different values, attitudes, and beliefs
- Fathers did not identify with daughters
  - Sabotaged independence and autonomy
  - Devalued others who provided role modeling
Individuation

- Attachment
  - Insecure
  - More evidence suggests problematic

- Autonomy
  - Sabotaged
  - Proximity seeking behaviors
Observations

- Few studies
  - father-daughter dyads demonstrated more disturbed communication patterns
  - used more complex types of communications
  - undermines the daughter’s attempt to individuate
  - daughters responded ambivalently by pretense of self-disclosure and submission

- Families relied on denial

- Cautions
Treatment and Recovery

- **Treatment**
  - Multiple approaches
  - Multiple theories

- **Recovery**
  - Research varied
  - Difficult to compare
Summary

- Daughters
  - strong attachments to fathers
  - Needed approval
  - Feared rejection

- Fathers of anorexic daughters
  - self-centered perfectionists, emotionally constricted, distant, & likely to be depressed
  - Different values
Future Research

- Women’s experiences
- Attachment
- Paternal role
- Interactions & processes
- Treatment & Recovery
And now......
Post-test questions

- In adolescence, paternal distance is beneficial for both sons and daughters. True or False?

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