

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHERLY AFFIRMATION AND A WOMAN'S SELF-ESTEEM, FEAR OF INTIMACY, COMFORT WITH WOMANHOOD AND COMFORT WITH SEXUALITY

Tanya S. Scheffler and Peter J. Naus
University of St. Jerome's College
Waterloo, Ontario

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the relationship of fatherly affirmation to women's self-esteem and other psychosexual characteristics. Female university student (n=57) completed questionnaires that measured their perception of their father's unconditional positive regard for them, perceptions of their father's feelings about their mother, self-esteem, fear of intimate relationships, comfort with their womanhood, and comfort with sexuality. It was predicted that perceived fatherly affirmation would be positively associated with self-esteem and negatively associated with fear of intimacy. These predictions were confirmed. It was also predicted that there would be a positive association between perceived fatherly affirmation and comfort with womanhood. This prediction was not confirmed. As predicted women's comfort or discomfort with their sexual experiences was related to their perceived affirmation by their fathers.*

INTRODUCTION

Research on the effect of the family on women's psychological development has focused primarily on the influence of the mother-daughter relationship. Although fathers might also be expected to have an impact on a daughter's psychosexual development, few studies have addressed this issue despite anecdotal evidence suggesting that fathers can have a considerable effect on a young woman's self-esteem and on her eventual choice of men. Forsman (1989) found that women's perception of their father's unconditional regard was significantly related to self-esteem, whereas their perception of their mother's unconditional regard was only weakly related to self-esteem. Richards, Gitelson, Petersen and Hurtig (1991) found that girls who perceived their father as being warm and supportive had higher self-esteem and that their ego development was only weakly related to their perceptions of the mothering they experienced. Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter (1984) found that career orientation among college women was more contingent on their fathers' influence and attitude toward career roles than on their mothers' influence. Cattell (1982) discovered a similarity between a father and his eldest daughter on central character traits such as ego strength, internalized self-control, and low

*Correspondence confirming this paper should be addressed to
Dr. Peter Naus 847 Queen's Blvd., Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, N2M 1A6.*

internal conflict. These observations are not intended to diminish the influence of mothers on their daughter's psychosexual development, but rather to illustrate the limited attention given to the impact of fathers in this area.

In their work on the influence of fatherly affirmation on the psychosexual development of young men, Naus & Theis (1994, 1995) found a relationship between a father's unconditional positive regard and such characteristics as self-esteem and comfort with masculinity. One might expect that a father's affirmation could have a similar affect on a young woman's self-esteem, comfort with her womanhood, and her subsequent openness to the pleasurable aspects of sex. For example, a father who was intimidating and avoided intimacy might well engender insecurity and fear of intimacy. A father who withdrew from his daughter when she began to develop physically during and after puberty (e.g. by no longer playing sports with her or showing physical affection or perhaps by even avoiding her), might similarly cause her to feel uncomfortable with her sense of herself as a woman and with her sexuality.

There is some support for these speculations in the literature. Based on a variety of sources, including her interviews with 150 U.S. women aged 18-70 and with 75 fathers of daughters, Secunda (1992) concluded that a sizeable number of men and women grew up with a remote and aloof father. She suggested that women who do not feel affirmed by their father tend to respond to the men in their lives as they responded to their elusive father, i.e. they desperately seek intimacy but are unable to believe that men can be trusted to remain close and are thus always on guard. Fields (1983), Owen (1983) and Sharpe (1994) found that a father's approval has a strong effect on his daughter's self-esteem and sexuality. Lebe (1986) described the importance of a father's encouragement in a young woman's emotional development and emphasized the detrimental effect that lack of such encouragement can have on a woman's feelings of self-worth and sense of femininity. Fisher (1989) demonstrated that a woman's perception of her father's attentiveness towards her during her childhood, rather than her perception of her mother's attentiveness, was related to her ability to reach orgasm consistently. While it is important that a daughter identifies with her mother, it is hypothesized that a woman's self-esteem, self-definition, comfort with her femininity, and comfort with her sexuality are also influenced by her father's acceptance. Since the term "femininity" might imply a particular stereotypical sex role expectation that was neither intended nor studied in this investigation, we use the phrase "comfort with womanhood" to identify our measure of the extent to which a respondent felt she had the characteristics that she thought a woman should have.

In studying the effect of fatherly affirmation on psychosexual characteristics of male university students, Naus & Theis (1994, 1995) also collected unpublished evidence that fatherly affirmation had an effect on self-esteem in women but not on their fear of intimacy. The present study used expanded and improved measures on a larger sample of female university students to determine the relationship between fatherly affirmation and women's self-esteem, fear of intimacy, comfort with womanhood, and construction of sexuality (i.e. feelings of comfort and success in sexual relationships).

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Fifty-seven female students from three undergraduate psychology courses at a university in south western Ontario volunteered to take part in the study. The majority of them (77%) were between 20 and 24 years of age and single (87%). They represented a range of majors, though most were arts students (70%). All but three of the participants were undergraduate students. They received neither payment nor course credit for their participation. A few of the participants were not born in Canada.

INSTRUMENTS

Participants were asked to fill-out a questionnaire containing 5 scales: Rosenberg's Scale of Self-Esteem, Barrett-Lennard's Relationship Inventory (with five questions added in order to ascertain a woman's perception of her father's feelings about and treatment of her mother), and scales dealing with Fear of Intimacy, Comfort with Womanhood, and Construction of Sexuality (a copy of the various instruments can be obtained from the second author).

ROSENBERG'S SCALE OF SELF-ESTEEM

The scale used to measure self-esteem is the frequently used Rosenberg Scale of Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1989). The scale consists of 10 statements that describe how one feels about oneself. Respondents rate their level of agreement with each statement on a four-point scale with a low score signifying high self-esteem. Hale, Fiedler & Cochran (1992) have shown the validity and reliability of the scale to be acceptable.

FATHERLY AFFIRMATION

All of the items in the Barrett-Lennard's Relationship Inventory (Barrett-Lennard, 1978) were used to measure fatherly affirmation, with the exception of those that were dropped after an internal consistency analysis of the unconditionality scale of the Barrett-Lennard's Relationship Inventory by Naus and Theis (1994). The measure consists of 56 items that are rated on a six-point scale. Respondents rate how they feel their father feels or behaves towards them. The higher the score, the higher the perceived fatherly affirmation.

Five questions were added to the end of this inventory in order to determine participants' perceptions of how their father feels or behaves towards their mother. This measure was included for exploratory purposes to see whether perceived feelings and behaviour of the father with respect to the mother would relate to the other variables of the study.

FEAR OF INTIMACY SCALE

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991) was used to measure comfort with intimacy. The scale consists of two parts. Part A contains 30 statements that require respondents to imagine themselves in a close dating relationship and to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement on a five-point scale. Part B consists of five statements pertaining to their past relationships that respondents rate on a five-point scale. Descutner and Thelen (1991) have shown the scale to be a valid and reliable measure of individuals' anxiety about close dating relationships. The higher the FIS score the lower the fear of intimate relationships.

COMFORT WITH WOMANHOOD SCALES

Comfort with womanhood was measured indirectly and directly. The indirect measure (Comfort with Womanhood 1) was an adaptation of the Masculinity Scale employed by Naus and Theis (1995). Respondents were first asked to list ten attributes they believed women should have. Next, they were asked to indicate on a separate page how well each attribute applied to themselves, using a five-point rating scale. It was assumed that the more applicable to oneself one considered these attributes to be, the more comfortable one felt with one's womanhood. Thus, a higher score indicates a greater comfort with one's womanhood.

The more direct measure (Comfort with Womanhood 2) used a five-point scale on which respondents rated their degree of satisfaction with the type of woman they are. Although both scales were designed to parallel the Masculinity Scale used by Naus and Theis (1995), we refer to them as "comfort with womanhood" scales since respondents independently and individually identified the attributes they thought women should have and were not asked to compare themselves with a particular set of expectations identified by the researchers or with traditional notions of "femininity."

CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Naus and Theis (1995) designed an instrument to ascertain whether lack of fatherly affirmation was associated with a man's need to "prove himself" in sexual experiences. The scale, therefore, emphasized dominance in a sexual relationship. In the present study the instrument was modified to allow for an exploration of possible relationships between perceived fatherly affirmation and a woman's experience of sexuality. The questions sought to determine whether a father's affirmation of a woman's sexuality is related to her feeling comfortable and successful in sexual relationships, as has been suggested by Lebe (1986) and Fisher (1989). Only participants who had at least one sexual experience with another person were supposed to respond to the items in this scale. They were asked to recall how often they experienced each of thirty feelings or sensations whenever they engaged in some sort of sexual activity. Fifteen of the items were the same as those in the scale by Naus and Theis (1995). All items were rated on a five-point scale.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited either by the researcher or the course instructor, who provided a general description of the study and an estimate of the time involved in filling out the questionnaire. Participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire at their own convenience, but to do so privately, and to return it at one of the next classes. They were instructed to not put their name on any of the materials and were assured that their answers would be treated confidentially.

RESULTS

PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS OF THE SEXUALITY SCALE

To ascertain which common factors underlie the various items of the sexuality questionnaire, a principal component analysis was applied to the answers. Nine factors were extracted of which three accounted for a substantial portion of the variance (47.2%). It was decided to take the items with high loadings on the first factor (accounting for 29.8% of the variance) and low loadings on the other two factors, as the measure of a respondent's construction of her sexuality.

There were eleven such items (See Table 1). The content of these items suggests that they measured the women's degree of comfort with their sexuality.

Table 1
Comfort with One's Sexuality (Based on a Principal Component Analysis of the Sexuality Questionnaire)

Whenever you engage in some sort of sexual activity with another person, how often do you experience each of the following?

Factor 1 - Comfort with sexuality

- 2. It makes me feel dirty (unclean).
 - 3. It makes me feel uncomfortable.
 - 6. I feel good because of sharing pleasure with the other person.
 - 7. I feel attractive and desirable.
 - 10. It makes me feel good about myself.
 - 16. I feel loved and cared for.
 - 19. It makes me worry about not performing well.
 - 20. I feel incapable of discussing my sexual wishes.
 - 21. I feel in control.
 - 22. It makes me feel helpless.
 - 23. It makes me happy.
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CORRELATIONAL ANALYSES

Product-moment correlations were computed between on the one hand scores for perceived fatherly affirmation, and on the other, scores for self-esteem, fear of intimacy, construction of sexuality (labelled 'comfort with one's sexuality' because of the results of the principal component analysis), comfort with one's womanhood, and perceived feelings about and treatment of one's mother by one's father. These correlations are presented in Table 2.

As can be seen from the data in the first column of Table 2, there were significant correlations between perceived fatherly affirmation and self-esteem, fear of intimacy, comfort with sexuality, and Perception of father's feeling towards mother, but not with comfort with womanhood. Following Naus and Theis (1995), we sought to determine whether the correlations between perceived fatherly affirmation and fear of intimacy and comfort with one's sexuality were spurious because of the correlations of the variables involved with self-esteem. A partial correlational analysis controlling for the effects of self-esteem (see Table 2, column 2) yielded findings that were not essentially different from those of the original analysis. The correlation of fatherly affirmation with fear of intimacy and comfort with sexuality does not appear to be simply a result of the association of these factors with self-esteem.

Table 2
Correlations Between Perceived Fatherly Affirmation and the Other Variables of the Study. With and Without Controlling for Self-Esteem and for Perceived Feelings of Father Towards Mother

	Fatherly Affirmation	Fatherly Affirmation (Controlling for Self-Esteem)	Fatherly Affirmation (Controlling for Perception of Father's Feelings towards Mother)
Self-esteem	-0.3123 (N = 53; p = 0.023)	n/a	-0.2873 (N = 50; p = 0.039)
Fear of intimacy	-0.4887 (N = 53; p < 0.0001)	-0.4478 (N = 50; p = 0.001)	-0.4034 (N = 50; p = 0.003)
Construction of sexuality	0.4339 (N = 47; p = 0.002)	0.3750 (N = 44; p = 0.010)	0.3131 (N = 44; p = 0.034)
Comfort with womanhood 1	0.0966 (N = 51; p = 0.500)	0.0165 (N = 48; p = 0.909)	0.0887 (N = 48; p = 0.540)
Comfort with womanhood 2	0.2210 (N = 51, p = 0.119)	0.1436 (N = 48; p = 0.320)	0.1034 (N = 48; p = 0.475)
Perception of father's feelings towards mother	0.6424 (N = 53; p < 0.0001)	0.6347 (N = 50; p < 0.0001)	n/a

Variability of N is due to missing variables, i.e., some participants chose not to fill out all of the questionnaires.

We found surprisingly high correlations between respondents' perceptions of their father's feelings towards their mother and the other variables of the study. The correlation between this variable and perceived fatherly affirmation was 0.64 (see Table 2, column 1). To examine how perception of father's feelings towards mother might have influenced the relationships between perceived fatherly affirmation and the other variables, a second partial correlational analysis was conducted, this time controlling for the effects of this variable. The data in Table 2, column 3, show that controlling for perception of father's feelings towards mother reduced the correlation between perceived fatherly affirmation and comfort with one's sexuality from 0.43 to just over 0.31.

DISCUSSION

As expected, there was a positive relationship between perceived fatherly affirmation and self-esteem and a negative one between fatherly affirmation and fear of intimacy. In line with other research, notably that of Fields (1983), Forsman (1989), Owen (1983), Secunda (1992), and Sharpe (1994), it was found that the more affirmed women feel by their fathers the higher

their self-esteem. Naus and Theis (1994, 1995) obtained similar results for men. It was found as well, that perceived affirmation by the father goes along with feeling less fearful of intimate relationships. This outcome fits with the conclusions of Secunda's (1992) interviews with women and with the studies on men by Naus and Theis (1994; 1995). In the present study, however, the relationship between perceived fatherly affirmation and fear of intimacy was upheld when the effect of self-esteem on the variables in question was partialled out. This was not the case in the earlier Naus and Theis (1994) study on men.

The variable included here for exploratory purposes—perceptions of father's feelings toward and treatment of one's mother—correlated with some of the other variables of the study, most notably with perceived fatherly affirmation and with fear of intimacy. However, partial correlational analysis revealed that the correlation with fear of intimacy was based entirely on the correlations between the variables involved and perceived fatherly affirmation. It may be that the high correlation between perceived fatherly affirmation and perceived feelings and treatment of the mother by the father is an artefact arising because the measure of father's treatment of the mother was not sufficiently independent from the measure of fatherly affirmation. Perhaps a perception of one's father established through responding to the items of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory carried over in answers to the five questions which were added at the end of this instrument to gauge a respondent's perception of her father's feelings and treatment with respect to her mother.

It was expected that there would be a relationship between perceived fatherly affirmation and a woman's comfort with her sexuality. Given the provisional nature of the instrument used to measure construction of sexuality, the expectation lacked specificity. Nevertheless, we found a positive relationship between perceived fatherly affirmation and the most important factor resulting from a principal component analysis of the responses to this instrument. "Comfort with one's sexuality" seemed to be a fitting label for this factor. Our results suggest that feeling affirmed by one's father and feeling comfortable with one's sexuality go hand in hand. This suggestion is reminiscent of, though not identical with, Fisher's (1989) finding that a woman's perception of her father's attentiveness to her during childhood is related to her ability to reach orgasm consistently. One of the questions on the sexuality questionnaire has a direct bearing on Fisher's finding. Participants were asked to indicate their orgasm consistency in sexual interactions on a five-point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'always'. There was no significant correlation between answers to this question and perceived fatherly affirmation. Women who feel affirmed by their father were not more likely to indicate that they reached orgasm consistently in sexual interactions.

Contrary to expectation, there was no relationship between perceived fatherly affirmation and comfort with one's womanhood. In fact, the two measures of this variable were not correlated with any of the other variables, with the exception that the indirect measure of comfort with one's womanhood had a small but statistically significant correlation with self-esteem ($r=0.27$). The fact that we found only a weak tendency for women who felt more comfortable with their womanhood to have higher self-esteem led us to question the reliability of this measure and to review the responses to it.

Table 3
Most Frequently Mentioned Attributes Women Should Have

Twenty Most Frequent Female Attributes Listed	Frequency of Response (n=54)
Independent	48.1%
Self-confident	40.7%
Strong (mentally/personality)	37.0%
Honest (sincere)	29.6%
Intelligent	25.9%
Sense of humour	24.1%
Caring	20.4%
High self-esteem	20.4%
Nice physical appearance	20.4%
Ambitious	20.4%
Compassionate	18.5%
Respect for oneself (and others)	18.5%
Friendly (warm, kind)	16.7%
Goal-oriented/career-oriented	16.7%
Determined	16.7%
Loving	16.7%
Proud	14.8%
Self-sufficient/self-reliant	14.8%
Understanding	13.0%
Sensitive	13.0%

The indirect measure of comfort with one's womanhood required as a first step that a participant indicate which attributes she thought women should have. Three of the 57 participants did not answer this question; one refused because she felt that attributes should not be related to gender. Several other participants, though they did answer the question, made similar remarks. Some participants wrote long and thoughtful responses that were difficult to categorize in terms of specific attributes. The most frequently mentioned attributes are listed in Table 3. It is interesting that none of the five most frequently mentioned attributes — independent, self-confident, strong (mentally, personality wise), honest or sincere, and intelligent — is traditionally feminine. It would be interesting to know what the associations with self-esteem would have been had all respondents been asked to compare themselves with a researcher-specified list of characteristics drawn from Table 3 rather than with their own self-identified list.

Until recently most of the literature on father-daughter relationships has focused on personal stories of women or on Freud's Electra complex. Much has been written on father-daughter incest and relatively little on "normal" father-daughter relationships. It is noteworthy that what

has been often described as a powerful relationship in a woman's life has not been the subject of much scientific research. As Secunda (1992) observed, "Fathers have the more profound impact on a woman's sexual and romantic choices and relationships.... And yet, of all family ties, the father-daughter relationship is the least understood and least studied." While the results of the present study can not be generalized to women in general, they do underscore the need for further research on the impact of perceived fatherly affirmation on women's psychosexual development.

Given the paucity of such research, it would be desirable to attempt to develop firm theoretical underpinnings for such investigations. Why is it that affirmation from their father is important to women? Are the reasons the same no matter whether the issue is a woman's self-esteem, her comfort with her womanhood, her comfort with intimate relationships, or her comfort with sexuality? Are the speculations Naus and Theis (1992) offered for understanding the importance of fatherly affirmation to men useful in addressing these questions or are the dynamics at work in father-daughter relationships sufficiently different to those in father-son relationships to warrant different conceptualizations? What is different about affirmation from the father as compared with that from the mother? Is it really only because the affirmation from the father seems more earned, as suggested by Suzanne Fields (1983), who observed:

A father's love is often more qualified than a mother's. Where a mother's love is unconditional, a father's love often is given as a reward for performance. Because her love is blind, a mother confirms a child's sense of security in a general way. When the father approves a child generally assumes that the love was earned (p. 11).

Such questions about the role of fatherly affirmation in the psychosexual development of women (and men) go to the heart of many contemporary issues surrounding sexuality, gender, sexual relationships, and sexual satisfaction. Further research in this area is needed.

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