

**Title: “*Holes in my memories*”: a qualitative study of men affected by father absence**

**Abstract**

This qualitative study explored adult men’s experiences of father absence. Interviews with 21 men aged between 24 – 70 years explored narratives of father absence and how the men perceived this influenced their life trajectory. Thematic analysis revealed that these men experienced a range of difficulties and challenges including episodes of sadness and depression associated with loss and grief for the paternal relationship, self-esteem issues, feelings of anger and rejection, and difficulty forming trusting relationships particularly with other men. This study contributes to understanding mental health issues that can be associated with paternal absence for men.

**Keywords:** Father Absence, qualitative, men’s health, mental health, parenting

## **BACKGROUND**

Traditionally, families have typically consisted of a dyadic partnership between a man and woman residing in the same household with their children. However, over the last several decades this norm has changed due to changing relationship dynamics and family structure including single parent families, divorce and separation (Carr & Springer, 2010) with a concomitant increase in the number of children who are growing up in single parent households. Current statistics estimate that almost 1 in 5 children are living in a single parent household which is most often headed by the mother (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This denotes that an increasing number of children are growing up in father absent homes.

Fathers, in addition to mothers play a significant role in their children's development and wellbeing (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002b; Geddes, 2008; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Research findings suggest that a father's active involvement and participation in a child's life is associated with improved academic achievement (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004), psychological wellbeing and social outcomes, and offers protection from the development of disruptive behaviours, particularly among boys (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2007). However, when a father resides outside the home, time spent with a child diminishes, which could mean that the protective factors offered by fathers to children may be lost (Carlson, 2006).

Additionally, literature has suggested that children who grow up in a father absent home are at risk of greater exposure to life adversity (East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006). Research exploring the amount of contact between children and their non-resident fathers has suggested that a decline in father involvement may increase the likelihood of delinquent behaviour in adolescent years (Coley & Medeiros, 2007). Similarly, Flouri and Buchanan (2002a) found that lack of father involvement was a risk factor for delinquency in boys, and

Harper and McLanahan's (2004) study revealed that adolescent boys who grew up in a father absent home were more likely to be at risk of incarceration. Other research has also found that children who grow up in father absent homes experience a sense of abandonment and may feel unloved by their father (East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2007). Although other factors may influence the life trajectory of children who grow up without a father, such as the child and mother relationship, living arrangements, family discord, and socio-economic factors evidence indicates that father absence impacts unfavourably on a child's life path. Considering this and the fact that research has found father absence is associated with disruptive behaviours among boys in particular, the aim of this study was to explore and gain insights into adult men's' experiences of father absence using a qualitative lived experienced approach. For the purposes of this study, father absence was defined as a child/adolescent living in a separate dwelling from their biological father with or without contact, as a result of family discord.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **Recruitment**

Men over the age of 21 years who had grown up in an absent father home during the childhood and/or adolescent years for a minimum period of four years were invited to participate in this study. No particular cultural, ethnic or socio-economic background was targeted, although the men were required to converse in English. Men were recruited via a media release and advertisements being distributed through research networks and local non-government and community organisations. This study was granted ethics approval from the relevant institution's Human Research Ethics Committee.

## **Data Collection**

Once recruited, either face-to-face or telephone interviews lasting between 30 and 75 minutes were arranged. Participants were given the option of a female or male interviewer. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were of a qualitative nature focused on the men's stories of father absence and how they perceived this may or may not have influenced their life trajectory. Each interview began with collecting basic demographic data followed by open ended questions such as 'what are your experiences of father absence?' and associated prompting and probing questions focused on the participants' experiences.

## **Data analysis**

Inductive thematic analysis of the full set of transcribed interviews was undertaken. This analysis aimed to identify from men's narratives their experience of father absence, and the impact of this absence on their life trajectory. A social constructivist approach to the relationships between men's described experience and the social construction of meaning guided the data analysis (Schwandt, 1998). Initially, four of the five members of the team separately analysed complete transcripts. Through a process of immersion and repeated reading of the transcripts open coding employing key words, descriptors and phrases that conveyed detail of experience or meaning was undertaken (Babbie, 2004). This within and across narrative analysis was employed to distill emergent categories and their illustrative exemplars. After which, the team met to review the emerging major themes and the constituent sub-categories, with cross-member checking (Johnson & Turner, 2003) and reference to the narratives employed to derive consensus within the team on the emerging interpretation. Over a two day period the team re-immersed themselves in the transcripts and the emerging thematic interpretation. Through this detailed consideration and process of

constant comparison (Polkinghorne, 1983) the connections between categories and themes were analysed, generating patterns of meaning and illuminating the more significant themes (Pope, Mays, & Popay, 2007). This approach distilled from the diversity in the narratives statements that clustered the meaning of specific subject matter into themes and their constituent sub-categories.

### **The participants**

A total of 21 men were eligible and provided informed consent to participate in this study. At the time of data collection the men's ages ranged between 24 and 70 years and they identified having a diverse range of careers and professional attributes. The men described having various contact with their fathers from never and infrequent contact to weekly and frequent contact with the men experiencing father absence from birth to early adolescence (table 1). Of the 21 men, 17 were interviewed by a female; in keeping with the participants' preferences and 4 contacted a male researcher to be interviewed.

**\*INSERT TABLE 1 HERE\***

### **FINDINGS**

Findings revealed the extent of life disruption associated with father absence perceived by these men. Participants felt the loss of the paternal relationship very keenly. They felt their status as being father-absent boy children and experiences they associated with it had been very influential in their life courses and in the decisions they made. The men had experienced a range of difficulties and challenges that they associated with father absence. This included episodes of sadness and depression they associated with loss and grief for the paternal relationship, as well as self-esteem issues, anger, and difficulty in forming trusting relationships. Through the analytic process six themes were revealed including: *What's*

*wrong with us kids that he didn't want to contact us? Stigmatised, isolated and unworthy; It leaves this huge hole: Recurring and ongoing sense of loss; My emotions are very poor: Struggling with relationships; Wanting that connection: Seeking father out; I don't trust men: Preferring the company of women and Work out hard at the skills of living: Acceptance of the past and moving on. Each theme is discussed in detail below.*

***What's wrong with us kids that he didn't want to contact us? Stigmatised, isolated and unworthy***

These men had spent much of their lives – from their boyhoods through to their adult lives wondering why their fathers had elected to not stay in touch with them once the parental relationship had broken down. Larry stated that *as a kid I thought of it and even as an adult, I always wondered about everything. Why and what's wrong with us kids that he didn't want to contact us? That was only one painful thing for us at the time.*

Participants experienced a range of feelings and emotions associated with this, and these included feelings of confusion, bewilderment, disappointment, destabilisation, loneliness, isolation, sadness and anger. They described feeling let down by their fathers, and this sense of being let down was something the men could vividly recall:

*Just being constantly let down; I'd get this message that he would come and he wouldn't come. And that was very disturbing for me. ...and I used to sort of cry— I'd be crying (Frank).*

Their situation meant the men had felt different to other boys. Eric recalled that *as a child it seemed like everyone had a mum and dad except me.* The participants felt they had missed

out on many activities as children because they did not have fathers to support and encourage their participation. This made them feel isolated and marginalised in their communities. For example Bill asserted:

*I always felt as if we sort of had too low a profile in our town because of, partly because of not having a father and we didn't get to go to things that other kids did, like just involved in the surf club and heavily into sports and stuff like that. So I think we sort of missed out that way.*

The feelings of isolation were distressing for the men and these feelings were accompanied by a sense of stigmatisation that meant the men had found it difficult to give voice to their sadness, even to those closest to them:

*It's not something you talk about so in some way you do feel like you're isolated and if there's something you gotta do it on your own. I talked to my wife about it and she just looked at me as if I had three heads. And she can't – she hears me. She feels the hurt in my voice and see(s) the hurt, but she don't understand (Jake).*

The feelings were so overwhelming and persistent that some of the men recalled being treated for mental health problems in their childhoods. Frank stated:

*It [absence of father] did have a fairly profound effect on me. In fact, I think I got depressed; I can remember— can't remember what age, probably ten, eleven, I used to cry myself to sleep and I think my mother was obviously concerned. And I was put on tablets and I could only assume that they were antidepressants. I was told to take one every day and I would get better. I ended up taking an overdose. Fairly serious, I ended up in hospital for about six weeks, I think, not because of the overdose but because they were concerned about my mental health.*

Those men who were treated for their mental health difficulties had no doubts that the absence of their fathers from their lives was the major factor that had caused their problems. Similarly to Frank, Greg's wellbeing was affected when his father left:

*After my father left was a very traumatic time for me and I actually ended up having a bit of a breakdown at age 16 where I was in counselling ... just really going through a really bad patch...looking back, I mean, you might describe it as a pretty severe case of teenage depression. It was basically for about a year. I didn't get out of bed much and had sort of – just felt quite overwhelmed by life and all that sort of thing, but a lot of it at that time had to do with the absent relationship, not having my father in my life, that sort of thing.*

As the boys grew into men, many described episodes of anger. Anger was commonly expressed in ways that disrupted the young men's education or brought them into contact with the police: *I had an anger issue when I was younger. I got expelled from school for fighting and I ended up being charged with assault... And I wasn't convicted, but that taught me a big lesson I think. So I had anger issues.* (Frank).

The men also described a sense of aloneness – a feeling that there was nobody really there for them to help them to navigate life's difficulties. There was frequent reference to feeling alone, that no-one had their back:

*Father absence to me is that it doesn't feel like anyone's got your back. It feels like you're in this fight alone. And it's something I didn't expect to still feel as a 50 year old. So, the father absent thing, it's very formative. It stays with you, it becomes a really deep part of who you are* (Nathaniel).



The nature of the anger meant that it came back again and again, as the men were presented with various life difficulties and challenges and were again reminded that they did not have the support of a father:

*I lost a sibling to cancer a number of years ago and again it created a huge period of anger with my father because he was so absent through it. And he was so peripheral to it... It became a bad period of loneliness and isolation really. For me and my other siblings...it would have been nice to be able to walk into our father's arms and feel safe and we didn't* (Nathaniel).

### ***It leaves this huge hole: Recurring and ongoing sense of loss***

The sense of loss was ongoing and had cast a shadow over the lives of many of the men. They described *hurt and disappointment* (David) that was continuing and deep, and a direct result of the loss of their fathers' active participation in their lives. As stated by Frank: *What happened to me, with my father not being around did have a fairly profound effect on me and I've probably spent a long time trying to sort things out since, really.* Reminders of what they had lost were all around these men and so many day-to-day activities became problematized and complicated by sadness:

*There were times you felt left out because you'd see your mates and friends with their fathers doing what fathers and sons do and you didn't have that ... male role model within your life* (Eric).

Where in their earlier lives the distress was often enacted as anger, as they grew older, and matured, the anger was replaced with a deep and abiding sadness for what might have been had things been different. For example Greg asserted:

*I spent a lot of my teenage years and my 20s just being really angry at him and blaming him for what I was going through and blaming him for not being a different person... I don't feel*

*anger about it. I feel a tremendous sadness that we didn't make more of the opportunity we had.*

Though a number of the participants had actively sought to resolve the sadness and loss through therapy and other measures, this was often ultimately unsuccessful:

*I've been in and out of counselling a number of times. Depression is something that's always been with me. Whenever I've been in counselling, the conversation always very quickly comes back to my father and my relationship with my father and there's been a lot of going over of all the different aspects of how – the way that relationship went – set up the rest of my life, so yeah, it's been an ongoing thing (Greg).*

This left some of the men with a sense of incompleteness, a sense that there were important things missing from their lives – things that could not easily be replaced and held considerable consequences.

*Young men especially, they need a man in their life...we need someone to be an example and without that – take that away and you can have really far-reaching consequence (Greg).*

Jake poignantly described how this was for him using the metaphor of holes in his life:

*I look at all the holes in my memories in my life. A father figure is important. Holes in knowledge, holes in experiences, holes in dealing with the emotions, having that connection as father-son so that then when you switch roles... You become the father and then you got the relationship father-son you still got that continuity of how it all works and you learn (Jake).*

Jake went on to say that this sense of loss - of incompleteness - was worse for him at certain times of the year. Furthermore, the sadness was as intense and strong for him at age 43 as it had been for him as a boy:

*There are certain times a year that are very bad for me just from memories. And I have been in a pretty much a downward spiral since (the) beginning of November, and just lots of different things happening in current life. But particularly they sort of triggered a memory and 'cause as I was already feeling under pressure from other things, it just sort of pushed me down further.*

***My emotions are very poor: Struggling with relationships***

The loss of such an important primary relationship had left the men ill-equipped for relationships with others. For some of the men issues with trust and intimacy meant that they were deeply suspicious of relationships, and so took steps to avoid becoming emotionally attached to other people. Nathaniel stated:

*From a very early age what I always figured love was going to lead to pain. And so I never allowed myself to get deeply involved with somebody else...there's been periods of very deep depression because I've never allowed myself...I went through a very deep, sad depression a few years ago.*

However many of the men had tried to form intimate relationships with others but many had experienced great difficulty, and had been disappointed again and again. Some of the men had not previously given voice to their concerns in this area and so struggled to articulate their thoughts and feelings:

*My emotions are very poor in any kind of situation where there might be health, or where there might be romance, or where there might be a kind of relationship. I just don't know how to handle it ...it's really difficult. And it's pouring in many, many ways. It's really difficult because I feel that I've lost something and — I'm going to say fatherless (Ike).*

For some of the men, the difficulties they had in forming meaningful and enduring intimate relationships were because they did not know or understand issues around sexuality. As they became interested in contemplating and exploring their sexuality, there was a lack of an adult man with whom they had a trusting relationship to discuss these matters with:

*I had a hard time learning about sex. I had an exceptionally difficult time. I never got any kind of learning ... I mean, education-wise, it never happened although, as I said, I wagged [skipped] school so much that I probably might've missed out on the class, etcetera; but I had—something that was really missing— As far as I never learned anything in regards to understanding sex or heterosexuality, how's that? (Ike).*

The men held strong views that their relationship difficulties were strongly associated with their experiences of father absence. For those men who had not ever been able to form a satisfying and meaningful emotional relationship with a significant other, this served as a further reminder of the losses they had experienced in relation to the loss of their father from their lives:

*I've had issues with depression. I've had relationship issues. ...I recognise that there is the issue with my father which has been the biggest influence in my life and the biggest single factor in my life. ... I feel like I haven't fulfilled my potential in a lot of areas. I put that down to the issues with my father, but there are the other circumstances as well (Greg).*

Beyond the romantic relationship realm, there were also difficulties in showing love to people in other contexts, and this included their own children. For example Jake stated:

*I don't have – sometimes I struggle as to how to show fatherly love. I give the kids cuddle, a hug, pat on the back, and it's sort of – It's not something that comes naturally in some way. I didn't have a father to get it from.*

### ***Wanting that connection: seeking father out***

The need of a father compelled participants to seek out their fathers. Eric explained that *he just wanted to get to know who my father was. So it was really driven by me*. Despite having very little encouragement with or contact with their fathers, their need was such that the men took active steps to locate and establish connections with their absent fathers. In all cases where contact was sought, it was the sons not the fathers who were active in seeking the connection. Many of the sons had tried over a number of years, and some had yet to achieve success, yet still persevered:

*Since about 17 or 18 I've made regular and constant searches for my absent father (Oliver).*

The importance of establishing a connection meant that the sons persisted, even when the fathers were successfully contacted but less than effusive or did not respond positively to the contact. Michael explained:

*I emailed him, and I got a response back and it was good, and then I sent him another email, it was a basically what-I'm-up-to email, what I've been up to for the last 20-something years. But then I didn't hear back from that for a month or so, and I emailed him again and said "Did you get my last email?" and he said "I did, and I'm happy to hear from you from time to time to hear how you're going, but I don't really want to pursue a relationship". So I gave it a few years and I just contacted him again recently by email, and he was much more responsive and we've now exchanged a few emails back and forth. So, yeah, we'll see where it goes from here.*

There was a real need on the part of some of these adult sons to attempt to resolve their feelings about their paternal relationships and they had made many efforts to do this.

However, again and again they were faced with what they took to be paternal disinterest and lack of care:

*It's hard to resolve the relationship with him because he's not giving anything to it and he never has and he never willingly participated in it... the man's never hugged me, right, he's never once in my recollection, hugged me. And I've lost a sister and I've lost a mother ... he's given me very little along the way (Nathaniel).*

The desire of Nathaniel to try to create connections with the father who had shown so little interest in him resulted in him choosing the same profession as his father. But this too was ultimately unsuccessful:

*I was always eager to discover who my father was and to create that connection you know...I spent a lot of my childhood probably quite aggressively pursuing him ...It was trying to understand him, it was trying to create a connection with him. I thought we might end up doing – working together on some level and all of those things. None of which worked out to tell the truth. None of which ever transpired.*

Kambara spoke of yearning for a mentoring male figure, in the absence of any possibility of a relationship with his father. At age 56 years, Kambara positioned this lack as one of the greatest regrets of his life:

*I've always been looking for a father figure like that who's a mentor and that... I've dwelt on this for a lot of my life, about finding a fatherly figure. ...That's one of the greatest regrets of my life. I know you shouldn't regret, but— not having that mentor figure. You know, I think I could've been much better and done much better if I had had a good mentor in a male.*

Similarly, Greg, aged 42 years at the time of data collection, still expressed regret over not having an older male with whom he could have a mentoring relationship:

*There just wasn't that emotional connection that I wanted. I've never had anyone like that in my life... I didn't have any uncles or anything like that around and now, throughout my working career, that sort of thing, I've never had a stronger older male mentor and fully recognising that looking back, that that's something I really wished I'd come across and that it happened in my life.*

At 73 years old, Pierce was one of the older men in the participant group. He had finally managed in his late 60's to achieve a closure of sorts after writing his father a letter. The letter was never sent, but helped this son express his feelings to the father that had been absent from his life:

*And about five years ago, I was up early one morning and I just thought I'm going to sit down and write that letter, just sort of came to me, so I sat down in front of the computer and away I went. It was a very emotional experience, there were a lot of tears, but that sort of helped me.*

### ***I don't trust men: Preferring the company of women***

The lack of a paternal relationship had affected these men and how they engaged with other men. Despite it not being a focus of the data collection interviews, most of the men spontaneously disclosed having a preference for the company of women. Sometimes this was framed in comments such as *I've never particularly liked men. ..I don't really trust men* (David), or in statements such as *I much prefer living with women than men* (Michael). Some men such as Nathaniel had sought therapy to try to resolve these feelings but they were largely unsuccessful:

*I don't trust men... I've become very distrusting of men. As much as I'm conscious of it and have done work around it, it's still my fall-back position when it comes to men... if I'm in a situation I always gravitate towards the women not men (Nathaniel).*

This preference to talk to women and their greater comfort around women is also seen in the number of participants who, when given the choice of a male or female to speak to for this study, chose a woman (n=17). Pierce expressed:

*I've got some lasting friendship from workplaces, but most of the lasting relationship are with ladies that I've worked with or worked for me. How many guys from past lives do I still keep in touch with? Probably not a lot. ... I find it hard to get going with somebody [male]. It takes a while and hard work and maybe it wouldn't have been if you were used to having a dad around. That's why when you sort of said to me, I think yesterday on the phone, if I'd be preferred to be interviewed by a man or no, I preferred to be interviewed by you. It's funny isn't it? 'Cause I think, women are, I think they're easy to talk to, but that, of course, may go back to the fact that I had three – I was living with two maiden aunts and my mother.*

This guardedness around men and the difficulties with establishing trust with men, made women easier for the men to engage with as stated by Kambara:

*I think, through all these experiences, what it's done to me is it's made it difficult for me to bond with men. I've walked away from a lot of friendships over the years, male friendships, yes... I can talk to and feel more comfortable around women, and I always remember that being the way and that's the way it still is now.*

Many of these men lived in very female dominated households as children and did not get regular access or exposure to men in the home situation. This lack of male bonding then spilled over into life outside the home, into social, work and school settings:



*So that's a big hole. It's because you don't have that – Haven't had that male relationship and I noticed that through high school in terms of I had so many girls as friends. People used to think I was the luckiest guy ever and there are a lot of girls and so I was surrounded by them while I was growing up. And so I could relate with girls, couldn't relate to guys at school. I struggled (Jake).*

***Work out hard at the skills of living: Acceptance of the past and moving on***

Participants were able to acknowledge the vulnerability they had experienced as boys and young men. However, overall, participants saw themselves as survivors. They felt that having survived their childhood, adolescence and transition to manhood without a father present, they had developed certain skills such as *self-reliance* (Bill), *determination, independence* (David) and a sense they had to work for everything they needed – *none of us [own siblings] have grown up with a sense of entitlement* (Bill).

While many of the men still experienced issues around the sense of loss, incompleteness and regret, they had strived to overcome this life adversity and made the best of the situation they found themselves in:

*Growing up without a father...you either go one way or the other...you either become a drug addict who ends up killing himself through depression and everything else, or you go the other way and work out how to make the best of a situation and come out on top and work out hard at the skills of living (Aaron).*

David had worked hard to understand his own reactions to the hurt of his father leaving him. Through this he had come to see the anger he displayed as a normal response to the trauma of his father's absence, and sought opportunities to reach out to other young people experiencing the pain of paternal absence.

*Actually, I found myself a fairly angry young man at times, so I misbehaved. But in the late teens, I did a couple of years of counselling, helping others, and I've come to believe that no matter how badly done by you feel, there's myriads of people out there that have got a lot more challenges and face a lot more difficulties and that was quite an interesting time...I sort of like to encourage younger kids who might be feeling the pain of a father absence that there is light at the end of the tunnel, there's a lot that you can achieve with your life. And when you look back at it, if there's any angry behaviour, it's probably just a natural response to being hurt. But if you can channel that energy into positive directions, there's very little limit to what you can achieve in life, so that's probably the main motivation really for me coming in [to the study] and throw my small contribution in.*

## **Discussion**

The level of expected paternal involvement in a child's life varies from and within cultures and socioeconomic groups (Paquette, 2004; Williams & Kelly, 2005). However, our findings have shown that these sons still regretted the absence of a father in their lives. As Herrmann (2005 p. 338) shared, "aren't Dads supposed to be involved in the lives of their children, especially little boys, especially first-born sons who are their namesakes?" Indeed, even as mature adults, the adult sons in our study still keenly felt the loss of their fathers from their lives and attributed a range of life difficulties to this paternal absence.

The consequences for children of problematic parent-child relationships are well documented. When parent-child bonds are not well established or maintained, aggressive deviant and delinquent behaviour, academic failure, mental health disorders and unplanned pregnancy can be the outcome (Williams & Kelly, 2005). Problems socialising, completing education, avoiding substances and suicide are all far more prevalent problems in boys than girls (Paquette, 2004). Boys from a father absent home struggle with developing peer relationships as they are less popular and less likely to engage in boisterous games (Paquette,

2004). Father absence is also thought to affect adolescent moral and social development (Jones, Kramer, Armitage, & Williams, 2003). Conversely, strong parent-child bonds are associated with increased social competence, positive self-esteem and emotional equilibrium (Williams & Kelly, 2005).

Despite there being a large body of literature about father absence and the consequences for children it is predominately derived from quantitative methods. There is a distinct lack of experiential data within which to situate our findings. Nevertheless our findings resonate with the literature in that our participants reported feelings of loss, issues with self-esteem and mental health, increased contact with police, difficulties in subsequent relationships and a mistrust of men. The negative effects from father absence are understood to be the result of cumulative losses resulting from parental relationship breakdown. When fathers leave, mothers and children suffer economically. This can result in mothers either being forced into the job market or longer working hours. More investment in working can result in her having less emotional resources for her children.

Many participants in this current study expressed feelings of rejection that they were somehow unworthy as they did not experience love from their fathers. Parental rejection, both maternal and paternal, is associated with significant personality and psychological problems including “negative self-concept, negative self-esteem, emotional instability, anxiety, social and emotional withdrawal, and aggression; conduct problems, including externalising behaviours and delinquency; drug and alcohol abuse; cognitive and academic difficulties; and forms of mental disorder such as depression, depressed affect, and borderline personality disorder” (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001 p. 397).

A son’s need for his father increases during adolescence. Regardless of the level of contact a boy has with a non-cohabiting father, he remains a “significant psychological presence”

(Jones et al., 2003, p. 74). In his autoethnographic article, Herrmann (2005, p. 337) explored his childhood wonderings about his absent father stating that “feelings of desertion, anger and loss can continue well into adulthood. So too can feelings of anxiety, despair and distrust.” Herrmann (2005) acknowledged that he had no understanding of his father and experienced vague memories of him in terms of abandonment and loss and feelings of poor self-worth. There were no answers to his many questions. Resonating with our own findings Herrmann (2005, p. 338) wrote, “My lack of memories, these blank spots in my mind where there is no father, have bothered me for years.”

Early relationships represent a precedent for future attachments as they shape individual notions of self-worth and personal value and expectations of affection being reciprocated (Williams & Kelly, 2005). Regardless of culture or country, the experience of being loved or not loved as a child shapes future relationships (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Having experienced perceived rejection from a parent, sets up the expectation of rejection from others (Williams & Kelly, 2005). Furthermore, witnessing chaotic parental relationships before fathers become absent can also taint the expectations children hold of adult relationships (Mendle et al., 2009).

Through a healthy loving relationship and the promotion of secure, stable attachments fathers are thought to contribute heavily to their sons' self-confidence and feelings of security (Jones et al., 2003). Although a positive relationship with their mother can largely mediate the effects of father absence, children that have grown up with little contact with their father can experience anxiety about forming intimate relationships as adults (Jones et al., 2003). Adult children who have experienced parental divorce are also more likely to cohabitate rather than marry, or once married more likely to divorce (Wautericks, Gouwy, & Bracke, 2006).

Little research has explored the relationship patterns of young disadvantaged men (Tach & Edin, 2011). However, the scant research that does exist highlights the destabilising effect that economic disadvantage and entrenched mistrust has upon their ability to maintain stable romantic relationships (Tach & Edin, 2011). Some of the difficulties entering into a committed relationship have been attributed to lower educational attainment, increased incarceration rates, substance abuse and mental health issues and adult economic instability (Jones et al., 2003; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Tach & Edin, 2011). Our findings cast further light on this difficulty with relationships, and highlight that father-absent adult sons can experience on-going challenges and difficulties forming deep friendships and trusting relationships with other men.

## **Conclusions**

The adult sons in our study still keenly felt the loss of their fathers from their lives and attributed a range of difficulties to this paternal absence. The men described feeling alone and let down by their fathers. These feelings of isolation were accompanied by a sense of stigmatisation linked to difficulty voicing their associated sadness, even to those closest to them. Episodes of anger and depression that were disruptive to their childhood were depicted as having been replaced by sadness and a longing for what could have been. These recollections included memories of being treated for mental health problems with the men identifying father absence as a major causative factor for their problems. This reoccurring and ongoing sense of loss presents a metaphor of holes in life memories. The men linked these memories and memory gaps to an ongoing struggle to form trusting relationships. A lack of knowledge of intimacy, emotional attachment and sexuality was associated with an inability to form a satisfying and meaningful emotional relationship with a significant other. The men described engaging with women easier than men for whom they experienced difficulties establishing trust associated with a lack of male bonding. Whilst the men

expressed regret and sadness when met with paternal disinterest and absence of an older male mentor, they also expressed acceptance of the past and described themselves as survivors who had overcome their experienced adversity. The memories discussed by these men revealed a range of difficulties that were consistent with research into the impact of father absence on children and childhood development. By connecting these narratives to life trajectories, insight into the long term impact of father absence can be gained.

### **Implications for Practice**

Many of the men interviewed in this study described ongoing mental health related issues associated with father absence and/or parental rejection. Whilst some of the men had been treated as a child or adolescent with either medication or counselling, it was apparent that many had not sought any treatment for their ongoing feelings of sadness and depression. From childhood to mid and late adulthood, there is scope for nursing and healthcare interventions that promotes mental wellbeing. The provision of services such as those that offer male companionship and support services to boys who have experienced father absence may assist in establishing trust which may encourage discussion of feelings and emotions associated with father absence. The provision of such services may assist in reducing the mental health problems and adverse life pathways associated with father absence. Further, the importance of forming a trusting nurse patient relationship should not be underestimated considering father absent boys may find it difficult in forming therapeutic relationships with other men and are essential in promoting the positive wellbeing.

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