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ABSTRACT

This is an empirical, psychoanalytic inquiry designed to uncover what exists in the space for “father” when men grow up father absent. I interviewed 10 father absent men to find out how they conceptualized their personal representations of father and whether the conjured images played a material role in their lives. In light of the interviews, I contend that, regardless of circumstance, intrapsychic space exists for father. Building on Green (2004), I argue that father absent men have a combination of positive and negative space for father. Positive space is filled principally with directly experienced memories, and stories as recounted by others, particularly the mother, who is often a decisive figure in shaping the discourse on father. Positive space is filled with father mirroring memories, memories of tactile, mimetic experiences that serve as signposts for worldly engagement. Positive space is also filled by symbolic fathers, people and systems, who father feelings are displaced onto. Negative father space is empty. It is that which is not seen, symbolized, or mirrored by the father. Negative space is full, however, to the extent that negative space is recreated in the gaps of living, gaps particularly in arenas of fathering and loving.

**IN THE SPACE OF THE FATHER: FATHER IMAGES, EMPTINESS, AND
FATHER MIRRORING IN FATHER ABSENT MEN**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2015

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To my father, mother, Kathleen, Bre, Billy, Kevin, and E.D.

To lost fathers and sons searching for each other.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This thesis began in earnest in the spring of 2014 when I approached a distinguished clinician with a question about a clinical case. I suspected that my patient's experience growing up father absent was playing a decisive role in an ongoing relational dilemma. I wondered how I could work through feelings concerning the absence, and in doing so, help resolve the dilemma. To the best of my recollection, this is what I was told: searching for meaning in absence is a fool's errand because memory hooks onto sensory experiences. What is absent is not sensed, and therefore not remembered, and so there is nothing to work through. Although this clinician's expertise was beyond dispute, I was unconvinced. Feeling slightly audacious, I resolved to find out more about the nature of absence. At the same time, I was combing through the history of the psychoanalytic movement, which proved bountiful beyond measure, but also generally presupposed an available father in its theoretical formulations.

I suspected that father absent men would have thoughts and observations about their experience, and about their fathers. I imagined that there would be something in the space of the father for these men, but I knew not what. I also suspected that whatever was found in this space would have a bearing on the course and tempo of these men's lives. 10 very generous men shared their stories, and helped me weave together some observations about how, and with what, men fill the space for father when they grow up father absent. Andre Green wrote, "From time to time, the analyst, like the archaeologist, finds one tooth, one mandible, and reconstructs a whole personality" (1998, p. 124). What follows will scarcely be a whole personality, but with luck, it will be a tooth or a mandible.

In Chapter II, I offer a psychoanalytic history of the father. I explore some of the major ideas about the functions of the father as he influences the psychic development of a son. Principally, this is an exploration of the Oedipus complex in its various configurations and applications, especially with respect to non-traditional family structures. In Chapter III, I delineate my methodology. I explain how I identified participants, how I planned and conducted interviews, how I recorded the interviews, and how I analyzed and formulated ideas based on what the participants shared. Chapter IV illustrates the main themes that emerged from the participants. I am, as the researcher always is, in the authoritative position of selecting a few of many possible stories to tell about father image. That said, with the exception of a few minor changes to preserve confidentiality, the claims I make, hinge on the powerful and polyphonic voices of the participants. What I found was entirely unexpected. I set out to learn about fathers and I ended up with conclusions about mothers. I set out to discover unexamined presences and I came to conclusions about unexplored emptiness. So much revealed itself in the space for father, both of the actual father and other symbolic fathers that I am left wondering if the term “absent father” might, itself, conceal more than it elucidates. Chapter V offers a conceptual bridge between the psychoanalytic literature and my findings.

Chapter II

Literature review

Sigmund Freud revealed psychoanalysis to the world and in so doing, Freud forever changed the way people would see themselves, their families, and their societies. Freud wrote expansively about fathers and, not incidentally, his own father. Freud situated the “father complex” at heart of human neuroses, the origin of society and civilization, and the formation of monotheistic religion (Freud, 1909/1955; Freud, 1913/1955; Freud, 1927/1961). In the years after Freud’s death in 1939, psychoanalysts have elaborated on Freud’s thoughts on fathers, building especially on the ambivalent feelings boys have for their father, feelings which have their origin in the Oedipus complex. To this day, psychoanalytic communities debate the question of universality of the Oedipus complex and its role in the analytic project.

As a brief disclaimer, in the forthcoming discussion of Freud’s texts on father, and the subsequent psychoanalytic discourse on father, one might hear Freud’s association between father and power, and bristle at its phallocentrism. Many are inclined to dismiss Freud on these grounds, but I contend that to do so is to misread Freud and to turn a blind eye to the world as it is. Freud was writing about reality, however stark and brutal. Not to see the world in all its glory and all its unpleasantness, is to live blind. Freud uncovered previously hidden societal injunctions and gender classifications, some of which, I argue, still hold in contemporary society.

Freud’s intellectual independence made him radical, unpopular, and most of all, indispensable. In the pages that follow, I will refer to psychoanalytic language that could be read as immoderately adherent to the gender binary. Suffice it to say, the intent of this thesis is decidedly not to reinforce a biological imperative about what boys and fathers are, and inevitably will be, only to narrowly and faithfully represent the experience of 10 male participants. As

Freud advises the student of scientific inquiry, “It is simply a fact that the truth... admits of no compromises or limitations, that research regards every sphere of human activity as belonging to it and that it must be relentlessly critical if any other power tries to take over any part of it” (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 160).

Since everything psychoanalytic begins with Freud, this project must first take account for Freud’s contributions to the arena of father. This will lay the groundwork for the major psychoanalytic concepts of father, around which subsequent theorists have pivoted. Second, this project will try to capture some of the major, subsequent contributions to psychoanalysis beyond Freud. Third, this project will hone in on what psychoanalytic theorists have written about “absent fatherhood” and its impact on male development. Fourth, this project will introduce relational psychoanalysis and its contributions to fatherhood and father absence, particularly the innovation of “thirdness.” Fifth, this project will introduce Jacques Lacan’s concepts of father, as father features in his “symbolic realm.” Sixth, this project will describe several examples of father image studies, especially how father image must be situated in the context of race and social position.

Fathers in the oedipal situation

Freud’s writing spans many decades and many volumes. As such, the scope of this project can only but scratch the surface of what Freud wrote about fathers. In a few words, Freud believed in the universality of the Oedipus complex, an ingenious re-reading of the Oedipus myth by Sophocles. In the myth, his parents fearing an oracular prophesy, infant Oedipus is left in the wilderness to die. Oedipus is rescued, reared, and returns to unknowingly slay his father, King Laius. After solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus is crowned king, made husband to the queen, who is, of course, his mother, fulfilling his tragic destiny (Van Nortwick, 1998).

Freud wrote that this dramatic myth is revived and relived in every boy. The boy falls in love with his mother and seeks to conquer his father, the boy's feared rival and competitor for the mother's love. In a letter to Fleiss, Freud writes: "I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood" (Freud, 1897/1966, p. 265). In brief, Freud cautions that everyone possesses desirous and murderous wishes which must be resolved or ignored to our peril. The drama can be submerged, repressed, but not without cost. If left unresolved, the repressed conflicts manifest as symptoms, a "return of the dead" (Freud, 1919/1955, p. 217) or a return of the repressed. Much of what Freud writes about men and fathers revolves around the oedipal story. For our purposes, we will look especially to four of Freud's works to help elucidate the oedipal situation, and by extension modern man: (1) *Totem and Taboo*, (2) *The Future of an Illusion*, (3) *Moses and Monotheism*, and (4) *The Dissolution of the Oedipus complex*.

Totem and Taboo is Freud's speculative work of anthropology in which he follows Darwin's findings to imagine the life of the "primal horde" at the dawn of civilization. Dismissed by many, Freud virulently adhered to the literal details he describes therein. As will soon see, Freud attributes the development of civilization to the establishment of the Oedipus complex. From prehistory to the present, the remnants of this first oedipal trauma have been carried on through unconscious memories.

In the beginning, there was a father. A jealous and violent father ruled a small group of brothers and sisters. All together, they comprised the primal horde. This tyrannical and powerful father presided over the brothers, and made all the sisters objects of his sexual cravings. The primal father forbade the brothers participation in the prizes of his dominion. Increasingly unsatisfied with this arrangement, the brothers learned that if they acted together they could

overthrow the primal father. So they plotted; “they slew and ate the father” (Freud, 1918, p. 234). The brothers were triumphant, but the brothers were guilty because the previously repressed tender feelings toward the father returned in the form of remorse. To displace their guilt, the brothers created a “totem animal,” an animal which held symbolic importance to the horde, and also symbolically represented the father. The people of the horde renounced partaking of the flesh of the totem animal, and the brothers renounced sexual relations with females associated with the totem. The primal horde would, however, have a totem feast in which the totem animal was slaughtered and consumed. Freud described this as “the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act” (Freud, 1918, p. 234), the story of the killing of the primal father.

On its surface, this is a strange, phantasmagoric, and perhaps unlikely, story. Regardless of whether the primal horde ever ruled and ruined, Freud’s myth offers a compelling account about the transition from law by direct physical force toward the internalization of morality, laws, and symbolic power (Laurent, 2009). While the primal father was alive, he directly regulated the behavior of the horde. After the brothers toppled the primal father, however, it was their revulsion at their deed, the memory of the father’s demise, and the memory of the father’s authority, that motivated the horde’s actions going forward. As Freud forcefully wrote, “The dead now became stronger than the living” (1918, p. 236). Indeed, the first laws of mankind, according to Freud, are coded versions of the two transgressions described in the story of Oedipus: (1) prohibition against eating the totem animal, which is a displaced memory of the original killing of the primal father, and is a coded prohibition against parricide, and (2) the prohibition against sexual activity with the women of the totem clan, which describes the rule of exogamy, the incest prohibition. Freud speculated that these two prohibitions were essential for

human survival. Without these two prohibitions, the primal horde would have destroyed itself competing for power and sexual partners. Ever onward, the memory of this event became etched into the psyche of man and became a new, symbolic power. Beyond the credence Freud lent to this story, *Totem and Taboo* is also relevant for the purposes of this project because it describes nothing other than an origin story for absent fathers – how men remember the father, and how his memory, the fear of his authority, is repressed, regulated, and turned into law.

The second piece of Freud's writing that bears some scrutiny for this project is *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1961). In it, Freud grapples with monotheistic religion, attempting to identify its cultural utility, while remaining dubious of the veracity of religion. Freud calls attention to the beginning of human life, which is one of extreme dependency and abject helplessness. Babies are utterly at the mercy of their parents to provide shelter, to soothe, to keep warm, to feed, to keep safe, and provide all other life-giving essentials. For a child, the word of the parents, and in Freud's time, particularly the father, existed like the word of God. One was to obey the father's prohibitions or suffer his wrath. For Freud, this is not entirely for the bad. As Freud writes, "the regulations of civilization can only be maintained by a certain degree of coercion—namely that men are not spontaneously fond of work and that arguments are of no avail against their passions" (Freud, 1927/1961, p. 8). In other words, we need authority to keep us in line, to keep our passions from colliding and capsizing everything humans have carefully built.

Freud believed that prohibitions set out by early caregivers, especially the father, are eventually internalized in the child and exist even when the authority figure is no longer present. Freud called this super-ego, which roughly corresponds to the modern notion of a "conscience". As people grow and develop, they retain their superego, but soon confront new

and troubling realities. The world is harsh and dangerous. Freud wrote humans find themselves feeling helpless and scared, just as they felt in childhood. They are reminded of, and crave, the safety and protection they felt as children from their strong, seemingly omnipotent, parents. The father no longer possesses the staggering powers he once enjoyed. And so people turn to, or, as Freud maintained, create, God. Thus explains God – a stand in for the protection of the father, the one who says you are not helpless. Freud explains that giving up God is as unappealing as it is essential to psychic health: “They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and magnificence in the machinery of the universe...They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable” (Freud, 1927/1961, p. 49).

Freud saw the paternal function, in part, as not unlike the function of God: to provide justice, safety, and contain anxiety about one’s sheer helplessness in the world. Freud argues that when the father no longer suffices to contain our anxiety about the brutal realities of the world, we look elsewhere. In this, Freud presupposes an available father. First there is father; then there is God. In the following chapters, this project will investigate what can be culled from this model when father is not present, and sometimes has not been present from the start.

The next Freudian text this project will explore is *Moses and Monotheism* which, published in 1939, was Freud’s final book. *Moses and Monotheism* is a character study on the biblical figure of Moses. Freud was perhaps less interested in the man, Moses, than why this particular man ushered in a radical new type of religion: monotheism. Again, I am not in a position to validate or discredit Freud’s anthropological data, which is exhaustive, but which even Freud admits are contestable. Part one of the book is mostly an account of the pre-historical holy land, which Freud uses to support his surprising findings.

The second part of the book is more relevant for this project. Freud more directly compares the Moses story to human neurosis, and the role of the father. In this work, Freud explicitly talks about the evolution of feelings a boy has toward his father over the course of a lifetime. Freud writes “A child's earliest years are dominated by an enormous overvaluation of his father” (Freud, 1939/1964, p. 12). As a child, the boy is afraid of the father’s power and submits passively to his authority. As the boy grows physically stronger, experiences rivalry “real disappointment in real life” (Freud, 1939/1964, p. 12), the pubescent boy develops an “extreme relation to his father, reckless to the pitch of self-destruction” (Freud, 1939/1964, p. 79). While he emerges from a latency period with aggressive and competitive feelings toward the father, the longing for the father never subsides. Later in the text Freud lists characteristics of the father which kindle these feelings of longing: “decisiveness of thought, the strength of will, the energy of action...one must admire him, one may trust him, but one cannot avoid being afraid of him too” (1939/1964, p. 109-110). Of these traits, Freud elaborates on the craving for authority, his praise and reproaches, the masochistic pleasure of a father’s spankings, “the ego is apprehensive about risking the love of its supreme master [the superego]; it feels his approval as liberation and satisfaction and his reproaches as pangs of conscience” (Freud, 1939/1964, p. 117).

The fourth of Freud’s works this project will look to is *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* (1924/1961). In this short work, Freud elaborates on oedipal dynamics and their resolution in childhood. Freud writes that the oedipal complex becomes central in “the sexual period of early childhood. After that, its dissolution takes place; it succumbs to repression” (Freud, 1924/1961, p. 173). For Freud, the boy becomes overwrought by preoccupation with his penis and what will happen to it. When he wets the bed, the boy fears this is because of his

naughty obsession with his penis. The boy becomes preoccupied with castration, that for his penile transgressions, his parents will steal his penis. Moreover, the boy has become inured to two central castration rituals: (1) loss of possession of the mother's breast through weaning, and (2) "the daily demand on them to give up the contents of the bowel" (Freud, 1924/1961, p. 175). Thwarted by the father, and fearing castration, the boy renounces his quest for an incestuous affair with the mother. By giving up the sexual aim of the mother, the boy preserves "the genital organ—has averted the danger of its loss—and, on the other, has paralyzed it—has removed its function" (Freud, 1924, p. 177). This process ushers in the period of latency. Meanwhile, the boy has introjected the authority of the father "into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father" (Freud, 1924/1961, p. 176-177). Freud therefore posits that the threat of castration contributes to the creation of a healthy superego, causing the libidinal aims toward the mother to be sublimated and redirected, and enabling the new, de-sexualized parental identifications, thereby destroying the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1924/1961). In lay terms, the father's authority prevents the son from acting on his desirous impulses toward the mother. The boy, knowing he can never possess his mother, must then seek other (and in fact healthier) ways to channel his sexual energies. Implicit Freud's argument is a claim that without an available father the boy will not fear castration and will continually seek to possess the mother. In the subsequent chapters, we will look to the participants to see how men navigate incestuous desire when the father is not present.

The paternal function in psychoanalysis after Freud

In this section, I will summarize some of innovations in classical psychoanalysis since Freud. To do so this project will introduce the role of the father in the context of: (1) Greenson's landmark paper "Dis-identifying with the mother," (3) Modell's concept of "right to life" and

superego development, (3) Blos's fight against passivity and concept of re-engulfment, and (4) Blum's explication of the primal scene.

In 1968, Ralph Greenson published the landmark paper, "Dis-identifying with the mother." Greenson argues that for both boys and girls, the first identification is with the mother. The mother/child dyad is likely to be the most fused and symbiotic relationship that will ever exist for the human being. The identification with the mother is pleasure-giving, safe, and tender, and therefore unhappily relinquished. Alas, Greenson argues that by preserving this exclusive identification with mother, the boy sacrifices positive feelings about his own gender, since he is not a woman. Greenson contends that the pathological fear many heterosexual neurotic men have regarding masculinity, and the dread of latent homosexuality, is traceable to maternal identification. Greenson argues that for the boy to feel better about his own body, sexuality, and development, he must form an identification with the often less accessible, less warm, father. Greenson, drawing from Anna Freud, argues that mothers "must allow the boy to identify with the father figure" which can be done by "genuinely enjoying and admiring the boy's boyish features and skills" (Greenson, 1968, p. 265).

Modell (1965) writes about a specific feature of superego development, which he calls "the right to life." Modell writes, as I have addressed, that Freud linked the development of the superego to the incorporation of the father's authority. Modell writes about what happens when there is a failure in identification. Modell writes about patients who carry tremendous unconscious guilt about having an independent life of their own, apart from their parents. Modell's patients report a belief that, were they to separate from their mother, this would precipitate the mother's death. Modell builds on Freud's concept that guilt is often synonymous with fear of the superego. In Modell's case, the exaggerated guilt his patients feel

is traceable to a belief that psychic separation from the mother is tantamount to “depriving the mother of her basic substance” (Modell, 1965, p. 330). Modell contends that the irrational fear of matricide persists because the identities of mother and son are so entwined as to appear as indistinguishable. Modell contends that this psychic arrangement persisted beyond its function, in part, because the father did not succeed in enticing the son to identify and establish a psychic separation between the mother and son.

Blos (1984) elaborates on the oedipal constellation and father-son relationships. Blos contends that during the pre-Oedipal period boys typically seek approval and affirmation from their fathers, laying the foundation for a “libidinal bond of a profound and lasting kind” (Blos, 1984, p. 303). The establishment of this early bond contributes to internalization of a sense of security in the world. These positive strivings for the father typically give way to a rivalrous and conflictual relationship during adolescence. Blos describes this process as a fight against passivity (Blos, 1984). In other words, adolescent males revolt to achieve self-assertion. The son implores the father to recognize and admire his emerging manhood. The struggle for the adolescent, then, is to recover from the revolt, to resolve this antagonistic relationship. During adolescence, filled with father rage, the son is in danger of regression back into symbiosis with the mother, a “reengulfment,” which could preempt the male adolescent from individuating, becoming a full and independent self (Blos, 1984). The complex is resolved, according to Blos, when oppositional feelings transform into identification with the father. In analysis, this is done through “the search for the loving and loved father” (Blos, 1984, p. 314). Blos provides a clear, theoretical grounding of oedipal dynamics in the father-son dyad, but as with many psychoanalytic theorists, Blos gives no indication for how the adolescent can resolve the Oedipus complex without an active, available father.

Blum (1979) clarifies the psychoanalytic concept of the “primal scene” and its bearing on the self. The “primal scene” is either the parental sex act as witnessed by, or fantasied by, the child (Blum, 1979). Blum attributes primal scene exposure to “fixation and tendencies toward greater regression” (1979) Blum writes that primal scene shock takes the form of a trauma through overexposure (1979). Indeed, Blum writes that the primal scene is the “oedipal drama at the point of highest intensity,” (1979, p. 29) the child being thrust into the world of sexuality, gender, and birth origin. Blum writes that children repeatedly exposed to the primal scene may internalize an “incestuous perversion,” while children excluded from the primal scene may experience “loneliness, rage, and feelings of rejection” (Blum, 1979, p. 32). Blum does not, however, indicate how the father-absent child conceives of the primal scene. If the father is not available, there is no possibility for actual witnessing, except possibly in the refracted sense of seeing mother engage in relations with another partner. In subsequent chapters we will see examples of how the father absent child imagines (or struggles to imagine) his origin, whether and how this form of exclusion from the primal scene presents its own set of challenges.

Psychoanalysis and absent fathers

In this section, I will explore how psychoanalysis has approached absent fatherhood and its effects on men by looking to the following authors: (1) Burgner’s concern regarding lack of incest prohibition, (2) Lane’s rescue fantasies in father absent adolescents, (3) Limentani’s description of defensive splitting of feelings toward the parents, and (4) Ehrensaft’s description of technological advancement and the creation of new frontiers of father absence.

Burgner (1985) writes that without an available father, the incest taboo “becomes alarmingly tenuous for boys whose fathers are absent and who are left alone, or largely alone, with their mothers” (Burgner, 1985, p. 311-312). In other words, the boy is subjected to

Oedipus's trauma: "the symbolic effects of parricide and incest: an absent father and an available mother" (Burgner, 1985, p. 312). Burgner surmises that when fathers leave prior to oedipal resolution, the boy may punish himself for succeeding in his omnipotent fantasy of banishing his father to have the mother all to himself. The boy may consequently have considerable and chronic fear of losing the mother in the same way, which inspires him to carry with him "the exaggerated ambivalent investment of the primary object [mother] into latency, adolescence and even into adulthood" (Burgner, 1985, p. 313). Moreover, should the boy believe that it was his omnipotence which drove away the father he may also fear paternal retaliation, which could turn into an excessively harsh superego (Burgner, 1985). Burgner concludes that, for the above reasons, father-absent boys have disproportionate tendencies toward "depression, certain fundamental difficulties in forming stable and durable relationships, a tendency to leave school, and a tendency to take jobs below their capacity" (Burgner, 1985, p. 314).

Lane (1988) also proposes that oedipal feelings are revived in adolescence. Lane argues that without an available father to which to direct the resurgence of oedipal feelings, the father absent adolescent resorts to acting out behavior. Lane suggests that when adolescent boys have experienced abandonment, they often reenact this early trauma in relationships. Moreover, without a father to contain him, the boy may aggressively act out because of an unconscious wish that his aggressive behavior will inspire the father to spontaneously materialize and act as a container for the aggression (Lane, 1988). Lane quotes his patient's rescue fantasy thusly: "My father can help me get out of this mess—I wish I could find him" (Lane, 1988, p. 114). This patient believes that the father could help him navigate his current challenges, but he knows not how or where to look for his support. Father absent adolescents conjure fantasies of the father to strengthen a sense of male identification. Lane suggests the male identification process is often

troubled, however, when the mother communicates a denigrated impression of the absent father. Lane argues that this, in turn, pushes the adolescent male to act out as a way to embody the negative father image as presented by the mother. Lane contends that interruptions to the attachment process lead to developmental failures and heightened feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame (1988). Lane suggests that as father absent adolescents try to escape these various identity crises, they create fantasies of being rescued by the biological father or the psychoanalyst, who often functions as a proxy father (1988).

Limentani (1991) begins by arguing that it is a boy's right to be protected by his father. The boy needs protection against his naturally-occurring, but nonetheless terrifying, incestuous wishes. Limentani contends that when parents get divorced, and father leaves the home, the boy may "at the point of gaining insight into his imagined role in the breaking up of the parents' marriage" decide he is deserving of punishment, he "should go into exile, not his father" (Limentani, 1991, p. 576). The boy may also cope with the traumatic loss of the father by developing primitive feelings toward his parents – idealizing the mother who has stayed, while splitting off all bad feelings and projecting them into the villainous, abandoning father, who is deemed to have been ill-suited for identification even if he stayed (Limentani, 1991). Limentani also broaches the potentiality that boy may become a replacement love object for the mother, "in lieu of her husband," (1991, p. 581) an indefensible seduction with the potential to be as disruptive to the boy as his father's departure.

Ehrensaft (2013) offers a helpful addition to the oedipal situation, which is often framed in terms of the heterosexual union between man and woman, father and mother. Ehrensaft discusses how technological innovation, in particular donor insemination, has enabled new parental configurations, which have generated new forms of father absence. Ehrensaft reports

that sperm donor families have four distinct forms: “lesbian single mothers, heterosexual single mothers, lesbian couples, and heterosexual couples” (2013, p. 373). According to Ehrensaft, each of the four arrangements present challenges with regard to absent fatherhood, the first three having a “lack” of an available father, the fourth having an “extra” father (2013). Moreover, Ehrensaft reports that sperm donors have “a range of sperm donor involvement from a frozen vial of sperm donated by an anonymous donor to the fresh sperm of an uncle or friend active in the child’s life and often known to the child as his or her genetic father” (Ehrensaft, 2013, p. 373). Ehrensaft finds children of donor families, even if they have not been told of their origin, possess intense curiosity, and imagine fantastical origin stories for themselves. Ehrensaft reports that donor families often seek to downplay or wholly forget that insemination took place, considering it “a nonevent” (Ehrensaft, 2013, p. 382). In psychoanalytic terms, Ehrensaft describes the psychic process of converting the father (a human sperm donor) into a part object, “a vial of sperm” (2013, p. 388). As she writes, “Those tadpole-shaped little creatures are disembodied from the “whole object” of the man who made them” (Ehrensaft, 2013, p. 388). Despite this process, Ehrensaft reports that children are truth-seeking, and spontaneously search for the whole object of their sperm donor fathers. Ehrensaft reports that children are all the healthier psychologically when whole representations are generated (2013).

Burgner, Lane, Limentani, and Ehrensaft offer psychoanalytic observations about father absent men. Each illustrate how the lack of a father often results in a primarily dyadic (or pre-oedipal) structure for the father absent boy, as opposed to the triangular, oedipal structure. Each offer conclusions about how the boy is likely to be affected by this structure, including the possible development of an excessively punitive superego and challenges with the expression of

anger. Just as the role of the mother featured in these authors, she will also feature in the findings section as an important participant in the process of father image creation.

Relational theory and thirdness

Though some people retrospectively trace relational theory to Sandor Ferenczi, a contemporary of Freud's, relational theory is a relatively new innovation of psychoanalytic thought. Relational theory emphasizes the here-and-now relationship between patient and analyst, the way early dynamics are enacted in session, and the ways in which patient and analyst co-construct transference/countertransference dynamics. One way relational analysts conceptualize this co-construction is through third space, the space that exists between the patient and analyst. In this section, this project will trace the origins of thirdness as it relates to the history of the father in psychoanalysis. To do so, this project will turn to: (1) Winnicott's concept of "potential space," (2) Benjamin's writing on thirdness, (3) Green's writing on thirdness, (4) Green's theory of the negative, and (5) Sinkkonen and Keinanan's belief in the maternal creation of a third for the father absent boy.

Winnicott (1971) coined the term "potential space" to describe the transitional space "between fantasy and reality" (Ogden, 1985, p. 139). Winnicott proposed that potential space originates in the physical and psychical space between mother and infant (Ogden, 1985) where "the mother (or part of the mother) is in a 'to and fro' between being that which the baby has the capacity to find and (alternatively) being herself wanting to be found" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 47). Winnicott describes potential space as pivotal to the development of personhood, learning to distinguish what is "me" from what is "not-me". Of this concept, Ogden writes, "paradoxically, 'I-ness' is made possible by the other" (1985). Winnicott describes this as the infant's discovery of himself in what he sees reflected in his mother's eyes. This creates an interpersonal dialectic

wherein “‘I-ness’ and otherness create one another and are preserved by the other” (1985, p. 131). For Winnicott, it is in potential space that children develop the capacity to generate symbols, to develop imagination, without which all collapses into pure fantasy (Ogden, 1985).

If Winnicott is seen as forerunner to the relational third, Benjamin (2004) is perhaps the most recognizable spokesperson. Benjamin, in a major departure from Freud, Lacan, and the bulk of analysts, configures the relational third wholly apart from the Oedipal triangle. Benjamin, following Winnicott, contends that the third partially emerges through the rhythmic attunement of gestures between mother and infant (Benjamin, 2004). Not unlike Winnicott’s potential space, Benjamin describes thirdness as “a quality or experience of intersubjective relatedness” that “refers to a certain letting go of the self, and thus also implies the ability to take in the other’s point of view or reality” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 8). Benjamin distinguishes thirdness from twoness, which is characterized by a doer/done-to system, in which both participants feel “done to,” because no space exists in which to act as “an agent helping to shape a co-created reality” (Benjamin, 2004).

Green (2004), who masterfully integrated Winnicottian and Lacanian theories, wrote extensively on “thirdness.” Green writes that the earliest phases of development can be characterized by a dyadic (pre-Oedipal) relationship, mother and child, which predates the introduction of a third object, typically the father, whose psychic introduction enables the child to develop triadic (Oedipal) capacity for relating (Green, 2004). Green writes that as fathers are a biological requirement for childbearing, there is always a third, even when there is not an actual, available third (Green, 2004). Green writes even when a father is not physically present the mother holds psychic space for the father in her mind. This space for “father”, Green argues, is built upon important relationships in the mother’s life – her father, her brother, her past lovers,

the child's father. As such, the mother's interactions with the child will be mediated by the father fantasies she dreams about while she interacts with the infant. Green proposes that without an actual father, the roles of father and child blur, since the intense and erotic physical pleasure of caring for a baby generates memories of physical intimacy of the baby's father (2004). When this occurs, Green suggests, "if she is thinking of the father while being co-present with the child in an intimate closeness she is absent from the child to a certain degree, even though she is with the child" (2004, p. 105-106). The mother can, Green argues, make use of this absence by communicating to the infant who these fathers are that swirl in her mind, by talking through her remembrances (Green, 2004).

As evidenced above, Green (1998) is fascinated by the dialectic between presence and absence. In what he terms the "negative," Green describes the paradox that absence itself becomes present, a thing, because absence is "excessively present owing to the very fact of its lack" (as cited in Baker, 2006, p. 59). Green writes that absence holds its own space, its own "concretized emptiness," which fills psychic space that would be occupied by actual objects were they available (Baker, 2006). Green's concept of the negative link to thirdness insofar as "the negative" can become a third space. That is to say, babies and children invest energy into their early caregivers. This process is called "cathexis." Green proposes the idea that there is a corresponding "negative cathexis," wherein psychic energies are invested into a void, where they become "entombed" (Baker, 2006). They are entombed, Baker contends, because the energy invested into nothingness cannot be withdrawn (de-cathected) and reinvested elsewhere, "they cannot be disinvested from their link to an object-less void" (Baker, 2006, p. 62). There is, according to Green, "destruction of the image, a blotting out of it, or fading that creates a wound

in the mind; produces a haemorrhage of the representation, a pain with no image of the wound, but just a blank state, as I said, or a hole” (Green, 1998, p. 658).

Sinkkonen and Keinänen (2008) choose to begin, as a reference point, with the Greenson mantra that for a boy to achieve a healthy self-esteem he must dis-identify with the mother. To successfully separate, the child must be encouraged to access and mobilize his aggression, but his aggression must also “be contained and neutralized by the parents” (Sinkkonen and Keinänen, 2008, p. 39). These tasks, Sinkkonen and Keinänen argue, are often facilitated by a father who admires “his son’s phallic narcissism” (2008, p. 39), channels the son’s aggression, and kindles in the boy a desire for masculine identification with the father. Without an available father, the boy’s road toward masculine identification becomes thornier, but not impossible. If the mother is able to transmit positive and “constructive internal images of loving and supportive men,” (2008, p. 39) to her son, he is likely to develop a healthier male self-image than if the mother herself lacks “triadic capacity” and fails to “conceptualize her child as an independent human being growing up to be a man” (Sinkkonen and Keinänen, 2008, p.48).

Lacan and symbolization

Jacques Lacan (1949/2006) dominated French psychoanalytic thought during the mid-twentieth century. Despite his obscurant and elliptical writing style, Lacan has put his stamp on psychoanalysis, literary theory, semiotics, film theory, and more. Lacan is perhaps best known for situating language at the center of the analytic project. In fact, Lacan’s writing has been seen as an attempt to validate Freudian psychoanalysis through the structural linguistics of Claude Levi-Strauss and Fernande de Saussure (Zafiropoulos, 2013). Most relevant to this project are Lacan’s: (1) Tripartite model (real, imaginary, symbolic) and particularly (2) the symbolic register and it’s relation to the paternal function.

Lacan describes three fundamental ‘registers’ of being, which correspond to actual developmental life stages, but also persist throughout the life cycle. To make use of Lacan for this project, I will briefly introduce Lacan’s tripartite model – the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. At birth, Lacan writes, infants exist in an undifferentiated state of oneness with the environment. The infant has no concept of boundary between itself and others. In fact, the infant has no real conception of itself. This oneness, or in Freudian terms, the limitless “oceanic” describes the state of being in the ‘real’. Not unlike much of Lacan’s concepts, the real defies stable definition. Nevertheless, Žizek offers some clarification, writing of several sub-categories of the real: a primordial abyss, something expressing nature’s automatic functioning, and *l’objet petit a*, the unfathomable something. (Žizek, 2006). While the real predates the other two registers, Fink cautions not to think of the real in “strictly temporal terms,” since the real continues to pervade existence in “that which has not been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization” (Fink, 1995, p. 25).

Lacan’s second realm is the imaginary, which is typified by the mirror stage. At birth, the infant is undifferentiated, but then he has an *aha-Erlebnis*, an “aha experience,” which is the sudden recognition that he *is* who he sees in the mirror. This offers a solution to the question: who am I? I am this image. Lacan describes this as the infant’s initial identification, or “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan, 1949/2006, p. 76). The mirror stage is at once a great advance, and a terrible, if necessary, deception. This mirror image enables the infant to construct a self-identity, building on this initial identification by adding additional investments through object cathecting (Lacan, 1949/2006). Lacan writes that the mirror stage is necessary for the establishment of ego, the locus of self. At the same time, the mirror stage, and by extension the ego, is fundamentally a ‘mirage’ because the

specular image (a gestalt, a statue) fails to correspond with actual existence of the infant (fragmented, disintegrated) (Lacan, 1949/2006). Moreover, the image the infant receives of himself in the mirror has undergone a right-left inversion, further alienating the infant's actual experience from the identified self-image. In this way, coherent, contoured self-image takes the form of "ideal-I," a coherence somewhat at odds with the infant's internal experience. Henceforth, Lacan writes, the ego will strive toward this fictional coherence that "will asymptotically approach the subject's becoming" (Lacan, 1949/2006, p. 95).

The mirror stage sets the groundwork, as it were, for the third register: the symbolic. For Lacan, analysis is analogous to decoding a cryptogram, a search for unconscious treasure (Zafiroopoulos, 2013). Lacan famously said that the unconscious is structured like a language. What he means by this is that the unconscious is filled with coded symbolic desires and drives which have been separated from their meanings. Of the psychoanalytic patient Lacan writes, "we are ignorant of the symbolic constellation dwelling in the subject's unconscious" (Lacan, 1954/2013, p. 65). For Lacan, like Levi-Strauss, we all have personal myths, symbolic constellations that tell our story. The patient, like the analyst, however, does not know the contents of his cryptogram. For Lacan, what has gone wrong is a failure in symbolization. That is to say, the contents of the unconscious remain unconscious because the signified material has not been reunited with the attending signifier; the symbols have not been re-linked to their repressed meanings (Zafiroopoulos, 2013).

The 1950's marked Lacan's return to Freud. Lacan underwent an exhaustive study of Freud's writings which served as the basis for the weekly seminars he delivered to his devoted pupils. During this time, Lacan built novel theory of the father. Lacan described the father as the "absolute Other" who provided "alterity" (or difference) that is necessary develop a healthy

imago. Otherwise, Lacan warns that the child can remain trapped “in the image of his own brother, and even the terrible imago of the mother” (Zafiroopoulos, 2013). Beyond his image, the father provides a basis for the superego. Lacan likens this to the totem meal of *Totem and Taboo*, in which the brothers cannibalize the father, literally incorporate the father into their being. Such christens the move from the primal father to the *dead father*, or “symbolic father”. The symbolic father for Lacan is linked with the “Law,” with the “other” of culture, with prohibitions such as incest, with society’s written and symbolical rules. This is relevant to this project insofar as, as Perelberg writes, everyone has a symbolic father, regardless of whether an actual available father exists (Perelberg, 2009). People are born into a society with rules. Therefore, a harsh, punitive father exists in all people. Lacan’s writing is especially relevant to this project because the attempt to categorize and describe an absent father is precisely a process of converting actual objects into symbols. In the process recreating a father narrative, participants are exercising the “capacity to represent a missing object, as well as the ability to comprehend that a symbol is not the real object” (Anzieu-Premmereur, 2009, p. 111).

By asking men to conjure an image of the absent-father, I am conducting an undertaking of symbolization, not so unlike Lacan’s unspooling of the cryptogram in psychoanalysis. Lacan weaves together roles of father, language, and Law. These functions will prove relevant to the findings section since the participants describe feelings toward the actual father and systems of authority (Law) which overlap and mutually reinforce one another.

Father image and social position

This project will not be the first to try and generate father images. Researchers have tried various interventions to generate father images. Two of the most recent studies have used projective tools to elicit participant’s thoughts, feelings, and images attached to their absent

fathers. For example, Salvatore et al. used Table IV of the Rorschach test (2013). This card is informally called the “table of father,” due to its reliability in generating projections about authority (Salvatore et al., 2013). Salvatore et al. found a connection between the capacity to symbolize the father figure and mood disorders (2013).

Lowe, a systems-oriented family therapist, has attempted to resolve conflicts in father absent households by using empty-chair techniques to generate projections and images of the absent father (2000). Lowe’s paper principally describes the negative consequences when the mother triangulates her child, and imbues him/her with attributes of the missing father, but his paper can easily be translated to use of projections with father absent males (2000).

Father absence has drawn attention in the media and research beyond the cloistered confines of psychoanalytic research. This project will dwell for a moment on non-psychoanalytic research on father absence.

To this point, it should be named that the psychoanalytic history of the father can be characterized by a conspicuous absence of attention race and social position in the discourse on fathers. There has been insufficient attention placed in uncovering whether, let alone how, fatherhood might be culturally constructed. Hamer (1997) provides offers some conclusions to this end. Hamer concludes that black non-custodial fathers conceive of their roles differently than the “western ideal of fatherhood.” According to Hamer, majority western culture prioritizes the “provider” function of fathers. Hamer writes that the structural disenfranchisement of black men undermined their capacity to provide (i.e. racially exclusionary property ownership laws), thereby undermining their capacity to “father” given the predominant meaning of fatherhood. In response to structural racism, Hamer contends that by revaluing various paternal roles, the black community redefined father to counterbalance structural limitations (1997). After conducting

interviews with black non-custodial fathers, Hamer concluded that men tend to construct an ideal of fatherhood based “according to what their father did or did not provide for them when they were children” (1997). Interviewees described the most important roles for the father as: spending time, providing emotional support, and providing discipline, among other considerations. Notably, providing financial support was referenced least of the identified paternal roles (Hamer, 1997).

In non-psychoanalytic research on father absence, we find similar themes, such as difficulty containing aggression. Botero, for example, describes father absence as a form of violence on the child, which is converted into aggression in adolescence, and fuels a cycle of community violence and trauma (2012). Moreover, social work research on father absence has discussed (and criticized) the structural mechanisms which reinforce father absence patterns. Brown et al. have likened fathers in the child welfare system to “ghosts” (2009). They use the word ghost because “in order to see a ghost, one must first believe in their existence and relevance” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 26). They describe a process whereby fathers are forced not to be seen because benefits are tied to father absence. Moreover, workers tend to use “parent” and “mother” interchangeably, a symbolic, if unintentional, systemic annihilation of the father (Brown et al., 2009). Botero and Brown et al. help explore the relationships between father absent family systems and larger structures. The topic of intersecting systems will return in the discussion section where I will discuss how clinicians and social workers can take an active stance in promoting virtuous circles of father engagement.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry designed to capture the essence of father image for a cross-section of adult men who grew up father absent. The participants in this sample participated in semi-structured, in-person, Skype, and phone interviews. In total, 10 men were interviewed. One man was interviewed twice, after he reached out to share more in light of what emerged after the first interview.

This project identified adult, father absent, male participants. The inclusion criteria established to meet the threshold of father absence was: any man who grew up with limited physical access to his biological father during childhood and/or adolescence (birth to 25). While emotional deprivation is a form of absence, which presents its own set of challenges, this project isolated men who grew up with a materially absent father. His father must have resided elsewhere than the participant's primary residence for a portion of his childhood and or adolescence. This project did not specify a minimum period of time, rather simple acknowledgement that some measureable physical deprivation took place. This project set out to interview both men who maintained limited contact with their biological father and men who never met their father.

This project isolated males as persons of inquiry because of the unique developmental elements of losing a same gender parent and because evidence suggests "boys respond more negatively" to father absence than girls (McLanahan et al., 2013, p. 401). The decision to study *adult* males was informed by two considerations: (1) the preponderance of existent literature attends to the experiences of children (Ehrensaft, 2000; Jones, 2007; Lane, 1988; Sinkkonen & Keinänen, 2008) and, (2) having lived through the turbulence of identity formation in

adolescence, adult participants may be speaking from a more stable identity position than their father absent counterparts in childhood and adolescence.

I recruited participants through a variety of sources. First, I established a partnership with the Philadelphia branch of the ManKind Project, a men's organization. I identified this group due to the likelihood that it would be comprised of men interested in the nature of maleness and masculinity. According to the ManKind Project (MKP) website, the mission is to have "men mentor men through the passages of their lives." I received written permission from the director of MKP Philadelphia to communicate with MKP members. My email was distributed to MKP members and I received several responses expressing interest in my project. I then contacted these men, screened for eligibility, and coordinated a time for conducting the interview.

I attempted to recruit the second cohort of participants through snowball sampling. At the end of each of the interviews, I asked participants to recommend other prospective participants by sharing the details of my study to anyone in their existing network of people. I offered to reach out directly to any prospective participants, following the same protocol of screening for eligibility. Snowball sampling did not yield any new participants. I followed back up with MKP, in an attempt to gather more participants in a purposive fashion. This did not yield results. Having exhausted the initial sample, I attempted to recruit more participants through availability sampling. I began disseminating fliers throughout the Philadelphia metropolitan area and posting several advertisements through Craigslist. Neither of these options yielded participants.

I then reached out to my existing network of friends and family. This was by far the most fruitful technique for obtaining participants. In fact, all remaining participants were identified through people within my existing network of contacts. One possible explanation for this is that

men, who would otherwise be reluctant to share about their experience growing up father absent, feel safer talking to someone tangentially connected to them.

The content of interviews began with a broad question and moved progressively toward the specific. During the course of the interview, I asked a series of questions about the participant's experience growing up father absent. The questions followed three general domains: (1) the nature/meaning of the father/son relationship, (2) specific images that are conjured regarding the father, and (3) projective questions about what men wished about the father/son relationship. The interviews were semi-structured to accommodate exploration of topics of special importance to the participants. At the very end, I gave participants the opportunity to share any additional thoughts they had that did not fit into the preceding questions, and used these responses to inform future interviews. Finally, I thanked participants for their time. This project required one meeting with each participant. Participants were advised that the interview would be approximately one hour. Since interviews were semi-structured, I allowed for some flexibility regarding time length. The interviews did have some small variation in length, but most interviews were slightly under an hour.

In person interviews took place at the Philadelphia School of Psychoanalysis. This location was selected because it is a public location, it is located near several forms of public transportation in center city Philadelphia, and has counseling rooms that offer confidential space. I obtained written consent for use of their space for research purposes. Interviews were also being conducted over the phone or through Skype. For the duration of each call, I conducted each interview in a confidential space, where the call could not be overheard by anyone.

Each interview was audiotaped through the iPhone audio recording application Voice Recorder Pro or the Microsoft Sound Recorder, with the exception of one interview, which was

unable to be recorded do to an audio glitch. Instead, I took extensive handwritten notes for this interview. Participants were notified in advance that the interview would be recorded. My iPhone and computer were both password protected to ensure protection of the data. Audio files were subsequently transferred onto a password protected storage space through a cloud platform. Original audio files will be transcribed into a password-protected Google document with personal information fully de-identified.

Once audio files were transcribed, I created a duplicate document of the transcripts, and began combing line by line to identify emergent codes, which I notated through the comment tab. From the emergent codes, I generated a code-book which consisted of 37 codes. Codes were specified as main codes or subcodes, and then given a name, a definition, and an example illustrating the content of the code. With the code-book established, I identified three main themes. I then returned to the emergent code document to identify quotes that matched each of the three themes, which were to be explored in the findings.

All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

Participants were asked to describe an experience (the nature of father absence) which was potentially difficult and painful to recount. Should any of the participants have become distressed at any point during the interview, I was prepared to check in, offer to take breaks, offer the opportunity to skip any questions, and/or provide a list of local psychotherapy referrals. None of these measures were utilized during the interviews.

I serve to personally benefit from this thesis because father absence is a frequent source of psychic distress for patients that I treat clinically. Investigation into the functioning of father-son dyads may help me gain insight into my own family of origin experience. Gaining insight into the experience and import of fatherhood may be personally valuable should I become a father myself.

This thesis may have had personal benefits to the participants by virtue of the opportunity to reflect on and share their experience. Some of these men are likely to have been discouraged from talking about their experience throughout their lives both because of societal pressures for men to hold feelings internally and familial pressure not to discuss a problematic figure. The experience of sharing a topic that has been held inward was likely to be cathartic to some participants. By vocalizing their personal narratives, the participants likely made new connections between their family of origin and their personal identities sons, husbands, and fathers. Participants are likely to have ventilated some feelings that had accumulated throughout their lives.

The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

Social science research has largely neglected the role of the father in the psychic development of men. This oversight amounts to a devaluation of the role of the father, and worse, a devaluation of the pain men feel when they grow up without fathers. This is a particularly egregious oversight in the field of social work since men with targeted identities much more likely to experience father absence than men with more social advantage (Hamer, 1997). Strangely, the academy has mirrored the invisibility of fathers in oppressed communities

by systematically neglecting father absence research. This project seeks to draw attention to, and reverse, this worrisome oversight.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

From what materials does a boy develop an image of a father who is not physically present to behold? The short answer is: from everywhere he can. The image is shaped by his own memories, if indeed he has any personal memories, of his father. The image is shaped from photo albums (Interview #5), high school football jerseys (Interview #8), a pair of shoes (Interview #2), films (Interview #3) and dusty heirlooms of all varieties. The image is also shaped by all the people who knew his father and subsequently shared personal details with the boy. A participant remarked: "I'll hear from his siblings, my aunts and uncles about him, and in a strange way, more than my family, his friends" (Interview #5). All the people who share stories with the boy will have a slightly different cast on the father, each emphasizing slightly different aspects of his personality, his bearing. One participant, for example, heard stories from his dad's friends that he would not have heard elsewhere: "the kinds of things I think my mom wouldn't readily share with me about the sort of prankster he was...who quite literally liked to be the center of attention and the life of the party" (Interview #5).

Given that father image is shaped by many things and many people, I will reach toward three major themes to arrive at both from where father image is created and why father image matters. The following are themes which will be discussed: (1) Mother as architect of the father image, (2) Displacement of father image onto symbolic fathers, and (3) Father mirroring experiences and the development of self.

Mother as architect of the father image

As the participants conjured memories and images of their respective fathers, they found their memories mediated and aided by one figure in particular: the mother. As a participant

offered: “I kind of have to go off memories and reflections of my mother especially...”

(Interview #5) Another participant offered, “Yeah, there was second hand information of course from my mother...and other folks” (Interview #6). And another participant on how he heard about his father, “mostly from my mom” (Interview #1).

The mother’s role is so unmistakable she might best be seen as the “architect” or “guardian” of the father-image. This section will offer a glimpse into what it means to be architect of the father image by illustrating several aspects of the mother’s position with regard to the creation of father image: (1) I will address why it is that the mother is important to the creation of father image. (2) I hope to convey that there is no easy or straightforward way for the mother to talk about the absent father. (3) Given the diversity of mothers’ temperaments, communication styles, and the range of experiences with biological fathers, mothers vary widely in the ways they talk about the biological father to their son. I will explore several communication patterns from mothers of the participants. (4) I submit that it is generally good for boys to know about their biological father. According to Ehrensaft (2000), children are naturally curious about their origins, where they came from. How and what a boy hears about his father will influence not only his father image, but also how he feels about himself, how he feels about male peers, and about men generally. (5) Lastly, I will present a predicament that might be called “the paradox of wholeness”, which draws out a dilemma about whether father absent men consider their family, and their internal experience, “whole.”

Before proceeding any further, I must address the obvious point that not all father absent men grow up with their mothers. Most of the participants in this study did grow up with their mothers, but a few of the participants in this study did not. This paper could proceed by exchanging the term “caregiver” for “mother,” but as will become clearer in the next few pages,

by using the term “caregiver” significant information would be compromised in terms of the relationship between the mother and the father as these dynamics importantly influence father image creation. Participants who were raised up apart from their biological mothers will appear elsewhere as negative cases, but given the themes to be discussed, a thorough investigation of alternative parenting arrangements deserves more careful attention than can be devoted here.

On to the question of the centrality of the mother. The mother is central for three relatively straightforward reasons: (1) the mother’s position *vis-a-vis* the son, (2) the mother’s position *vis-a-vis* the father, and (3) the relative positioning of everyone else. First, the mother plays a pivotal role in the father absent boy’s development. As several participants explained, the mother is often forced to play the “dual role...as mom and dad” (Interview #5). For the father absent boy, the mother is frequently the main provider, the main caretaker, and moral compass. One participant offered, “I just rely on my upbringing from my mother, and her side of the family. My morals and integrity that type thing” (Interview #8). The mother feeds, bathes, and reads to the child. The already hefty responsibility of the mother in raising a child is increased in proportion to the diminished role of the father, unless or until someone else attempts to fill this void, as sometimes happens. Said differently, the mother’s role is magnified for the father absent boy. The same participant continued, he came to the realization growing up, “I only really had one parent in my corner” (Interview #8). In many real ways the son’s life depends on his relationship with his mother. Shill contended that father absent men have increased dependence on the mother, who is the more available parent, and men may therefore deny hostility felt toward her (Shill, 1981). In some cases, the son is invested in making sure the mother is well enough to take care of him. Burgner elaborated, “After the separation from the father, these children live in constant dread of the loss of the remaining object, the mother” (Burgner, 1985, p.

313). One participant explained, “Like I said, when we would go to church, and a certain song, she would just start crying...So, I guess maybe in a way we all tried to be strong for her too, and try to help as much as we could” (Interview #10). With everyone pulling together around the mother, the son often incorporates her worldview, and with it, the mother’s assessment of the father. In other words, the mother may be the first, and most enduring, voice to speak about the father in the boy’s life.

Second, the mother is central to father-image because of her unique position to the father. At the most fundamental level, the mother may be the only person with accurate information about *who* the biological father actually is. The mother controls father image insofar as she is in a unique position of knowing the identity of the father. A participant reflected, “I had asked on occasions prior to that... ‘Is this guy Sam, my step dad, is he my real father? How do I get in touch with these people? Is it the right time?’ My mother always discouraged it because she didn’t think I was mature enough, I don’t think. Because I was very small” (Interview #3). As we observe from this quote, the son reaches out to the mother for answers about the true identity of his father. It was up to the mother to decide when to reveal the truth and when to provide the information necessary for the son to contact his father.

Third, the mother’s position begins to appear closer still when you look at other players likely to be in the boy’s life. At the outset, we should specify that the “everyone else” includes the father himself. By virtue of his absence, the father will have a diminished opportunity to speak for himself, who he is in his own words. Beyond the father, the onset of father-absence is often followed by a frosting of relations with the paternal family, people likely to have intimate knowledge of the father. A participant explained, “My relationship with my paternal father’s family has been greatly affected” (Interview #8). In some cases, the relations with the paternal

side of the family were never close to begin with. One participant offered, “my biological father’s family has always ostracized me” (Interview #7). When I asked another participant about his relations with the extended families he replied, “Well, that’s the weird part too was that there wasn’t much” (Interview #6). Therefore, beyond the paternal side, people who are likely to remain in the son’s life, who also know about the father include: mutual family friends, older siblings, neighbors, and maternal relatives, each of whom typically spend less time and have less influence over the son than the mother. An interviewee described his interactions with his father’s family thusly, “I don’t know if I’m as close as I should be. I’m definitely not close with my aunt or my grandparents, my paternal aunt or my grandparents as I know I could be just because I didn’t have a relationship with him” (Interview #8).

Having set forth some reasons for the centrality of the mother, I will hone in on her position in an attempt to see what sorts of things are at work when she paints a picture of the father. There are two main observations to be made with regard to the mother’s position in relation to the absent father: (1) the type of relationship the mother had with the father will shade the father image she presents to the son, and (2) the impact of the father’s absence on the mother’s health and wellbeing will influence many things, including father image as perceived by the boy. First, it is clear that many of the participants’ mothers had unfavorable impressions of the fathers. To be sure, in many cases, the mother will have accurately observed unfavorable characteristics of the father. That said, it is perhaps also true that mothers, in the wake of father absence, develop unfavorable impressions of the father out of proportion with other observers of the father. In other words, the person with generally the greatest influence on the boy’s father image, and by extension, the boy’s template for male behavior and psyche, is likely to be the person with the least favorable impression of the father as a person. One interviewee offered:

“My mother would constantly put him down and rip him any way she could. So that started my emotional detachment from my father slowly in the sixth, seventh, eighth grade...” (Interview #1) Another participant remembers his mother bemoaning her fate in the marriage, yelling, “I didn’t grow up like this!” (Interview #2) As a small caveat, the negative impression of the father was least true in cases of father death compared to all other reasons for the father’s departure.

Second, and this might help explain the above, the impact of the dissolution of whatever arrangement had been made with the father often has a negative impact on the mother. With the loss of a father, the loss to the mother might be manifold: precipitous drop in financial stability, loss of shared child care responsibility, loss of companionship, and loss of psychological support. A participant offered, “My mother was in a pretty rough state of affairs mentally and psychologically, I guess... You look at photographs and it’s also very evident, the comparison between how she looked two or three years after he died compared to before” (Interview #6).

The mother’s life post-relationship might serve to further diminish her impression of the father as well as sap her available psychic resources to parent and function independently. A psychologically drained mother is perhaps less likely to speak judiciously and dispassionately about a man whose absence contributed to her current situation. Nevertheless, some mothers tried to shield their sons from their own suffering. It is often only in retrospect that sons realized the extent to which their mothers were affected by the father absence and struggled to keep afloat. As one participant reported, “It’s been incredibly eye opening the kind of ongoing grief and suffering that she experienced since my dad’s death... a lot of that was sort of, kind of, hidden from me in the immediate years after his death” (Interview #5). Another participant observed, “But so she probably knew what us kids were going through because what she was

going through herself, so I don't know if she hid a lot of emotion from us...It's just something we didn't talk about" (Interview #10).

Given that the mother is in a position of enormous control over the discourse of the father and given that the mother often has a negative impression of the father, we will next look to how the participants' mother approached their position as conduit for the transmission of ideas and images of the father. Across the data, the following are thematic stances mothers took with regard to discussing the father: (1) retributive, (2) open, (3) silent, (4) restrained, (5) magnanimous. The following should not be read as an exhaustive account, merely a list of characteristics as observed in the transcripts.

Retributive mothers used their position to exact revenge on the father. In this case, the mother might withhold visitation from the father to punish him for how he treated her in their relationship. This mother might openly attack the father with the intent to sully the son's impression of the father, discouraging him from taking any interest in the father at all. A clear example of this model of thinking came in the form of a story told by a participant regarding the mother of one of his own children, in a sense, the second generation of absent fatherhood: "And there's a three year gap there where we weren't involved in each other's lives [of his daughter], 'til finally I said, "Why does your mom keep telling me you don't want to talk to me?" And she goes, "Well, she told me that you don't want to be around me." And now looking back seeing the choice that I made at that time, it made it really easy for her mother to say, "Oh, I'll just tell her her daddy doesn't want her." You know?" (Interview #6) In this example, we find the mother intentionally distorting the father image to strengthen her position and punish the father. To be sure, the chain of retribution is bi-directional. Fathers and mothers both can use their sons as instruments to hurt their former partner. When describing why his father left, one participant

remarked, for example, “It was a way to get back at my mother, she was truly in love with my father, but he cheated on her...He neglected me because he knew I was what she cared about most” (Interview #8).

Open mothers are very transparent with their children about the nature of their relationship with the father and everything that they felt transpired. Being open has the advantage of transparency. Such transparency could serve to sate the child’s curiosity, give him some grounding and rootedness in the world. Depending on how this openness is approached, however, the son might feel overwhelmed by the information he hears. Regarding when he learned about why his father left, for example, a participant reported, “She told me things at that age I probably...was not in my best interest. I wasn’t old enough. I wasn’t mature enough to know what I found out” (Interview #1) I asked if he could elaborate about what felt too much, he said, “What he used to do to her. Some history. Some stuff that I didn’t know about. Of course, how could I know?” (Interview #1)

Silent mothers elected not to speak about the father at all. One participant remembers the only way he knew his mother was affected by his father’s death was, “when we went would go to church, and a certain song [played], she would just start crying” (Interview #10). When I asked him if his mother ever talked about his father he replied, “Not really. No” (Interview #10). As to why his mother didn’t talk about his father’s death, he offered, “I don’t know if she didn’t want us to go through the feelings again or not, but I don’t know. It was like, like it didn’t happen. It’s like it happened, but like it didn’t happen” (Interview #10). Perhaps she believed that in some way, not talking about the father’s absence would diminish its importance, its grip on the family. If it was not talked about, it would simply recede until it disappeared. More likely, not talking about the father trapped feelings inside, and prevented the children from

developing an ability to talk about their father as they grew older. As Freud explained, “All the wishes, instinctual impulses, modes of reaction and attitudes of childhood are still demonstrably present in maturity and in appropriate circumstances can emerge once more. They are not destroyed but merely overlaid” (Freud, 1913/1955, p. 184). Years later, this participant would be suddenly jolted back to that fateful night: “I guess I probably suppressed some feelings over the years regarding that [his father’s death]...And so I don’t know what it is about bringing something like that up from the past, but there’s times when I get tired or depressed, I flash back to that day when it happened...It’s just like a photograph in my mind” (Interview #10).

Restrained mothers filtered what was talked about with the son. These mothers tried to limit the amount of hostility they vocalized in the presence of the son. One interviewee, whose father died in an alcohol-fueled car wreck after a long battle with drinking, remembers his mother providing some context for his addiction: “He wasn’t always intoxicated. It was just something that sort of occurred over time...And she said ‘For all his faults...unlike with a lot of guys when they drink a lot, he never laid his hands on me’” (Interview #9).

Finally, one participant’s mother might best be described as magnanimous. She not only actively tried to limit the hostility she shared to the son, but tried to encourage a positive relationship with the father to the extent that one was possible. The participant described his mother’s stance: “My mother is the only reason why my father and I have a relationship right now. She would never allow me to disrespect him in any type of way, even though there were rifts verbally, that I was privy to many times. She would never allow me to take part in that or get to the point where I hated him...It kind of mediates the, or lessens the amount of resentment that you allow yourself to have. So, if it wasn’t for her instilling that in me, I’m 100 percent certain I would not have my father in my life right now” (Interview #8). This mother is able to

simultaneously present her position in the relationship and also describe and provide context to the father's perspective, the male perspective. In doing so, the magnanimous mother recreates a two-parent experience for the child and presents a fully three-dimensional portrait of the father. In psychoanalytic terms, this mother demonstrates very strong "triadic capacity" or the ability to form and model triangular relationships for the boy (Sinkkonen & Keinänen, 2008).

The aforementioned categories represent different stances the mother can take, but this discussion must also consider that the mother's stance toward the father is unquestionably influenced by the characteristics and qualities of the father himself, at least insofar as he is observed by the mother. Suffice it to say that the more destructive, harmful, erratic, dangerous, or otherwise bad the father is perceived in the mother's eye, the more fraught becomes the mother's decision about when and how much the son should know about the father and how much direct contact in the son's best interest. The father with a history of endangering his children with eruptions of violence and unpredictable drug binges, for one, should be approached with greater caution than the basically stable and supportive father. Take, for instance, a description of a scene involving the participant's father post-divorce: "All's I know is there was a fight and I remember hearing like 'Drop the gun. Drop the gun.' And there being this huge crash and then waking up, I don't know things finally settled down. It's one of those things where you are just laying downstairs paralyzed. You know, wondering "What the heck just happened?" (Interview #9). The traumatic chaos of this scene embodies the type of experience a mother does well to shield her son from, even if it requires keeping him at a physical distance from the father.

We will close this session with a discussion about the paradox of wholeness as a way to illustrate the bind mothers are put into when attempting to describe the absent father to her son.

The paradox: ideally the father absent boy will grow up feeling well-taken care of. He will feel safe and well-provided for. He will not be significantly deprived in ways that threaten his ability to thrive in the world. He may consider his life “whole.” At the same time, the “whole” father absent boy might logically conclude that the father and men more broadly, are superfluous, dispensable, and unnecessary, as indeed was the case in his childhood. Then, growing up, he is forced into a bind: either he himself is superfluous and unnecessary like the role of men in his childhood or his childhood was built on a deeply flawed proposition. A participant described his experience thusly, “I won’t necessarily say that I want to be [closer to the father’s side of the family] because earlier I never really wanted for anything. So it’s not like I was...the paternal side of the family is a great thing to have, but if you haven’t had it I guess, I put that in my mind so much that I began to believe it. So I wouldn’t say that I miss having them. I just take it for what it is” (Interview #8). In this quote, we hear the participant describing the confusing experience of simultaneously having a complete and incomplete family. When the son feels the world is complete without men, he is put into a troubling bind about locating his own place in the world. Perhaps this embodies Lacan’s the curious remark “man cannot aim at being whole” (Lacan, 1958/2006).

In short, the mother’s path is fraught with difficulty. All ways of approaching the father have risky potentialities. The mother can be very forthright with the son about his father and unintentionally the son feels guilty, deprived, and responsible for the father’s leaving. The mother can withhold unpleasant information about the father, and unintentionally the son finds the mother secretive and resents her restraint. What is at stake, moreover, is not just the father image, but the son’s self-image insofar as he identifies himself with his father. The son may take in negative information about the father and assume that the same applies to himself. Or, the son

deprived of information about the father will struggle to locate himself among his peers in the male role.

Displacement onto symbolic fathers

Fathers have many functions and are charged with many responsibilities. These functions are fluid and embedded in culture. From the Judeo-Christian model of “God the Father,” to the film *The Godfather*, western culture is replete with examples which bind the concepts of father and authority. Freud was transfixed by the matching roles of fathers and other symbolic realms of authority. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud wrote, “We know that in the mass of mankind there is a powerful need for an authority who can be admired, before whom one bows down, by whom one is ruled and perhaps even ill-treated. We have learnt from the psychology of individual men what the origin is of this need of the masses. It is a longing for the father felt by everyone from his childhood onwards, for the same father whom the hero of legend boasts he has overcome.” (Freud, 1939/1964, p. 109). The participants provided examples which reaffirms, and offers new angles on, this relationship between father and authority.

Given that fathers are often models of authority, I wondered whether the absence of “paternal authority” would reveal itself in the interviews with participants. What I found was that the search for father image in these men could also be seen as a parallel journey to discover just authority in their lives. The following section will open with a brief explication of the connection between fathers and authority and then offer three stories from the participants to illustrate how authority functioned in these father absent men and their respective searches for father, just authority, and meaning in life. The three examples will go thusly: (1) How a stepfather can fill the father/authority vacuum, (2) an erratic narcissistic father’s relationship to cults, and (3) the function of “state” authority in an orphaned boy.

People in society expect fathers to serve as models for rules and discipline (Hamer, 1997). When the participants talked about the role of the father, frequently authority was referenced: fathers are for “loving and administering discipline” (Interview #7); a step-father created “a very structured environment” (Interview #7); fathers establish “the rules” (Interview #3); fathers provide “the stability...of your income, and security, because every kid needs security” (Interview #6); fathers are admired, “as the coach, as the one who was directing things and calling the shots” (Interview #5); a father figure is “the protector” (Interview #1); finally a participant spoke of his future children: “they’ll take heed to what I’m trying to instill in them” (Interview #8).

We ask fathers to initiate children into a set of cultural rules and larger systems of authority. When fathers are chronically inconsistent, violent, or altogether absent, the example they set will influence how sons perceive the wider world. Paternal figures shape their sons’ engagement in systems of authority -- religion, courts, government, and police. More to the point, men crave and long for the safety and stability of a father when they do not have one. One interviewee remembers going to his father’s grave and saying “I wish you were here to tell me what lies ahead in life” (Interview #7). In an attempt to manage the longing, to fill the void, men displace feelings elsewhere, to varied results. With some losses there is an intentional search to fill the father vacuum with other available males in the boy’s life. One participant talked about his godfather who “you might say very deliberately, seriously, took on in the years after my dad’s death to kind of be that father-figure for me. To sort of pick up where they left off with my dad, in terms of even things like fishing, my dad was a fisherman, my uncle J---- would take me fishing” (Interview #5). Sometimes feelings are transferred onto other actual men. Other times

feelings are displaced on symbolic representations of fathers. To further explain, we will turn to three participant narratives.

This first example follows Reggie, an African-American man who grew up in the civil rights era Midwest. He grew up in a small town which, as Reggie remembers it, somehow bypassed the racial hostility and antagonism, encircling similar towns across the heartland. When Reggie's mother became pregnant with him, she was secreted away to another town because his father was already married to another woman. Reggie's birth was seen as a "blemish on quote-unquote 'clean livin'" (Interview #7). Consequently, Reggie and his mother were shunned and rendered invisible by his father and everyone else in the family. Reggie never really asked about his father "because at that era you were taught to not ask questions. You were to be seen and not heard. And just accept things as they were said..." (Interview #7)

About his biological father, Reggie said, "I could tell you all...everything I know about my father in 25 words or less" (Interview #7). I asked Reggie what those 25 words were and he said, "Well, he played the saxophone. He was very musical. Like I said before, he had an affinity for blondes. He like to...he was a lady's man so to speak. And, the cause of death was...they say the Ku Klux Klan ran him off the road and killed him. And that's the extent of what I know about my father" (Interview #7). Reggie remembers dozing through the funeral. He remembers a vaguely transgressive feeling that he was not supposed to be there, and this is the only clear memory he has of his father.

When Reggie was 11, his mother met a man and they got married. Reggie was ecstatic. From the moment his step-father entered the home, Reggie's life took on a new and dramatically improved course. Reggie talks adoringly of his step-father. He is described as reliable and fair in all his dealings, including as a parent. Reggie on how the arc of his life changed: "Well, we went

from...living off public assistance to having a man who could actually provide for us. We went from bein' poor to being middle class. You know, we went from living in a rental house to living in a house that she bought. You know, all of a sudden we were wearing new clothes instead of hand me downs...Um, also he brought into the house some stability because there were two parents" (Interview #7). Of the stability, Reggie offered, "And you knew dad would always be there because that's just what S----- was. He'd go to work and he'd come home. You know, and he'd sit in the same reclining chair every evening, you know he'd read the paper, and have dinner at 7 o'clock every night. You know, and he had to have grape Kool-Aid with his dinner every night" (Interview #7).

Indeed, from the start, Reggie began calling this man "Daddy." And so he was. Reggie's step-father became, for all intents and purposes, Reggie's father--emotionally, financially, and in name also. With the additional financial support, Reggie's stepfather made it possible for his mother to be around more too. So, in a sense, Reggie got the gift of a father and a mother at the same time. According to Reggie, he and all of his siblings went on to lead stable lives and maintain successful long-term relationships. Reggie reports, "we don't have a lot of those wounds that are commonly associated with growing up without a parent in the home. Because S----- came along and was the salve to those wounds" (Interview #7).

This is a wonderful and happy story, and happier still because it offers us some clues about father-image. One aspect that bears some consideration is why Reggie so readily and openly embraced his step-father and began calling him Daddy without hesitation? Why was his step-father taken in as a "just authority"? It seems as if nearly all the "father feelings" were seamlessly transferred over to this new person. As in: "I don't really spend much time

contemplating what he [biological father] was like. You know, my love and allegiance is with my step-father” (Interview #7). Why?

First, Reggie’s ties to his biological father were extremely tenuous. As Reggie describes, “to this day I don’t have a picture of my biological father” (Interview #7). Reggie had literally no image of his father, and the space for father was largely empty for Reggie until his step-father entered. In other words, when his step-father appeared, there was no competition, no sense of “I must maintain an allegiance to my *real* father” since there was no association of any kind. As Reggie said, “You know we don’t call him step-dad. We call him dad. You know that’s just the way it is. Cuz, in our minds, he is dad. He’s the only father we’ve ever really known” (Interview #7).

Second, not only was Reggie’s father absent from the start, but he was also deceased when Reggie’s mother married his step-father. In other words, Reggie would never have the opportunity to get to know his biological father. He was not in a position to hold out hope that one day his biological father would emerge and reenter his life, as is the case for some men.

Third, Reggie’s step-father is clearly a special man who embodies an abundance of traits men look for in a father figure--warmth, stability, regularity, and fairness. Reggie’s step-father was embraced so wholeheartedly, in part, because he was the type of man people are drawn to. Part of the embrace is due to the exceptional characteristics of the stepfather. Reggie: “You know, just very consistent. Very fair. And just, you know, I always say if I can be half the man he is I’ll be tickled to death” (Interview #7).

Fourth, notably, Reggie’s step-father was willing and ready to embrace Reggie as a son. That is to say, in order for a non-biological father and son to become such, and for that arrangement to flourish, there has to be a mutual agreement on terms. Reggie wanted his

stepfather to be simply Daddy. And his step-father willingly embraced the role. Reggie offered, “Even his own biological daughter got no more than the rest of us. You know he was always showing an even playing field” (Interview #7).

Fifth, in the preceding examples we find that the transfer of feelings onto the stepfather was nearly complete, yet not total. After the interview with Reggie, Reggie called back to say he suddenly remembered something: “Um, yesterday when we were talking you asked me if I ever thought much about my biological father, and at the time, I said no, but after about an hour it dawned on me that as a young man I would go to the cemetery. And stand over his grave and talk to him...I would always just swing in. I would spend a few minutes just communicating with dad” (Interview #7). Such an experience suggests that even for a figure who is largely unknown, there was still a psychic place held for his biological father that never disappeared. The pilgrimage to the father’s gravesite might also suggest embody a kind of non-verbal connectedness between fathers and sons, the continued longing for father to provide direction, and the need to project father into the future and preserve his place as lodestar.

As Freud suggested, this example captures Reggie’s longing for authority. This example also tells us that when there is no father from the start, some men eagerly anticipate an authority to materialize, and then transfer feelings that would have gone to the biological father, directly onto this new object, as soon as he appears. For the above reasons, this filling of the father vacuum occurred in a particularly seamless fashion for Reggie.

This next example follows Elijah. Elijah is a middle-aged man from a large East Coast city. Elijah describes his father’s family as “Very much European, Jews coming over from the shtetl...You know she [Elijah’s grandmother] just had to run a tight ship, and she did” (Interview #2). According to family lore, Elijah’s paternal grandmother pushed Elijah’s father to get

married because marriage was assumed to be a route out of the war. Not long after the marriage was consummated, however, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and “after December 7th, 1941 everybody went. So it didn’t really matter” (Interview #2). Elijah’s father, Levi, returned alive, but with a fragile constitution. By this time, Elijah was born and Levi moved the family down South, believing the sun would have a restorative effect. Levi’s health bounced back, and lured by the prospect of taking over the family business, moved the family back north, to their city of origin. Levi did indeed take over the family business, a hot dog joint his mother established to carry the family through the depression. As Elijah remarked, “During the depression...everybody wanted hot dogs, your cheap product. I mean you could feed your kids for a couple bucks. You know...hot dogs!” (Interview #2)

Where the business thrived, the family withered. Levi was a hopeless, if charismatic, alcoholic. Levi spent much of his time away from the family, and what time he was around, he is described as too self-absorbed to do anything resembling fatherhood. Elijah described the atmosphere of the home: “You know the slogan wherever you go there you are? But, let’s say you walk through the world, but you walk among them, not of them. And that slogan is a very true slogan. When you walk...you know the entire stream of my life growing up with Levi, I walked among him but was not of him. And so, when you go through a certain life, you think that is what life is. When you have parents...it’s just the way they are. And they keep saying “Well, this is life” (Interview #2). In this quote, Elijah communicates a sense of profound alienation from his family, but this alienation was made to feel routinized, normal and inescapable.

The marriage was never a close one. Elijah offered, “It wasn’t much after the wedding to my mother that he wasn’t available to her” (Interview #2). Nevertheless, they stayed married

until Elijah was 16, when Levi announced that he and Elijah's mother would be divorcing. After Elijah's pained protest, the parents prolonged the marriage for another year, but divorce was imminent, and was finalized when Elijah was 17. At this time, Elijah describes feeling both alone and confused about how to live his life. Without anything really to hold onto, Elijah decided to hitch a ride with a friend who was moving west in search of a new life. To Elijah, this seemed as good an idea as any, so he tagged along.

After about eight months out west, Elijah returned to the East Coast. He would make this trip back and forth periodically over the next few years. Elijah tried working for his father. He even entertained the possibility of himself taking over the family business, as his father had from his mother. But, Elijah's hopes were dashed. Elijah came to believe that his father would never entrust him with the business: "Well after that summer I realized that I wasn't going to be able to take it over because he was a selfish sonofabitch and you know, the kind of person I was, I needed to be brought in. I couldn't get in by fighting my way in...Everything was a struggle, a fight" (Interview #2). Levi was only concerned with Levi, and Elijah would have to figure things out for himself. Unfortunately, things were not so easy for Elijah. Elijah struggled to find an identity, a way of life.

Then, just as quickly as his friend proposing the cross-country move, Elijah was swept into a movement, a community with a utopian vision, with "a lot of socialist leanings" (Interview #2). These people became his new family and new home. Looking back, Elijah realizes he was in a cult. At the time, however, these were people who provided some meaning in his life. They were a group of people that took care of him, gave him some skills. Unfortunately, things did not stay so positive. A major tragedy shook the group. The group fractured and dissolved in a whirl of controversy. Seven years had transpired, and again, Elijah was on his own. He was without

home, without community, without direction. Despite the passage of time, Elijah was still a scared young man, no closer in his search for life direction: “So, when the whole thing fell apart I just didn’t, I just went back exactly to how I was 7 years before” (Interview #2).

In the years that followed, Elijah had many life experiences, he got married and divorced. He dabbled in many trades. He even went back to school in middle age. Elijah: “I really bounced around” (Interview #2). All the while, he struggled with direction. Elijah felt he had the tools, the skills to make a real contribution to the world, but something was holding him back. If only someone had given him the right opportunity, he could have really been somebody. This is his regret. In Elijah’s view, his father had everything to do with his joining the cult, with his persistent struggles.

First, Elijah was constantly craving for his father to pull him in. Elijah wanted connection, to be shown the ropes, shown how to make a go of things. Instead, Levi repeatedly turned a blind eye to Elijah’s pleas for help, for guidance. Elijah reports “and I still got to go back to the original father that it all came back because of no acknowledgement of what I really knew how to do” (Interview #2). Indeed, this craving for someone to tell Elijah the right path, a way forward, continued all the way into adulthood. Elijah struggled in finding his own path, in part, because he was always searching for someone to point him in the right direction, for someone to say “Let’s drag this guy in” (Interview #2). Another fellow is described as saying, “And this guy, like, I swear, he just took me by the hand and he said ‘Do this, do this, do this, or this’ And I did, did, did, did, did. It got me out of my problems” (Interview #2). Elijah: “Meanwhile, I was kind of growing up, I kept going back to Levi cuz your shtick is about fathers, absent fathers and so, nobody was there growing up. I couldn’t make something out of myself cuz I didn’t know which one to become. Which Elijah” (Interview #2). To the

psychoanalytic reader, one might conceptualize Elijah's plight in developmental terms: "During rapprochement, the child experiences the pain of separation from the mother and from safety. Yet, that safety also represents a regressive pull back into helplessness" (Ott, 1997, p. 38-39). In other words, the absence of an available third, Elijah had no one to serve as "model and facilitator of the romance with the world" (Osman, 2009, p. 768).

Second, even a cursory glance at how a cult functions can give us some clues as to why it would be so appealing for Elijah. A cult provides all the things Elijah was seeking. Growing up, Elijah felt "I didn't grow up with anything except strangers. So, Levi was the chief stranger" (Interview #2). In contrast, the cult pulled him in, made him feel a part of something. They gave him a chance, an opportunity. For Elijah, who always felt like a stranger, to belong was a much sought after, and highly elusive quest. By his own description, the church leaders helped him develop skills and become a productive member in their group.

Third, while the cult provided things that Elijah felt were missing in his life, there were also important similarities to Elijah's home life. Elijah paints an eerie parallel between the personality type of the cult leader and his father. Both, Elijah reports, were startlingly charismatic, narcissistic leaders. Elijah reports: "Levi's shtick and J's shtick [cult leader], they were interchangeable. They really were doing the same thing. You know, different way and all that, but the kind of people they were. You know, "I'm the greatest thing since sliced cheese." I'm the greatest thing since sliced cheese. You all just listen to me." And for me, since I didn't really have much owning who I was, well I met two men who were the greatest thing since sliced cheese, I guess you just go along with the sliced cheese movement" (Interview #2).

Unlike Reggie, Elijah knew of his biological father, but his father was emotionally withdrawn, inconsistent, and hated. From the start, Elijah felt alienated and rejected by his father.

Elijah had a model of male authority, but one that was deeply disappointing. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Elijah seems to have resigned himself to the belief that all authority would be like his father (“When you go through life, you think ‘Well this is what life is’...”) and so Elijah repeatedly found himself replicating the model of authority which had its foundation with his father. Elijah’s search for just authority led him directly back to incarnations of his unjust father.

The final story we will explore in this section follows Matthew. Matthew is a European American man who grew up in a blue collar town at the edge of a large metropolitan area on the East Coast. By his description, Matthew’s father was a mild-mannered, hard-working man, not unlike the man Matthew grew up to be. Matthew only knows this from second- and third-hand sources, however, because his father died when Matthew was just 4. At the time, Matthew had a vague awareness of his father’s death, but mostly remembers a pervasive sense of confusion. While his father’s death had a hazy, unclear feeling at first, the magnitude of his father’s death steadily built over time until it had an undeniable presence. Indeed, Matthew slowly realized that his mother was unraveling before his very eyes. His father’s death was made manifest in the unmistakable changes that were going on inside his mother, and how his mother’s changes affected him. Matthew: “It was devastating to my mother. As I got a little bit older, I didn’t realize it back then, but looking back, and then remembering how things were, I could see how devastating it was to her” (Interview #6).

Looking back, Matthew reasons that his mother simply “had very little interest in carrying on, I guess is what it comes to” (Interview #6). For as far back as he could recall, Matthew’s mother had a seizure disorder. Occasionally, she would have an episode, but mostly her symptoms were managed. After her husband died, however, Matthew’s mother stopped

regularly taking her medications. Matthew reports: “She just didn’t give a damn about whether she did or didn’t” (Interview #6). The seizures returned with greater force. Slowly other aspects of their lives unraveled. The house fell into disarray. Matthew went to school in tattered clothes that that he had far outgrown, clothes that were the ridicule of his schoolmates.

Without the father’s income to support them, Matthew’s mother took in a boarder who, in time, also became her lover. Matthew was at first heartened by this development: “Early on there was respect. He was an electrician and that caught my interest. I wanted to be accepted by him and it seemed interesting what he was doing” (Interview #6). But, soon it became clear to Matthew that “I was an undesirable element in the relationship. And he was pretty tough on me. I grew to hate him pretty thoroughly” (Interview #6). Matthew was also treated differently from this man’s children from previous relationships “You know one of the small examples of that that I can think of was one time at the ice cream stand, they all got what they were looking for, some kind of special sundae, or whatever it may have been, and you know, I wanted that, but I remember, “No, no, all you get is this.” What was so poignant was his oldest daughter at the time...she picked up on it and pointed it out to me. Initially, I didn’t think too much about it. It was just another episode, but she kind of stood up to her father about how unfair it was, and it didn’t make any difference, and that’s when I kind of noticed “Yeah, I guess it is unfair” (Interview #6).

Matthew would not have to suffer long with this step-father, however, because tragedy struck again. Matthew’s mother had a terrible seizure one day, and died. Matthew was nine.

Now parentless, and with few extended relatives, Matthew had the choice to move in with his aunt and uncle out of state or stay in town and live with family friends. Matthew,

reluctant to be uprooted from the community he knew, and his friends, moved to a nearby home and lived with friends of his parents, who he called aunt and uncle.

Life with these people was pleasant. It was fine. Matthew had enough to eat and he now had older “siblings,” college-aged girls, to look up to. Still, the environment did not quite feel like home. “I could never bring myself to call them mother or father. I don’t even know if we ever had that conversation” (Interview #6). Slowly, it became clearer to Matthew the difference between what parents were and the role these people were playing in his life. Matthew offered a story: “One of the things that sometimes comes to mind that illustrated the distance in the relationship I guess you would put it, I can remember I’m going to say I was ten years old, I could have been 11, but I was leaving for a church summer camp...It was a very big deal leading up to that, and the day arrives and the minister shows up to the house with a couple other kids and he’s gonna take us all to this camp and I remember heading out the door to go with him, to get into the car, and he says “Well, why don’t you kiss your aunt goodbye,” and it was one of those things that, hell. I never even thought that (laughing) It’s like “Yeah, I guess. Well, fine.” You know? ... Again, a typical mother wouldn’t let you get out the door without grabbing you, hugging you” (Interview #6).

He also realized that his guardians kept receipts for everything they purchased. When he realized that the state was reimbursing his aunt and uncle for his care, he felt a sinking sense of disappointment. Matthew: “And then you finally realize, “Well gee whiz, a parent takes care of the expense of their own kind and here the state has been paying for me and not the people I wanted to be my parents. So, that’s another one of those let downs, I guess is how to describe it” (Interview #6).

Matthew also realized that the way he was punished differently than other children he knew. When Matthew misbehaved, he was reminded time and again that all his aunt had to do was place a phone call and he would be shipped away. The state would take possession of him. For Matthew, this was a very real and terrifying threat: “That was always hanging over my head...that was usually just a few inches away” (Interview #6). Matthew felt that this instability ate away at his childhood, his desire to play and live unencumbered by the looming threat of removal.

From this example, we can make several observations. First, the loss of the father heavily contributed to the loss of his mother. Losing his father, then losing his mother, contributed to the eradication of father image because his mother, possessor of information about the father was, initially after the father’s death, incapacitated, and then herself gone and unable to provide credible information about the father, “I had really no true thorough recollection of him” (Interview #6) personally or by description.

Second, we find the state playing a kind of stand in for the father. Matthew’s guardians export critical roles of parenting to the distant authority of the state. Most specifically, the state functions as disciplinarian and as provider. What results is a hybrid parenting system wherein the people who take care of him are not his parents, but neither is the state which also performs some of the parenting responsibilities.

Third, when we consider why the aunt and uncle do not function as parents, one is led to the concept of unconditionally. The fact that his aunt and uncle’s introduce the possibility of terminating their contract as caregivers, in a way, invalidates their claim to parenthood, since the inability to dissolve one’s claim to children is a central factor in being a parent. Matthew: “You

know, certainly a typical parent wouldn't say "If you misbehave you're going to an orphanage and, uh, you might go to your room or you might be grounded for two weeks..." (Interview #6)

Fourth, when we consider the state, the state performs a service, but cannot reasonably be considered a parent either. Indeed, provider and disciplinarian are two primary roles principally ascribed to the father, but calling the state a father leaves us unsatisfied. Perhaps the reason for the discomfort with this title is that a father is a credible authority when he is a provider and a disciplinarian, but he performs these functions out of a sense of love. It is love that binds the father to these roles. The state performs these functions out of a sense of fidelity to the laws as established by its people, in other words, out of obligation, not love.

Father mirroring experiences and the development of self

On balance, study participants tend to deemphasize the verbal interplay with their fathers. What memories are preserved, tend to be father and son in action, having tactile experiences, in a mutual pursuit of some kind. Over and over, we find the father literally inaugurating the son into the tasks of the world. This matches Lemche and Stockler's assessment that "the father's role in the family is that of mediator of outward-oriented, explorative, and expansive tendencies" (2002, p. 142). The father pulls the son into the world, out of the home, outside of the mother's orbit. The father instructs son about how to build things, how to work with tools, how to play games, and play sports. The father demonstrates how to do a particular task in the world. The son closely observes and mimics the father's practiced gestures. As such, many of the father images, memories of the father are of mirroring experiences. The following section will attempt to fulfill two objectives (1) offer clear examples of what father-mirroring experiences look like and what they offer, and (2) describe what happens with the process of father-mirroring is interrupted, or was never established.

Repeatedly in the interviews, the participants balked at questions such as “What would your father say?” It became increasingly clear that men remembered and valued the actions that their fathers demonstrated much more so than the actual words spoken between them. As one interviewee described: “You’ve got to have integrity. Your child is going to mirror what they see you do. And a lot of times parents operate from the base of “Do as I say, not as I do” Well, that’s not going to fly” (Interview #7).

The lack of verbal connectedness between fathers and sons might relate, in some way, to the societal injunction that men be stoical, rational, and unemotional beings. That is not to say that fathers are always these things, but as described by the participants, the emotional expression is of a very particular variety, and it has an oblique quality. To this concept, one participant offered, “the way men empathize, and the way men express emotion can be so dramatically different than from the way women do it. I don’t think that one is better than the other. Just different. We just need exposure to both” (Interview #3). As in, “We used to go horseback riding down the beach. Which was nice, but no real communication. You know you’re driving for hours with the guy and it’s just silent. And he’s singing. He’s a good piano player so he’d play the piano and sing” (Interview #2). Another example of non-verbal relating can be found in this example of an interviewee talking about the time he spent with his father after reconnecting after many years of separation, “I have a printing company...Once a week we could come visit me. I’d see his Caddy pull up and I’d go out and meet him and come in. Wasn’t anything he could do. He’d just hang out Frank. He would just sit at the light table. He’d ask me questions. He was bored obviously, but just being in that presence was enough” (Interview #1).

Love was more likely to be communicated through the transmission of skills, in the preparation for an independent life, than in the verbal expression of love. The following are a

few examples. The first illustration of father-mirroring comes from a participant who lost his father to cancer during latency (Interview #5). In fact, there are two images that that are offered that bear consideration. The first example is one of his only memories of his father. He remembers being a small child, maybe four or five years old. He remembers going outside in the yard with his father, who was outside to mow the lawn. He remembers his father walking the lawn, mowing row by row. He also remembers that he himself was fashioned with a small boy's toy lawnmower. In this small example all of the qualities of a father-mirroring experience are represented. The father and boy engaged in an active, physical pursuit which pulls the child outside of the house, separating the boy from the presence of the mother. What also stands out in this example is the literal mirroring of the fathers movements. The boy is literally retracing the father's steps. He is, if unconsciously, practicing to become "daddy" one day.

The second example from this case occurs after the father has passed away. This interviewee learned from his mother that his father was a talented musician, guitarist, who played and listened to music from the 1960s. As the participant grew older, he learned to play the piano, and then the guitar. He too developed an interest for the same type music and began learning the same type songs his father was interested in. Again, we find the pattern repeated: physical activity wherein the son attempts to master a skill possessed by the father. One can even imagine the father and son playing the same song, their fingers playing the same notes. Again there is a repetitious quality of following the father's motions, moving fingers in the same practiced way his father once did. He offered: "Again, I didn't necessarily realize that when I first myself started dabbling in music, but as it progressed along I realized that it was something I was sharing with him and it was expressing itself" (Interview #5).

The next father mirroring example comes from a participant who grew up across the country from his father (Interview #3). The participant lived out west and the father was in the northeast. Indeed the son did not learn of his father's identity until early adolescence and then they established a correspondence and planned a meeting. On the first trip, the interviewee took to see his father on the East Coast he was astonished by one fact: they had exactly the same shoes. Never having met one another, the participant was perplexed how they could have chosen the exact same footwear. He turned the idea over and over in his mind wondering what this meant about their relationship, whether it meant they shared the same value set on a deep and fundamental level. Again we return to the idea of physicality, movement, and the retracing of the steps of the father. He offered: "To me it's something so simple as buying a pair of shoes, and yet, when I think of buying a pair of shoes, to me there is so much that goes into it. There's taste. There's personal sense of style. Personal sense of fashion. There's also functionality. Do you want the shoes to be comfortable in a social setting as well as go hiking in? Or do you need two different pairs of shoes for those sorts of things? Does he care about all these things, or does he just like the shoes?" (Interview #3) In these questions, the son is asking: do I walk like my father? Have we trod the same ground?

Keeping with the shoe imagery, another example that surfaced was from a participant whose father was a champion runner and track coach (Interview #4). The participant lived with his mother and father until the father was discovered to have been leading a double life. The father promptly vacated the home, and became largely absent to the participant. While he was around, the father was remembered as voluble, but temperamental, and as a hard-driving competitor. The participant describes a father who was intent on training his son to be a great runner, of Olympic quality. When the father left, the participant gave up running, admitting that

he was most interested in running because he wanted to make his father proud. The participant did, however, return to running as a young adult. Slowly, he started running for fun. Currently, he is training to do an annual half-marathon race which winds through the streets of the large city in which he lives. Indeed, the participant remembers that his father ran this same race every year until he relocated to the south. In this example too, the participant went out in the world and literally retraced the father's footsteps.

Given the abundance of examples of father mirroring experiences, the significance of these memories is notable. The son feels that there is something to be gained in practicing the father's gestures. I offer several possible explanations, all of which might offer a partial angle on the son's motivations: (1) The son feels that following the father's steps will lead him closer to his own intended life path, (2) since so many fathers are not demonstrative in their love, mirroring is a way for men to achieve otherwise unattainable closeness with the father, (3) in the case of father death, mirroring is a way to preserve the father's life, a continuation of his spirit, (4) mirroring the father is a route toward skill acquisition and the development of real world experience, and (5) mirroring the father as a way to develop an identification with the same-gender parent, to learn how to walk, talk, and move like a man in the world.

In addition to mirroring experiences, the participants also reveal what happens when the mirroring experiences cease. As will soon be described, an absence of mirroring experiences can be revealed in the experience of lack. In other words, in the same way that we can observe mirroring experiences between fathers and sons, we can observe what was not mirrored though that which was not mastered, the things not experienced by men. There is a "presence" in the absence of skills, comfort, and ease in various aspects of life. There is a mirroring of the father *void*. When the father is gone, there is a grieving the things not seen, not learned, from the

father. In the interviews, men hungered for two main things that they felt they lacked: (1) knowing how to be a parent, and (2) knowing how to be in relationships.

The first example shows that when fathers are absent, sons do not have the opportunity to observe how fathers parent their children. Lack of mirroring their own fathers, many of the men interviewed reported anxiety, confusion, and fear at the prospect of becoming a father themselves. Men reported challenges with all aspects of parenting children: from being physically present, to administering punishment, to showing affection. A participant offered some of his thoughts by recounting a conversation that he had with his wife, “I don’t know how to be a dad. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, when I’m supposed to do it. I’m scared to death about having children. You know, they don’t have a manual that says how to be a dad” (Interview #1). Another participant described the challenges he has faced being tender with his children, “I was a father who really didn’t know how to show love. And as I look back on this now you kind of kick yourself in the butt for not realizing it. But I was never really shown how to love as a kid, so I don’t know how to show love myself” (Interview #9). Another participant talked specifically about disciplining his children, “So, maybe I’m missing the strength to know what to do in those times because I didn’t see it maybe” (Interview #10).

The second example is connected to the parental relationship. When the father is absent, the son lacks the opportunity to see relationships function from a male point of view, to see his father showing loving affection to his mother, to see his parents resolve disputes, cooperate and share household responsibilities, among other innumerable relational features that are picked up naturally from the children of intact families. The participants talked about how this lack of seeing their father showing love to their mother served as an obstacle in their own lives. Men felt at a loss, at a disadvantage, in how it was that a man was supposed to treat the person he

loved. As one participant reflected, “So I think cuz of the relationship that I...or lack thereof that I had with him kind of affected me in my dealings with women because I haven’t settled down in my 31 years, yet. So I really think that’s the only similarity that he and I have” (Interview #8). A participant offered this flash of insight: “So one time I had them over [his mother and father], cooked them a meal, and we’re at a little table, three of us sitting there. And they’re engaged. And they’re constantly talking. And I’m watching this. And I haven’t even picked up my fork, and mom goes, “Joey, eat, munch, munch.” And the funny thing was they were talking in Italian, which is amazing. And my mother goes “Joey, munch, eat, munch, eat. Skinny.” And I’m like, “I can’t eat.” And she’s like “Why” And I said “Look at you two.” I’m watching my mother and father Frank, engage, on a intimate level, eye to eye, that I had never seen, to the likes I’d never seen. In my house. And I was just letting it all in. I was so present for that moment that I didn’t want to do anything to disturb it, so I just watched” (Interview #1). I asked Joey what was so special about this moment and he replied “Because I had never seen that before. It was the first time in my life I had seen that, and I was in my thirties” (Interview #1). This participant went on to say that if his father had been around more, had been a more ideal father, “I may have been able to see how he treated my mom in a loving way, so that I could do that” (Interview #1).

While these two examples were the two most apparent lacks observed in the participants, it is clear that the other participants felt distress in other ways still. As mentioned above, the lack of mirroring experiences manifested in psychic distress in adulthood due to a sense of lack of mastery and competency in two features of adult life. In the final part of this section, however, we will dwell for a moment on the felt experience of the child not having a father to mirror. Without having a father in the home, men felt one resounding thing: difference. Men described this feeling in a variety of ways, but all emphasized that they felt apart from their peers. As in

this snapshot from a participant: “I never played on these little league teams or anything like that, just the sandlot baseball. And that was one of those things that I didn’t think about until later on. It just seemed like it was for other kids and not me” (Interview #6).

These men felt out of place, like strangers, outsiders, or misfits. The sense of difference and lack of connection often translated to a lack of a sense of purpose or direction. One participant offered, “I never really had any direction. Or any stability. I struggled in high school with grades. Not because I was dumb, but because I didn’t care.” (Interview #9) Another participant reported that his, “sense of family, it doesn’t really do anything for me. It doesn’t make me feel warm and fuzzy. It doesn’t make me feel like I belong. Sometimes it’s more like a thing I have to do” (Interview #3).

Perhaps, the clearest expression of difference can be observed in its inverse, in the wave of relief that comes over one of the participants when he discovers he will finally have a father-figure: “I remember the day our mom left to get married and looking at my brother and saying...sorry it’s very emotional, ‘We’re finally going to have a daddy.’ And for me, at that time, that was so important. You know, cuz I was entering early adolescence, and I needed to have that male figure around me. Yeah sure I had the scout leaders, the guys at church, and the teachers I had at school...to have a person you call your Daddy, was to me, I would say, a source of pride. It makes you feel normal” (Interview #7).

Summary

Each of these themes offers a different look into the creation and meaning of father image for father absent men. First, mothers have considerable power over the creation of father image because she is most often in a position to decide when, how, and how much the son directly sees and hears about the father. How the mother navigates discussions about the father will influence

not only what the son learns about his father, but it will also influence the father/mother relationship, the father/son relationship, the mother/son relationship, and the boy's attitudes about men, authority, and himself. Second, the father absent men described, from an early age, an authority vacuum. Without actual fathers around, men displaced "father feelings" elsewhere onto symbolic fathers. The interaction between the biological father and symbolic father proved to have an enormous bearing on the men's experience of the world. Third, what men most remember about their fathers are "father-mirroring experiences." These images take on a distinct shape and offer clues about how these boys might engage the world as their own world expands outward. Men were affected by what they were not able to mirror from their fathers, or what their father's modeled ineffectively or inconsistently. A participant summarized this concept, "There's two ways of learning. You can learn what not to do, or learn what to do. Or hybrid your own" (Interview #1).

CHAPTER V

Discussion

In this section, I will apply existing psychoanalytic research to the participants' stories. I will follow the structure of the findings section and address each of the themes in turn.

Specifically, this section will address: (1) how Greenson's concept of 'dis-identifying with the mother' and Ehrensaft's work on 'whole-representations' relate to the mother's position in father image, (2) how Freud's use of displacement relates to displacement in the participants, and (3) how Green's concept of the negative relates to father-mirroring experiences.

Mother as architect, Greenson, and Ehrensaft

Father image in father absent men is heavily influenced by information gleaned about the father from the mother. Psychoanalytic theory offers some additional psychological explanations as to why this might be, explanations which match the findings as described by the participants. Though psychoanalytic theory sheds light, it also obscures. In this section, I will attempt to explain how the findings and psychoanalytic theory mutually reinforce each other, a conclusion that was developed from the participants.

Greenson writes that nearly without exception, the first identification for a baby is with the mother (1968). Greenson contends that boys will continue identifying with the mother unless and until they are pulled out of the mother's orbit. One participant explained, "You know I think there was no doubt I had more of the female influence early on. I think most men do, you know, early on with their mothers" (Interview #6). Having a strong bond with the maternal figure is not a bad thing, in fact it is vital, but preserving the maternal identification to the exclusion of other identifications, staying in the comfort and safety of the maternal bond, may impede the boy's path toward establishing his own identity.

The degree to which mothers play an outsized role in the creation of father image for the participants is *itself* evidence, perhaps, of the degree to which mothers persisted as the primary object of identification for the participants. There is evidence of maternal identification in the participants' descriptions of their mothers, as in "my mom was the mom of moms. I mean, she was so...she was like a fire-plug...she spoiled me, but loved so unconditionally, to everybody, that's where I got what I have" (Interview #1). This quote highlights the sweeping reach of the mother, the mother as taking on a mythically large role. Another participant recollected, "I distinctly remember her being there constantly for me, so I never was wanting for anything" (Interview #5). In this example too, mother is total for the child. The lack of space between some participants and their mothers fits what Burgner describes regarding the incest taboo "which becomes alarmingly tenuous for boys whose fathers are absent and who are left alone, or largely alone, with their mothers" (1985, p. 311). Participants also displayed maternal identification in the relationships they formed in life. One participant offers, "As I look back on it now, I'm closer and more comfortable around females than I am around males, even today" (Interview #9). Another participant described, "I'm a pretty laid back. I'm not overly aggressive. So, my feelings probably are softer, I guess. I'm kind of emotional like that" (Interview #10).

In these examples, we observe qualities of maternal identification that predominated throughout the lifetime. To be clear, this is not to say that men should not have "soft" qualities, or that men who identify exclusively with their mothers necessarily will have feminine traits. Rather this would only be a problem insofar as, "initiative-taking or other assertive behavior would be inhibited or be accompanied by guilt, shame, or the expectation of punishment" (Shill, 1981, p. 264). Another participant developed in a different direction: "so to be raised by someone who is a nurturer, you kind of see...you kind of empathize more, and I

guess if my father was around more I would have had that balance. Not being so empathetic and letting emotion drive my decisions and my interactions...I was not someone who wanted to be that type of person, so I think I went to the other extreme” (Interview #8). In this description of lack of balance, one hears another note sounded by Shill: “Paternal deprived male child patients often exhibit counterphobic aggressiveness” (1985, p. 264) as opposed to the optimal situation: “unconflicted self-assertiveness and behavior” (1985, p. 264).

According to Greenson, the most readily available way for the boy to form an additional identification is through the father. The father, both literally and symbolically, models action and an alternative way of being. It is crucial, Greenson contends, and that the mother “be willing to allow the boy to identify with the father figure” (Greenson, 1968, p. 373). Fatherly modeling is particularly important for boys because the father, in the best case, serves as a model for male behavior, for what the boy can be when he grows up. By extension, Greenson argues that boys learn healthy self-images through the opportunities to develop identifications with men, such as the father.

Greenson’s concept is essentially a refined, less erotic, elaboration of Freud’s discussion of the Oedipus complex. Freud describes baby boys as literally entwined with their mothers, joined at the breast. Boys long for this love relationship to persist in perpetuity, and yet, if boys get their wish, it becomes incestuous, enmeshed, and taboo. Therefore, it is the responsibility of some outside force, typically the father, to intercede. The father prevents the son from establishing an unhealthily entwined relationship with his mother. Freud writes:

“At a very early age the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother’s breast and is the prototype of an object-choice on the anaclitic model; the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time

these two relationships proceed side by side until the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them" (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 31).

Therefore the boy's relationship to the father is both connected to identification, "You ought to be like this" (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 34) and prohibition, "You may not be like this--that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative" (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 34). At this point, the father introduces "castration anxiety," wherein the boy fears his father's authority, fears he will lose his masculine power as represented by the phallus, and the boy eventually gives up his desire to possess his mother. These two currents, identification and prohibition, free the boy to channel his desire elsewhere in adulthood, out in the wider world.

Both Freud and Greenson present a fairly straightforward path toward establishment of healthy identifications, provided the boy has access to an available, decent father. It is less clear, however, how this can be accomplished when the father is absent. The participants presented two options: (1) develop additional identifications through other available figures, and (2) develop an additional identification through the created image of the father.

To a greater or lesser extent, the paternal identification can be filled by other figures in the boy's life. Since the boy cannot leave his mother into the embrace of the father, the boy must take a leap into the unknown or be otherwise pulled into the world by some other figure. Of his step-father, one participant explained, "Here was this new guy disrupting the relationship I had with my mom. Also, the rules were different. I had a bedtime suddenly" (Interview #3). In this case, we find the stepfather introducing rules, structure, and disrupting the union between mother and son, a role classically ascribed to the biological father. Another participant talked about being pulled into work with his uncle, "You know I was the kid hauling the lumber, sweeping

the floor, and uh, I did learn, from him and some of that was the not the warm kind of loving, I guess is how you'd describe it, more the stern kind of learning. So, it was probably an appropriate change to have more of a male influence at that point in time, 11, 12 years old" (Interview #6). Another participant talks about how his brother provided an additional identification, "I tell ya. He was the patriarch. Still is the patriarch of the family...you know I had my big brother there. I was going to be protected" (Interview #1).

Another the way for father absent men to develop additional identifications is through the father image, which is heavily dependent on how the mother portrays the biological father. Muller writes, "For thousands of years before the use of DNA testing, paternity of was a function of what Lacan called "The Name-of-the-Father," that is, the father as named by the mother, and therefore an object of belief; the father's name was held in mind as an object of belief in the mother's speech" (2008). In the concept of the *Name-of-the-Father*, the mother literally names the father; she inaugurates the father through the words she speaks.

The biological father is a profound symbol, perhaps the most important symbol, of maleness and masculinity for the boy. The way the boy hears about the father will influence his beliefs about men, his beliefs about himself, the personality that he is likely to develop, and what his interests will be. As one participant reported, "having experienced what I experienced with the loss of my father, and sort of what my mother has shared with me [about my father]...in those years after my dad's death, that definitely has shaped the path I've taken I'd say" (Interview #5). Another participant described, "The reason I grew up playing soccer was because my mother did not, I mean, I look just like him so when she look[ed] at me she saw him. I think she didn't allow me to play football, it would have been...she didn't want me to get hurt, that it would have

reminded her too much of my father to see me out there a football player playing football”
(Interview #8).

In both examples we see how a discourse about the father influenced actions and beliefs among the participants. In the latter example, we find the mother comparing qualities of the father with the son, the mother being concerned that the son would turn into father. Since son and father are genetically related, these comparisons are to some extent inevitable, but it underscores how a discourse of the biological father is sometimes to be interpreted by the son from the position of: “How does this apply to me?” A third participant described how it was important for him to learn models of maleness: “children and especially adolescents need to be exposed to the fact that there is no specific stereotype about what it means to be a man...[in] my own experience as a male, I think adolescent males need to be exposed to the fact that men have to be flexible, they have to be versatile, and they have to be able to express emotion...”

(Interview #3)

Another way of framing the process of creating new identifications is in the possibility of the boy establishing independence from the mother, *through* the mother. The way the mother approaches the father’s absence can prove instrumental in facilitating the boy’s psychic development. In the way the mother talks about the father, in the way she talks about men, in the way she forms relationships and imagines other men in her life, she can create space for the boy to grow. Green captures this spirit in this poetic passage, “The matter at issue, and the one of utmost importance, is whether the actual partners in a relationship are only those physically present, or whether an absent party can play a role by virtue of being present in the mind of another member of the relationship” (Green, 2004, p. 101). Beyond the mother’s internal

representations of maleness the mother can also promote the third by genuinely admiring her boy as he does boyish things (Greenson, 1968).

When the mother creates a rich, full, father image for the boy, the son is, paradoxically, relying on his mother in order to successfully separate from her. The degree to which the mother accomplishes this function will influence the speed and ease with which the boy can accomplish developmental tasks and mature. The mother not only needs to love and nurture the child, but also needs to impose limits on her role, surrendering her possession of him, so the boy has room to form additional identifications, space to develop his maleness. One mother was able to hold psychic space for the father, despite his absence: “She always made sure that I recognized that even though we don’t have a relationship, he’s still my father and he should be respected” (Interview #8). Another participant described his mother going out of her way to bring her son to his father’s funeral, against the wishes of the paternal side of the family, “I do remember my mother telling me that I had to be just very quiet because she was taking me someplace that she thought I needed to be, but somebody didn’t want me” (Interview #7). This mother understood how this event could be important for her son to have at least a glimpse of his father, something to remember his father by. In both of these examples, the mother is actively carving out psychic space for the father, for the boy to observe and internalize thoughts about father and men.

Father absent boys, like all children, want to know about their origins. By extension, father absent children have an inborn curiosity about their fathers. They have a craving to learn about him, to know him, to seek his approval, and to win his affection. When I asked a participant why he sought out his father, he replied, “I think it was curiosity, it was really curiosity...here is this guy out there who’s responsible for my birth and I know nothing about him. And things sort of unfolded from there” (Interview #3). I asked another participant if he

was curious about his father growing up, “Certainly, yeah. Especially of course as I got older, it was easy to begin to think about, well, what impact would his personality and his mannerisms have had on me so that it of course made me wonder how he was, of course, and how that would have affected me” (Interview #6). I asked another participant the same question: “Oh, to this day I want to know more” (Interview #7). In psychoanalytic terms, one might frame this discussion in terms of fascination with the primal scene. Children are fascinated and repelled by the parental sex act which reveals answers about their origins and their place in the family system. Without information about his father, the boy’s origins are shrouded in mystery. When children are about to formulate “whole representations” (Ehrensaft, 2000) about their parents, they are more easily able to situate themselves in the world, which might be connected to a sense of rootedness or belonging in the world. This might shed some light on the themes of difference, exclusion, and alterity that the participants reported.

Ehrensaft (2000) explains that to the degree to which children are frustrated in their attempts to learn about their creation, they will spontaneously and creatively generate stories from their imagination. They generate their own answers. One participant has an early memory of his father in which he rationalizes his father’s absence by imbuing him with special, almost magical properties. I asked him what he admired about his father and he replied, “The name, and the image of, he wasn’t there and when he came, there was dad! Like a bright-eyed bushy-tailed little kid. You know, I’d always heard about him. I’d hear about him, then all of a sudden there he is! It’s like Santa Claus. The minute, the first time you see Santa Claus. Like, uhh! There he is. He’s like really there” (Interview #1). This participant likened his father to Santa Claus, a much contemplated figure among children, who is adored, mythical, and largely hidden from

view, to explain his father's role in his life. This participant was able to transform a difficult situation, his father's absence, into a more acceptable, if fantastic, situation.

In most of these cases we find the mother largely in a position to guide the type of representation the father absent boy has of his father. The various stances the mother takes regarding the father will influence the depth of understanding the boy has about his father and the relative mystery he has about his origins. The mother also has a stake in the openness with which the boy is exposed to other objects of identification. How the boy is exposed to men, and to his father, in image and in person, will deeply influence his life.

Displacement in Freud and the participants

Formal observations of men displacing father feelings onto symbolic or substitute father figures traces as far back as Freud, who wrote about the phenomenon roughly one hundred years ago. As Freud offers of the search for God, "this god-creator is undisguisedly called 'father'. Psycho-analysis infers that he really is the father, with all the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child. A religious man pictures the creation of the universe just as he pictures his own origin" (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 163). This section will look into Freud's use of displacement with regard to fathers to help contextualize the findings and explain what the participants add that provides contour to Freud's innovative conclusions.

Freud was particularly interested in fathers because, in his eyes, they functioned as templates for moral authority and civilization (1939/1964). Freud believed that children introject ways of thinking and behaving from their parents and this forms the basis of the superego. When the son has internalized parental authority, he has a conscience--the moral voice transmitted from outside, which later resides inside the child's mind, whether the authority is present or not. Freud offered, "The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and

there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis” (1924/1961, p. 176). With the rules of the world basically established for the child, the child feels safe. The child feels that the world is basically good and predictable. The problem is, however, the father cannot protect the child from the scale of problems in the world, the random suffering, the injustices.

Freud thought that when people are confronted with the workings of the world, they are often struck by their impotence and inadequacy in the face of overwhelmingly large and powerful forces that govern human action, and people begin to feel small and weak and scared. We need something to soothe us and make us feel safe again. Thus, we look to religion for reassurance. The longing for father’s benevolent authority is transferred onto God, a personified father-figure. In Freud’s words:

“When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever [sic], that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers to the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection” (1927/1961, p. 24).

Freud’s model is fascinating as it is explanatory, but there is one problem: it presupposes a basically good and available father. First there is father, then there is God. For Freud, at the start of a boy’s life, he has a father providing safety and predictability about the world, and as he grows up, he seeks continuity, a force that will offer a continuation of this worldview. As Freud wrote, “For this situation is nothing new. It has an infantile prototype, of which it is in fact only the continuation. For once before one has found oneself in a similar state of helplessness: as a

small child, in relation to one's parents" (1927/1961, p. 17). But, as evidenced by the men interviewed, there is not always a stable, predictable, law-dispensing father from the beginning. There is not always a predictable position of authority from the start. The world is not always seen as basically good. Laws and rules are not always clearly established.

The three case examples: Reggie, Elijah, and Matthew offer different perspectives about what happens when there is not a clearly demarcated paternal authority from the beginning. The following pages will draw out what it looks like for a boy who grew up without a stable, reliable, paternal authority figure.

What Reggie offers is an illustration of the sense of profound longing that men feel when deprived of a male figure growing up. James Herzog (2014) has coined the wonderfully incisive phrase "father hunger" to describe what Reggie was feeling – the sense of loss and longing for a paternal figure. What we find is that when Reggie's stepfather enters his life, there is a profound relief. Reggie can suddenly relax because he knows that he will be better taken care of. Reggie's life progresses with greater structure and greater predictability, which has a containing and therapeutic effect on him. Reggie feels his life, once topsy-turvy, is suddenly recalibrated, suddenly thrown into balance, and made safer.

Where Reggie's search for paternal authority is accomplished with the introduction of the step-father, Elijah's search is more frustrated. With Elijah, we find the same sense of deprivation. Elijah communicates a sense of strangeness and alterity, attributable to the lack of connection with his parents, particularly his father, an absent and unpredictable alcoholic. Elijah simply cannot find any guidance from his parents. Without the sense of containment and modeling that Reggie found in his step-father, Elijah wanders aimlessly in search for the just

authority he did not find in childhood. Elijah wanders west, and returns. Elijah is swept into a cult, and follows, for seven years, the lead of that mystical clan.

Into adulthood, we find Elijah turning to a parade of others to give his life meaning, to point him in the right direction. Elijah is continually searching for a good father, and is continually frustrated. Instead, Elijah ends up discovering people who are incarnations of his erratic and narcissistic father. For Freud, surplus anxiety, beyond what could be contained by the father in childhood, gets projected onto the figure of God, but in Elijah we see something much more dramatic and global. Much of his being is consumed by the search for a good father. Elijah's protracted detour into the cult is one such example, a search for a profound force of order in the world that would guide his life. We also observe what Freud called the repetition compulsion in Elijah's unconscious return to the chaotic father: "the subject appears to have a passive experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality" (Freud, 1922/1955, p. 22). Elijah's preoccupation with the search for authority, someone to point his way, eclipsed his own confidence in his ability to seek and find meaning himself.

Finally, in Matthew, we see a kind of reversal of Freud's use of displacement in *The Future of an Illusion*. In it, God is a kind of stand in for the father. The feelings of the father are transferred upward, and God, the symbolic authority, is a kind of double of the father, existing in the cosmos. For Matthew, there is no paternal authority from age four onwards. Instead, the state, the symbolic authority, descends from its distant reaches, and steps in to become an actual father. In Freud, symbolic authority is an extension of the father. In Matthew, the father is an extension of the symbolic authority. Freud does, in a way, address the interaction between actual and symbolic father in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud offers this oracular statement: "The dead now

became stronger than the living had been, even as we observe it now in the destinies of men. What the fathers' presence had formerly prevented, they themselves now prevented in the psychic situation of 'subsequent obedience' " (Freud, 1913/1955, p. 236). What Freud is communicating, and what we see in Matthew, is the influence of symbolic authority, of laws and culture, which provide structure whether father is present or not.

Father-mirroring and Green's "the negative"

This discussion of father-mirroring is indebted to Green's concept of "the negative." Green uses "the negative" to describe trapped, empty psychic space, entombed feelings. Green argues that this empty space, when it exists from the beginning, as in a case of father absence, is unchangeable because the space is full. The space is full, however, only insofar as it is full of emptiness. The emptiness can only be preserved and mirrored with more emptiness. Green contends that a "bad thing has to be there, and if it is not, it is this absence equated with void and emptiness that becomes real, more real than the existing objects that are around" (Green, 1999, p. 210).

Whereas father mirroring experiences might comprise the "positive" father image, the "negative" father image is precisely what participants talked about when describing how they knew they were father absent. As one participant described his position towards his paternal relatives, "I think I have a mental block...if you haven't had it I guess, I put that in my mind so much that I began to believe it" (Interview #8). The space for paternal relations was filled with blank space, and so could not be filled. Or, this participant, "When it comes to my extended family, often times it can feel like something which I just have to do...Which I don't think is true of many people. But, when I think about it in terms of my own trajectory, it feels out of place, or dirty, I'm not quite sure how to describe it" (Interview #3).

The men also talked about great areas of challenge in their lives. Participants emphasized that the difficulties they faced frequently felt connected to experiences they never watched in their father. In particular men described confusion and challenges regarding how to be a father and how to love a partner. In other words, the men mirrored the emptiness of father absence, eluding situations which eluded them in youth. These men lacked the experience of seeing a father and lacked the experience of seeing paternal affection shown toward the mother. These men preserved these lacks in their minds which returned as nagging, if partially unconscious, unease in those areas.

When men overcame the resistance to love and to father, a portion of the lack, the empty space, was crystalized and transmitted down, a kind of intergenerational transmission of the negative. This exists in many forms in the interviews. Men who were not shown love as children had trouble showing love to their children. Men whose fathers were not around at all have trouble being physically present for their children. One participant described how he worked extra jobs, “I was a long time basketball and football official. And then my job has been in the corrections field, took me out a lot. I was gone away from home a lot. It was a convenient avocation for me, cuz it kept me away from home a lot, if you know what I mean. I didn’t have to deal with all that kid raising stuff” (Interview #9). Another participant talked about the replication of lack of stability, “Probably, my lack of a stable family has been a motivation that I wanted a stable family, no doubt about that. I feel that that has been the base of it all, which is probably why my first attempt at it didn’t work” (Interview #6).

For the participants, the projects of loving and fathering are filled with discomfort because of general unfamiliarity, but also possibly because they emphasize and wink at the deprivations of their childhoods, which are uncomfortable to confront. Another possible way of

looking at the recreation of lack, of absence, is that for men who grew up without fathers, the only way for them to identify, to establish a connection with their father, is by identifying with the father's absence. By becoming emotionally or physically distant parents, the men may unconsciously learn about their father by learning how he may have felt as an absent father.

Another particularly salient example of the negative is the role of addiction, particularly alcohol, which functions as a manifestation of the void. One of the great draws of alcohol is that it succeeds in wiping the mind of its unpleasant contents. Alcohol creates blank space. For father absent men, the alcohol, then, re-creates the blankness; it mirrors the void of father absence. On another level, alcohol contributes the transmission of blank space, insofar as one's dedication to the addiction creates the conditions for men to then become absent fathers themselves. Alcohol becomes total. Thus, addicts create both blank space in their minds, and erase their own role with their children by virtue of their own physical absence. As one participant offered, "There was always that elephant in the room that he's drinking and often times when he did show up he'd been drinking. You know so, awkward. Just being around him when he's under the influence. Not a real in-depth father son conversation. It was just real superficial." (Interview #9) Another participant described his father as "an alcoholic, an extreme one" who "by God, made sure he did everything wrong. Between relationships and not having a...family. He just ignored my family. He ignored me" (Interview #2).

Emptiness has its own force and form. Emptiness is not neutral. The "black out" represents the inertia of negative father mirroring. The pull for the father absent man to be himself father absent, to pass onward his void.

Implications for social work

These findings are clinically valuable because they capture something phenomenologically about the experience of father absent men: what they value, what they struggle with, what they remember, and what they longed for in a father. Father absence is quickly becoming the norm, rather than the exception, particularly for patients of social workers, who often work with people with targeted identities. Invisible fatherhood, fathers who are deceased, incarcerated, narcotized, unknown, or otherwise unavailable are a major feature of communities crisscrossing America.

Not only is the concept of father image important for clinicians to have awareness of father absence, but it is also important for clinicians to have a sense of how father absent men respond to their situations, and what can be done to work through the suffering that has been accumulated, and often suppressed, regarding the father's absence.

The following are a list of a few observations that might be relevant to a clinician treating a father absent man, (1) Men are curious about their origins. Even if the man never met his father, he is likely to wonder about what this person contributed genetically, why he left, what his family was like, and whether he is still alive. (2) Father absent men have clear and meaningful memories of what the father provided. Even if the father was only around sporadically, what little is remembered may be of strong significance, an anchor to an important, if tenuous, bond. Men often remember how their father interacted in the world, how the father forged a path for himself. Men are attentive to this path and cherish the attempts fathers make to show their sons how to make their own stamp on the world. (3) Some men transfer the preponderance of feelings about father onto another person, several people, or other symbolic fathers. Refractions of the father are found in legal bodies, state apparatus, older brothers,

godfathers, friends' fathers, and mothers' minds. It can be therapeutically valuable to follow where feelings about the father went, whether there were other people or systems that carried paternal responsibilities. (4) One should not assume that a man who grew up without a father feels any one particular way about this person. He might be idealized or devalued or he might seem blurry. (5) Father images are an important way father absent men learn about maleness. Paying attention to what a man heard about his father, from whom, will offer a sense of his internalized attitudes about men and his self-representations. (6) Absence is meaningful and can be meaningfully measured. If a man was unable to mirror important aspects of living from his father, he may carry discomfort in tackling similar situations in his own life. When men describe what they wished they had the chance to observe but did not, they may be offering clues as to these areas of present discomfort. Projective questions of this nature may be a way to delicately address problematic areas, highlighting what could merit further investigation.

The participants described several scenarios in which the paternal function is replaced by state agencies. Social workers are likely to be employed by some such agencies. It is crucial that social workers are aware how their agency is functioning regarding the roles of father. Core attitudes proliferating in agencies may influence actual interactions between fathers and sons. Social workers in agencies, in family courts, in the legal system, must be mindful not to disincentivize father/son interactions, in an attempt to justify their own role within a family. The attitudes that prevail in these settings could unwittingly reproduce father absence. One participant described his disquieting interactions with the child custody system: "Justice is blind, but justice also have flesh and bones" (Interview #7).

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

In a play on Winnicott, Green wrote, “There is no such thing as a mother-infant relationship. I intend this statement, of course, as a reminder of the role of the father” (2004, p. 101). The father is always there, even when he is not. There is space for father that cannot be collapsed. Men who grew up without available fathers, hungered for information about their fathers, sought out supplemental and symbolic fathers, and longed for a containing, paternal presence when no one stepped in to fill the void. Men struggled to recreate the triangular structure of their origins, by engaging with other men or systems that modeled the just authority of a father. Memories of father/son interactions were often vivid, active, mimetic expressions of love through the transmission of skills, the joy of common pursuit. What men lacked in terms of father-mirroring, often besieged these men as they grew older. The lack of mirroring resurfaced as sticking points, nagging reminders of the missing father. And yet, across the board, men tried to use the challenges of their childhood to provide something better, something more for the next generation: “There’s little doubt in my mind that in my strongest most, conscious moment, I have tried to avoid the downfalls that I felt as a child. At my weak moments, I am probably guilty of them. You know when you’re at the best of your game you can be aware of what you’re doing” (Interview #6).

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APPENDIX A



School for Social Work

Smith College

Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 1, 2014

Frank Tisano

Dear Frank,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jennifer Willett, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B



Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

.....

In the Space of the Father
Investigator(s): Frank Tisano, SSW, 443-691-3568

.....

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study about father absence.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are an adult male who resided elsewhere than your father for at least one year during childhood.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to learn about how men create father images when they grew up father absent.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: agree to participate in one interview for approximately one hour in duration.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has the following risks: participants will be asked to describe an experience (father absence) which may be difficult to recount. Likelihood of risk is low to moderate. Questions are open-ended and, therefore, adaptable to the level of depth participant feels comfortable addressing.
- The interviewer will mitigate risk by: (1) assessing for discomfort, (2) checking in with participant, offering to take a break, and/or offering to skip a question should discomfort arise, (3) making available a list of area psychotherapy referrals upon request.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation are: (1) opportunity to release mental energy – since men face societal pressure not to talk about personal experiences and father absent men might confront family

pressure not to discuss a particularly charged figure, and (2) gaining insight by making connections between family experience and personal identity.

- The benefits to social work/society are: (1) knowing how father absent men generate father images will help clinicians treat father absent men, (2) this project will draw attention to father absence as a vital area of investigation and an increasingly normative social pattern, as well as one disproportionately experienced by men with targeted identities.

Confidentiality

- Your participation will be kept confidential. Interviews will be conducted in a confidential space – a counseling room at the Philadelphia Consultation Center. Outside of counseling rooms are sound cancelling machines to protect privacy of conversation. In addition, the records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. After the interview is recorded, the audio file will be transferred onto a zip drive, which will be stored in a secure cabinet at the Philadelphia Consultation Center. Each Interview will be assigned a corresponding number. A master list with participant names and contact information will be kept in the same cabinet. The audio file will be transcribed into a password-protected Google document with the names removed and replaced by the assigned number. After each of the transcripts is coded, the material will be de-identified. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation. Complementary beverage available upon request.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by 6/1/15. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Frank Tisano at ftisano@smith.edu or by telephone at 443-691-3568. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study.

.....

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

.....

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____