

# **Males Raised by Emotionally Absent Mothers: All Nature No Nurture**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this research pertains to males who were raised by emotionally absent mothers and their perception of women during adulthood. This aspect of research has been omitted from the school of sociology. However, existing research on children from single parent families has focused on children raised in absent father families and the predicted emotional and psychological developmental outcomes of children, yet there has not been a study that has analyzed the children of these families as adults. This paper analyzes a sample of participants obtained from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 79 (NLSY79) Child/ Young Adults (1986-2006) Survey (United States Department of Labor [U.S. DOL], 2008). Specifically this paper looks at two subsample variables, the Family Attitude Scale (2002) and the Home Emotional Support Scale (1986). Using a linear regressions test, this study indicated that being raised by an emotionally absent mother has implications on adult males' perception of women. Findings show greater emotional support being associated with more egalitarian views of women in society and conclude that males' perception of their childhood relationship with their mothers affects their relationships with women in adulthood.

## **Introduction**

The number of single parent families in the United States has been increasing in recent years. A single parent family is considered to be a family where one parent, mother or father, is the sole caretaker of the children. In studies involving single parent homes, it is common that the father is the parent who leaves the home and abandons his family. As a result, many studies produced have been primarily concerned with the single mother's experiences and the experiences of her children (Accock

& Demo, 1988; Ellis et al., 2003; Wu, 1996). Specifically, these studies have looked at how being raised in a single-mother household effects the sociological and psychological well-being of children. Many of the negative outcomes found in these children range from low performance in school, overuse of alcohol and drugs, and being at risk of early teen pregnancy (Ellis et al., 2003; Wu, 1996). Children raised in single-father homes do not differ much from children raised in single-mother homes. The only major differences were in educational attainment and in externalizing behaviors. Studies show that adolescent females from single-mother homes tend to perform better than adolescent males in school. Furthermore, adolescent males from single-father homes were at a higher risk of exhibiting external behavioral problems than adolescent females being raised in single-father homes (Breivik & Olweus, 2006).

Breivik and Olweus (2006) found that when a couple with children goes through a divorce it is usually the mother who gains custody of the children involved. If the father should gain custody of the children, "it is more likely the result of a problematic family environment (for example, ex-spouse has serious emotional problems or there is a high inter-parental conflict) than when a mother gains custody" (2006, p. 20). Biblarz and Stacey (2010) support this finding in their article "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter." The mother in this scenario may have been an emotionally absent mother.

An emotionally absent mother, in my study, is defined as a mother who is physically present in her child's life but is neglectful by not providing the emotional support and attention that the child needs. The focus of this study will be males who were raised by an emotionally absent mother and their development of a subordinate view of women in adulthood. For the purpose of this study, having a subordinate view of women includes having difficulty forming lasting interpersonal relationships with women, seeing women's roles to be of lower and insignificant status and generally having a patriarchal outlook.

Today there are many variations of family structures found in the United States. The most common family structures are two-parent family, the step-parent(s) family, and the single-parent family. When individuals hear the term single parent family, it is usually the biological mother who is thought of. But studies show that single-parent fathers do

exist. Furthermore, single-parent fathers face similar issues as single-parent mothers. The only difference is there is not a lot of available assistance for single-parent fathers because that form of a family is uncommon.

### **Literature Review**

*Single-Parent Families.* Being a single father is a concept which is not widely accepted and at times a single-father household is viewed as an improper family environment. Social support groups and welfare systems are not readily available for single fathers, making their transition of becoming a single parent difficult and stressful (Tumaliuan, 2004). Deleon (2008) describes his experiences of being a single father in his paper “Challenging the Gender Role: Personal Narrative of a Single Father.” Realizing that the United States social welfare system is built specifically to cater to females, Deleon found it difficult to receive the support system he needed. Social support systems include family, friends, employment benefits, and community support. These are necessary in order for single fathers to enjoy a better quality of life, which ultimately benefits them and their children (Tumaliuan, 2004). In studies of divorced men who retain custody of their children, men report feeling like oddities within their community. Richards and Schmiede (1993) support this claim by concluding that women are traditionally seen as the involved or committed parent—not the father. The reason for the lack of social systems for single fathers is because males tend to have a distinct financial and career advantage that single mothers do not (Richards & Schmiede, 1993). Though single fathers have reported to be financially stable, the question of whether or not they can provide for their children emotionally is debated.

Studies state that although single fathers feel that it is time-consuming and exhausting, it is achievable to raise children as a single parent. Because of the inherent social expectancy that a child needs care, single fathers respond accordingly. This expectancy brings out the mothering side of a male that is at times indistinguishable from mothers (Risman, 1987). In contradiction to the study listed above, there are others who found that fathers are not capable of successfully raising children. Breivik and Olweus (2006) found children raised in single-

father families are at higher risk of exhibiting external behavioral problems (e.g., antisocial behavior and substance abuse). This finding can be contributed to a father's lack of involvement in his child's life. Other studies report that "the single parent father is viewed as a threat and is also labeled less capable of caring for his children" (R. Smith & C. Smith, 1981, p. 416). The majority of single fathers agree that providing a child's basic emotional needs is the one area that they find to be most challenging (R. Smith & C. Smith, 1981; Cui, Conger, Bryant, & Elder 2002). When it comes to meeting a child's basic emotional needs, a study by Gilbert, Hanson and Davis (1982) reported 82% of parents agreed that meeting a child's basic emotional needs is a major responsibility.

*Parental Roles.* During early childhood to adolescence, the combination of the roles displayed by the mother and father in child rearing is essential to the overall development of children. Fathers teach their children instrumental behaviors (e.g., independence, cognitive thinking and assertiveness), and mothers teach their children interpersonal behaviors (e.g., manners, politeness and courtesy). Parents rear their children in what they feel are traditional roles that a child should be displaying in society. In single-father families the traditional roles are still enforced. In a study that examined if a child's gender plays a role in defining who will be assigned which chores, findings showed most single fathers took gender into consideration: sons were assigned outdoor chores, while daughters were assigned household chores (Greif, 1985).

The gender of the child and the gender of the parent play a significant role in determining how parents raise their child. In a study that observes the different parenting styles between women and men, researchers found parents display "more punitive and less rewarding with same-sexed children" (Power and Shanks, 1988, p. 214). In other words, parents were more rewarding to opposite-sexed children. Furthermore, there are studies which enforce the finding that parents and their same-sex children have a stronger correlation in the quality of their relationship in comparison to their opposite-sex children (Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002).

The emotional support children receive from their parents, especially the mother, has been proven to have a significant impact on the child's

overall development. Children who are raised with maternal emotional support had a higher quality of life and better psychological and social relationships in comparison to their counterparts. A study supports that the relationship between a parent and his/her child influences the child's relationship with his/her peers/friends (Cui et al., 2002). Emotional support within itself is not the only factor that foresees how a child will interact with others during adulthood. A combination of emotional support and a moderate degree of control from both parents is proven to be associated with children's psychological and social adjustment. Furthermore, these findings show that a child needs the emotional support and discipline of both parents in order to have good adult relationships. In single-father families both male and female children are deprived of the emotional care that is traditionally provided by the children's mother.

*Children Raised in Single Parent Families.* Studies that involve children from divorced or single-parent families are at a higher risk of experiencing internal and external behavioral problems than do children being raised by both parents. Richards and Schmiede (1993) found that children raised in a divorced single-parent household are more likely to develop into adults earlier. This is because children in single-parent families take on more responsibility than their counterparts (Richards & Schmiede, 1993). Sorce and Emde (1981) conclude that an infant's behavior is affected by the amount of availability (attention) their mother gives them. Infants whose mother gave them attention while playing were more adventurous and were willing to explore their surroundings and interact with others who were present in the room. Infants whose mother ignored them were not adventurous; they stayed relatively close to their mother and were not interacting with the other individuals in the room.

### **Methodology**

Analyzing a longitudinal data set, I analyzed the answers to several surveys which were filled out by members of the cohort. The data came from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth79, Child/Young Adult Survey (U.S. DOL, 2008). Participants from the cohort were chosen to

be in my study if they fulfilled certain set criteria, which will be discussed later in this paper. I chose to analyze the cohort from the NLSY79 Child/Young Adult Survey (1986-2008) (U.S. DOL, 2008) because the participants were asked to give their opinions on surveys that are relevant to this current study.

By using exploratory analysis and scatter plots, I determined which variables would be the best predictors of the study. Exploratory analysis assists in choosing how to interpret the data and its findings. Scatter plots seeks for an existing relationship between a pair of variables. To prove that a relationship exists between two variables, the points on the graph must be grouped into a linear pattern. By looking at the linear regression of the line, one can explain the findings from the graph.

Linear regression is used to analyze the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Based on the direction the pattern is going, escalating or deescalating, is how the findings of the variables can be concluded. If the pattern is escalating, it can be interpreted as the greater X becomes, the greater Y will be. If it is deescalating, it can be interpreted as, the greater X becomes, the smaller Y will be.

## **Procedures**

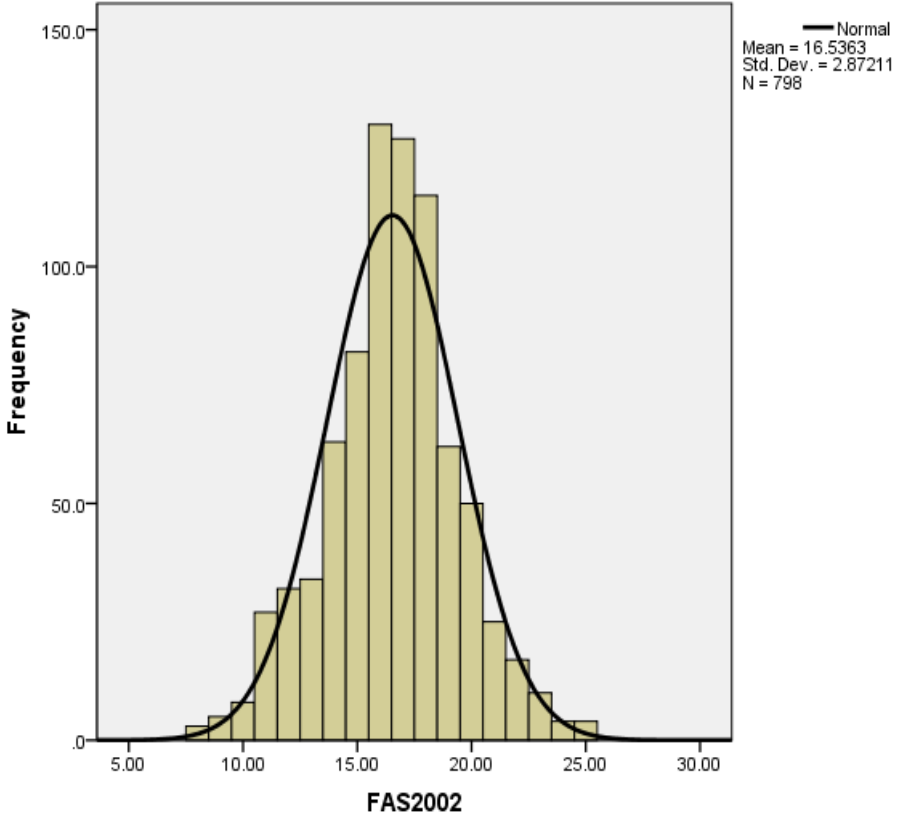
Looking at the NLSY79 Child/Young Adult Survey (U.S. DOL, 2008) I chose which participants were to be selected for this study and which variables best represent my study. The NLSY79 Child/Young Adult cohort was originally 11,300 participants, after eliminating those that did not fit into the set criteria, the sample came out to be 798 participants (N=798). The set criteria that the participants had to meet were: male, 14 years or age or older in the year 2002, and must have completed the 2002 “Family Attitudes” survey. In addition to these characteristics, a subsample of participants who are currently living with or were raised by both biological parents are included in the study. Reason for choosing these characteristics is based on the demographic traits my study examines: adult males, raised by their mothers and the participants must have a set disposition towards women. Following the selection of the participants, I chose the variables which best describes the question of the study.

The independent variable was the Home Emotional Support 1986, this measured the amount of emotional support the participant received during the year 1986 (this survey was filled out by the mothers/caregivers of the participants); it was around this time that the majority of the participants would have been infants. The dependent variable is the Family Attitudes scale of 2002; this scale measures how the participants' perceptions of what women's current roles should be in the year 2002. This scale was chosen based on the results of a frequency test, which resulted in a histogram (see chart.1). The histogram came out to show a bell-shaped curve that concludes that the participants who answered the questions to this scale were a good predictor for my study and that the opinions they gave have a higher probability of occurring in real life than those in extreme cases. In addition to these two variables, I also used two control variables along with my independent and dependent variables.

The two control variables tested with these measurements were 1) birth order of respondents, 2) age of mother at birth of respondent. Price (2006) showed that parents spent more time with the oldest child when comparing the time parents spent with the second-born child. Furthermore, he concludes "that the first-born child gets about 37% more quality time with his or her father and 28% more time with his or her mother than the second-born child" (p. 16). This study looks at age of mother because a young mother may be ill prepared to adequately raise a baby.

A bivariate correlation coefficient test was used to find an existing relationship between Home Emotional Support 1986 scale (independent variable) and Family Attitude Scale 2002 (dependent variable). A correlation coefficient test was used to find a "numerical index that reflects the relationship between two variables" (Salkind, 2000, p. 389).

**Chart 1: Histogram showing a bell-shaped curve for the Family Attitude Scale of 2002**



**Findings**

Using SPSS to conduct the analysis, I tested the independent variable and the dependent variable to see if there was any statistical significance by running a bivariate correlations test. In the NLSY79 Child/Young Adult cohort (U.S. DOL, 2008), there was a significant difference between the Emotional Support 1986 scale and the Views of Women 2002 scale. This finding indicates that males' childhood perception of how much emotional support they received from their mothers does have an effect on their perception of women, and as such their relationships with



women. The findings from the Sig. (2-tailed) test is on the margins of statistical significance ( $p=.118$ ) (see table 1). Participants who felt they received more emotional support from their mother as children have an egalitarian view of women. Participants who felt they received little to no emotional support from their mother as children have a subordinate view of women. As such, the findings conclude to have failed to reject the null hypothesis. In summary the relationship between a male's perception of the emotional availability of his mother during childhood and his view of women during adulthood is not only due to chance.

***Table 1. Bivariate Correlation of the Family Attitude Scale of 2002 and the Home Emotional Support Scale 1986.***

	<b>Family Attitude Scale (2002)</b>	<b>Home Emotional Support</b>	<b>Age of Mother at Birth</b>	<b>Birth Order</b>
<b>Family Attitude Scale (2002)</b>	1.0			
<b>Home Emotional Support (1986)</b>	-.059	1.0		
<b>Age of Mother at Birth</b>	.124**	.114**	1.0	
<b>Birth Order</b>	.104**	.111**	.400	1.0

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

The strongest correlation that was found came from the control variable Age of Mother at Birth of Respondent by using a linear regression test. After testing to find if the independent and the dependent variables were statistically significant, a linear regression test was used on the independent variable and the control variables to observe if the control variables held any statistical significance. The results showed that the strongest variable that appears to have the highest statistical

significance with the independent variable is the variable Age of Mother at Birth of Respondent ( $B=.097$ ,  $p=.007$ ) (see table 2). Concluding that the best predictor of how a male's perception of women and his relationship with women will be as an adult is based on how old his mother was at the time of his birth.

**Table. 2 Linear Regression Measuring the Independent Variable (Home: Emo. Supp. Percentile Score) and Confounding Factors (Birth Order of Child & Age of Mother at Birth of Child) with Dependent Variable (Family Attitude Scale 2002).**

	Model I	Model II
<b>Home Emotional Support (1986)</b>	-0.005 (.004)	-0.006 (.004)+
<b>Age of Mother at Birth</b>		.166 (.131)
<b>Birth Order</b>		.097 (.036)
<b>Intercept</b>	16.867**	14.662**
<b>R-squared</b>	.003	.023

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

### Limitations

Though the NLSY79 data sets provided excellent raw data that was used to analyze the study, there were limitations within the data collection. The survey is a self-administered survey, limiting the range of participants that would have made for the data of this study to be a better representation of the population. As such, this study relies on the use of secondary data, which allows me only limited test on my hypothesis.

Due to legal, moral, and ethical reasons the study could not forcibly choose for infants to have emotionally absent mothers just for the sake of a social experiment, so the design was a non-experimental design, and as such, it cannot determine causation. Though the study cannot determine causation, the results do reveal that the topic does give insight into an

existing relationship between the dependent and independent variables of the study.

### **Conclusions**

The study shows that a relationship exists between the dependent and independent variables. Albeit the findings prove to be on the margins of statistical significance, they show that with further investigation into the subject, the numbers might prove to be pretentious. While the two main variables proved to be statistically significant, the Age of Mother at Birth of Respondent factor showed to have the greatest statistical significance when comparing the independent variable to the rest of the variables. Proving that even though I failed to reject the null hypothesis, one of the control variables proved to be of greater statistical significance.

For future studies I would distribute my own survey to multiple participants and use probability sampling method to choose the participants so my sample population can be generalized. Furthermore, a future study would be of interest if characteristics such as ethnic background, economic status and educational attainment were taken into account when studying males who were raised by an emotionally absent mother.

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