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research article

The generational shift towards the reciprocal disclosure of intimacy in daughter–father relationships through physical activity in the UK

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Within family sociology during the past 30 years, while a general consensus has developed that most parents and children in the Western world have come to share relationships characterised by a greater degree of intimate disclosure, the extent to which parent–child relationships have become ‘purer’ and more egalitarian remains a contested issue. Although there has been a developing interest in involved fathering through sport and physical activity over the past decade, research has yet to concentrate on the consequences of this transformation for daughters. This article applies Mannheim’s tenet of generation entelechy to life history interviews with 14 women born between 1950 and 1994 to argue that involved fathering through physical activity offers conditions for daughters to realise a long-held desire to establish more emotionally reciprocated intimate bonds with fathers. Daughters described a shift from viewing fathers as emotionally uninvolved workers to becoming interdependent intimates.

Keywords daughters • fathers • generations • intimacy • physical activity

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Introduction

The degree to which parent–child relationships are becoming typified by more democratic and intimate interactions has been widely contested in family sociology for over three decades (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999; Solomon et al, 2002; Vasbø and Hegna, 2023). For the majority of the 20th century in Anglophone countries of the Western world, intimate involvement in the lives of children was expected of mothers, while fathers fulfilled background provider roles in family life (Jamieson, 1998). By the end of the century, ideals of sensitive and involved fatherhood had become widespread but mainly as an addition, rather than an alternative, to the extensive and intensive

time sacrificed by mothers to provide children with emotional support (Jamieson, 1999). Since then, more research has sought to better understand how fathers negotiate the increased diversity of fatherhood expectations and practices (Brannen, 2001; Dermott, 2014; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017; Fletcher, 2020). One area in particular where the contemporary identity of fatherhood has been studied is in the context of sport and physical activity, which have been conceptualised as spaces where intimate fathering is now practised (Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Stefansen et al, 2018; Earley et al, 2019; Fletcher, 2020). While some of these studies acknowledge the influence of contemporary fathering upon father–child relationships, the focus has been on describing and theorising father’s experiences. As sport, physical activity and outdoor play settings are locations long associated with masculine performances and socialisation (Messner, 1990; Earley et al, 2019), the experiences and perspectives of daughters being fathered in connection to such practices are vitally important in terms of the gender norms they become accustomed to during childhood.

This article draws on life history interview data from daughters to argue that a sense of intimate connection has become more reciprocated in daughter–father relationships since the late 1980s in the United Kingdom. The context of physical activity features as a means through which daughters interacted with fathers to establish this bond, as informed by contemporary ideals of involved fatherhood. Prior to the growth of such ideals, daughters carried a desire to share more emotionally intense relationships with fathers, but this was not possible to the same depth or extent as is now the case due to social norms that structured fatherhood as a more detached practice. Mannheim’s (1952) notion of generation entelechy is employed to illustrate how daughters are not simply passive actors but have been waiting to establish a greater sense of reciprocated and open intimacy in their relationships with fathers. Throughout the article, intimacy is recognised not simply as a reciprocal sharing of thoughts and feelings but also ‘really knowing’ a person through being trusted with privileged knowledge about them (Jamieson, 1998:9).

Parent–child intimacies and being fathered through physical activity

In historically conventional circumstances where fathers perform the background role of supplementary contributors to parenting while adhering to the role of family providers (Jamieson, 1998), daughters can be socialised into expecting only superficial support and commitment from men during and beyond childhood (Sharpe, 1994). However, at a time when both the notion of involved fatherhood as an aspirational ideal and intimate disclosures between parents and children are on the rise (Jamieson, 1998; Gabb, 2008; Earley et al, 2019), generational research exploring daughter–father relationships from the perspective of daughters remains a relatively uncharted area. Around 20 years ago in a UK context, it was argued that the mutual disclosure of intimacy between parents and teenage children was problematic for parents to authentically enact, due to the unabating sense of duty to protect their children from adult worries and concerns (Solomon et al, 2002). More recently, research in Norway (Vasbø and Hegna, 2023) reported that authentically reciprocated and shared intimacy has become more commonplace and more comfortably expressed in relationships between parents and their children born in the early 1990s.

The conclusion Vasbø and Hegna (2023) draw of the Norwegian context is informed by Giddens’ (1992) theory that parent–child relationships are becoming ‘pure’, as characterised by mutual reciprocation of communication, emotional sharing and equal

rights. The overall argument is that the desire to feel closely involved in one another's personal lives is now a joint venture entered into by parents and children with motives based solely around mutually enhancing the love, care and openness of the relationship. Giddens' perspective of the purported transformation of intimacy into more pure and egalitarian forms has been challenged for being grounded almost exclusively in therapeutic literature and overlooking the perpetuation of structural gender inequality extensively documented elsewhere (Jamieson, 1999). Moreover, the sweeping changes to intimacy claimed by Giddens (1992) over 30 years ago are outlined without being situated or even described in the context of any underpinning sociological mechanisms. Crucially, while the majority of personal relationships contain pleasurable elements, they are also shaped by practical, economic and social conditions, such as gender norms (Jamieson, 1998). For example, fathers adjusting to and re-creating identities of involved and intimate fatherhood (Brannen, 2001; Dermott, 2014; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017).

With regard to involved fatherhood, physical activity and sport settings appear to be social spaces where many fathers feel most comfortable spending time with their children, and this is supported by studies conducted over the past decade (Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Stefansen et al, 2018; Earley et al, 2019; Fletcher, 2020). In one such UK-based study, Earley et al (2019) proposed that physical activity can be considered an *intimate fathering practice*. Central to this position is that physical activity is a practice through which fathers can perform 'good' parenting and align themselves with contemporary ideals of close involvement with their children. Fundamental to fathers' views that physical activity offers an ideal practice to create intimate bonds with their children is that it can simultaneously function as a method of upholding a masculine identity while performing one-to-one parenting (Earley et al, 2019; Pollock et al, 2020). A complexity for daughters to navigate is that physical activity in the form of sport has long been considered a space that propagates and perpetuates masculine closeness and notions of brotherhood (see Messner, 1990; Evers, 2006). This is reflected in Earley et al's (2019: 226) work, who noted 'minimal discussion of fathers' understandings and doing of physical activity with their daughters' and prioritising sons' physical activity involvement as a 'natural' and necessary element of the 'lad and dad' relationship. However, despite the practical and unequal structuring of power in parent–child relationships (Jamieson, 1999), which meant that fathers' interests in physical activity could have become coercive, children disputed some of their father's beliefs about the benefits of physical activity being self-evident in comparison to more sedentary pastimes (Earley et al, 2019). Nevertheless, as is the case in most studies of fathering through physical activity and sport, the focus is devoted to fathers' experiences, and a parallel body of qualitative knowledge on daughters' experiences of being fathered in such settings does not yet exist. In research where the perspectives of daughters have received some attention, the context of being fathered through physical activity was reported as both empowering and marginalising (Earley et al, 2019; Pollock et al, 2020). Overall, the influence of daughters' agency upon their relationship with fathers in the context of physical activity remains an unexplored but important dimension of this bond, carrying implications for broader gender relations arising from the parent–child norms daughters become accustomed to during childhood.

Generation units and entelechies

Fundamental to Karl Mannheim's (1952) theory of social generations is the concept of a generation unit, which is distinguishable from the biological age cohorts uncritically

labelled as generations in rudimentary public discourse and lay knowledge (Wuthnow, 1976). While members of a biological age cohort may share common experiences due to the historical timing of their birth, it is not the case that all those with shared historical experiences will interpret or act upon their experiences in the same or even similar ways (Mannheim, 1952). Rather, distinctions in how those born within the same epoch work out and ‘work up’ their experiences are the very specificities which come to define the boundaries and nuances of separate generation units (Mannheim, 1952: 304). Although the biological event of birth may predispose an age cohort to potential generational perimeters through the chance location they take up in the historical process, the label of an ‘actual generation’ can only be applied to members of this cohort once they develop and participate, through choice or constraint, in a ‘common destiny’ (Mannheim, 1952: 306–7). According to Mannheim (1952), it is this observable impetus and shift in trajectory away from influential and existing modes of thought, feeling or action among members of an actual generation that constitutes a generation unit.

Mannheim’s work has been primarily utilised to illustrate that a single actual generation may contain separate and multiple generation units (see Simirenko, 1966). Less emphasis has been devoted to making sense of data using Mannheim’s (1952: 310–11) observations about the variable tempo of social change, which encapsulates the empirical character of actual generations and generation units, setting them apart from the misleading but widespread tendency to group age cohorts into predetermined and orderly intervals like ‘generation’ X, Y, Z and Alpha,

Whether a new *generation style* emerges every year, every thirty, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the trigger action of the social and cultural process ... it depends on this group of social and cultural factors whether the impulses of a generation shall achieve a distinctive unity of style, or whether they shall remain latent. The biological fact of the existence of generations merely provides the *possibility* that generation entelechies may emerge at all ... the question which generation locations will realize the potentialities inherent in them, finds its answer at the level of the social and cultural structure – a level regularly skipped by the usual kind of theory which starts from naturalism and then abruptly lands in the most extreme kind of spiritualism.

For Mannheim, generation entelechies represent the potential capacity for social change to be instigated through the aims, character and impulses of a generation, only if provided with the opportunity to be realised by the social currents that come to typify this temporal section of history. In the absence of emerging cultural and social trends to drive the possibility of change among an actual generation, entelechies will remain latent and unfulfilled (Mannheim, 1952). From a Mannheimian (1952: 305) perspective, therefore, the capacity for generation units to work up their experiences through generation entelechies depends upon the existing ‘trend entelechies’ that are foremost and prevalent at the moment in time members of a generation unit attempt to impose their ‘collective strivings’.

Social trend entelechies scaffold various polar tensions between and within generations that can remain latent or be brought into immediate consciousness depending on the interaction with generation units (Mannheim, 1952). In this article,

the social trend at the core of daughters' reflections on their relationships with fathers is that of intimacy. While most family relationships contain an element of intimacy, the degree with which intimacy is fully and authentically reciprocated between children and parents has been a matter of debate (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). Comparing the accounts of daughters born across a 44-year period using Mannheim's generational lens reveals something about the dimension of daughter–father intimacies which seems to be in transformation. Specifically, the article argues that the mechanism driving an increased sense of reciprocated closeness with fathers, as articulated by daughters, is a greater willingness among fathers to *disclose* intimate and privileged knowledge about themselves. Such a shift is bound up with changes to fathering identities, especially the social trend entelechy away from relatively detached and towards more involved forms of fatherhood. The empirical focus of the argument which follows is on the lesser documented perspective of daughters, and a long-standing but only recently realised generation entelechy to develop and establish more intimate emotional bonds with their fathers. As this striving for more authentic intimate connections with fathers was held by most of the daughters in the study, Mannheim's (1952) perspective that the interdependence between trend and generation entelechies are fundamental to the non-linear flow of generations is useful in understanding the nuances of potential and realised transformations to intimacy.

Method

As part of a wider study that sought to better understand connections between family relationships and physical activity, a life history methodology was utilised to develop knowledge grounded in lived experience of the interplay between history and biography (Plummer, 2001). Critical of any positivist notions that events of previous experience can be captured, the study was framed by the perspective that, whether fact or fiction, historically situated human consciousness is best signified by interpretations and reinterpretations of experience (Sartre, 1963; Plummer, 2001). Moreover, storied articulation of experience is a fundamental part of practising intimacy and how interactions are acted out between significant others (Jamieson, 1998).

Due to blurred and irregular boundaries of generational belonging, the rich experience-based content of life histories cannot be organised into neat categories to inform participant sampling prior to data collection (Miller, 2000). However, to balance this unpredictability with some type of structure to inform participant sampling, a pragmatic outlook was adopted to recruit a similar number of female and male participants to the categories of 20–29, 40–49 and 60–69 years of age. Such categories enhanced the variety of the sample in terms of family membership identities (daughter, mother, grandmother), generational positioning and life course stage. To further enhance the variety of data collected and allow more rigorous analytic generalisations to be made from comparable and contrasting perspectives, no two participants were recruited from the same family. Along the lines of crafting generalisable arguments from varied cases of data, the recruitment strategy also sought variety in terms of current physical activity involvement. Those with physically active identities were recruited from a triathlon club and a gym in South East England, and those who did not perceive themselves to possess such an identity were recruited through personal connections across the South East and West Midlands of England. Snowball sampling then increased the number

of participants from both groups and was used to avoid an entirely dichotomous sample by recruiting a third group of interviewees who used terms such as ‘casual’ to describe their physical activity participation. In total, 28 participants were recruited, consisting of 14 men and 14 women. The focus of this article is on analysis of data collected from life history interviews with the 14 women. Four of the women were born 1950–3, five were born 1968–74 and five were born 1986–94 (see [Table 1](#)). Less attention was paid to explicitly monitoring the social class of interviewees, which is a limitation of the study. However, all participants referred to previous or current middle-class occupations in some respect during the interviews. Indicative of UK service industry growth and the decline in manual employment ([Brannen, 2001](#)), all of the eldest age cohort were raised in working-class households, whereas four of the youngest cohort were reared in middle-class conditions. All women identified as White British, apart from Maria, who was born and raised in Central Europe before moving to the UK as a young adult.

Data were collected using life history interviews that navigated associations between each participant’s physical activity career and family relationships. Participants were first asked to provide a life course description of their physical activity involvement. Interviewees were then asked to recall their earliest memories of physical activity involvement and why they remembered these particular episodes. Further questions sought to develop more in-depth contextual accounts of relationships with specific family members who had been described as influential. In each case, interviewees were also asked about the potential influence of physical activity upon the nature and quality of the relationship. Finally, interviewees were asked if there were any other connections between their family relationships and physical activity which

Table 1: Participant information

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Relationship with father
Helen	1950	Referred to father as performing a worker role
Fiona	1950	Referred to father as performing a worker role
Louise	1952	Referred to father as performing a worker role
Rachel	1953	Father avoided her after parents divorced
Olivia	1968	Does not know who her father is
Paige	1970	Participates in physical activity (PA) with father but without sharing a reciprocally close relationship
Claire	1971	Lost touch with father after her parents divorced but did occasionally participate together in ‘his’ PA beforehand
Emma	1973	Referred mainly to father as performing a worker role
Maria	1974	Informally participated in PA with father until he became less physically active in his thirties
Charlotte	1986	Participates in and shares stories about PA with father
Yasmin	1989	Shares stories about PA with father
Beth	1990	Participates in and shares stories about PA with father
Becky	1992	Shares stories about PA with father and occasionally participate together
Sophie	1994	Closer with step-father than biological father and discuss PA together in relation to their health

Note: All interviews were conducted in 2016.

they had not yet mentioned and to elucidate if so. Interview data of 10 hours and 19 minutes were collected in total, with single interviews ranging from 26 minutes to 1 hour 38 minutes in duration. I conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. The study was ethically approved by Canterbury Christ Church University (UK). In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms are used to present the data provided by interviewees.

Data were analysed using Znaniecki's (1934) analytic induction with the intention of crafting theoretical generalisations. Fundamental to the ideal of rigorous and exhaustive qualitative data analysis as well as the development of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Seale, 1999), analytic induction was chosen to enhance the analytical generalisability of the study findings (Hammersley, 2011; Ragin, 2023). Unconstrained by the notion of data saturation which limits grounded theorising, analytic induction demands that working hypotheses are also tested during the process of theory generation with 'consideration of *all* available data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 104, emphasis in original). Like Mannheim's (1952) position on generations, for Znaniecki (1934) the flow of history is produced through agency while structurally influenced by the remnant and current social conditions in which people act.

The craft of analytic induction demands exhaustively scrutinising each case to build up generalised working hypotheses that are tested and revised upon encountering negative instances during the process of examining every case (Znaniecki, 1934). To do this, I read each transcript, noting relationships with family members that participants identified as influential to their physical activity careers and instances where a sense of closeness had developed between family members through physical activity. A working hypothesis was developed for each of the three age-related groups. This involved simultaneously coding each transcript and developing memos for theoretical ideas to then test and revise, where necessary, against other transcripts from the group. Then, hypotheses crafted for each group were compared to identify plausible patterns and the original transcripts were re-read to offer contextual insights that may explain and substantiate these patterns. For female participants born 1968–74 and 1986–94, physical activity was primarily viewed as a means of relating with their fathers, either through participating together or sharing storied experiences. While only daughters born 1986–94 spoke of an authentic and emotionally fulfilling connection with their fathers, it was observed how female interviewees born 1968–74 and 1950–3 also carried an enduring desire to feel close to and valued by their fathers. It is this generational difference articulated by younger females of the sample through realising a sense of authentic intimate connection with fathers that this article focuses on. The potential generalisability of this argument beyond the UK is likely to be confined to the experiences of middle-class women living in Western societies where there has been a similar concomitant emergence of intimate interaction as a desirable element of cherished relationships (Jamieson, 1998) and state-led encouragement of physical activity as a major public health strategy.

Sport, physical activity and outdoor play are commonly practised or at least a frequent topic of conversation within middle-class families in the UK (Earley et al, 2019), and have also been persistently attached to masculine performances and socialisation (Messner, 1990). The broadest and arguably most flexible category here is that of physical activity, a health-related term physiologically defined as 'any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure' (Caspersen et al, 1985: 126). In addition to the pragmatic value of using physical activity as a broad umbrella term to capture the forms of sport and outdoor play also referred to

by the daughters interviewed in the study, it also best represents the data collected and the argument offered. Notably, some participants did not appraise sport as being an intimate practice due to the competitiveness required but did perceive health-related conversations with fathers arising from the topic of physical activity as conducive to intimately knowing their fathers.

Findings and discussion

From fathers as workers to fathers as potential intimates

Daughters born in the 1950s recalled the sole family responsibility performed by their fathers as revolving around that of a worker (Brannen, 2001). Louise's father often missed holidays to stay at home and work:

My family and my friend's family ... our mums were friends ... both our dads used to work nights, and when they worked nights, we'd sometimes go for a week away, all together in a caravan and the dads would be at home, working. (Louise, born 1950)

Consequently, during this period the possibility for fathers and daughters to share thoughts and feelings with one another in mutually trusting disclosures was limited by the extensive time fathers were expected to spend working to financially provide for their families (Jamieson, 1998). Furthermore, as a type of practical assistance to everyday family life and especially for the purposes of raising children, there was a widespread social norm that simply providing for children was an acceptable way for fathers to demonstrate sufficient love and care (Jamieson, 1998). While the financial provider identity of fatherhood remained dominant until at least the end of the 20th century in the UK (Brannen, 2001), during the 1960s alternative ideas to traditionally gendered family roles associated with changes to intimate relationships in the Western world also started to gather traction (Gabb, 2008). Since then, it is generally accepted that family intimacies have become more democratic, with fathers beginning to spend more time involved in their children's lives (Gabb, 2008; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). The cultural trend entelechy of a softening of fatherhood, experienced as a gradual structural transformation from the perspective of daughters, can explain how Maria, born in 1974, remembers playfully running with her dad at an early age:

My dad was always running with me, since I could walk [laughs] ... we would, er, always leave my mum and my brother behind, we would run to our destination and then, we would wait for them until they joined us [laughs]. (Maria, born 1974)

While Maria highlights that play-oriented encounters between fathers and daughters within the context of physical activity had become more feasible by the 1970s and early 1980s, it was exclusively daughters who experienced childhood in the 1990s and early years of the new millennium that reported involvement in more shared and intimate disclosures of knowledge and self with fathers. Here, intimate stories shared by fathers both mirrored elements of the physical activities they participated in with daughters and revealed to daughters their own childhood memories:

We'd go cycling in the woods. The woods were really close to our house, so we always wanted to go and cycle in the woods ...

His dad just cut a path in some stinging nettles, and then [laughs] put him on the bike and said 'don't fall off' and just gave him a shove [makes shove action] ... that's one of his favourites (stories). (Charlotte, born 1986)

Even in the case of Yasmin, where participating in physical activity with her father during childhood was minimal, she still drew on feeling close to him in the context of physical activity through stories of their shared biological and embodied ability to sprint:

He (father) was always really good at sprinting ... he still holds his secondary school title for sprints, and no one's ever beaten it ... I 'spose I get the genes from him. Every sports day he'd go along and watch the boy's 100-metre race, just to make sure that it never got beat! ... Even when I watch it, I get kind of the adrenaline, and my heart starts pumping ... I just kind of thrive off that feeling ... it's just in me. (Yasmin, born 1989)

A striking distinction between data from interviewees born in the early 1950s and those born 1986–94 is that a privileged and storied knowledge of intimate details of their father's lives was built into the self-narrative of daughters who navigated childhood in the 1990s. That is to say, it was only the younger group of participants in the study who had, in part, come to understand and negotiate the unfolding of their own lives via a mutual and uniquely personal sense of knowing they had built and shared with their fathers. For interviewees born 1968–74, the expansion and loosening of fatherly love and care beyond that of a financial provider and background actor in everyday family life meant that Maria and Paige retold tales of revered involvement in physical activity with their fathers. Yet, this time shared together did not develop into getting to 'really know and understand' their fathers (Jamieson, 1998: 9). Instead, Paige described this time together as a means of gaining approval from her father:

He spent a lot of time either at work ... doing his exercise [laughs], or doing his studies, he was quite absent from our lives. ... I was probably about 12 ... and he said 'Do you wanna come for a run with me?', and I went out for a run with him. It nearly killed me and then we went for a swim afterwards and then it became a bit of a regular Saturday morning thing. I think it was my way of just spending time with my dad, and it was the way I got approval from him. (Paige, born 1970)

It has been suggested that 'a sense of unconditional love, trust and acceptance' symbolised through 'caring action' but little sharing of deeply personal knowledge may be sufficient to maintain cherished parent–child relationships characterised by reciprocated feelings of intimacy (Jamieson, 1999: 489). Previously, this has been reported as typical of father–child relationships, especially on the part of fathers (Jamieson, 1998). However, the current study points to an alternative story of daughter–father relationships. Although Paige referred to how she seemed to 'connect' with

her father more often than her 'prudent' mother through their shared interests in physical activity and being outdoors, she also voiced her disappointment at the lack of interest he displayed in other aspects of her life, also regarding him as 'blinker' and 'a selfish person'. This way of daughters viewing fathers with an eternal admiration, but as distant yet exciting strangers whose attention had to be earned has also been recalled elsewhere, during childhoods of a similar time period within a Scandinavian context (Nielsen, 2017). Also, like some of the findings reported there, Paige's lasting memory of childhood is one of dissatisfaction with a relationship in which she only felt noticed when behaving like a son (Nielsen, 2017). In terms of social change, interviewees born between 1968 and 1974 revealed that although some fathers had started to spend more time with daughters than was the case for participants born in the 1950s, there was still a noticeable absence of intimacy in father–daughter relationships compared with interviewees born between 1986 and 1994. Along these lines, the sense of unfulfilled intimacy expressed by daughters about the relationship with their father was evident among participants born in the 1950s, late 1960s and first half of the 1970s.

Unfulfilled intimacies

As opposed to being content with an absence of intense interaction with her father, Rachel, born in 1953, had spent much of her life trying to compensate for the lack of an emotional bond that she longed to share with him. When her mother and father split up and her father also became physically absent, this longing developed into a desire to be successful and illustrate to her father what he was missing out on:

My father left us when I was 13 ... my dad would cross to the other side of the road, so he wouldn't have to speak [to us] ... yet he was my hero. I could lie on the psychiatrist's couch and say to you 'It's my father's rejection of me', and my attempt to show him what he's actually let go, whether my whole life has been about ... proving to him ... that this is what he threw away, this is what he chose to reject, I mean, it's feasible. When I qualified as a teacher, I wrote to my grandfather ... to say, 'Could you let my dad know that I've qualified as a teacher?' ... He never responded but obviously there was something there about letting him know. (Rachel, born 1953)

Losing touch and regular contact with their fathers after parental divorce was also an 'unfortunate' story retold by Claire and Maria, both born in the first half of the 1970s. Although, recalling these potential but unrealised intimate relationships was done with a greater degree of acceptance than Rachel's life-defining conceptualisation:

Unfortunately, he (father) developed Alzheimer's, and my parents divorced. I saw him last year, but prior to that I hadn't seen him for about 20 years ... I think he always still went on his walks, but that would have been the amount of his exercise. (Claire, born 1971)

Rather than serving as a mechanism for establishing a deep and valued connection with daughters, physical activity represented another vehicle for fathers to practice their roles as ‘instrumental leaders’ with little to no emotional responsibilities (Jamieson, 1998: 48). For Claire, this took the form of her and the rest of the family joining and following her father on ‘his’ two-hour walk on Sunday afternoons. While Maria’s father took on a community leadership role as the local village football coach, ‘because he had two sons and wanted to involve them’. It is also worth noting that most participants born between 1950 and 1974 did not recognise intentional physical activity as a normal or popular leisure-time pursuit for parental participation in quite the same way it is viewed today:

That generation, they (parents) just really weren’t into activities ... it would have been ... bizarre for them to go and join a gym, or to go for a run ... my father went to work and that would be it, he might have played cricket, or maybe squash very occasionally, but exercise was never in the forefront of my household. (Claire, born 1971)

Not to do the physical activity that people do nowadays ... by the time they’d done their full day’s work and then dad did his garden and mum had four children to bring up, they wouldn’t have had time. (Helen, born 1950)

Therefore, the notion of physical activity as being an important father–daughter practice expressed by interviewees born in the 1970s was likely to have been incidental at the time, especially from the perspective of fathers, and only recalled as being relevant from daughters’ retrospective positioning in the present.

Nonetheless, from an early age, interviewees who negotiated childhood from the 1950s up until the 1980s had become accustomed to making do with less emotional investment from fathers than they would prefer (Sharpe, 1994). This also suggests that since at least the 1950s daughters have been craving the opportunity to engage in and negotiate more intimate relationships with their fathers, a latent generation entelechy later realised by those of the sample born in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similar to a study in Norway of age cohorts born 1931–45, 1963–70 and 1992–3 (Vasbo and Hegna, 2023), any opportunity for establishing a sense of intimacy with parents among those born in the 1970s and earlier was recalled as needing to be instigated and negotiated by children themselves. Likewise, in parent–child relationships where some sense of closeness during childhood was arrived at from the perspective of children, as illustrated by Paige and Maria’s interpretations, the desire for reciprocated emotional openness was left unsatisfied (Vasbo and Hegna, 2023). Therefore, while the sense of unfulfilled intimacy with fathers during childhood was expressed by both daughters born 1950–3 and 1968–74, this was due to fathers’ primary focus on acting as breadwinners for the earlier age cohort, and for the cohort born later, a lack of reciprocated interest and sharing by fathers still somewhat removed from everyday family life. Despite these differences across both cohorts of daughters spanning a range of 24 years, there exists a consciousness of overall disenchantment with the lack of reciprocated openness from fathers due to not encountering childhood conditions conducive to realising this latent entelechy. This re-emphasises Mannheim’s (1952) point that generations do not occur rhythmically and the normalised assumption that significant differences will

always exist between the lives and dispositions of children and their parents is a claim that requires empirical evidence to be substantiated. In terms of their collective and unrealised strivings for an authentically reciprocated sense of intimate connection with their fathers, daughters born 1950–3 and 1968–74 would appear to form part of the same generation unit due to the interaction between their gender and the timing of their childhoods within broader historical trends in parent–child intimacies, as supported by their enduring interpretations.

Disclosing reciprocated intimacy through physical activity: the realisation of a generation entelechy

The inclination for openness and a meaningful reciprocity with fathers was also shared by the age cohort born 1986–94, but among this cohort the entelechy had been realised. For this youngest age group of interviewees, a reciprocal sharing of intimate knowledge with their fathers through spending ‘quality time together’ was often elucidated upon. For Charlotte, Yasmin, Becky and Beth, participating in and exchanging stories about physical activity featured as a treasured element of this time:

In secondary school I went on a foreign exchange, and I had a form to fill-out my hobbies and my dad did it for me [laughs] and wrote that one of my hobbies was walking [laughs], I was like, ‘No, that’s stupid, you can’t put that!’, but I actually did like walking, we did it all the time. (Beth, born 1990)

Feelings of reciprocated intimacy are not simply a consequence of parents and children spending enough time together in the same space but depend upon the *quality* of this time (Gabb, 2008). Indeed, being in a generational position to say that they had spent quality time with their father during childhood was the underlying distinction which differentiated the stories of daughters born 1986–94 from those born 1968–74. The quality of time spent together is considered the most valuable emotional resource of intimate relationships because it is not infinite and is always limited in the context of both daily schedules and the restrictions of the human lifespan (Jamieson, 1998; Gabb, 2008). Grounded in and characterised by the emotion, trust and privileged knowledge of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998), episodes of sharing quality time with fathers included interactions that could be deeply moving and relived during interview by daughters born in the 1980s and 1990s:

My dad ... he had to have an operation on his heart ... maybe six years ago ... ‘cos he’s overweight. He had to have a heart bypass, so he lost a lot of weight for that ... so the reason we went swimming at the weekend ... I went home because I made my dad go ... when he had to have the operation, we went to see him afterwards ... he was like in the intensive care unit, and he was just lying there ... I remember him saying ... [cries] ... sorry [cries] ... [cries] he said to me and my sister... ‘I don’t ever want you two girls to be in this position’, but I think from seeing that ... it makes me think about the importance of staying fit and active. (Becky, born 1992)

This highlights that physical activity plays some part in the relationship between daughters and their fathers but, for the daughters interviewed, serves primarily as a means of building, establishing and maintaining an intimate connection (Young et al, 2019). It is this sense of connection through being a valued and trusted part of their father's personal life that was desired and savoured above all else. The development of physical activity as not only a health-related practice but also a family practice that can be significant in the socialisation of children is important in this regard. Both the health and enjoyment related aspects of physical activity were foremost aspects of life that daughters born 1986–94 shared with fathers, while also distancing themselves from any perceived attempt by fathers to re-orientate their main motivation for participation towards the competitiveness often associated with the masculine socialisation of boys (Messner, 1990):

I do like swimming, but when my dad was tryin' to get me to do the swimming gala and join the club ... it just wasn't appealing, I think because I'm not very competitive, so it wouldn't of been fun. (Becky, born 1992)

While the proliferation in knowledge and national policies about the health-related benefits of regular physical activity participation since the 1990s have been criticised for reconstructing the enjoyment of childhood play as less spontaneous and more rationally organised (Alexander et al, 2015; Day, 2024), it also presents alternative and potentially more inclusive ways for physical activities to feature within parent–child relationships beyond masculine-oriented competitiveness (Young et al, 2019; Pollock et al, 2020). For instance, openly discussing physical activity as a health improvement strategy:

I have a step-dad... he was really big actually, he really struggled with his weight and he never did any exercise or anything, but more recently he's lost quite a bit of weight as he just goes for walks, like he doesn't do any strenuous exercise, he'll drive to like a hill and then walk up a hill or something, which is pretty cool. (Sophie, born 1994)

However, the important structural caveat to such changes in daughter–father intimacies is that they have only been permitted and legitimated by shifts in fatherhood expectations and, subsequently, changes to fathers' own preferences. By the end of the 20th century in the UK, more diverse identities of fatherhood had emerged and 'hands on' fathering practices among young fathers were on the rise, including a distancing from the worker identity in some cases (Brannen, 2001; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). Fathers choosing physical activity as a practice through which intimate knowledge is reciprocally shared with daughters therefore also serves the purpose of achieving, or at least displaying, a performance of 'good fathering' (Earley et al, 2019). It is also the case that such narratives about physical activity are structured, at least initially, according to fathers' preferences and thus guide this intimate connection to some extent. This arrangement is also a practical reflection of the expectation that parents should nurture children in some way, meaning unequal adult–child power relations will persist during childhood socialisation (Jamieson, 1999).

It has been proposed in a Norwegian context that evidence of a growing closeness and mutual openness enacted between parents and their children born 1992–3 can be

considered a joint project invested in equally by both parties (Vasbo and Hegna, 2023). As with the current study, this reciprocated investment of time and emotion to openly disclose and intentionally construct an intimate closeness between parents and children is what distinguishes this age cohort's childhood experiences from cohorts born earlier. Although, the authors of the study, Vasbo and Hegna (2023), claim this intimacy occurs in an entirely equitable and pure fashion, free from ideology and a matter of free will rather than necessity or expectation. The current analysis of daughter–father relationships in the context of the UK and physical activity challenges this suggestion, as the generational framing of the data highlights that parent–child relationships are always tied up in social norms and trends, such as changes to fatherhood expectations and practices. Nevertheless, the youngest age cohort of daughters did seem to have greater emotional involvement and more intimate relationships with fathers than in the past, who, more so than mothers, represent a connection with the wider world beyond the immediate family environment (Nielsen, 2017). Continuation of this shift could invoke long-term consequences by gradually eroding wider patriarchal structures (Earley et al, 2019; Pollock et al, 2020). The reciprocated disclosure of intimacy offered by fathers and experienced only by daughters born 1986–94, may mean that daughters who have negotiated childhood since the mid-1980s have done so in a fashion which sets them apart as a distinct generation—unit socialised into working up such experiences with men as a norm and expectation.

Conclusion

Drawing on the concept of generation entelechy to explain life history interview data from females born between 1950 and 1994, this article argues that, underpinned by the practice of physical activity, daughters have started to develop stronger emotional bonds with fathers during childhood since the late 1980s. Crucial to this is the UK context, where intimate interdependence is indicative of sought-after relationships and a public health context where physical activity participation is championed to reduce non-communicable disease. Interview data across all age cohorts of the study demonstrate an inclination among daughters to establish and maintain mutually sincere relationships with fathers, which has endured for more than half a century. However, of the interviewees, only daughters born in the 1980s and 1990s had been raised in social conditions that allowed them to realise and build such relationships. Key factors associated with fatherhood that have enabled this transformation to the intimate lives of daughters are the increased prominence of involved fatherhood ideals and physical activity becoming a parenting and health-related practice that fathers feel comfortable performing and talking about. As much of this proposed generational transformation to daughterhood was dependent upon changes to fatherhood, the balancing of control in such relationships continues to be primarily structured around the preferences of fathers. However, it is also the case that fathers would now seem to be more emotionally involved with and dependent upon daughters compared to their previous position in family life as admired yet detached and authoritarian strangers.

Of course, not all fathers were emotionally distant from daughters during the 1950s and 1970s and nor do all men who have become fathers since the 1990s share reciprocated friend-like relationships with daughters. Nevertheless, at a time when uncertainty remains about what constitutes 'good fathering' (Earley et al, 2019), the importance of daughters' involvement in this transformation should not

be underestimated in respect of the consequences for gender relations. A potential long-term consequence for daughters is childhood socialisation experiences with fathers that encourage expectations of more genuine and reciprocated support and commitment from men throughout the life course.

While the interaction between gender and generations were considered in the study design, ethnicity and socioeconomic status were not paid the same degree of attention. More intentionally varied UK research samples according to social class and ethnicity are therefore encouraged in future studies to test and add nuance to the conclusions raised in this article.

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Conflict of interest

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