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Daughters and Dads

BY DONNA DICELLO AND LORRAINE MANGIONE
What do Italian American women think of their fathers? When they were children, were their fathers close or distant? Did they spend a lot of time together or was he always at work? And, if their fathers have died, how do these daughters grieve? We explored answers to these questions in *Daughters, Dads, and the Path through Grief: Tales from Italian America*, our soon-to-be-published study on the Italian American father-daughter relationship and its influence throughout a woman’s life.

As trained psychologists, we knew that our field has traditionally given little importance to the positive aspects of the father-daughter relationship in general and even less specifically on Italian American fathers and daughters. But recent research indicates that a father’s influence on his daughter is lifelong and much more vital to her emotional, psychological and intellectual development than previously thought.

While actual studies on the subject are scarce, the Italian American father-daughter relationship is shrouded in popular misconceptions and stereotypes. Italian American fathers are believed to favor sons over daughters; to dismiss education; and to be punitive and even harsh. However, our study uncovered evidence that shattered these stereotypes, replacing them with portraits of close, loving, and influential, albeit sometimes conflicted relationships between Italian American fathers and daughters that were rich in complexity.

Our method was simple. We put out a call to interview Italian American women who had basically sound relationships with their fathers. The interview would trace the father-daughter story from childhood into adulthood. In psychology, such in-depth interviews have fewer people in it compared to a survey. We hoped to find 15 to 20 women to interview. We got 51 – nearly triple that number.

The women ranged in age from 33 to 86. Most lived in large northeastern cities, suburbs, and small towns with a few from across the country. They represented a breadth of educational backgrounds – from an 8th grade education to a doctoral degree. Their occupations were a cross-section of the workforce: business owners, artists, writers, secretaries, teachers and teacher’s aides, nurses, attorneys, administrators and administrative assistants – even a film maker and a congresswoman. Their families come from southern Italy and Sicily, with a few from Tuscany and Liguria.

**Early Influence**

Participants stated that throughout their childhood, they felt the importance of their relationship with their fathers. They recounted instances of shared activities that ranged from reading books; discussing philosophy; and listening to music to playing basketball; swimming; fishing; and working on electronics. Many recalled these activities were marked by great affection and playfulness that sometimes included practical jokes; a sense of adventure that might entail flying in their father’s airplane; or sledding in the winter.

Most participants reported receiving paternal support for their independence, interest in going to school, and having a career. Several women connected with their fathers through church, religion, and spirituality. Although a few women described fathers who wished for or favored sons, most reported warm and close relationships in which they felt valued. Some fathers were particularly empathetic and compassionate. One woman conjectured that this was due to the poor treatment her father received as a young immigrant.
Education was actively promoted by the fathers, whether it was finishing high school or attending college, preferably close to home for many dads. Even graduate work was encouraged although in one case, the father did not understand the field chosen. Several women noted that their fathers had not had the educational opportunities they enjoyed. They believed this strengthened their fathers’ emphasis on education. One participant told of her father taking her to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to speak with the dean about college when she was very young. It was a bit embarrassing, she says, but stimulated her to think about getting a degree.

Fathers and Family

Family was the center of the world for the fathers of most participants. Some daughters said their fathers sacrificed for the extended family. Many saw their dads as family story-tellers and jokesters; wonderful sons to their elderly mothers; and lovers of good times with family on a Sunday afternoon at the park or during holiday dinners. Many fathers expected their daughters to marry and have children. However, domestic life was not necessarily valued above getting an education, entering a profession, or developing one’s talents and abilities.

While many fathers worked long hours, and several were civic-oriented or spent time at Italian clubs, all the participants described their fathers as being “present and involved.” Many had special traditions: going to church and then breakfast with just their father; taking bus rides together; or going to a sports event together. Some women said they could speak with their fathers about “almost anything,” even their boyfriends. They saw their fathers as confidantes.

Others said that while their fathers always offered them love and affection, certain more emotional issues could not be discussed. A few had regrets about topics never discussed, such as a father’s wartime experience or the loss of a family member. The closeness and attention these women remembered having with their fathers contrast to the stereotype of the aloof Italian American father who leaves child-rearing to his wife.

Some participants noted their fathers being protective, veering toward over-protection once they reached adolescence. However it was often coupled with tolerance. One woman stated that her father kept her and her siblings “on a short leash,” but she understood his protectiveness, given the number of teen-agers in the family.

For the most part, participants weathered normal teenage conflicts with their dads successfully. Sometimes, fathers were more lenient than mothers. One woman remembered wanting to travel abroad. Her mother vetoed the idea, but her father “asked pertinent questions” and then said yes. Another woman commented that her dad always trusted her when she left home for college and later out of her parents’ home and into a serious relationship.

Later Influence

Most women saw their father’s influence extending throughout their lives. One woman’s family smiles at her remarkable mechanical aptitude that is like her dad’s. Another sees her daughter transforming her father’s tool and die machinery into theater pieces. An artist who engages in a life of study believes it comes from her Jesuit-trained father’s own love of learning. A lawyer’s father always told her that she had “a good, strong background, nothing fancy but very solid.” That stayed with her. Another father “visits” his daughter in dreams to talk over her most important decisions. Some women pray to their fathers for wisdom. A few saw changes they were considering that might have upset the dad were he still alive.

The fathers we met through their daughters’ memories were loving, hard-working, inspiring, and devoted. The daughters looked to their fathers for advice, values, and their Italian heritage. One woman summed up what many expressed. “Italians ... have a sense of history and pride, and there’s substance there.” We resoundingly agree.

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