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Dependency and Distance: Analyzing Paternal Bond in the 19th-Century Working-Class British Families

The long 19th-century brought a profound change in every aspect of human civilization. Economy, politics, environment, and society itself transformed monumentally during this period. Spearheaded by the industrial revolution, one of the most affected by this change was the family. The move from country to the city and the burgeoning factory system of 19th century Britain, created an emotional chasm between the father and the child and altered views on authority and respect. The essay explores the changing family dynamics due to the dependency on the male breadwinner by reviewing the academic position on the topic.

The father-child relationship of the working-class pre-industrial era was one of interdependence, and adherence to family values beneficial to both parties. The reason for interdependence was the operation of peasant families as "small household economies based on the labor of all members of the family” (Minge-Kalman 455). The family was run as a small company whether its members were engaged in farming or the traditional cottage industry. Children helped in farm work from a young age and would learn the essentials of farming from their fathers. Similarly, in cottage industries tied to a family farm, "(w)hole families of peasants were involved: the children, often from four years of age onwards” (455). Such a setup allowed members to interact closely and be in each other's presence for most of the day (Wilkinson 1). To the father's benefit, utilizing the family as a workforce provided him with the labor necessary for tilling his farms or weaving the clothes and for the child, a claim on the family inheritance. Future prospects made respecting the father's authority and his say in family matters such as marriage, an important consideration for the child (Anderson 132). Often, children's association with their parents would be lifelong as they would stay on the farm even after marriage. In this way, the child "inheriting the farm, (would also inherit) the obligation to care for parents in old age” (93). Studying the conditions of pre-industrial rural England shows the symbiotic father-child bond based on deference, indebtedness, and general affection that time brings to a relationship.

Even in the non-property-owning families where the father was involved in a trade, the mechanism of interdependence between the father and the child defined their relationship. The contribution of children was vital to the father for running a big family. "Children who were helpers in the family business received training in a trade and their work directly increased the productivity of the family and hence the family’s income" (Tuttle). To the father, it represented a means to sustain and, in many cases, even grow the family business. “(I)ndependent craftsmen had recognized standing in the local community” (Abbott 94), and having their children follow them in the trade was a matter of prestige. Children were the equal beneficiary of this passing down of skills from one generation to the other as they got a good start to their careers by inheriting the tools and workshops from their fathers (81). Long hours of working together, and learning the tips and tricks of a trade, strengthened the bond between the father and the child. There were cases, depending on the economic viability of the trade and guild regulations, where some children chose not to take up their father's profession. However, this course of action was usually driven by necessity rather than choice (85). Overall, following in the father's footsteps and building a stable working relationship remained more or less constant until the big shift in the early 19th-century brought by factors examined next.

The big step toward the changing working-class family equation and the father-child relationship was emigration from rural England to urban centers. This migration was the result of increasing industrialization and changes to the rural economy. Factories provided higher earning opportunities to the young adults from villages. With many single men and women moving to cities, “fathers could no longer pass on skills to their children” (JRank Web), and there was a break in the continuity of the family traditions. Outcompeted by their industrial counterparts, many families engaged in cottage industries also moved to urban centers (Nelson 91-93). Migration to cities was indicative of the changing socio-economic scene with rural communities in its front and center.

Another factor contributing to the city ward migration, especially for families working in the farming sector, was the Enclosure Acts (Abbott 132; National Archive Web). Traditionally, small peasants would work on strips of common land held under the open-field system. Parliamentary Inclosure acts created legal property rights to common land, which consolidated smaller strips of land into more compact units. The government provided farmers and agricultural laborers with some compensation, but this was often not enough (Neeson 18-25). The Acts resulted in small farmers losing their land and finding themselves looking cityward to earn a livelihood. Farm enclosures started as land consolidation and ended as farming families' dispersion into new industrial towns.

Leaving the village behind resulted in a loss of personal identity for the male head of the family, who suddenly saw his traditional way of life disappear. This identity crisis for the father was a direct result of the changing British demographics. The scale of migration could be understood by looking into the population growth of towns from 1801 to 1911 (see fig. 1). A growth of 45% in the urban population within 100 odd years is an indicator of monumental changes to both the rural and city landscape. It is only logical to deduce that such a mass migration would bring enormous social change. The urban immigration resulted in a physical and authoritative displacement for the patriarch coupled with a diminishing sense of pride, which would eventually transform his role and relationship with his child.

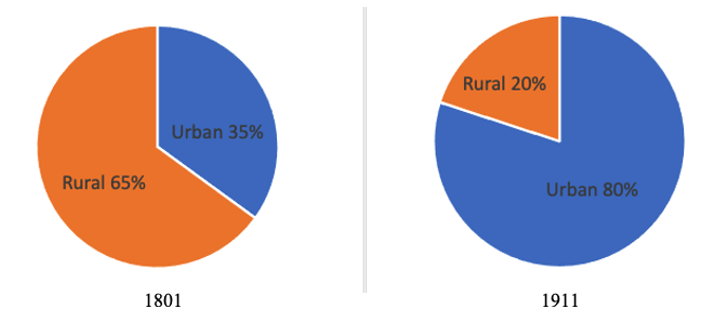


Fig. 1: Comparison between Urban and Rural Population in 19th Century England and Wales.

Source: Lawton 195

To meet the demands of a new urban setting, the family had to transform in its function. Adjustments resulted in the rise of the male breadwinner, which in turn fueled detachment within the family.[[1]](#footnote-1)Though the concept of male breadwinner precedes the 19th-century (Horrell and Humphries 26), it came to the forefront of British life during the industrialization era. As part of the new breadwinner arrangement, fathers made 75% of the family earnings by mid 19th century (Horrell and Humphries 31). The new system was a major disruption in the economic functioning of the working-class family compared to the pre-industrial times. Fathers sometimes traveled long distances for work or lived in a different city to make money for the family (Humphries 130). Even when living with their families, long grueling hours of factory work would leave men too tired for any family obligations (Humphries 129; Wilkinson 1). Absence and dependency on fathers are well captured by Jane Humphries when she notes: “Ironically, as women and children became more reliant on fathers, fathers became alienated and distanced from their wives and children” (Humphries 126). Being the breadwinner affected the emotional bond a father had with his family, but not being one also had consequences for the family.

The breadwinner dependency for many families gave rise to what is known as the breadwinner frailty, which again affected family dynamics and emotional dependency between the father and the child (Humphries 120). Breadwinner frailty is described as the inability or absence of the father to provide for the family. Falling wages often prevented fathers from making what was necessary for family survival, which led to the inclusion of women and children in the workforce (Humphries 172-207). With children working, fathers would get less time to spend with them, further fueling the detachment. Accompanying the changing working-class family were the shifting views on respect and authority. If fulfilling the breadwinner responsibilities resulted in a newfound respect for father's toil and a recognition of his authority, breadwinner frailty resulted in the same being questioned (Horrell and Humphries 51; Strange 23, 84-85). Chronologically, the effects of both breadwinner and breadwinner frailty were shaping the 19th-century British working-class at the same time. The accumulation of social changes from being the breadwinner or failing to do so, combined with a few other factors discussed below, advances the discussion in the essay on the themes of authority, respect, and detachment.

Authority served men well wherever they could earn the living wages, but in most cases, breadwinner frailty affected the power structure at home and transformed the father-child relationship. As stated above, some fathers could not make enough wages to run the family, and hence, circumstances forced the women and children to work in factories. As noted by historians like Karl Ittmann in *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England*, "opportunities for work for women and children … undermined the normal patterns of authority within the working-class family" (143). By allowing wife and children to earn independent income, father became increasingly dependent on the dual-income mode of earning, and his grip on the family started loosening. Capitalizing on the ability to make a wage, young adults would leave home and, with that, paternal control as soon as they can. Bachelors would increasingly have a say in matters concerning marriage, which often challenged the father's opinion. For children still living at home, earning brought a change of status and an ability to negotiate on matters of food and spending (Abbott 154; Anderson 114; Ittmann 223-224). Capturing the essence of this new relationship dynamics is a quotation from one Jack Lawson:

I worked ten hours that day, and my pay for it was tenpence. Still I was a man and I knew it. There was no more drudging at home. I was entitled to as much meat as I wanted, and others cleared out to make a seat for me. (Abbott 146)

Breadwinner frailty resulted in the dilution of paternal authority, giving rise to increased bargaining power to the children and hence changing the relationship dynamics.

Apart from the internal challenges from family members, the father's authority also faced subversion by external forces like the government and judiciary. The reason for the increased interference was the tendency of the upper-class to view the lives of the marginalized with disdain (Nelson 33-35, 63). Child labor legislation which was initially brought in the 1830s to oversee the relationship of employer and child laborers, later started including "forms of labor instigated directly by parents, (eroding) the father's traditional right to demand such labor from his child as he saw fit" (62). Government support of the children's consent on the types of contracts they could sign, and a growing realization of their rights shrank the realm of the father's influence (Honeyman and Goose 113, 252). A manifestation of the contempt Victorians held for the working-class men came with the growing tendency of the judiciary to award custody of children to mothers in cases of marital dispute. Further intruding in the personal space of the father was the act of 1889, which limited the use of corporal punishment and with it the power of the fathers to "rear their offspring as they saw fit" (Nelson 62). Though there is a consensus today that such an act was much needed to prevent child abuse, the intention of illustrating this point is to show government's increased say in the workings of the father-child relationship. Assault on all fronts to father's authority was damaging to his prestige, and with time it started affecting the respect he enjoyed from his children.

Respect for the father's profession aroused ambivalent feelings in the children of 19th century working-class. As discussed previously, breadwinning was the central theme in the father's functioning as the house-head. The ability of the father to "win through" the struggle of life became so crucial that children would look at the relationship from the lens of the father’s profession. For many children, father was the giver of material gifts as well as the gift of skill. Such was the case with Labour politician[[2]](#footnote-2) David Kirkwood who deeply identified with his steelworker father's efforts and ethos, and championed trade union interests during his lifetime (Strange 30-45). There were instances where sons and daughters spoke about their respect for their father's trade, which enabled a better life for them (24-31) but also cases where the grown-up child would like to distance himself from the shadow of their father's profession. With self-help books of the period offering "young working-class men alternative role models to their fathers," a lot of upwardly mobile young adults would view their fathers as "misguided … or even contemptible" (Nelson 93). An example elucidating the point is novelist D. H. Lawrence, whose inspiration for the character of the illiterate, drunk father in *Sons and Lovers* was from his own life (Mandibaye et al. 54). A Nottingham University graduate, Lawrence repudiated his miner father in his youth and only changed his stance later in life. The absence of respect created "emotional barriers that made love and understanding difficult," giving rise to disassociation and sorrow (94). Hence, displaying respect for the father's effort in providing for the family kept the father-child bond strong, but its unappreciation brought neglect and estrangement.

Though divergence of careers caused a rift in the family, alienation of working-class from their jobs, and its effects in alcohol consumption and violence were the major contributors to the estrangement between father and the child. No book better explains the mental drudge a worker went through in the factory system than *Capital:* “(factory system) degrade worker to the level of an appendage of a machine … alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process … deform the conditions under which he works" (Marx 799). The argument extended here is that the mechanical nature of factory work disassociated the worker from his own labor. The resulting psychological dissatisfaction hurtled him in the direction of alcohol to seek comfort. Men who had to show deference in the workplace tried to compensate for it in the house. Alcohol-fueled violence was common in working-class homes, and many children grew up in abusive conditions (Abbott 154; Griffin 129; Humphries 135). Alcohol-addicted fathers would spend all their money on drinking, leaving children to starve. Apathy towards family wellbeing combined with cruelty against the mother and themselves only exacerbated children's anger against the father. Under such conditions, it was natural that the father-child relationship became strained (Anderson 70). For fathers, alienation in public workspace transformed into alienation in private family life, deepening a crevasse caused by urban living.

The distant father is perhaps the single most agreed-upon aspect of 19th-century fatherhood. Breadwinning fathers were often missing from the family stage, transforming them into shadowy figures working behind the scenes (Humphries 120, Strange 18). In the context of factory work, there was a consensus amongst many Victorian commentators that "the factory separated family members and removed women and children … from the direct supervision of fathers and husbands" (Ittmann 143). With women and children working in factories at odd times, men returned from work to empty houses, making family time negligible (144). With a life geared towards surviving in the industrial world, time spent teaching skills or laboring on the field together became memories of a bygone era, and the opportunities for bonding disappeared. Also part of the changing social scene was the idea of finding relaxation and enjoyment outside the family. As Emma Griffin writes in *Breadwinner*, “We can see men turning away from home as the source of human company and personal identity, and searching for these things in the public world of pubs and clubs instead” (133). With working men spending their time in alehouses or clubs, children missing their fathers at home became the story of many households. Hence, complaints of neglect and complacency against fathers also became common (Bailey 288; Sanders 9). With years of emotional unavailability between them, many children, after they could support themselves, left their paternal house and disassociated from their fathers (Griffin 150, Humphries 143). With the potential to terminate the father-child relationship, the emotional detachment was a sinister offering of the Industrial Era.

The growing distance between the father and the child might have made some children leave their fathers, but its most devastating effect was in men deserting their families. Many causes, as described below, prompted fathers to leave their families to fend for themselves. Some fathers were never present in their children's lives because they disappeared soon after the child was born. In such cases, the illegitimacy of the relation and criminal charges against the father were strong motivators (Griffin 148; Humphries 131). On the other extreme, there were men leaving "their families much later in life, long after marriage and after the birth of several children" (Griffin 148). An example is men running away after an unsuccessful business venture. As can be deduced, the inability to support a large family was the reason for such desertions. Abandoning the family was also common amongst men involved in work that required traveling like navvying jobs. An emotionally hard-hitting account is of “Kay Pearson’s father (who) was a sailor and at some point during her adolescence … simply stopped returning to the family home". It shows that the demands of a life on the road and distractions from an increasingly materialistic world played a part in severing blood ties. Such recollections found in 19th-century autobiographies are strong indicators of growing detachment between father and the child (Griffin 147-151; Nelson 60). Growing up in fatherless households was a reality for many 19th-century children, as evidenced by 170 of 662 autobiographies used in *Breadwinner*. Out of the 170, 90 autobiographers document desertion and illegitimacy as the cause of fatherlessness, revealing the depth of the crisis (see Fig. 2). Father's involvement with the children is the cornerstone of their relationship, and desertion ensured that the bond would never exist for many Victorian-era children.

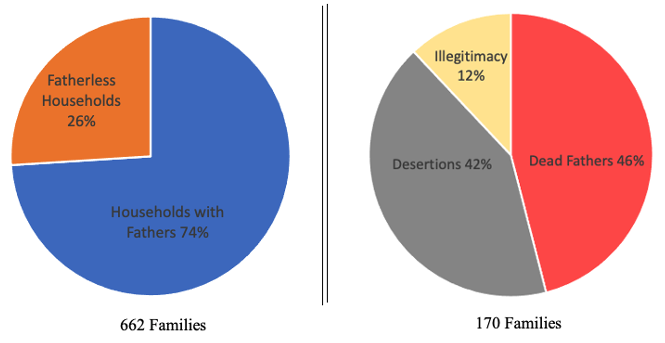


Fig. 2: The Crisis of Fatherless Households.

Source: Griffin 110, 147

Discussion on the physical and emotional distance between the father and the child, and all the ailments arising from it is incomplete without getting into some alternate opinions on the topic. Many authors who have highlighted the instances of estrangement have also pointed out that “men did not sit at home telling their families they loved them; (but) went to work to prove it” (Strange 25). Breadwinning was such a crucial part of the father's role that the measure of his devotion to the family was the number of hours he would spend on duty. Machine did make the father distant from his own flesh and blood, but at the same time, the toil and the sacrifice were all for his children’s sake. Some children recognized this and were grateful towards their fathers for providing (Strange 33-48). The bouts of violence and propensity for drinking were serious problems, but such behaviors were more common in unemployed or underpaid men. A good majority of men neither indulged in alcoholism nor were extremely violent. The only charge against them was their absenteeism from the lives of their children (Humphries 137). Many autobiographies from the 19th-century mention instances of fathers' love and care for their children. Fathers "deeply mourn(ing) the loss of young ones" (Anderson 69; Bailey 267) is well noted and emphasizes the point that not all saw their children as an economic burden. Children, too, would be grief-stricken from the loss of their fathers and saw it as a loss of their support system (Humphries 133). Statistically, though there were a lot of desertions, there was also caretaking and providing. Probably the most redemptive statement about fathers of the industrial era is that they were really trying hard to be the breadwinners their families wanted them to be. The stress of providing did get the better of many fathers, but they too were the victims of the capitalist style of production. It would be fair to say that changing father-child dynamics was a truth of the 19th-century British society, but at the same time, some relationships preserved the old-world values.

Momentous changes in 19th century Britain in the form of immigration, industrialization, and breadwinning transformed the value system associated with the father-child relationship. It affected the power structure at home, changed the meaning of dependency, and altered the perception of love. The most profound effect, though, is on the emotional availability between the father and the child. A distanced father became a norm going forward, and disassociation on the part of the child was relatively commonplace. In conclusion, analyzing the British working-class society of the industrial age provides a deep insight into the factors that defined a century of changing father-child relationships.

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1. It is worth clarifying here that the term breadwinner is used in the literal sense, which means that there is a member of the family who is making the majority of the household's income. Though the modern use of the word is associated with positive connotations, we will go by its neutral definition in the essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Member of the political Labour Party (UK) which is described as an alliance of social democrats and trade unionists [↑](#footnote-ref-2)