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# The Fathering Debate

*In May 2000, at the invitation of the Christchurch branch of NZAP, Rosemary Du Plessis contributed a paper exploring the sociological realities of fathering and fatherlessness to a panel discussion entitled 'The Contextual Realities of Psychotherapy in the New Millennium'. Members of NZAP working from a variety of theoretical foundations were later invited to respond to the implications of this paper for psychotherapists, their clients and the work of psychotherapy. The paper and members' responses to it follow.*

## Fathering and Fatherlessness Challenges for the New Millennium

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### Abstract

In the last decade there has been a considerable amount of writing about 'fatherlessness', 'father hunger' and 'fatherhood'. Fathering activists have argued that issues relating to fathering are challenges that individuals, families, communities, political parties, state bureaucrats and those in the helping professions must confront in 'the new millennium'. This paper examines some recent assertions offered in the United States and in New Zealand about a fathering 'crisis' and appropriate responses to it. The aim is to highlight some issues associated with fathering and fatherlessness that may be relevant to those working as psychotherapists at the beginning of a new century. A long-term interest in the politics of gender provides a background to the discussion of fathering politics offered in this paper.

### A fathering crisis?

In the last decade a new social movement has developed, the fathering movement, and a host of new books have emerged that address fathering as a social issue (Blankenhorn: 1995; Burgess: 1997; Coltrane: 1996; Coontz: 1997; Daniel: 1996; Faludi: 1999; Gersen: 1993, LaRossa: 1997; Popenoe: 1996). Fathering activists argue that issues relating to fathering are challenges that individuals, families, communities, political parties, state bureaucrats and

those in the helping professions must confront in 'the new millennium'. I want to focus on their assertions about a fathering 'crisis', their claims relating to 'fatherlessness' and their arguments about the significance of men's contribution to parenting. This involves looking at the arguments of the most prominent fathering advocates in the United States and at some books published recently in New Zealand. These are publications aimed at a wide audience, but particularly directed at men. Through this review I hope to highlight some issues associated with fathering and fatherlessness that may be relevant to those working as psychotherapists as we move into a new century. My early academic work developed out of debates about mothering and paid work in the 1970s. Then the focus was on 'mother absence' and 'maternal deprivation'. 'Father absence' was not a significant issue. It seems appropriate a quarter of a century later to look at men's arguments and activism about fathering.

In 1995 David Blankenhorn published *Fatherlessness in America: Confronting our most urgent social problem*. Fast on the heels of this attempt to construct the United States as 'a fatherless society' was sociologist David Popenoe's *Life Without Father: Compelling new evidence that fatherhood and marriage are indispensable for the good of children and society* (1996). Both Blankenhorn and Popenoe assert that fatherhood is 'on the decline'. For them the challenge of the new millennium is the challenge of what they describe as 'fatherlessness'. These books inform much of the writing in the New Zealand context that focuses attention on fathering and fatherlessness.

Anxiety about the supposed 'decline' in fathering is based on a statistical decline in the proportion of biological fathers who occupy the same households as their children. Even men who live with their children may not be 'fathers' in the way fathering advocates like Blankenhorn and Popenoe consider appropriate. 'New Fathers', fathers who parent much like mothers, are not seen as 'fathers' (Blankenhorn: 1995: 96-123). Their children are defined as 'fatherless' because they are not exposed to a male parent who is differentiated from their female parent. For children to be 'fathered' according to this view of fathering, they must not only have access to a male parent (stepfathers, mothers' friends and lovers, uncles and grandparents are not good enough), but also to a man who parents *differently* from their mother.

Why this attack on men who change nappies, get up in the night, supervise the homework and talk to children about their problems with their friends? The problem, according to the most conservative of the fatherhood advocates, is that these new fathers are potentially superfluous. If men offer no more than

women as parents, then they are redundant and replaceable. For Blankenhorn and Popenoe, convergence in male and female parenting is deeply threatening, particularly in a context where women are capable of earning as well as parenting and where the state has assumed some economic responsibilities for the support of sole parent households.

In the 1970s the issues around parenting focused on mothers not being sufficiently available to their children because they were increasingly in paid work. Now the attention in many social democracies, like Aotearoa/New Zealand, has shifted to *men*. Fathers, not mothers, are the parents under scrutiny for their lack of involvement in the lives of their children, either as fathers who do not live with their children, or fathers in the same household who are not active 'hands on' fathers.

The fatherhood advocates argue that men have to be organised into fatherhood. They require a set of legal and extra-legal pressures to get them to meet up to their responsibilities. According to Blankenhorn:

Because men do not volunteer for fatherhood as much as they are conscripted into it by the surrounding culture, only an authoritative cultural story of fatherhood can fuse biological and social paternity into a coherent male identity' (Blankenhorn: 1995: 3).

Feminists' critiques of masculinity and arguments for men's greater emotional and practical involvement with children disrupt this 'authoritative cultural story'. The fatherlessness agenda is, at least in part, an attempt to revive that story. Anxiety about it is, however, an indication of its fragility.

### Critiques of the fatherlessness thesis

What criticisms can be directed at this moral panic about fatherlessness? Most significantly, what are presented as the consequences of fatherlessness are often the consequences of sole parenthood. It is cut-backs in state support for sole parents who are not in paid work, pressures on them to train and enter paid work when they are heavily pressed by domestic responsibilities, the low rates of pay for female dominated jobs and levels of unemployment among working class men that are the sources of deprivation and disadvantage, not the absence of fathers *per se*.

Fatherlessness gurus like Popenoe and Blankenhorn concede that the most immediate consequence of men not living with children is financial deprivation. Another way of looking at this is that levels of marriage dissolution and

conception outside ongoing cohabiting heterosexual relationships have highlighted the damaging consequences of *gender differentiation*. Since the financial situation of children in father-only households is not considered a problem, one has to conclude that the problem is women's earnings and the lack of significant differentiation between those earnings and forms of state support available to one-parent households. Since children in father-only households do not experience the poverty of children in mother-only households, the problems must lie with their parents' access to resources, either through the state or through their own earnings.

### **Getting closer to home: Aotearoa/New Zealand and the fathering debates**

Two recent books published in Aotearoa/New Zealand explore some of the agendas that have been the focus of discussion in the United States about fathering and fatherlessness. Both are self-help books aimed at a popular audience. One is focused on men becoming parents: *Beginning Fatherhood* (1998). The other addresses fatherlessness explicitly: *Fatherless Sons: The Experiences of New Zealand Men* (1999). What do these books tell us about how arguments about fathering are being translated into this national context?

#### *An Antipodean version of the uniqueness of fathers - Fatherless Sons*

Rex McCann's *Fatherless Sons* draws on interviews with 40 New Zealand men who talk about the experience of fatherlessness in their lives (McCann: 1999). Fatherlessness is defined as the physical or emotional absence of a father. Rex McCann's assertions about the impact of increased sole parenting, divorce, separation and the decreased involvement of biological fathers are largely consistent with the United States fatherlessness literature, particularly the work of Popenoe and Blankenhorn.

McCann argues for 'new' forms of masculinity, but also against the 'new father' who parents as women parent. Like others in the fatherlessness genre, he is convinced about the need for men to offer something *different* as parents. Men are presented as encouraging physical risk taking, an engagement with the outside world of work, sport and competition. They are presented as having a long-term view of their children as functioning earning members of a community, while mothers are seen as the experts in being emotionally responsive to children on a day-to-day basis. All the standard claims are made about the correlates of not having a father in the home—suicide, teen

pregnancy, youth crime, lower academic achievement, behavioural problems, depression.

McCann argues against an oppositional approach to women and the women's movement, but he is convinced about the 'uniqueness' of women and men's contributions to parenting. In many respects McCann's project is to construct a new public story about men and fathering, a story for the new millennium. Men are presented as experiencing grief and uncertainty about change, but 'yearning' for something 'unnamed'. This is a story which has much in common with Betty Friedan's discussion of 'the problem that has no name' in *The Feminine Mystique* in the late 1960s. For educated white women in the US in the 1960s it was conflicts between career fulfilment and the constraints of domesticity that were the problem; for men on the cusp of a new millennium the problem that cannot be named is 'love' — 'the fire of an engaged masculine heart' (McCann: 1999: 125). Critical of the old patriarchal archetype, McCann nevertheless wants to construct a new archetype.

A number of feminists have responded to arguments about 'father absence' by advocating 'paraparenting'—notions of parental commitment that extend beyond the nuclear family and involve adults who are not biological parents in long-term commitments to certain children (Cornell: 1996; Stacey: 1996). McCann similarly argues for the importance of spreading commitment to children beyond biological or adoptive parents. He talks of 'a fathering force' in the community. Why not a parenting force or 'paraparenting'? Well, because he wants, like others, to argue that there is something totally distinctive about the way men do parenting; it has to be *fathering*, otherwise this distinctiveness is unrecognised and unrealised.

*Fatherless Sons* plays out an Antipodean version of a story articulated in the US in the mid 1990s and in Australia and Britain in the late 1990s—the construction of a strategy to involve men in parenting that does not in any way undermine gender differences or threaten masculinity. It is to be *masculine fathering*, not substitute mothering.

While the overall tone of the book is positive about changes in women's lives, the book includes this question in its chapter on the future:

In bringing women's concerns into the public sphere have we colluded in running fatherhood down? Without a strong and masculine story of fatherhood men drift off from the role... We have lost an authoritative story

of fatherhood and it is up to men and women today to re-establish one (1999: 187).

There is no discussion of gay fathers. Men who are not heterosexual are totally absent from this story about masculine parenting.

In his conclusion McCann addresses the negative consequences of criticizing fathers in the past and argues that we need to recognise that 'they did the best they could with what they had' (McCann: 1999: 192). At the same time he argues for change, and 'a break in the stream of fathering'. Old fathering is rejected and the language of partnership is evoked—partnership between cultures, between women and men and between adults and young people.

### *Catching them early - beginning fathers?*

*Beginning Fatherhood* is the product of cooperation between an Auckland lecturer in men's studies and coordinator of a men's well-being centre, Warwick Pudney, and a West Auckland midwife, Judy Cottrell. It is a self-help book for 'beginning fathers' about how to be what Popenoe and Blankenhorn would disparagingly refer to as 'New Fathers'. At the same time it draws on some of the same discursive repertoire as the writing of conservative fathering advocates (Pudney & Cottrell: 1998).

The back cover suggests that men are both a support for partners during pregnancy and childbirth and 'an integral part of the experience at the same time'. Pudney and Cottrell rework the 'fatherlessness' agendas that construct men as 'essential' and 'necessary'. However, they argue that being 'integral' is a matter of practice and effort, not the inevitable right of biological fathers, nor exclusively the outcome of meeting children's material needs.

*Beginning Fatherhood* suggests that contemporary fathers may 'do things better' than their fathers (the sort of approach that angers Blankenhorn), but also suggests that this will involve regaining 'some of the fathering that seems to have been lost in our families' (Pudney & Cottrell: 1998: 12). In this respect it harks back to a lost pre-industrial utopian fathering era. It also reinforces the notion that men need to claim their position as fathers against the background of men who think you should leave it to the mother and women 'who might sideline you' (p. 13). This involvement is presented both as an opportunity for men and as the right of children: 'Your child deserves this and so do you' (p. 13).

Fathers are told that their presence is vital for their children. Pudney and Cottrell suggest that girls learn through their fathers to have loving non-sexual

relationships with men. Boys learn how to have emotionally open relationships with other men. Men are encouraged to spend less time doing paid work and more time caring for their children. They are told to take the initiative, not just act as a support person. The job description offered suggests that they should encourage their partner to have a life apart from the baby and that fathers should get support from other men.

So this is new fatherhood which is assertive, that assumes some gender differences, including the differences in male and female physicality and differences in embodied reproduction, but also suggests that parenting is something that men need to be informed about and work at. It is assumed that they will make mistakes and learn from these mistakes. It does not assume that the most important things men have to offer are their earnings and their authority, spiritual or otherwise.

Where does this book stand in the fatherhood controversies? Clearly it draws on both 'new' fatherhood discourses and attempts by people like Blankenhorn and Popenoe to defend distinctively male fathering. The beginning fathers in this book are all assumed to be living with the mothers of the children, while many beginning fathers may not be in the same household. In this respect the book is part of a 'marriage culture' rather than a 'diversity culture' in that it assumes that good fathers will be fathers who continue to live in the same household as their children. A new ideal father is being constructed, and involved fathering presented as a way in which men can avoid being divorced or 'absent' fathers.

### Towards some conclusions

What can we conclude about the current escalation of literature on 'fatherhood' in Aotearoa/New Zealand and elsewhere?

This advocacy of fathering is not on the whole gay, lesbian or single mother friendly. It is often directed at consolidating gender differentiated parenting, even as it tells heterosexual men that they can learn to be emotionally responsive, skilled at nappy changing, ironing and tumbler stacking. While texts like *Beginning Fatherhood* are assertive in their rejection of men as 'heads of households' and associate good parenting with egalitarian relationships with women, they still present idealised images of distinctively 'masculine' parenting.

In the light of these arguments perhaps there should not be books on fathering or fatherhood at all? Shouldn't there just be books on *parenting* that assume that

those engaging in this complex and very long-term task can be of either gender and sometimes both or neither? While I am very attracted to this position, I've also found it necessary to subject it to some close critical scrutiny.

Women have at various times had to struggle for access to forms of work defined as solely appropriate for men. Women are still the minority in a number of professions and trades. This absence of women, and their concentration in restricted forms of work, spawned books, research projects, posters and pamphlets. Attention to the women and paid work analogy pushes me to look at some father advocacy as 'affirmative action' for men. Parenting work is absolutely vital in communities and involves some of the most valuable, the most rewarding, the most challenging, the most time consuming and the most emotionally and intellectually stretching activity. Men's involvement in this work has not been as extensive as it can be. There is a lot of ground to be made up.

There may be a time when there will be no need for books on parenting specifically directed towards fathers. Meanwhile their presence is probably inevitable. At the same time they need to be assessed critically for their assumptions about inevitable differences in male and female parenting as well as the assumption that all children will be reared in heterosexual households. Inclusiveness with respect to male parents should involve recognition that 'beginning fathers' may not be living in the homes of their children or their pregnant lovers. They might be embarking on a co-parenting arrangement with their male lover and two mothers. They may be a teenage parent who lives with his parents.

If effective parenting is important then it seems vital that these forms of diversity are built into the development of new discourses of caring that include men. It seems especially important to challenge the presentation of "fatherhood" as a unitary phenomenon and vital that we look at fathering as a variety of activities engaged in by men of different ages, classes, ethnicities and in different household arrangements. The most conservative of father advocates would deny that all but a select group of married heterosexual breadwinning men are 'fathers' and engage in 'fathering'. However, if involved responsible parenting is good for children and an engaging, extending, rewarding activity for adults, then it will need to be presented to a general audience as available to a diversity of men, not just the "fathers" constructed by Blankenhorn, McCann and others.

It will also involve recognising that fathering is always an activity embedded within a network of social relations, and crucially relations with mothers as well as children, regardless of whether parents occupy the same household (Doherty, et al: 1998). Analysing these relations is the work of sociologists. Facilitating talk about them and reflecting on alternative strategies for action is the work of psychotherapists. Both must respond to challenges to old understandings about gendered parenting and new family forms in the twenty-first century.

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