

Responses

Jayne Hubble

Rosemary Du Plessis' paper was not easy to apprehend. I think she believes parenting is very valuable work and that both men and women need to be involved in its activities. She is not sure about 'fatherlessness' and a 'fathering crisis' which the literature she reviews focuses on. As a feminist sociologist Du Plessis examines the issue of parenting and fathering by looking at the division of labour, (who does what and their capacity to earn), and the related topic of gender differentiation. Du Plessis seems most concerned by how important it is

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.

On reading her paper I was struck by an important omission: the experience and needs of the baby. A psychotherapeutic viewpoint places the baby at the centre of the parenting endeavour. Our knowledge about the emotional development of the baby is based on 100 years of psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic practice, observation, writing and research. This includes mother-infant studies, and the rise of child psychotherapy and analysis. More recently this body of knowledge has been complemented by neurological study and research.

We know that for a baby to develop healthily she needs the consistent care of a person over a long period of time. It is important for this person to be able to be attuned to the needs of that particular baby and stay responsive to it, especially in the early weeks and months. We know that, very early on, the baby needs to experience 'good-enough' holding as embodied in its day to day physical care. This enables integration of physical sensations and emotional experience to take place and for the baby to gain a sense of the limits of herself and to begin to develop awareness of the other. We know about the sophisticated emotional capacities of even very young babies, and that they are 'attachment seeking' from birth. (On a personal note, my own son, born very prematurely, demonstrated this capacity weeks before he had reached his due birth date.) Being attachment or relationship oriented, we know that babies

suffer and are strongly affected by the loss of those they have become attached to.

Is it possible then to hold both points of view together, whereby women's and men's choices about work and income are upheld and the needs of the baby remain the priority?

Taking a psychotherapeutic stance also brings us up against prevailing cultural beliefs rooted in our post-modern world. In such a world consumerism rules; freedom for the individual to choose is the greatest god. Image and flexibility are in, "substance" and loyalty are out. How do the baby and its needs fare among such attitudes? In the last 20 years we have seen a proliferation of childcare centres that cater for all levels of childcare, from newly born through to pre-school. Thus care for the baby is 'bought' while mothers and fathers can remain in the workplace if that is what they choose.

I would like to respond to another main theme of Du Plessis' analysis: gender differentiation. At one point she talks about "the damaging consequences of gender differentiation" (her emphasis), and later says

...books on *parenting* 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 scrutiny.

She goes on to scrutinise it in terms of the disadvantage to women, in the workforce and in relation to income, if men and women are seen as different.

From a psychotherapeutic stance the proposition that perhaps parents could be of either gender, both or neither (I'm unsure what she means by this last category) also requires scrutiny. I would not presume to know the answers to these complex social and psychological questions, except to say that the needs of the baby to have consistent, responsive care still apply. If freedom to choose and select is in and loyalty and substance out, how are mothers and fathers going to fare if the baby they have does not fit in with their chosen social arrangement? Will they have the courage to change to fit around the particular needs of their child?

How else do babies learn about what is male and female than from the intimate experience of being parented by men and women? How does a baby learn to be in a relationship if not from an intense long lasting intimacy with at least one of those parents? How does a baby go on to learn about three person

relationships in the world, if not by experiencing exactly that at home with mum and dad?

Like Du Plessis, I am not sure about a 'fathering crisis'. At least I am not sure that there is any more of a fathering crisis than a mothering or parenting crisis, in which the needs of the baby are often unknown or unrecognised. The field of psychotherapy is an advocate for the needs of the baby and child. More than this, there is a need to disseminate the knowledge we have about the emotional development of children so that others can learn. The language and lens of psychotherapy and feminist sociology are very different, yet they share similar concerns as well. For the sake of parents and babies, it is hoped that these two disciplines, along with related others, can find a way of talking and listening to each other, so that their contributions can be put to good use for future generations.

Lesley King

What a challenge to be invited to respond to this paper. I found myself back in the 70s when men wrote about women's issues and we women were righteously indignant. And I found myself on a personal journey: 'Fathers I have known', reflecting especially on my experience as daughter, partner and mother of fathers who are dear to me.

Like many New Zealanders of my generation, my childhood setting was rural. My father's work was my home. I remember hearing my mother comment that I was lucky to have such an opportunity to know my father, maybe reflecting that as a daughter she had missed that. I agreed, without understanding any personal background to her remark. My Dad and I were good companions. We milked cows and checked the ewes at lambing time together. He taught me to hear the birds, to be still, to believe in myself. Sometimes he punished me, but I always believed that somehow that was my mother's fault. My Dad could do no wrong.

My husband and I became parents in the late 60s and early 70s. My life experience and feminist consciousness told me (and I told him) that parenting was a shared task, that his children were more important than his job, that if I was home caring for our children all day while he was earning our income, then we both shared cooking, cleaning, nappy changing and child minding in the evenings. That if he was doing interesting things in his 'free' time he should have one or more children under his arm. I remember swinging from impotent rage the times he did not do these 'obvious' things to guilt that I felt I had so

much more fun in my life than he did, so much more opportunity to get to know these miraculous new people in our lives. Now my eldest son is a father. Before our first grandchild was born I saw a documentary about the great apes. I learned that when a baby is born in their society the females turn inwards towards the mother-infant pair while the males turn their backs on them and scan their surroundings. For the first time I understood the importance of the parent whose focus is at their family's interface with the world.

Rosemary Du Plessis writes that 'fathering is ... embedded within a network of social relations....' It is also embedded within an historical and intrapsychic network. What a complex interweaving goes into the fabric of parenting: how we and our parents were parented, how we believe that affected us, how we see ourselves and others see us, the ease or otherwise of our relationships with co-parents, how easy or hard our financial path, how easy or challenging the 'fit' between each parent and each child, between each parent and society, all else that is happening in our lives. . . .

Historically 'he fathered the child' has had a very different meaning to 'she mothered the child', suggesting the significance of the father in a child's life was largely at conception. Those of us who examine our own experience and are witness to that of others know for sure this is not so. The reality of one's father, or, if absent, the fantasy woven round him, becomes part of one's core being. Fathers, whether present or absent, are a potent force for their offspring.

In a sense the current debate on 'how to father' continues the questioning families like mine found themselves in in the 70s In that brave new world, where women and men were equal, the easiest way to understand 'equal' was to substitute 'the same'. Anything mothers did fathers could and should do. But often they didn't, leaving women with the mix of dissatisfaction, relief and occasional rage that I remember. I have heard fathers speak of a parallel mix of inadequacy, guilt and resentment. Now that 'equal' is being redefined, and gender roles are less fixed, old ideas are being revisited and new ones stated. This could degenerate into another either/or debate, or it could make room for fathers and their children to find the right way for them. It could focus on roles and behaviour or it could focus on wholeness and relationship.

I watch with empathy and pride as our new family generation meets the challenges of mothering and fathering in this millennium. I wonder too how the fathering and fatherlessness debate helps or hinders parents like these who are currently at the coal face. I hope it does not focus them outwards, on a set of rules, 'how this should be done'. I hope it does not focus them on deficit, on

the differences between their family constellation and the dominant models. The focus I hope for them is relationship. Whether their influence in their children's lives is based in reality or fantasy depends on this relationship, which is forged through moments spent together, meeting each other as they are, beyond socially prescribed roles. Meeting like this goes beyond value judgements about an individual family structure. It reaches beyond the ubiquitous lists of practical child-rearing tips, helpful as they are. It is about *being*, together.

I would like this generation of fathers (and children and mothers) to discover what I learned in relationship with my father: that they are unique and valuable for who they are, not for what they do.

Neal Brown

In traditional white middle class culture, the male role was seen as distinct from that of the female. In what Rosemary Du Plessis describes as the 'marriage culture', the mother had the natural desire to nurture and comfort while the father provided earnings, authority and support. In what this paper describes as today's 'diversity culture', there are many variations to this stereotype. In particular the stereotype has been skewed by the rise in feminism and the growing education of women, with the result that mothers of today are very different from mothers of the nineteenth century. They tend to be more articulate, both emotionally and verbally, and have developed a greater range of roles compared with many fathers.

There does not seem to have been a comparable development of functional roles for fathers, with the result that they are not able to function as equals in the male/female relationship. Previously they would have used power and authority—sometimes even force and violence—as a means of functioning within the relationship. With these options no longer acceptable, the response of the father/partner to the more assertive/educated mother/partner is to withdraw either physically or emotionally into isolation and dysfunction. The anxiety generated by publicity such as that surrounding the Christchurch Civic Creche may be an added reason for withdrawal.

The argument in Rosemary Du Plessis' paper seems to centre on the social roles and gender difference of fathers and mothers whereas the problem, as I see it, is more in the inter- and intrapsychic areas. Role theory from psychodrama can throw light on what is needed to enable couples to function more effectively in these areas. There are three categories of roles: progressive roles that enable a person to move forward and engage; roles for coping; and dysfunctional roles.

Progressive roles include *acceptor of self*, able to accept him or herself as a person; *truth speaker*, speaking their own truth about their thoughts and feelings; *active listener*, putting himself in the other person's shoes; and *naive enquirer*, asking non-judgemental questions. Learning these four progressive roles would enable fathers to stay in a relationship and not withdraw into dysfunctional roles. The task of the psychotherapist is to help both men and women develop the roles necessary to function more adequately. In particular they need to help men not to withdraw but to stay in relationships, and to develop roles that allow them to be more emotionally present, open and flexible.

There is a need to look at the problem as a system: not just to look at one role but to also look at the counter role. How do the mother and father roles complement one another? The issue is not just about how to be fathers. It is about how mothers and fathers function in a relationship. It is about how to be an adequate and equal partner. With this development, the roles of the father will more naturally follow.

Another way to look at the changes that have taken place in parenting, as the article suggests, is to ask the question: 'What roles are necessary to parent?' Who carries them out may not be determined by gender but by the circumstances of a particular couple. Parenting roles are not solely defined by gender, but rather by how the specific couple works out between them who functions in what role to meet the needs of the child. And if as is so often the fact today, fathers and partners may not be living in the same household, flexibility and variation of roles may be even more necessary.

One issue that the article does not address is the importance in a child's life of stability and continuity in parenting. While the paper suggests that pararenting could meet the needs of the child in a 'diversity culture', I am not so sure. Children moved from home to home are often left feeling unstable and vulnerable. Stability and continuity of parenting are essential if children are to develop a strong sense of who they are.

Andrew Duncan

As a father of a teenager I am very interested in fathering and read Rosemary Du Plessis' presentation with energy and intensity.

I immediately reacted to the negative tone of the article. Early on the focus on "mother absence" and "maternal deprivation" in the 70s is mentioned, and that "'Father absence' was not a significant issue." The tone suggests that the author wishes that was still true. In fact later Du Plessis says "Shouldn't there

just be books on *parenting* (her emphasis) that assume that those engaging in this complex and very long-term task can be of either gender and sometimes both or neither? ... I am very attracted to this position....” It is relieving to hear this clear statement of her bias. Just quietly, although I appreciate her gender neutrality in many ways, I am not sure what to make of the above reference to parenting by people of “neither” gender!

Du Plessis seems to be going to challenge the “anxiety about the supposed ‘decline’ in fathering... based on a statistical decline in the proportion of biological fathers who occupy the same households as their children” which seems to me to be a very legitimate anxiety. However, she promptly leaves this issue with no substantive critique and moves on to the “fathering” authors’ critique of ‘new fathers’; those “fathers who parent much like mothers”. Here I am in full agreement with her. “Much like mothers” seems to refer to nurturant men who are willing to change nappies and put infants to bed etc: activities which I certainly see as desirable for all fathers if threatening to some. Where I differ from Du Plessis is that I have no anxiety or wish that men who participate in the more nurturant side of parenting will be the same as women in their parenting. To my mind the gender difference runs too deep to be removed this way.

It is argued that “what are presented as the consequences of fatherlessness are often the consequences of sole parenthood”. This is an interesting idea but surely needs some discussion if not evidence. She suggests that a well resourced single parent (presumably female) does not need the support of fathering for her children. Again a possible idea but very controversial and surely needing evidence and discussion! Du Plessis seems to be arguing that the real problem is “gender differentiation” (her emphasis). I heartily agree with her stance that the economic inequality between men and women is a very serious problem and that an “immediate consequence of men not living with children is financial deprivation”. And furthermore I would add that this has been aggravated by the state progressively reducing support to single parent families (most often women) especially over the last 20 years of new right dominated policies. However, this is a quite different issue from the value or otherwise of gender differentiation in parenting. Given that the economic issues tend more often to be absent with male single parents I wonder if there is any research looking at the outcomes for children of those families.

I find the tone of Du Plessis’ presentation objectionable in its subtle polemic. Just one example is the way she diminishes Kiwi men’s writing on fathering

by referring to them as “translating” the U.S. issues into New Zealand. I doubt the writers would see themselves as doing that and it diminishes the authenticity of the issues in Aotearoa. Rex McCann’s attachment to **fathering** rather than parenting is disparaged, yet once again there is no substance to the argument. I will acknowledge my bias to the value of a distinct contribution to the upbringing of children from fathering, However I see it more as a role than necessarily residing in men. I was impressed by Andrew Samuel’s suggestion at the 1997 NZAP national conference from research (if I remember rightly) that in lesbian couples one member tends to take on a more fathering type of role. I can understand an objection to the gender laden word “fathering” being used to refer to this role and I am not attached to the word, but the role itself seems to me to be likely to be important.

Du Plessis’ critique of Rex McCann’s leaving out any discussion of gay fathers is an important point. Perhaps he did not find any useful material on this but it does need to be acknowledged as an important area perhaps especially when we are talking about fatherlessness.

The critique of *Beginning Fatherhood* seems to try to have it both ways. It is disparaged by the labelling as about ‘new fathers’ although I thought Du Plessis disagreed with this, and then disparaged implicitly by its description as drawing “on some of the same discursive repertoire as the writing of conservative fathering advocates”. Thus Pudney and Cottrell are tainted by the ‘conservative’ brush but again with no substantial argument.

In fact Du Plessis seems to have little argument with most of the material in *Beginning Fatherhood*. Her description still maintains its disparaging tone but is really just descriptive. Again she validly points out the bias in the book towards the intact family and a seeming implication that to do things well the good father must be living with his partner and children. However I would suggest that this is unconscious rather than intentional (since both the authors are divorced) and does not damage their fundamental argument about the importance of the involved father.

I can’t resist drawing attention to Du Plessis’ use of the word ‘escalation’ to refer to the increase in literature on fatherhood. This seems a desperate attempt to create a conflict in writing which is intended quite explicitly to be integrating of men’s and women’s concerns.

The argument seems to be that advocacy of fathering is by definition not “gay, lesbian or single mother friendly”. Is “father advocacy” “affirmative action for

men”? This is a bit strong. I don’t believe men are suggesting they should displace women. They are arguing for a valuable role in parenting. Of course, some men do have their own issues about mothering such that they might like to be able to take over the mother role—we have our share of envy of women’s capacity for bearing children and breast feeding and being the ‘primary caregiver’. However, speaking as the parent of one child, it seems to me there are plenty of valuable contributions to go around. Being a single parent of either gender is not generally something people are thrilled about doing but it is often the best option and a perfectly viable if not easy one. Surely the Kiwi books discussed are interested in how we can cooperate to provide best for the needs of children, and who can seriously dispute that there is a dearth of fathering as well as of parenting?

Warwick Pudney

Men and women are different. Although this seems a rather obvious statement, the West has just experienced 40 years of denial of this difference, albeit for good reason. Our ‘60s feminists were working to break very rigid gender stereotypes that severely limited women’s and men’s lives. One aspect of this was a denial of difference for the purpose of generating an atmosphere where society could believe that in fact “*girls could do anything*”. We live today with the success of that political activism and the need for continued change for both genders.

However, there has been some fallout along the way from the process of denial of the differences between men and women. Differences do exist, both genetic and constructed, and these differences serve to give diversity and breadth to our families and communities in the qualities each brings to them. In this way fathering is also different from mothering. To say that they are not is to perpetuate the denial. Some of the tasks may be different, such as protection roles that stem from male physical strength, and nurture roles that receive understanding from the power of a woman’s birth and feeding. The same task, however, may be done differently, with different qualities — women operating in senior management will do it differently from men doing the same task, and men nursing will do it differently from women. Psychotherapy clients often choose therapists on the basis of gender due to the difference that gender brings.

It is to the poverty of our nation that we ignore this difference, especially as every child born in New Zealand has to spend its life relating, successfully we

hope, to both genders and developing its own gender identity, which I would suggest is at least as important as any ethnic cultural identity.

Differences based on both genetic sex and constructed gender include the following:

- Men are born with and continue to have about 30% more muscle tissue than women. This has a profound effect on the roles that they are allocated and results in men taking on higher risk protection roles and danger. Women will always have the power of giving birth and feeding.
- Additionally, the protector roles, combined with the provider role, require men to emotionally repress and focus on the power of anger as the most useful emotion. Girls and women are allowed to display a much fuller range of emotions and have the power and the privilege of vulnerability.
- Boys and men also are cross-culturally more active and physical. They prefer to *do and act* rather than *talk, relate and express*.
- Male brains are “wired” differently and process things differently. Males may practice generally a more linear and problem-solving thinking and females a more systemic thinking that focuses on interrelationship and enables multi-tasking.
- The hormonal make-up of women and men is different and testosterone is a key genetic influence on all of the above.

Whatever the political motivations, there is cultural, social strength in the differences and the diversity that they offer. I believe that it is time to value that difference and consider that it be an essential part of our approach to a broad-based cultural sensitivity. It is for the possibilities of our combined futures and our community that we acknowledge that the culture of men and women is wonderfully different. And nowhere is that more essential than in the parenting, the mothering and fathering, of our children.

