Literature Review

Fatherhood Throughout History

Compared to present-day families, 17th century households serviced a wider range of functions and had more porous and flexible boundaries. They served a variety of productive, educational, religious, and welfare roles that were subsequently allocated to other institutions. In certain respects, fathers now play a more active role in domestic life than would have been true two centuries ago (Mordue, 2003). In the past they were chiefly responsible for teaching their children to write, leading household prayers, and instructing the young in farming and craft skills. Domestic conduct manuals and childrearing advice books were addressed to men not their wives. During the early 1800’s late 1700’s fathers were also considered as the legal primary parent. Fathers, not mothers, received custody after divorce or separation. In addition, the father was responsible for placing his children in a lawful calling or occupation; consenting to his children’s marriage; and distributing the family property. Yet it would be mistaken to exaggerate or romanticize colonial men’s involvement in family life. Although men could be attached to and indulgent of very young children, there is no evidence that they engaged in the daily care of infants or toddlers. Diaper changing, feeding, bathing, cooking and other everyday tasks of childcare were left to wives, daughters, or servants during this period (Mintz, 1992).

Other demographic circumstances also contributed to the patriarchal concept of men being significantly older than their wives by four to five years on average (Mintz, 1992; Sanson and Wise, 2001). It was a universal experience in the 17th and 18th century for wives to transfer from their father’s influence to their husbands without any period of self- independence in between. This was largely due to women’s need to be financially supported. During the late 18th century, a series of demographic, economic and cultural changes transformed the meaning and social experience of fatherhood and motherhood. Both the ideology and the reality of father’s authority visibly declined. Fathers found themselves less able to influence the son’s choices and less able to
determine when and whom their daughter’s would marry. Later in the century, in Western Europe, England and the United States, there was a growing belief that children’s nurturance and moral development should be entrusted to mothers (Smyth, 2003). Although there is little evidence as to what justified this shift away from fathers and the functions they had previously successfully performed. In the United States there was a deepening conviction, in the early evolution of the feminist movement, that women who were free from the corrupting influence of society had a special ability to mould the character traits of children. Although there appears to be little creditable evidence that supports these claims (Mintz, 1992; Sanson and Wise, 2001).

Historical commentary on the 19th century identifies the industrial revolution for helping mothers to become the central figure of domestic life while reducing men to essentially economic figures within the family household (Roberts and Moseley, 1996). Before the modern era childrearing was a collective enterprise and most family matters, including father-child relationships were ruled primarily by duty and obligation (Roberts and Moseley, 1996).

This physical separation of the household and the workplace also contributed to a different conception of the family and of the men’s family roles. According to an emerging middle-class ideology, the family was the oasis or haven from the pressures of payed employment, with the husband and father being the family’s provider and protector.

At the early stages of the 19th century however, the workplace moved further away from the family home. This increased the time many fathers were forced to be away from their families to fullfill their working and therefore family commitments. Increasingly men left home each day to go to work, while wives stayed at home. This led to a new emerging language to describe family relationships, which clearly identified the father as previously mentioned as provider and protector and his wife or mother of his children as his dependants. By the end of the 19th century, however male family involvement had declined with many outside influences contributing to this
shift. The separation of home and the workplace was one of those influences as governments were physically restructuring cities into suburbs and central business district (Arndt, 2004).

Fathers have been a rather invisible entity in the study of child development and family processes, with their influence rarely considered and their voices scarcely heard (Coley, 2001). However, the past two decades have seen a significant growth in the public, political, and academic attention directed at fathers, addressing their roles in families, their rights and responsibilities and their influence on their children (Coley, 2001). Subsequently, there is still little understanding of fathers who fall outside the considered normal research parameters. This is largely due to the historical shifts in family life and economics where the popular perception of the father’s primary role has experienced dramatic changes over recent times. In the 17th & 18th centuries, fathers were seen primarily as breadwinners and dispatchers of moral values and religious education (Coley, 2001).

The previous few decades though have brought even greater demographic change. Women moving from the home to the work force in substantial numbers, while increasing their financial power have been a major result of these changes. Alongside this movement, men’s wages began to stagnate and the relative importance of father’s financial support of children and families declined (Coley, 2001; Horn and Bush, 2003; Renk, 2003). The last century also saw a significant evolution in the standard working week for full-time workers. The working week slowly decreased from forty-nine hours in the beginning of the 1900’s to thirty-five/thirty-eight hour week in 1980’s (Gray, 2004). Regardless of these changes many fathers were still working more than forty-eight hours a week with an increase between 1978 – 1994 to a little over 20 per cent of all full-time workers effected (Gray, 2004). This has led to a greater interest occurring in the effects of extended working hours fathers were performing and their inability to have reasonable amounts of time for family life, and leisure time. Added to these concerns has been
the dramatic increase in mothers entering the workforce over the past three decades. This has produced profound effects on the overall wellbeing of the family structure with added pressure of managing a balance between work and family becoming increasingly harder (Gray, 2004).

By the middle of the 20th century significant changes had occurred to the family with mothers gaining almost sole responsibility for home and children. Father’s attitudes, women’s attitudes towards paternal involvement have changed gradually over the last two decades. A survey that shows a majority of men wanting greater involvement in their children’s lives show that a majority of women do not want their partners to be more involved than they currently are (Sanson and Wise, 2001). This suggests that although many mother’s are heavily burdened by their workloads and would like more support from their partners a considerable numbers of mothers are quiet satisfied with the current status quo. In relation not only to the extent of the father’s involvement but also to the range and types of activities in which fathers involve themselves. In support of fathers though, women overwhelmingly view breadwinning as a crucial role for husbands and fathers.

In contrast and for a considerable longer period, Indigenous communities around the world generally had women as the primary child carer as part of their culture and traditions (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003). Together, these demographic changes increased women’s financial freedom and made paternal financial support by biological fathers less necessary for some families. Related trends include declining fertility, increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, heightened rates of non-marital childbearing and increases in welfare support for single mothers have all contributed to the removal of many men from traditional fathering roles and often from their children’s households completely (Coley, 2001). These changes have reinforced a complex family system while making the presently ill-defined roles for fathers even less clear (Coley, 2001; Mordue, 2003).
The “traditional family” structure – in which mothers were the caregivers and fathers are the income earners is increasingly becoming a rarity (Flemming and Tobin, 2005). It is however, a myth that continues to be upheld in social and economic policy formulation (Stolberg, Mullett et al., 1998). This is reinforced by Australia’s current welfare policy that is in conflict with fathers interests. Sole parents welfare has focused on empowering women (Horn and Bush, 2003). Examples of this in Australia are evident with family payments being paid exclusively to women and generally not men (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002).

On the domestic front, while women have taken on an increasing role in providing income to their families, men appear to have not taken up their share of the responsibility for family life (Flemming and Tobin, 2005). Responsibility for children in particular, is still seen as belonging to the mother. The duties of fathers both actual and expected - vary greatly throughout the world. However fathers’ contributions to the direct care of their children, particularly when children are very young, is critical (Fraenkel, 1999). Fathers have also been care providers and teachers in different cultures from past eras (Sanson and Wise, 2001). In ancient Greece, the father’s role was well defined. The role of fathers throughout the 19th and 20th century’s has been through considerably more changes in recent years than women. There is slowly an increasing emphasis on the crucial role that fathers play in their children’s personal development. Historically, the stability of marriage and the family has been seen as fundamental to the stability of society (Flood, 1998).

In the last quarter of the 20th century, Western states have largely ceased to regulate the role of men and women as husband and wives (Russell, Barclay et al., 1999; Muchlenberg, 2004). Importantly humans have had to learn how to parent in every culture and historical period know
to mankind, with men’s family role traditionally shaped by social, economic, and cultural expectations (Arendell and College, 1996).

Fatherhood in Aboriginal Communities

Mick Dobson one of Australia’s Aboriginal leaders, identifies that the same plight is being faced by Aboriginal fathers in his article Healing Body Mind and Spirit- It’s About Time We Took a Stand (Dobson,, 2002). In this article, Dobson highlights the demise of the Aboriginal father’s identity continually being eroded since European occupation over the last two hundred years. This leads him to believe that this has occurred due to colonisation and through the lack of recognition of Aboriginal fathers, grandfathers, sons, and grandsons traditional roles (Dobson 2002). In Aboriginal culture, the oldest culture in the world, the father’s role was clearly defined and provided a sense of coherence and meaning to young male’s identity. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a complex system of family relations, where each person knows their kin and their land. These extended family relationships are the core of Indigenous kinship systems that are also central to the way culture is passed on and society is organised.

In this way, Elders bridge the past and the present and provide guidance for the future. They teach important traditions and pass on their skills, knowledge and personal experiences, including parenting skills (Mackinnon-Lewis, Volling et al., 1994). It is for these reasons that in Indigenous society, Elders are treated with respect and are valued highly for their knowledge and wisdom. However, this does not mean that all Aboriginal knowledge can be known by all people. Some information can only be revealed to certain people. This information is known as Aboriginal Law and is considered as sacred (Museum, 2004). For example, some sacred information can only be told to certain initiated women and men after they have carried out certain initiation rites (Museum, 2004). One type of initiation relevant to this project is when elders initiate boys into
manhood: a cultural protocol that has been part of Aboriginal traditions since well before colonization (Campbell, 2003).

Evidence is starting to overwhelmingly indicate the significant benefits that Aboriginal fathers bring to their children's social and emotional development (Milburn, 2002). The question for Australian society that remains unanswered is how do we change the negative social views of Aboriginal men as fathers while promoting the benefits that a majority of Aboriginal fathers can bring to the overall development of children? Some justifiable reasons associated with the negative social view of Aboriginal fathers include, increases in domestic violence against mother’s and Aboriginal fathers not meeting their financial responsibilities for their children (Horn, 2004). In addition, Aboriginal fathers need to take more responsibility in acknowledging the emotional and social fall out that their children suffer due to their lack of involvement in the children’s lives (Howard, 2003). Furthermore, there needs to be greater recognition that a proportion of the social issues facing Australian society today stem from the demise of traditional marriage structure and the lack of fathers in the home (Milburn, 2002). Unfortunately fatherless Aboriginal homes are not just a major social issue here in Australia, they are now an international concern as well (Horn, 2004).

**Studying the Psychosocial Aspects of Fatherhood**

Fatherhood in general terms could be defined as a biological and social relationship between a male parent and his offspring (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002). Fatherhood has also been referred to as a patterned set of parenting behaviours and reflects society’s ideals about the rights and obligations of men in families (Parliament of South Australia, 2003). There are many different kinds of fathers. You may be a father in a traditional nuclear family, a stepfamily or have full time care as a sole parent - although evidence indicates this is rare for men (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A). Today fathers are expected to play a more “hands on” approach as carers and
role models (Mundigo, 1995). With many more women in the paid workforce than at any other
time in Australia’s history, a greater balance is required in the home between mothers and fathers
in caring for their children (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A).

During the mid 1970’s a number of investigators sought to describe fatherhood through direct
observation and sometimes through detailed maternal and paternal report. These reports directly
examined the extent of paternal interactions with children. This has led to many findings
assuming that fathers essentially take no responsibility for their children’s care or rearing.
However fathers who take higher degrees of responsibility have not been studied extensively
(Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A). In two-parent families with employed mothers, the average
levels of paternal engagement and accessibility are both substantially higher than in families with
unemployed mothers. Although descriptive accounts of father’s actual contact with their children
are informative, they fall short of identifying what fathers feel they do when they are available and
why they do what they do (Lamb and Elster, 1985). In this regard, a fuller understanding of
father’s roles and the origins of their presumed responsibilities is justified. Historical, cultural and
family ideas have also informed the roles that fathers play and undoubtedly shape the absolute
amounts of time fathers spend with their children, activities they share with them, and perhaps
even the quality of the father-child relationships. In earlier times, fathers were viewed as all-
powerful patriarchs who wielded enormous power over their families, and remnants of these
notions continued until quiet recently.

These earlier conceptualizations of father’s roles often focused too narrowly on breadwinning
capabilities (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A). Since then researchers, theorist, and practitioners
no longer cling to the simplistic belief that fathers fill just a one-dimensional role in their families
and children’s eyes (Lamb and Elster, 1985). Instead, they recognise that fathers play a number of
significant roles, such as companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, role models, moral
guides, teachers, breadwinners – whose relative importance to their children varies across historical periods and different sub-cultural groups (Lamb and Elster, 1985).

Scholars are slowly (but not consistently), recognising the diverse array of family types and socio-cultural expectations and demands that shape parents roles, family processes and child development. Researchers such as Smyth, Russell and Lamb all raise similar issues. In reality, this means that fathers play differing roles in different cultural contexts and that various group’s hold contrasting views of what constitutes a good father. For example, breadwinning may be paramount importance in some contexts while moral guidance may be quiet unimportant. For other families and communities, financial support may be unimportant, direct care and supervision crucial and emotional support invaluable. Such variations in the different aspects of fatherhood and family structures further complicate attempts to conceptualise and assess parent roles and their influence, but when appropriately recognise, these promise to permit a more extensive exploration in research into father-child relationships. Careful attempts to describe father-child relationships in vastly different cultures will however assist in building a database needed for further progress in greater understanding of father-child relationships and roles.

Only by considering the father’s performance of these various roles and by taking into account their relative importance in their social and ecological contexts, can researchers truly evaluate father’s impact on child development (Trowell and Etchegoyen, 2002). Unfortunately, theorist and social commentators have tended in the past to emphasize only one paternal role at a time, with different functions attracting most attention during different historical eras (Roberts and Moseley, 1996).
Although fathers have typically been perceived and judged by their breadwinning or provisioning capabilities, fathers fill other roles as well. Much of the early observational and survey data suggested that mothers and fathers engaged in rather different types of interaction with their children, especially (but not only) in relation to infants (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A). Such findings seem quiet reliable, although the results have often been misrepresented and have led to overly stereotypic and unbalanced portrayals of fathers contribution as play partners (Flood, 2001). Compared with mothers, fathers indeed spend a greater proportion of their own time with children engaged in play. In absolute terms, most past studies suggest that mothers play with their children more than fathers do, but because play is particular boisterous, stimulating, and emotionally arousing, it is more prominent in father-child interactions. One might argue that in highlighting the unique qualities of fathers and mothers, these studies may promote narrow views of fathers and mother’s roles, thereby failing to capture similarities in the meaning or degree of influence parents exert on their children. In fact, both father’s and mother’s encourage exploration during play with their children.

A vast majority of studies on families were conducted between the 1940’s and 1970’s, when fathers were considered as sex-role models. As a result, most studies were focused on sex-role development, especially in sons (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997). The design of these early studies was quiet simple with researchers assessing masculinity in fathers and sons and then determining how strongly the two sets of scores then correlated (Horin, 2003). What was surprising for researchers was as there was no consistent correlation between the two findings, a puzzling outcome because it appeared to clash with the guiding assumption about the crucial function served by fathers (Horin, 2003). One could use this issue to support the feminist view that if fathers did not make boys into men then what role did they really serve (Coley, 2001).
Current knowledge and understanding of traditional Aboriginal society and culture derives from Aboriginal oral and art traditions, the writings of early European voyagers and settlers, and extensive research studies. Most of the recorded information derives from post-nineteenth century studies that have been carried out by non-Aboriginal researchers. The findings of such researchers may reasonably be considered speculative, since many were observing Aboriginal peoples in times of profound change (Lamb and Elster, 1985).

Unfortunately, there are many problems with recent research about fathering, that include conceptualisation, sampling and methodological issues. For example, Marsiglio (1998) points out that much of the sociological research has relied on mother’s reports of fathers attitudes and behaviours, though there is a growing amount of research exploring the beliefs and perceptions of fathers themselves. Even father’s self-report data needs to be questioned as there is evidence that they report providing more financial support than mothers report receiving (Mintz, 1992).

As research in the areas around fathering become more sophisticated and extensive, it is likely that our views of the role that father’s play in the development of the child will change. Paul Amato who earlier in his research career, argued that children were not necessarily negatively affected by divorce, has recent years completed research which has changed his mind. At the Men and Family Relationship Forum in Canberra in 1998, he reported on a metaanalysis he undertook of 54 existing studies of non-resident fathers and children. He found that children’s academic success was not linked to amount or frequency of contact between the child and its father. It was however positively correlated with the amount of child, and authoritative parenting styles usually adopted by the fathers. This analysis goes some way towards helping us understand the complexity of the effect of fathers on the well-being of the child (Sullivan, 2000).
It has taken a long time for psychologists to realise that they had failed to ask why should boys want to be like their fathers. Would they only want to resemble their fathers with whom they had a relationship that was generally warm and positive? In fact, the quality of father-son relationships proved to be a crucial mediating variable (Lindsey, Mackinnon-Lewis, et al., 2002). When the relationships between masculine fathers and their sons were good, the boys were indeed more masculine. Boys also seem to conform to the sex-role standards of their fathers when their relationship with their own fathers was warm and caring, regardless of how masculine the fathers were. Even though the ability to be warm and intimate has traditionally only considered as a female attribute (Arndt, 2004).

Father paternal behaviour and involvement is undoubtedly affected by the members of a father’s social networks particularly his relationship with the mother of his children (Dekovic, Wissink, et al., 2004). The roles that fathers play in family life, whether or not they reside with mothers of their children, often depends on mother’s attitudes and expectations (Allen, 1999). Mothers often consider themselves as the gatekeepers when it comes to non-residential father’s access to children and they frequently constrain and define the roles and responsibilities of both residential and non-residential fathers (Arendell and College, 1996; Allen, 1999). For example, mothers communicate their parenting expectations of their partners by handing over the babies for diapering, instead of diapering babies themselves.

Likewise, subtle maternal grimaces when fathers fail to console their crying infants may lead fathers to leave the nurturing to the mothers. In other cases mothers may use children as bait or bargaining tools to get what they want: for example money and or sexual favours from their partners (Denner, 1998).
The Fathers Role in the Family

In general, fathers (including biological fathers, stepfathers, divorced fathers, and father figures) are expected to love, support, protect, nurture, teach, discipline, and control their children. Fatherhood has been linked to the exercise of family authority at least since Ancient Greece and Rome (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002). Recent research performed by the South Australian government confirmed such practices (Parliament of South Australia, 2003).

Reviews and comments on research into fathers roles have consistently drawn attention to increased knowledge of the multifaceted, complex, and changing nature of the father role (Mackinnon-Lewis, Volling, et al., 1994). An example of the complexity faced by men as indicated by White (1994) who believes, that the debate on the fatherhood role is associated with the politicization and theorisation of gender relations. White (1994) also argues that another dilemma facing fathers is the need to establish a new balance between the physical and emotional costs of traditionally defined male roles. Roles that consider the investments fathers perform in their paid work while financially supporting their family. White (1994) sees the family as both a foundation to social functioning in society and yet proving to be very fragile.

One of the longitudinal changes on the father’s participation in family life is divorce, which has lead to increases in women entering the workforce and parents raising children in single parent families (Arendell and College, 1996). Few studies examine how single and divorced fathers feel about fathering (Trowell and Etchegoyen, 2002). Most social scientists have assumed that men were not capable of, nor interested in, actual hands on parenting, but research showed that at least in laboratory settings, fathers expressed interest in and could care for infants and young children as well as a mother (Bulanda, 2004). Cross-cultural research also shows that about half of the worlds known indigenous societies have exhibited close father-child relationships, with contact typically increasing as the children get older (Lindsey, Mackinnon-Lewis, et al., 2002).
Previous research studies, traditionally in psychology, tended to focus specifically on ‘sex difference’ in parenting styles rather than parenting as a holistic subject (Horn, 2004).

Another influence on the father’s role is that the average hours worked by full-time male employers in Australia has increased since the late 1970’s. Combined with increases in female labour force participation, these have created concerns about the impact that long working hours have on family time (Smyth, 2003). Added evidence indicates that overall satisfaction within the workplace decreases as the number of weekly hours worked increases beyond the standard thirty-eight hour working week (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1997). For fathers working very long hours, their satisfaction between their work hours and family is extremely relevant to father’s function and overall wellbeing (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1997).

Even with concerns about the effects of long working hours there still is not a consensus on the overall implications that long work hours have for families. Most empirical research on impact has been on individual wellbeing, however within Australia, little qualitative research has addressed the influence of father involvement on overall family wellbeing (Westmore, 2003). Added to this lack of research is that most studies that have previously been performed have tended to focus only on specific industries or are quantitative by nature which reduced investigations to specific contexts (Parliament of South Australia, 2003). Importantly, while examining the relationship between working hours and the time available for family acknowledgement that finding a balance between family and work is becoming a more complex and difficult issue.

**Genders Roles- Male/Female**

One of the most common cited issues confronting fathers reflected across a range of societies is the impact of the traditional father’s role on fatherhood. Some of those identified barriers causing
fathers some concern cited in then report on “The Status of Fathers in South Australia” (Parliament of South Australia, 2003) include,

- A social view that fathers are financial providers, not nurturers: “for some reason, if you stay at home and look after the kids, you’re not a man”
- Father’s hesitation in taking up family support policies, due to fear of being considered “un-masculine” or “uncommitted” to their work, causing undue employment insecurity
- A social expectation of fathers as disciplinarians: “fathers are often confused about their role – they have to balance discipline verses sensitivity and don’t have a clear idea on how they are therefore supposed to provide support to their partners or their children” (Parliament of South Australia, 2003).

The report noted these identified barriers reinforce traditional stereotypes which then influence the way fathers, as men, express their emotion’s or seek personal support. Suggesting a powerful stereotyping of men that says ‘men don’t cry or that men don’t have feelings’.

Men and Women have generally had very well-defined roles which vary according to their age, while being influenced by their own socio-cultural circumstances. Men and women are separate biological entities with clearly defined physiological and sexual characteristics. Men’s procreative roles are restricted to the initial phase of the reproductive process. However, men are also sexual partners – that is, they play a role in sexual initiation, in establishing sexual unions, or in stopping them. Men are husbands and fathers, and as such are central figures in marriage and in reproduction. The role of men in society, including their sexual behaviour, participation in reproductive decisions, and child care involvement, varies from culture to culture, as do the corresponding roles of women (Campbell, 2003).

Gender roles also influence development in Indigenous children. For children during the crucial period of early adolescence they struggle with issues of identity particularly gender identity.
Through the process of self-categorization, identification incorporates both social and cultural roles to form an individual identity (Museum, 2004). An important aspect of identity is the confidence one has about achieving their goals and aspirations in forming their future identity. In this way, Indigenous Australian children are extremely vulnerable to negative communications from the mainstream and adults (Wilkinson, 2002). As early adolescents begin to explore various career and educational opportunities, they begin to consider seriously achievements for the future. This aids in providing a basis for setting goals, planning, exploring options, making commitments. These ultimately guide the adolescent’s personal developmental course (Chase-Lansdale, Wakschlag, et al., 1995). A person’s self-characteristics serve as the cognitive representation to guide their behaviour and process information about themselves. This process is believed to have significant long-term consequences to how men and women function as adults (Dekovic, Wissink, et al., 2004). Identity formation is a complex cognitive-motivational structure. Its motivational properties draw from the needs value of expected behavioural outcomes, the self-appraisal of internal ability and effort as well as socio-cultural factors for satisfying personal needs. Empirical studies have shown that the cognitive representation of the prospective self is further shaped by gender, age and cultural settings (Bloodworth, Unknown). Exploration and commitment during adolescence strongly influence self-perception. While at the same time, the role parents and the home environment continue to strongly impact on their educational goal setting and thus their future career paths. Given adolescence is a period of developmental change, challenge and potential, it is the optimal time to identify and address the formation of a self-concept with assistance and encouragement to go forth and achieve. I believe for these reasons Aboriginal fathers should be provided with this encouragement in adolescence which I don’t think they currently receive at the present.
Family Dynamics and Social Change

The concept and experience of fatherhood is affected by variations in and emerging changes to family types. In order to understand more fully the contemporary role of fathers, it is important to also be aware of the context in which fathering takes place (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1997; Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003; Parliament of South Australia, 2003). Although the above studies created a recent picture of family types in Australia, there is a continuing trend away from the traditional ‘nuclear family’ and towards alternative family compositions (Roberts and Moseley, 1996). Evidence supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that between 1986 and 2001 the number of single parent families increased by 53%. During the same period there was also an increase in percentage of couple families free of children from 28% of to 35.7% (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1997; Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003)

The ABS (2003) report explains these “shifts in the prevalence of different family types in society” just identified as linked to the following economic and social trends:

- Trends of increasing family divorce and remarriage have contributed to increasing numbers of one-parent, step-parent and blended families Trends towards delayed childbearing, increased childlessness and greater longevity have contributed to an increase in the number of ‘couple’ families with no children.

- The nature of these couple families has changed with an increase in de facto partnering.

- The age profile of particular family types (such as couples with children) has shifted, as young people increasingly postpone major life events like having children. For example, young adults are remaining in education longer, gaining economic independence later in life, and forming long-term relationships at older ages. The exception to this rule is with Indigenous young adults aged between 15 and 18, who double the remaining Australian population child birth rates. They are also unlikely to remain with the child’s father in a long-term relationship.
In relation to these social changes, in traditional Aboriginal society, childhood is short but
considered a time of great freedom for children. As children approach puberty they are required
to undergo ritual initiation processes (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2002). By the time of
initiation, a girl is considered physically capable of fulfilling her traditional role of food gatherer,
sexual partner, bearer of children, and carer of the elderly (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A). At
that time she will be initiated into women hood. After a relatively short time of seclusion from
the group, during which she may be instructed in women’s business, appropriate initiation
ceremonies are conducted for her. This includes ritual acts of body-cleansing, body-painting and
ornamentation. A boy approaching puberty is introduced into manhood through a series of
initiation ordeals which may include tooth evulsion, circumcision, nose piercing, sleep
deprivation, and/or the cutting of ceremonial markings upon skin - usually the chest (Fryer-
Smith, 2002). These tests are designed to instil qualities of obedience, discipline, self reliance and
cooperativeness. Upon satisfactory completion of these tests, complex and elaborate initiation
ceremonies are held in the boy’s honour. After initiation ceremonies, young men are still regarded
as novices. They are expected to sit in respectful silence at meetings held by men. A young man
gains status by participating in further tests and ceremonies during succeeding years. As a man
becomes entrusted with more secrets of the scared Law, he then grows in power and influence. I
believe these cultural practices currently sit uneasily with the wider social changes Australia is
experiencing, and need to be considered in policy responses to reinforcing Aboriginal
fatherhood.

Certain senior male members of traditional language groups may become Elders. Elders are
initiated men who are selected to be ritual leaders upon the basis of their personal qualities (such
as bravery and compassion) and upon their knowledge of the Law (Fryer-Smith, 2002). Elders
provide leadership in matters affecting the group, including dispute-resolution, educating the
young and advising on marriage partners. In traditional Aboriginal society the advice of the
Elders is usually heeded and understood. Elders assume responsibility for sacred objects, spiritual matters and the performance of sacred rituals. The Elders are vested with the responsibility of custodianship of Aboriginal Law. Their overriding duty is to honour and maintain the Law, and pass it down to the next generation (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

Historically, the traditional role and status of women in traditional Aboriginal society has not been easy to ascertain. In earlier times anthropologist concluded that men, rather than woman, performed significant roles in the operation of the Law and in ritual life (Fryer-Smith, 2002). This was attributed to the fact that usually after marriage women left their own people’s country to live in their husband’s country. Since ritual matters are conducted by the traditional owners of territory where men were regarded as sacred keepers.

In today’s day and age, Aboriginal families are increasingly moving away from the traditional mother/ father structure more commonly associated with traditions. Although the role of mothers has varied over time, the general child/mother relationship has remained the same. Women’s empowerment begins in the household with equality, autonomy, and respect.

Achieving equality between men and women in the family is the foundation on which empowerment in other areas is based in many families (Fraenkel, 1999). Women’s lives are usually described in terms of motherhood, while men’s lives are usually characterized as heads of households or wage-earners. Men’s roles as fathers tend to be vague (Renk, 2003). Yet men’s lives involve are commitment to their children and is the key to improving the quality of family life and the prospects of the next generation (Fraenkel, 1999).

Although the stereotyped father image includes being “the head of the house” and the person who makes major decisions, very few fathers see themselves in this way (Lamb and Tamis-
Lemonda, N/A). These perceptions are broadly consistent with findings from early Australian family studies which have asked about actual family decision making (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, N/A).

**Challenges to Fathers’ Roles**

Firstly, it is important to establish that much of the literature on fatherhood roles relates to the biological father of a child. As noted in previous paragraphs fatherhood in the law is seen generally as an identity arising out of a biological relationship. Whilst also allowing for the legal construction of a father identity through the mechanism of adoption or through deeming under artificial reproduction law (Fryer-Smith, 2002).

The biological connection or act of fathering a child is what changes a man into a father and the change in identity caused by this is physically irreversible in law (Braungart-Rieker, 1999). He will always be the father of his child within the core of the biological definition, even where the law supplants his biological status as father through mechanisms of adoption. Biological fatherhood still remains the standard reference point for any discussion of fatherhood status or roles (including social roles). Indeed, I believe much of the literature on the impact of absent fathers and their lack of presence in children’s lives assumes a biological definition. In current literature there is also much discussion comparing outcomes for those children experiencing their biological father’s presence in their lives. These discussions also compared children parented by stepfathers or other father like figures and those lacking any real father like role models. The overall results is definitions of fatherhood start becoming extremely varied and complex.

In discussing the father’s role in family formations and child rearing, the majority of issues discussed the South Australian report into the “Status of Fathers” raised questions on the traditional perception of fathers being considered the ‘providers’ of the family unit and mothers
the true ‘nurtures’ of children (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003; Parliament of South Australia, 2003). Although this report acknowledged that such a perception still existed in society this did not reflect the reality or expectation of current Australian family life (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003; Parliament of South Australia, 2003).

Today’s reality though includes acknowledging the ever increasing number of women participating in the paid workforce, as well as increases in community sentiment against fathers seeking and successfully receiving primary custody of their children. While equally striving to also provide, a fairer distribution in the domestic responsibilities for child rearing by both the male and female parents.

Intriguing accounts of the good dad-bad dad complex trace its origins to colonial America and followed through to present day (Horn and Bush, 2003). Documented laws, punitive action against men and entries in journals, diaries, and letters were assembled to weave a story of favourable and unfavourable images of fathers, changing standards about good fathering and acceptable roles for men. The perceptions of good and bad fathering are shaped by social change and historical events such as wars and or the Depression and their effects on men’s economic circumstances (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002). “Good” standards of fathering for middle class men do differ from those imposed on Aboriginal people and immigrants. Economic and educational constraints precluded Aboriginal people and immigrants from being involved fathers, much the same way as poverty constrains opportunity for non-Aboriginal men today (Driscoll, Brough, et al., 2004). Definitions of “deadbeat dads” which mean fathers who abandon their children or fathers who do not contribute in any form towards the wellbeing of their children in contrast remain unchanged.
Usually deadbeat dads have been those who have consistently included moral condemnation and punishment. According to some researcher’s efforts to make fathers pay maintenance reflect longstanding core beliefs about family life and the economic dependence of women and children on the father’s income (Driscoll, Brough, et al., 2004). The persistence of these beliefs over two centuries of Australian history poses a conundrum in the face of the previously discussed revolutionary changes in mother and fathers’ family roles today

Currently, there is a public spotlight on men’s issues, as changes in gender relationships have led to a questioning of what it is to be a man and father in contemporary Australia. We have also, unfortunately witnessed in the news in recent times, the tragic consequences of desperate men reacting violently to the breakdown of their relationship’s or denied access to their children through murder-suicide. Through this unnecessary tragedy, we are seeing an increasing recognition and why there is such a high importance placed on a healthy relationship being essential between wife and husband. Changes in the composition of families being caused by increased unemployment for men and increasing rates of employment for women have also been part of public debate over the well-being of children. This rapid social change is affecting all aspects of the family and lives includes an increase in the number of children who do not have a male figure consistently in their lives (Driscoll, Brough, et al., 2004).

In the last few years, much has been written on the role of men in our society. Yet, ‘men as fathers’, is a comparatively new area of study. Changing concepts of fatherhood, and the implications for children, are currently embedded in debate fuelled by the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of the feminist movements, men’s rights organisations, gay/lesbian organisations, and new the right (Sullivan, 2000).
Research acknowledges that changes in family structure have meant that these concepts now include non-biological fathers as well (Sullivan, 2000). The dynamics of Australian society now has men increasingly more likely than ever before living separately from their children and to father outside of marriage. Many men experience fatherhood as a sequence of relationships with children, some biologically their own and some the children of spouses or partners. This growing diversity of relationships between men and children means that decreasing proportion of children do not live with their biological fathers.

Some relevant Australian statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) include:
- 53% of divorces involve children under 18
- 19.3% of all families with children under 15 are headed by a lone female
- in 32.9% of all marriages at least one partner has had a previous marriage

Thus being a father is a challenging notion an contemporary Australia. Many factors shape the way fatherhood is perceived and fathers behave. Cultural images of fatherhood include both ideal images as well as the not-so-ideal images.

Some see the changing role of fathers as strongly associated with the women’s movement, a consequence of women moving into the workforce in greater numbers and putting pressure on their partners to share the housework and childcare. The absence of the father in contemporary Australia and the conflicting trends need to be considered in the process of developing an understanding of contemporary fathering.

However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that some researchers have failed to note that father absence “has striking economic consequences for the children” (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997). And of course, poverty is strongly related to high rates of school failure and drop-out, and the other negative outcomes for young people (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997;
Burbach, Fox, et al., 2004). Furthermore, it is my belief that it is the father’s absence that is the crucial factor in creating these outcomes and poses real challenges for researchers in this area. The consensus in the literature is that the economic hardship of many single mothers seriously restricts the educational, health, and occupational opportunities for the children.

A successful father, as defined in terms of his children’s development, is one whose role performance matches the demands and prescriptions of his socio-cultural and family contexts. Although the added problem of father absence has been well documented both in numbers that capture the scope of the problem and in a range of negatives that reflect the deep psychological trauma experience by the children – still the high cost of its presence creates a great burden on society’s wellbeing. Consequently, father’s absence is now also strongly associated with early sexual activity, and teen pregnancy, youth suicide, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality (Dekovic, Wissink, et al., 2004)