Changes in Australian Society that have Affected the Role of Fathers

Since the early 1970’s, when family fertility levels began to decline in Australia, a great deal of attention has been given to identifying the causes of such a decline. Among those factors often cited are, reduction of male fertility, the widespread use of the “pill”, the incidence of abortion, the rising age of marriage and the increased participation by married women in the paid workforce increasing their choices and opportunities (Russell, Barclay, et al., 1999).

A recent study in Australia also identified that there has been a “flight from fatherhood” over the last 30 years, greater than the flight reduction in motherhood (Westmore, 2003). While this study did not analyse the cause of this remarkable change, others have pointed to both sociological and economic factors that have contributed to men’s flight from fatherhood. These include the introduction of the Child Support Agency in the early 60’s and the Family Court system where both have been proven to be biased towards women in their decisions (Scultz, 2004). Since the cultural change of the sixties, the institution of marriage has been undermined by laws that make divorce easy (Sanson and Wise, 2001). These have been accompanied by the growth of individualism, the emergence of radical feminism, rampant materialism and the erosion of a sense of family responsibility (Westmore, 2003).

The end result has led to increases in divorce rates, resulting in a reluctance by both men and women to willingly accept their responsibility for their children (Sanson and Wise, 2001). Additionally, government policies pushed fulltime homemakers into the workforce, though this mixture of conflicting influences (Westmore, 2003). For example financial payments as incentives to have children but welfare reductions after a child turns a particular age as an incentive to force mothers to return to the workforce (Baldry and Green, 2002).
Research on the benefits of shared parenting is at a very preliminary stage. Clearly shared parenting is meant to promise positive benefits for the children and both parents if it can be made to work. In order to be successful there needs to be a capacity and commitment on the part of both partners to parent, and respect for each other as parents and a willingness to separate their relationship as parents from their spousal relationship. Where these elements are not present, and/or a high level of continued animosity between the parents continues, preliminary research tends to suggest that the children will be much worse off than they would be under sole parenting arrangements.

Many father’s rights agencies claim that court ordered contact is not enforced and is frequently disobeyed by custodial parents. The Child Support Action Group, for example, says that custodial parents can unilaterally decide that the non-custodial parent is unsuitable parent and decide to punish them by withdrawing access (Smyth, 2003). The Lone Fathers Association claims, that the main source of continual litigation in family law is the frustration of court ordered contact by the custodial parent (Stolberg, Mullett, et al., 1998). This group is nearly alone in attempting to provide some substantiation of these claims. It reports interviewing one hundred divorced men to find that 85% had experience denial of access with many fathers enduring unprovable domestic violence orders as a way of stopping access to their children with extended evidence of mothers committing perjury in making these claims.

For some father’s rights group’s denial of contact is presented as a denial of the rights of the children. For example, Lone Father’s Association claims that when access is denied, children are denied their basic human right to have a relationship with their fathers and are “held hostage” in breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997). For many of these groups the issue however is primarily one of equity between parents. The social perception is that court orders (such as protection orders, maintenance
orders, and child support payments) are harshly enforced against fathers, while women are dealt with lightly or not at all when they breach access orders. Another example is the “Parents without Rights” group which claims that the Family Court doesn’t jail mothers for denial of access, even though denying access is a criminal act in Australia with soft options like counselling and mediation usually used instead, but fathers are jailed almost weekly. They also contrast the difficulties a non-custodial parent faces in enforcing an access order with their own private resources while the public enforcement of maintenance orders is the responsibility of the Child Support Agency (CSA) (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Scultz, 2004).

Some suggested solutions to the malicious denial of access by custodial parents being proffered by some groups is firstly that child support should be automatically withheld when lawful, or even reasonable, access is denied. Mens groups argue that prior to the advent of the recent Child Support Scheme (CSS) if the wife refused access, the father could withhold payments of child support until father’s access is reinstated. According to men’s groups this aided in keeping both parents relatively honest, and the children’s best interest were met. The Family Law Reform Party also mentions that access is the best and cheapest incentive to encourage non-custodial parents to support their children (Lindsey, Mackinnon-Lewis, et al., 2002). A second enforcement suggestion which betrays a similar lack of sensitivity to the position of the children is that custody should be used as an enforcement measure.

Obviously there will be some custodial parents who have failed to resolve their issues around the demise of their relationship with the non-custodial parent and who allow this to obscure their ability to act in the best interest of the child on the issue of contact. In the absence of any research, any attempt to estimate the extent of this phenomenon is speculative and impressionistic. What is clear is that it is difficult to come up with solutions in such cases that don’t harm children while recognising the rights of fathers. Particularly when one considers the
extent to which the social health interests are bound up with assisting the wellbeing of the
custodial parent (Westmore, 2003). There are no easy solutions.

Impact of Social Changes on Fathers Roles

It is possibly easier to examine literature that has highlighted the negative effects that occur from
having fatherless children. Fatherless children are a growing problem in Australia and other parts
of the Western world (Burbach, Fox, et al., 2004). This is largely due to increases in divorce and
broken families or by individual’s deliberately choosing ‘single parenting’. The result is we are
continuously raising our children without fathers (Trowell and Etcheogoyen, 2002). In truth, 85%
of single parent families are fatherless families (Muchlenberg, 2002). The father’s absence is
revealed to be a major disadvantage to the short and long-term well being of children
(Muchlenberg, 2002). Following will be the evidence and argument for the importance of fathers
and examination of the need to revert back to the values of the traditional two-parent family’s.

While the body of studies into families was escalating in the 1950’s, another body of literature
was compiling information with a view to understanding the father’s role from the perspective of
families without fathers. The research focused on comparing the behaviour and personalities of
children raised without fathers, essentially by process of evaluation with a view to estimating what
sort of influence fathers typically had on children’s development. As the early father absence and
simultaneous studies were conducted in roughly the same era, it is not surprising therefore that
study outcomes were very similar, and that the conclusions were consistent with popular
assumptions about fathers. As indicated by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1997)), children,
especially boys growing up without fathers, appear to have problems in the areas of sex-role and
gender-identity development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and in the control of
aggression.
Some related issues arising from the father-absence research to be considered, when evaluating such findings. Firstly, is that researcher’s examine the possibility that there are differences between children raised in families with a father and children raised with their father absent from the family. Importantly, researchers must ask themselves why these differences exist and how it is best interpreted. Secondly, it is important to remember that the existence of differences between groups of children growing up with and without fathers does not mean that all children without fathers have problems. Particularly in relation to development concerns or that all children who’s fathers are at home develop without problems.

Research on paternal influences has also moved beyond studies of absence and divorce to explore pathways through which fathers ultimately affect their children. Fathers affect their children directly and indirectly and both factors are key to a comprehensive understanding of fatherhood. Fathers influence their children directly through their behaviours and their attitudes and messages they convey. This is probably highlighted more in traditional Aboriginal families with the role of fathers educating their sons on how to treat woman and/or their Elders. The direct effects of these attitudes are especially relevant when father’s and mother’s interactions differ. As fathers typically spend their time differently with their children. For example, many are less familiar with their children’s language competencies and thus more likely to speak in ways that challenge children’s behaviours. Especially when talking to young children, fathers use more directives in their language examples being, requests for clarification, and more reference to past occurrences than mothers do. For this fact fathers use generally more complex forms of speech with their children and provide them with an education that reflects a reality closer to the outside world (Bulanda, 2004). Due to this unique communication style used by father’s, children learn better communication demands relative to normal social exchanges. Indirect sources of influence that stem from the father’s role include providing mothers with emotional and instrumental support. The fathers function as a source of emotional support tends to enhance the quality of
mother-child relationships and thus facilitate positive adjustment by children (Lamb and Elster, 1985). On the other side of the coin, if fathers are unsupportive and martial conflict is high within the family, children suffer. Fathers can also affect the quality of the family dynamics by being involved in child related housework, thus easing mother’s workloads (Driscoll, Brough, et al., 2004).

Paternal behaviour is multifaceted, embracing not only what fathers do but also how much of it they do, while the existing literature on factors influencing paternal behaviour is focused primarily on variations in direct paternal involvement. Ironically this focus ignores much of what fathers do for their children by way of economic and emotional support within the impact that current social changes have on their roles in the family (Milburn, 2002). The specific focus reflects the widespread assumptions that the extent of direct father-child contact is of primary importance and that involvement with the child and parent-child closeness are intimately associated. Even though most studies of paternal involvement ignore the emotional quality of father-child relationships or find the quality and quantity of interaction to be unrelated (Muchlenberg, 2002).

Nevertheless there is consensus that father involvement is affected by multiple interacting systems operating at different levels over ones life course. Some of these include, psychological factors (e.g., motivation, skills, or self confidence), the children’s individual characteristics (e.g., temperament, gender), social support (e.g., relationship with partners and extended family members), community and cultural influences (e.g., socio-economic opportunity, cultural ideologies), and institutional practices and public policies (e.g., welfare support, child support enforcement) (Sanson and Wise, 2001). These reciprocally interacting levels can be viewed as a hierarchy of factors influencing paternal behaviour. As explained favourable conditions must exist at each level if increased paternal involvement and broadened paternal behaviour are to be possible and beneficial (Sanson and Wise, 2001; Renk, 2003).
Economic Considerations and Power Arrangements in Families

One contemporary issue facing both parents in present society is that frequently both parents are working with additional fear of becoming unemployed. This is highlighted by the instability of employment in today’s current workforce. This has led to a joint participation by both parents towards more shared parenting roles. An arrangement that has become vital for the overall long-term welfare of the children (Bulanda, 2004). This includes those parents who no longer live in the same household as their children. Other research has also re-confirmed that age, gender, social and educational backgrounds are all factors that stop men gaining knowledge on how to be effective parents (Renk, 2003). For example if services are not culturally appropriate then Aboriginal men will not feel comfortable using them, or if they appear gender orientated towards women the same outcome will apply (Renk, 2003).

There are many reasons why there is maternal hesitation about changing parent’s roles. Some mothers may feel that their husbands are incompetent or fear that increased partner involvement may threaten the fundamental power dynamics within the family (Lamb and Elster, 1985). The role of mothers and manager of the household are two areas in which women’s have traditionally enjoyed a majority of the power and control. Increased partner involvement threatens this power and control. The trade-off has dubious value because although many women have entered the work force in the last three decades, many occupy low-paying, low-prestige positions with little prospect of advancement. For this reason it would appear that many women apparently prefer to maintain authority in the child-care arena even if it means physical and mental exhaustion. This also feeds into the common societal belief that women are irreplaceable within the family environment. I suggest that the women’s resistance is likely to persist continuing the barrier against greater father’s involvement.
Until fundamental changes in attitude within society occurs to cause a basic shift in the distribution of power in the family arena, the inequable balance will always create ongoing power struggles between both parents. Economic needs seem to make it unlikely to reduce the dependency of both parents to participate in the paid workforce with women continuing to need husbands and fathers to be the main breadwinner for the family. I also believe that what needs to be recognised is the importance of clearly defining paternal roles between both parents.

As mentioned earlier, family dynamics with children are formatively arrangements significantly because fundamental conflicts promote adverse effects on children’s development and overall wellbeing.

**Changes Needed in Policy and Attitudes**

Over the past several years, welfare caseloads in America have dropped nearly 50%, as millions of individuals previously on disability and single mother pensions have successfully entered the paid labour force. This is good news for those who support neo-liberal politics. However because fatherhood and marriage frequently touch upon difficult, painful, highly personal decisions, policymakers have generally been very reluctant to address them through public policy reforms. As a result, welfare reform efforts rarely have included policies to promote marriage and fatherhood. But it is important to understand that promoting marriage and increasing father involvement are not goals in themselves. Rather, they are a means for achieving welfare reform’s most important objective; improving the welfare and well-being of children. Families are the primary institutions through which we nurture and protect our children, and upon which free societies depend for establishing social order and promoting individual liberty and fulfilment.

Over the past several decades, all developed countries have seen declines in the institution of marriage and lack of reliance on two-parent families to rear children. Even more precisely, we
have been experiencing a decline in fatherhood, because when marriages fail or when children are
born out of wedlock and two parent families never form, it is almost always the father who is
absent. I argue that the absence of fathers has in turn, severely increased the life risks faced by
their children.

State and Federal governments promote the achievements of replacing welfare with work they
must not lose sight of some larger issues of fatherhood and marriage. Rather than simply helping
single-parent households generate earnings in the absence of fathers. I contend that reforms must
also find ways to bring more fathers into the lives of their children. At the least, this requires
addressing the ability of fathers to support their children financially. But the importance of
fathers extends beyond economics. Their involvement as nurturers, disciplinarians, teachers,
coaches, and moral instructors is also critically important to healthy development and maturation
of their children.

The added problem is that strategies for promoting fatherhood and marriage are to the greater
extent in conflict with those strategies that seek to aid single mothers achieve self-
sufficiency through work and welfare support. Indeed a welfare system that helps single mothers
to become employed but ignores the need to promote fatherhood and marriage may serve only
to enable unmarried women to rear children without the presence of the father. Yet, despite
increasing public concern about the problems of out-of-wedlock childbearing and the absence of
fathers, most welfare reforms efforts to date have focused almost exclusively on moving unwed
mothers into paid labour force.

Part of the reason for current focus on welfare to work strategies is that Government’s know
much more about promoting work than they do about helping couples to form and sustain
healthy, mutually satisfying marriages. Moreover, because fatherhood and marriage frequently
touch upon painful and highly personal decisions, policymakers have been reluctant to address them through policy reforms (Renk, 2003).

As mentioned previously, efforts to increase the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children have been given added momentum by findings of studies that show positive involvement benefits child development. Investigation into the efficacy of these efforts have led to increases in recognition of the support needs of men during their transition to fatherhood from the antenatal period through to early childhood, and beyond. Even though there are doubts about the degree to which fathers roles are changing, the demand for information and support for fathers has increased substantially in the past fifteen years (Campbell, 2003).

Increasingly health agencies are monitoring their inability to meet the all the specific needs of women. How are they then going to meet the needs of men due to cut-backs in funding in this environment? This is only making it more difficult to introduce new services for fathers or to incorporate fathers more comprehensively within their family services (Parliament of South Australia, 2003). Another concern raised was that father-oriented services might compromise funding for mothers’ services or even clash ethically (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2003).

Governments from Australia’s State and Federal levels need to lead the development of coherent multi-faceted policy developments that concentrate on the diversity of needs required by men as fathers. Their policy development needs to focus on enhancing the capacities of institutions’ social systems and service providers that engage with men in flexible and culturally appropriate ways. This will enable men the opportunity to become more competent and confident in their role as fathers and to achieve a more rewarding balance between their paid work and their family commitments. It’s my view that these changes will only be achieved by making services more accessible to fathers and men.
Results from a major report conducted in Australia in 1999 found several major findings in relation to services. One being that a majority of professionals/service provider's believed that mothers and fathers should share parenting tasks/activities equally (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999) Additionally professionals believe fathers play a significant role in the development outcomes for both boys and girls (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). One alarming outcome was that 48% of professionals believed that up to 24% of fathers physically abuse their children and 31% of professionals believed that 24% of fathers sexually abuse their children (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). This is in an environment of minimal and unstable funding for appropriate programs and services to address father’s needs in these dire circumstances.
Discussion

The concerns that prompted this literature review are due to my perception that there is a overtly negative portrayal of fathers in Australian society. It is also believed, that currently there are forces focused on specifically minimizing the significant contribution fathers bring to families and society as a whole. With one of the stronger forces being the feminist movement that considers marriage a trap for women while ignoring the best interest of children. Additionally there was an important need to identify the effects of previous research on how fathers are presented and the areas that previous research had specifically focused on. This included, examining whether previous research findings have actually contributed to the current negative perception of fathers, which evidence indicates they have.

As identified over the last two centuries fatherhood has been continually re-defined and the contribution fatherhood brings is well documented. But the barriers stemming from the negative actions of some fathers has negated the positive contribution that successful fathers bring to their children’s wellbeing. The literature presented has further identified some direct consequences stemming from fatherless children which include, increases in poor academic achievement, substance abuse, behavioural disorders, delinquency, and suicidal behaviour.

Subsequently there is little evidence to indicate that the societies expectations of the role of fathers to love, financially support, protect, nurture, educate, and discipline their families has change much throughout time.

Steven Mintz highlights a major point about fatherhood when he mentions how fatherhood has continually being redefined by the different socio-cultural expectations of the fathers role. I tend to agree with him but contest the notion that the expectations on father’s and their roles have not
change significantly. It is society and its willingness to allow fathers to perform those roles that has changed.

I believe it is understandable (and somewhat desirable) that the liberation movement of the 60’s produced the feminist legal analysis and discourse of the 70’s. This was done with the aim to improve the status of women in the present time. Unfortunately, I would question their processes and some of their claims during this period. Especially as it would appear now more women are raising children below or on the poverty line. This is a normal and healthy reaction to the historical dominance of men in Western society, although the feminist influence has been less dominating in Eastern cultural based societies. I do believe though, whether we are considering female agendas or male agendas, special interest groups that seek to privilege one group over another have no place in our family law system. Fatherhood should not be a political football. It is my opinion that, no women should have to face any form of gender bias within the legal system, but neither should any man have to overcome stereotypical assumptions of judges and lawyers.

What with the new-age definition of father’s it appears that society wants fathers to play a more proactive role in the day to day events of the home environment but mothers don’t seem all that unhappy with the current status quo. With the evidence indicating that this current status quo within the family has allowed mothers to retain a sense of power by being in control of the home environment. Additionally, there is very little acknowledgement that if fathers did not spend the required time working and providing financially for their families the quality of life for children in all areas would be dramatically jeopardised.

There is however, enough evidence cited in this literature review to indicate that fathers are finding it harder to understand how they are meant to perform their roles within families.
Traditional beliefs now are considered unacceptable but little information or resources have been supplied to fathers which would allow them learn how to adapt to these new expectations.

Significantly in favour of fathers though is the fact the researchers are now beginning to examine fatherhood as a multifaceted role rather than just in the singular context. In highlighting that fathers are finding it difficult, I believe it is important to recognize that there are very little services available to assist fathers in bridging this fathering/knowledge gap.

One positive thing that has come from this literature review and that is the justification for a more comprehensive investigation into the reasons towards answering how Aboriginal fathers and their roles could gain greater recognition in Australia’s current society.

Eventually it is envisaged, that this project will give policy makers and program developers a better understanding of the current plight of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fathers. It will also assist in contributing in their developing more innovative and proactive programs that portray a more positive perception of Aboriginal men as fathers and fathers in general.

Evidence on what father’s contribution to family life in the beginning of the feminist movement appears to have been couched in alarmist terms with strong images that were intended to appeal to society’s emotions. Some of the alarmist terms have included wife-basher, child abuser and other stereotyping such as domestic violence perpetrator or dead-beat dad. While ignoring the same destructive influences of mothers.

Sadly, from the evidence our society appears to not challenge the ever increasing divorce figure or the rapidly rising numbers of sole parents with children with any real success. This may be due to the entrenched anti-family beliefs held by many of those who are in a position to influence
policy planning and implementation in Australia. Just as the feminist movement despised women who chose to stay at home with their young children, hardline feminism has evolved into a movement that seems to hold the same dislike for fathers and families.

The family Court, despite attempts to change the ideology remain true to a “maternal” preference. Until we fathers can challenge the research conducted under the pro-feminist agenda by producing studies soundly based on approved research methods, designed to provide independent results, such as this one, there will be no change in the present status for fathers.

What is clear though about Australian specific research is it is a disservice to Australian families to continue to allow the allocation of large sums of research funds to a small number of academics, whose previous research seems unable to find anything favourable about men/fathers. While it continually portrays women as victims of male dominance, especially if this is the only research that is receives the greatest voice.

Stewart Rein, author of “Betray of the Child” is extremely critical of the extremist culture of radical feminism. He says and I support the notion that the private political agendas of anti-male attitudes has assisted to create the current father dilemma and have helped to create circumstances threatening the very core of family relationships.

The end result is we need to understand the damage that is being caused to Australia’s children and fathers as a result of family separation and divorce under the present regime. We also need to act now to give both parents the reasonable expectation their relationship, whether married or not, will survive without policies providing encouragement to separate. An example of this present trend is evident in Australia’s welfare system, and hopefully projects like the current one will now begin to address.
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