Aboriginal Fathers / Fathers Roles
Are They Recognised in Australia's Contemporary Society?

Honours Thesis

"Home Bound" (Gambirra 1999)

Phil Maslen

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Aboriginal Fathers/Fathers Roles
Are They Recognised in Australia’s Contemporary Society?

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on father's, in particular Indigenous fathers, in general with a view to establishing what literature currently identifies and recognises the role fathers play in Australian society today. This project will mainly be a literature review of this research. This literature review provides a comprehensive and credible body of evidence into the status of current Aboriginal fathers roles and an over view of what it means to be and perform as a father. The review contrasts and compares past and present ideologies of fatherhood. After the presentation of this literature, the discussion will summarize the literature findings. This discussion will clarify the current state of Indigenous fatherhood, how their roles are perceived socially and what benefits fatherhood brings to the wellbeing of the family and society as a whole.

It also provides some possible holistic solutions to current social dilemmas facing fathers so that they can be the best fathers they desire to be.
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Background

As an adult the memory of what it was like growing up in a broken family remains vividly for me. The end result was that I was raised mainly in a single parent family. Although my mother did her best in raising five children after my father departed, it left all her children pretty messed up emotionally. Common belief at the time and still largely today was that fathers were the perpetrators of child abuse and physical violence. Unfortunately, this was not the case in our family as my mother was the sole instigator of violence throughout my early upbringing. This was taking place in complete contrast to what women’s advocates were claiming at the time. This was one of the fundamental benefits that women had over men when it came to whom were the best nurturers for children. These claims also ran parallel to the rise of the feminist movement in the early 60’s and 70’s, with discussion by social groups, researchers, and feminist groups claimed there were more pluses than minus from being raised in a sole mother’s care. This activity in my home was occurring in complete contrast to these discussions. From personal experience, I remain unconvinced that there were any benefits from living in a single parent family. For these reasons and many more, becoming a father created many mixed feelings for me in later life. This has therefore motivated me to investigating why there are currently more social difficulties like binge drinking challenging Australian’s adolescents in conjunction with the highest rate of single mother households in Australia’s history.

Currently in Australia we have the greatest rates of decline in father’s involvement with their children after separation. This is occurring for many reasons and with many detrimental effects on society which I will investigate further throughout this thesis.

On a personal level when my then defacto informed me that she was pregnant fourteen years ago with Christian our first child, I initially had a lot of trepidation about the whole idea of having a
child. What was a father expected to do? The thought of becoming a father also left me feeling quiet numb. My own father had not been much of a role model for me to follow while my introduction into fatherhood with Christian’s birth was also very unexpected. Fatherhood, as with motherhood, is a scary proposition, but leaves you feeling extremely proud at the same time. When your are first confronted with fatherhood and are going to become a father, the knowledge itself can become quiet overwhelming. The new pressure of ensuring that you can do the right thing such as support a family and provide for them is extremely intense. My growing belief is that these pressures result in many men feeling that they have to live up to unrealistic and/or unclear expectations from their spouses and society in general.

When the nine months waiting is finally over and you are in the maternity ward watching your baby’s head suddenly start appearing, it is a miracle to witness. An additional experience that father’s have is the intimate opportunity to bear witnesses to the whole childbirth phenomenon while gaining a deeper understanding what women endure during child-birth and why women are such amazing creatures themselves.

The natural biological connection between the child and mother, commences at the very beginning of conception and is carried on then for the rest of the child’s life (Allen 1999). When your child initially leaves the warmth and protection of their mother’s womb and you, “the father”, hold your newborn child for the first time, you suddenly realise the reality that this small defenceless infant is now your responsibility for life. With this responsibility comes an undefinable need for the new father to protect and to nurture their children. For fathers and from my own experience as a father, the biological connection only really occurs for fathers when the umbilical cord is cut and fathers get their first opportunity to hold their sons or daughters independently from their mothers.
My first son Christian was born in January, 1991 while my second son Matthew’s birth followed the next year in December, 1992. Regardless of the lack of opportunity for me to be an active part of both of my son’s lives, I will always consider them the small miracles that saved my life. Just after Christian’s first birthday, I decided that to become the father and person that I wanted to be, I needed to stop being an active alcoholic. This resulted in me placing myself in rehab in April 1992, and continued for nearly twelve months. An additional reason for stopping drinking was in me trying to be a good supporting partner. Initially the plan for me was to attend rehab and return home just prior to Matthew’s birth. Ironically, when I first started my recovery, my relationship was not in jeopardy. As time past I started to become aware and gain a better understanding that I was not the only destructive force within my relationship with the boys mother. This resulted in me finally deciding that the relationship I had was too destructive to continue for myself, my sobriety and most importantly for both Christian and Matthew wellbeing so I ended the relationship, which resulted in a reduction of my contact with my boys.

Circumstances being what they were at the time, I decided it was in the best interest of my children to move into separate accommodation in 1993. This meant leaving the children and their mother a month after Matthew’s birth. Importantly it was agreed between the boys mother and myself that, after Christian’s birth, we would not have anymore children and that the boys mother would use a contraceptive. However she had other ideas.

Within two months of this separation my children were gone, relocated anonymously by their mother. This resulted in my access to my children becoming “a non-event”. The biggest injustice I believe occurred when my children lost contact with both their Indigenous culture and myself. For nearly seven years as the boys’ father, I had no idea where my children were or if they were healthy or even alive. This caused a terrible feeling of hurt for me that some may say is not stereotypically associated with men. Seven years on, with many trips to legal advisors and with the
intervention finally of a Federal Parliamentarian, I found my children and commenced legal proceedings to regain access to both Christian and Matthew.

Legal Aid gave me accurate advice after the boys' mother disappeared with the two boys. They informed me that I was wasting my time under the current system in trying to obtain custody of my children. It was extremely unlikely that the courts would give custody to a single father. Interestingly, thirteen years later, fathers still face this dilemma when applying for sole custody.

Although at the end of my relationship, there were many difficulties that caused the breakdown of the relationship, a major one was related to the raising of the children. This involved significant differences I had with my de facto over our specific parenting styles, with our different upbringings and cultures continually clashing.

Always wanting to provide a positive contribution to my children’s lives, I commenced legal proceedings to see my children with my ultimate goal to be recognised as an equal parent to their mother. Not just a financial provider, as I currently am. A similar occurrence has recently publicly been acknowledged as a growing problem amongst many other father’s across Australia (Stolberg, Mullett et al. 1998; Flemming and Tobin 2005). Thirteen years on, I have still not seen my children. I continue to pay 27% of my income to the Child Support Agency for my two boys. An amount today that would be surpassed by double the finances that I would have used to raise my children if I still had custody of them. The saddest part though, is that I do not even know who my children are or what they look like as it has been so long since I have seen them.

All this occurred while trying to build a new life, a new home and nurture and continue another personal relationship. For the first seven years of Christian and Mathew’s childhood, both children were informed, that they had no father and that their father was an Aboriginal man. This
resulted in extreme duress for both the boys and myself when contact recommenced. When I finally located them through the electoral role, I commenced proceedings to reconnect with them as their father. During mediation, I was told that when the boys were informed that they had a father and he wanted to see them, Matthew started wetting himself and Christian became increasingly disruptive. As the boys’ father and not having had any contact with them since 1992, I was seriously concerned with the type of environment they were being raised in. Moreover, my concerns extended to what the boys had been told about me to create these levels of duress their mother claimed they demonstrated.

My journey through this thesis has resulted in providing me with a greater clarity and understanding of these difficult issues that I have endured throughout the past and it is helping me to build closure around my fatherhood.
Introduction

Denner (1998) highlights that traditionally men have inherited the belief that women (mothers) were responsible for the nurturing component of parenting while men believed their responsibility was as a provider, disciplinarian and protector. He also indicates that the traditional role of men created a large parenting disparity for all fathers, especially those who are separated and or divorced and living away from their children. Denner (1998) and other researchers also note that an extra complication for fathers in developing their parenting skills is their resistance to seek support and a lack of support when they do ask for it (Denner, 1998; Pasley, Futris et al., 2002). Along with Denner, Pasley, Futris et al (2002) also believe that the parenting partnership is vitally important to the effective functioning of the family – even more so since the Industrial revolution. Parenting today though increasingly involves both an ever-busy mother and father. An ever-growing number of divorce and separations, along with increases in single sex families and young teenage mothers have also mitigate against traditional parenting roles (Denner, 1998).

Divorce is a difficult period in any marriage breakdown because many couples initially believe that they will be with their partner forever. Unfortunately, this has become a rarity in today’s world. We are yet to determine the exact percentage of families that split up or are overwhelmed by their parenting differences. Anecdotal evidence suggests that with at least half of all marriages with children that separate, parent conflict contributes to many of these marriage breakdowns (Fife-Yeomans, 1998). We read a lot about problems related to ‘access’ and men being denied access. Evidence provided on current practices of Australia’s courts indicate that decisions tend to be in favour of women in the granting of sole custody (Fife-Yeomans, 1998; Vieth, 2001; Scultz, 2004). Although there is little evidence why this should be the case. This, I believe, is not solely the fault of judges or the perceptions on families that they have, but that some decisions stem from womens’ willingness to use perjury or domestic violence orders to create a negative impression of fathers. This is something that I personally experienced even though I resided 1600
kilometres away. Also considering that I had not see or had any contact for over seven years, while everything mentioned on the complaint about me occurred prior to me giving up drinking in 1992. My strong belief is that to reverse this outcome to a more equitable one for both parents, a major change needs to occur. This change involves Australia’s Family courts acknowledging the importance of fathers in children’s lives. Recent evidence appears to reinforce the notion that courts are still failing to recognise fathers as only six percent of all Australia’s single father parents having sole custody (Smyth, 2003). This occurs in complete contradiction to the Family Court claiming that their decisions are made with the children’s best interest at heart (Howard, 2003). This also occurs appears overwhelming evidence of the benefits that direct contact between the father and child produces for both parties (Pasley, Futris et al., 2002). Additional considerations should examine how the Family Law Court Act was initially set up and to consider the social environment of the time. This was an environment that was being strongly influenced by the women’s movement, also known historically as the feminist movement (Sullivan, 2000)

Far from being fixed and static categories, motherhood and fatherhood are social, cultural, and ideological constructs. Their social definition and meaning has been hotly contested in recent times (Mintz, 1992). Over the past few centuries the dominant cultural ideals on fatherhood and motherhood have changed dramatically. Today media images of fatherhood range from the nurturing “new age” father and male who participates equally in housework and child care to the deadbeat dad, wife beater, and the child abuser (Mintz, 1992). Legal definitions of fatherhood encompass stepfathers and foster fathers with no biological connection to their children, as well as many non-residential fathers or sperm donors with little or no emotional connection to their offspring.
Similarly, there is no single, dominant discourse of motherhood in today’s society. Popular belief presents an extraordinarily wide range of images of motherhood: nurturing, empathetic, and involved, but also overprotective, stifling, neglectful, intrusive, rejecting, cold, and child abuser (Mintz, 1992; Braungart-Rieker, 1999). The sociology of motherhood also varies widely. Alongside the traditional full-time housewife and mother there are single moms, divorced moms, lesbian mothers, employed mothers, and teen mothers. The emergence of new birth technologies has also resulted in mothers with radically new relations with their children. A mother might be an egg donor or a surrogate mother who carried the child to term. At the same time, “open adoption” encourages many birth mothers to maintain contact with their children alongside adoptive mothers (Mintz, 1992).

Aboriginal men as fathers appear to endure even higher levels of prejudice resulting in Aboriginal fathers remaining disjointed from their families and their children. Historically Aboriginal men traditionally held a central role and responsibilities in continuing Aboriginal traditions and family kinship. This included fathers, uncles, and grandfathers who also held family obligations to teach Aboriginal children, especially Aboriginal boys what their responsibilities were to their families and why they needed to respect their Elders. This is an example of how Aboriginal kinship works. Additionally, fathers and men in general also provided knowledge, leadership, guidance and discipline (Maslen, 2004). Estimates indicate that there are approximately 202,000 Indigenous males in Australia (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1997) with the impact of colonisation still impacting on the health and wellbeing of men and fathers today. The process of colonisation basically removed nearly all traditional responsibilities from Aboriginal fathers and men. An important note to consider when examining Aboriginal fathers is that, if a man is well, he can therefore provide for his family, therefore if the family is provided for, they will be nourished. If the family is nourished then they need not draw on resources from the community, with the end
result being that the community stays healthy and all are able to function to their full potential (Maslen, 2004).

So what is a father? What should his role be in his child’s life? How does this benefit the child’s personal, physical, and spiritual development? These questions are particular relevant given the complexities of service delivery to fathers. When a mother is referred for post-natal depression, how much effort should be expended to include the father? When a boy is in trouble at school, should his dad be invited along? And if dad is now living interstate, should mum’s boyfriend be contacted instead and should both men be invited to ‘parents’ night? In practical situations such as these, the role and the identity of the father are far from straightforward and are influenced by a multitude of factors as mentioned previously (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002). Again there are no easy solutions. But I believe that the welfare of the child should be the main determiner of how the father’s role is defined in all the contexts that the father finds himself.

The justification for this literature review is to provide a overview of existing and past research and to identify the common denominator’s from this previous research on Indigenous fathers and their roles as fathers. Eventually it is envisaged that the information dissected and collated by this project will help raise an awareness that will changes society’s overall lack of understanding of the positive influence fathers can bring to children, parenting, and the health of Australia’s families as a whole.

Moreover this project aims to prompt new action by both Australia’s State and Federal Government Family Service provider’s to increase their focus on developing appropriate men’s and father’s community health programs. The two most important aims of this literature review is to firstly give a clearer picture for policy makers on the valuable role fathers provide for their children and to themselves. Secondly this literature review is envisaged as a starting point in
identifying how fathers can re-establish their roles and status in Australian society as nurturing and effective parents.

This project will examine current literature over the last fifteen years on fatherhood to examine if Aboriginal Fathers are recognized in Australian society and if so, how are they recognized. The following questions were selected to help filter accessed documentation and develop recommendations to these findings.

These questions are:

1. What were the historical contexts through which fatherhood has changed over time and has been studied?
2. What are the social forces currently influencing how fatherhood is perceived and constructed?
3. What can be done to revive fatherhood and privilege its status in Australian society?

All three questions will be examined in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts.
Methodology

The literature review selected for this research project has two roles. In the first role, it functions as a stand-alone paper. In the other role it can actually be part of a larger section of a postgraduate research thesis. As a stand-alone paper, this literature review is multi layered and more formal and detailed than a book review.

In effect a literature review is a paper that compiles, outlines and evaluates previously established research. It also provides a context for readers as if they were researching the topic on their own. Just from reading a literature review readers should be able to gain an insight into the amount and quality of the research on the chosen topic. As with most research, some form of written account of findings applied to the current project. The then dissemination of such literature is important because it provides the opportunity to contribute to understanding a given view point.

The justification for a literature review for this chosen topic stems from several significant factors. Firstly, as there is a time limit for the completion of this thesis to provide a creditable amount of information, it was felt that an initial investigation needed to identify what data has already been conducted on this selected topic. This 'literature review' also is intended to only be a starting point for more in depth qualitative research in the future – a further reason for the selection of this method of research. Other reasons for choosing this method was the sparse amount of data being available on the topic of fathers, especially Aboriginal fathers.

As this literature review is intending to examine such personal and sometimes difficult topics such as Aboriginal father’s roles in Australian society, there was a strong ethical consideration as to how this thesis could respect Aboriginal fathers plight while not being actively involved with a specific Aboriginal community. Overall, it was considered to be inappropriate, to expect to just walk into an Aboriginal community and have fathers divulge such personal information.
Especially as, historically researchers have claimed to being doing research for the benefit of Aboriginal people but many Aboriginal people are still waiting for such benefits. This is clearly evident by Aboriginal peoples lower life expectancy compared to non-Aborigines especially as Aboriginal people in Australia have been the most researched sub-population with the aim of improving their quality of life. The other research options that were considered, as a method of research if these (overriding factors had not been such a strong issue) were Action Research or Oral Histories.

Some barriers that restricted and therefore created some bother in obtaining relevant information on Aboriginal fathers was the fact that most research had been perform by non-Aboriginal researchers. Some might think that this can be overcome but it was my belief that the researcher is restricted if they are limited in their comprehension on Aboriginal Culture, Law, and Kinship. This possibly could effect the interpretation of their findings. Additionally the issues on fatherhood and the role of Aboriginal fathers has only recently becoming a topic of social importance. Previously most research on families has placed the mother or the child at the forefront of research, with this being evident by the current amount of community services available to mums and bubs.

An extra barrier in obtaining the necessary information included the fact creditable electronic resources were therefore limited in the amount of available information that was accessible.

In saying there were some barriers with the identification and access to relevant information importantly there were some significant positives stemming from the use of this method of research. It allowed the chance to identify and analyse what if any research, had already been conducted on the chosen topic. It also provided a sound starting point for future research at a later stage. This also reduced the chance of duplicating other research that may have already been
conducted, while allowing the opportunity to expand the knowledge on the given topic. Ethically, this was considered very important largely due to amount of research that has previously been performed on Aboriginal people and their families with little difference towards improving the quality of Aboriginal peoples lives.

**Data Collection**

The data collected were drawn from literature between the years 1985 and 2005 with the exception being historical information where searches were required to be extended prior to 1985. All the studies were collected via the ‘world wide web’ utilising creditable electronic resources such as electronic libraries, university campuses and other similar knowledge bases. Search engines utilised in refining data searches for this literature review include Google Scholar, Mooter, Questia and Ovid.

During the analysis of the collected information, specific attention was given to areas of methodology, discussion, and recommendations conclusion sections in each of the studies selected. The reason for this focussing was that it was felt important to understand the expected outcomes other researchers were striving to attain from their investigations. Additionally an examination of associated references was performed to ascertain consistent authors within particular views on this topic.
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
fulfill 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 a 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 psychologist 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 Etchegeoyen, 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, your 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 suppose 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 adolescent 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 womenhood. 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 ‘nurture’s’ 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)
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 unproviable 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 Etchegoyen, 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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