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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?

Phil Maslen

Submitted as Final Course Requirement for
Honours Degree Thesis

Honours Thesis Supervisor:

Warren Losberg

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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 defacto 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 credible 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 focusing 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.