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Father's Perceptions about Their Fathering Role

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores scholarly contributions about the historical factors and modern day considerations that have served to shape our understanding of the fathering role. Human history has bared witness to significant shifts in perceptions concerning the role of the patriarch within the context of both familial and social structures. Socio-economic factors have served to shape the modern conceptualization of fatherhood. Fathers must face both external and internal attitudes about their role. The impact of these attitudes and the systems they inform has led to concerns about the parent-child attachment process. Global attitudes and expectation about the paternal role have also led to concerns about the safety and well-being of children. Faced with challenges that range from societal expectations and preconceived notions, to systemic challenges, fathers today must become strong advocates for their right to influence and participate in the lives of their children.

Keywords: Fatherhood, fathering role, fathers, paternal role.

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1.0 Introduction

To understand present day societal culture concerning fatherhood, it is necessary to explore fatherhood historically, at least to some degree. Unfortunately, there is not a comprehensive history of

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fatherhood (Aitken, 2009), but “there are histories of fatherhoods” (LaRossa, 1997, p.21). This history focuses on the Eurocentric perspective of fatherhood. Badinter (1980) contends that whoever controls the child, and has the child aligned with either the father or the mother will win societal prominence when the interests of society favour the child. As far back as the ancient texts, the family is presented as a religious community with the father holding a two-fold responsibility: that of power and authority (Badinter, 1980). This assertion is eloquently captured in the following statement:

The power and authority of the head of the family, in effect a public official serving in the home, are found again almost unchanged in the classical period, somewhat diminished in Greek society and somewhat enlarged in Roman...it was necessary to await Christ's word before there was any change, even theoretical...Jesus proclaimed that the authority of the father is not established in the father's interest but in the child's and that the wife-mother is not his slave but his companion (p.7).

The spread of Christianity did change the status of women in upper classes, but by the 17th century the power and authority of the father is still very strong because society was founded on the principle of authority (Badinter, 1980). Philosophical works by academics in the seventeenth century describe the ordering of family life (Freedman, 2002). The husband did have authority over his wife, but this authority is tempered; he is not permitted to be violent towards his wife and it is mandatory that he protect her from harm (Freedman, 2002). The husband is referred to as ““the father of the family’ (*paterfamilias*)” (Freedman, 2002 p.298). Jordan (2010) offers a micro view of seventeenth century Dublin’s family life:

We conclude that family life in Dublin’s parishes in the [seventeenth century] was harsh by our standards, and according to extant statistics of life, death, and disease. Families endured high levels of stress within a politico-social system controlled by a socioreligious elite; that stratum was itself under tension from religious and political strains as groups jockeyed for power. For decades land was the currency of control in the Cromwellian land settlement. Even so families formed, and babies were born—if only to die in great numbers (p.262).

There is a dearth of research on what comprised the primary characteristics of fatherhood in the eighteenth century (Bailey, 2010). The prevailing culture of emotional responsiveness and Christian theology are combined to create the father’s form and the discourse surrounding fatherhood (Bailey, 2010). Succinctly, the eighteenth century father is described as being “engrossed in his offspring to the exclusion of much else apart from his wife and national duties, he offered his children a moral example and instruction...”(Bailey, 2010 p.266). Toward the middle of the eighteenth century society moves away from the concept of the father’s total authoritarian control and widens the description of unacceptable behavior (Bailey, 2010). Fathers are increasingly encouraged to eschew physical punishments in favour of the new sensibilities of reason, negotiation, and use of rewards in disciplining their children (Bailey, 2010). Further, the inclusion of fathers and mothers is viewed as necessary for healthy growth and development of children (Bailey, 2010).

The nineteenth century presented many challenges to fatherhood and the prevailing ideology of the eighteenth century. The industrial revolution and the explosion of new modes of transportation offered multiple employment opportunities for fathers that took them away from their homes (Nutting, 2010). Eighteenth century tenets of the devoted and ever present father no longer applied. Capitalism and the requirement for the family to have a wage earner in the new system significantly altered family functioning (Aitken, 2009; Nutting, 2010). Fathers now engaged in the “cult of success” and mothers in the “cult of domesticity” (Nutting, 2010 p.330). Thus, the ever present father who works with children in the fields, or other family form of work now is replaced with the father who is absent for the greater part of the day and present only in the evening (Nutting, 2010). This new representation of the father places him in the role of family provider to the exclusion or diminishment of his former roles (Nutting, 2010).

According to Faron (2001) the authority of the father declined significantly in the early twentieth century. World War I, in 1914, was a major factor in the diminishment of the father's authority because many fathers were killed during this war, and large numbers returned home crushed, psychologically, emotionally, and physically (Faron, 2001). Succinctly put, throughout the twentieth century the construction of the father as breadwinner, and family man has been sustained (Hearn, 2002). Now in the twenty-first century "...a quiet revolution is occurring in fatherhood" (Cullen, & Grossman, 2007, p. 2). Men are spending more time with their families at increasing rates compared to the last century with the number of at home fathers tripling in the past ten years (Cullen, & Grossman, 2007). Old definitions of masculinity are being challenged by contemporary fathers; men who embrace the new construction of fatherhood are much happier because the dominant focus of fathering is on expressiveness, emotionality, and caring, not on money and work concerns (Cullen, & Grossman, 2007). Challenges remain, whether fathers embrace the "Old Fatherhood" or the "New Fatherhood" (LaRossa, 1997, p.5).

2.0 Challenges for fathers: Positive outcomes

Brown, McBride, Shin, and Bost (2007) stated that there is a dearth of research detailing father-child attachment behaviours. Currently, research associates the quality of parenting as a major factor in the development of attachment; research on infant-father attachment shows that infants are capable of strong attachments to fathers and this bond promotes healthy development (Brown et. al., 2007).

Yeung, Duncan and Hill's (2000) study correlates the fathers' role in the home environment with adult child outcomes. Results of this study show that fathers' educational achievement and resultant wage benefits positively affect children's level of education as well as a daughter's likelihood of bearing children outside of the marital context (Yeung et al., 2000). Further, paternal church involvement was the primary factor associated with children completing their education (Yeung et al., 2000).

Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, and Bremberg (2007) reviewed findings on positive outcomes for father engagement and child development. These researchers (2007) considered the "general effects of father involvement", as well as "specific effects of father involvement" (p.155). Examples of positive outcomes for father involvement in the category of general effects include decreases in juvenile delinquency, higher educational attainment, increases in social skills, and relationship abilities throughout the lifespan (Sarkadi et. al., 2007). Specific effects of father engagement include social effects on young adults; for instance, father involvement with children at age seven, predicts protection against poverty and homelessness in comparison to peers who did not have the advantage of an engaged father (Sarkadi et. al., 2007).

3.0 Security

An important challenge for parents, both mothers and fathers, is the physical safety of their offspring. Tsoumakas, Dousis, Mavridi, Gemou and Matziou (2009) conducted research to ascertain parental knowledge regarding home safety and preventative measures. Children six years old and younger comprise 60-80% of all accidental injuries for children under the age of nineteen years (Tsoumakas et. al., 2009). These unintentional injuries represent preventable causes of disability and death in developed countries- with toddlers and pre-schoolers at greatest risk. Tsoumakas et. al., (2009) stated that parents who follow preventative measures, benefit from a 36% reduction in their child or children's home related accidents. One interesting finding is that fathers with lower educational achievement strongly adhere to safety precautions, possibly due to the fact that they are aware of their lack of knowledge and strive harder to apply new information (Tsoumakas et. al., 2009).

Yeung et al.'s, (2000) study investigates the steps parents take to provide safety and future security for their children. Their findings show that fathers who engage in behaviours that reduce risk, such as using

seat belts, maintaining an emergency savings account, and buying automobile insurance enjoy positive outcomes primarily with their adolescent sons than their daughters.

Another area pertinent to security of children is paternal longevity. Albright (2007) offers suggestions that contribute to the long term health of fathers. Albright (2007) notes that paying attention to driving habits decreases the chances of accidental death. As well, men who exhibit difficulties with anger management, show unfavorable increases in heart disease, with one out of five men in their 40s suffering from congestive heart disease (Albright, 2007).

4.0 Knowledge and parenting abilities

An understanding of the complexity of paternal parenting assists in the development of parenting programs resulting in more positive outcomes for fathers and their children. Stryker (as cited in Rane, & McBride, 2000) states that “the self is a structure of identities organized in hierarchical fashion...[identities are] internalized sets of role expectations, with the person having as many identities as roles played in distinct sets of social relationships” (p.348). A father’s behaviour when fulfilling the father role will depend on where the individual places fathering in the identity hierarchy (Rane & McBride, 2000). For parenting programs that include fathers, it is important for the program facilitator to assist fathers in a comprehensive self-assessment of their role, and its’ accompanying tasks such as nurturing, providing, disciplining, and associating (Rane & McBride, 2000).

Further, Nicholson, Howard, and Borkowski (2008) agree with the importance of identity theory and state that an important factor in shaping fathering identity is the presence of constructive parental role models. Parental role models impact the “working model of parenting” (Nicholson et. al., 2008, p. 41). Additionally, “metaparenting” is a term that refers to inner assessment and self-reflection on parenting behaviours arising from the cognition (Nicholson et. al., 2008, p. 42). Holden and Hawk (as cited in Nicholson et. al., 2008) expand on metaparenting and offer four areas of thoughts regarding parenting: “anticipating issues that may arise in childrearing, assessing children’s development and surrounding contextual situations, problem-solving in the face of parenting challenges, and reflecting upon parenting and parent/child interactions” (p. 42).

The notions of fathering identity, the importance of constructive role models, and the ability of fathers to engage in metaparenting, are some of the salient factors to address when including fathers in parenting programs. Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, and Lovejoy (2008) state that parenting programs should include fathers and suggest that program adjustments may be necessary to meet the specific requirements of fathers. For instance, it is known that fathers prefer active participatory roles in parent education programs (Magill-Evans, Harrison, Benzies, Gierl, & Kimak, 2007).

5.0 Discipline

Lee, Kim, Taylor and Perron (2011) state that very little is known about the way fathers’ choose to discipline their children, and even less is known about other aspects of paternal discipline. Jewell, Krohn, Scott, Carlton, and Meinz (2008) agree with these notions and examine fathers’ discipline styles with their pre-school children. They identified three types of discipline styles: Permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative (Jewell et. al., 2008).

The permissive father requires little from the child regarding responsibilities, and structure, and does not help the child manage behaviour; the authoritarian father punishes the disobedient child when the child’s behaviour does not match the father’s beliefs; and the authoritative father fulfills the ideal of guiding the child in a common sense manner with communication that explains the reasoning behind requests and gives the child opportunity to give reasons for objecting (Jewell et. al., 2008). An interesting finding from this study shows that fathers– who rated high for use of the permissive style of

discipline-had children who exhibited challenging and difficult behaviours in the home and the classroom (Jewell et. al., 2008).

Lee, Kim, Taylor and Perron (2011) in-depth study of fathers, regarding aggressive and non-aggressive discipline, shows that pre-school children exhibit an increase in aggressive behaviours when fathers increasingly discipline in an aggressive manner. High amounts of non-aggressive behaviours accompanying the aggressive behaviours did not have a mitigating effect on the children's behaviours (Lee et. al., 2011). The researchers (2011) suggest that professionals who work with families assist parents to strengthen the positive aspects of discipline while also teaching parents about the damaging consequences of severe discipline on young children.

6.0 Work-life balance

The concept of modern fatherhood evokes images of fathers making a dash from the office, where traditional fatherhood roles are fulfilled, to the sports field, where active coaching and support speaks of a more hand's on fathering role. This image symbolizes a broad shift in the roles men assume within the context of their professional and personal lives. Today's fathers are "more likely to sacrifice pay, modify work travel, and refuse relocation for family reasons" (Goodman, 2005).

This change in priorities signifies a challenge of traditional roles. In the context of the "breadwinner" role, fathers are faced with a variety of work place culture issues. The active fathering role is a newly emerging concept with many employers failing to recognize how best to promote a father-friendly work environment. Another interesting trend in the workplace is that of men who fail to advocate and assert their rights as fathers. Within the context of the family unit, fathers are faced with the challenge of asserting their role in a setting where long-standing gender role designations have traditionally categorized fathers in more of a secondary, supportive role.

Traditional assumptions concerning childrearing responsibilities serve to promote workplace policies and attitudes that negate the changing fathering role. This assertion is supported by recent data that reflects the inadequacy of these systems with 39 percent of fathers in the workforce reporting that work related responsibilities reduce the quality and value of family interactions, and compromise their role as supportive caregivers and spouses. Furthermore, 68 percent of working fathers report experiencing difficulties with their employers in their attempts to balance work-related priorities and care giving responsibilities (Hall, 2011). The challenges of these policies and attitudes, and their effect on the morale of working fathers present a very real barrier to achieving a work-life balance. These trends are further exemplified in the experience of a working father seeking the support of his employer in order to care for an ailing child, finding himself faced with resistance and references to the appropriateness of his deferring the situation to female caregivers. This working father was faced with ongoing references to the incident and a work environment that was "a little uncomfortable" thereafter (Hamilton, 2008).

Another issue of concern for today's working fathers is that of being put on the "daddy track". Daddy tracking is defined as discrimination in the work place in terms of promotions and other career track opportunities as a direct reflection of workplace attitudes concerning parental tasks and priorities (Hamilton, 2008). Self-perceptions about the evolving fathering role have put forth some interesting trends in regards to men's advocacy efforts and assertions concerning their rights as fathers. Available data suggests that working fathers struggle with taking advantage of available benefits and seeking employer support in balancing their work-life priorities. Employers report reduced access to family related benefits by their male staff (Goodman, 2005). Faced with dismissive and ridiculing attitudes, the potential for reduced career advancement opportunities, and failed assertions due to perceived negative attitudes, fathers are discouraged from being actively involved in the lives of their children and are forced to remain in their traditional role as breadwinners and secondary caregivers.

Traditional parenting roles consistently regard female caregivers as primary sources of knowledge and decision-making, leaving male caregivers in more of a direction seeking, supportive role. The concept of mothers as "gatekeepers" is described as a set of behaviours and attitudes by traditional primary caregivers that serve to perpetuate the notion that fathers are best suited for a supportive role. This trend not only serves to promote an atmosphere of rejection and ridicule for men trying to assert their fathering role, but it reinforces long standing insecurities about male caregiver competencies (Phillips, 2010). It is important to recognize the impact of traditional gender role shaping and its hindering effects on promoting a positive fathering role.

7.0 Conclusion

This literature review reveals that today's fathers are faced with a multitude of challenges in their pursuit of balance in their professional and personal lives. How are today's fathers to find a sense of balance between their traditional bread winner role and that of an actively involved, caring parent? Whether faced with a negative work place culture, or dismissive and discouraging social attitudes, fathers seeking balance and those whom believe in the inherent value of the fathering role must be prepared to champion the cause for fathers' rights and pave the way for a new definition of fatherhood.

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