

Fathers' involvement in child rearing Chasing an ideal or challenging barriers?

Annette Holland

An earlier version of this paper, entitled 'Fathers and children: Dismantling the barriers to men's participation in child rearing' was presented at the issues in Australian Childhood Conference: Brisbane, September 23-25, 1993.

Identifying and describing factors which influence men's participation in child rearing has been the focus of major studies on fatherhood over the past two decades. Traditional divisions of labour within the domestic sphere are being redefined and challenged as greater equity in parental role tasks has become a desirable characteristic of contemporary family life. Recent research has shown that many men, far from being reluctant participants in parenting tasks, frequently experience discouragement in their attempts at greater involvement in the raising of their children. This paper reports on studies which describe institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers which men may experience in their attempts to create a more nurturant style of fatherhood, including fathers' reactions to these barriers.

Discussion on fathers' involvement in child rearing, even after several decades of competent research, invariably generates expression of strong opinion and feelings which reflect both men's and women's personal experiences in families. Many studies continue to show evidence of the continuance of traditional roles while others identify shifts in rigid role performance. Regardless of the sometimes contradictory descriptions of contemporary fatherhood it

Annette Holland, Dip T., B.Ed. (Early Childhood), M.Ed St., PhD (Monash) is a lecturer, Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University. She has a background in early childhood teaching and her current academic interests were developed through working closely with parents in preschool centres. Through her Masters and Doctoral research, she pursued her interest in individual Psychology theory and its application to family education, family counselling and family relationships.

The impact of adult-child relationships on children's personality development, learning styles and group participation underpin involvement in teaching areas of family and society, parenting studies, classroom management, professional development and communications. Recent research has focused on fatherhood; specifically, how men report their perceptions of the experience of being a father.

Annette took up her current position at the Northern Territory University in July 1992, having previously taught in early childhood courses in Victoria within the TAFE system and at the University of Melbourne, School of Early Childhood Studies.

is clear that most fathers report being more actively involved in the lives of their children than their fathers were with them (Mackay, 1993).

The literature on fathers' involvement in child rearing has been characterised by a focus on the changing role of women and its impact on men's conduct in the domestic sphere, while the pace as well as the actuality of change in men's family involvement have been the subject of research and debate (La Rossa, 1988). In Australian society the demand from women for equality in relationships has begun to create family and partnership styles which reflect interpersonal negotiation rather than social determinism. At the same time there are indications from men that they wish to have greater involvement in child-rearing than has been practised by fathers in the past. They are willing to speak openly about their beliefs and feelings as fathers, and wish to be seen as having a role of significance in child rearing rather than being regarded as satellite parents (Lamb, Pleck & Levine, 1985; Kewley & Lewis, 1993; Holland, 1993).

The public behaviour of fathers provides evidence of an increased willingness on the part of men to be counted in their commitment to involvement with their children. The 'ideal, sensitive, nurturant father',

rather than providing an impossible model for men, has given a new generation of fathers permission to engage more fully in the experience of fatherhood. The expressions of intense feelings about becoming and being a father and a strong sense of commitment to the parenting task are common to many fathers (Seel, 1987). This suggests nurturing capacities in men which were previously unrecognised in the research which sought to quantify social determinants of father involvement.

...the slow but persistent softening of sexual stereotyping continues apace, allowing men to be more open in revealing their internal, more nurturant, emotional, less aggressive and less competitive selves. This permits some relaxation of the grip of rigid 'masculinity'.

(Pruett, 1987:p15)

At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, patterns of socialisation and social institutions continue to moderate the behaviour of men in their roles as fathers. Partners, intergenerational influences, fathers' perceptions of their parenting abilities, and the primacy of work related responsibilities are now being recognised as conspiring to create subtle and not so subtle barriers to change. The nature of these influences, their effect on fathers' sense of responsibility and some of the ways in which men themselves are attempting to deal with these barriers are the focus of

the remainder of this paper. Associated findings from a study of forty Australian fathers (Holland, 1993) which utilised small discussion groups to explore the meanings men attribute to the experience of fatherhood, are presented.

Barriers to paternal involvement

Partners as gatekeepers

A number of studies have indicated that a major determinant of men's participation in childrearing is the attitudes and behaviour of their partners (Barnett & Baruch, 1988). There is evidence in the research that women's attitudes to men's involvement in child rearing have undergone less change than the rhetoric would suggest. In a study of British families, Backett (1987) found that assumptions about the egalitarian family do not recognise the continuing existence of traditional patriarchal values which are still subsumed strongly by women as well as men. Backett contended that women's considerable domestic power, which legitimates their opinion in domestic matters, acts as a barrier to men's negotiation of fatherhood and their capacity to develop paternal competencies which are accorded equal weight and validity with maternal ones.

These outcomes continue to confirm earlier findings that, while some mothers would like their partners to do more, a substantial number do not, suggesting a high level of ambivalence about fathers' involvement in childrearing (Pleck, 1982). While Barnett and Baruch (1988) concluded that fathers' participation is less reflective of availability and preference and more controlled by wives' employment related needs, wives' attitudes towards roles were shown to be a major predictor of participation. When attitudes were liberal, husbands did more and when they were traditional, husbands did less. In the same study, fathers who reported enjoying increased contact with their children, also reported increased marital strain.

Similarly, wives of higher participating fathers evaluated their partners positively but reported feeling less satisfaction with overall life. They reported work-family conflict and were quite self-blaming. Fathers

who spent more time alone with children described more tension in the marriage, and men who spent more time with their children in the company of their wives described themselves as more competent and involved with their children and did not report the marital tensions. This suggests that mothers still perceive themselves as having primary responsibility for children, and where they maintain a presence during fathers interactions with children, they are likely to be more accepting of their partners' participation.

In the Melbourne study (Holland, 1993), findings indicated that for a number of men the attitudes of their partners were a disincentive to their sense of competence and to their enthusiasm for participation in child-rearing tasks. Contentious issues included how they went about dressing children, what they dressed them in, how dirty children got when they were with the father and therefore the activities they were involved in, being continually contradicted by partners as they attempted to take responsibility in childrearing tasks and trying to do the right thing but never appearing to do so. As one respondent summarised 'They want an assistant, not a partner'.

The way in which initial intentions for participation may gradually shift as an outcome of partners conduct were evident.

'We were both going to be involved. It turned out she was more involved than I was and then she decided she was better at it than I was so she ended up doing most of it. I didn't do it as well as she does and so she would rather do it. I used to get angry. To talk about the involved father, mothers have to give up some of the role to fathers.'

From a longitudinal study of men's participation in family life Cowan and Cowan (1987:167) found that:

... the more men feel supported in the parental role by their wives the more they tend to stay involved in the care of their young children.

Models from own fathers

Fathers who want to be more involved in child care, according to Sagl (1982), are operating on either the desire to **compensate** for their experience of neglect by their own fathers or the wish to **model** the involvement with their own fathers which they hold in high regard. Men who reported adopting a compensatory approach to their conduct of fatherhood were frequently responding to what they recalled as being a humiliating childhood which they were determined not to repeat with their own children. Those who wish to reproduce their experiences of the involvement of their own fathers recall them as being encouraging, kind, caring and worthy of respect.

While it has been suggested that '... parent's recollections of their childhood experiences are fallible and may not tell us much about the actual circumstances in which they were raised' (Lamb & Oppenheim, 1989:16), the individual's perception of experience is nonetheless the most powerful influence on the formation of attitudes and beliefs about parenting.

Men who struggle with negative childhood experiences while trying to create their own vision for acceptable parenting, often perceive this dilemma as a barrier to satisfactory involvement with their children. Fathers who lack appropriate models and feel uncertain about the way to conduct family relationships, report that when difficulties arise they often resort to the behaviours of their own fathers with a strong sense of failure and disappointment. As Cowan and Cowan (1987) indicated, knowing what they don't want to be as fathers provides little information for achieving their ideal. Failure to move away from the unacceptable models of their own fathers frequently results in a tendency to withdraw from involvement rather than impose their own childhood experience on their children, particularly as children get older. A father of pre-adolescent children who admitted to seeking weekends away alone stated:

You get tired of being the ogre; the boss in the family, having to make all the hard decisions.

Intergenerational disapproval

Intergenerational conflict is frequently experienced by men as they attempt to create new family roles (Cowan & Cowan, 1987). Fathers report that their own parents often intensify feelings of inadequacy by reacting to their attempts to be more nurturing and involved. They are frequently disapproving of their son's caregiving behaviours and create tension between them and their partners by suggesting the inappropriateness of non-traditional role performance. This was reported by a number of participants in the Melbourne study who were subject to ongoing criticism, ridicule or disregard.

My mates had a real go at me about changing and washing nappies. My mother says that too. My old man said 'what's wrong with your wife'.

I finally told my father why I do so much for my kids. I pointed out that he had never done anything with me and I was not going to do that to my children. I really got angry and he was devastated.

People tend to think you're Mr Wonderful because you are have done this (decided to share equally in parenting). They think you could not possibly have chosen to do it. Why should you be treated like a saint because you are doing what you should be doing? Not only that but my wife gets credit for allowing me to do it!

Attitudes which reflect a secondary role for fathers are described by Pruett (1987) as 'empty paternity'. This view of fatherhood overlooks the emotional intensity of paternity and assumes that men can be distanced from their role and relationship to it without reaction or pain. Family research appears to have generally overlooked the depth of feeling which men have on these issues. Acknowledgment of these intense feelings and respect for them may go a long way to bringing men and women together on complex parenting issues.

Differences between their private, and others' public definitions of their role as fathers were shown to be problematic and at times anxiety-promoting for a number of men in the Melbourne study as they attempted to perform adequately in what they experienced as an ill-defined and undervalued role. As one primary caregiving father expressed it:

The male role in families is not seen as important. I'm a single father and it's a struggle to be taken seriously.

Work and time

A number of studies have identified fathers' work patterns and time allocations as barriers to increased involvement on childrearing (Glezer, 1991). Levant (1988) argued that men's family roles are more significant psychologically than their work roles and challenged the belief that low levels of participation in family work reflects a low level of psychological commitment. With the onset of fatherhood, the traditional provider role may become paramount resulting in conflict between an ideal for closeness and affiliation in the developing family unit and a heightened sense of responsibility (Grossman, 1987). Some fathers take on additional work at this stage of family formation to meet new family resource demands.



At the same time, workplace culture has failed to recognise the primacy of fatherhood in men's lives. In a review of the impact of work on the conduct of fatherhood, Bowen and Orthner (1991) argue that while there has been a great deal of attention to the gap between men's expanding role perceptions and their actual behaviour, the effect of organisational

culture on their role performance as fathers has virtually been ignored. Studies have shown that while policies relating to paternity leave provision, work based child care and support for workers with family responsibilities are gradually put in place, employing organisations remain traditional. According to Bowen and Orthner:

...organisations have not typically changed their work expectations or reward systems to permit men more participatory parenthood.

(1991:206)

Company relocation continues unabated, paternity leave is discouraged and taking time to be with families rather than doing overtime is frowned upon and may affect promotion. Australian studies, such as that of Edgar and Glezer indicate that:

No matter how much fathers want to accept a bigger role in child care and home making, they will be unable to do so until work practices change'.

(1992:39)

Participants in the Melbourne study reported that there was not enough time available to be the kind of father they would ideally like to be, but they saw work demands as non-negotiable. They also confirmed that time commitments shifted in response to work rather than in response to family. Whatever time was 'left over' from work was made available to the family. Some men in the sample indicated feelings of discouragement and stress in the conflict between their ideal for participation in family life, particularly their desire to create a friendship style of relationship with children, and the time available to do this.

One father with older children expressed a deep and genuine sense of regret at having spent so little time with his children who now had little time for him.

There was considerable debate in the research groups about the issue of quality time versus quantity time, which Palm and Palkovitz (1988)

argue is an oversimplification of the crucial aspect of time in the development of family relationships and in the balancing of work, family and leisure time. There was a level of awareness that a quantity of time needed to be spent with children before it was possible to share quality time, and that quality time meant more than just being together. For those fathers who felt stressed by time constraints in relation to family responsibilities, the notion that whatever time was available should be quality time was a comforting ideal which was only sometimes realised.

There was a level of awareness that a quantity of time needed to be spent with children before it was possible to share quality time, and that quality time meant more than just being together.

Parenting skills

Men's sense of competence in the skills of parenting have been shown to impact on their degree of involvement in childrearing (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). Related to skill development is the issue of how quickly others, particularly partners, step in when fathers are uneasy, and how little time men give themselves for feeling uncertain in child rearing responsibilities. This reflects the continuance of traditional role boundaries and the way in which they may be subtly maintained.

Men are less likely than women to have had any experience or training in parenting skills, but are not given time or opportunities to 'catch up' as they take on new co-parenting strategies or seek to create close relationships with children. Lack of opportunities available to men for greater preparation for fatherhood and the lack of social and institutional support for the paternal role are seen by Mc Bride (1990), as limiting fathers' options for determining the type and amount of involvement they will have with their children.

While Levant (1988) reported an increase in the number of child rear-

ing programs available for fathers, men continue to indicate that it is a bigger role than they had anticipated and with little guidance, they rely on trial and error for the conduct of fatherhood. Certainly in the Melbourne study, one of the areas of perceived role dysfunction identified by participants was the issue of discipline. Dealing with conflict and setting limits was experienced as a barrier to the close nurturing relationships which participants expressed as their desired goal in families. Such issues as falling back on the rigid discipline strategies of their own fathers, being in disagreement with partners over discipline processes, and having children challenge their behaviour management strategies was sufficient for a number of men to report not wishing to spend any more time with their children than they already did. Far from being an abdication of responsibility, these fathers reflected in discussion the view expressed by Formaini (1990:61) 'Rigid authoritarianism is very unpleasant when it is dispensed in place of feelings of love and tenderness, and it is just as unpleasant in what it does for the one who dispenses it.' As one father expressed it:

When they are young you can cuddle them, help and encourage them, but when discipline begins, that's when discouragement begins ... sometimes I feel annoyed and angry, other times I feel confused.

When alternative approaches to discipline were discussed as a way beyond this barrier, many had not realised that such 'sensible' knowledge was available, that it had application to many aspects of relationships, including with partners and in the work place. Nor did they realise that such a range of options existed for dealing with behavioural complexities. Certainly it was the first time most had discussed any such concerns with other men. One father summarised his dilemma:

When you become a parent it's supposed to just all happen. You don't have the time or the skills. You have to work at it.

Challenging the barriers.

An understanding of how both men and women construct their parenting roles and the impact which each partner has on the other's sense of competence is a key element in

diminishing the problem of gender and power as defined by Backett (1987). A major factor in fathers' involvement in child rearing is the willingness of mothers to redefine their role in relation to that of fathers. This may mean the realignment of power structures within families including acceptance of men's willingness to learn and women's willingness to allow them to do so. The ability to negotiate the style and degree of involvement which suits both partners is crucial (Mc Bride, 1991).

Intergenerational discouragement of shared parenting, which defines fathers' participation as inadequacy in both parents, is reported as being both amusing and painful for men as well as their partners. It is described by Cowan and Cowan (1987) as being one of the most subtle barriers to fathers' family involvement because both men and women in their study indicated caring very much about their own parents' reactions. Secure relationships, where partners support each other while maintaining respect for the others' points of view, is argued as diminishing such intergenerational discouragers. Dismissal of this area of influence as negligible in fathers' feelings about their emerging role, is to underestimate and perpetuate the barrier.

A major factor in fathers' involvement in child rearing is the willingness of mothers to redefine their role in relation to that of fathers. This may mean the realignment of power structures within families including acceptance of men's willingness to learn and women's willingness to allow them to do so.

Barriers which men perceive as being created by work commitments can be considered at both the corporate and personal level. It is clear that policy developments have not been matched by a shift in corporate attitudes. The culture of work, particularly in

current economic conditions, mitigates against men resorting to these provisions when family responsibilities become pressing.

Greater flexibility in working hours has been argued as a way of diminishing work-family conflict. In the Melbourne study men reported using the availability of particular shifts to maximise the amount of time they could spend with their children. Others indicated ways in which they included children in their work activities either during the children's school holidays or on weekends. Some fathers made a point of using family routines before and after work to create time with their children, for example, breakfasting alone with children and driving them to school or creche. One participant who travelled extensively in his occupation had developed a system whereby he spent time with his children mapping out where his work was taking him, sharing his itinerary and agreeing to communicate from particular locations. Yet another installed a telephone system in his office which was for his children to contact him any time of the day. It was known in his work place that calls on this system had priority.

Men benefit from discussing their experiences of parenthood with other men, which frees them from the model of mother as ideal parent and enables them to explore fatherhood from their own perspective.

It is evident from the literature that the skilling of fathers in parental role tasks will diminish barriers for men who wish to participate more in child rearing (Palm & Palkovitz, 1988). Programs which go beyond childbirth preparation classes to supporting fathers in areas such as dealing with the transition to parenthood, understanding play and development, communication skills training and aspects of family relationships development, are essential to dismantling barriers to men's family involvement (Levant, 1988).

Fathers' parenting perceptions and experiential bases are different from those of mothers, therefore men-only parenting groups should form part of the profile of available parent education programs. Men benefit from discussing their experiences of parenthood with other men, which frees them from the model of mother as ideal parent and enables them to explore fatherhood from their own perspective (Palm & Palkovitz, 1988).

Conclusion

The option for fathers to engage fully in the parenting role is more available now than a generation ago as social constructs continue to change and men realise the benefits to be gained from the nurturing of children for their own adult development. There is evidence that fathers wish to create new patterns of relationships with their children, which they perceive as benefiting their children, their partners and themselves. Wider acceptance of the fact that men have a genuine desire to move beyond narrow definitions of their roles as fathers will facilitate the dismantling of barriers which tend to perpetuate the myth of 'empty fatherhood'. ♦

References

- Backett K. (1987) The negotiation of fatherhood, *in* C. Lewis & M. O'Brien (eds.) *Reassessing fatherhood: New observations on fathers and the modern family*, pp74-90. London: Sage.
- Barnett R.C. & Baruch G.K. (1988) Correlates of fathers' participation in family work, *in* P. Bronstein & C.P. Cowan (eds.) *Fatherhood today: Men's changing role in the family*, pp66-78, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Bowen G.L. & Orthner D.K. (1991) Effects of organisational culture on fatherhood, *in* F.W. Bozett & S.M. Hanson (eds.) *Fatherhood and families in cultural context*, pp187-217, New York: Springer.
- Cowan C.P. & Cowan P.A. (1987) Men's involvement in parenthood: Identifying the antecedents and understanding the barriers, *in* P.W. Berman & F.A. Pederson (eds.), *Men's transitions to parenthood: Longitudinal studies of early family experience*, pp145-174, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates
- Edgar D. & Glezer H. (1992) A man's place ... ? Restructuring family realities, *Family Matters*, 31, pp36-39.

Formaini H. (1990) *Men: The darker continent*. London: Heinemann.

Glezer H. (1991) Juggling work and family commitments, *Family Matters*, 28, pp6-10.

Grossman F.K. (1987) Separate and together: Men's autonomy and affiliation in the transition to parenthood, *in* P.W. Berman & F.A. Pederson (eds.), *Men's transitions to parenthood: Longitudinal studies of early family experience*, pp89-112, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.

Holland A. (1993) *Men's Perceptions of fatherhood: A study of fathers' understandings of their experience of fatherhood*, Doctoral dissertation, Monash University.

Kewley J. & Lewis H. (1993) *Fathers*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble

Lamb M.E. & Oppenheim D. (1989) Fatherhood and father-child relationships: Five years of research, *in* S.H. Cath, A. Gurwitt & L. Gunsberg (eds.) *Fathers and their families*, pp11-26, Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

Lamb M.E., Pleck J.H. & Levine J.A. (1987) Effects of increased paternal involvement on fathers and mothers, *in* C. Lewis & M. O'Brien (eds.) *Reassessing fatherhood: New observations on fathers and the modern family*, pp109-125, London: Sage.

La Rossa R. (1988) Fatherhood and social change, *Family Relations*, 37, pp451-457.

Levant R. (1988) Education for fatherhood, *in* P. Bronstein & C.P. Cowan (eds.) *Fatherhood today: Men's changing role in the family*, pp253-275, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Mackay H. (1993) *Reinventing Australia: The mind and mood of Australia in the 90s*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Palm G.F. & Palkovitz R. (1988) The challenge of working with new fathers: Implications for support providers, *in* R. Palkovitz & M.B. Sussman (eds.) *Transitions to parenthood*, pp357-376, New York: The Haworth Press.

Pleck J.H. (1982) *Husbands' and wives' paid work, family work, and adjustment*. Wellesley, MA: Center for research on women, Wellesley College.

Pruett K.D. (1987) *The nurturing father*. New York: Warner Books.

Sagi A. (1982) Antecedents and consequences of various degrees of paternal involvement in child rearing: The Israel Project, *in* M.E. Lamb (ed.) *Non-traditional families: Parenting and child development*, pp205-232, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Seel R. (1987) *The uncertain father*, Bath: Gateway Books.