GENERATIVE FATHERING AFTER DIVORCE: MOVING FROM BLAME TO NEW DEFINITIONS OF FATHERWORK AFTER SEPARATION.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research by Russell, Barclay, Edgecombe, Donovan, Habib and Pawson (1998) into fathers' and their partners' attitudes reported a number of changes in the way Australian fathers perceive their roles. The report suggests that fewer fathers see their major role as that of the breadwinner and are more likely to value the role of "being there when needed", "ensuring that children are happy/ and feel supported", and providing "safety and protection" (p9). These characteristically generative (caring) intentions and dispositions are seriously disrupted and challenged when men become single or separated fathers. At the same time, negative images of non-resident fathers as being uninterested, disengaged and uninvolved pervade both professional and popular literature and so continue to position them within deficit assumptions.

This paper will present some preliminary findings from a study with a small group of separated fathers and will argue that constructs associated with Erikson's (1950) concept of generativity and systems theory provide strong frameworks for developing non-deficit approaches to understanding and working with separated fathers. Non-deficit approaches are crucial in encouraging separated fathers to engage with support services at a time in their life when they experience significant feelings of isolation and exclusion. Discussion will draw on recent developments in the theory of generativity to interpret these fathers' personal narratives and on systems theory to describe the problem solving and growth promoting group processes with

which this group of fathers became engaged. The study was designed to explore issues and concerns associated with being a separated father and to assist participants to process and redefine their experiences of fatherhood after separation.

The group consisted of six fathers in age range 25-56 years from diverse occupational backgrounds. Three members of the group had custody of one child and, along with the remainder of the group, two had contact with their other children on a regular basis. One had supervised access to his only child once each fortnight. All had previously attended support groups associated with Western Sydney Fathers' Resource Centre. Three of the group members attended all sessions, two attended four sessions and one attended three meetings only. Sessions were audiotaped and this paper will present dominant themes which emerged within the group and the ways in which some of these themes (issues) were processed through group discussion.

GENERATIVITY AND SYSTEMS THEORY

The generative intentions of separated fathers are supported in programs which enable them to step out of linear cause-effect thinking and reframe their experience through harnessing the growth promoting aspects of change. In recent years, systems theory has been applied to differentiate between 'restrictive and destructive environments' and 'supportive and growth orientated environments'. These concepts have direct application to assisting men as they deal with their lives as separated fathers by affirming and capitalising on their generative dispositions and existing knowledge within the learning potential of the change processes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERATIVE FATHERING

Generative fathering has been described as "... fathering that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them." (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997:18). Erikson (1975) considered parenthood to be the primary developmental task of adulthood which includes both the moral obligation to attend to the needs of the next generation and an emergent sense within the adult that caring for children is central to personal and societal well being. Extreme threats to an adult's parental generativity will likely result in what is described as "generativity chill", a type of anxiety resulting from a perceived or real danger of losing the child or children one has helped to create (Snarey, 1993). "It seems likely that brief or extended threats to generativity will have a significant impact on a father's selfhood: ...". (Snarey, 1993:23-24). Family breakdown presents separated fathers with such a threat.

Fatherwork is the term used to describe men's sustained effort to care for and about their children (see Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). Categories of fatherwork reflect the intentions and lived experiences of fathers who seek to contribute to the well-being of their families. These include **ethical work***:* the commitment to providing a secure, trustworthy environment which is responsive to the needs of children; **stewardship work***:* involving dedicated effort to providing the resources for children and the family and providing opportunities for children to develop and learn; **developmental work***:* which involves the caring effort to sustain healthy development and adaptability across time and circumstance and **relationship work***:* the devoted effort to facilitate attachments and understandings between children and others and develop children's ability to understand the needs of others (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997:27-29).

Aspects of these dimensions of fatherwork often become difficult to sustain for separated fathers. The tension between wishing to care for their children and separation from them militates against fulfilment of fathers' generative intentions. Issues of major concern raised in the study group indicated the need to manage contradictions and tensions associated with the desire to maintain healthy and mutually beneficial relationships with children.

FATHERWORK AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION:
The first session of the program involved establishing the interests of participants and the directions in which they wished to take the discussion over the five week period. When asked what they hoped to achieve from attending the program the following areas were identified:

- better relationships now and into the future with my children
- improved communication and conflict resolution skills
- maintain and improve my self esteem
- sharing and learning
- improve my parenting skills
- learn to take a negative and try to change it into a positive - with my kids first and then see what happens. Also try to learn to communicate properly

Preferred directions and topics for each of the discussion sessions included:

- communication - with children about how they feel and how you feel
- how to relieve pressure on children in relation to separation and conflict
- dealing with children's divided loyalties
- dealing with children's grief
- answers to children's questions that you can't answer for yourself
- understanding behaviour
- guidance and discipline
- dealing with absence and children's experiences which are "unknown"
- communication with ex-partner
- expectations and age of children
- children playing parents off against each other

Topics for discussion were agreed upon and included communication, discipline, expectations of children and parenting style. Discussion outcomes will be briefly presented in terms of categories of `fatherwork'. These broad areas of concern indicated  areas of generative `work' and an urgent need to resolve aspects of relationships with children and partners which interfered with their best intentions as fathers.

Ethical work
All discussion sessions indicated these fathers' retained a sense of ethical obligation to their children, including a desire to improve parenting skills, communication skills and to work towards better relationships with ex partners to achieve the best outcomes for their children. The

desire to be there for children, was reflected in the concerns raised and also indicated motives for attending the group:

> *...guide them and to give something back...*

> *...to teach them between good and bad...*

> *You are kind of there trying to do the right thing.*

Suggestion of generativity chill, associated with the thwarting of ethical intentions was indicated by one father:

> *It's one of the hardest things...just not being there with your children. I hate that. I look back at what we had and just think it was just a waste to destroy it. And now it just isn't there ... I see it in my children, part of my children die off because they haven't got their father and mother there... dealing with their grief. Trying to provide answers to questions that you can't really answer yourself. ... it's very difficult for me, very difficult.*

Fathers in this group were acutely aware of their ethical responsibility to assist children by learning to deal with and understand contradictions and tensions within themselves, their children and in relationships with partners. They were seeking new skills and understandings to be able to meet these obligations. These included dealing with perceived partner antagonism and hostility, controlling emotions and dealing with the fear of losing contact with children if particular issues were not properly managed.

Stewardship work
Discussions within the group frequently centred around the issue of available resources and how to best utilise scarcity of both materials and time. The need to guide children in the appropriate use of resources was raised across a number of the discussion sessions. Choosing and allocating resources wisely was a concern for most of these men while at the same time they wished to contribute fairly and effectively to the material needs of children. In relation to communication and discipline one participant said:

> *... you have got to be more consistent with your boundaries ...as far as what they can do and can't do. ... financial constraints are greater than they used to be ... you may not necessarily have the latest TV and video equipment or play stations for amusement but you actually find more time interacting with them. You play cards or doing the simpler things, which is probably just as enjoyable for the kids and it is for yourself.*

Teaching children the value of things and the importance of being able to adapt to circumstance and change was raised in a number of contexts.

> *The general things like manners, appreciating what you are given as opposed to demanding... you just can't be equal ... one week when you had a lot of money then this week you have not got any money. These are the sort of things that happen in life, circumstances change and they have got to learn to accept those changes. Because their circumstances have changed through their life and they have to cope with those changes.*

The utilisation of time was an issue for most of the group as access was limited and time available with children prized.

> *Time is more precious, so you are more conscious of using that time to the best*

> *I work 12 days straight and (have) two days off to spend with my three children.*

> *It's very difficult because you only have them for two days a fortnight or one day a fortnight or for two hours or whatever ... and you tend to let them stay up longer than you should.*

The issue of scarcity of time made communication with ex partners a crucial factor in the quality of the time available for sustaining relationships with children, with the fear of loss of access and fractured relationships with children a major concern. The nurturing of responsibility in children as an aspect of stewardship work was a matter of balancing the need to teach children while maintaining a strong relationship with limited contact. As summarised by one participant:

> *I guess I'm trying for the girls to go forward and learn without being harsh on them. Just trying to guide them in the right mind.*

Developmental work
Monitoring children's development and learning and promoting positive support for change was an issue of paramount importance to members of the group. Understanding age appropriate expectations was something which they wished to explore and as the focus of one session, created considerable debate. A schedule of suggested age related responsibilities was offered to generate discussion and most group members felt children were incapable of the tasks indicated for each age group. The one member of the group who had custody of his preschool aged child indicated how his daughter was able to do most things listed for her age group in some form or another.

> *Set the table... put away groceries...she feeds the pet cat... helps with the dishes... cleans the yard. We get out there and mow, pull out the weeds, stuff like that. ... My daughter uses scissors all the time. ... My daughter never cuts herself.*

This suggests that following children's emerging abilities and skill development when living apart from them is an issue for separated fathers.

Of considerable concern was monitoring children's school performance. Attempts to be included in children's school activities was not always supported by partners. Collecting children from school or other leisure activities provided some fathers with opportunities to find out about school related developments.

> *Last year my little girl had an inservice day at preschool. I wanted to be part of it and I told them... and I watched her play with the kids and every time I tried to walk out... she would run after me. My partner has just abused me (saying) I shouldn't have turned up.*

Understanding individual differences in children and the need to treat each differently was raised in discussion. One father described his children with pleasure and pride, valuing and articulating the unique characteristics of each.

> *All my kids are different and I treat them as different. J is extremely determined and very confident ... and extremely capable. N is good at dancing and academically but doesn't have the confidence yet that J has.... I guess you become a lot more confident as you get older. L has no fear which I think is great in a boy. ...he is also a very good boy and a very good son at times and very supportive. He is still not scared to give you a cuddle and hug, things like that. They look after each other if you're not there and help each other.*

The task of supporting children's development and understanding how children construct knowledge would appear from the discussion outcomes to be an area in which separated fathers would benefit from increased knowledge and insight.

Relationship work

Discussion over the five week period was predominantly focussed on relationship work. Concern about relationships with children was the main purpose for attendance at the group and the maintenance and facilitation of healthy, constructive affectionate bonds was of major importance. A great deal of the discussions about access to, and relationships with, children was marked by issues associated with perceived hostility of partners and its influence on themselves and their children. The frustrations associated with children being caught between adult disputes was a cause for deep pain and regret. The desire to improve communication to alleviate tension was a serious focus throughout the discussion sessions. In giving an example of communication breakdown, one father said:

> *I felt terrible. It felt totally beyond my control and .. my ex said that she would have to go and sort it out and `see what you've done'. So I felt miserable and the outcome was, you know, I lost what was the opportunity to talk to both my children.*

These fathers were aware of the need to work on maintaining positive, nurturing relationships with children while expressing strong beliefs that partners, procedures and systems were to blame for frustrations and barriers to their generative intentions. Fear of rejection in the near or distant future remained a concern for fathers in this group. Improved communication skills were seen as a helpful way of moderating situations and moving away from blaming and adversarial relationships associated with what appear to be intractable systems and arrangements that interfere with constructive fatherwork.

SYSTEMS APPROACH

Systems theory is a useful framework for understanding relationships between different components within a variety of social systems. Systems theory, with both its strengths and weaknesses, has been applied across many disciplines. Georg Hegel in the development of systems theory, articulated the notion that "the world is in process and is controlled by a tension between opposites." (Littlejohn, 1996:56).

Two key concepts underpin the transition of separated fathers from a linear system of blame to a growth orientated system that emphasises new learning. Kolb's learning cycle can be used to highlight significant milestones along the learning pathway being taken by these men.. This learning will only effectively occur when they are exposed to an organisational culture that adopts a non-deficit perspective.

Linear systems compared to growth orientated systems.
Systems theory identifies the transition for separated fathers by seeing interrelationships between what is important in their lives rather than linear cause-effect chains that encourage blame and resentment. The linear cause- effect approach, strongly emphasises the allocation of blame regarding separation thereby reinforcing the belief that men and women remain trapped in the snapshot of a traumatic experience. This is the hallmark of the adversarial court system as legal professionals encourage the collection of affidavits that advantage one party over another. It is during this period of perceived victimisation, that self blame or the blame of the partner is entrenched, creating a restrictive and destructive process rather than a supportive and growth orientated environment. Linear responses are highlighted in the following exchanges within the group:

> *So that is a typical thing with my ex wife, there is no communication what so ever. Little is said and then it just goes down hill from there very quickly., and I say what I think, she says hers and then one of us end up hanging up on the other. There is no communication, absolutely just zero. (Participant in week 2).*

> *Yes probably nine out of ten times we communicate, especially on the phone ends up the same way. It either ends up in hostility or no communications, you just deflect it or say we will talk about this latter or I wont talk about it in front of the children. (Participant in week 2).*

There was a time a few months ago when I thought I really have got to try for the kids, so I went and apologised for everything that went wrong in our marriage, our life, everything that has gone wrong in their life. Then I said that I had thought of a way I was willing to forget everything that has happened in the past and move forward from this point for the and not to blame each other for anything in the past. We should start at this point and move on for the children's sake. This worked great for two about weeks. (Participant in week 2).

However the participants in the group began to step out of the linear cause - effect system and to engage in a circular approach to problem solving that allows for the development of new and family growth orientated solutions. These cyclic approaches to problem solving are similar to Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984). The learning cycle for separated fathers occurs when they first learn through the **immediate experience** of the separation, then through having time to conduct **reflective observation**, the development of **abstract conceptualisation** (understanding) and the **experimentation** in trying new solutions to the problems they face. (Foley, 1995).

Towards the end of the second session, a new form of questioning was emerging between the participants. This questioning highlighted the active tousle of ideas when these men were conceptualising;

> *P.1 No, that's not right because this will make (your son) hate his mother and you do not want this either.*
> *P.2 No....My opinion may not be correct but this is what I think, but this is happening constantly and it is very difficult not to react. ...it may be wrong , but I thought perhaps it was the right thing to do.*
> *P.1 You have to explain it right, you cannot keep him sitting in the corner, you have to say something....*

During session 3, several of the men reported experiences that demonstrated that they had reflected on a certain situation, developed their own thoughts about new responses to old situations and then experimented when the situation re-occurred.

> *P.3 We actually went shopping this week and it went very well.*
> *L. 1 "That's great. Did you use any of the strategies that we discussed?.*
> *P.3 It was perfect. It was just myself and her this time without my girlfriend. So I said okay we are going shopping this week and we will go to the shop and we will see how you go with dresses. And she was really good.... when we got them we also had to do some grocery shopping as well. I said to her when we got home, see when you behave, we all have a good time and so on. She was all excited and raced off to show her dresses off and all that kind of stuff.*

Argyris and Schon (1978) emphasised the difference between double loop (generative) learning and single loop (linear corrective) learning. **Double loop learning** was evident when this group of separated fathers engaged in critically questioning their own situation. The challenge for

services who work with separated fathers is in developing double loop learning within the clients life.

The following participants remarks demonstrate double loop learning at the end of week 3 & 4;

> *Yes you learn to be consistent and you learn to not blame anyone for your behaviour and to take a firm approach with what you control and what you can not control. Likewise you can control your behaviour but you can not necessarily control theirs [the children sic]. You are controlling yours and by that you are setting examples to them, and they are learning from that example. (Participant in session 3).*

> *I only see my daughter on Thursday evenings, after she has been to maths tutoring. One of the suggestions from last week was that she may be brain dead... So anyway this Thursday night when I picked her up I said to her 'are you feeling brain dead?' and she replied 'after 1.5 hours of maths what do you expect?'. So I said 'do you want to talk or do you want to rest for a while?'. She said 'I just want to rest for a little while', so I said 'okay and we will just listen to the radio'. It was a bit strange at first but then we started to talk after about 10 minutes. She was still a bit touchy but she appreciated saying how she felt. (Participant in week 4).*

WORKING WITHIN A NON-DEFICIT MODEL - ORGANISATIONAL AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS.

The tendency for programs to adopt deficit and linear models of intervention overlook fathers existing commitment to their generative `work' and discourages them from accessing support programs when they are struggling with feelings of isolation and a sense of exclusion from family life. Concepts associated with generativity and systems theory provide insight into fathers' concerns and intentions and ways in which they can move away from the cause-effect cycle towards growth promoting solutions.

Organisations who are interested in developing growth orientated new learning amongst separated fathers who access their services need to reinforce generative values and Kolb's learning cycle. While the values appear quite simple, establishing them within a firm organisational base will present challenges, especially for agencies that have previously endorsed or worked from deficit assumptions.

Key areas for program development

The following aspects of program review and development are suggested:

1. The endorsement of a values base that is compatible with Erikson's theory of generativity which emphasise the concept of fatherwork involving ethical work, stewardship work,

developmental work and relationship work (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). These values would be understood and validated at both program and organisational levels.

2. The practice of the values listed above in the creation of an environment where:

- participants and staff are challenged when linear responses of blame are expressed and respond by seeking growth promoting perspectives and skills

- opportunities are developed for separated fathers to tell their own stories and reflect on their experiences and develop new understandings of what fatherwork means

- there is access to relevant information regarding their current situation as most men are ill prepared for the time of separation from their family and their response to this

- separated fathers are assisted and allowed to develop a new learning cycle which is intensified when participants are encouraged to live the fatherwork values both within the program and within their family and community life. In order to further develop this, programs for separated fathers need to train peer leaders in interpersonal skills and involve them in program operation. This involves the development of responsibilities for staff and volunteers and the provision of best practice supervision

- there is provision of support throughout the court experience so that self blame or the blame of the partner does not become entrenched, thereby creating a growth orientated environment which develops ongoing and the most stable relationships outcomes for the children

3. The provision of opportunities for separated fathers to learn more about aspects of child development. This can be done in informal, enjoyable ways for example by providing opportunities for separated fathers to meet in groups and with other separated fathers and their children in family fun days.

CONCLUSION
The constructs associated with Erikson's (1950) concept of generativity and systems theory provide strong frameworks for developing non-deficit approaches to understanding and working with separated fathers. The development of these concepts by Hawkins & Dollahite (1997) emphasises the importance of `fatherwork' especially as an expression of ethical work, stewardship work, developmental work and relationship work.

The development of non-deficit approaches are crucial in encouraging separated fathers to engage with support services. The development of non-deficit approaches works against the all too easy establishment of blame orientated responses to life problems. Separated fathers identify strongly with their continuing ethical responsibilities as fathers and can develop new learning and

growth promoting responses towards their children and ex-partners especially when agencies involve them in program development and work from a non-deficit perspective.

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