

Changing families, challenging futures

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Generativity and the Transition to Fatherhood: the Emergence of Fathers' Nurturing Capacities

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INTRODUCTION:

The notion of father as nurturer gained prominence in the fatherhood literature of the 1980's as scholars recognised, and research confirmed that men as well as women are capable of sustaining a deep commitment to caring relationships and healthy intimacy with their children (Pruett, 1987). The literature has described fathers' participation in care-giving and custodial tasks, the extent and quality of involvement and relationships with children, as well as the developmental implications of participation in child rearing for men and their children. As a consequence, attention is now being paid to the extent to which social attitudes, systems and policies accept, value, acknowledge, and foster men's abilities and right to nurture their children (Gerson, 1993; Burgess and Ruxton, 1996). Any reassessment of social policy will require a significant shift away from scepticism about fathers' commitments to family life and a move towards more attentive listening to what is being said about men's contributions to the well-being of their families (see Edgar, 1998). This paper will argue that effective listening and reasoning has been, and will continue to be, well served by theorising fatherhood within Erikson's concept of generativity (see McAdam & de St. Aubin 1992; Snarey, 1993; Kotre, 1996; Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997).

THEORISING FATHERHOOD

In an articulate discussion of poststructuralist perspectives on fatherhood, Lupton and Barklay (1997:9) claim that "...fatherhood is a phenomenon around which there currently exist many and often competing discourses.", concluding that there is no one fixed way of representing fatherhood. At the same time it can be reasonably argued that the conduct of fatherhood has been extensively defined and described within social role theory, resulting in dominant discourses which have essentially positioned fatherhood within a deficit paradigm (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). As Burgess (1997) argues, any such ideology is of itself insufficient to bring about insight and profound change.

As a welcome challenge to the social role definitions of fatherhood, recent scholarship has utilised Erikson's concept of generativity to inform understandings of contemporary fatherhood and to formulate and advance an ideal of fatherhood as developmental 'work' in adulthood (Snarey, 1993; Hawkins & Dollahite:1997). The concept of fathering as generative work or "fatherwork", has been defined, and used to describe men's sustained effort to care for, and about, their children (see Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997).

THEORIES OF GENERATIVITY

Several theories of generativity have been developed and frameworks proposed which, this paper will argue, facilitate broader, nuanced understandings of fatherhood with potential for reframing family intervention programs and social policy (see Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997).

In spite of objections to positivism and the fixedness of age/stage theories, Erikson's concepts have continued to be used extensively to describe personality characteristics which emerge at particular stages of the life span as an outcome of maturation and interaction with the socialising environment. Kotre (1996:8) argues that when proposing his age-stage theory of psychosocial development, Erikson maintained that it was "... a tool for thought and not a prescription...". Generativity as the seventh of Erikson's eight life tasks is primarily associated with but not exclusive to, adult care and concern for their offspring as members of the next generation. Generativity has been described as "... a need, drive, concern, task and issue." (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992:1004). Three theories of generativity offer 'tools for thought' in relation to fatherhood.

GENERATIVITY, PERSON AND ENVIRONMENT

In proposing a conceptual and methodological framework for the scientific study of generativity McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) developed a schematic, integrative model of generativity which draws together what they describe as Erikson's "scattered" writings as well as statements from other more recent expositions on generativity. The notion of generativity as a "... single structured concept located 'within' the individual." is redefined to reflect the multiplicity of contexts through which generativity links the individual to the social world "... within a psychosocial space that subsumes person and environment." (p.1004). The model proposed by McAdams and de St. Aubin, (1992: 1005) indicates four dimensions of generativity consisting of seven psychosocial features:

Motivational sources; including cultural demand, inner desire and conscious concern:
Thoughts/Plans; including beliefs and commitment; **Behaviour;** including actions: **Meaning;** including narration of life stories

Generativity is shaped in adulthood by internal desire (the need for symbolic immortality and the need to be needed) and cultural demand (to care for and about the next generation). These combine to create a conscious concern about, and commitment to, behaviours which nurture, cultivate, protect, preserve, and maintain all that is believed to be worthy in traditions and rituals for the purpose of linking generations and assuring continuity. Commitment may be strengthened or undermined by belief in the worthwhileness of an envisioned future and the nature of the surrounding culture (Mc Adam & de St. Auburn, 1992:1006).

The model offers an integrated conceptualisation of generativity, each element of which the authors claim, requires full examination in the understanding of a given person's life.

Adult narratives provide the meanings ascribed to generative endeavour and are self defining within particular social and cultural contexts. The notion that generativity occurs as a defined stage in adult development is rejected although it is conceded that generativity is a task for adulthood in which society expects adults to take responsibility for the next generation (Mc Adam & de St. Aubin, 1992: 1004).

GENERATIVITY AND MOTIVE

Kotre (1996) articulated a theory of generativity based on Erikson's core concept of 'motive', an element clearly embedded in the integrated model previously discussed. Generativity is described by Kotre (1996:7) as a concept that invites reflection on the range of human endeavours which are directed at the future and encompass not only conception of offspring but also social and cultural caring for their continuing existence. It "... denotes a power that is both instructional and psychosocial, one that engages imagination, reason, conscience and will.". According to Kotre generativity is not only a concept critical to collective well-being but one which has been

dramatically altered by the impact on successive generations of rapid social change. In an attempt to redress what he considered to be neglect of the concept in the literature, Kotre has developed a theory of generativity in which he describes a four element typology of generative care. This provides a framework to which individual life stories can be linked rather than defined and through which connections within and between histories can be found. Types of generativity are described as:

biological generativity; conceiving, bearing and caring for the infant as generative object:

parental generativity; nurturing and guiding offspring within family traditions with the child as generative object:

technical generativity; teaching skills and passing on symbol systems in which these are embedded with the apprentice and skill as the generative object:

cultural generativity; creating, reshaping and conserving the symbol system or the 'mind' of a culture and passing it on to successors with the generative object being the followers and the culture itself. (Kotre, 1996:12)

Kotre (1996,16-17) also indicates two modes of generativity based on the those described by David Bakan: **Agentic;** in which the life interests may fall more heavily on the self and in which the progenitor's interests and needs assumes greater weight than those of the generative object: **Communal** in which the life interest is transferred to the generative object whose life becomes more important than the progenitor's. While agency and community in their extremes represent the opposites of total self-absorption and absorption by the other, most generative adults combine agentic and communal generativity in their life histories, that is they combine both power and intimacy in healthy relationships (Mc Adams, 1985; cited in Kotre, 1996). Kotre (1996,:18) suggests that the depiction of these two modes offers a lens through which the complexity of human motives can become visible.

Types and modes of generativity offer insight into fathers' varied responses to the demands on them to be more involved parenting and their perspectives on their status as progenitors, parents, partners, providers and community members. "... the truly generative father is both a self-aggrandizing creator and a self-sacrificing giver..." (Mc Adam & de St Aubin, 1992:1006). He creates a child, nurtures and protects it, assists it to develop its own identity and eventually has to let it go.

GENERATIVITY AS ADULT DEVELOPMENT

While McAdam and de St. Aubin and Kotre inherently discount structural change in personality as an aspect of generativity, missing from both frameworks is Erikson's key concept of crisis resolution and the development of 'virtues' or ego strengths as an outcome of responses to the demands of significant life events. Failure to achieve the generative ego strength of care may result in psychosocial stagnation. Extreme threats to an adult's generativity may 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 and divorce poses such an existential threat for fathers.

Erikson considered parenthood as the primary developmental task of adulthood and indicated an ethical imperative inherent in the responsibility of nurturing the next generation. The ethical imperative includes the moral obligation to attend to the needs of the next generation with an emergent sense within the adult that caring for children is central to personal and societal well being. Snarey (1993: 357) describes the parent-child relationships as one having moral significance and Erikson's theory as a psychoethical model. He indicates that Erikson used the term stage in a functional metaphorical sense to refer to a "... turning point or period of increased vulnerability and

heightened potentiality" which " ... challenges the ego in its interaction with the socialising environment" (Snarey, p14). The successful resolution of these crises or turning points gives rise to a corresponding ego strength which is understood as a state of moral will or moral courage associated with concern for the next generation (p14). As reflected in the integrated model of McAdam and de St. Aubin (1992), Snarey (1993:14) also indicates that feelings, thoughts and acts are highly interrelated at each point of development.

FATHERING AS GENERATIVE WORK

It has long been understood that the generative tasks of adulthood and the developmental tasks of childhood are interrelated. In positioning the discussion of fatherhood within the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson and recent expositions of Eriksonian concepts found in the work of Snarey (1992), Kotre, (1996) Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) and Palm (1997) it is clear that being a father and being fathered is a collaborative process in which child and adult development is integrated. This occurs in a relationship through which each is "called" into an experience of mutuality, collaboration and interdependence and in which both learn consideration for the other within an ethic of care. "... fathers are called by the next generation to meet their needs and ... this assumption is grounded in the ethical imperative to respond to the needs of 'the other '." (Dollahite, Hawkins and Brotherson 1997 :19).

The concept of fathering as 'generative work' describes men's sustained efforts to care for and about their children. Categories of fatherwork have been defined by Dollahite, Hawkins and Brotherson (1997) to reflect and combine the ideal and lived experiences of fathers as they work 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 the children's ability to understand the needs of others (pp. 27-29).

Sociocultural contexts, motivation, obligation and life experience combine to influence men's' generative work as fathers. Theorising fatherhood through the models of generativity described, can provide a wide-angle lens through which constructive representations of fatherhood may be more broadly viewed, analysed, represented and supported.

In summary, these frameworks offer alternatives to role deficit theories which in problematising the conduct of men in the fathering role have also tended in their extremes to pathologise fatherhood.

FATHERS' TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

In the transition to fatherhood, the preparation for parenthood, the birth event and subsequent care of the newborn is a crucial time for men's emerging sense of generativity and its synchrony with the infant's developing sense of trust and belonging. Fathers' often unexpected intense, affective response to the birth of their children frequently remains unrecognised by practitioners, partners, family and friends. The prevalent belief that emphasis on these aspects of experience carries the danger of reducing new constructions of fatherhood to emotionalism and sentimentality is challenged within constructs of generativity.

The need and right of fathers to achieve close physical and emotional contact with their newborns has begun to be acknowledged as having legitimacy alongside the needs and rights of mothers. Qualitative studies of fatherhood increasingly include verbatim statements from men's personal stories. Those which report experiences associated with the birth of children provide descriptions in what can be defined as 'the language of generativity'.

In a study with forty Australian fathers, (Holland, 1993) participants were asked in focussed group discussion to describe their experiences of the pregnancy and birth of their children and the impact on them of becoming and being a parent. These men described events, beliefs and feelings in language indicative of a heightened sense of care and concern associated with the transition to fatherhood as well as some uncertainty.

At the beginning of discussions a number of fathers commented that it was the first time they had been asked for their account of the pregnancy and birth and the opportunity to discuss their experiences with other men in the research group acted as a trigger for recall of the detail of events. A number of men indicated verbally and emotionally that recall re-created the intense feelings experienced at the time.

You can remember all the details of the build up to the birth; feelings and sequences of events. We changed gynaecologists for the second child. The first one was a non-communicator and the second would volunteer information.

Pregnancy

Experiences of pregnancy varied according to partners health and well being throughout, and their readiness as well as that of the partnership for pregnancy and parenthood. Some had not anticipated the impact of pregnancy on the relationship nor on their own sense of who they were, suggesting that they were at a turning point or period of increased vulnerability and heightened potentiality (Snarey 1993). Contradictions can be linked to generative modes of agency and community as described by Kotre (1996).

I got closer to my wife during the pregnancy, until the baby was born and then I felt on the outer.

My wife had a great pregnancy so it was rather enjoyable. I used to think 'I'm so young, should I be a father; will we cope financially' I used to come home early too, with a strong commitment to be there when needed.

Didn't think pregnancy would affect me. It's her body, her pregnancy. I was a shock, it did affect me. There was morning sickness, dietary issues and sexual experience.

I anticipated difficulties but we became closer, finding new styles of intimacy.

I set about painting the house, building an extension and getting ready.

Birth

The birth of children links biological generativity with generational continuity and men, like women feel a great sense of pride, achievement and fulfilment in the act of procreativity (Snarey, 1993). Discussions concerning the actual birth were animated in all groups, and experiences were freely exchanged between participants. Those for whom there were no complications or trauma described it as an unforgettable experience.

Exhilarating, I cried and was on a high for days

I felt incredibly part of it, mopping, pushing etc. I can't imagine her doing it without me. They talk about the miracle of birth and it is. It's an amazing experience to see your child take its first breath. The most thrilling experience of my life. Can't describe it.

Time ceased to exist. I left the hospital early in the morning, looked up at the stars, whew! it was wonderful.

Not all were convinced that participation in the birth was a peak experience and some believed that they should have the right to choose how they wish to be involved.

Society has put pressure on women and there is no choice. It's compulsory for men to attend the birth

The nurse said I should cut the cord. A terrible experience, the most revolting thing, involvement so called but women have been brainwashed. It's about the only thing men can do.

Styles of management and aspects of the birth for which some fathers felt unprepared was described as making them feel powerless, and sometimes subsequently chided (albeit good naturedly) for the way in which they dealt with these events. The presence of a non-generative culture around fathers' involvement in the birth is not uncommon and Burgess and Ruxton (1996: 33) argue that obstetric staff should be aware that "... fathers are dependent on them for information and support... and they are unlikely to be effective members of the birth team if ...their needs are not met."

The mother and infant often become and remain the focus of discussion about the pregnancy and birth with the father's responses being peripheral. The outcomes of the Melbourne study suggest that fathers heightened sense of generativity and associated feelings during the pregnancy and birth are rarely openly discussed and may often be disregarded or shelved by men and others as either inappropriate or of little consequence. Partners are pleased at their participation and proud that they 'saw it through', but the magnitude of the impact of this experience on fathers generative self is frequently overlooked in the assumption that recognition of their presence as support and helper is sufficient. The psychosocial separation of fathers from their heightened generative experience may squander the potential for the development of confidence or moral courage in engaging fully in the subsequent care of the infant.

BEING A NEW FATHER

When asked how they felt after becoming a father, most participants in the research groups described it in terms of a sense of fulfilment and pride.

It feels good to be seen with my family

Emotionally draining but the feeling of achievement and pride was the most positive I have ever felt

Extremely proud at the birth of each child

Feel more confident and fulfilled, contented

Feeling of being needed; a guiding influence

Feeling of belonging to a family is sensational

Brings a secure feeling

Creating a family creates closeness, it's a milestone in your adult life.

These fathers also expressed anxiety and feelings of ambivalence about the onset of fatherhood. Concerns were related to the realisation of the responsibility parenthood entailed and its effect on the partnership. Fear of not doing the best for their children, particularly in relation to their desire to

improve on the experiences of their own childhood, influenced generative beliefs, commitment and behaviour. This suggests the emergence of the psychoethical dimensions of fatherwork which is grounded in a commitment to providing a secure responsive environment through which children are assisted to grow and develop.

At the same time the meaning of fatherhood was captured in descriptions of family life as a highly desirable and necessary experience for the achievement of a sense of belonging. Fatherhood was described as enabling the giving of love and friendship to children while feeling loved and respected in return. In terms of selfhood the birth of children created a sense of self-worth and esteem from others:

Emotionally draining but the feeling of achievement and pride was the most positive I have ever experienced.

Feel more confident and fulfilled; contented

Self esteem increased from a feeling of being needed and being a guiding influence

Feels good to be seen with my family

A new reason in life - not always positive

Extremely proud with the birth of each child

and finally, in agentic mode representing self-expansion and self-assertion:

When you become a father your parents lose control over you.

I always smoked but never in front of my father. Once I became

a father I did, right in front of him. All those years before I

never would have done it.

CONCLUSION

Pregnancy and birth have been shown to create a heightened emotional sense in expectant fathers associated with nurturance, generativity and purpose (Zeren, 1984). In an observational study of primary care-giving fathers behaviour patterns and their effects on the development of infants, Pruett (1989) indicated that the style and choice of care-giving behaviour was drawn from the father's own adaptive repertoire created by a desire to nurture, and that the capacity of the infant to elicit nurturing responses and to create a vital sense of fatherliness are underestimated.

The capacity to father certainly is rooted more broadly in the biological matrix than is the expression of fathering... it is vital that we not neglect the enormous capacity of the infant to elicit, promote, provoke, and nudge fathering from men. (Pruett, 1989:380)

Theories of generativity provide a language capable of decoding the experience of fathers to reveal what many already know from the time of the birth of their children but which appears not to be widely acknowledged - that fathers develop a deep desire, a lifetime commitment and a healthy concern in relation to maintaining the well-being of their children. Within a generative culture most fathers translate these intentions into behaviours which have recently been described as "fatherwork" - a term used as part of a new scholarly language capable of describing the range of behaviours associated with fathers' contributions to, and care and concern for, the next generation.

Men are capable of articulating their own perceptions and experiences in language which, when listened to, provides more than sufficient evidence of a vital interest in the protection and guidance of the next generation. They need time with their children, not as mother helpers but as full participants in the generative endeavour of childrearing.

Policy makers who are concerned with fathers and children have begun to acknowledge the need and right of fathers to be fully participant in generative endeavour on behalf of their own and the community's children. Planners and public administrators would do well to attune to the theory and language of generativity to more fully inform policy.

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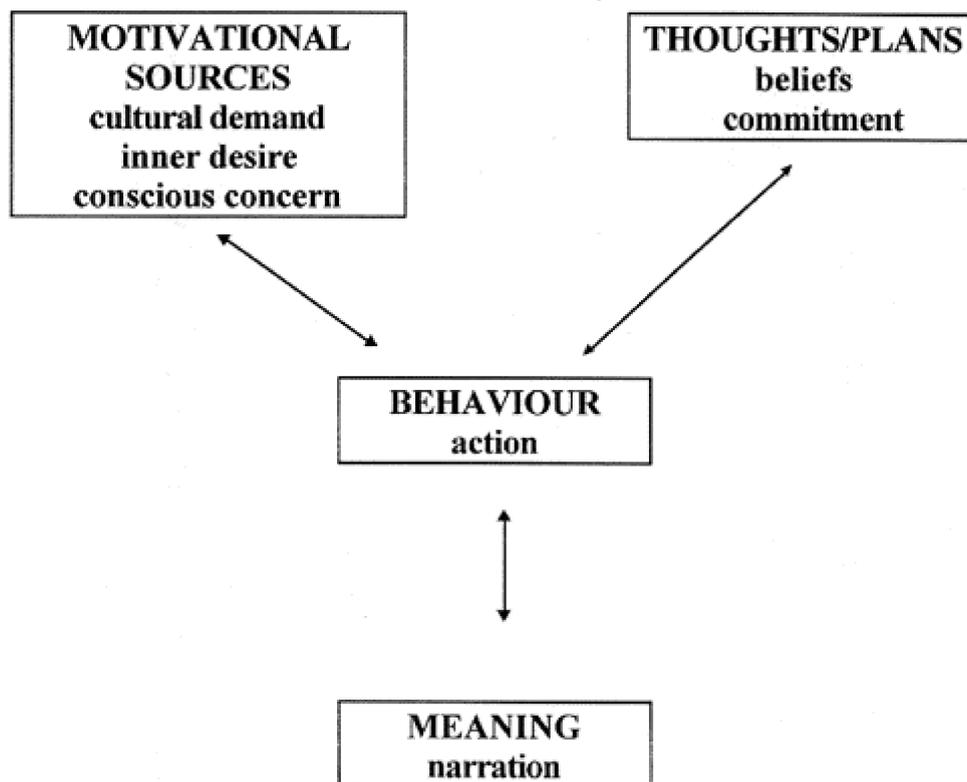
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FEATURES OF GENERATIVITY

Adapted from McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992:1003)



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