



# Involved fathering: Expanding conceptualisations of men's paternal caring

Ria Smit  
Department of Sociology  
Rand Afrikaans University  
AUCKLAND PARK  
E-mail: rsm@lw.rau.ac.za

## Abstract

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*Fatherhood has received increased attention during the past few decades in both scholarly writings and public forums, yet the conceptualisation of **involved fathering** has remained largely limited to the idea that men are merely childcare assistants. In this article the generativity perspective on fathering is considered as a possible theoretical expansion of what paternal involvement may entail. Taking the concept of **generativity**, as defined by Erik Erikson in his psychosocial development theory, as point of departure, generative fathering refers to paternal conduct that responds to the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of a child. This kind of involved fathering implies that a father is focused on lovingly nurturing his child and improving the well-being of his offspring, instead of merely conforming to what is stipulated by society and cultural norms with regard to paternal role obligations.*

## Opsomming

Vaderlike betrokkenheid: die uitbreiding van die konseptualisering van mans se vaderskapsverwante versorging

*Vaderskap het toenemend aandag ontvang gedurende die afgelope aantal dekades in sowel vakkundige werke as by openbare forums. Nogtans bly die konseptualisering van **vaderlike betrokkenheid** grotendeels beperk tot die idee dat die man bloot 'n kinderversorgingsassistent is. In hierdie artikel word die generatiewiteitsperspektief oorweeg as 'n moontlike teoretiese uitbreiding van dít wat met vaderlike betrokkenheid bedoel word. Wanneer die konsep van **generatiewiteit**, soos dit deur Erik Erikson in sy psigososiale ont-*

*wikkelingsteorie gedefineer word, as vertrekpunt geneem word, kan generatiewe vaderskap beskou word as vaderlike gedrag wat op die fisieke, emosionele en kognitiewe behoeftes van 'n kind reageer. Hierdie tipe vaderlike betrokkenheid impliseer dat 'n vader daarop gefokus is om sy kind liefdevol te koester en die welsyn van sy kind te verbeter, eerder as om bloot te konformeer aan die vaderskapsverwante rolverwagtings, soos deur die samelewing en kulturele norme gestipuleer.*

## 1. Introduction

With the dawn of the twenty-first century it became clear, more than ever, that fatherhood has developed into a kaleidoscope of sometimes confusing images. Although the first wave of “new fatherhood” had its origin during the 1920s in countries such as the USA (Griswold, 1993:91) and Sweden (Hwang, 1987:119), it was rather during the second wave of “new fatherhood” in the mid-1970s and 1980s that a bigger diversity of men across the globe were encouraged to act upon their desire to become more nurturant and expressive parents (Griswold, 1993:7). The phenomenon of “involved fathering” can, therefore, no longer be exclusively associated with Western societies, but due to changing patterns in work-family life as a result of urbanisation, globalisation and the increase in the number of dual-earner families, fathering has continuously become a burning issue in developing countries such as South Africa (Smit, 2002:412). Although the culture of fatherhood has undergone changes in numerous societies, the concept of *fathering* is still fraught with ambiguity. Men are still confronted with the inconsistency between society's idolisation of the family and involved parenting on the one hand and, on the other hand, an amplified emphasis on work commitment. This, along with the depiction of men as being mere “helpers” in the childcare environment, leave some men agape when trying to define “involved fathering”. It is therefore of great importance that society at large and members of the scholarly community alike must expand the conceptualisation of what paternal caring entails. In this article I look beyond the restricting role-inadequacy approach to fathering and turn to the generativity perspective as a possible way to broaden the conceptual “horizon” of *fathering*.

## 2. Fathering: moving beyond the role-inadequacy perspective

Numerous studies on fathering are, in my opinion, fraught with the so-called deficit paradigm. According to such a worldview, men

show low levels of father involvement because, on the one hand, men are less than willing to be involved in the lives of their children and, on the other hand, lack the skill, time and motivation to be active fathers. This perspective is quite evident in subject-related literature when the disparity in the allocation and performance of domestic and childcare-related tasks of fathers and mothers are discussed (Pittman & Blanchard, 1996:78). The underlying argument in this regard is that although men's domestic and childcare participation have risen ever so slightly during the past decades, men either experience obstacles (such as long working hours) preventing them from being more involved and/or resist the changes that are taking place with regard to fatherhood. This makes them, according to Hawkins and Dollahite (1997:6), "physically present but functionally absent [in the private sphere]".

This so-called "absent-father" syndrome is far from being a contemporary phenomenon. Despite the fact that many fathers may have been "absent" from family life throughout history, father absence became more prevalent with the wide-ranging manifestation of industrialisation and the concomitant dawn of the man's role as primary financial provider of the family (Griswold, 1993:13). Apart from Western countries such as the USA (Griswold, 1993:13), the phenomenon of father absence also manifested in South Africa among both traditional Afrikaans-speaking (Cilliers, 1960:47) and black families (Viljoen, 1994:45) in the post World War II years.

In this discussion I do not negate the past and present incidence of the phenomenon of father absence, and neither do I ignore the possible negative consequences thereof. I am, however, of the opinion that theorists who write from a deficit paradigmatic point of view overemphasise the detrimental effect of father absence. Shapiro *et al.* (1995:7) and Biller (1995:74) report for example on the findings of researchers who state that a father's prolonged absence may have negative effects on his children's lives in terms of their self-concepts, scholastic performances, psychosocial adjustment and gender role identities.

I am, however, of the same mind as other researchers, such as Lamb (1995:31), who consider the above-mentioned argument to be an oversimplification of reality. This situation can be caused insofar as the possibility that the negative impact of father absence may be due to a combination of factors, rather than just the "absence" of the father *per se*. The broader context of an individual's family life must instead be taken into consideration before the destructive impact of

the phenomenon of father absence can be made applicable to all situations.

In addition to the above, one also finds embedded in this deficit paradigmatic approach the so-called role-inadequacy perspective. This perspective perceives fathering to be a social role that most men do not perform adequately. I add my voice of criticism of the role-inadequacy perspective to that of Hawkins and Dollahite (1997: 14), specifically regarding this perspective's overemphasis of fathering as being a *role*. The idea of men *performing* the role of father suggests that men are acting out a prescribed text, i.e. the views of society with regard to paternal involvement. Although I concur that the socio-historical context and views regarding fatherhood are important, I consider these conceptualisations as merely influencing men's individual perceptions of father involvement, rather than seeing these as determinants of paternal behaviour.

A second point of criticism that can be raised against the role-inadequacy perspective revolves around its narrow conception of paternal care-giving. Theorists who endorse the role-inadequacy perspective tend to argue that men, in taking care of their children, need to emulate women in terms of their mothering. Garbarino (1993:53) is for example of the opinion that when it comes to parenting, the question arises: "Why can't a man be more like a woman?" In contrast to this notion, Pruett (1995:36) stands firm in his view that "[because] fathers are not mothers ... the mother-mimic tactic soon falters" and that "[t]he child does not expect it, and the father cannot do it". Thus, rather than expecting men to be good "mothers", the focus must fall on *fathers* and their ability to be capable and loving care-givers in their own right.

A third point of criticism deals with the role-inadequacy perspective's explanation of men's inability to perform their role as fathers competently. Lupton and Barclay (1997:55) note that, in contrast to women, men (especially men as fathers) show little motivation in adapting to societal changes which affect family life. In trying to address this issue, the role-inadequacy perspective proposes macro-level endeavours such as changing the culture of fatherhood as to motivate men in becoming more involved parents. Although I applaud macro-level efforts such as pro-family workplace policies and legislation that facilitate the establishment of a better work-family fit (Cherlin, 2002:306), I consider these efforts to be a top-down approach. In addition to such an approach where the social context is taken into consideration, a micro-level orientation can further contribute to expanding the conceptualisations of what active

father involvement entails. One of these micro-level approaches that goes beyond the role-inadequacy perspective is a more value-directed theoretical and personal developmental approach, i.e. the generativity perspective.

### 3. Generativity perspective

The generativity perspective on fatherhood and the accompanying concept of *generative fathering* has developed primarily as a result of John Snarey's groundbreaking work *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation* (1993). In this book Snarey fuses his analysis of data spanning over four decades of research regarding patterns of paternal conduct with that of the theoretical work of Erik H. Erikson. As background to the generativity perspective on fatherhood, I shall give a brief overview of *generativity* from an Eriksonian theoretical perspective.

#### 3.1 Generativity and the psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson

In principle, according to Erikson (1963:273), human personality development takes place throughout an individual's life. This process can analytically be subdivided into eight developmental stages. During each of these stages the individual is confronted with a specific crisis, i.e. a situation where the individual must orientate him-/herself with regard to two opposite poles. During middle adulthood (the time when most individuals become parents) the so-called psychosocial task at hand is that of dealing with the dichotomy, generativity versus stagnation and self-absorption (Erikson, 1963: 266).

Generativity is a broad concept that encompasses the notion of taking care of and being attentive to the needs of the next generation. This sense of caring attentiveness includes more than just one's own offspring; it also refers to making a productive and creative contribution to culture, promoting the development of society at large and thus contributing potentially to the well-being of generations to come. The successful resolution of this crisis gives rise to what Erikson (1963:267) refers to as the development of a specific ego (or personality) strength, that is *care* (Snarey, 1993: 19).

The complexity of generativity is best explained by means of three categories of generativity as identified by Erikson (1982). Taking into

consideration that fathering is the focus of this article, the categories of generativity will be discussed with due allowance.

- The first of the three categories is that of *biological generativity*. The birth of his child propels a man into biological generativity. Snarey (1993:20) relates biological generativity to procreativity, which, in my opinion, refers to the man's role as genitor.
- The second category is parental or in this case *paternal generativity*. In light of the fact that paternal generativity refers to a father being actively involved in the rearing and care-taking of his children (Snarey, 1993:21), I would say this form of generativity is linked to the role of *pater*. Paternal generativity does not only entail giving nurturant care, but also implies that a father helps to facilitate his child's resolution of personality-development crises during the childhood stages and thus helps his child to accomplish ego strengths such as trust, autonomy, initiative, and identity (Erikson, 1963:247-263).
- *Societal generativity* is the last of the three categories and refers to so-called cultural fathers. Within the context of this concept, men act in a broader social generative manner towards children in generations to come insofar as creatively contributing to society – being ethically compelled to act responsively to the well-being of the next generation (Snarey, 1993:23). This facet includes serving as a mentor to someone other than one's own children or being involved in community work or a youth organisation.

*Generative fathering* can thus in a nutshell be described as fathering that responds to the needs of children, instead of merely conforming to the social and cultural prescriptions with regard to a father's role obligations. But how does generative fathering impact children's and fathers' lives on a day to day basis and what does father involvement really entail?

### 3.2 Generative fathering: unpacking the concept

When focusing on paternal involvement, the first question that comes to the fore is: Why is it important for men to be generative fathers? To my mind, the answer to this question can primarily be summarised in the words *personal well-being*, i.e. the well-being of both father and child.

Being actively and caringly involved in the lives of one's children is far more important than just being defined as "a good dad".

According to Hawkins *et al.* (1993:531) practising generative fathering may also be crucial to a man's own sense of well-being and personal growth. Snarey (1993:22) puts this idea in even simpler terms (but still using Eriksonian concepts) when he says:

On the one hand, children provide opportunities for parents to satisfy their own developmental need to be generative. On the other hand, through their generativity, parents provide support for their child's development.

For some men nurturant fathering may transcend the mere importance of the well-being of father and child. To them their paternal ethos is influenced by their religious convictions. Although being primarily patriarchal in nature, the three major monotheistic religions, i.e. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, place high prescriptive value on both fatherhood and motherhood. Within the Christian faith the baptismal vow made by parents signifies their responsibility towards God to educate their children within the framework of the Holy Bible. Although Jewish religious teaching lies primarily in the hands of the rabbi, fathers in orthodox and conservative Jewish families are highly involved in the lives of their offspring in order to ensure that their children (especially their sons) are taught the Jewish rituals, laws of the Torah and the tradition of *sholem bayis* (harmony and peace in the family) (Nock, 1992:343). Islam, on the other hand, also views parenthood as an ethical vocation. According to Salaam (2003) parenting, and fathering in particular, is seen as a divine responsibility.

Nurturing children and positive parenting ... is at the heart of Muslim life. For a sound and healthy continuity of Islamic civilisational legacy, every parent has to transfer the spirit and message of Islam to his offspring ... [helping them] to grow up as emissaries of Allah on earth.

Although strong religious convictions are not a prerequisite for generative fathering, it does seem, however, that men who hold religious values dear, may experience an ethical calling to focus on especially the spiritual well-being of their offspring.

If generative fathering is supposedly beneficial to the well-being of children, then the next question will be: What does generative fathering entail?

### 3.2.1 Conceptualisations of generative fathering

From subject-related literature it is evident that theorists who write from a generativity point of view, define fathering as being much

more than just providing financial support. Generative fathering describes fathers as not only more nurturant in their involvement with their children (Ritner, 1992:i) but also as men who feel ethically compelled to lovingly guide the next generation (Cherlin, 2002:327) with a sentiment of univocal reciprocity – "... a type of moral norm that encourages individuals to engage in social exchanges with others without expecting to receive direct or immediate reciprocation" (Marsiglio, 1995:83).

Instead of placing the emphasis on *fatherhood*, the generativity perspective prefers to use the concept *fatherwork*. In conceptualising fathering, Hawkins and Dollahite (1997:15) are of the opinion that "... good *fathering* is active, creative, all-encompassing, irreplaceable, hard *work*, not simply a role they [fathers] *play*". *Fatherwork* may possibly, in my opinion, relate to the Marxian concept of *labour*, i.e. an expression of your creativity and capabilities – to give something of yourself (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004:49). This idea links with that of Dollahite *et al.* (1997:21) who view father involvement as his commitment to the "labour of love", in being actively participating in the lives of his children. Based on this concept Dollahite *et al.* (1997:27) identify four analytical categories of that which is in reality inseparable components of generative fatherwork.

- The first of these categories is that of *ethical work*. Ethical work refers to a father's commitment to provide a safe milieu for his child and to respond to his child's needs while he/she is still in his care (Dollahite *et al.*, 1997:27). This ethical dimension of generative work is, according to Snarey (1993:22), more than merely an aspect of paternal conduct. It is, however, a "moral endeavour" and an ethical imperative that implies deep-rooted and irrevocable commitment.
- The second category of generative work relates to a *father's creative ability to provide resources* to ensure that his family and children will not only be able to survive in terms of their real material wants but will also be able to thrive beyond their basic need for food, clothing and shelter. Stewardship work is therefore related to a father's monetary income, his occupational endeavours or his ability to be a financial provider (Dollahite *et al.*, 1997:28).
- *Development work* is the third category of generative fatherwork (Dollahite *et al.*, 1997:28). This category entails a father's attempt to maintain a caring environment that will not only be stimulating for a child's healthy physical growth, but will also be conducive to

a child's cognitive, psychological and social development. From an Eriksonian perspective this implies that the father will actively try to ensure a social context that will *inter alia* encourage a child to apply him-/herself to the psychological task he/she is confronted with in a specific development stage. For example, a father may facilitate his child in dealing with the developmental tasks of attaining autonomy versus doubt (ages two to three years); identity versus role confusion (adolescence) and intimacy versus isolation (young adulthood) (Erikson, 1963:251, 261, 263).

- *Relationship work*, the fourth dimension of generative fatherwork, is a father's attempt to facilitate healthy relationships between his child and other people in his/her social environment. This bringing about of healthy relationships entails a father acting as socialisation agent in teaching and encouraging the child to build healthy relationships and to move from an exclusively self-centred point of view to developing an understanding for other's perceptions of reality (Dollahite *et al.*, 1997:29).
- In addition to these four categories of generative fatherwork, as identified by Dollahite *et al.* (1997), I would like to add a fifth category. The father's active involvement in the enhancement of his child's well-being is, in my opinion, also strongly related to the concept of *emotion work*. Emotion work refers to the active, rational attempt to manage one's own emotions to bring about a discernible facial, bodily and/or verbal "display" in the endeavour to enhance the other's emotional well-being (Hochschild, 1979: 561; Erickson, 1993:888). Traditionally, according to Erickson (1993:890), the performance of emotion work was embedded within the wife/mother's family responsibilities. Expressive and nurturant qualities have, however, also become more manifest in the role of the husband/father, especially insofar as more men are actively becoming aware of the importance of the performance of emotion work vis-à-vis their children. This role implies that a father is constantly asking himself what is best for the emotional well-being of his child. This attitude may include behaviour such as a father not readily losing his temper, being attentive to his child's feelings and expressing his love towards his child.

Taking the categories of fatherwork as background, it is further possible to identify different ways in which men can manifest active involved fathering. According to Lamb (1987:8; 1995:23) involved fathering can be separated into three components, i.e. interaction, accessibility and responsibility.

## **Interaction**

The first component of Lamb's tripartite typology of involvement revolves around *interaction*. In this respect we refer to a father who spends time in direct person-to-person interaction with his child. This interaction does not only entail having a conversation with the child, but also implies that the father is engaged in interaction situations during the performance of childcare activities, such as feeding his child, lending assistance with school-related homework, reading stories and playing games (Lamb, 1995:23). It is, however, important to note that this form of interaction between father and child is more than mere superficial involvement. It rather refers to a situation where the father pays full attention to his child – an interaction situation that is described by Lamb (LaRossa, 1995:450) and Ritner (1992:76) in terms of the concepts *engagement* and *engrossment* respectively.

## **Accessibility**

The second component, *accessibility*, does not necessarily involve direct interaction between father and child, but rather refers to the time the father spends in close proximity to the child. It is therefore, according to LaRossa (1988:452), a less intense degree of interaction. Accessibility thus entails the father's psychological and physical availability, i.e. to be able to respond to the child's needs if need be. To illustrate father accessibility, Lamb (1995:24) cites situations where the father may for example be involved in a task such as cooking in the kitchen, while the child is playing in an adjacent room.

## **Paternal responsibility**

The third component of father involvement deals with *paternal responsibility*. This concept refers to the extent to which the father is accountable for the child's well-being and care. Paternal responsibility also includes the awareness of the child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs as well as implementing strategies to address these needs, such as taking care of a child when he/she is ill, taking a child to the dentist and making arrangements for day-care services (LaRossa, 1995:450; Volling & Belsky, 1991:462).

Although theorists, such as McBride (1989:15), are of the opinion that men are inclined to manifest father involvement by way of interacting with their children and less in terms of taking responsibility for childcare, Erickson and Gecas (1991:118) note that

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more men are also gradually assimilating the other components of father involvement into their way of conduct.

Although Lamb's typology of father involvement has been used extensively in fatherhood-related research, the question arises as to whether father involvement can only be limited to the components interaction, accessibility and responsibility? Is this not perhaps, to some extent, a constricted conceptualisation of father involvement? I concur with Palkovitz (1997:210) who believes that an overemphasis is placed on the observable behavioural patterns related to paternal involvement. Based on this assumption, he expands the more *behavioural*-orientated typology of father involvement, as formulated by Lamb (1987, 1995), to incorporate two other domains of involvement, i.e. the *cognitive* and *affective* manifestations of paternal involvement.

Although he agrees with Lamb (1987) that father involvement has a strong overt behavioural component (e.g. a father having a conversation with his child, playing games with his child or performing childcare tasks), Palkovitz (1997:208) concludes that, in investigating the level of father involvement, researchers also need to focus on the cognitive dimension of paternal involvement. Examples of this cognitive dimension include a father's assessment of the needs of his child, the prioritisation of his time schedule as to allocate time to the performance of childcare-related tasks or merely the mental preoccupation with his child's well-being.

Fathers are also involved in the lives of their children on an affective or emotional level (Palkovitz, 1997:210). This affective component of fathering include, for example, the love a father has for his child and the feeling of distress he might experience with regard to the well-being of his offspring. It may also involve a man cuddling, hugging or smiling at his child. This emotional dimension of father involvement may not only have a positive effect on a father's own well-being (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001:381), but also accentuates the complex nature of paternal involvement.

It thus seems that involved fathering entails much more than that which meets the (general public's) eye and more than merely the father's overt behavioural involvement in childcare tasks. When only measuring father involvement in terms of its behavioural component, men will probably continue to lag behind the parental involvement of mothers. I am suggesting that the cognitive and affective dimensions (which are not so readily quantifiable as in the case of overt paternal behaviour), apart from the behavioural dimension, must be included

in the assessment of paternal involvement by means of a more qualitative approach. In doing so, researchers may develop a more comprehensive picture of the extent to which men are involved in the lives of their children.

One of the perspectives that have become increasingly concerned about a comprehensive view of men's paternal involvement is the feminist perspective. Although feminists applaud men's nurturant and emotional involvement in childrearing, many of them are convinced that generative fathering must also assume the qualities of equal parenting. Three dimensions of equal parenting can be identified, the first being that fathers must equally participate in both, what Gerson (1997:44) refers to as, routine or prosaic work (such as dressing a child or taking him/her to school), as well as "fun work" (such as playing games and reading stories) (Griswold, 1993:247). A second dimension of equal parenting entails that fathers need to adopt equal responsibility for their children's well-being and care. Rather than being mere childcare assistants, men need to take on equal accountability for ensuring that their children's needs are addressed (DeGenova & Rice, 2002:263). In addition to equal responsibilities, equal parenting includes, as third dimension, parents making equal sacrifices. This implies that a father must be equally willing to make occupational or career-related sacrifices as well as being agreeable to forfeit time spent at leisure activities, for the sake of the children's well-being and care (Gerson, 1997:45).

### **Equality and equity**

Although, as a feminist, I commend the notion of equal parenting, I suggest that, in addition to focusing on the concept of equality, emphasis must also be placed on the idea of equity. Instead of (morally) prescribing that parents need to manifest equal parenting, I am of the opinion that each couple needs to define for themselves what they consider to be equitable parenting in their unique family context. This definition of equitable parenting include, for example, what they deem to be fair with regard to the extent to which each parent is (a) performing childcare-related work, (b) taking responsibility for the well-being and care of their children, and (c) making sacrifices for the sake of their children.

From the above discussion it seems clear that father involvement, as a multidimensional concept, is complex in nature. It is therefore important to ask additional questions such as: Why are some men manifesting generative involved fathering while others are not? What

brings about the emergence of a generative perspective in paternal conduct?

### 3.2.2 Variables that promote generative fathering

Using Symbolic Interactionism as a theoretical background, I am cautious of the notion that the social context determines one's behaviour. The assumptions of this theory state that the actor has the ability to interpret his/her own social world (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004:373). I, therefore, rather believe that social variables within both the public and private domains may at most influence one's perceptions and way of conduct. From this vantage point, the question is not how fathers are shaped by their social milieu, but rather which possible variables may influence men to become more involved fathers.

#### **Motivation**

No amount of coercion can induce men to manifest genuine and sincere generative father involvement. The first variable that stimulates involved fathering is, therefore, motivation – i.e. the extent to which a man wants to be an active nurturant father (Gerson, 1997:39). Sustainable generative fathering practices go, in my opinion, beyond motivation. It also necessitates a father to have a deep-rooted commitment to contribute to a mutually fulfilling father-child relationship, as well as being involved in enhancing the well-being of his child (Dienhart & Daly, 1997:162; Fox & Bruce, 2001:400).

#### **Socialisation in father's family of origin**

A second important antecedent of father involvement relates to the way in which a man was socialised in his family of origin in terms of what fatherhood is all about. Smit (2000:79) found that men tend to respond to the relationship they had with their own fathers while still being a child. Two variations on this theme can be identified. On the one hand, some men, giving their retrospective accounts, voice that they emulate the example set by their own fathers insofar as having had a loving, caring and involved relationship with their fathers. On the other hand, some men express their dissatisfaction with the quality of their own fathers' paternal involvement during their youth years. This involvement became an incentive to them in becoming active nurturant fathers themselves – moving beyond the "absent" father figure they grew up with.

### **Opportunities to be used in acquiring skills**

It is, in the third place, also imperative that men are given the *opportunity* to be involved in nurturing and caring for their children and develop the necessary skills required to be involved generative fathers. This will in turn bring about a sense of self-confidence and parenthood-related competence that may not only be highly satisfactory and self-fulfilling but may also encourage a father to be even more involved in the life of his child (Cooney *et al.*, 1993:213). The person who plays a major role in giving a father the opportunity to become a more involved parent, is the mother of the child. Theorists such as Cooney *et al.* (1993:213) state that the more the father perceives himself to be the recipient of his wife/partner's support in his endeavours to be an involved father, the higher the likelihood that he will become even more involved in his child's life.

### **Pro-family organisational culture**

Another important avenue that provides a man with the opportunity to become a more involved father is that of a pro-family organisational culture. This fourth variable refers to a responsive workplace or family-friendly employer that accommodates the employee's family commitments and responsibilities. This is usually made possible by means of flexible employment patterns such as flexible work schedules, telecommuting, part-time work and job sharing (Becker & Moen, 1999:1004; DeGenova & Rice, 2002:263). In addition to these employment patterns, parental, and more specifically paternity leave are considered key elements in a pro-family workplace (Cherlin, 2002:308).

### **Marital quality**

A fifth variable that may promote generative fathering revolves around the quality of the relationship between a man and his spouse/partner. Aldous *et al.* (1998:812) consider marital quality and happiness as good predictors of father involvement. This point of view links with the work of Volling and Belsky (1991:463) who found in their research that "... high-quality marital relations predicted greater father participation in childcare, while an absence of marital problems predicted more playfulness and parenting satisfaction". The correlation between marital quality and father involvement, as seen in the work by Smit (2002:411) and Volling and Belsky (1991:463), also stresses the significance of high levels of nurturant paternal involvement in the enhancement of the spouses' experience of marital happiness.

Far from being an exhaustive list of antecedents of father involvement, the five variables discussed above can, however, be used as a point of departure in studies investigating factors that may influence paternal conduct. In addition to focusing on variables that may promote generative fathering, it is also imperative to identify variables that may suppress nurturant father involvement.

### 3.2.3 Variables that impede generative fathering

Despite the fact that men may be highly motivated to be active nurturant fathers, they are still confronted with the countervailing pressure of, what Dienhart and Daly (1997:149) refer to as a *nongenerative culture*. Although the culture of fatherhood has undergone changes such as merging nurturant and expressive qualities with the father's traditional role as economic provider, many men still find themselves by and large in patriarchal societies that propagate traditional gender-role differentiation (DeGenova & Rice, 2002:306, 386). In the following discussion a brief overview will be given of some of the variables which may hinder the development of generative fathering.

#### **The cult of maternalism**

The first of the variables that are associated with a nongenerative culture is the so-called cult of maternalism, "which emphasize[s] the ideological exaltation of mothers as indispensable, natural and necessary" (Dienhart & Daly, 1997:150). One of the ways in which the cult of maternalism, with its underlying role-inadequacy perspective, comes to the fore is by way of maternal gatekeeping. Theorists such as Barclay and Lupton (1999:1015) and DeGenova and Rice (2002:151) refer to maternal gatekeeping as the mother's reluctance to allow the father to take full accountability of and responsibility for certain childcare-related issues. It may also entail the mother's management of her husband/partner's father involvement, in as far as prescribing the content and the manner of paternal conduct.

#### **A father's occupational environment**

A second set of variables that may act as a barrier to generative fathering is related to a father's occupational environment. Long working hours and demanding jobs or (professional) careers have been cited by a number of theorists as impediments to increased levels of paternal involvement (Barclay & Lupton, 1999:1015; Spruijt & Duindam, 2002:685). This may bring about a situation where men experience that their work do not only take up a considerable

segment of their time, but also absorbs a lot of their physical and mental energy, arriving home with their energy reserves nearly depleted. Although the number of family-friendly organisations may be rising, sources such as the South African Commission on Gender Equality (2000), and College Recruiter (2003) are of the opinion that these organisations are still few and far between. Pro-family policies in the workplace also tend to be primarily directed towards women with children, and although men are in some cases *de jure* entitled to utilise flexible work patterns and parental leave, they are discouraged from doing so by means of informal sanctions such as perceived barred promotion opportunities (Dienhart & Daly, 1997: 159; Lamb *et al.*, 1987:117). Therefore, when investigating father involvement in the South African context it is important to identify possible work-related variables, such as the type and nature of employment, the continued existence of a "masculine ethic" in the labour market, and a discrepancy between organisational policies and employee familial commitment and responsibility.

### **The "whispering" discourse on fatherhood**

The third variable that may be part of a nongenerative culture is what I refer to as the "whispering" discourse on fatherhood. Notwithstanding the fact that the past two to three decades have seen an increase in public debate and scholarly inquiry regarding fatherhood, "it is but a murmur in relation to the powerful and dominant discourse of motherhood" (Dienhart & Daly, 1997:157). The "whispering" discourse on fatherhood is even more evident in the private lives of fathers. Although very few studies have undertaken research on the topic (cf. Daly, 1994), it seems clear that, due to the fact that being a father is not often considered a man's primary identity, fewer conversations revolve around men's experiences as being fathers. In contrast to women who are more inclined to discuss their parenting experiences with other mothers, men rarely turn to other men in gaining information regarding childcare and rearing (Dienhart & Daly, 1997:157). I believe that, although the discourse on fatherhood may not be silent, it is far from being a stimulating debate among men and women alike. Apart from becoming a way of life, generative fathering also needs to become an euphonious topic in men's day-to-day conversations.

## **4. Conclusion**

In contrast to motherhood, fatherhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon has been studied far less. It is thus understandable that the conceptualisation of *fatherhood* and *fathering* is much more

constricted than the case may be with motherhood and mothering. Although some theorists who endorse the generativity perspective may, in my opinion, place too much emphasis on moralism (cf. Dollahite *et al.*, 1997), this perspective does, however, move the conceptual boundaries of fathering decidedly beyond the restricting view of the deficit-paradigm and the role-inadequacy perspective.

The generativity perspective sheds light on involved fathering as being more than mere childcare assistance. Generative fathering encompasses the idea that a father is involved in the life of his child, not only in terms of what he does on a behavioural dimension, but also includes his endeavours to enhance the well-being of his child on a cognitive and emotional level. In doing so, a father does not necessarily need to emulate the caring behaviour of a mother. I am rather of mind that it may ultimately be to the benefit of the child if the parents value each other's different approaches to parental involvement and thus giving men the opportunity to *father* their children.

To conclude, I suggest, from both a generativity and a symbolic interactionist perspective, that fathers need to develop their own definitions of involved fathering that does not only fit their unique circumstances, but will also be beneficial to the well-being of both father and child. To be able to succeed in doing so, it is important that fathers need to critically assess and screen the sometimes conflicting messages propagated by society. Secondly, it is of concern for men to reflect on their own lives and compare their experiences of fathering with the accounts of other fathers. In this way an awareness of the importance of debating fatherhood is created, coupled with the understanding that the conceptualisation of *involved fathering* must constantly be refined in an ever changing social milieu.

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**Key concepts:**

father-child relationship  
fatherhood  
generativity perspective  
nurturant fathering

**Kernbegrippe:**

generatieweitspektief  
koesterende vaderskap  
vader-kindverhouding  
vaderskap