

## RESEARCHING INDIGENOUS FATHERHOOD

### Richard Fletcher

In his introductory speech to the 1996 'Listening to the Past, Looking to the Future' conference on men's health, John Hayden, Chairperson of the Kaata-Wangkinyiny Regional Council contrasted the situation for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men in regard to their health and wellbeing. He stated:

Non-Aboriginal men are attempting to define their role in the post-feminist era of the 1990s and attempting to come to terms with the problem inherent in a male dominated society. Their situation is essentially that of a white middle class Australia.

For Nyoongah men though he had this to say:

Our problems are different. We know our role; it is built into our traditional laws and customs but we must identify the barriers which prevent us from playing this role today...Nyoongah men must recognise the importance of their role as fathers and grandfathers to our children.

Speaking as a white middle class man I think that he was correct about our situation. As non-Indigenous men we don't have traditional laws and customs to learn from. As well, second wave feminism has identified the main problem, or at least the root of every major problem, as male domination. This has meant that non-Indigenous men have struggled to have their needs taken seriously. During that time, the early 1990s, here in the Hunter Valley we were developing the first Men's Health policy in Australia. When I spoke to professional colleagues about this they were genuinely amused. "What would you want a men's health policy for?" they quipped "Men run the health system; there are plenty of male doctors and specialists, what more do you want?" At this time young men were suiciding and dying of road traffic accidents at three times the rate of young women. While senior health professionals, by and large, were also sceptical of the need to address "men's health", the people who weren't sceptical then were the mothers, the sisters and the wives and partners of men. Parents and family members came out in large numbers to attend meetings about boys and men's health all around Australia (Fletcher 1997). Mothers and sisters who were also nurses or teachers or allied professionals made the links into the health system to kick start attention to men's health. Men were involved of course. The first "men's health" conference held in Australia was organised with Indigenous men in the Pilbara region, but in other areas it was most frequently the

women family members who made the first moves (Fletcher 1995). It has taken until this year for the government to commit to developing a national men's health policy (Roxon 2008) and for issues such as paternity leave to be acknowledged (Productivity Commission 2008).

The path for Noongah men and other Indigenous men to recognise the importance of their role as fathers and grandfathers and have this role recognised by the non-Indigenous community has also been a difficult one. As recent events in the Northern Territory demonstrate, the strengths and skills of Indigenous fathers, uncles and pops can be completely denigrated in a fashion that is inconceivable for non-Indigenous men. Nevertheless there have been positive developments in communities across Australia. Programs specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers or programs for families that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers have been developed in several states (Fletcher et al 2008). As you will hear from Bourkie (Craig Hammond) developing programs for fathers and recognizing the importance of fathers can require extensive discussion that involves the whole community, something Mick Adams, chair of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and others have called for (Coyne 2008). The discussions undertaken at this seminar are part of that ongoing, long term conversation flagged by John Hayden in 1996; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are figuring out their role as fathers and grandfathers to their children.

We called this seminar *Researching Indigenous Fatherhood* because research is the core business of the Fathers and Families Research Program, although what exactly counts as 'research' and what should be thought of as 'community development' is sometimes difficult to decide. We are part of the Family Action Centre which has a strong role in community program development and members of the Fathers and Families Research Program are involved in running programs such as Brothers Inside at Cessnock and St Hellier's jails. We are aware that 'research' has different meanings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In the non-Indigenous world, 'researcher' has a positive value, but in the Indigenous community it's not so: research has a bad name, not simply because it may be unhelpful but because it has been part of the exploitation and suppression on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

No-one is suggesting abandoning research but it is something that we have had to go slowly with; to find a way of conducting 'research' that fits in with where the

Indigenous community wants to go. We at the Family Action Centre have approached several Indigenous community organizations with the idea of identifying positive representations of fathers and so far, in every case, they have agreed to work in partnership with us. They agree for two reasons I would say. One is the reputation and skill of Bourkie and the other reason is that we are clear in our wish to investigate the strengths and skills of the fathers, not to measure their weaknesses or look for what is wrong with them. As you will hear from Bourkie, this can be an empowering process. Bourkie will be describing his work as part of the Engaging Fathers Project which was based here in the Family Action Centre from 2000 to 2006. This project, which received core funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, set out to work alongside health and education services to make them more father-inclusive. It was during this time that along with John Lester from U Mulliko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre we carried out the research project on Young Aboriginal Fathers and the Fathers as Mentors project. Bourkie will also describe his current work in Brothers Inside and the Dubbo research project.

While the projects undertaken by Craig include communities in Thursday Island, Alice Springs and Yarrabah near Cairns, the bulk of his work has involved urban or regional Indigenous populations. That is why we are particularly fortunate to have Dr Brian McCoy to present alongside Craig today; to discuss his research from the desert regions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Kanyirninpa is not a word I'd ever heard before reading about it in Brian's book. And now having read the book I am still not sure if I have understood all the layers of meaning that it conveys. But the role of adult men in "holding" or "growing up" the next generation of men is something that is important for Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. By describing the way the desert men from the Wirrimanu, Malarn, Kururrungka and Yaka Yaka grow up their children, Brian is adding an important element to the debate about a father's role that is taking place in every part of the country.

We non-Indigenous men have a lot to learn from the way that Indigenous men identify the barriers to building on their traditional laws and customs to take their place in growing up their children; we too have the task of recognising the importance of our role as fathers and grandfathers to our children.

## References

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