

Lone Fathers and the Scales of Justice: Renegotiating Masculinity After Divorce

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Surveys of lone fathers in the region of Newcastle (New South Wales) revealed views of hegemonic masculinity constructed within the urban-industrial environment and fostered by participation in the Lone Fathers Association. This view of masculinity was contested in the public terrain of the Australian Family Court. Lone fathers' defence of masculine privilege involved a derogatory "common-sense" discourse about women, who were constructed as either "tramps" or "gold-diggers." The breakdown of marriage brought about changes in expectations of lone fathers and others, leading to the forging of new identities in the continual process of the re-creation and re-negotiation of masculinities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the results of a small number of in-depth interviews and over fifty questionnaire surveys of members of the Newcastle branch of the Lone Fathers Association Australia who were contacted through that organisation. The majority of the lone fathers¹ were non-custodial parents, most of whom had some access to their children.

This paper attempts a mapping of the socially dominant view of masculinity in the specific socio-spatial context of urban-industrial Newcastle. For lone fathers soon after separation and divorce, masculinity is defined, reproduced and re-negotiated by participation in the Lone Fathers Association, in addition to the environments of home, work and leisure. This hegemonic masculinity is defended publicly in the Family Court; however, the fathers felt that they were the losers in the contest with the legal system. Their masculinity is defended and reconstructed in social interaction within the Lone Fathers Association by derogatory discourse aimed at women. The primary aims of this paper are to map the hegemonic masculinity of Newcastle and to examine the defence of that contested masculinity through deconstruction of the discourse used about women. In addition, the experiences of lone fathers after separation are examined briefly in relation to housing, work and family circumstances, and the role of the Lone Fathers Association in the cultural politics of masculinity is outlined. The constructed and fluctuating nature of masculinity is first reviewed and the interview and questionnaire methods outlined before considering the contested masculinity of Newcastle Lone Fathers.

MASCULINITIES

Hegemonic masculinity has been defined by Connell (1995, 77) as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." The hegemonic view is that which is socially dominant at any given time and place; as such, it is always contested and does not necessarily imply the view held by most men or by any particular man. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a rejection of and as superior to the other, the feminine, and is characterised by power and heterosexuality. Even masculinity's apparent negatives such as violence, misogyny and the suppression of emotions other than aggression are considered more positively from this hegemonic viewpoint than their opposite characteristics such as passivity and emotionality, which are considered to be "feminine."

The limitations of language tend to typecast masculinity in a static way, dualistically opposed to femininity. Masculinity is dynamic in that it is defined in relation to others, not just the mother/feminine but in all social interaction, revealed and shaped daily in different but interconnected contexts (Connell 1995). Masculinity is shaped in various domains: home, school, street, workplace and leisure. It is shaped in innumerable ways; by what we say (Milan 1995), what we wear (McDowell and Court 1994; Bell et al. 1995), what we do with and against others (Jackson 1990), and what we eat and drink (Jackson 1994; Housiaux 1995). Massey (1995) cautions against dualistic thinking that closes-off options and structures the world in terms of either/or, at the risk of inherent contradictions and inconsistencies. Pile (1994) has suggested that the paradoxes of polarised oppositions, with their gendered and expected associations, can be reconciled by the notion of a "third space": an alternative location "which mobilizes place, politics and hybrid identities," and "an alternative geometry of knowledge...which is located in neither the center nor the margin" (Pile 1994, 257).

However, not only is masculinity continually modified and renegotiated, the very idea of hegemonic masculinity is being replaced in Connell's more recent (1997) work by a much more complex array of multiple, layered and collectively-defined masculinities. The definition of hegemonic masculinity implies a range of other masculinities, all of which are to some extent fluid and constantly negotiated. Various masculinities are considered as subordinate to the hegemonic, particularly homosexual and racialised ones (see for example, Segal 1990; Jackson 1994; and, in non-western society, Kandiyoti 1994). The changing legal and social status of homosexual masculinities is a particularly visible example of the dynamic nature of masculinities (Forrest 1994). Connell (1991; 1995) has also usefully defined masculinities of the protest, complicit and alternative types, although again these are not to be taken as static gender roles. Connell (1997), in moving away from such categories, reflects on the contradictions and tensions embedded in masculinity, and defines now an ethnographic moment in masculinity research in which the local and specific is emphasised. Importantly also for this paper he considers the role of groups and institutions in sustaining and enacting collective (and multiple) masculinities.

Masculinities in Australian society are seen as part of a globalising gender order with crisis tendencies. Connell (1997) contrasts current masculinities of neo-liberalism

with earlier masculinities of conquest and empire. Gender identities now are being powerfully contested in neo-liberal political structures of the English-speaking world. The 1997 proposal by Australia's Liberal government for a woman's stay-at-home allowance (of \$35 per week) contributes to the demeaning of women's contribution to paid employment and reinforces their status as a reserve army of labour. Similarly, Laws (1994) comments that media representatives are largely shaping potentially universal negative images of "welfare moms" as irresponsible, socially undesirable and contributing to a breakdown of law and order. In contemporary discussions of youth male suicides in Australia, the "problem" of fatherless families is often considered to be a root cause of social breakdown.

Hearn (1994, 54) in theorising patriarchy commented that "historically fatherhood and the rule of the father or fathers has been a source of immense power and an excuse for all sorts of violences, sometimes in the name of love." In western culture, the role of the father is inextricably tied up with the Enlightenment Project, the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the Protestant work ethic (Seidler 1989). The role of the father as the authority, disciplinarian and provider in the family is accepted not only as part of hegemonic masculinity but also by many whose adopted masculinity is best described as protest or complicit. The traditions of Christianity and the Protestant work ethic define authority, work and reason as masculine, while submission, domesticity and emotion are considered to be feminine and child-like. In contemporary Australia, although Christianity is no longer a driving force in many families and capitalism is in a crisis of restructuring, fathers have maintained these associations, sustained through institutionalised patriarchal structures. The conventional responsibilities of fatherhood were once seen to provide unproblematic benefits to families: fathers provided economic security and an identifiable source of discipline for children; they were available to meet children's needs and to provide instruction on how they were to become productive and contributing members of society (White 1994, 122). Yet whether or not they achieved these objects, the benefits of fatherhood are derived by men as a class. As Hearn (1994, 51) argued: "all men benefit from the family mode of production and from the social institution of paternity even though clearly not all are husbands or fathers."

Although there has been change in the role of the father from a probably mythical absolute dominance, the identification of men with the world of work has often left them withdrawn or absent from the world of home (Seidler 1989; White 1994). Fathers' relationships at home tend to be instrumental rather than expressive, and despite changing gender roles, many fathers' participation in the domestic sphere consists mainly of providing financial support and playing with the children for short periods (Segal 1990; Pease and Wilson 1991, 54). Although many men express a desire to be more fully involved in their children's daily lives, work is often used as a justification for avoiding this even when their partners are also heavily committed outside the home (White 1994, 128). Furthermore, the daily routine work of providing food and clean clothes, tasks predominantly undertaken by mothers, are consistently undervalued by fathers.

The crisis of restructuring has led to the loss of jobs and the deskilling and degradation of much manual work. Such economic changes are refracted into the domestic sphere;

frustrations experienced by fathers at work or out of work can be taken out on women and children: "it could be that if men feel they no longer have dignity and respect at work that they will demand this more intensely from partners and children" (Seidler 1988, 294). One way of attempting to maintain such respect is by distance from the daily domestic routine rather than emotional involvement and support. Hipgrave (1982, 180) commented that "so-called 'masculine' rewards are generally inconsistent with the personal and generally intangible rewards of childcare." As such, men who have sole custody of their children and necessarily become fully involved both emotionally and in the daily drudgery were considered by Hipgrave in 1982 to have "a problematic status." The family is a domain where masculinity is constantly reasserted through daily interactions with wives and children, and is defined and maintained as much by distance as by involvement.

It is argued here that the construction of hegemonic masculinity in Newcastle, Australia in the 1990s is one which has common characteristics with the hegemonic masculinity apparent in many other societies. However, there are indications that the more extreme views demonstrated here are particular products of a group of self-selected people within a particular social organisation, which itself is set in the context of a male-orientated industrial-urban environment, where masculinity is continually reaffirmed in a number of different domains of life.

Massey (1995) and Berg (1994) in considering regional expressions and constructions of masculinity have vividly demonstrated how such an identity is contingent on place and time. For example, Massey's study of Cambridge-based scientists emphasised the masculinity of theory, reason and control, whereas Berg found that New Zealand masculinities were defined in controlling wild and dangerous frontier territory in opposition to feminine "theorising." This Newcastle study depicts also a defined masculine locale whose characteristics are contingent on place and time.

Newcastle has a history of being a maritime industrial city, originally based on coal and steel, shipbuilding and textiles. Although it has recently been through a series of changes in direction, residual attitudes persist. Manual industrial places, such as mines (Metcalf 1988) and factories (Willis 1979; Cockburn 1983) are environments where hegemonic masculinity is continually and aggressively reasserted and reproduced. Women are subordinate in the image and in the power-broking of the city (Metcalf 1993). The sporting image of the city rests on the Newcastle Knights, the local "footy" team in the quintessentially aggressive and violent sport of Rugby League. Residential areas of Newcastle have been found to be uncomfortable places for subordinate homosexual masculinities to be acted out (Dowsett et al. 1992).

METHODOLOGY

The empirical study on which this paper is based was undertaken using a combination of intensive qualitative interviews with extensive quantifiable questionnaires, in a classical mixed methods approach (Burgess 1982; Brannen 1992). Interviews were undertaken with six key informants (Tremblay 1982), who were drawn from the committee members of the Newcastle branch of the Lone Fathers Association (LFA). These interviews were

used as a pilot study for pre-testing hypotheses and developing the questionnaire for wider use (Brenner 1985, 148). The second stage of the methodology was undertaken using the revised structured questionnaires with 54 members of the Newcastle LFA.

The interviews were successful in generating and clarifying hypotheses to be tested. It was clear for most non-custodial fathers and members of the LFA that issues of access, custody and support would be significant. Specific concerns arose in the interviews, to which I had not previously given adequate consideration, including the perception of inequitable access to legal aid and the vulnerability of separated fathers to allegations of child physical and sexual abuse. Questions concerning some of these extremely personal financial and emotional matters, and about the role of the legal profession and support services, were subsequently incorporated into the questionnaire to ascertain the generality of their occurrence. The key informants were themselves also instrumental in suggesting changes to the survey instrument. These ranged from simple but useful changes of phrasing (the question on access was rephrased to days per fortnight to reflect local access arrangements) to suggestions for new questions on the role of the court in settling disputes.

At a deeper level, the interviews revealed great wells of anger:

Simon²: Calm! Calm! I'm bloody boiling inside I tell you...

The tenor of most of the interviews was so bitterly misogynist against women in general and ex-wives in particular that I became convinced that family structures and gender practices had to be explored directly, and so included a number of open-ended questions about the activities of mothers and fathers in the family, and the changing experiences of the fathers since separation.

The interviewing procedure raised some significant issues of gender relations between interviewer and interviewee and also major ethical issues of representation and power: these issues are explored in more detail elsewhere (Winchester 1996). In part the issue of gender and power relations was resolved by an empathetic approach rather than the more traditional "objective" approach to the interview procedure (see Brenner 1985; Oakley 1986; Herod 1993). By creating a "two-way street" of shared information (Oakley 1986) based on common life-stage experiences (see also Wearing 1984), I was able to establish a point of contact which led directly into the areas of their own personal lives that I was investigating.

Though fraught with frustrations, the empathetic style of interviewing was necessary as, in some cases, the interviews would have been impossible if the disparity between patterns of beliefs and politics of the interviewer and interviewees had been made overt (Schoenberger 1982; Smart 1984; McDowell 1992; McDowell and Court 1994).

The questionnaires were undertaken mainly face-to-face by an experienced interviewer, although a small number of questionnaires had to be left for collection and were returned by post. The response rate was very good, partly because the members had been given preliminary information through the organisation's newsletter, but mainly because the men felt deeply about events which were still very recent for most and very raw. Fifty-four of the seventy members of the LFA were surveyed, but a number of the others could not be contacted mainly because they had moved away from the addresses

held by the organisation. Only one man refused to complete the questionnaire; more commonly members were ringing up asking why they had not yet been contacted for an appointment. One questionnaire was incomplete and was deemed to be unusable in the analysis.

The sample drawn from the Lone Fathers Association cannot be construed as a random or representative sample, and there is no control group against which it can be compared. The group's ethnic and socio-economic composition is comparable to that of Newcastle's general population. However, this group had recently experienced marital separation, divorce, and contested custody proceedings. Furthermore they were drawn together in an organisation, the Lone Fathers Association, which gave them an outlet for sharing these experiences. This group of men was therefore atypical in that it had an environment additional to work and home, in which the masculinity of behaviour was constantly in the foreground and constantly recreated.

THE LONE FATHERS ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA

The Lone Fathers Association (LEA) is a lobbying and support organisation for lone fathers. It was founded by one man, Barry Williams, who in 1970 was left with four children, the youngest only three months old, but who at that time was unable to claim "supporting mother's benefit." He single-mindedly tackled the inequities of the benefits system in a campaign for a better deal for lone fathers which included a four-day hunger strike outside Parliament House in Canberra. In 1980, Williams formed the LFA which subsequently developed a network of regional branches across Australia. Its slogan is "Children need their fathers as much as they need their mothers" and its logo shows a schematic parent (of deliberately indeterminate sex) holding its arms out protectively over two children (clearly a girl and a boy) (Figure 1). The organisation is entirely run by volunteers and financed by membership subscriptions. Its regular branch activities are monthly regional meetings with guest speakers, the provision of individual advice and support, and the dissemination of regional and national newsletters. The Canberra national office is the focus for most of the lobbying activity directed at Parliament and the press.

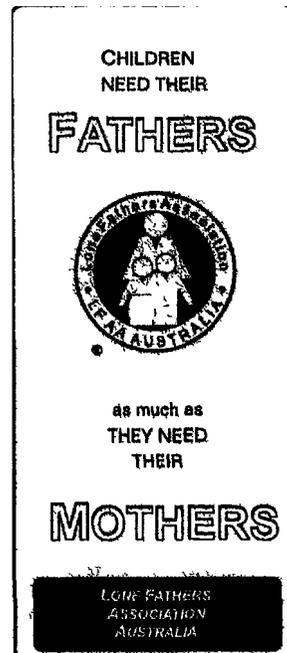


Figure 1. Logo and slogan of the Lone Fathers Association Australia (Source: LFAA, n.d.)

The LFA has six stated aims (Table I), which are not clearly focussed, but which deal with three main issues. The first is the lobbying function on behalf of lone fathers, especially in matters relating to access and custody (aims 1, 2 and 5). The second is the support role for lone fathers and their children (aims 3 and 4). The third attempts to provide a code of moral conduct "an explicit code of conduct and behaviour for lone fathers" in relation to children and ex-partners (aims 3, 4, 5 and 6). The LFA proclaims itself to be non-sexist, non-sectarian and non-profit making, and membership is open to "fathers who have or desire to have custody or care and control of a child or children" (LFAA,

Aims of the Lone Fathers Association Australia

- (1) to represent to the community, government and other agencies, the special needs of lone fathers as a significant group in the population;
- (2) to promote and assist the development of a better understanding and equity in the Family Courts on custody, access and property settlements;
- (3) to aid, assist and encourage lone fathers to support and sustain their children and do their utmost to prevent the institutionalisation of the children of lone fathers;
- (4) to promote an explicit code of conduct and behaviour for lone fathers with special emphasis on the welfare of their children, and to develop acceptable methods by which lone fathers can handle problems affecting their children;
- (5) to promote and encourage the best possible practice on access and custody matters, always with the happiness and emotional wellbeing of the child as the primary consideration, accepting that each child needs the love and guidance of both father and mother;
- (6) to encourage lone fathers not to degrade their former partner in any way to young children, as this affects children in many ways.

Table 1. The aims of the Lone Fathers Association Australia (Source: LFAA, n.d.)

The members of the LFA who were surveyed were asked what they felt to be the main role of the LFA. Only 6 percent specified that the LFA was a lobby group, but this appeared to be used in a narrow political sense. Over half (51 percent) mentioned a more general lobbying purpose using terms such as an "arena for justice," "to create change" and to "provide a male perspective." A quarter (25 percent) considered that the main role was help and support, and 15 percent specified the provision of information. The provision of a code of behaviour was either felt to be incidental or not made explicit.

The code of behaviour in relation to children and former partners mentioned in Aim 4 is not a written document, but such a code is necessarily derived from and in turn serves to reinforce the pre-existing ideas of the organisation's members. A code of behaviour in relation to "broken" families has to be based on ideas of the ways in which families are supposed to function. These ideas about the functioning of families and of fathers, derived from interviews and questionnaires with members of this organisation, are considered in this paper in relation to notions of hegemonic masculinity. It is argued here that the LFA is an organisation which is important in the cultural politics of masculinity. It defines and defends a notion of masculinity which is socially and geographically constructed. The contested terrain over which this idea of masculinity is publicly defended is the Family Court of Australia.

LONE FATHERS IN NEWCASTLE

The majority of lone fathers in the study were non-custodial parents aged in their twenties or thirties, had been separated for about two years, and had two or three children of school age. Most had access to their children about the legal norm (two days per fortnight and one weekday night, plus 50 percent of holidays), but a significant minority (21 percent) had no access while 11 percent had sole or joint custody of one or more children. During those periods of access, about 25 percent of fathers received temporary help with child care from relatives and friends, especially from their own parents. A mere 4 percent chose to separate themselves from their children, and for a small number of lone fathers (8 percent) access was no longer an issue because the children had reached the age of majority.

The recent separation of most lone fathers meant that the majority were currently living alone whilst 28 percent had remarried or were living in a *de facto* relationship. A rather larger proportion (44 percent) indicated that their ex-partners were remarried or living in a *de facto* relationship or "had a boyfriend hanging round." The majority of respondents had moved house since becoming lone fathers; 36 percent had moved once, and 32 percent between two and four times. A large percentage of these moves (64 percent) had been made locally and most of their ex-partners still lived in the Newcastle area. The housing status of the lone fathers at the time of the survey showed that 47 percent owned, were purchasing, building or selling their homes whilst 32 percent rented privately. Before becoming lone fathers, 88 percent of respondents owned or were purchasing their own homes whilst only 6 percent rented privately. Most of the lone fathers had lived in a detached house whilst married (98 percent) and most still lived in detached houses (reflecting the nature of the Newcastle housing stock). Nearly all claimed to have sufficient space (51 percent) or extra space (38 percent).

The majority of lone fathers were employed full-time (74 percent). Only nine percent considered themselves not to be in the labour force or looking for work. About half (49 percent) of those in the labour force were involved in trades and production process operations. Most had completed some form of post-school (tertiary) qualification, 32 percent in a trade and 23 percent from TAFE (Technical and Further Education). The range in income was substantial, averaging around \$400/week. Ninety percent of lone fathers had a car (21 percent a company car), and most used the vehicle for commuting to work.

In a number of respects the group of parents appeared representative of Newcastle's population. Most had been married but were separated or had worked in the town's industries, and lived in suburban homes. They were exclusively white, and predominantly of Anglo-Australian backgrounds, although 4 percent came from other north European backgrounds. Although the unemployment level was slightly higher than average for the city, the range of occupations and incomes reflected the employment opportunities available. One of the most marked features of their socio-economic status was the general down-turn which the men had experienced in their housing conditions. This phenomenon of moving down the housing market after divorce has been previously noted for women

(see for example, Winchester 1990) but in the prevailing legal circumstances, women with children are increasingly likely to stay in the family home. Nonetheless most of the men had sufficient or surplus space, a situation less likely to apply to women with children.

The family home is usually the major material family possession as well as being invested with symbolic and emotional meaning. The house was mentioned as a major goal in life, something which had been worked for and laboured over:

Patrick: I suppose what with the house an' that there was always something at weekends, building, painting, laying concrete... I did all that out there (gesticulates to verandah, car port, sand pit)...and she had the kids...

For some, the house inevitably became the focus of struggle:

If I buy the house, decorate it, make it nice, then **you** try and take it from me...well, I wasn't having that...I just stayed put...you can try what you like (his tone of emphasis).

The house as the major material and symbolic representation of the enclosed family unit in society was a source of struggle which is worthy of further study, but this paper will focus more closely on aspects of personal relations which were contested in the Family Courts.

CONTESTED TERRAIN AND DEROGATORY DISCOURSE

Contested arrangements for property settlement, and access, custody and maintenance were the norm rather than the exception. The contested terrain over which these battles were fought was the Family Court of Australia. At stake were not only homes and material possessions but control and custody of children and provision for their support. Constructions of the hegemonic masculinity of the father as authority, disciplinarian and provider, were being contested. This contest which was operated through institutions such as the Family Law Act and the Legal Aid system, which are not considered in detail here, was narrated using derogatory discourse against women, particularly the narratives of women as "tramps" and "gold-diggers."

Most of the lone fathers (85 percent) had been involved in legal disputes over access, custody, or maintenance or for a combination of reasons. Over half of the disputes (57 percent) had gone to court. Comments on the operation of the Family Law Act were highly negative, and most lone fathers (77 percent) felt it was biased against men and unfair in its operation. A comment that occurred remarkably frequently (used by 11 percent of respondents) about the Family Law Act was that "it stinks," and there were numerous negative remarks about members of the legal profession. One father commented that the Family Law Act "supports divorce and marriage breakups"; another extreme comment was that it was "one of the Devil's churches." Many (52 percent) felt that the pendulum had swung too far against men in favour of women and that it had become easy for women to divorce. Using the same analogy, one father commented that "formerly women had a rough deal, but the balance has swung the other way." Others indicated that the system encouraged women "to continue legal battles because men have to pay for it," that courts and police "only enforce orders against men not women" and that women can too easily bring unsubstantiated claims (23 percent).

Larry: She alleged sexual abuse - it's the fourteen year old I'm talking about - and never had to give a shred of evidence...it's stopped my access...! never visit alone now but always take my sister... (from a father who was cleared by the court of abuse charges)

Claims of domestic violence and in particular sexual abuse of children were taken extremely seriously by the courts and were often sufficient to stop access "without a shred of evidence." Commenting that men were assumed to be guilty unless proven innocent, one father offered the opinion that "criminals have more rights than lone fathers." During legal proceedings, only 13 percent of lone fathers had been able to obtain Legal Aid, whereas 51 percent claimed that their ex-partners had received Legal Aid. The responses about Legal Aid were overwhelmingly negative, it being viewed as unfairly allocated to women, as a weapon and as too expensive.

Joe: I can't get Legal Aid 'cos I'm working, but she ...she can just give up her job, go on the dole and get it just like that...every time she takes me to court I'm a thousand dollars down - she can use the courts to get at me...

The majority of lone fathers reported that they contributed to the maintenance and support of their children, either through direct financial support (23 percent), or indirectly, for example, through the provision of food or clothing (15 percent) or in both forms (53 percent). Many (43 percent) felt that their level of contribution was unfair and unreasonable. The reasons cited for this included the following: that it took no account of the individual's financial obligations (25 percent), that the father had no say in how the money was spent (8 percent) or that it was not equitable (8 percent). In particular there was resentment against women who were perceived to be deliberately "rorting the system" (cheating) by receiving benefits and not working, women who "have qualifications but choose not to use them" or who "deliberately stay on pensions and get paid by their ex-spouse." Such accusations formed part of the "gold-digger" narrative, that women were "out to trap a man and get his money." Another major resentment was over lack of control over the money paid to their ex-wives; one man reported that he did "not like to pay for (his) ex-wife having a good time," another that his maintenance payments go to his "(ex-) wife and (her) boyfriend and not to pay bills and furniture." A combination of these grievances was aired by the father who complained that "women get it easy living on a pension, and maintenance pays for her new car;" similarly another claimed that "women divorce because they know they will get looked after." The belief that single mothers with children live well on state benefits forms part of an international discourse which vilifies welfare recipients (Laws 1994). In this case it is combined with a demand that women should be "forced" or "given incentives" to find work to support their children.

The minority of fathers who felt that their maintenance contributions were fair and reasonable did so because they felt responsible for the maintenance of their child. Others reported that agreement had been reached as part of a settlement arrangement (11 percent). At least one parent who paid nothing in maintenance considered that this amount was eminently fair and reasonable.

A second narrative in the derogatory discourse against women was that of the "tramp," used in the sense of women making themselves sexually available. Other

similar terms that were used included "slut," "bitch," "whore," and "adulterer." A number of men commented that their ex-wives were not fit to be mothers and to have custody of children. One father, who had fathered children by different women both within and without wedlock, claimed he had custody of the children of his marriage because their "mother was a tramp." Another felt that his "ex-wife shouldn't have got custody since she was an adulterer." Others questioned the ways in which their children were being brought up, claiming that their wives were not exerting sufficient control over the children who were "becoming delinquents"; one father claimed his ex-wife was a "criminal" and that their daughter was "in moral danger." A number of fathers spoke in less specific terms, arguing that the non-custodial parent "should have more say" in the children's welfare and upbringing. Some further argued that joint custodial arrangements should become the norm. Others abnegated their own desires for involvement in parenting but considered that the children's wishes and views should be taken into consideration more seriously.

The fathers felt that the court system in general, the claims over children, and the use of unsubstantiated allegations were all "weapons" used in a battle which they did not define, but which was felt by them as being against them as individuals, but could also be construed as being against men as a class and against particular constructions of masculinity. One comment that "you are better off in this country being black than a lone father" combines a number of derogatory discourses about race, women and welfare. Only 6 percent of comments about Legal Aid were positive and a mere 4 percent of respondents found anything positive to say about the Family Law Act and the legal system in general. In the contested terrain of the Family Court, lone fathers almost unanimously felt that they were the losers.

The lone fathers were asked for their views of the family in society, the main contributions of mothers and fathers in families, and how they themselves felt they had changed since becoming a lone father, in a series of open-ended questions. The prevailing view of the family in society was that it was important and significant, with analogies such as the "fabric," the "mainstay," and the "backbone" of society being used by the majority of fathers (68 percent). A smaller proportion (21 percent) claimed that the family did not exist or that they had no respect for it. A very few admitted to mixed feelings about the nuclear family now (4 percent) or commented that single parenthood could be a positive option (6 percent) while a further 4 percent answered by saying that it was too easy for women to leave the family. It appeared that most men answered the question generally (as intended) but some answered it more with reference to their own personal circumstances.

Within the family in general, 55 percent felt that the main contribution of fathers was to be the breadwinner, provide discipline, balance and moral guardianship and a "male perspective," while 68 percent felt that the main contribution of mothers was to nurture and bring up children and provide a "female perspective." There was therefore considered to be a clear demarcation between the contributions of fathers and mothers. The roles of provider and disciplinarian are clear characteristics of the hegemonic masculinity of the father. A significant proportion (15 percent) considered that the main

contribution of fathers in the family was loving and nurturing, but in combination with guiding and teaching. It is notable that the usually feminine roles of loving and nurturing are combined in this answer with the more pedagogic roles ascribed to the father. A small proportion (8 percent) felt that their contribution was "to be there under any circumstances," while 15 percent saw no difference between the contributions of mothers and fathers. Of the few remaining respondents, 2 percent felt that fathers had no contribution to make and 6 percent did not reply.

The contributions of mothers in the family were considered by the majority (68 percent) to be clearly defined and limited to nurturing and bringing up children; in no case was a pedagogic or guiding role mentioned. As with fathers, 15 percent felt that the contributions of mothers and fathers were identical; only 2 percent did not reply, but a further 15 percent made negative and derogatory responses, including one person who appeared to consider his ex-wife's role to be defined by domestic service. Some comments were fairly extreme; motherhood was considered by one to be "the highest God-given calling for a woman." Nonetheless, the nurturing role of mothers was consistently undervalued. One father commented that "it doesn't cost \$85 per week to feed a six-year old girl." Another said of his ex-wife who had custody of three school-age children, "she doesn't do anything all day, just sits around on her fat arse."

Many lone fathers felt that their role as a father had changed with their changed marital circumstances. A significant proportion (27 percent) believed that their role was no longer related to fatherhood, and that they had no input into their relationship with their children. A further 26 percent saw their relationship with their children as having become more important. About 20 percent felt that their relationship with their children had changed, deteriorated or become more distant or tenuous.

Many lone fathers felt that their experiences of lone fatherhood had changed their views of themselves and their masculinity. The question was: "Has your experience as a lone father changed your view of yourself as a man?" The question was always asked exactly in this form and none of the lone fathers sought any clarification as to what it meant. They were being asked to consider themselves as men, as masculine. Almost half (47 percent) reported that their self-esteem had been damaged, their role lost or that they had become suspicious or cynical of women. Comments included men who felt themselves to be a "failure" and whose "dreams had been shattered." A number, however, reported outcomes which they felt to be positive, as in becoming stronger (15 percent), more tolerant (9 percent), or less concerned about money (2 percent). A further 13 percent felt that they had experienced no change and 6 percent did not reply.

The contrast between the hegemonic view of the patriarchal family as a pillar of society and the experience of the lone fathers in their own separated families is stark. Yet few of the displaced fathers seemed to have any insight into the circumstances which led to the collapse of their role. In relation to their wives and marriages, many claimed that they "did not know why she left" or "did not know what went wrong." While the individual circumstances of marriage breakdown vary enormously, the great chasm between the dream family and the reality of daily life suggests a tension leading to rupture.

DECONSTRUCTING DEROGATORY DISCOURSE

Hegemonic constructions of the masculinity of fatherhood are contested by marital breakdown and conflict over custody and maintenance in the Family Court. Women who leave unsatisfactory marriages are exercising power; in so doing they confront head-on the expectations of their husbands to be the authority, provider and disciplinarian in the family. This challenge to the power of the father is interpreted by men as a female conspiracy. The female conspiracy theory involves both essentialised and constructed notions of women as mothers and nurturers, and of men as fathers and providers. Women's desire to marry, have children and a father/male provider are essentialised and taken for granted. Their motivations for divorce are then interpreted as gaining financial advantage both in maintenance payments from the man and in benefit payments from the state. One person, who himself used the term "female conspiracy," suggested that women then go on to marry someone else richer: "her new husband, he's a doctor...." Women in this discourse are seen as "gold-diggers" both to the detriment of individual men and as beneficiaries from the state. Another father in a variation of this argument claimed that "divorce is part of a government conspiracy" in which money is siphoned from the father to the "(ex)-spouse not the kids" and women "get looked after." The Family Court in its increasingly favourable settlements to women, particularly over property from the marriage, may be seen as placing a higher value on women's domestic contribution than is held by their ex-husbands.

The gold-digging narrative integral to the female conspiracy argument is based on a number of false assumptions. The first of these is that single mothers are well off financially, whereas in fact there is a considerable body of evidence which shows that they, along with lone person households, are the poorest (and predominantly female) household types. The second false assumption is that the maintenance payments paid by men to their ex-wives is for the support of the women, whereas in fact it is also (in some cases, predominantly) for the children.³ The fathers' responsibility for the support of their children is obscured by concerns expressed over the way in which the money is spent. The third false assumption is that child support of this type is meant to "feed" the child, taking no account of the associated costs of housing, electricity, transport, medical costs and so on. This third assumption forms part of the consistent under-valuation placed by men on their partners' domestic work and domestic goods. Indeed, the whole argument of a female conspiracy is based on women's inferior access to money, work, authority and power.

One reaction to households which have usurped the authority of the father is for the ousted males to suggest that the transferral of power should be accompanied by a selective reversal of gender roles in a form of masculine fundamentalism (Connell 1997,9). It is clear that many men felt they had failed, their self-esteem shattered by their new status as an outsider to the family. The extensions of the conspiracy theory suggest both that the mother should take on the role of breadwinner/ provider, while at the same time being unfit to take on the nurturing roles. The "gold-digging" narrative is extended to the idea that women who claim authority in their households should be forced also to use their qualifications, come off benefits and go out to work. Men also particularly

resent paying maintenance in cases where the ex-wife has a new partner or boyfriend, who they feel should provide not only for the woman but for the children of her former marriage. Such claims derive directly from the primary notion of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity, the male as authority and provider. In advancing such suggestions, men are in fact reinforcing as masculine the authority and breadwinning functions of the household, even when suggesting it should be adopted by another male or by the ex-wife. The gross inequity of women adopting the dual role in a gender-segregated job market was not considered as an issue.

A further aspect of suggested gender role reversal occurs in the "tramp" narrative. This narrative suggests that women, in taking other sexual partners, are deemed to be unsuitable to undertake the nurturing role, however under-valued it may be. This claim associates nurturing with chastity in echoes of the Virgin-Mother ideology and of women as property. In claiming that women are unfit for nurturing, they are left with no role at all. The profound misogyny of this idea, and the deep bitterness with which it was expressed, was on occasions quite startling. Such a narrative, which vilifies and demeans women, again reinforces aspects of hegemonic masculinity through violent assertions of control over women's bodies and behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The hegemonic masculinity of Newcastle men outlined above is characterised by power, heterosexuality, violence, misogyny and repressed emotionality, inculcated in a social and industrial environment which is characterised by invisible women and profoundly misogynistic attitudes. Fatherhood is part of that hegemonic masculinity, and is a social institution which supports men at the expense of women's domestic labour. The Lone Fathers Association provides a supportive environment for men in a period of profound transition in their lives. In so doing it defines, defends and reproduces a hegemonic construction of masculinity through discussion and reiteration, and in particular through the derogatory misogynist "common-sense" discourse outlined above. Its aim of providing an "explicit code of conduct and behaviour for lone fathers" in relation to their children and ex-partners has not been achieved. However, its implicit code of conduct and behaviour is based on an idealised view of family life which bears little relation to the marriages experienced by its members. For over half the men (51 percent), the Lone Fathers Association provided an "arena for justice" and a "male perspective" which helped reinforce and maintain the hegemonic masculinity which had been inculcated in other domains. However, even this hegemonic masculinity showed one element of change which was the willingness of the men to engage in discussion of intensely emotional matters. Such discussion however exhibited two paradoxical elements. One was that discussion was often apparently stereotyped in the form outlined above. The other was that such discussion of emotional issues often occurred contemporaneously with (further) distancing themselves from families and relationships.

The hegemonic view of masculinity outlined here was held by the majority of the members of the LFA. There were a number of men, however, who claimed equal roles for mothers and fathers (15 percent), who felt their maintenance contributions were

reasonable (25 percent), who wanted to be there for their children (8 percent) and who offered positive remarks about (lone) parenthood (4 percent). These men were more likely than the average to have had both experience of (sole or joint) custody of children, and to be re-established in a long-term heterosexual relationship. In these cases the masculinity being recreated appeared to be more fluid, more negotiated and more complex in maintaining former and new relationships. These lone fathers showed no hints of violence, no overt misogyny and they also perceived at least some significant positive outcomes for themselves and their children from the process of separation, as in "becoming more tolerant" and "less of a parent, more like a friend." Although one father suggested that middle-class men were less likely to adopt violent masculinities "vindictiveness and aggression from lone fathers is a class thing," there was no clear evidence from the occupational data of any class differentiation in the negotiation of masculinity. Neither was there any evidence of the adoption of subordinated masculinities such as the homosexual or alternative masculinities through individual life-style choices.

There was, however, much evidence of the continual re-negotiation of masculinity. The answers to the question "has your experience as a lone father changed your view of yourself as a man?" showed that for 81 percent of those interviewed their self-perception "as a man" had changed in a whole range of ways from those who said they had "no role any more" or those who felt they had become "cynical of women" to those who had become "more tolerant" or "less money-orientated." The renegotiation of masculinity brought about by the time of domestic crisis had clearly led some men to adopt a more violent and authoritarian masculinity and for others to establish more reciprocal emotional relationships. The breakdown in the power relationship between husband and wife had brought about changes in expectations of themselves and others, leading to the forging of new identities in the continual process of the re-creation and re-negotiation of masculinities.

Primarily the collective masculinity forged by membership of the LFA is one which can best be described as hegemonic, with its characteristic associations with power and heterosexuality but also violence and misogyny. One characteristic of hegemonic masculinity that appeared to be freed up by the trauma of separation and divorce was the suppression of emotions: lone fathers talked animatedly of deeply emotional and personal issues and the ways in which they were affected by them. The LFA provided a forum for the concretisation of "common-sense" derogatory discourses targeted against women. As such, this men's group, which offered much-needed support in times of trauma, also appeared to influence the cultural politics of masculinity in the local arena. This mapping of masculinity in the quintessentially masculine environment of Newcastle shows limited signs of renegotiation from the classic hegemonic view. The individual experiences of men after divorce are tempered by global discourses in a constant process of renegotiation and realignment in the social construction of masculinity for individuals and localities.

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NOTES

¹ The usage of the term "lone father" for a non-custodial parent is the one used by the men themselves, and by the Lone Fathers Association. Elsewhere in the literature on lone parents, the term "lone father" is used to refer to custodial parents (e.g. Hipgrave 1982). In the initial stages of this research the terminology used had led the researcher to expect a high proportion of male parents with custody of their children, but it became clear on initial contact with the organisation that this was not the case. As in Australia as a whole, the proportion of male custodial parents is very low (Winchester 1990).

² Names are used from the interviews but not from the questionnaires. Names have been changed to protect anonymity of respondents.

³ Kirkwood (1986) describes underlying assumptions for the conditions related to Supporting Mother's (now Parent's) Benefit and the Widow's Pension which may have exacerbated LFA members' antagonism:

- a) father's role was to work, therefore no work test was introduced for recipients in initial stages (51),
- b) eligibility criteria initially directed specifically at categories of "women" (52). However, in 1977, due to persistent lobbying, eligibility was broadened to include male "supporting parents" (Kirkwood 1986, 68), although eligibility for a widow's pension, despite appeals of discrimination under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is still restricted to females (51), and
- c) men who reneged on payment were considered to be unwilling, rather than unable, to pay (57).

Since the research was earned out there have been further changes in legislation relating to custody, access and maintenance:

- a) 1996 amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975* are described as a change of emphasis from the "nghts" of custodial and non-custodial parents to the "rights" of a child to have regular, ongoing contact with both parents who have mutual and continuing "responsibilities" for the child (*Sydney Morning Herald* 21 March 1997, 6), and
- b) the new Family Law Reform Act provisions include consideration for apprehended violence orders (AVOs) when deciding custody and access arrangements (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 February 1997, 13). These provisions are considered to be inflammatory by LFA national president, Barry Williams, who believes that applications for AVOs are being used "as a ploy to deny access [to fathers who are] still entitled to access away from the mother" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 February 1997, 13) even if the mother had been assaulted. However, a defence lawyer believes that "the really serious domestic violence orders are

generally attached to police charges of assault or worse" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 February 1997, 13) as evidenced by the fatal shooting of a mother, under protection of two AVOs, as she arrived at Parramatta Family Court for a custody hearing.

Planned changes to the child support formula, "in recognition of real living costs" (*Sun-Herald* 27 April 27, 35), to prevent non-custodial parents from falling into poverty are expected to be more welcome.

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