

# Beyond The Father Wound: Memory-Work And The Deconstruction Of The Father–son Relationship

Bob Pease\*

---

*This article examines how profeminist men in a collaborative inquiry group used memory-work to make sense of their experiences of discontent with their fathers. It challenges the current conceptualisation of this dissatisfaction with fathers as 'the father wound' and the emphasis on encouraging men to forgive their fathers unilaterally for what they have done. The article also challenges the view that boys need to identify with their fathers to establish their gender identity and suggests that sons can construct their masculine subjectivity through dis-identification with patriarchal fathers and through empathy with the experiences of their mothers.*

---

How important is a boy's identification with his father? There is a widespread assumption that boys need to identify with their fathers to acquire their masculinity and if they do not, it is assumed that they will have personality and gender problems (Brittan, 1989: 33). Numerous writers on men and masculinity claim that there is a relationship between fathers' physical and emotional absence from their sons, and boys' personal and social behaviour. In the 1970s, there was a view strongly held by some theorists that children in fatherless families were more likely to become juvenile delinquents and that the psychological effects of father absence and lack of a male role model were likely to impair a boy's sense of his masculinity (Herzog and Sudia, 1971: 13–16). In addition, too much mothering and 'inadequate fathering' was thought to lead to overt aggression (Hamilton, 1977: 28) and homosexuality (Pleck, 1987: 92).

## THE FATHER WOUND

In more recent writing on men, the major emphasis has been on the significance of the 'father wound' or 'father hunger', suggesting that most men carry deep wounds as a result of their relationships with their fathers. The most damaging of these wounds is said to be caused by fathers' remoteness and absence (Farmer, 1991: 24–25). Corneau (1991: 13) argues that lack of fatherly attention leads to the son's inability 'to identify

with his father as a means of establishing his own masculine identity' and consequently, such a son 'is unable to advance to adulthood'.

Some feminist writers have also argued that greater involvement of men in child care would lead to a decrease in men's violence against women. Horsfall (1991: 98) argues that fathers' physical and emotional distance from their sons creates difficulties with gender identity for the sons. In her view, the greater the emotional distance, the lower the male self-esteem and the greater the insecurity about masculinity, hence rendering it more likely that men will be violent towards women. Miedzian (1992: 82) adopts a similar position, arguing that 'high levels of violent behaviour are frequently linked to a boy's having had inadequate fathering'. These views are supported by Lisak's (1991: 249) research into rapists' relationships with their fathers, which were marked by physical abusiveness, physical and emotional distance, and unavailability.

What is it about the fathers' role that is seen as significant in shaping the gender identity of sons? The research of Emihovich, Gaier and Cronin (1984: 867) in the 1980s revealed that fathers held very traditional sex role beliefs and expectations and that these clearly influenced their sons' beliefs. Their findings are consistent with the research cited by Miedzian (1992: 85) which reveals that fathers are disturbed by any behaviour in their sons that is not typically masculine.

Furthermore, whilst this literature advocates greater involvement of fathers with their children, it also encourages clear distinctions between men's and women's roles: fathers are expected to be the main transmitters to their sons of culturally approved forms of masculinity. Thus it is not clear whether greater involvement of men in child care would break down traditional sex roles or reinforce them (Pleck, 1987: 92–94).

---

\* Bob Pease is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at RMIT University. Address for correspondence: School of Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, PO Box 2476V Melbourne, Victoria 3001 Phone +61 3 9925 2232, bob.pease@rmit.edu.au. An earlier version of some sections of this article will appear in the author's forthcoming book entitled *Recreating Men: Postmodern Masculinity Politics* (London, Sage).

Taubman (1986: 16–17) argues that men's attitudes towards women will become less patriarchal and more egalitarian as a result of men becoming more involved in parenting, but Wilson's (1990: 135) research challenges this view. His study of single fathers showed that the men's relatively high level of involvement with their children did not influence their patriarchal attitudes towards women.

Children learn relations of power and domination by observing the relationship between their parents. The majority of respondents to Hite's (1994: 369) survey report second-class treatment of the mother by the father. As children observe the father being able to make unreciprocated claims upon the mother, the boys may come to regard a man 'as someone able to get certain services from a woman', leading to 'a sense of male entitlement'. Men can come to believe that they deserve something from women 'and this sense may even be experienced as a "right"' (Mederos, 1987: 34).

Many writers postulate a direct correlation between the behaviour of the father and the subsequent behaviour of the son. Farmer (1991: 26), for example, suggests that a boy whose father is a tyrant will learn to be a tyrant himself and Lee (1991: 43) argues that if a boy perceives his father to be competitive or an abuser, he will take it upon himself to be the same.

I argue that for this to occur, however, boys need to identify with their fathers. Most boys do identify with the aggressor rather than the object of aggression (Silverstein and Rashbaum, 1994: 85). Boys' identification with traditional fathers is the prevailing social practice, but why should this necessarily be so? It is clearly not always desirable, because, in this case, the norm is one of male domination. Identification with traditional fathers is one mechanism that reproduces hegemonic masculinity, male dominance and patriarchy (Christian, 1994: 190). The father–son relationship thus replicates the sexual and political values of the wider culture.

There is an ongoing debate within feminism and critical theory about the universal status of the concept of patriarchy. However, as it still has some currency as an acceptable term for describing systemic male domination, I will use it here, while avoiding its biologically determinist connotations. While I see patriarchy as a system of practices and structures through which men dominate women, I believe it is best understood as an historical structure with changing dynamics.

In contrast to the role that fathering plays in the reproduction of patriarchy, I believe that fatherhood should be ideally conceived in terms of nurturance. Thus, I do not want to suggest that fatherhood is inherently oppressive. Boys want fathers who are 'warm, receptive, physically affectionate and comforting, open and honest about their feelings and approving and accepting of their sons despite their sons' failures' (Arcana, 1983: 142). I agree with Stoltenberg's ideal of fatherhood as 'an influential grown-up who plays a significant role in the development of a child's relation to selfhood (1993: 50). Such an ideal father passes on the child a core self-esteem. May and Strikwerda see the nurturing father as being more similar to

a mother (1992: 82), thus challenging the assumption that mothers and fathers are inherently different.

It is not my intention to deny that some forms of mothering may also reproduce patriarchy. Mothers may accept the male definition of femininity and accommodate to men's version of masculinity. Smith points out that stereotyped gender behaviour can also be reinforced by mothers (1995: 162). Thus, they may collude in the reproduction of patriarchal culture.

My focus here, however, is on the father–son relationship and, following Christian, I argue that until most fathers are non-patriarchal, nurturing fathers, the father–son relationship is likely to continue to reproduce the norms of misogyny and male violence (Christian, 1994: 191). Thus, while I believe it is important for sons to identify with nurturing and egalitarian fathers, I believe it is equally important to dis-identify with patriarchal and abusive fathers. This is consistent with Christian's (1994: 192) findings on the family background of anti-sexist men, that 'men who do not identify with traditional fathers or who do identify with non-traditional fathers are more likely to have sympathetic attitudes towards women and feminist ideals'.

## COLLABORATIVE GROUP INQUIRY

I researched these issues as part of a larger study on the subjectivities and practices of profeminist men. In 1992 I invited a number of self-defining profeminist men to participate in a collaborative inquiry to explore the politics and practices of profeminism. This group took the form of an anti-patriarchal men's consciousness-raising group which met 22 times between November 1992 and February 1994.

I used a purposive sampling technique to identify potential participants in the project. From my involvement in profeminist politics, I drew up a list of twenty men whom I knew personally and who I believed would identify with a profeminist stance. Ten of these men were, at the time of the research, active in Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA); the others were from a range of activist backgrounds including the non-violence movement, perpetrator counselling, and non-sexist educational programs for boys in schools.

Eleven men committed themselves to the full project over a period of fifteen months and 22 meetings. After the introductory meetings, the size of the group varied throughout the project from a maximum of eleven participants to a minimum of five.

The men involved in the research were all middle class, heterosexual and white. We all identified as profeminist and were all struggling to work out what this meant in both our personal and public lives.

From the beginning, I was committed to sharing power with the participants, although this was always constrained by my greater investment in the outcomes of the group process. To this end, I relinquished the role of facilitator after the first two sessions. Each subsequent session was facilitated by other participants on a rotating basis.

The group session reported here took place at the eighth meeting of the group, at which six men were present. In this account, participants decided to examine their experiences of discontent in their relationships with their fathers. The method of inquiry into men's experiences was memory-work.

## Memory-Work As Method

Memory-work is a method that builds upon, yet goes beyond, consciousness-raising. The method was developed by Frigga Haug (1987) to gain greater understanding of the resistance to the dominant ideology at the level of the individual, as well as to gain insight into how women internalise dominant values and how their reactions are colonised by dominant patterns of thought. Haug (1987: 13) describes memory-work as 'a method for the unravelling of gender socialisation'. Her argument is that it is essential to examine subjective memories if we want to discover anything about how people appropriate objective structures (Haug 1992: 20).

By sharing and comparing memories from their own lives, Haug and her groups hope to uncover the workings of dominant ideology in their subjectivities. Her particular concern is 'with the ways in which people construct their identities through experiences that become subjectively significant to them' (1987: 40–52). The premise is that everything we remember is a significant basis for the formation of identity.

By illustrating the ways in which people participate in their own socialisation, their potential to intervene in and change the world is expanded. By making conscious the way in which we have previously unconsciously interpreted the world, we are more able to develop resistance against this 'normality' (Haug 1987: 60) and thus develop ways of subverting our own socialisation.

Memory-work is carried out by a group of co-researchers who choose a topic or theme to investigate. It involves at least three phases:

First, written memories are produced according to certain rules. Individuals are asked to write a memory of a particular episode, action or event in the third person without any interpretation or explanation. Writing in the third person encourages description and avoids rationalisation.

Second, the written memories are collectively analysed. After writing the memories, the co-researchers meet to read and analyse them. Each group member expresses her opinions and ideas about the memories and looks for similarities, differences and cultural imperatives. Memories are compared and contrasted with each other and appraised and reappraised by both the writer and others in the group so that the common elements are identified. Members of the group thus collectively interpret, discuss and theorise the memories. It is through this process that new meanings are created.

Third, memories are reappraised and analysed in the context of a range of theories. This involves rewriting the memories following the collective theorising (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton, 1992: 40–51).

Memory-work is an example of what McLaren and da Silva (1993: 73–75) call 'remembering in a critical mode'; it becomes a form of 'counter memory'. The purpose of this approach to remembering is 'not only to understand the past but to understand it differently'. By recounting histories of oppression, suffering and domination, those who occupy positions of dominance can find ways to recognise their privilege and form alliances with the oppressed (McLaren et al., 1993: 77).

In this study, those of us in the research group explored experiences when we had wanted or needed a nurturing or supportive response from our fathers but did not get such a response.

The premise of the memory-work experience was not to deny that incidents of 'wounding' were not balanced by occasions of support and affirmation by our fathers. Rather, these memories were to provoke discussion on discontent in father-son relationships. We wanted to understand more fully the way in which such discontent is constructed, as it seemed to be such a powerful element in both masculinity therapy and the mythopoetic men's movement, as promoted by Robert Bly (1990). We were critical of the way in which the father 'wound' was articulated in these writings and we were curious to see what sorts of memories a cue of 'discontent with fathers' would evoke for us. This cue was not imposed on the group by myself as researcher, but was formulated as a result of group discussion.

The group produced five memories in response to this cue, written in the third person to encourage a description of particular events rather than a justification or explanation of the events.

## PATRIARCHAL EXPECTATIONS IN FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

The first three memories elicited accounts of unfulfilled expectations between fathers and sons. The following memory from Michael relates to his need to talk to his father about the distress he associated with his work:

*Michael (aged sixteen) was distressed. He had been a manual worker for two years now and he hated the work. He hated the noise and the dust and the physical demands of the job along with the boredom associated with much of it. He felt isolated and lonely in the job, even though his father worked there. All the men were older and he had no close friends his own age. He also felt troubled on an emotional level about his experience of himself as a male and he began to wonder about his sexuality.*

*He approached his father in the lounge room after work one night. He said 'Dad, there are a couple of things I want to talk to you about'. His father acknowledged the statement, but he did not put the paper down. 'Firstly Dad, I'm unhappy at work. I don't get any enjoyment out of it. I want to do something different.'*

*His father put the paper down. 'Listen, you've only been working for two years. I've been working for over 30 years. You can't expect work to be enjoyable. You just have to get used to it. All jobs have their good and bad aspects. You won't find any job that you'll like all the time. You just have to get used to it.' Michael began to talk further about his feelings about work, but it seemingly fell on deaf ears.*

*'Dad there's something else I'm feeling troubled about, some other stuff that's not only to do with work. I want to talk to someone about it.' 'What is it to do with?' 'It's not easy to explain, but I'm very unhappy with myself at the moment', Michael said, trying to find a way to open it up. 'Don't worry about it,' his father said. 'You'll grow out of it. It's just a phase. You'll be OK.' There didn't seem to be anything further to say. Michael withdrew and went to his room.*

In this memory, Michael was struggling with sexual identity issues arising from his sense of marginalisation from dominant masculinities and with his alienation from a masculinist work-place culture. He had constructed himself as possibly gay because he had not conformed in a range of ways to expected male behaviour. This memory demonstrates the power that homophobia has in the making of masculinities.

The memory evokes a strong sense of despair. Michael is trying to talk about his unhappiness and he is rejected by the dismissive clichés in his father's response: 'You can't expect work to be enjoyable—You'll grow out of it. It's just a phase.' His father was unable to give him the time that he wanted.

In discussing the episode, Michael said that he blamed his father for the lack of choices and opportunities in his life. He felt resentful about the years he spent doing manual process work:

*It was the conditions of your life. You didn't expect to be happy ... Work was pretty shitty and hard. That's the way work was. That's the way the world was ... You just accepted the reality of it.*

Dominant ideologies about work are translated through fathers to sons, shaping the expectations and satisfactions in the world of work. In this memory, Michael is given the message by his father that there is no way out; there is nothing that he can do to alter his life. However, Michael resisted this pressure; he did not accept 'the reality of it'. He made dramatic changes in his life, breaking away from his class location and his positioning as a particular kind of male.

Furthermore, as Michael became more politically active, he came to see his father in the context of the material conditions of his life, living at a particular point in history, within a class, and doing the best he could. He came to acknowledge that we live in a class-divided society where people are not expected to make changes to their class location. By seeing his father in the culture of his time, he became more forgiving of him, which

seems very common, particularly among working-class sons. Many sons come to forgive their fathers for their failings because they come to see their fathers' neglect and abusive behaviour as a result of their sacrifices for them and the family (Nordstrom, 1992: 4).

Peter said that he identified with Michael's memory. 'I could feel the thickness of it.' There are certainly similarities in Peter's memory, which also involved a work related experience:

*He was about fifteen at his first full time job in a cabinet making workshop in Collingwood. He had been at this job for about six months, not liking it much. He found it boring and repetitive and grossly underpaid at \$1.66 an hour. There was quite a lot of pressure for him to stay at this job. In his father's words: 'If you're not going to stay at school then you'll damn well work, if you think you're going to stay at home'. He smoked too much dope. He was disillusioned with the state of the world. School didn't connect with him. This job didn't connect with him. He did not really know what he was doing there or what he wanted to do or that he may even have a choice. He started being late for work, daydreaming rather than sanding the 4000th chair leg with complete attention and enthusiasm. He was there in body and every day less and less in spirit. Eventually the inevitable happened. He was sacked. What a relief. But what about the old man? He told his father there was nothing he did. They just didn't need him any more. His father had already talked to the boss and knew that he was not what you would call the most enthusiastic workman. His father knew about his arriving late and that if he tried harder he'd still have a job. His father started yelling, abusing; 'worthless failure, lazy and useless'. He'd confirmed by his actions what his father had been telling him for years. He didn't want to know anything about where he was or who he was. The boy did not meet the required standard. There was a job to be done. He had failed to do it.*

As Peter read the memory, there was strong emotion in his voice. He began the discussion of his memory by stating that there was a lot about his father that he found very painful and difficult and he felt scared to share it with people.

Tony was immediately struck by Peter's not meeting the criteria he was supposed to meet to be worthwhile in his father's eyes. In both of these memories, the fathers are conveying to their sons that what they feel about a job is irrelevant; it is having the right attitude about the job that is important. As in the first memory though, in spite of Tony's experience that he had no choice, he expressed his agency by turning up for work late, until 'the inevitable happened; he was sacked'.

All of the men in the group easily identified with these two memories as they elicited recollections of a judgmental or angry father. Many men feel that their fathers are disappointed in them. They come to learn, though, that they can never fulfil their fathers' expectations and are unable to gain the approval, respect and acceptance they want from their fathers.

The following memory from Bruce also illustrates a son's failure to live up to his father's expectations:

*Bruce had a request of his father. He was in financial difficulty and needed a small amount of money to tide him over for a couple of weeks. Bruce's father's response was: 'No, I'm not willing to give you that money. I am willing to give you a very large sum of money that you can use towards the purchase of a house.' And Bruce said: 'That's not what I need'.*

Discussing the memory, Bruce said that his father believed that he had betrayed his class by not becoming a professional. He remembered his father saying: *'It sounds to me like you're doing really well in your work with children. What about lecturing in Early Childhood Development Studies?'* Bruce was able to articulate to his father why he valued his work intrinsically but there was this idea that he had failed by not pursuing a professional career. Fathers become disillusioned when sons fail to become the men they envisage.

## VIOLENCE AND FEAR IN FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

Violence and fear of violence are other themes that run through men's stories of their fathers. The following memory is one in which Tony describes an early childhood experience of his father's rage:

*Tony (aged seven) was fighting his little brother in the back yard of his house. He saw his father rushing towards them, obviously to intervene. Dad'll fix him up. Tony clearly thought that he'd been wronged and that his brother was the guilty party in the dispute. His father looked annoyed and flustered as he approached. His father didn't act to plan. Instead of admonishing his brother, his father grabbed him, turned around and picked up a stick from a pile of sticks that was handy and hit him on the backside. Tony was stunned. He wanted to yell out 'It's not fair'. But he didn't. It all happened so quickly.*

In discussing the memory later, Tony said:

*It's something like getting caught up in a rage. It's like getting caught up in a whirlpool. It's like 'What the hell is going on here?' My father's approaching me. He would often be in a rage like this. He was quite volatile at times. He would be quite unpredictable, when it would come out. What*

*I remember mostly was that it just wasn't fair. It was one of quite a few instances of injustice. The main thing I remember was being scared of him, scared it would be like that in the end. When I typed it out on the computer this afternoon, I typed 'It's not fair' in capital letters. I wanted to yell it out.*

Tony's memory conveys his powerful sense of injustice and writing it brought to the surface the feelings associated with it, including the feeling of fear. The memory elicited a painful experience from Harry:

*I can remember my father beating the shit out of my mother in the kitchen and I used to hide under the bed.*

Many boys fear their father's anger and punishment. In Hite's (1994: 335) research, 41 percent of boys report that their father had an explosive temper that they had to watch out for. Furthermore, many of the men interviewed remembered being physically punished by their fathers. Townsend's (1994: 37-38) Australian study demonstrates similar trends and even when there was no physical violence, many men reported being afraid of their fathers.

The following memory from Alan tells a story of a different kind of fear:

*It was Christmas Eve. The twelve year old boy named Alan and his brother Anthony, ten years old, went to work with their father, Bernie. Bernie is a plumber and his current work involves laying sewage pipes for residential properties in a small town about 21 miles from where the boys live. They finished the work they had to do for the day and Bernie and the boys and the labourer went off to the pub. The boys wanted to get home because it was Christmas. And Bernie stayed and drank more and Alan had observed how his father's behaviour had changed and that his father was getting drunk and tired. And he started to get really concerned about driving home. Alan spent that half hour or so terrified in the car as his father veered back and forth across the road, terrified that he wouldn't make it home and terrified that they would hit another car. Each time a car came towards them, his father veered back to the right side of the road. Very luckily they made it home. And he thanked his lucky stars.*

Alan began the discussion of his memory with:

*It was terrifying. A real let down, a real disappointment. Because I think it was the first time I had felt put in a situation by him that was really unsafe and totally out of my control. I really desperately wanted to get home. There was no way I could challenge my father and say you can't drive. You've been drinking too much. It was really at that time that my relationship changed with him and I didn't respect him from that point.*

There was sadness in Alan's voice when he recalled this memory. He reported that he had never confronted his father about the incident but since that time, he has never allowed himself to be put in a similar situation and he has generally tried to extract himself from all situations of

vulnerability. While his survival may have been threatened in that situation as a twelve year old boy, situations of vulnerability he encounters as an adult male are unlikely to be as life threatening.

## OPPRESSION IN FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

After examining each individual memory of our fathers, we then considered the memories as a whole, looking for common patterns and recurring themes. A common theme informing all of the memories was betrayal. Emotional abandonment, violence, fear and pressure to conform to fathers' expectations can all be equated to forms of betrayal. All of the men were disappointed in, or felt betrayed by, their fathers because of the father's lack of power to change the situation. The father is either not listening or demonstrates his inability to change, which is in turn perhaps linked to the son's growing awareness of his own future lack of power. Tony expects his father to solve his problem with his younger brother but the father does not, while in Alan's memory, drunk fathers can do little. The sons are also disappointed in their fathers' unjust and oppressive use of power.

These men's experiences with their fathers are not atypical; they are the ones that together construct the notion of the 'father wound'. By contrast, another way of theorising these memories is to argue that, as boys, the men have been *oppressed* by their fathers. The concept of oppression has not generally been used to characterise boys' relationships with their fathers, but the extent to which they have suffered violence, abuse and rejection at the hands of their fathers may invite us to understand their experiences in these terms.

In his interviews with anti-sexist men, Christian (1994: 189) conceptualises boys' experiences as suffering from the generational dimension of patriarchy. The meaning of patriarchy is 'rule by fathers', which implies that, as well as men dominating women, older men can dominate younger men. The men in his study saw links between their oppression as boys and women's oppression and the perceived similarity in these experiences may provide the potential for dialogue and alliances.

What is significant in the men's reflected memories of their fathers is that framing their experiences as 'oppression' enabled them to identify with women's experiences of men. This is evident in discussions following a number of the memories. For example, after Peter's memory, Harry asked:

*Would it be the lack of fathering that would make feminism that much more important?*

**Peter:** *I think feminism just made sense to me because I had the experience of oppression, basically, his oppression and the all-pervasiveness of it. It was thick and present when he was home. So I think I was quite feminist before I even met a feminist. I think feminism articulated a lot of things for me.*

In discussing his memory of requesting a loan from his father, Bruce saw a connection between his father's

arrogance about wanting him to have a certain attitude towards money, and experiences that his mother had:

*When I'd learnt some stories about the conditions under which she had to raise me, a whole lot of things began to click and I began to have more empathy for my mother and my relationship with her has changed. I've become quite angry with my father and quite sympathetic to my mother.*

Following Tony's memory of feeling unfairly treated by his father, Bruce asked:

*I wonder if there's any connection between that line of feeling and your interest in feminist theory?*

**Tony:** *Yeah, there could be. I always felt I was on the outside of a lot of things. In some ways I have often felt like I wanted to side with victims and getting in touch with everything being unjust and unfair. In some ways, it was like I was on side with my mum in a way because she was also scared of my father.*

Thus, the experiences of sons with their fathers may have parallels with their mother's experiences with the same man. Many boys have the same struggle that women have with men, trying to get them to 'open up' and communicate more. The men in this study had already begun to reframe their experiences with their fathers and this may have contributed to their ability to connect with women's demands for respect and equality and for an end to sexual violence. Such men were more likely to be drawn to feminism because it expressed their concerns about morality and justice.

It is important to acknowledge of course that most boys distance themselves from their mothers. They turn away because they do not want to identify with women's experience of powerlessness. In these cases, masculine identity is reproduced by repressing the feminine. One consequence of separation without attachment is that men are often unable to develop a sense of empathic identity with women (Pease, 1997: 27). Research cited by Lisak (1991: 259) suggests that boys' identification with women is only a problem in a society that emphasises sex differences and values men above women. Pro-feminist men's experiences demonstrate the importance of breaking down the imposition of these rigid sex roles.

## BEYOND THE FATHER-WOUND

In most of the literature on father-son relationships, there is a focus on forgiveness and reconciliation. Biddulph (1994: 22) believes that father hunger is perhaps the most important concept in male psychology and, seeing it as the starting point in men's journey to health, he encourages them to develop respect for their fathers. Similarly, Farmer (1991: 32-34) encourages men to see their fathers as 'wounded' as well and to understand that much of their fathers' remoteness and violence was their means of coping with their wounds. Such an understanding is seen as a first step towards healing the father wound. Blaming one's father is seen as preventing one from moving beyond anger to the hurt and sadness. Bly (1990: 92-122) argues that all fathers, even those who are unsupportive, emotionally remote and alcoholic, are to be forgiven and Tacey (1997: 43) argues that men's dissatisfaction with

their fathers is 'archetypally conditioned' by the era we live in and that 'personal fathers are not to blame'.

For men who feel the loss of their fathers, however, forgiveness and reconciliation may not always be the best way forward. Many men conclude that to love their fathers they must excuse them, but this could require accepting behaviour that is inexcusable. Men may also want to excuse their fathers so that they too can be excused (Arcana, 1983: 181). It may be premature for men to forgive their fathers, if they have not acknowledged their anger and disappointment towards them.

Horsfield (1994: 45–47) argues that the powerful ought to be called to account for the abuse of their power before forgiveness and reconciliation can occur. Thus, in this view, forgiveness is not the means towards recovery but is something that 'may happen at the end of the long hard process of recovery and then only if the conditions of forgiveness have been fulfilled'. Further, a reconciliation between father and son may 'strengthen forms of male bonding that reinforce patriarchal expressions of power' (Hite, 1994: 341).

In some situations, it may be more appropriate to discourage dis-identification with the father and to reject some aspects of his behaviour. Consciously sorting out those lessons from our fathers that reinforce patriarchal manhood from those that encourage justice is a difficult process but an uncritical reconciliation between father and son, which fails to address the father's controlling or abusive behaviour, should be challenged.

Furthermore, I question whether there is some sort of universal need for men to have a particular kind of relationship with their fathers. The presumption underlying most of the work on father absence is the view that a son raised by a mother necessarily lacks something that can only get be acquired from the father. Biddulph (1994: 99–100), for example, claims that 'boys have a biological need for several hours of one to one male contact per day'. In his view, boys cannot learn how to be a man from their mothers, 'no matter how good they are'. While there may be some lessons that men can better teach their sons, I question the assertion that there is a biological need to which only fathers can respond.

Women can also teach boys to become men, as Silverstein and Rashbaum have so persuasively argued (1994). Research demonstrates that boys who are without a father or are closer to their mother are psychologically and emotionally healthier, adhere less to patriarchal stereotypes and are more responsive to change (Hite, 1994: 341–342).

Thus, what I am arguing here is that boys do not need to identify with the father and reject the mother to construct a masculine identity. While it is important to construct new ways of fathering, boys can also build their identity in relation to their mothers.

Widespread cultural changes that result in higher value being placed on women's experiences, and changes in child-rearing practices that break down rigid divisions between men's and women's roles will be required for this to occur on a large scale. Nevertheless, the experiences of profeminist men demonstrate the extent to which change

is possible. Furthermore, critical stocktaking of the kind facilitated by memory-work can help men to reframe their experiences and to reposition themselves in relation to both mothers and fathers.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

### References

- Arcana, J., 1983. *Every Mother's Son: The Role of Mothers in the Making of Men*, London, Women's Press.
- Biddulph, S., 1994. *Manhood*, Sydney, Finch.
- Bly, R., 1990. *Iron John: A Book About Men*, NY, Addison Wesley.
- Brittan, A., 1989. *Masculinity and Power*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- Christian, H., 1994. *The Making of Anti-sexist Men*, London, Routledge.
- Corneau, G., 1991. *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search For Masculine Identity*, Boston, Shambhala.
- Crawford, J., Kippax, S., Onyx, J., Gault, U. and Benton, P., 1992. *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning From Memory*, London, Sage.
- Emihovich, C., Gaier, E. and Cronin, N., 1984. Sex-Role Expectation Changes by Fathers for their Sons, *Sex Roles*, 11, 9–10: 861–868.
- Farmer, S., 1991. *The Wounded Male*, NY, Ballantine.
- Hamilton, M., 1977. *Fathers' Influences on Children*, Chicago, Nelson Hall.
- Haug, F., 1987. *Female Sexualisation: A Collective Work of Memory*, London, Verso.
- Haug, F., 1992. *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory-Work and Politics*, London, Verso.
- Hertzog, E. and Sudia, C., 1971. *Boys in Fatherless Families*, Washington, DC, US Department of Health Education Service.
- Hite, S., 1994. *The Hite Report on the Family: Growing up Under Patriarchy*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Horsfall, J., 1991. *The Presence of the Past: Male Violence in the Family*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.
- Horsfield, P., 1994. The Church, Forgiveness and Reconciliation. In S. Bartley and H. Macdonald, (Eds), *Sexual Assault and Other Forms of Violence Within the Australian Community*, National Resource and Training Seminar, CASA House, Melbourne.
- Lee, J., 1991. *At My Father's Wedding: Reclaiming Our True Masculinity*, NY, Bantam.
- Lisak, D., 1991. Sexual Aggression, Masculinity and Fathers, *Signs: Journal of Women, Culture and Society*, 16, 2: 239–263.
- May, L. and Strikwerda, R., 1992. Fatherhood and Nurture. In L. May and R. Strikwerda, (Eds), *Retinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*, Maryland, Littlefield Adams.
- McLaren, P. and da Silva, T., 1993. Decentering Pedagogy: Critical Literacy, Resistance and the Politics of Memory. In P. McLaren and P. Leonard, (Eds), *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, London, Routledge.
- Mederos, F., 1987. Patriarchy and Male Psychology. Unpublished Manuscript, Montreal.
- Miedzian, M., 1992. Father Hunger: Why Soup Kitchen Fathers are Not Good Enough. In K. Hagen (Ed.), *Women Respond to the Men's Movement*, San Francisco, Harper.
- Nordstrom, B., 1992. How Men Grow Up: Sources of Tradition and Change. Paper presented at the 17th National Conference on Men and Masculinity, Chicago.
- Pease, B., 1997. Honouring Our Mothers, *XY: Men, Sex, Politics*, 7, 1: 26–27.
- Pleck, J., 1987. American Fathering in Historical Perspective. In M. Kimmel (Ed.), *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Newbury Park, Sage.
- Silverstein, O. and Rashbaum, B., 1994. *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, NY, Viking.
- Smith, B., 1995. *Mothers and Sons*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.
- Stoltenberg, J., 1993. *The End of Manhood*, NY, Dutton.
- Tacey, D., 1997. *Remaking Men*, London, Routledge.
- Taubman, S., 1986. Beyond the Bravado: Sex Roles and the Exploitative Male, *Social Work*, 31, 1: 12–17.
- Townsend, H., 1994. *Real Men*, Sydney, HarperCollins.
- Wilson, J., 1990. *Single Fathers*, Melbourne, Sun Books.