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‘A ‘new involved father’ role that is more welcoming of emotional expression and involvement in a child’s life’

‘Often characterised as one replete with much tension and discomfort’

Why the Father Wound Matters: Consequences for Male Mental Health and the Father-Son Relationship

Adult men often report a sense of feeling a father wound when reflecting on their own father-son relationship. Perhaps in part due to a rejection of traditional fathering practices that may have contributed to such wounds, fathers today are increasingly adopting a ‘new involved father’ role that is more welcoming of emotional expression and involvement in a child’s life. This paper argues that adopting this new role may allow men to not only connect with their sons, but also to come to terms with problematic aspects of their own father-son relationship. In this way, fathering a son may allow men to alter aspects of their self. Limitations and future directions for the father wound construct are also discussed. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGE:

- This paper offers a critical review and analysis of the father wound concept and its larger clinical and social developmental significance for males.
- Traditionally, many adult men report a sense of loss or grief when considering their own father-son relationship.
- Becoming a father, particularly to a son, may allow men to come to terms with earlier father-son wounds to the betterment of these aforesaid fathers and their sons.

KEY WORDS: father wound; father roles; fathering; father-son relationship

From at least the writings of Sigmund Freud (1933), the father-son relationship has often been characterised as one replete with much tension and discomfort. Contemporary academic literature on the nature of the father-son relationship largely portrays the father as critical to how the son sees himself as an emerging adult (e.g. Mormon and Floyd, 2006). The struggles that men often face due to a physically or emotionally absent father have also been explored in popular culture, such as in *The Star Wars* movie series (Bettis and Sternod, 2009).

Many men report feeling wounded in reflecting on their relationship with their father (Vogt and SIRRIDGE, 1991). Clinician Michael J. Diamond (2007) conceptualises the father wound as an ‘internalized, unresolved conflict

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between father and son' (p. 161). Levant (1996) even goes as far as to suggest that father wounds are so pervasive that they are a 'normative developmental trauma' (p. 263). He adds that:

'The difficult father-son relationship leaves a deep impression on the man...which is manifested in myriad direct and disguised forms of desperately seeking some contact, some closeness with one's father (or his surrogate), or in being furious at him for his failures. Many men are burdened with feelings that they never knew their fathers, nor how their fathers felt as men, nor if their fathers even liked them, nor if their fathers ever really approved of them' (p. 263)

While it is still unclear if the father wound truly represents a universally shared experience amongst men, many scholars have focused on this theme when examining the core motivations behind the men's movement. Bly's (1990) book *Iron John* is often viewed as a critical guide to the men's movement: In his book, Bly discusses how American culture has traditionally encouraged a sense of detachment between fathers and sons – to the detriment of both. Magnuson (2008) argues that a significant motivation of the men's movement is to underscore and correct the damage done to men by their own absent or dysfunctional fathers. In their development of an instrument designed to assess men's spiritual and general motivational factors, Castellini *et al.* (2005) found that male bonding and contending with troublesome father-son relationships are critical. In fact, they suggest that male bonding may even occur due to a widespread desire to overcome these wounds:

'Additional factors indicate a sense of isolation and existential loneliness...which may precede men turning to other men. Paralleling men's cry of abandonment from their own fathers, a distinct factor seeks to address Father-Son Relationships. The emptiness within men can be conceptualized as a lack of shared energy that can be trusted and relied upon, passing from father to son. Men may be seeking not only a closeness with their own fathers, but the generation of bonds with their own sons which allows them to fulfill roles of guidance and care taking in the male tradition' (p. 53)

Men also report that these wounds are aggravated during pivotal life experiences and transitions such as marriage and fatherhood (e.g. Balcom, 2002; Corneau, 1991; Tracey *et al.*, 1996). There are even popular press books that attempt to counsel first-time fathers about the possibility and consequences of such a wound by noting:

'Many men who are about to become fathers feel they're on their own. Their own fathers may have been physically or emotionally absent, causing what family experts call a "father wound." If you've suffered abuse, neglect, or absence, then your father wound is a deep and painful one' (Pettit and Pettit, 2002, p. 7)

Surprisingly though, there is relatively little research on the precise question of how many adult men feel that their relationship with their father is in need of healing and, if so, how to achieve such healing. One of the few exceptions is an intriguing qualitative study by Katz (2002) who studied six pairs of fathers and their adult sons. Katz (2002) offers a reason why research is lacking in this area by noting the extremely low subject response rate in his own study 'due to the sensitive nature of the topic' (p. 16) coupled with his own personal reflections regarding the common themes of 'grief and horror' that were in these accounts. The results from Katz's (2002) investigation are subject to interpretation given the low response rate: Specifically, one could raise reasonable questions

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regarding both the transferability of the results as well as a selection bias. However, this study is consistent with the theme that the father-son wound – who may be already reluctant to discuss emotional matters – may be especially unwilling to even approach this potentially traumatic issue.

Where the Father Wound Comes From and Its Relevance to Mental Health

It appears that strongly adhering to the traditional masculine role of largely focusing on work and remaining emotionally detached is hurting both fathers and sons. The adoption of such a rigid, stereotypic masculine role may be at the core of why the self-perceived father wound occurs (e.g. Kimmel, 2007). Floyd (2006) contends that the father-son relationship may be the single most significant male-male relationship in a man’s life cycle. And yet, in an attempt to teach expectations about socially proscribed masculine roles, men often encourage emotional distancing between father and son. In his book *Fatherless Sons*, clinician Jonathan Diamond (2006) details the profound grief that many men feel (even if their father is physically alive) over the nature of their relationship with their father.

There is much evidence to showcase the negative effects of absent fathers on men and society (more generally): These men tend to have low self-esteem, struggle to establish intimate relationships and may be at greater risk of engaging in antisocial or violent behaviour (e.g. Balcom, 2002; Dishion *et al.*, 2004; Pope, 2001). For boys and men alike, the theme of understanding one’s masculine identity is often most prominent when trying to understand the consequences of a father’s literal or symbolic absence (e.g. Blundell, 2002). Palkovitz (2002) perhaps best summarises these effects by noting that:

‘Fathers who are abusive, substance dependent, or unpredictably vacillating between warmth and harshness, and those who are consistently detached or absent, create developmental deficits for their children to overcome’ (p. 5)

A related concept – though not necessarily identical to the father wound construct – has also been explored with respect to the study of ‘father hunger’. Herzog (1981, 1988, 2001, 2009) was one of the first scholars to discuss the deep-seated angst and dysfunction experienced by boys and men whose fathers were absent in their lives. Such father hunger can occur in the absence of both physical and emotional ties and is often transmitted across generations (e.g. Erickson, 1996). Perrin *et al.* (2009) offer one of the few empirical investigations of the father hunger construct, which they defined as ‘the emotional and psychological longing that a person has for a father who has been physically, emotionally, or psychologically distant in the person’s life’ (p. 315). Their exploratory factor analysis yielded an 11-item scale with such representative items as: ‘I wasn’t sure what my father thought of me’, ‘My father never thought I was good enough’ and ‘My father was not good at showing his affection to me (hugs, kisses)’. This scale represents a very solid advance in offering a relatively sound instrument that is designed ‘to understand and facilitate the fathering skills that facilitate healthy child development’ (p. 325).

In assessing some of the potential shortcomings of their scale, Perrin and colleagues (2009) offered these limitations of their measure: That is, more than two thirds of their samples were female, subjects may not have necessarily

focused on one's biological father, social desirability concerns may have been present and questions regarding how 'father hunger differs from constructs such as depression or general negative affect' (p. 324). All of these factors – particularly the latter – may help illuminate the subtle conceptual difference between the father hunger and father wound concepts. Father hunger appears to be the theoretical opposite of the father presence construct where one believes that one's father has had a consistent and positive influence on one's life (Krampe, 2009). Though the father wound may include a sense of absence of one's father, it may also indicate a deeper psychic injury: Frankly, it can be likened to a physical wound that is in need of healing. While future research needs to further flesh out these potential differences, the father hunger construct provides additional evidence regarding the potentially detrimental effects of having a physically or emotionally unavailable father.

The Father Wound and Child Abuse

The importance of the father wound concept is further amplified by understanding its potential linkages to psychological child abuse. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) generally views child abuse, including psychological abuse, as an act of commission whereas child neglect, including emotional neglect, is an act of omission where there is a failure to meet key needs of the child; it is also noted that these acts may not necessarily be undertaken in order to directly harm the child. The CDC further adds that there are many ways by which a caregiver may cause a child to experience psychological abuse including:

'Behaving in a manner that is harmful, potentially harmful, or insensitive to the child's developmental needs. . . [and] Behaving in a manner that can potentially damage the child psychologically or emotionally' (Leeb *et al.*, 2008, p. 69)

If we are to accept this operational definition, then the father wound – or behaviours that would lead a male to ultimately feel such a wound – should be viewed as a potential form of psychological abuse.

Pleck (1995) underscores this point by arguing that the father wound is synonymous with 'profound distance, pain, and sadness about [men's] relationship to their own fathers' (p. 214) and reflects a sense of wounding, grief and loss amongst fathers and sons. Pleck (1995) suggests that traditional expectations of the 'father as psychologically absent and distant breadwinner' (p. 217) have allowed for the destructive pattern of alienation and angst that can be experienced between father and son. Part of his analysis includes some of his own reflections and those of others in regards to father-son relationships. For instance, Pleck (1995) quotes a friend who plaintively remarked: 'If my father saw a dog lying on the sidewalk bleeding, he would stop to do something. But his own son, he would step over' (p. 220). While the experience of becoming a father may reawaken some of these earlier wounds, Pleck (1995) does add a hopeful note that the experience of becoming a father may allow men to 'see that you cannot heal your father, but you can let your child help you to heal yourself' (p. 223).

Australian psychologist Steve Biddulph (2004) furthers many of these themes in his influential analysis of the struggles of male psychosocial

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development. Biddulph (2004) contends that it is the atypical adult man who views his father as a true ‘friend’ (p. 42) and source of emotional support. Rather, he posits that most men either have no relationship with their father, a strained or difficult one, or a relationship that is kept ‘mostly out of duty’ (p. 41). Similar to Pleck’s (1995) examination, Biddulph (2004) suggests that it is critical for men to understand and come to terms with their own fathers’ limitations and foibles; likewise, today’s fathers may want to strike a different tone with their own children (and sons, in particular) because their own earlier wounds are still quite pervasive in the male experience.

The father wound is particularly noteworthy in that there may be many paths by which a man may experience it. Some men may have such a wound due to literal abandonment whereas others may have experienced psychological abandonment, rejection or insensitivity. Some men may have experienced clear episodes of physical abuse at the hands of their fathers whereas others may have endured more subtle forms of psychological alienation. Even more telling is that a father may have been, objectively speaking, a provider to his son and encouraged stereotypic behaviours associated with the male role (e.g. showing emotional strength and assertion, encouraging the value of work) and yet his son may report such a father wound as well. Likewise, it is not entirely clear that a given male, when faced with *any* of the above conditions, would necessarily label their experience as synonymous with a father wound. Future research needs to further explore these possibilities.

In recent decades, developmental researchers have stressed that child abuse and maltreatment are best understood with an ecological approach (e.g. Belsky, 1980; Sidebotham, 2001). Understanding how the father wound can develop is consistent with the four interactive layers of this perspective. For instance, the personal dynamics and reflections that an individual father has in regard to his own father impact the ontogenic development of the child. A critical theme of this paper is that, in regards to the father-son relationship, behaviours which may have once been accepted by mothers, fathers and society (e.g. keeping psychological distance) may no longer be widely supported: This has much relevance for how we understand the child’s microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem where immediate family, social and larger societal influences, respectively, impact how the father wound may be viewed – and how these particular systems may be changing in regards to normative expectations for fatherhood.

If we are to view the father wound as a potential form of child abuse, there are two potential concerns we should consider. It is estimated that overt physical and sexual abuse is grossly underreported worldwide (e.g. Gilbert *et al.*, 2009). Further, there is much variation in how various jurisdictions legally define child abuse and how to report it (e.g. Hornor, 2005). This aforementioned point drew international attention in the aftermath of revelations that a former high-profile Pennsylvania State University football coach, Jerry Sandusky, was charged with multiple acts of sexual abuse against minor boys in November 2011: Even though there may have been a witness to at least one of the alleged acts, Pennsylvania law did not legally compel witnesses to abuse to report it directly to law enforcement (Associated Press, 2011). The larger issue here is that if we often struggle to correctly identify and report serious acts of more overt physical and sexual abuse, then it bears to reason that recognising a more subtle form of potential psychological abuse may prove to be even more challenging.

The second concern pertains to the actual memories associated with any self-reports of a father wound. The father wound appears to have a social developmental quality to it in that many men tend to report its presence well into adulthood. If we are to view such memories as potentially abusive ones, then we must necessarily consider the lengthy and robust literature about the accuracy of supposedly repressed and recovered memories about other forms of abuse (e.g. Loftus and Davis, 2006). Much of this literature though has focused on memories of childhood sexual abuse and cautions against unduly probing and making suggestions to individuals about their memories due to the concern that patently false memories of abuse could be created (e.g. Bremner *et al.*, 2000; Loftus, 1993) or that individuals remembering such abuse could be prone to false memories particularly when suggested by others (e.g. Geraerts *et al.*, 2009). Presumably, such questions could be raised in regards to the examination of memories associated with the father wound. More generally, from both a clinical and ethical standpoint, there is also the question of how – or even whether – to assess the presence of a father wound if it is psychologically traumatic as some contend it may be.

The Changing Role of Fatherhood: Why This May Help to Heal the Father-Son Wound

Morman and Floyd (2002) argue that the culture of the detached authoritarian father is giving way to a role of an involved, nurturing father. With this changing role, men may feel more at ease to become more nurturing fathers. Today's American father is now actually encouraged to be connected to the lives of his children (e.g. Singleton and Maher, 2004). Given that fathers and sons, in particular, have historically had difficulties in emotional connectedness, this point gives hope that many of today's sons will not grow up reporting a father wound. Frankly, one could argue that this shift is long overdue.

Social role theory has had a long and influential history in the field of psychology; this theory has largely tried to explain the presence of sex and gender differences as a function of personal characteristics that men and women should possess in order to fulfil certain societal roles (e.g. Eagly, 1997). Consistent with this perspective, psychological androgyny has long been associated with many great psychological benefits, including successful coping skills, for men and women alike (e.g. Cheng, 2005). As such, successful fathering should represent this androgynous blend of positive masculine and feminine qualities (Garbarino, 2000).

Connell (1995, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) has greatly advanced our understanding of gender by discussing the role and function of hegemonic masculinity. In brief, this construct suggests that traditional masculinity associated with power and strength is that which is most valued in men; another essential aspect of this view is the rejection of behaviours and beliefs (most commonly associated with women and femininity) that do not further this view. Hegemonic masculinity assumes that, historically, men strive to assert a sense of dominance over women (in general) and other men who do not uphold values consistent with maintaining a sense of emotional detachment or competition (Bird, 1996) and being physically imposing (e.g.

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‘Fathers may also reflect on their own experience and role as a son’

Iacuone, 2005). Alcohol consumption, coarse fraternal interactions and the sexualisation of women and rejection of gay men are also believed to be integral to the tradition of imposing this hierarchy of patriarchal power (e.g. Clayton and Humberstone, 2006). Some have argued that there can be multiple hegemonic masculinities in order to reflect differing societal or cultural norms about masculinity (e.g. Beasley, 2008; Hearn, 2004). Regardless, there is an assumption that behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity are present because they allow men to maintain a sense of stature and prominence in their lives and careers (e.g. Hodges and Budig, 2010).

Hegemonic masculinity is also viewed as having many maladaptive aspects that cause men to try to live up to unrealistic ideals (e.g. Watts, 2010). While it is possible for men, including fathers, to resist the influence of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Almqvist, 2008), it still significantly shapes how men approach parenting (e.g. Wall and Arnold, 2007). For instance, Kane (2006) suggests that heterosexual fathers are especially likely to raise their sons in such a way that is consistent with traditional hegemonic masculinity. A different line of research notes that stay-at-home fathers are often treated with stigma and negative evaluations from others because such behaviour is not consistent with hegemonic masculine ideals (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005; Doucet, 2004). However, Johansson and Klinth (2008) argue that ‘the hegemonic structure is changing’ (p. 58) such that men should be expected to actively engage in childcare just as they would in regards to other traditionally masculine ideals. Consistent with this point, de Visser (2009) argues that young men may try to carve an alternative route to masculinity that embraces manhood without some of the unhealthy values of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. constricted emotionality). It remains to be seen if men will continue to reject traditional expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity, at least in regards to fatherhood and parenting.

Regardless of which approach we utilise to understand the construction of gender, it should be clear that by allowing men to more freely express emotion, men will have greater choices in how they lead their lives and view their mental health. Fathers not only may have the opportunity to bond with their children but also to heal earlier wounds dating back to their own father-son relationships. And, in doing so, men may feel more comfortable to openly discuss and cope with their own earlier father wounds.

Rethinking of One’s Roles as Father and Son

The field of psychology has long held the importance of understanding how individuals come to see themselves as social beings (e.g. Dweck, 1999). Social roles and gender influences have long been part of the self-concept (e.g. Bem, 1993; Schlenker, 1985). As such, scholars should necessarily be concerned with the issue of how men come to understand aspects of themselves through *both* their roles as a father *and* as a son and how this impacts aspects of male health. In understanding how to relate to their sons, naturally, fathers may also reflect on their own experience and role as a son.

In general, fatherhood can allow men to make sense of their own changing life course (e.g. Palkovitz, 1996, 2004). Most men report that becoming a father is the single most important shaper of their lives and can engender them

to be more giving, less self-centred and endorsing themes of generativity (Palkovitz *et al.*, 2001). Generative fathering can provide great benefits to both fathers and sons (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Dollahite and Hawkins, 1998). Fatherhood may be especially redemptive to men who have faced serious life problems such as overcoming substance abuse and interpersonal problems (e.g. Roy and Lucas, 2006) or even incarceration (e.g. Walker, 2010).

However, very little scholarship has specifically examined how the experience of raising a son might allow fathers to come to terms with earlier father-son wounds. A notable exception comes from the work of clinician Michael J. Diamond (2007) whose book *My Father Before Me: How Fathers and Sons Influence Each Other Throughout Their Lives* details how the experience of fathering a son can allow men to find peace in their relationship with their own father. Diamond (2007) suggests that in raising a son, fathers can gain a sense of empathy for their own fathers' past behaviours and decisions; in doing so, men should appreciate that their fathers' actions were generally 'good enough' though not perfect. This awareness might help men to understand their own past and father-son relationship by no longer feeling that their father is necessary to validate their own personal sense of self-worth. Diamond (2007) suggests that this realisation may not have even been fully possible without first becoming a father to a son.

The hope here is that once men come to terms with their own father-son wounds, these men will not perpetuate them onto their children (e.g. Magnuson, 2008). In a presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Graham (1992) stated that: 'Although father and son seem made for contention, they derive their highest sense of pride from one another' (p. 840). He further adds that men often feel conflicting emotions in the rearing of their children: On the one hand, men want to foster self-reliance, but they also yearn for closeness and to let their children know that they care for them. Ultimately, allowing for greater expression and flexibility of men's emotional lives may allow fathers to feel more comfortable in expressing their feelings toward their sons. Perhaps, in doing so, this may allow for a means of altering aspects of the self by cracking 'the Boy Code' where men and boys alike can feel more comfortable at expressing emotions or nurturing behaviour as warranted (e.g. Pollack, 1998).

Potential Limitations and Caveats of the Father Wound

Many well-established academic fields such as social development (e.g. Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999), behavioural genetics (e.g. Plomin *et al.*, 1994) and evolutionary psychology (e.g. Buss, 2007) have questioned the true relevance of fatherhood to some extent. Indeed, there have been select provocative studies that have seriously questioned whether fathers are necessary to a child's wellbeing and development (e.g. Paul, 2010). For instance, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) offer evidence that psychological and social wellbeing may be higher among children raised by single mothers rather than single fathers. In this vein, Pease (2000) offers some caution on the inherent logic of the father wound concept by noting:

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'Select provocative studies that have seriously questioned whether fathers are necessary to a child's wellbeing and development'

‘The larger emotional consequences of a son feeling as though his father did not have more nurturing or supportive responses and reactions’

‘The material conditions of his life, living at a particular point in history, within a class, and doing the best he could’

‘Obama’s case illustrates how loving caregivers – even in the absence of one’s biological father – can facilitate healthy psychosocial development’

‘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 be acquired from the father’ (p. 15)

Pease’s (2000) aforementioned points are well-taken in that there should not be an *a priori* assumption that all men will have a certain type of relationship with their fathers that will be steeped in conflict. However, Levinson and colleagues’ (1978) influential analysis of the male adult lifespan course does suggest that a man generally is ‘encouraged to seek his own way rather than to literally follow in his father’s footsteps’ (p. 76). Moreover, as we have considered, mothers certainly can help their sons with general life and emotional needs – perhaps even better than fathers at times (e.g. Morman and Floyd, 2006). However, this logic should not negate either the variety of theoretical reasons why fathers should and do matter in their children’s lives (e.g. Pleck, 2007) or the larger emotional consequences of a son feeling as though his father did not have more nurturing or supportive responses and reactions.

Pease’s (2000) analysis of the father wound concept is also contradictory and questionable in certain respects. Pease (2000) forms many of his conclusions on interviews he conducted with a convenience sample of 11 profeminist men who held collaborative group meetings with the author over the span of many months. Even though Pease (2000) seems to discount a more universally shared father wound, these men recounted troubling themes in their father-son relationships such as difficult patriarchal expectations, violence and fear, and oppression. Moreover, Pease (2000) states that ‘forgiveness and reconciliation may not always be the best way forward’ for ‘men who feel the loss of their fathers’ (p. 15). Ironically, Pease (2000) offers some accounts of men who did forgive their fathers even if they did not feel that their father was completely supportive. One of his subjects, Michael, was increasingly distraught over his father’s seeming indifference to his work-related concerns; this indifference also made Michael feel that he could not confide and discuss his own sexual identity concerns with his father, which brought about additional personal distress. However, it is later noted that Michael ‘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’ (p. 12). This account, which seems to contradict one of Pease’s (2000) points about forgiving one’s father, is consistent with a larger literature that highlights the many benefits of forgiveness (e.g. Wallace *et al.*, 2008).

It is fair to say that even if a man has a father wound, it should not necessarily be presumed that a man cannot achieve great success and life satisfaction. The prominent autobiography *Dreams From My Father* from Barack Obama (2004), the first African-American US President, offers a powerful example of a man who may have endured the ill and long-lasting effects of having an absent father (or otherwise poor father-son relationship) and yet still be able to flourish in life. In his book, Obama talks extensively about the great love and nurturance given to him from his mother and his maternal grandparents. Indeed, Obama’s case illustrates how loving caregivers – even in the absence of one’s biological father – can facilitate healthy psychosocial development of children. This case also highlights that the father-son relationship is greatly

influenced by other family and social relationships (e.g. Lamb and Lewis, 2010; Magnuson, 2008). Accordingly, a father wound may be moderated and shaped through these and other social influences.

But still, a father wound can and should be viewed as just that: a wound. Physical wounds can heal though scars may remain. Psychic wounds too may heal, but ultimately be viewed as personal losses that have reshaped our personal sense of self and identity (e.g. Harvey and Miller, 1998). Returning to the analysis of President Obama, consider this point from Selig (2009):

‘It took nearly 460 pages in *Dreams From My Father* (2004) to explore the father wound, and one senses after reading it and some of his subsequent speeches that he is still working through it, though it has been 46 years since his father left him. Through the energy of his wound, Obama is dedicated to showing us what it is like to be a good father, schooling the country in fatherhood, modeling for us that even though a man is busy with important work, he can still take the time to help his children get ready for their first day in a new school and to attend a parent teacher conference or an occasional soccer game. The Commander-In-Chief is also the Father-In-Chief, a father who is modeling for us a deep respect for partnership with a woman who is clearly his lover as well as his wife and the mother of his beloved little women. The iconic images of him with his wife and his daughters are more imprinted in my psyche so far than any images of him with cabinet members or commanders of state, and this searing of images of a new kind of fatherhood may be one of his biggest legacies, all stemming from the vow that he made on behalf of his wounded child to be a good father’ (p. 12)

The larger point here is that a father wound does not necessarily have to be a driving force of negativity in a man’s life. As Obama’s account suggests, it can have a positive motivational influence on the lives of men and those around them. Future research needs to consider why and how a man might pursue either of these different life courses when evaluating the net effects of his father wound.

Future Directions: Suggestions for Research

The topic of the father-son wound and how to remedy it represents an area in great need of further research. First, it needs to be more clearly established how prevalent this wound truly is found amongst men and the degree it may be impacting male biopsychosocial functioning.

Much of the literature, to date, largely implies that most men were not raised with the ‘new involved father’ of today (e.g. Marks and Palkovitz, 2004). Accordingly, should we presume that men who did not have this fathering style are more likely to experience this wound? Or, is it an inevitable reality of male social development for men to have serious doubts or misgivings about their relationships with their fathers? Answering these questions can be extremely challenging given that men are generally reluctant to openly address their personal feelings – especially about a particularly emotionally sensitive issue such as this.

Despite some research that proffers that the qualitative distinctions between the four dyad parent–child relationships (i.e. father-son, mother-son, father-daughter and mother-daughter) are virtually non-existent (e.g. Russell and Saebel, 1997), the scholarship on the consequences of fatherhood for both father and son continues to develop. Lamb (2010) asserts that the presence

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‘The scholarship on the consequences of fatherhood for both father and son continues to develop’

‘Could a non-father engage in a symbolic father role, such as working with youth, and, in doing so, address a father wound?’

‘There is much potential benefit for male mental health for those who work to reconcile these earlier wounds with their fathers’

of parental characteristics such as warmth, nurturance and closeness – which can be found in both mothers and fathers – is of greatest importance to a child’s wellbeing; gender characteristics, such as the masculinity of a father, have little to no effect on child adjustment. However, much more work needs to focus on the specific processes by which nurturing a son may allow men to reflect on their own past experiences with their fathers. Given that men increasingly are taking a more involved and nurturing interest in fatherhood, this issue is worthy of increased attention. Another related question might be whether the experience of raising a daughter allows for such reflection as well. More generally, we need to address whether it is necessary to become a father in order to overcome a father wound. If not, how do fathers versus non-fathers view aspects of their own father-son relationship? For instance, could a non-father engage in a symbolic father role, such as working with youth, and, in doing so, address a father wound?

While it is clear that this topic has profound relevance for men’s lives and men’s studies, this is an issue that should also have great implications for women’s lives too. Obviously, women who are concerned with the wellbeing of significant others who are male may be interested in this issue. But, there are other noteworthy implications that this topic has for women. The influence of mothers on the raising of children has been primarily emphasised by society and mainstream academic thought alike. By introducing the importance of fathers, some unfair burdens and pressures may be removed from mothers and women (e.g. Carr, 2004). It is also significant that confronting one’s father wound may force men to examine and tend to difficult emotions. In doing so, there is an implicit realisation that it is critical to engage in behaviour that has traditionally been viewed as more aligned with femininity (e.g. identify and discuss feelings) as a means of coping with this uniquely male issue. Perhaps a positive consequence of contending with an earlier father wound is that men may be less likely to experience the ill effects of male gender role conflict such as sexism and restricted emotionality (e.g. Wester, 2008).

Fundamentally, the issue of how men may be able to come to terms with their earlier wounds once they are fathers requires men to examine, question and possibly modify aspects of the self – including, most notably, social and gender roles. If the consequences of a father wound are as traumatic as the limited academic literature would suggest it might be, there is much value for male mental health in working to remedy this wound. There is a rich research tradition that stresses the role and importance of disclosure of past trauma for one’s physical and psychological health (e.g. Pennebaker, 1997). As such, there is much potential benefit for male mental health for those who work to reconcile these earlier wounds with their fathers (e.g. Katz, 2002). Further analysis of the developmental impact of the father wound may also extend our understanding of psychological child abuse as well.

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