

Contemporary Fathering by Brid Featherstone

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The purpose of this text is to locate fathering within a wide social and historical context, with a view to enabling discussion of contemporary issues relating to fatherhood: some of which are rarely addressed in practice, but are considered highly relevant to the study of fathers today. As noted by the author, this book emerges from a contemporary climate within which there has been increasing interest, from a range of fields, in fathers and fatherhood. Indeed, by the author's own admission, this text would not have been considered relevant to practitioners twenty years ago. Featherstone suggests its relevance today, is born from "a period of profound changes in relationships between men, women and children and attempts by governments to adapt to these changes" (p193). With emerging discourses of the new and 'involved' father, fathering today is not as it used to be. Throughout the book Featherstone provides detailed description and evaluation of the changes that have contributed to "Contemporary Fatherhood" and the implications these may have for families today.

Featherstone begins the book by introducing and discussing the contemporary social and political context in which men father today and by outlining the particular interdisciplinary, feminist approach that informs the text. She makes a point of recognising that changes in demographics, such as the increase in divorce rates, alongside individual differences between men, will make for a significant diversity in the situations in which men can, and do, father. This diversity, for Featherstone, is something that is too often ignored in policy and practice and is something she requests that we attend to throughout the text. Following the introduction, chapter two discusses these contemporary contexts in more depth by exploring men's situations in workplace and their participation in the home in relation to fathering. Chapter three goes on to explore historical debates around fathering and retraces historical 'images' of the father, eventually leaving us with the idea that the "distant breadwinner" model, which was once dominant, is now being challenged more than ever before by women's movement into the paid workforce. This leads us to question why families need fathers, and this is something the author explores in the following two chapters with discussions of psychoanalytic and psychological theories on fatherhood. Chapter six then deals with developments in sociological theory and research on fathers, which, as a discipline, attends to the wider social and cultural issues surrounding fatherhood that psychology and psychoanalysis often neglect. It seems appropriate to note here that one of Featherstone's main aims for this book was to "bring together in one book voices from disciplines that do not always speak to one another" (p 193) and while the author describes eloquently the contribution that these three different, and often competing, theoretical approaches have made to the study of fatherhood, she additionally directs us to, and requests that we take note of those instances where those theories converge: an approach that is becoming increasingly popular and is often in the realm of critical psychology (see Fox et al, 2009).

Moving on from theory slightly, chapter seven deals with what the author deems "one of the most visible and controversial aspects of fathering today" – father's rights groups, and the reactions these have prompted from feminists. Chapter eight gives an overview of changes in policy relating to families and, in particular, discusses the impact New Labour has made on contemporary fatherhood by introducing father friendly

policies with an aim to encourage father involvement. This was felt particularly necessary following the continued influx of women into the paid work force and the consequent decline of the 'father as breadwinner' model. Such policies included the introduction of statutory paternity pay, policies on flexible working (yet as Featherstone points out these tend to be more geared toward women than men) and the widespread encouragement of engaging fathers across the board in health and social care settings. The introduction of child support legislation has also financially tied fathers to children, forcing them to take up their responsibilities as parents irrespective of the situation. Chapters nine and ten go on to explore practice issues and evaluate the practical application of policies to involve fathers.

This ambitious book provides an overview of contemporary fatherhood that is at once incredibly descriptive and commendably critical. Featherstone recognises the importance of encouraging 'involved' fatherhood yet at the same time critiques its meaning and practical application. Aligning herself in approach to Doucet (2006), while the author empathises with the limitation of some policies and efforts to involve fathers in a system which can be seen viewed as favouring mothers, she maintains that we cannot direct our focus away from mothers completely as we are then at risk of negating or undermining all the hard care work women have performed up until now. Furthermore, Featherstone feels it important to question the taken-for-granted assumption that involved fatherhood will lead to positive outcomes for the child. She recognises that men want to be involved fathers but suggests that we cannot ignore those cases in which a fathers pledge for involvement and equality, for example in terms of access after separation or divorce, could partially be motivated by the desire to undermine and exert power over women outside of the home. Featherstone highlights domestic violence as a case in point.

In this way Featherstone takes issue with a 'one size fits all' policy towards fathering in which there is a tendency "to impose a father on every arrangement" (p 149). In cases such as these the pursuit for gender equality is undermined. Instead, she argues for a specific focus on relationships between the mother, father and child alongside recognition of the diversity of situations in which men father today.

This is an incredibly informative and thought-provoking book, which discusses a huge body of current literature and opinion on fatherhood (much more than I can do justice to in this short review). However in discussing and evaluating varying, and often competing, opinions, perspectives and research, Featherstone leaves a number of questions unanswered – a limitation she acknowledges. Although it is arguable providing a critical account of the evidence is the best we can achieve if we align ourselves with Featherstone and other scholars that fatherhood as an institution is undergoing profound changes (e.g. Sunderland, 2006).

Coming from a background in social work, Featherstone draws highly upon her real life experience in engaging with fathers and their families, which has clear benefits for the text in terms of discussing issues around practical application. In making references to these practical applications, as well as discussing and evaluating theory and research throughout, she ensures that the book is highly relevant and would be of great interest to both practitioners and researchers alike.

References:

Doucet, A. (2006) *Do men mother?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Fox, D., Prilleltensky, I. and Austin, S., eds (2009) *Critical Psychology*. 2nd ed. London: Sage

Sunderland, J. (2006) 'Parenting' or 'mothering'? The case of modern childcare magazines. *Discourse and Society*, 17: 503-527.