

# Mythologizing Fatherhood

**Ralph LaRossa, Ph.D.**

<https://www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/focus/fatherhood/mythologizing-fatherhood>

\* \* \*

Mythologies matter. To believe something is true, when it is not, can have significant consequences. We know this. As educators, we spend a good part of our professional lives talking and writing about mythologies, and--if we feel it is important to do so--trying to dispel them.

As someone who researches the history of fatherhood, I have committed a fair amount of time and energy to thinking about yesterday's dads and the mythologies that often are crafted about them. With each new project, I learn a bit more. With each new project, I become more keenly aware of both the differing and the distorted views of the men (and women) who came before.

In an earlier project, I examined the culture and conduct of fatherhood from the early 1900s to the beginning of the Second World War. In a current project, I am studying fatherhood in the 1950s and am trying to get a sense of how involved fathers were with their kids back then. The work has been a journey of sorts for me, because I was a youngster in the 1950s, and am part of the cultural and behavioral fabric I now endeavor to understand.

The curious thing about fathers in the 1950s is that these men continue to grab people's attention, especially when it comes to fatherhood. Fathers in the 1950s often are used as the benchmark against which to measure fathers today.

Much of what I am finding, as it turns out, does not square with what I once thought was true; nor does it mesh neatly with the standard historical references on the era. I also have come to realize more than I did before how often fathers in the 1950s are portrayed in stereotypical terms. Though there are exceptions, fathers in the 1950s routinely are depicted as men who had virtually no meaningful contact with their children. Consider, for example, the following accounts:

When men gather to discuss common concerns, they return insistently to the emotional abyss so many feel separates them from their male parents. "Father hunger" is what some call this feeling. Much attention is currently being paid to the topic of preoccupied fathers and neglected sons. One man spoke for many when he said of his childhood: "My father would come home, tired, he gave it all at the office. He had nothing left at home (Ralph Keyes [ed.], *Sons on Fathers*, 1992).

What does it mean to be a father? Men of our parents' generation gave this question little serious consideration. . . . No matter what their background, it seems that fathers of the 50s and 60s were away for so many hours during the day that their presence around the house was experienced as a treat, more like a favorite uncle coming to visit than an ongoing participation . . . . Dad was away at work too often for us to be able to talk with him about everyday life (Jonathan W. Gould and Robert E. Gunther, *Reinventing Fatherhood*, 1993).

My father's generation often said, sadly, they just didn't have a clue how to be a father. They didn't know how to hug, to be there, even to talk because their fathers never did it with them (Nancy Evans, *Family Life*, 1994).

The men of my father's generation didn't consciously consider that they were missing anything by being less than present in the lives of their children (Travis Grant, *About.com*, 2000).

Dads used to come home from work, read the paper in silence and speak to children only when they were prepared to talk about subjects like sports, internal-combustion engines, the military and geopolitics (Douglas Brown, *Denver Post*, 2006).

Do these statements qualify as myths? What actually is a myth? The anthropologist Bradd Shore, whose book, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (1996), provides a detailed description of the social nature of people's thought, offers an interesting take on the subject. He refers to myths as paradoxical narratives. "Myths are not simply lies," he says "and they are also not simply truths. Myths are special kinds of stories, stories which always frame something that is arguably true along with something that is arguably not true. It's a particular mix of fact and fiction."

How can this definition of myths be applied to the stories being told about fatherhood in the 1950s? First, we would acknowledge that there is some truth to the narratives. That truth may include references to fathers who commuted between home and work and were available to their children on weekdays primarily in the early morning or early evening (assuming their work hours were during the day). The first two narratives include this element. Another truth may be that the particular person telling the story did indeed have a father who tended to ignore him or her. Why, without hesitation, would we doubt the son who reported that his father was too exhausted at the end of the day to "give" at home? There were--and are--any number of fathers (and mothers) who work long and arduous hours, sometimes at two or three jobs, and who feel worn out after their shifts.

And the fiction? Well, the fiction comes in when the narrators employ hyperbole and overgeneralization--often for dramatic effect--to condemn an entire generation of fathers. Lost in the naive stories about fathers in the 1950s is the fact that fatherhood is plural and multifaceted. Yesterday's dads were not a monolithic entity (any more than today's fathers are), but a mosaic with significant differences among them, based on individual personality as well as class, race, ethnicity, age, etc. I mean, how seriously should we take the assertion that the postwar generation of fathers "didn't have a clue how to be a father" and "didn't even know how to hug"? What about the claim that these men "didn't consciously consider that they were missing anything by being less than present in the lives of their children"? Didn't consciously consider? Ever?

Needless to say, separating fact from fiction is a challenge--and, for some, an epistemologically meaningless exercise. But if it is believed that researchers can, and should, carefully piece together information to provide a reasonably accurate picture of things, then it is important to ask, to what extent do these stories of fathers in the 1950s empirically hold up? My read of the historical evidence is that the stories fall short.

Although it is correct to say that, on an aggregate level, fathers in the postwar era did less child care and especially less infant care than did mothers, it is incorrect to say that, by and large, because of their work schedules, fathers had absolutely no time to devote to their children; or that, when they did have time, they were clueless as to how to interact. Let me add, too, there is ample evidence to indicate that a number of fathers in the postwar era--as well as before--regularly changed diapers, got up for 2 a.m. feedings, rocked and burped children, and administered to sick babies. In at least one instance among the files I have been poring over, it was the father who taught the mother how to care for the baby, rather than vice versa. Granted,

the vast majority of fathers viewed their involvement as "helping" mothers (the division of routine child care was decidedly unequal), but their help was not necessarily as inconsequential or as optional as some have suggested.

What is especially remarkable about the hyperbolic accounts is that they are recurrent. Although the five I refer to above were all published fairly recently, similar kinds of accounts can be found in every decade over the past 100 years. Children, but especially sons from what I've been able to gather, repeatedly have told stories of how yesterday's dads (not just their dads, but all dads) were totally uninvolved.

What is also interesting is how often hyperbolic stories of fathers in the past serve as a prologue to other stories--namely stories of how a son and the generation of fathers he belongs to--are, or will be, entirely different. The major message seems to be (quoting from a *Parents' Magazine* article in the 1930s) that "The old type of father is passing!"

Which brings us back to the question, what purpose do myths serve? Social psychologists tell us that all stories, including myths, are intricately tied to the politics of identity. Stories, as such, are inseparable from who we think we are, or would like to be.

The linkage between storytelling and identity formation can be conceptually examined in a variety of ways. One approach is to rely on a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. Drawing on the work of cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, we may view the production of stories/myths as an effort to create "islands of meaning." Here is how Zerubavel describes the process in his book, *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (1991). "Creating islands of meaning," he says, "entails two rather different mental processes--lumping and splitting. On the one hand, it involves grouping 'similar' items together in a single mental cluster--sculptors and filmmakers ('artists'), murder and arson ('felonies'), foxes and camels ('animals'). At the same time, it also involves separating in our mind 'different' mental clusters from one another--artists from scientists, felonies from misdemeanors, animals from humans. . . . Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them."

Stories about fathers in the past generally employ both lumping and splitting. Certain fathers are lumped into one category, so as to distinguish them from other fathers who are lumped into another category. (The fathers grouped in category A are deemed similar to one another, but dissimilar from the fathers grouped in category B.) Myths about fathers in the 1950s thus are a combination of two stories. One story is about how fathers in the 1950s were all alike, in that they were not very involved with their children. The other story is about how the current generation of fathers, typically the generation that the narrator belongs to, is different from previous generations. Implicit is the assertion that fathers in the narrator's generation also are all alike, only in the contemporaneous case the fathers are said to be intimately involved with their kids.

What is the point of these stories? Putting aside for the moment whether they are true or not (and they cannot be altogether true, because each group of fathers is stereotypically depicted as a homogenous set), the stories are identity aggrandizing. The current generation of fathers is said to be not just completely different from previous generations, but also infinitely better. Belittling yesterday's dads--across the board--super-inflates the egos of, and mythologizes, today's dads.

Another purpose behind grossly mischaracterizing yesterday's dads is that it gives some dads the license not to critically examine their own lack of involvement. Asked why they are not seriously engaged in, or responsible for, childcare, fathers can justify their physical and/or psychological absence by saying they are doing a lot more than all the dads who came before. (Again, hyperbole is the key.) Or they can claim that they should get credit for whatever they do with their children, even if it is minimal, because they have had

to invent (presumably for the first time) what it means to be a nurturing father. The implication is that yesterday's dads were completely incompetent as parents and did absolutely no child care. If we hope to achieve gender equality, these hyperbolic narratives must be recognized for what they are: mythologies that reinforce and reproduce institutionalized sexism.

Needless to say, throughout a nation and throughout the world, there is not just one mythology of fatherhood, but many. I have focused on hyperbolic progressive narratives (compared to the dads of today, the dads of the 1950s, as a whole, were terrible), because these are frequently used to caricature fathers in the post World War II era. It is important to note, however, that hyperbolic regressive narratives (the dads of the 1950s were uniformly wonderful) have also been inserted in books and articles and can be damaging as well. (Certainly we should be smart enough not to reduce the history of fatherhood in the 1950s to television's *Father Knows Best* or any other sitcom.) Whether it is a hyperbolic progressive narrative or a hyperbolic regressive narrative, the lumping and splitting process is still in play. In both, too, the politics of identity (someone's or a group's) is at the core.

It is not that we should be suspicious of anything said about yesterday's or today's dads, but that we should be wary of gross generalizations that conceal rather than reveal. Stereotypic history renders people and events in the most naive terms. Serious history, in principle, does not.

\* \* \*

This essay is based on remarks made at a "Myths of the American Family" conference, sponsored by the Emory University Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life (2006); and, with a focus on the 1950s, advances ideas that were first put forth in Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (1997) and Ralph LaRossa, "Stories and Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (1995).

Ralph LaRossa is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Georgia State University (rlarossa@gsu.edu).