

Emotional Inheritance

An Enabling Concept for Males in Crisis

Working with males experiencing separation crisis, in both community and prison settings, has highlighted what appears to be the most prominent, though least articulated, source of abiding fear and pain for such clients. This brief article seeks to define aspects of this source of difficulty for such clients, which is arguably related to disruptions to a phenomenon that will be termed “emotional inheritance”.

When we think of the word inheritance, we invariably relate such concept, primarily to physical resources (eg houses, estates, objects or money) that are bequeathed following a death. Common understanding is as a sort of property settlement following the death of a relative or sometimes even a friend. In any event, most commonly experienced as part of an intentional plan and legal process established by the original property owner prior to their actual demise. Most of us can readily associate those ‘reading of the will’ scenes in movies where most often, less than deserving descendants gather and sit on the edge of their seats as the lawyer reads out the deceased’s wishes.

Irrespective of how fair or otherwise those persons (or indeed ourselves if we’ve been involved in such a scenario) think of this process, such is nevertheless normally straightforward, legally defined and supported by law. If we’re lucky, we get something from Aunt Thelma, Grandad, Mum or Dad. If they’ve been particularly successful and if they’ve grown to like us in their lifetime, maybe we inherit a substantial portion of their resources. Regardless, the process is most commonly well defined, and despite the media focus on challenging of wills; the vast majority of recipients simply settle for what has been prescribed as their lot.

Separation and divorce often introduces a range of complications into the distribution of inheritance between parents and children. This is particularly so if remarriage occurs and involves not only new partners for one or both parents, but stepchildren or additional biological offspring into the equation. Many children from the original, intact family can often experience a systematic disenfranchisement from what they might have originally received or expected. Given that approximately half of all marriages now fail in Australia, and given that most divorcees eventually repartner; its clear that inheritance decision-making and outcomes commonly involve other than biologically related persons. The potential for bereavements to involve feelings of unfairness, betrayal and/or loss of a perceived birthright is increasingly commonplace in contemporary society.

Despite such problems, it has been the writer’s experience that non-custodial (non-resident) parents (mainly fathers) show little substantial concern about how much property they can pass on to their children by way of physical and/or economic resources. Few report agonising long-term over the substantial legacy of divorce as being their reduced capacity to pass on the products of their labour or investments. I’m purposely jumping over immediate post-divorce settlements, maintenance arrangements etc, which clearly involve considerable angst for many parents. It seems, however, that following an economic adjustment period, there remains for many, the most disturbing impact on inheritance that is

not defined in economic terms. Let's call this factor, "emotional inheritance." From personal and professional experience, this factor is worthy of considerable description, identification and focus, since it underlies the most significant disruption and substantial disinheritance experienced by non-custodial fathers and their children following family breakdowns.

Let's try and understand this concept of emotional inheritance by momentarily shifting the focus away from separated fathers and their children to aspects of relationships with our own parents. If we ask ourselves, what is it that we consider we have really inherited from them; or even more simply, what are those memories that most sharply define the quality of the relationships we have or have had with our own parents; the answers often become remarkably simple. We quickly realise that whether or not our parents lived in a stately mansion, drove expensive cars or lavished us with worldly goods; (while clearly a factor), such simply take a back seat to other aspects of our experience.

More pointedly, such defining memories appear related to; how much time they spent with us, what we did during those times, how they interacted with us, talked, laughed, shared disappointment, administered discipline, dealt with frustration and anger, how they treated each other, whether they were there for sporting games, graduations and times of celebration, if they made themselves emotionally available when you were struggling, hurting or failed in something, and whether they took the time to listen to you, encourage you or celebrate with you. Such collective memories form the substantial mosaic of emotional attachments, identity and sense of safety with our parents. In essence, the sense of how much they were supportive, actively involved and available to your life, more clearly defines parent-child relationships. Such experiences seem to cluster together into what is termed the 'emotional inheritance' gained from our parents. This quality of connectedness invariably affected how we think about the world and ourselves in general. Further, the nature of our emotional inheritance is maintained to subsequently impact on the nature of the emotional inheritance we pass on to own children.

It seems almost innate for children to really want to know their parents. Not just what they do, but how, when, where and why they do things. That sense of knowing, of real visibility of our parents seems to provide a sort of emotional safety net and appears critical to the development of self knowledge in children. Equally, not really knowing our parents, or our parents being invisible to us, seems to produce a vacuum within which the development of a stable self-esteem is hampered. It's as if a very real disinheritance of sorts is experienced. Tragically, this has become the hallmark of relationships between hardworking (absent, distant and tired) fathers and their children; even in intact families. How often have you heard, or indeed even spoken similar words describing your father.

'He was a good man and worked very hard to provide for our family. But (and there's always a but); I really wish I'd gotten to know him as a person before he died'.

On the other side of the coin, after nearly two decades of working with fathers, the writer would like a dollar for every time a male client expressed the following sentiments.

'I've worked hard to establish a home and opportunities for my children. I was shocked at how quickly they went off the rails when they hit their teens. I really wished I'd worked less and spent more time with them. Maybe we'd have a better relationship now.'

Paradoxically, those same fathers will often say

'But I really enjoy playing with the grandkids, they are a real delight. I take them on walks, to their activities, attend their speech nights, etc etc'.

Those same grandfathers have often expressed the sadness and grief associated with their awareness of having “missed out” on so much of the good things with their own children. Often, as much motivated by guilt as opportunity; they plunge themselves into meaningful activity with grandchildren as work commitments tail off. Alan, a 48 year old grandfather of 3 grandchildren wistfully explained

'In a way, I know I'm trying to make up for what I didn't give to my own kids. I wasn't really there for my own, but I'm bloody well sure I'm not going to make the same mistake with these grandkids'.

Now, here's the zinger (by Alan again)

"You know what's really sad? I see my own son busy, building up his business, and making the same mistakes with his own kids that I did with him"

In the words of that great ballad by Cat Stevens (Cats in the Cradle)

"and as I hung up the phone it occurred to me,

my boy was just like me, yeah, he'd grown up just like me..."

The utility of the concept of “emotional inheritance” in working with males, particularly where post-separation fathering opportunities may be limited to 48 hour time windows every two weeks has been found to include:

- An idea on which to project and enable significant grieving that is commonly stuck at an agitated and angry stage of adjustment.
- A concept which can motivate non-resident males to sustain contact arrangements with their children through difficult times and changing roles/responsibilities on their or their ex-partner's part.
- A concept that reinforces appropriate post-separation maintenance payments by removing such from difficulties between parents.
- A concept that provided hope and value to post-separation fathers who may grow to regard their fathering as being reduced to the risk of a “walking wallet”.
- As a general pro-social and far-sighted concept that can reduce the typical focus on blaming, deservedness, failure and guilt to strategies that are more appropriately “in the best interests of the children”.

For further information contact:

Owen C Pershouse
PO Box 240
KEDRON QLD 4031
Phone/Fax +61 (7) 3359 6633
E-mail: pacificb@modemss.brisnet.org.au