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### Original Citation

Draper, Jan (2002) Fatherhood As Transition: The Contemporary Relevance of Transition Theory. In: Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 85-93.

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# 8 Fatherhood As Transition: The Contemporary Relevance of Transition Theory

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This chapter explores the contemporary utility of ritual transition theory (Van Gennep [1909], 1960). Drawing on qualitative data generated during a longitudinal ethnographic study of men's transition to fatherhood, the paper describes how the three phases associated with the theory - separation, transition and re-incorporation - provide insight into men's transition to contemporary fatherhood. It is argued therefore, that despite its earlier structural-functionalist roots the theory remains a valuable and relevant framework illuminating contemporary transitions across the life course.

## **Introduction**

This chapter draws upon data generated during a longitudinal ethnographic study and examines men's experiences of the transition to contemporary fatherhood. Ritual transition theory, first associated with Van Gennep ([1909], 1960), has been used as a theoretical framework through which to understand men's transition to fatherhood. In the chapter, I outline my use of ritual transition theory and argue that despite its early roots, the theory remains a valuable and relevant framework illuminating not only transitions to fatherhood but also other transitions across the life course. I first briefly discuss the historical development of transition or ritual theory and then, drawing upon interviews with men undergoing the transition to fatherhood, analyse its relevance in understanding experiences of contemporary fatherhood.

## **Development of the Theory of Rites of Passage**

In developing his original theory, Van Gennep ([1909], 1960) proposed that individuals within a society move between fixed positions or events such as birth, childhood, marriage and death. In observing movement across these positions he suggested that a common pattern was discernible, which recurred irrespective of the event. He described this pattern in terms of three phases:

separation, transition (or limen) and incorporation. He called this schema *rites de passage*, or the pattern of rites of transition.

Separation was characterised by removal of the individual from his or her 'normal' social life, marked by certain customs and taboos. The transition phase was a stage between social statuses, where the individual no longer belonged to the previous status but had not yet completed the passage to the next. This transitional or liminal phase, in which the individual occupied a non-status, a kind of no-man's land, was regarded by Van Gennep as potentially threatening and harmful and ritual within the liminal phase was concerned with preventing or containing danger. Rituals associated with the individual assuming the new status marked the phase of incorporation.

So movement between statuses was accomplished and marked by rites of either separation, transition or initiation which either symbolically or practically signified the change in status (Froggatt, 1997). Some of these rites were more elaborated depending on the nature of the passage. For example, Van Gennep ([1909], 1960) argued rites of separation were prominent at funeral ceremonies, incorporation at marriage ceremonies and transition rites in pregnancy. So for example, pregnancy could be described as a transitional period characterised by rites of separation and birth as a period of reintegration or incorporation. Separation rites during pregnancy could include food and pollution taboos and purification rites. Taboos of impurity associated with the mother were thought transmissible to the child, so rites of incorporation after the birth often involved purification, such as washing of the head, serving to establish her new position and reintegrate the woman into groups to which she previously belonged.

### **The Contemporary Relevance of Ritual Transition**

In contrast to the abundance of ritual practices in 'traditional' societies, it has been suggested that ritual has disappeared within complex largely secular Western societies, resulting in what Grimes (1995) calls a ritual impoverishment. However rather than a loss of ritual, I propose that the nature of ritual within contemporary society is altering and becoming more diverse, reflecting changing political, industrial and technological landscapes. Regarding contemporary ritual in this way encourages the rediscovery and cultivation of ritual meaning in everyday life (Grimes, 1995). This incubation of ritual is visible in the work of a number of contemporary researchers. For example Froggatt (1997) explored how hospices for the terminally ill manage transitions between life and death; Littlewood (1993) discussed contemporary death related rituals; Hockey (1990) explored the experience of death in both hospice and residential care; Helman (1994) discussed the ritual nature of the medical encounter and Davis Floyd (1987, 1990) examined the changing

nature of pregnancy and childbirth rituals. Drawing on the theory in this way not only allows the anthropologist to make sense of the complexity of observed ritual practices in contemporary society but also leads to refinements of the theory itself, so that despite its early twentieth century origins, I suggest it remains a useful framework within which to explore life course transitions within twenty first century Western society.

### **Contemporary Transition**

The present study explored men's experiences of pregnancy, labour and early fatherhood 'from the native's point of view' (Geertz, 1977: 480). These insider accounts spoke vividly of feelings of marginalisation and vulnerability, experiences clearly reflecting the second of Van Gennep's three phases - the limen. Central to this phase is the concept of liminality, the sense of being in a kind of no-man's land. During this liminal phase the individual is betwixt and between social statuses, neither one thing or the other. Drawing upon the accounts of the men in the study, I suggest their experiences during pregnancy and birth bear the classical characteristics of the liminal phase of rites of passage. From the point of the announcement of the pregnancy, the men began a transition toward fatherhood in which they were betwixt and between social statuses, during which they felt vulnerable and excluded, feelings which were experienced in a heightened sense during labour. I now briefly sketch out examples of their marginal experience.

#### *Pregnancy*

Of their experiences of the pregnancy, many men spoke of their lack of knowledge about the process, their feelings of isolation, their inability to engage in its reality and their sense of redundancy. Women's passage to motherhood, framed predominantly by medical science, is a more clearly structured transition. The visual outward signs of the pregnancy mark her changing status. The men had no such status. Matthew was a novice father and, using the language of rites of passage, he expressed how he felt in a state of limbo:

And you really think 'Well nothing's happening now' and you're in a bit of a limbo I suppose. (Matthew, 1: 2)

This limbo was emphasised by their inability to directly experience the physiological aspects of the pregnancy and men frequently told me of their frustrations at not being able to directly feel what their partners were feeling. For a woman, her transition to motherhood is usually accompanied by

biological changes in and on her own body. Such changes do not accompany a man's transition to fatherhood. Men's inaccessibility to direct embodied experience of pregnancy means that their biological encounters are therefore by proxy, as they rely upon the 'second hand' accounts of their partners. The men in the study engaged in a range of activities during this period, what I called body-mediated-moments, which helped shape their rite of passage into fatherhood.

### *Labour and Birth*

Labour was a particularly ambiguous time for men. Although invited into the labour room, most felt out of place, powerless, unsure of what to do and therefore very vulnerable. They were neither visitor nor patient; the 'business' - as in pregnancy - happening in someone else's body and the environment surrounding labour (medicine and women's bodies) alien to them. Roger described birth as 'very much a female thing':

I think er birth is very much a female thing. Most of the time, you have, the men are kept out of it. I don't know where I get this idea from but ... I think it definitely ... I mean my mum couldn't believe it when I said I was going to the birth last time. I mean my dad was no where around and she got on with it with the midwives, and that's just the way it was done. (Roger, 2: 11)

### *Post Delivery*

Immediately after delivery when their partners and new babies were still in hospital, many of the men experienced a kind of dislocation between two worlds; the new which now included the new baby and the old which did not. The incorporation into his new role had begun but was not yet complete. For some men this dislocation between worlds began immediately after the birth when they had to make the choice between accompanying their partners onto the post-natal ward or going with their new baby to the special care baby unit. For some men this was a big choice. Julian was a novice father expecting twins:

Yeh, yeh. You're kind of like, you know, stuck between. Stay with the babies or stay with your wife. (Julian, FG3: 26)

Leaving the hospital and coming home to an empty house, also underscored the sense of dislocation between the two worlds. Both the men and the women were out of place: the women in an institutional setting and the men in an altered profane space. Barry was a novice father. He vividly described how he experienced this strange disorientating spatially-grounded liminality, and the behaviour in which he engaged to shape it:

When I first came home the first night, I remember being really emotional. I wanted to start crying. It was a funny feeling, you know. For some reason, I couldn't find the light switches in the house. I was moving around like this (*gesturing finding his way around in the dark*). I couldn't sleep and laid awake all night. I slept less when they weren't there than when they were. The second night I had a load of whiskey. That was the best thing. (Barry, FG2: 8)

There is a sense then of men occupying a space in between two worlds, a kind of dislocation in normal space and time. Malcolm was an experienced father, with an older family from his first marriage, now becoming a father again in later life. He vividly described the disorienting sense of being out of time and place when he left both his wife and his baby. Photographs immediately after the birth (rather like their sonographic antenatal counterparts) marked his transition providing a lasting visual reminder of the elusive moment. Malcolm's feelings were compounded by not being able to see the photographs he thought he had taken. The liminal phase of his transition was a space where thoughts about the future mingled with thoughts about the present and his experience from the past:

I left the baby somewhere and Lucy somewhere else and came home. I cried then. I cried and one of the reasons I cried because she wanted some photographs and I found I had no film in the camera! ... But it was very emotional, a very emotional time. There was this child that we had seen and gone somewhere and your wife was somewhere else asleep and you were in this house on your own, that was never going to be the same anymore, and sort of all these thoughts, responsibilities, and changes in your life. (Malcolm, FG3: 26)

For some men their repositioning back into the real (ordinary) world began only when their partners and their babies came home. The 'home-coming' then was the beginning of their incorporation into fatherhood. Rick, a novice father, described how this home coming marked his new status and signalled the start of the 'job':

No, coming home felt right. It's us now, it's our job, you know, ours, let's get on with it. It was, no, it was really good. I'm a dad now (*laughter*). (Rick, 3:10)

### **Contemporary Man's Pregnancy Ritual**

So how does this analysis assist our understanding of the contemporary man's pregnancy and childbirth ritual? It is perhaps helpful to begin answering this question by illustrating the familiar rituals associated with women's structured transition to motherhood, and then contrasting these with men's relatively

underdeveloped rite of passage. Women's transition to motherhood in contemporary Western societies is now framed largely by medical science (Davis-Floyd, 1987; Martin, 1987; Helman, 1994; Lupton, 1994) with the woman's pregnant body fore-grounded in her transition. Medical management begins on confirmation of the pregnancy, although with the developments of new reproductive technologies it is on occasion evident pre-conceptually. Marked by the milestones of serum screening tests, ultrasound scanning, antenatal examinations, antenatal education and hospital birth, the medical management of pregnancy and labour has become the framework of women's transition to motherhood. In parallel, social processes also structure this transition. Women embrace pre-conceptual health promotion (Lupton, 1995), avoid alcohol and risky foods, wear clothes which either reveal or conceal their pregnant state and rehearse their imminent change of status with other women also making the transition to motherhood. Policy is a further dimension structuring women's transition. Maternity allowance and leave from paid employment legitimate women's absence from paid employment and mark their social transition to the different status of motherhood. These cultural practices - medical, social and policy - provide a clear structure through which women's new identities as mothers are produced. In contrast men's transition to fatherhood is not so clearly structured. I suggest that the feelings of marginality and vulnerability, referred to earlier, are symptoms of the relatively new phenomenon in the West of men's involvement in pregnancy and birth, and are themselves direct consequences of the ambiguous nature of this not-yet-clearly-understood role.

So despite the changing nature of men's involvement in pregnancy, birth and early fatherhood, men remain on the periphery of this process. In contrast to the woman whose biological transition is fore-grounded within her social transition, the man is not able to directly experience the biological aspects and consequently his transition to fatherhood is rather more elusive. The contemporary man's pregnancy ritual (Heinowitz, 1979) involves men being relocated in an unfamiliar 'private' arena, rather than their more familiar 'public' roles. So just as the new technological model of birth (Davis-Floyd, 1987) with its ritual symbols of science and technology, relocates women's traditional private birth experience in the public domain of the hospital, so the new contemporary man's pregnancy ritual locates men in an unfamiliar private space of bodies and birth. This ritual space of pregnancy and birth, despite its technological management, is one in which the private pregnant body is fore-grounded and I suggest that the nature of this private, predominantly 'body' domain is alien to men and whilst they are encouraged to be part of the pregnancy and birth experience this alienation serves ironically to marginalise them even more. They are welcomed into the previously secret space of pregnancy and birth and yet simultaneously occupy a sort of non-role, what Shapiro (1987) calls the cultural double bind.

I argue therefore that analysis of these insider experiences indicates that the nature of men's rite of passage into fatherhood is underdeveloped, fragmented and incomplete. Despite this the men in the study attempted to forge their own rites of passage and these involved a number of things. During pregnancy and birth the privileged medicalised female body provided a site of transition for the expectant father as well as for the expectant mother, through a range of body-mediated-moments. Shaped by the familiar masculine instruments of science, vision and performativity, these body-mediated-moments (the pregnancy test, the annunciation (pregnancy confirmation), the ultrasound, quickening and birth attendance) helped men to reframe the unfamiliar territory of pregnancy and birth. In addition to those new rituals associated with the fore-grounded body, the new rite of passage also involves a range of social rituals which also generate a sense of men's transition to fatherhood. These social rituals were predominantly, although not exclusively, drawn from the new man discourse and included: sharing experiences with other men in antenatal classes, informing friends and family of the birth, exchanging presents between existing children and the new baby, freezing moments of transition on video, wetting the babies head and making preparations for the home coming.

At this point, it is worth noting that ritual is not only of significance for the individuals making the transition but for the society as a whole. Traditionally ritual was regarded as the deliberate production of disorder out of which life course transitions were enabled and society restored to a predetermined balance (Seremetakis, 1991: 48). However, Billington et al. (1998: 83) argue that 'rituals associated with lifecourse transitions not only serve to produce new individuals, but also through their symbols regenerate the belief system of the social group as a whole'. The private experience or performance of ritual therefore contributes to collective meanings of cultural practice. There is therefore a reciprocal making and marking of rituals at both individual and cultural levels, what I have called the individual/cultural dialectic. Men engaging in contemporary pregnancy and childbirth rituals not only make their own individual transitions toward fatherhood but contribute to the legitimisation, maintenance and development of the ritual itself. I argue that men's individual journeys to fatherhood shape the structure of men's collective experience. So in this way the individual shapes the collective and the collective shapes the individual.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined men's experiences of their transition to fatherhood. Whilst this is an everyday taken-for-granted affair, the theoretical framework of rites of passage has provided a useful lens through which to understand this



transition. The tripartite nature of Van Gennep's *Rites de Passage* - separation, liminality and incorporation - has enabled an analysis of the rite of passage to contemporary fatherhood and the identification of its associated rituals. So despite its early twentieth century roots, ritual transition theory remains a valuable framework within which to describe and understand social transitions at individual and collective levels within contemporary societies.

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