



Review of Chen Z. Oren and Dora Chase Oren
(eds.), *Counseling Fathers* (New York:
Routledge, 2009), xxxvii + 304 pp.

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I'm 65, and I must be getting old. I am still trying to figure out the paradigms of masculinity from the 1960s through the 1990s, when I was in my 30s, 40s, and 50s. I am trying to figure out whether I care about being a Provider, Protector, and Impregnator (David Gilmore), or what it really means to be a "marketplace man" (Michael Kimmel), or how to perform my male gender in ways that do as little violence as possible to women and children and the earth, or how to break free spiritually from the oppressive misogyny and patriarchalism of institutional monotheism and the history of Biblical exegesis. Perhaps I'm not unlike those who are stuck in Second Wave feminism, looking at the emergence of Third Wave feminism and thinking "Wait. There are still problems that need more attention before we move on to something new."

Almost twenty years ago, I wrote a book called *Counseling Men* (Fortress Press, 1994), in which I attempted to address some of the issues that proceeded out of my personal and cultural struggle to be a better father to my two children. I didn't have all the answers then, but thinking back, I am struck by the negative hermeneutical lens through which I wrote *Counseling Men* in contrast with the positive hermeneutical lens adopted by the various authors included in Oren and Oren's *Counseling Fathers*. Probably influenced by my training in psychotherapy, my own writings on fatherhood were shaped by my reaction to my father's neglect in walking me through the Oedipal struggle, his seeming disinterest in teaching me how to be "a man" (whatever that means), and his general absence from my life, in keeping with the work of Guy Corneau and Samuel Osherson. Men of my generation will understand, at least viscerally, what I am talking about, and how we have spent our lives struggling with the resulting woundedness.

All that is a background to explain my surprise when I began to read Oren and Oren's collection of essays about something called "The New Fathering Movement." Perhaps because my children are now in their 30s, my attention has shifted too far away from my responsibilities for nurturing my children into a world that is as free from gender damage as possible, turning my attention instead to the task of "re-authoring" my own life as a male in the last decades of his life, and trying to figure out what that means and how to live into the "generativity" that Erik Erikson suggested as being a mark of maturity in later life. At the same time, I was pleased to see that our understandings of masculinity continue to grow, and perhaps it is a mark of the continuing maturation of the larger men's movement that *positive* interpretations of the role of fathering are being explored, bearing in mind the lessons learned from both the women's and men's movements of earlier decades.

Counseling Fathers is a collection of thirteen essays written by academics, counselors and psychologists, and educationalists. The opening essay, "The New Fathering Movement," by Ronald Levant and David Wimer, tracks the historical background of studies on masculinity and fathering, and examines the emergence of the new father role beginning in the late 1980s. This new role attempted to take seriously the criticisms of traditional masculinity that were generated by Second Wave feminism, but it also has taken into account the significant changes in American gendered behavior during the 1980s and 1990s, including the fact that two-thirds of all divorces are now initiated by women. As they remark:

In our view, women's increasing willingness to leave marriages is related to attitude changes. Basically, women want a better deal...They have been on their gender-role journeys for most of their adult lives, and they really *are* tired of waiting for men to catch up and join them on an equal plane, although Black women may have become tired of this much earlier than white women. (p. 9)

Levant and Wimer explain women's dissatisfaction with men's continuing behavior by discussing the "the male code," a set of socially constructed and socially reinforced rules delineating how "real" men should behave; the inherited assumptions ("the sturdy oak" theory) that men should not show weakness or display emotion; and "discrepancy strain," or the psychological distress that men feel when they fail to live up to the cultural ideals of masculinity. This is not new; these issues were identified already in the 1980s, and a number of writers in the men's movement challenged males to pluck up the courage to model new ways of being mature and responsible husbands and fathers. The antidote today seems to be to encourage men to become more intimately involved with their children, to counter this negative gender role legacy among their sons, and to provide their daughters with supportive and liberating parenting. Again, this has all been said before. What makes this collection of essays worth reading are the subsequent chapters that attempt, based on both qualitative and quantitative research, to teach men *how* to become more involved with their partners and children through the perspectives and techniques of "new fathering."

Chapter 2, by Chen Oren, Matt Englar-Carlson, Mark Stevens, and Dora Chase Oren, explores the possibility of a "strength-based perspective" that can replace the "deficit-based perspective" out of which too many men still operate. Fathers need to be encouraged to discover what they *can* do, rather than wringing their hands about what they *can't* do. The authors structure their suggestions about new fathering around three strengths: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. This combination is referred to as "generative fathering," for it emphasizes the strengths and positive qualities of fathers. However, because few men indicate that they have had satisfactory role models as fathers themselves, and little experience in caring for their siblings, the authors argue that new fathering must be intentionally taught, rather than "figured out." The suggested venue for this educational endeavor is the counselor's office or structured programs. The chapter provides a very helpful and detailed case study of a man who had lost his wife and young child through a divorce

precipitated by his substance abuse and emotional isolation, though the case study is too brief.

Chapter 3, "An Assessment Paradigm for Fathers and Men in Therapy Using Gender Role Conflict Theory," by James O'Neil and Melissa Luján, explores further the concept of generative fathering, particularly as a means to weaken the power of traditional patriarchy. Gender Role Conflict (GRC) is defined as "a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for the person or others. GRC occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of others and self" (p. 50). The four domains of GRC include the cognitive (how we think about gender), the affective (how we feel about gender), the behavioral (how we act because of gender training, or respond to and interact with others), and the unconscious (how gender dynamics outside our consciousness produce conflict). The application of the GRC diagnosis is explored creatively, so that it includes not only the stress that results from breaking out of the gender stereotypes an adult male has created, but also the stress that some fathers feel when their sons deviate from traditional masculinity. The chapter is also useful in its emphasis on how children internalize their father's emotional and psychological pain and the adult male's unconscious "father wound." The authors observe that few counselors and therapists are trained to diagnose and work with GRC, or in fact, to address gender issues in the therapy room at all! Without such sensitivity, counselors and therapists tend only to focus on provider roles, discipline, protection, and the enforcement of a moral code, overlooking altogether some of the other critical factors in a male parent's identity, such as spiritual and sexual education, emotional literacy, and self-confidence to nurture.

For the purposes of a review in this particular journal, it is interesting to note that the first time that the subject of "spirituality" is even mentioned is one-quarter of the way into the book, and then only briefly. Only two of the thirteen chapters purport to intentionally include the topic of spirituality, a subject of concern to the readers of *JMMS*: "Mexican American Fatherhood: Culture, Machismo, and Spirituality," by Joseph Cervantes, and "Challenges and Clinical Issues in Counseling Religiously Affiliated Fathers," by John Robertson. Cervantes' essay defines spirituality quite loosely, as a part of the construction of Mexican American masculinity:

a Mexican American man cannot be fully complete in his manhood nor as a parent unless he is able to recognize the truth of his word, the sense of responsibility, and the rejection of any abuse. In addition, to take time to reflect and pray, be sensitive and understanding, speak with support and clarity to others, and model honesty and love are understood to be fundamental aspects of being a Mexican American male and a father. (p. 88)

One would hope that all fathers, no matter their race or culture, could recognize these as admirable qualities and integral aspects of the new fathering. Cervantes fails to address the predominantly Roman Catholic heritage of Mexican Americans, including the strong sense of patriarchal privilege built into that religious system. Robertson's essay is both much stronger on the topic, and yet it too is limited. Robertson begins with a question: "The dilemma can be perplexing: how to help a

man who maintains that his clearly ineffective fathering practices are rooted in his religious values?" The counselor is caught in a dilemma: will the father misunderstand challenges to his parenting style as being challenges to his religious beliefs? If the father can separate parenting style from religious beliefs, is the counselor then equipped to handle the possible repercussions of a father's identity becoming less stable when his spiritual foundation is rocked? In general, this is a very useful and challenging essay for any counselor to read. For example, Robertson suggests that not knowing about a father's religious views may be a violation of the American Psychiatric Association's insistence that multicultural awareness and sensitivity be part of a mental health treatment plan. The author argues that spiritual assessment should be part of the treatment plan for any man who is experiencing gender-role strain in his responsibilities as a husband and father, yet few of the standard psychometric instruments are suitable for assessing spirituality outside its traditional Christian forms.

None of the essays in this book address any form of spirituality outside the organized denominationalism of Christianity. To my mind, this is a significant shortcoming of the book, for almost all cultural and spiritual heritages have gender assumptions built into them that can easily and invisibly spill over into ways in which masculine stereotypes are privileged and responsibilities gendered.

This is a significant weakness in the book, since mental health is presently understood to include the integration of mental, physical, emotional, relational, *and spiritual* wellbeing. Yet this weakness should not detract from the overall usefulness of this collection of essays. Fully two-thirds of the book demands culturally competent clinical interventions by mental health practitioners who are treating gender role conflict for the purpose of encouraging new fathering, whether culture is defined in terms of ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. I was pleased to see this, for cultural sensitivity and awareness are slow to enter much of the men's movement literature, in spite of the fact that most scholars in the field understand masculinity as a cultural construction. In addition to the chapter on Mexican American fathering, there are chapters on Asian American fathering, African American fathering, as well as Caucasian fathering, and other chapters on teen fathering, gay fathering, and fathering by older males, including grandfathers.

In late December last year, I functioned as the officiant/celebrant at the wedding of my daughter Katie to a great guy named Jim. My daughter and son-in-law look forward to being parents themselves in the future. Although the book is generally oriented toward the technicalities of counseling and psychotherapy, it contains useful-enough information that I plan to give them a copy to read. Strength-based fathering is still a new idea for many, even in my children's generation, and to be effective, needs the support of both men and women, no matter their age.

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