

A Father Without a Family

Six Degrees of Separation

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- Demographics
- Relationships
- Emotional Wellbeing
- Having a Child
- Social Stigma
- The Future

The aim was to build a picture of how single mums perceive what I consider are some of the most important parts of our lives as parents. I hope it might provide some comfort for other women who may be going through a separation right now. This may also help men who are struggling to understand what their partner or ex-partner is going through. Feeling normal plays a huge part in our emotional wellbeing, and drives what sort of façade we put up to the outside world. The more normal you feel, the less you need to buttress your world with anxiety and other psychological affronts.

Details

Date 23 November 2013

Word Count 3665

URL <http://www.afatherwithoutafamily.com/six-degrees-of-separation>

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The aim was to build a picture of how single mums perceive what I consider are some of the most important parts of our lives as parents. This BLOG has in general, been about me, and how I have dealt with the loss of my marriage. Whilst I have covered other more general topics, I wanted to provide some balance and try to understand how women feel, act, fear, and celebrate what is a very challenging time when you separate. I also hope it might provide some comfort for other women who may be going through a separation right now. This may also help men who are struggling to understand what their partner or ex-partner is going through.

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Before I move onto the some of the findings, lets talk a little about the women involved. All live in NSW, Australia, and all were born in Australia.

Mum 1:

A 37-year-old mum with a 5-year-old daughter. She is currently studying full time at university whilst raising her daughter to school age. She hopes that next year she can return to the workforce as her daughter starts school. She separated from her husband four years ago after a thirteen-year relationship and a five-year marriage. She is currently in a relationship that has lasted almost 4 years, and lives at home with her parents who support her financially, emotionally, and with shelter for her and her daughter. Her ex-husband lives approx. 15 minutes away and has his daughter 2 nights per fortnight.

Mum 2:

A 40-year-old single mum with two children aged 14, and 8. She is currently working fulltime. She is currently renting and lives there with her children. She separated from husband one year ago after a fifteen-year relationship in which she was never married. She is currently single, her ex-husband lives ten minutes away and see's his children two-to-three nights per fortnight.

Mum 3:

A 39-year-old single mum with three children aged 12, 7, and 5. She is currently working part time. She is still living in the family home that is mortgaged. She separated from her husband five months ago after a fourteen-year relationship and nine year marriage. She is currently single, her ex-husband lives approx. 15 minutes away and see's his children two nights per fortnight.

Mum 4:

A 37-year-old mum with 3 children aged 18, 16, and 11. She works full time. She has been able to buy a house with her new partner. She separated from her husband three and a half years ago after a seventeen-year relationship and fourteen year marriage. She is currently in a relationship that has lasted two and a half years and now lives with her new partner. Her ex-husband lives approx. twenty minutes away and see's his children seven nights per fortnight.

Mum 5:

A 41-year-old single mum with three children aged 10, 8, and 6. She is currently working full time. She is currently renting while she looks for a place to buy from the proceeds of the divorce settlement. She separated from her husband six years ago after a thirteen-year relationship and ten year marriage. She is currently single, her ex-husband lives approx. ten minutes away and see's his children six nights per fortnight.

Mum 6:

A 43-year-old single mum with three children aged 17, 15, and 14. She is currently working fulltime. She is currently renting and lives there with her children. She separated from husband nine years ago after a seventeen-year relationship and ten-year marriage. She is currently single, her ex-husband lives twenty minutes away and does not paly an active part in their lives.

So that's our six mum's, all great girls and all very supportive of this initiative. They are all equally curious to see what the findings are as well!

The first part of the survey was on demographics. This covered the basic elements of, who, where, how much. Here is what we found,

Demographics:

Exactly half of the girls were in a current relationship, again, exactly half the girls completed their Higher School Certificate, with a mixture of tertiary education levels ranging from Cert III to a Masters Degree. When it came to living arrangements, the majority of the girls are renting, and the most common house size is a three-bedroom place. The majority of the girls are in paid employment, with a huge spread of income across all of our tax brackets. When it came to the age of their children the most common age group was 6-8 and 15-17. Gender wise the children were split, 7 girls and 8 boys.

Some conclusions we can pull from these results are that access to education for women is well and truly not a problem in Australia. The range of income these girls are earning further supports this. Lastly, and I think it links directly to their age bracket; most have pre-teen or teenage children.

The second part of the survey was on relationships and covered confidence, deal breakers, and faithfulness. Here is what we found,

Relationships:

The first question I asked was how long they felt it took them to get over their last serious relationship, this may have included their marriage if they were recently separated or divorced. The overwhelming majority responded with 1-2 years or more. I often talk about how this period of your life (post separation) is a long game. I guess seeing these women offer up that they are potentially taking a couple of years to move on suggests we all feel that pain for a long time.

When it comes to modernity, the majority of our girls thought themselves a mixture of traditional and modern women. Again, I think this would link to their age bracket having been children of the baby boomers and still growing up in houses where women were possibly still in a separate sphere as opposed to men. It would be interesting to survey the girls who are now 18 when they are around 40!

Almost all of the girls had been faithful in their relationships, with an even bigger majority unwilling to condone adultery. When it came to love at first sight we were split right down the middle. Has the effect of the loss of a marriage spoiled that dream for them, or is that all it ever was, a dream? I am surprised, as I would have thought most girls thought it possible. When I asked the girls to rate what were the biggest deal breakers for them in a relationship, the top three responses were (in order), Violence, Lying, and Gambling. Interestingly smoking and watching porn rated the very lowest. I hope you guys are taking notes here!

On the flip side, the next question asked them to rate the must haves in a relationship. No surprises here, Communication came in first, with Time Together running second, Intimacy and Passion tied for third. Coming in last was selflessness.

I asked the girls how long they thought appropriate before co-habituating with a new partner. No one said less than 6 months, with the majority saying 1 year or more. Conversely, the majority of the girls thought only to wait 3-6 months before introducing a new partner. I am a little surprised at this, as I would have thought the girls would be more guarded in exposing their kids to a new person. You learn something every day :)

The last question in this part of the survey was about whom they put first, their partner or their children. One hundred per cent answered their children. This is a definite change from previous generations, for instance, my grand parents generation and even my parent's generation overwhelmingly answer that they put their partner first. This is consistent across Australia the UK, US, and Germany. This could largely be driven by the fact that they are no longer cohabitating with the father of the children?

Pulling together these results I can see that people are changing, both generationally and because of losing a marriage. They are taking longer to trust, are more modern, losing the dream of love at first sight, and yet are traditional when it comes to adultery. Communication and lying are the best ways to win and lose a girl, and it seems guys, you will settle for second place over their kids. This part of the survey will be great to compare when I survey 6 men next year. I reckon the last question will offer pretty much the same result.

The third part of the survey was on emotional wellbeing and covered mental condition, wellbeing, loss, and physical condition. Here is what we found,

Emotional Wellbeing:

The girls 'seem' to be ok with making time for themselves, with the majority answering 'Sometimes' over Yes or No. When asked if they suffer from anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem in three separate questions, twenty pre cent answered no to anxiety, fifty pre cent to depression, and seventeen to low self-esteem. By comparison, when I asked the girls to rate Anxiety, Depression and Low Self-Esteem together in one question, the clear majority was Depression. The last question on mental health asked if they had ever taken medication for a diagnosed mental illness. Fifty per cent answered yes...

People are more important to these girls than material things or security. It seems that almost none of the women feel they have lost the ability to connect with new people since losing their marriage. This possibly links in with the response on self-esteem, moreover, the entire group feel that their physical condition is directly connected to their emotional wellbeing. The final question asked if they felt men or women were more emotionally vulnerable, seventy per cent answered even between the sexes.

Out of this set of questions I think its fair to say that you are normal if you are feeling depressed, anxious, or are struggling with your self-esteem. I would also think that if we can get some men to line up and answer these questions honestly we would get very similar answers. For me I definitely went through all three, occasionally one of these little devils visits me even today; thankfully I have people around me that support me regardless.

The fourth part of the survey was on having a child and covered wants and needs, regret, and gender. Here is what we found,

Having a Child:

Question one asked if the girls felt their wants and needs had changed since becoming a mother. Seventy pre cent answered yes, here is another great time for the guys to be taking notes. I did not understand the changes my wife went through when she had our children, I simply did not get it. More importantly I did not try and understand, I just put it in the 'chicks' category and kept moving. This proved fatal to our marriage...Read these words. 'Giving Birth'! Giving a life, risking theirs to create another. Words are simply not enough....

I have always wondered if women ever regret having children. For this group it was a majority of No. Of more concern was the answer to the question on whether they felt their partner was less attracted to them after giving birth. Over sixty per cent answered yes. When considering whether or not these women would have a child with a new partner, over eighty per cent said a no or maybe. Maybe time is weighing on their minds, or is it the workload being a little older now?

Only one of our girls answered yes to smoking, drinking or taking drugs whilst pregnant. There is so much research warning us of the dangers of this, yet there are plenty of European societies where pregnant women take a glass of wine every week and give birth to healthy babies. Only one of our girls admitted she was unfair when it came to providing access to the other parent of their children. This will be another interesting one to test when we question the men! A large majority of the women thought that neither women, nor men made better parents. The next questions asked if they felt same sex couples should be allowed to adopt babies, they answered with a resounding yes.

I asked the girls if they thought the welfare and support mechanisms were gender biased? Fifty per cent said yes to women, the other half said no.

To round out this set of questions I asked the girls to comment on what was the biggest single mistake men make when learning to parent. Three of the six girls answers were based around time and being engaged, or present. Other reasons covered were differing disciplinary styles, and trying to lead the children towards his interests instead of fostering a home where they can find their own passions.

To summarise the responses from this set of questions, I think it is fair to say that these women are fairly pragmatic about their lives after becoming a mother. There were some pretty tough questions in this block especially if they were recently separated.

The fifth part of the survey was on social stigma and covered gender equality, feminism, politics and God. Here is what we found,

Social Stigma:

Diving straight into gender equality, seventy per cent answered yes to any real measurable advancement in equality for women in society over the past twenty years. This is encouraging! However, the same volume of response, seventy per cent, answered no to whether former Prime Minister Julia Gillard helped in the struggle for gender equality. Was it the person, the party, or was Australia not ready for a female PM? I think that we still live in a gendered society; male perceptions still place women in separate spheres when it comes to work and children. Moreover, women in a man's world are still seen as weak. The problem here is that men use the physical weakness because masculinity is the measure for men. That may work when measuring men against men in a 'strength' contest, however physical strength means little when you need to engage your mind, heart and soul. These are women's core strengths...

Not one of the girls answered yes to whether we would ever see one hundred per cent equality for women in the workplace. When I asked what they thought was the biggest threat facing equality for women, workplace equality was a very clear number one. Considering the women's liberation movement, over eighty per cent thought that a valid movement still existed but that it was disjointed. One thing I was always curious about was whether women felt that they played any part in the social stigma women face with regards to their vanity, and appearance? All of the girls answered yes....

Politically, the majority of the girls were divided amongst the two major parties. When questioned on religion, most of the girls answered no or maybe as to whether the Christian Church was party to blame for the oppression of women. Being a history student, I can argue that there are plenty of links between the church and the oppression of women. I cannot speak for other faiths, but certainly in the last two hundred years, women have taken a social, political and cultural beating when liberal politics was supposedly emancipating the 'people'. This is particularly acute in nations where there is a well-constructed connection between church and state. I guess it all depends of what you consider oppression...

The last question in this series had the girls responding to this question. To you, what is the core issue of inequality for women in Australia?

What we got was a diverse range of answers with really only one common thread to emerge. I guess this adds support to the argument on a disjointed women's liberation movement. With so many divergent issues across society, it would prove very difficult to raise a campaign to fight with.

Here are the responses;

- Having children and career.
- The workplace.
- I don't have one.
- Today's woman.
- Parenthood.
- Wages.

This is another tough one; gender equality and women's liberation can be two different things. There is no doubt Australia has come along way to bridging the gap between the genders, especially in the workplace, for welfare, and in government. There is however, still a long way to go. Will we ever get there? The answer here lies in much subjectivity.

I believe education, objectivity, and merit not mates, are some of the key underlying issues we need to tackle, and I mean for both genders. Our world historically has been gendered on male masculinity. Allot of our rules, norms, and values are based on a male's perspective. The main reason is that women were not part of the political sphere when our constitutions, and laws were drafted. Yes there has been much change, but you cannot undo centuries of passive and active oppression in a few decades.

The sixth and final part of the survey was on the future and covered the five-year plan, death, and schooling. Here is what we found,

The Future:

I asked the girls to rate from one to five in importance, the following five terms, the results are below;

1. Shelter
2. Financial Independence
3. Employability
4. Personal Safety
5. Access to Services

What this reveals is the most very basic conditions of modern day life. Shelter, without it, you are in real trouble. You need financial independence to achieve your goals and raise your children. To achieve this you need to be employable, to get to work you need to be safe, and to get there safely you need access to services.

The next question was in the same style; five topics in order of importance, specifically covering the next five years, here are the findings;

1. Emotional Wellbeing
2. Access to Children
3. Physical Wellbeing
4. Trust
5. Intimacy

If we combine these two questions we can see that Shelter, and Emotional Wellbeing are the two most important things these women are thinking about. It is pretty easy to see how they connect.

When asked who would raise their children if they were to pass away tomorrow, the vast majority answered, the other parent. Unfortunately, almost none of our girls have a life insurance policy. This supports the gendered lives argument. Women were traditionally not targeted for life insurance because their income was a small fraction of the family total. If a man lost his wife, the family salary would suffer little, however if a family were to lose the father the family income would dive drastically. Hence why hardly any women have life insurance! We need to break this mould, clearly there are many women earning large salaries today, losing either parent is a tragedy, especially for the children!

With a touch of the modern woman coming out, sixty per cent answered yes to outsourcing the raising of their children if they could afford it. I must admit I am surprised at this response; it must be very confusing to be put in the position of being a mother. Your loyalties are constantly being challenged and divided.

When I asked what the girls thought the biggest threat to their child's future is, they all answered Social Media. Other options were, alcohol, drugs, health issues, poor education, and bullying. As parents we need to read the writing on the wall...how we manage it will be the challenge! Seventy per cent of our girls said they would relocate interstate or overseas despite an objection from the other parent. I have mixed emotions about this one, as it's a little close to home. Needless to say that I think parents need to critically evaluate the impact on their children before making any such moves. I acknowledge that every case is different; objectivity is key...

The next couple of questions are based around schooling. The first asks if they thought being an active parent in your child's school benefits the child into the future, all our girls said yes. The next question asked if they thought it was beneficial to be at home to receive their children after school. All the girls said yes. That's a tricky little balancing act! Support, support, support...

The last question in our survey asked the following,

Do you think your children may ever want to change the parent they live with, or to another family member? IE: The primary carer.

Four of six girls responded with a yes.

This last category was made to challenge the girls into thinking about their future. Several of the responses were unanimous, and none were split or even closely divided. It seems our girls have firm ideas on what their future holds, what they want, and what threatens their children the most.

I want to take a moment to thank the six women who participated in this survey, quite simply if it wasn't for you this could not have happened...Thank you!

As I mentioned earlier in the response, next year I am hoping to conduct a similar survey on six dads. As I broaden the scope of the BLOG I want to ensure we cover both sides of the story. As always I am keen to have any feedback on this little project. I have found it most enlightening, it certainly helps me try to understand how women are affected by many of the same things I have been through. Whilst there is some commonality in all separations, we must never forget that each story is different; respect for people's position is paramount, as no one really knows what goes on in a marriage other than the two people in it. None of us go into a marriage with the view of it failing; finding a helping hand when you need one can make all the difference. Be honest with yourself; don't get too caught up in what others think. The real friends will love you regardless....