Researching with Men:
Ideas and Strategies for Doing Better

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Abstract

This paper challenges the tendency of research to ignore issues related to the study of men and particularly men as parents. An argument is also presented for including men in studies of parenting and use of family services, including early childhood education services. We draw on our recent New Zealand study of fathers' experience of child and family services to highlight key issues in conducting research that involves men as informants and concerns men as parents. The issues identified include recruitment of men, interpretation of men's voice and the impact of stereotypes and myths regarding fathering. From our experience of conducting the study and working on these issues we share a set of recommendations. We hope the ideas and strategies that were developed for addressing these issues will prove useful in providing some guidance for future research with men.

Introduction

In many parts of the world men are becoming more involved in child rearing (Pleck, 1992). This change is noticeable in New Zealand as well (Callister, 1999; cited in Callister & Birks, 1999). Reasons for this change are varied but include economic conditions and changing ideas about gender roles within the family.

Despite this change there is scant evidence of 'male inclusive' gender initiatives in service provision as family related social services continue to target mothers and children, largely ignoring the role of fathers (Engle, cited in Sweetman, 2000; Callister & Podmore, 1995). In addition, where services would welcome more father involvement, they are unsure of how to make their services more attractive or accessible to fathers (Chapman, McIntosh & Mitchell, 2000).

Early childhood education services are but one area where these points have been identified both in terms of the lack presence of male teachers (Sumison, 2000) and a lack of involvement of dads (Callister, 1995; McBride & Rane, 2000). Why include men in early childhood services? Ask this question of anybody and a response is not quickly forthcoming. Many people respond as if the answer is "common sense", that the inclusion of men is necessary in order to reflect gender balance in society. Literature informing this issue cites positions ranging from redressing the

balance in a field that has traditionally been dominated by women (Sumison, 2000) to that of the need to focus on the rights of men (Sweetman, 2000).

As we move into a new millennium it is perhaps timely to consider these perspectives afresh. We believe the experiences of men in general and dads in particular have been silenced over many years. Further, we believe the work that has been carried out is usually framed within a paradigm critical of men, placing them in a position that is difficult to support (Mitchell, 1999). It seems to us that to move forward the voice of this group needs to be sought, heard and respected. In support of this vision we undertook an exploratory research project looking at the experiences of dads in their involvement with child and family services in the Nelson/Tasman region as well as their suggestions for "father[1] friendly services".

The Project

The research project involved a survey and focus groups. Following a pilot survey, questionnaires were distributed, aimed at providing information related to the dads use of child and family services, with 134 responses (an 89% response rate). This information was then explored in more depth in 3 focus groups. The findings have been published elsewhere (Chapman et al, 2000). In this paper ethical and methodological issues which arose in relation to working and researching with men are identified and discussed. We found most of these issues are not addressed in the literature or, if mentioned, were not addressed with the importance and insight that we believe they require.

Issues in researching with men

(i) Recruitment issues.

Gaining the views of a cross section of dads was considered vital for the success of the project. While we were clear that there would be no attempt made to generalise the findings of the project to a wider population we were also anxious that the project reflected a range of views. Initial attempts to attract participants through advertising were as expected in that only a small number (five in total) responded.

We then decided on a snowballing technique with particular attention paid to initial advertising and presence in places where dads might gather. During this process it became clear that the dads responded to an informal approach, especially from credible (local) people. For example, asking for help was responded to well in contrast to asking for information. It would seem that accessing groups who are unused to being approached for their opinion (including dads) requires additional planning, time and patience as well as the use of credible advocates. As the fieldworker stated at the time,

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[1] The term "dad" is used throughout this paper rather than that of "father". This was a clear preference voiced by many of the men in the project.

> *I would visit workplaces, frequent coffee carts, look out for who's pushing prams. I had to make the effort [to find dads], it wouldn't just happen.*

After we made these adjustments to our participant selection process we were pleased to find that the socio-economic profile and age range of the group approximated that of the target population as a whole.

Accessing participants is a common research problem. However, we believe accessing males to be compounded by the lack of qualitative research that involves men as participants and in particular how dads are unused to having their opinions sought on family issues. In our reading of research involving men, we have never seen any mention of the need for these, or similar, initiatives.

(ii) The invisibility of men's voice in research

A more androgynous approach to parenting has been promoted over recent years (Chapman et al, 2000; Grady, 2000). This position is based on the view that differences related to gender are more to do with the impact of socialisation processes rather than that of biology. As one researcher stated when talking about trends in childrearing, "[we are moving towards a] society where gender is not a major issue in parenting, and where each parent performs those aspects of a parent's role for which they are best suited as individuals" (Julian, 1999, p2).

One consequence of this move is that in studies related to the family, many writers use the generic term "parenting". However, as with all generic terms there is a danger that those people without a significant voice become even more invisible. While this situation could be argued for both genders, our reading suggests the reality is otherwise. For example, in recent work related to the early childhood environment (Dalli, 1999; Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse & Barnett; 2000) dads voices and/or advocacy were minimal or absent, both in the reviewed literature and in the construction of the report. Whether they were consulted or not is unknown. The following observation is another example of this problem.

> *By focusing on a more androgynous approach to parenting the "lack of voice" of dads may worsen. Indeed, in a recent [New Zealand] report regarding service provision for families by a national service provider, males accounted for 4.9% of the participants yet the findings were applied to families in general.*

(Chapman et al, 2000, p3).

To many people it may seem odd to describe men as "lacking voice". Historically, men's voices are said to have been implicit in research activity (Hearn, 1993). However it is our experience that, in relation to qualitative research (including that in early childhood studies), men's accounts of their experiences are currently absent.

The lack of research exploring the particular needs of dads becomes even more problematic when one considers the issue of whose voices are we really hearing. In our review of the literature research was found that talked of dads views but used language that, in our experience, dads would never think of using. As was explained at the time,

> *[Loss of voice in research reports] occurs subtly. Often the writing looks great, it's just that the language changes, usually towards the end of discussion, reflecting the authors agenda rather than the voices of the men involved.*
>
> (Chapman, 2000).

Again, this is a common problem in research activity. However, we believe this problem is compounded by the lack of qualitative research involving dads with the little that is carried out being mainly carried out by women. While we do not have a problem with women researching the lives of men we are astonished that there is no critique or acknowledgement of this in the reports. If the situation was reversed, acknowledgement and critique would be evident and we believe necessary.

There is also considerable debate as to how attempts at "giving voice" to the stories of others only serves to reconstruct their reality in the voice of the researcher (Fine, 1994; in Denzin & Lincoln). Bearing this in mind we used several methods during the research project to ensure that the perspectives of the dads was not lost. These included checking back with the dads at key times to ensure that the report was an accurate reflection of their views. The focus groups were also constructed so that the dads themselves were actively involved in the first stages of data analysis.

Of course, ensuring that researchers' interpretation of voice is as accurate as possible is not unique to researching with dads. However, we believe that because of points detailed above, particular care needs to be taken in this area, both by researchers and those reading research reports.

(iii) Fatherhood and hegemony.

When first approached with the survey questionnaire many of the dads were unable to comprehend and respond to the questions as was expected. In particular, they were unable to understand that the survey was about their experiences of services, and answered for their partners and children. They seemed quite unused to considering themselves as a valid recipient of support from child and family services. As was noted in the project report,

> *The survey participants were often unable to identify their needs before those of their partners and children, whereas in the focus group they were able to frame their position differently.*
>
> (Adapted from Chapman et al, 2000).

This inability to appreciate the importance of their own needs, even their ability to appreciate that they had needs in relation to supporting their role, was so consistent that we can only consider the situation to be hegemonic in nature.

This was also seen in the contradictions between the results of the survey and of the focus groups. For example, the survey indicated a high degree of satisfaction of dads in the early childhood environment. In the focus groups, where the dads were able to take the time to reflect on and share their experiences with others, the dads were clear that the early childhood environment (along with other services) generally failed to support their involvement. It should be understood that, for many of the dads, this was the first time they had considered and shared their thoughts in this area. It is clear to us that assisting dads to consider and verbalise their own needs takes careful preparation and extended time.

(iv) Catharsis.

Whether best considered a catharsis or an awakening, what became a concern during the research process was the need of the dads for time to talk through some of the issues that had been raised for them. This situation frequently arose following completion of the survey form and after the completion of focus groups. As was noted at the time,

> *After not thinking about these things (or thinking they are the only ones thinking this way) they get in a group and they get wound up. It all starts coming out, and it comes out in a rush.*

> (Fieldworker, 2000).

We found that when the dads made the shift to thinking of their own needs, they began to enter into a dialogue that raised new issues for them. Creating this "opportunity" posed a sense of responsibility for us in supporting the participants through a process that could be quite thought provoking, and at times difficult, for them. We (perhaps naively) had not expected it to appear as often nor as intensely. What is clear, is the need to be prepared to spend extra time in supporting men through these situations.

The emancipatory or consciousness raising nature of forms of qualitative research are well known, as is the need to support participants and/or researchers through this sometimes traumatic process. This caution is most often cited in regard to feminist enquiry (Reinharz, 1992; Maynard & Purvis, 1994). We have found no reference to this in regard to researching or working with men.

(v) The impact and pervasiveness of stereotypes and myths.

Much of the research that explores the lives of men is found in feminist literature (Canaan & Griffin, 1990). In our reading of this literature the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was frequently referred to. Here males are said to take a "tough man" attitude in regard to their

approach to life and its problems (Brannon, cited in Harding, 1998, p11). Indeed, it has been suggested that there is a reluctance to involve males in early childhood services because of a fear that there would be a return to these more traditional understandings of male roles (Sumison, 2000).

Within the focus groups, many assumptions regarding hegemonic masculinity were debunked as discussion progressed. After an initial period, the dads had no trouble at all in exploring their individual realities. Indeed they were acutely aware that their lives (and those of the ones they cared for) were complex and changing.

We acknowledge that there are various and multiple positions we could have taken in the project. For example, as researcher, as fellow dad, as fellow male perhaps even as "collaborator". However, the picture we still clearly hold is of the energy, care and commitment the dads brought to the discussion. We cannot help but conclude that current models of gender analysis tend to be based in understandings of society more suited to the 20th century (perhaps earlier) and only serve to perpetuate stereotypes and myths about masculinity in general and fathering in particular. Perhaps it is time for us to "explore how men and women might work collectively to challenge existing hegemonic gender norms." (Sumison, 2000, p268).

Concerns about stereotypes and myths related to men, children and sexuality were never far removed from the survey responses or the focus group discussion. *This area* has been and will no doubt continue to be the subject of considerable debate. What is clear to us is that the dads we talked to felt the area of *sexuality* to be of profound importance in their lives, affecting them deeply and consistently. They were also clear that they had much to offer in the education of their own children as well as the children of others and would welcome the opportunity to be more involved but not within the current climate of suspicion and fear that pervades this area. As a research participant commented,

> *The situation seems to be that we [as a society] are so preoccupied about safety that, by implication, the environment is absolutely unsafe in so many ways especially in regard to abuse.*

(Research participant, 2000).

The ethical and methodological issues that arose during the research process led us to realise that not only is there a significant lack of research that explores the lives of men and men as dads but that these issues are complex and poorly understood. In addition, successful work involves the use of a range of insights and skills that are again poorly understood.

Recommendations

In order to move towards supporting families, as a whole, to grow and thrive in a supportive early childhood environment, we would make the following recommendations.

1. The need for more research on men (and dads)

This was never far from our thoughts as we moved through the project. It was quite noticeable that there is a lack of research in this area, especially research that explores the lived experiences of men in general and dads in particular. Even more importantly, there is an almost complete lack of research that explores the world of men from a position of respect. In the main, research is based on (and within) rather critical assumptions about men that were not supported in our work. These assumptions take no account of the manner in which the dads in the project (and we believe men in general) encounter and adapt to the complex pressures they face in contemporary society.

2. A need for collaborative approaches to research.

We do not believe our project would have been as successful as it was without the guidance achieved through a mix of people. These represented a "grass roots" (dads) organisation, an academic institution and a health promotion unit. This inclusive approach ensured the active support of participants, adherence to research quality and relevance to the overall goals. There was also a mix of genders on the research team. Indeed it would seem most odd to not have men substantially involved in research related to men.

3. That reviewers of research proposals carefully consider proposals for studies that involve men in regards to issues raised in this paper.

As we have mentioned, research that attempts to understand and respect the world of men is noticeably lacking. We believe that participants who are male are vulnerable in ways that are not commonly understood and require additional attention to protection. In all our reading we gained no confidence that researchers viewed men as even a potentially vulnerable group.

4. Research proposals and published research on families and family services, including early childhood education, should be critiqued in the light of issues raised in this paper.

In particular, the need to look for the absence of men's voices in research that purports to speak in gender inclusive terms. For example, researchers who say they are have done a study on or including men but do not include men in an appropriate manner in samples should make explicit their bias in reporting.

Conclusion

We consistently found the dads involved in the project shared their experiences openly and enthusiastically. By far the majority of the 124 dads talked with considerable interest and passion for their parenting role, often sharing stories of vulnerability and pain. They also demonstrated an ability to co-operate with each other in developing new insights into their world as well as creating innovative solutions to complex problems. They were adamant that they wanted to be involved in the lives of their loved ones and felt they had considerable (and largely unappreciated) talents to offer.

It is our belief that many others would welcome an increased involvement from dads (including early childhood services). However, facilitating this involvement will not be easy. Drawing on our research experience, this paper has identified several areas we believe inhibit involvement such as the difficulty in accessing marginalised dads as well as managing the influence of hegemonic processes active within a climate of suspicion and fear. We believe these tensions are not limited to research activity.

What is clear to us is that models and roles that have sustained us in the past in regard to parenting in general and fathering in particular are not helpful as we move into the 21st century. We need to develop new ways of supporting families in this age. However, we also believe that researching with dads carries with it challenges (and responsibilities) that are quite distinct and not commonly understood.

We would also suggest that (in regard to early childhood services) it is the responsibility of researchers and teachers to carefully consider their own attitudes and beliefs in regard to dads and set in motion initiatives that truly reflect an attitude of value and respect so sadly lacking for this group of people.

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David Mitchell and Philip Chapman are both fathers who collaborate in research activity in relation to fathering. David is a senior academic staff member in the School of Health Studies, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology. He is active in applying critical research methods to provide an environment and process where participants can "find their voice". Philip is a Health Promoter and President of the Child and Family Trust of New Zealand. He is actively involved in parenting issues and over the past few years has been running fathering groups as well as providing support and advocacy for Dads.

> *"We find working together has a number of advantages. Especially in bringing together complementary yet differing perspectives, one voice from the coalface, the other with an academic focus. We also believe our emphasis on partnership and empowerment with men and service providers alike has proven very successful".*