

Seminar 2 summary

Gender and Parenting Culture: Intensive Fatherhood?

April 3 2009, University of Cambridge,

Ellie Lee opened the day, thanking those who had helped with the organisation. She also thanked the ESRC for their funding of the seminar series. She re-capped the aims of the series, to explore 'parenting' as a social object distinct from child-rearing. Within a policy context, she noted that parenting was always presented in the language of being problematic. Parenting is increasingly seen as the most important causal factor in child outcome, thus styles of parenting are a direct cause for concern. Increasingly, 'good enough' parenting is not, in fact 'good enough', and parents are encouraged to 'optimise' their efforts through the inclusion of expert knowledge.

She outlined two themes for discussion: The notion that 'parenting' is gender neutral is problematic, thus the day aimed specifically to explore the experiences of fathers when they parent: Are the experiences of fathers similar to those of mothers in an intensive parenting climate? Secondly, she noted that the problem of fatherhood was most striking in the field of law and policy. The move from *Every Child Matters*, to *Every Parent Matters* might easily, she argued, be followed by an 'Every Father Matters' policy programme. What are the implications of this policy evolution?

A write up of the sessions held over the day follows.

AV recordings of these sessions can be found [here](#)

Papers and PPT slides can be found [here](#)

Session 1

Intensive fatherhood? The inclusion dynamic

Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work and Social Policy, Bradford University, spoke first on 'Engaging Fathers: Promoting Gender Equality?' She started by problematising many of the phrases in the title of her talk: What is gender equality? Is it desirable? Is 'engaging fathers' part of this project? Or does 'engaging fathers' compromise this aim?

Many policy developments have named fathers – such as child support, work-family balance (such as paternity leave) and contact in custody arrangements, and all of these have received much attention from scholars. Brid's focus for her talk today however, was on the area of policy which seeks to 'engage fathers', and the role of services, which until now have received little attention.

Noting that there was an ideological background of the 'absent father' or the 'distant father' Brid traced the genealogy of policy moves to 'engage fathers', noting that the idea that services are crucial to this aim was made most explicit at the dawn of the New Labour era in politics. The 1998 document 'Supporting Families', for example, was the first government consultation on families spoke explicitly about engaging dads, a trope that has been continued by the DCSF, and in programmes such as Sure Start. In 2008, there was an explicit aim to 'Dad-proof' public services, in the Think Fathers campaign, with proposed measures such as allowing dads to stay in hospital after the birth of their children, and encouraging reading between fathers and children.

Generally, it is the birth father who is called upon as a father in these documents. Yet she argued that the evidence that fathers' involvement is good for children is somewhat cherry-picked, from a range of sources including developmental psychology. Setting up an important theme for the day, she noted that the way in which the father-child relationship is framed in these documents is in the form of a dyad, to the exclusion of mothers (who, in fact, do much of the mediation). The sort of involvement required by fathers is strongly on the emotional rather than practical side of the parenting relationship (so, for example, reading not cooking or cleaning). Services are generally constructed as being totally mother-focussed, yet women are generally effaced from the parenting relationship. Children tend to be reduced to the status of 'outcomes', and there is little on their views as to what counts as fathering.

Brid concluded by asking whether this project to engage fathers was desirable – since some people see that it is an important part of a project of gender equality, whilst others see that it has eclipsed the labour of mothers in the parenting relationship.

Gayle Letherby, Professor of Sociology, Plymouth University, gave the second paper called 'Young Fathers: including fathers in the debate?'. This paper drew on several studies conducted with colleagues at the University of Coventry exploring the experiences of teenage dads. She noted that most studies of teenage parenting tend to focus on teen mums, and assume that dads are either absent or feckless. There is a lack of data on dads, despite the drive to get them more 'involved'.

Drawing on her data, Gayle outlined four themes for discussion:

1. Changing roles and responsibilities – many of her interviewees felt that fatherhood was a time of great change, expressing emotions such as fear and shock; experiences shared by many new parents, old or young.
2. Many young fathers spoke about how they planned to do fatherhood differently to their own dads, again, echoing the claims of many new fathers.
3. Many men said they felt excluded by services, and felt that they had to 'ask permission to look after my own child' (as one interviewee put it). It is interesting to note that as soon as one talks of 'engaging' fathers, it assumes they are *a priori* absent – not something testified to by Gayle's data.
4. Many young fathers pointed to the complexity of their relationships, echoing Brid's comment on the problematic nature of talking about father-child dyads. Many partners of young parents are not young themselves, and this introduces a complex power-dynamic. Gayle gave the example that some young mothers feel they have been 'saved' by older partners, at the same time that they can sometimes be threatened by them, emotionally or physically,

Jan Macvarish led the discussion, drawing on her summary of the last seminar. She brought out the five themes raised then, and discussed them with a specific focus on fatherhood:

1. Thinking about fathers calls into question a number of categories which emerged as

subjects of discussion in the previous seminar: notions of masculinity and femininity; the biological and the social; public and private; adult and child. Questions regarding the definitions of adulthood and childhood and the insecure boundary between the two seem to be central to many of the developments under discussion. She noted that there is an association between men and the public sphere (in employed labour) but that many of the efforts to 'engage dads' seem to see this as less important than the 'emotional openness' associated with the private sphere. Referring back to the previous seminar's thinking about women's relationship to the state, she also raised whether fathers are actually more dependent on the state for the confirmation of their status and identity confirmed than are mothers. The broader discussion of manhood and adulthood being in crisis also shapes the context in which contemporary fathering takes place.

2. Understanding the way in which parenting is re-moralised through apparently objective discourses such as science and medicine was a central theme of the January seminar. In discussing the construction of fatherhood, the need was evident to further interrogate claims to 'expert' and 'evidence-based' knowledge in the field of parenting. She noted that whereas there is a long history of ideologising and intervening in the biology and psychology of motherhood, fatherhood has not so far, been medicalised or subject to heavily prescriptive expert discourse. The 'science' of parenting seems rather weak in relation to fathers. When experts today talk of 'parenting' do they really mean 'mothering'? How do fathers fit into such expert claims-making? What impact, for example, does pre-conception advice to fathers have?

3. Changing definitions of 'the parent': their role and their responsibilities: in particular the twin processes by which the determining power of the parent role is both ideologically inflated and practically diminished. She noted the current policy claims that the right kind of fathering is a 'magic bullet' to remedy social problems and in particular, to offset disadvantage, but there seems to be little understanding about what this really means in practice. How far has there been a shift in what is demanded of fathers: has paternal responsibility for the economic well-being of the child shifted to a concern that father's take responsibility for the emotional well-being of their child?

4. The changing relationship between the State and the parent. Setting up an important topic for the day, Jan noted that the State appears to project its own relationship with fathers onto real relationships between fathers and children. Thus, if state services appear not to have any 'contact' with fathers, it is assumed that mothers and children also have little 'contact'. This is not backed up by empirical research. Where does the idea of the 'invisible' father, prevalent in recent policy discourse, come from – invisible to whom? To their families or to the state? When policy-makers speak of the need to 'engage' fathers, do they mean that the state should engage with them, or that fathers should engage in their own families? Does this represent a further colonization of intimate life? Jan noted that the idea that parents have been reduced to the status of 'partners' with the state in the raising of their children – again denoted by a language of engagement.

5. The impact of these political and cultural developments on the subjectivities of parents and children. She also noted the increasing association between parenting and

panopticism: with fathers 'performing' their fathering for the social audience – for example reading to their children or being encouraged to be present for their children in the school environment. Men, in particular, are already tied to notions of risk because of their association with abuse in the private sphere and as a sexual or violent threat in public spaces. How does this impact on men's experience of being parents?

Discussion

Ellie Lee noted the absence of one discussant, Jennie Bristow, who was unable to attend, but who had sent comments in lieu. Jennie wanted to raise the issue that the notion of earning a wage as being incidental to good fathering was highly problematic. Tying in with comments from the first seminar, the sublimation of parenting to desires for a career or money is an interesting social shift. Work increasingly seems to be second in the 'Work-life balance' debates.

Brid Featherstone noted that there is a difference between policy and rhetoric, that participants should be careful to use – breadwinning is still central to policy, but, certainly in rhetoric it is devalued.

Helen Reece questioned the idea of the father-child dyad, asking whether it wasn't actually desirable that men would have direct relationships with their children that did not have to be mediated by mothers. Brid agreed that it would be desirable, but that it wasn't what really happened in practice, and it was the 'effacement' of women from policy that she found problematic. Lena Dominelli noted that mothers mediate the relationship between fathers and their children for a variety of reasons – sometimes to benefit from state payments, and not necessarily for any wish to involve fathers for the benefit of their children. Chris Pawson agreed that there was a need to understand how children themselves construct fathers and fathering. Brid agreed, and also said that it would be interesting to speak with practitioners who are aiming to 'engage fathers' – what is it exactly that they want to see?

Session 2

Intensive fatherhood? Experience and culture

Esther Dermott, senior lecturer in sociology, University of Bristol, opened this session with a paper that asked whether intensive fatherhood actually exists. She argued that certainly much is demanded of fathers today – full-time work and active involvement in the care of their children – but it is less certain whether fatherhood is as tied up with guilt and expert knowledge as is intensive motherhood. She cited Lynn Jamieson's description of the concept of 'intimate' relationships as those which require knowledge and understanding of our inner selves and are dialogic. The importance of an emotional connection was evident in contemporary discourses of fatherhood.

Her study of fathers found diversity in the contexts in which fathering takes place, but her paper sought to draw out the general, overarching ideas that people are buying into when it comes to contemporary fatherhood. Her research explored fathers' views of fatherhood. Her key findings were:

- Men seemed to desire closer relationships with their children than they had with their own fathers, with talk of being a 'modern father'.
- Emotional openness was a key characteristic of a 'modern father'. This openness was counterposed to a 'distant' father, characterized by her respondents as typical of previous generations. The recognition and expression of emotion was described as 'latent' in previous generations, with fathers today recognizing the importance of 'disclosure'.
- The contemporary culture of fatherhood has heightened expectations of involvement which tend to correlate with time involvement.
- There are key moments in the day or in a child's routine which have become normative in the construction of father's 'intimate' relationships with their children – bath-time and bedtime.
- Esther pointed to the subjective element of time-use – not all time is equal – it is the meaning of time, not its quantitative aspect that is significant. The aspiration to putting time into the fathering relationship was seen as indicative of the strength of the emotional tie between father and child.
- 'Good fathering' was that which was least work-like; these were given high symbolic value, these tended to be activities in the evening, such as bath-time, bed-time, the reading of stories, and differed from the day-to-day care of looking after children or maintaining a household.
- Significant life events such as sports days and parents evening were also assigned high symbolic value. These were understood to facilitate communication between father and child.
- Esther raised the issue of whether these valued activities indicate a classed outlook, in particular in the normative value placed on school involvement and involvement in reading. However, she pointed out that such activities have been reflected or represented strongly in policy.
- She argued that this form of fatherhood does not necessarily lead to gender equality. Neither does it relegate fathers to second place as the father-child dyad is seen as exclusive. The quality of the relationship comes to the fore in the father-child dyad. Behaviours are relatively fluid and open to negotiation as it is the quality of the relationship and not the acts which constitute it.

Charlotte Faircloth, PhD candidate in Anthropology at Cambridge University, gave her paper next, titled 'Attachment parenting, gender roles and (in)equalities of care'. She began by noting the shift in the meaning of 'parent' from noun to verb. Her paper aimed to look at this shift at the level of experience, in particular, by exploring the notions of fatherhood found amongst mothers operating within a strong attachment model of parenting. She characterised these ways of thinking as emphasising the physiological rather than the genetic relationship between mother and child. There is an elevation of nature, but also of scientific claims to the rightness of this way of child-rearing. There is talk of 'instinct' and things just 'feeling right' with strongly embodied notions of mothering and parenting. The central question is,

how are fathers configured within this culture of attachment parenting? Are they marginalised? Are they relegated to a passive role? Charlotte's key findings were:

- There is a tendency to assign to the father a passive role as breadwinner who facilitates maternal intensification.
- With fathers, there is not the same irrefutable biology as with mothers, but they are still seen as playing a vital role: the father is cast as the protector of the intensive mother-child dyad. Besides breadwinning, he may also be required to cook, clean and sometimes change the baby.
- The intensive maternal identity is potentially threatened by the involvement of others in feeding.
- The mother-child relationship is primary to the couple relationship.

Discussion

Zeynep Gurtin-Broadbent: The idea of investment seems to be central to contemporary constructions of parenting. This is 'good-enough-plus parenting'. It was noted how in Charlotte's description of attachment parenting, the father's supportive role is primarily domestic and practical whereas amongst Esther's fathers, the elective aspects of parent were significant rather than the necessary. There was commonality in the sense of sacrifice that was not begrudged.

Jonathan Ives: In his research, men saw themselves as making moral progress by rejecting their 'natural programming' to impregnate and 'bugger off'.

Ellie Lee: Esther's fathers seemed to display a lack of defensiveness in contrast to mothers. It seemed to be acceptable to have 'intimacy in chunks' whereas in women's accounts, they have to make excuses for pursuing their careers. Is this modified across the life-course? Are relationships with younger children more readily understood in terms of intimacy? If intimate fatherhood is constructed around openness, how can this continue into adolescence? Is there a reappearance of guilt about previous absences in earlier childhood? Are later problems interpreted as the result of a failure of earlier intimacy?

Jude Browne: Did Charlotte's women think the children of those who breast-fed long-term were superior to other children?

Richard Collier: asking about the sex/gender distinction, he asked whether the masculinity concept can hold together the contradiction.

Esther Dermott: (Responding to Ellie) when she asked her fathers about paternity leave, it did not really fit with men's understandings of fatherhood. There is no push from elsewhere necessitating excuses when it comes to working versus childcare. Regarding the fathering of older children, reading bedtime stories gave way to giving lifts as the time when intimate fathering takes place.

Charlotte Faircloth: (In response to Jonathan) monogamy was claimed as natural by the mothers in her research. (In response to Jude) They consider their children as

'gifts to the future' and that they are optimizing the species. They see that their role as intensive mothers validates why they are not working outside the home.

Jude Browne: Are the intensive mothers ever able to admit that a child is problematic?

Charlotte: Far greater ambiguity emerged from her observations of mothers than from the interviews. A difficult child is a problem for these mothers.

Session 3

Sally Sheldon, Professor of Law, University of Kent 'Fatherhood and Legal Change: Joint birth registration'

The assumptions that law and policy make about fathers are evident across a broad range of law. Sally's paper looks at the suggested change in the law regarding birth registrations to a default presumption that unmarried fathers should be named on the birth certificate of babies. Currently, married parents have a shared obligation to be registered, this can be done by one parent. In the case of unmarried parents, the mother may register her husband, but both parents must consent. The 'problem' which the suggested legal change is designed to resolve is that 43% of children are now being born to unmarried parents. About 15% of these children do not have a father named on the birth certificate (7% of all children do not have a father named on their birth certificate). Additionally, policy-makers have spoken of the need for fathers to be involved in their children's lives and claim that naming on the birth certificate leads to increased levels of paternal involvement. Sally disputed that there is robust evidence for the last step of the argument.

People who are the sole registers on a baby's birth certificate tend to be mothers who are poorer, single, younger, whose pregnancy tends to have been unplanned and who lack the knowledge about the significance of registering a father. Little is known about the fathers who are not registered. The proposed reform is currently in the House of Lords and will amend the 1953 Birth and Deaths Registration Act. According to the proposal, the unmarried mother must provide information regarding the father, except where she declares:

- a) the child legally fatherless (was conceived through AID)
- b) The father is dead
- c) The father's identity is unknown
- d) The father's whereabouts are unknown
- e) The father lacks capacity
- f) The mother has reason to fear for her safety if the father is contacted.

There is a consensus that no financial sanction should be given to mothers who do not comply, but it has been mooted that the Perjury Act could be extended which brings in the possibility of a jail sentence.

The rationale given for the proposed reform is:

- a) to promote child welfare
- b) that children have a right to know their parents – to a ‘genetic truth’
- c) that children have a right to be acknowledged by and cared for by a father
- d) that obstacles to paternal involvement should be removed
- e) that fatherhood and motherhood entail rights and responsibilities

Sally argued that this is not all about identifying fathers as financially responsible. There has been a change in the policy discourse with a shift to greater sympathy for the father as excluded. However, the reforms have also been argued for on the grounds that they will engage ‘indifferent’ fathers.

This raises questions such as, what is a birth certificate? Is it a genetic record or an instrument of child welfare? The meaning of birth registration is confused. Is it a backward-looking document of the creation of a person or a forward-looking document enshrining the social roles of parents?

Jonathan Ives from the Centre for Biomedical Ethics, University of Birmingham was the discussant for this paper. He began by noting how fathers and rights are linked through responsibility. In response to Sally, he asked:

- What does it mean to say that this is in the interests of children?
- What does ‘acknowledgement’ meant? Is it a public declaration?
- The empirical evidence linking men who sign birth certificates with more involved fathering is weak – one US study.
- Signed birth certificates give fathers rights.

He made the distinction between negative rights, which are a ‘freedom from’ and are earned by virtue of being human, and positive rights which are a claim on the actions of another or a ‘freedom to’, for example, being earned by being part of society and have to be continually earned. There are also privileged rights which are contingent on a particular competence being demonstrated, such as that by police or doctors. The right for the child to know their father seems to be a positive right. The right to be a father – to be involved in decision-making for the child, to have rights and power raises the question whether power over a child’s life should be a positive basic right or a positive privileged right.

Without tighter definition of what a parent is, the right seems to be without content. These are not rights to be earned other than by producing sperm. The competency of the progenitor as a parent is not morally significant. Parental rights are also reversible in the face of parental incompetence. In the proposal, rights are here offered as a carrot before they are earned.

Discussion

Ellie Lee: Formally, there now seems to be no difference between married and unmarried people. If couples are not getting married, then birth registration becomes an active process. It is significant that this is voluntary. By removing the voluntary aspect there is a risk of de-responsibilizing those who currently opt in as a voluntaristic, significant step.

Zeynep Gurtin-Broadbent: How will this work with today's fragmented relationships. Do we really care about fathers' rights or about delineating responsibilities?

Jude Browne: it does not seem to be right that a father's rights could be a privileged right as this puts them on a totally different footing to the mother.

Sally Sheldon: there are inconsistencies in what a birth certificate is, for example, one can have a new birth certificate made in a new transgender identity, i.e. it is not a record of genetic truth.

Jonathan Ives: This proposal is not about rights, it is actually about getting men to take responsibility within a rights rhetoric. This is morally wrong.

Martin Richards: It is inconsistent to argue that the birth certificate is a genetic record, it was never this. In the past, marriage was the determinate of paternity.

Gayle Letherby: There is an assumption that there is one type of parent. 'Real parents'. In the case of adoptive parents, they have to prove their competence.

Sally Sheldon: the fragmentation of fatherhood means that different roles are played by different people. The proposal 'utterly ignores' the impact for lesbian couples. Civil partnerships extend the parental presumption.

Lena Dominelli: Why is there such concern if only 7% of children do not have fathers on birth certificates? It seems to be about trying to get anyone involved in caring for children to be financially responsible for children. We should remember that women's rights to children are recent – in the past, fathers have had rights while mothers have had responsibilities. This sounds like retrograde step which is not about children's welfare.

Pam Lowe: It is about tying certain fathers to their children, delineating those able to take financial responsibility. The birth certificate is a marker of citizenship and property.

Mavis Maclean: She has acted as an advisor to the Lord Chancellor and was party to the discussions at which this reform was mooted. It was, she said, primarily a concern with child support, nothing to do with child welfare or parenting. Lord Falconer rejected it but it has popped up again – it is all about benefit payments.

Jonathan Ives: Parenthood rights are practiced out of love. The fragmentation gives it a positive spin – it is possible to delineate different kinds of father.

Sally Sheldon: There is a merit in separating out genetic from social facts.

Session 4

Richard Collier, Professor of Law, University of Newcastle: Father's Rights, Fatherhood and Parenting Culture

The politicisation of social and legal ideas of fatherhood is bound up with a reconfiguration of gender relations. Over the past year fatherhood has been central to a range of law and policy debates: e.g. Engaging Fathers, Think Fathers, DCFS child health strategy, the Fatherhood Institute, 'Dad-proofing' family policies, EHRC 'Working Better Report', Children's Society report, CSJ Family Law Review 2008.

- There have also been specific developments in law: e.g. The Children and Adoption Act, HFEA 2008, birth registration debate, new child maintenance laws.

- There has been significant change in relation to fathers' rights; e.g. in relation to specific fathers' groups, a realignment of stakeholders around the need to encourage co-operation, a growing engagement with the emotional fallout of separation (e.g. Kids in the Middle).

- The research base of fatherhood and masculinities has become more textured – more complex understanding of male subject.

- In a growing literature on fathers' rights groups range of issues have not been addressed – limits of seeing as backlash and need to recognise double edged nature of debates in this area: need for framework that might engage with problems both parents and children can face in separation.

- This links to need to adequately engage with questions of emotion and personal lives in approaching fathers rights politics: limits to simply tracking developments in this area to legal changes and cultural shifts (e.g. around idea of father as victim of law, masculine crisis).

- Rather, we need to locate in context of reconfiguration of rights, care, responsibilities and ideas about men of masculinities (in law, policy); questions of policy, emotion and separation; changing ideas about fatherhood and intimacy; not to overstate impact of fathers' groups.

- Events are bound up heightening in the symbolic power of law, as described by Helen Reece as people seeking affirmation through law in what might be called a therapeutic culture: on closer examination, fathers' rights claims map to the kinds of messages law itself contains about fathers e.g. relationship with children unmediated by mother.

- There are deep-seated uncertainties about what it means to be a father. Is this part of the intensive parenthood shift?

- The broader context has undergone some significant shifts: for example there has not been a displacement of fathers from the family but rather a refiguring of a nexus of assumptions which constructed the father as a beneficial presence in the first phase. We have seen changing ideas of childhood and shifts in masculinity.

- It is also important to recognise issues of class, race and ethnicity in a re-moralising of fatherhood, and this links to sifts around parenting culture
- Developments can tell us much about structures of feeling of times in which live – should be simply dismissed as minority activity.

Discussion

Jude Browne: What were Fathers for Justice asking for that alienated the middle-class?

Brid Featherstone: who will do the actual work of childrearing when mothers and fathers are after intimate parenting? Outsourcing of actual care?

Lena Dominelli: how do men define their angst about absence? Do men lose out when they cannot play the breadwinner role?

Richard Collier: the sociology of childhood literature is very important and useful.

Evelyn Mahon: class has been obliterated and pathologised. Psychology is partly responsible for this. There are parallels between the men's movement and the women's movement.

Richard: in the 1980s there was a focus on property and finance. In the 1990s there has been a focus on children.

Pam Lowe: claims for the refusal of fatherhood are not addressed in policy. Who is responsible for conception?

Ellie Lee: it is important to see the Fathers' Rights movement as a discrete phenomenon expressing wider developments. The lived experience of intimacy is very individual and idiosyncratic. It seems that we are moving in the reverse direction to any possibility of the socialisation of childcare.