

Scourfield, J. (2006) The challenge of engaging fathers in the child protection process. *Critical Social Policy*, special issue on gender and child welfare, 26, 2: 440-449.

*Abstract*

This commentary piece gives an overview of the well-known difficulties of engaging fathers in the child protection process and makes some suggestions about constructive responses from services. There is brief discussion of the historical context of the problem, current child welfare policy, the culture of front-line practice amongst child protection staff and the behaviour of fathers who come to the attention of child protection staff.

Ideas for changes in policy and practice include embracing more sophisticated theory, avoiding the dualistic responses of seeing men as either risk or resource, institutionalising the engagement of men as core business and building on interventions that have been found by research to be effective. A range of effective interventions may be relevant, including cognitive-behavioural work with abusive men and strengths-based family work such as the family group conference.

Keywords: fathers, child abuse, child protection, social work, gender

Much of this brief commentary is given over to explaining the roots of the problem of engaging fathers in child protection and describing some of the ways in which the problem manifests itself. Rather than being purely problem focused though, it ends on a more positive note by suggesting some ways forward. The commentary is structured into four main sections. These focus on social policy influences, practice culture, the behaviour of men and some ideas for the way forward.

The problems with engaging fathers in the child protection process are familiar to professionals and child welfare researchers. The criticism of established practice is, in brief, that child protection staff such as social workers spend most of their time working with mothers and that men involved with children tend not to be engaged. This practice can of course be criticised from two very different perspectives. There is the feminist argument that most maltreatment of children within families is the responsibility of men and that it is therefore unjust to make women/mothers responsible for this by focusing the scrutiny of the state on them. There is also a men's rights argument that fathers are denied meaningful involvement in major decisions about their children by not being involved enough in statutory processes. In referring to 'fathers', I mean of course not only biological parents but also other men who are involved in the care of children, as step-fathers or as the partner of a child's mother who does not live with the child but has significant contact.

It should be noted from the outset that I am taking it as read that we should be engaging fathers more in child protection. As O'Hagan (1997), amongst others, has observed, numerous enquiry reports have pointed out the dangers to children of not engaging abusive men and especially men involved with children and their mothers but without 'parental responsibility'. Abusive men are indeed the cause of most child protection concerns, often directly as abusers, or at least at one remove, perhaps as a threatening presence that affects a mother's parenting. But it is also true that many of the men that

child protection workers encounter have something to offer children and most children want contact with most fathers.

### Social policy: past and present, national and local

As Christie (2001) explains, to understand the position of men within social work, as clients and as workers, we need to remember that the welfare state was founded on the assumption of men being breadwinners and women full-time mothers. It should not be at all surprising that there is a deeply rooted legacy of men not being considered the business of child protection workers.

The history of children's services shows assumptions that the role was one of women working with women. There is a legacy of taking for granted that working in child protection is women's business. As Carter Hood *et al.* (1998) note, the Curtis Committee, whose report in 1946 recommended the establishment of the Children's Departments, said that they used the feminine pronoun when referring to Children's Officers 'not with any aim of excluding men from those posts but because we think it may be found that the majority of persons suitable for the work are women' (quoted in Carter Hood *et al.* 1998: 472). Equally there is a legacy of simply assuming that the main client base will be women. Abrams and Curran (2004) characterize social work as traditionally something that went on 'between women'.

As Daniel *et al.* (2005) argue, the Green Paper on children's services in England, *Every Child Matters*, was a lost opportunity for the government to have recognised some of the crucial gender issues in child protection work. There has been attention within policy to child protection and indeed to aspects of masculinity - a new development - and fathering in particular. New Labour can overall be seen as positive about men within the home (Scourfield and Drakeford, 2002), whatever Fathers 4 Justice might think. But the focus is on the value of ordinary dads spending time with children, and men who are abusive to women or children are not considered within these areas of policy. They are, in effect, seen as offenders and not fathers. Child protection workers know that things are rather more complicated than that, as they work with families where men are identified as fathers but are also abusive in one way or another, or families where there is a man around - somewhere - who is causing problems for the welfare of children even if he is not publicly acknowledged as having any kind of father role. In very many cases there is no criminal conviction and the children's mother apparently wants the family to stay together.

Another issue of national policy is the shift towards social services being more and more residual and the innovative developments in family interventions being concentrated in the voluntary sector and new organizations (Parton, 2002). These innovations include the recent emphasis on engaging fathers in family support, a development which is influencing practice in areas such as Sure Start, but is not having such an impact on social services.

In terms of local social policy, local authorities, Safeguarding Children Boards and so on can influence the priorities for child protection work. So, for example, focusing on sexual abuse or domestic violence as targets for intervention might be thought to increase the attention given to abusive men, though we know (see Scourfield, 2003) that the common practice is to put pressure on women to get violent and abusive men out of the house rather than to engage with men about their behaviour. A child protection focus that could lead to more engagement of fathers then becomes turned into another reason not to engage them. I also found in the authority where I did my ethnographic research (see below) that physical (rather than emotional) neglect was being prioritized, following what staff perceived to be the approach of the Bridge Child Care Consultancy, and this only intensified the scrutiny of mothering, since it was mothers who were, in practice, held responsible for the physical state of their houses and their children.

#### Practice culture in child protection work

As Evans and Harris (2004) have recently argued in relation to social workers, Lipsky's (1980) work on 'street level bureaucrats' can be seen to be still relevant 25 years on in some respects. Lipsky sees 'policy' not so much in the decisions of governments as in the actions of front-line staff such as social workers, teachers and housing officers. The discretion we find in street level bureaucracy is fundamentally influenced by occupational culture. What I mean by occupational culture is the ways of thinking and talking about clients that are (and are not) acceptable in the culture of the team, and also the approaches to assessing people and intervening that become taken for granted.

My ethnographic research in a social work team focused on how clients were constructed as gendered in the office culture (Scourfield, 2003). The discourses of masculinity I encountered in the social work office were mainly pejorative - men as a threat, as no use, as irrelevant and as absent - and there was a whole host of reasons for not engaging men. There was a complex picture though, and there were also ideas around that men and women should be treated the same, that both partners of a couple in conflict were 'as bad as each other' and also a minority of men were constructed as a resource for children when the children's mother was not succeeding in her expected role. The notion of 'men as a threat' was a particularly dominant construction, not surprisingly, given the kinds of problems that caused referrals to be made to the team. What interested me was that whereas sex offenders were regarded as understandable according to a predictable template of behaviour and attitudes, men's physical violence towards women was subject to a wide range of different interpretations, including both the mainstream feminist account of violence based on men's coercion of women over disputed domestic authority and also more traditional pre-feminist accounts of domestic violence such as mutual hostility in a couple or alcohol as the primary cause.

Discourses of femininity are very important in understanding the problems of engaging men. I found social workers - both men and women equally - talking of women as profoundly oppressed in the families they worked with - oppressed by poverty but especially by men. Despite this feminist consciousness, when it came to decisions about children's welfare in practice, the social workers saw women as ultimately responsible

for children, in a way that men were simply not expected to be. The social workers did ascribe to an ideal of gender equality in families, but the families they worked with were seen as so far from equal that it was women who had to be expected to make changes and indeed, despite being oppressed by social forces, were seen as ultimately making free choices to stay with abusive men or leave them.

It is certainly the case that the skills and knowledge needed for engaging men are not seen as core learning needs for child protection staff. University social work programmes do not prioritise them and neither do most employers in their training plans for their staff. There are developments ongoing in work with fathers, for example the training and conferences organized by Fathers Direct. But these tend on the whole to be attended by those working with the worried well (in a family support context) and not by those working with men whose behaviour is deeply problematic all round. This training and these practice developments are concentrated in family support services, Sure Start programmes and the voluntary sector.

### The behaviour of men

Family life and the social contexts of intimacy are developing rapidly in late modernity, as the ESRC CAVA (Care and the Values of Welfare) research has shown (Williams, 2004). Contemporary fathering specifically is increasingly diverse and a more complex understanding is needed of men as fathers (Featherstone, 2003). Smith's research (2004) shows that across most of the European Union men have become more involved with

child care over time (although there is no significant wave effect for the UK). However, despite there being evidence of some moves towards equalizing the gendered division of labour, the problem of engaging men is not just about staff attitudes and practices but about real problems with real men as clients. Claims such as that of Fathers Direct in publicity for their conference on fathers and child protection in 2001 that fathers should be seen as ‘protectors’, with no mention made of the risks that some fathers can pose to children, give out a dangerous overall message. Certainly men can help to protect children, but it is important to acknowledge the real threat that fathers pose to women and children in many of the child protection cases that social workers and other front-line staff deal with.

It should be recognized that there are many severe problems in the families that child protection staff encounter. These problems are often associated with profound gender inequality and intractable conflicts over the gendered division of labour. So, for example, violence against women partners is routine in the case loads of child protection social workers (see Hearn, 1999). Highly traditional gendered divisions of child care can be seen to be associated with some of the worst forms of child maltreatment, including child murder (Cavanagh, Dobash and Dobash, 2005). Some men avoid social workers, health visitors and so on, perhaps seeing child care as women’s business or perhaps not wanting to face up to the problems with their behaviour. Some men that are encountered by staff have a very threatening demeanour, which seriously puts people off from working with them (although as O’Hagan and Dillenburg [1995] observe, men social workers are more at risk than women and women clients are more violent towards staff than men are).



There are a number of serious problems here which have to be taken seriously and not dismissed either by academic deconstruction or by a desire to make mainstream family services more father-friendly.

### The ways forward

So what is to be done? Logically the first step is for gender to be made explicit in policy. This point has been made by other authors in this volume, so I will not expand on it here. Suffice to say that the need to engage men more in the child protection process is one of the most pressing reasons for policy to tackle gender inequalities and gendered behaviour head on.

Social workers need more sophisticated theory for practice. There is not scope here to do more than drop in a reference to gender theory such as Bob Connell's (2005) on masculinities. Although Connell sees validity in the careful use of the concept of patriarchy, he uses the plural term 'masculinities' because there is not only one model of manhood in any given society. It is, for example, possible to be an out gay man and regard yourself (and be regarded by others) as very much a man. However, not all masculinities are equal, so Connell talks of hegemonic, marginalized and subordinated masculinities, in recognition that there are hierarchies of social power (the concept of marginalized masculinity is especially relevant to the clients of child protection services). Connell also says that sociology is not enough and we need the insights of psychoanalysis to understand the complex biographies of individual men.

Men need to be regarded as core business, whether or not they have parental responsibility, and this needs to become institutionalized within services. There is a precedent for referred family centres that work with child protection cases to insist on the attendance of men where they are involved with children, giving the message that they will only work with this family if both parents attend. One such referred family centre (from the voluntary sector) in South Wales has managed to achieve a higher level of father involvement than is typical in mainstream child protection services, for a variety of reasons (Pithouse *et al.*, 2001). Taking the stance that men have to be involved in assessments and family interventions might of course mean working outside of office hours for some men who work during the day (although in reality many of the men child protection staff work with are unemployed) but this could also be the case for working with mothers, and it is a shift that staff will have to make.

We have to see men as both risk and resource for women and children, and avoid 'either or' approaches. Some practitioners and some academic commentators reject all but a narrow range of interventions that are explicitly focused on challenging men's minimization of their abusiveness. Equally there are others working in the field whose therapeutic orientation is entirely geared towards dealing with men's pain. Practice philosophies become very polarized between those who are seen as 'men bashers' and those who are seen as 'letting men off the hook' (Scourfield and Dobash, 1999). This polarization is unhelpful, and what is needed is openness towards a range of interventions. Yes, we are talking in most cases about men who abuse women and

children, and the most important part of any intervention has to be making these men accountable for that abuse and changing behaviour. But these men who are the clients of child protection social workers are themselves socially marginalized (usually they come from the extremes of relative poverty) and are also personally damaged, so interventions must respond to that reality.

There is evidence that cognitive-behavioural interventions can be effective with some offenders, including men who are violent towards women (see Dobash *et al.*, 2000 on pro-feminist interventions). Although these are more often used in a criminal justice context and more often in specialist services, I think that if offered training, mainstream child protection social workers could use some of these techniques. As Milner (2004) has written recently though, we need to go beyond the idea that abusive men can simply be confronted about their behaviour. A much more diverse toolkit of practice skills is required.

Strengths-based whole family interventions such as family group conferences have potential for involving men without them dominating (as some feminist commentators have feared). Recent research on conferences in South Wales (Holland *et al.*, 2005) found that there was a much higher involvement from men than in traditional interventions and that some men who were described as potentially difficult and domineering were in fact civilised by the conference process; at least they made constructive contributions and did not impose their will on decisions. Crucially, the children really valued the process of getting their wider families together to discuss their welfare.

There are of course no easy answers to the problem of engaging men in the child protection process. It is, however, a pressing problem that warrants more attention than it gets from policy makers, researchers and practitioners. Whether you are more inclined to view the men that child protection staff encounter as risk or resource, either way it is imperative that they are more involved with assessments and interventions.

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