

Masculinity and fatherhood in post divorce relationships

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Abstract

This paper, which draws on my Honours research, is situated against a background of a supposed 'crisis of masculinity'. Divorced fathers are usually the non-residential parent after separation/divorce. Research indicates that divorced fathers are challenged by their circumstances, by on-going contact with ex-partners, and support/maintenance obligations (Smyth 2004). Many men are likely to drop out of their children's lives as a result. This research explores men's subjective interpretations of their post divorce lives which include their changing feelings and experiences of fatherhood, family life, and Family Law. The paper draws on interview data from focus group research with seven members of a *Dads in Distress* support group. For the fathers in this research divorce constitutes a major life transition that provokes a questioning of identity and the ways in which experiences of divorce and parenting vary in terms of gender. This study also indicated that the personal relationships of fathers are in no way static and require an ongoing negotiation with the legal system, ex-partners as well as themselves as they construct various masculine roles and identities after divorce.

Keywords: Masculinity, Fathers, Divorce, Relationships, Emotions, Distress.

Introduction

After a marriage or relationship breakdown many men find it difficult to ask for support, express their anguish in non destructive ways and/ or to deal with the immense pain and confusion that comes with relationship breakdown, and in most cases, loss of daily contact with children (Smyth 2004). In this paper, which emerges from my honours research project, I will argue that the constructions of masculinity and fatherhood, in families and relationships, play an instrumental role in how men feel about their roles, their identities as fathers and husbands and indeed their actions. My research aims to explore the subjective understandings of a group of fathers in relation to their post divorce lives. This study is informed by a social constructivist/ interpretivist epistemology. I operate from a reflexive position of being informed by

the current literature on masculinity, fatherhood and families and by qualitative and poststructuralist methodologies.

In this paper I want to report on the conduct of a focus group discussion with seven men who regularly attended a support group called *Dads In Distress* (DIDs). I provide an account of this discussion and highlight and analyse the ways in which this discussion unfolded. This analysis is preceded by a brief discussion of the literature on masculinity, new families and divorce. I also provide a brief outline of the methodological issues that shape this research.

Marriage and divorce: a crisis of masculinity?

In my research I have used R.W. Connell's (2005) description of masculinity as the physical and behavioural characteristics that are associated with being a male. These characteristics are socially constructed and do not occur within a social vacuum. They are influenced by the interactions of historical, social, cultural and political factors (Brod & Kaufman 1994; Collier 1995; Connell 2005; Kimmel Hearn and Connell 2005). I have developed an understanding of men and masculinities as socially constructed, produced, and reproduced rather than somehow just 'naturally' one way or another. It also means that masculinity is a process/state that changes across time (history) and space (culture). The resulting forms of masculinities, which we come to recognize as ideals, are a product of the intersection of gender with other social structures, such as marriage and family (Kimmel et al. 2005: 3).

Nock (1998) suggests that marriage and family life are fundamental to dominant ideals of adult masculinity. Nock (1998: 44) claims that ideals of masculinity are sustained when men are fathers to their wives' children, providers for their families and act as protectors of their families. It is these elements of masculinity that coincide

with men's definitions of fatherhood (Nock 1998; Townsend 2002). Marriage and co-residency are where men are able to perform hegemonic masculine ideals (Catlett and McKenry 2004). Men's breadwinning role and their economic support to their children have been a means to perform their masculinity, but have also been a unifying element in fathers' lives in their sense of self (Catlett and McKenry 2004). The attainment of and access to financial resources enables fathers to exercise power in families. In turn, those ideals are often used to define 'the successful man' (Catlett and McKenry 2004).

Catlett and McKenry (2004) argue that contemporary culturally dominant ideals of fatherhood (the 'new father' and 'father as provider') are inherently conflictual, and that they create significant tensions for men as they seek to enact these masculine ideals. Nonetheless, masculinity continues to be defined in terms of paid work outside of the home (father as provider) and so violating this order to spend time with children and undertake housework (new father) can be seen as a 'transgressive act' (Pease 2002: 93).

Introducing the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the context of fathers' post divorce lives creates a space for me to consider and theorize how men's expectations and aspirations of achieving their 'manhood' is shaped by the intensely emotional process of being a non residential divorced father. It also allows me to observe whether certain expectations and aspirations for masculinity change as circumstances change. The changing nature of masculinities and men's subsequent analysis of their own roles within their families as husbands and fathers invites my research to consider what has been constructed as 'the crisis of masculinity' (Beynon 2002). Although the manifestation and experience of such a 'crisis' is ill-defined and elusive, this 'crisis' has previously been recognized by the scrutiny masculinity has endured

from social concerns around employment, changing family patterns, men's reluctance to face up to physical and psychological problems, to the notion that traditional masculinity is simply 'out-of-fashion' (Beynon 2002: 78-83).

The crisis becomes even more pronounced when fathers experience divorce (Beynon 2002; Catlett and McKenry 2004; Ihinger-Tallman et al. 1995). Divorce creates fundamental changes in the family systems in terms of gender (Arendell 1995). Many divorced fathers not only experience a loss of their home, loss of regular contact with children and a loss of their major source of social and emotional support (Catlett and McKenry 2004), but they also experience role ambiguity in their masculine identity and their self-conception as a father (Ihinger- Tallman et al. 1995: 60). Men's rigid attachment to a particular (hegemonic) masculine status may result in some men being ill-equipped to deal with the emotional strain that comes with the changing nature of family life and relationships in the 21st century. Divorce and being a non-resident father has been found to contribute to a sense of loss, disempowerment, shame, humiliation and fear in male adjustment to family life after divorce and to what constitutes a 'legitimate' masculine/ father status (Catlett and McKenry 2004; Levant 1997).

Talking it through man to man: a focus group discussion

My concern with how particular men understand these issues locates my work in a social constructionist framework. In this frame it was determined that a focus group interview would be a useful method for qualitative data (Babbie 2007: 305-309). University Ethics approval was granted to conduct a focus group with men from the DIDs group.

According to Khan and Manderson (cited in Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005: 76) a focus group is a qualitative method 'with the primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population to gain understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of the group's participants'. This involves participants who come from similar backgrounds and experiences or have a common denominator.

Dads in Distress holds weekly meetings throughout Australia and has a number of purposes, mainly to provide a safe forum for men going through the trauma of divorce, separation or relationship breakdown to express their grief. In July 2009, seven regular participants from DIDs took part in a semi-structured focus group which was reliant on the existing relationships among these fathers to facilitate an atmosphere of trust and openness so that rich and detailed conversation about the key themes could emerge. It has been suggested that men are less inclined to discuss their personal details for research purposes unless they have developed a sense of trust, safety and familiarity with the researcher (Zeller 1993). For this reason, I was invited to attend weekly meetings as a guest to quietly participate in and observe the meetings as a means of building rapport with the fathers. This meant that by the time the focus group was conducted for data collection, the fathers and I had developed a level of trust, understanding and respect.

As a researcher I was also positioned reflexively within the research since my personal experiences and interests provided this research with direction. Having experienced the divorce of my parents at a young age, as well as the legal separation of my mother's second marriage during the course of this research, I required a methodology that enabled me to express and recognise the links that exist between my understandings and discoveries as a researcher and my perceptions and interpretations

as a person. In adopting this position, I acknowledged that the many identities I brought to the research affected what I saw, how I interpreted observations and data, as well as how I proceeded (Law 2000).

For this reason, I was careful to build my starting point as a researcher in an ethical and respectful manner. This meant that I used a reflexive journal where I maintained ongoing entries containing my written reflections on my developing project, experiences and thoughts, and as a means of enhancing ethical and methodological rigour (Smith 1999). Since the themes of masculinity and divorce are still very much pertinent in my personal life, the information from my reflexive journal created an ‘audit trail’ of my reasoning, judgement and emotional reactions to the construction of this research. For example, on the 28 April 2009, after my first visit to DIDs my journal entry read:

I was asked why I chose to study divorced dads. The first thing that popped in to my head was the immense pain and confusion I felt as a child growing up trying to come to terms with the experience of divorce. But my answer was that divorced fathers are underrepresented in the literature. I thought that that was an appropriately ‘masculine’ way to answer the question. But it was only a small part of the story. I wondered if these men were also only sharing a small, ‘masculine’, part of their stories. I was intrigued, I pondered on what would be shared as the meeting progressed.

John Law’s (2000) argument for allowing the ‘personal’ in to social research by acknowledging the personal narratives and interpellations of the researcher and the researched can be understood as a structured combination of intersecting subjectivities and subject-object relationships. The expression of these intersecting subjectivities unfolded during the focus group and shapes the analysis I present here.

The subjective interactions allowed me to explore the post separation/ divorced lives of DIDs members: Harry, Simon, Paul, Luke, James, Bill and Peter. Each of them provided emotionally charged accounts of the profound changes and adjustments to their identities and practices as a result of their relationship breakdowns. The focus

group discussion produced a number of recurrent themes that I identified throughout the transcription of the data. These themes I labelled as Anger, Confusion, Distress and Love. These emotions were provoked by, or attached to, various individuals and processes: ex-partners, family members, Family Law processes and officials, and children. These themes were prominent in the various responses shared by the participants, though the general tone throughout the discussion was a combination of intense emotions, especially a sense of anger to perceived gender-based injustices which permeated throughout the entire group. Bill provided comments that were representative of this:

When you divorce and if your gender happens to be male that amount of control that you have is unfairly against you.

He later added:

[W]hen you actually do split you go ‘well you’re not equal, you’re male, your gender is male’, but I’m a really good male and I’m a better parent than that cow!

However, in this paper I have decided to focus on the emotional aspects of the stories from Simon and Luke. Both of these men described experiencing a very happy married life and the divorce, which was initiated by their ex-partners, was not anticipated. Their ability to continue to perform what they saw as their father role appeared to be greatly determined by the decisions or attitudes of their ex- wives.

Luke

Luke is 39 years old. He was married for 13 years and has been separated for two and a half to three years. His ex-wife initiated the divorce and he explained that this ‘hit me like a tonne of bricks’. He has a daughter who is 11 years old. He took a couple of years off work to care for her in the earlier years of her life. He explains that his experience as a ‘stay-at-home’ dad was not without its challenges:

I found myself...in that context in the school and social circles as well, I found myself very much ostracized from the cliquey mothers (Luke).

Luke's unconventional arrangement to postpone his employment status was a demonstration of his deep love and genuine interest in the day-to-day care of his daughter. Regardless of fulfilling what he describes as an equal co-parenting relationship with his ex-partner while married, he feels as though his status as a non residential parent affords him fewer rights to make decisions regarding his daughter's life. After an argument with his ex-wife, Luke recalls:

[S]he said 'you are nothing but a biological sperm donor', and I guess that's pretty much how she summed up my contribution to parenting.

This provoked Luke to question certain aspects of his 'father' status and share his views on parenting with the group:

[W]hen you are talking about fatherhood, I don't consider myself a father. I'm a parent. Other than the fact that we've got certain equipment that defines us as being male or female, the actual emotional content and the stability and the direction that you bring your children up in very much comes from being a parent...I think that's something that quite often gets forgotten about (Luke).

Simon

Simon is 47 years old. He was married for just over 10 years and has been divorced for seven years. He has two daughters and a son, nine, 10 and a half and 21 respectively. He describes his marriage as a 'fantastic married life' and that the separation caught him completely by surprise. He said that family life appeared normal as he fulfilled the breadwinner role. He also describes himself as 'a good dad'. He explained that his relationship with his ex-wife was filled with mutual respect and equality and that since the divorce 'it all went to hell'. When discussing his reaction to the issue of his rights as a father, Simon's anger was evident:

I thought, what total bullshit, my reality was that my rights were fucked. I had no rights. I was lucky. Instead of rights it was luck, I was lucky to see my kids.

Simon's anger at the legal system reflected the ongoing marginalisation he experienced as a parent, a role which is extremely important to him. This experience typified the overall experiences of the men in the focus group regarding their sense of the Family Law and their parental entitlements. Living as the non residential parent meant that they had to rely on other means to be able to perform their fathering duties which included the cooperation of their ex-wives, which were often hostile relationships. These fathers struggled to come to terms with the animosity their attempts at fathering were met with. Simon recalls his distress:

I'd never met anyone with such an unlimitless amount of anger who's prepared to act on it. I mean its one thing to be angry but it's another thing acting on that anger and I'd never seen anyone act on that anger much less known to me the parent. I would have thought that someone would have had more respect for the parent of their child. That hasn't been my experience.

Luke also shared Simon's distress after fearing the loss of regular contact with his daughter:

[My ex wife] believes that she is the only parent in our so-called family relationship. Now she doesn't want to co-parent. She's constantly trying to find ways to undermine my self and also to the extent of removing our daughter from the current shared care relationship.

As family life for these fathers becomes increasingly complex and difficult to define, the fatherhood role becomes both more important and more precarious. One common and frequently occurring theme in the data was the deep love that these men had for their children and the relationships they shared and wanted to have. The general view within the focus group was that the fathers believed that their children's experiences of their performance as fathers should facilitate their contact, as opposed to the hostile parental relationships. Luke was very proud to comment:

[My daughter] reckons I'm the best dad in the world and she says words to the effect of 'Dad I am so lucky to have you, other kids say that you're a great dad', and that type of thing, so I guess that I'm doing ok.

These men take great pride in their roles as fathers and the divorce in some way has acted as a catalyst for more meaningful relationships between the fathers and their children. Simon illustrated this point well:

[M]y persistence among incredibly adverse circumstances has secured my genuine love, deep love with my children and even though they are not old enough to really understand what I've endured to survive that love, its now unshakable.

Conclusion

My research indicates that divorce constitutes a major life transition evoking a questioning of identity and how experiences vary in terms of gender. Possibly for the first time in their lives, the DIDs participants have experienced a sense of powerlessness or lack of influence over the trajectory of their roles as fathers. This has meant that their perceptions of divorce and their fatherhood rights and roles have largely been a battle with ex-partners; a veritable 'war between the sexes' (Arendell, 1995: 14). For the majority of the participants, cooperation with ex-partners rather than resistance was their goal to assure access to their children. For these men, fatherhood was crucially important to their identity after divorce. My research suggests that the personal relationships of fathers are in no way static and require an ongoing negotiation with the legal system, ex-partners, as well as themselves as they construct various masculine roles and identities.

In some respects this research is one-sided. The only voices we hear are Dads in Distress. However, these voices, and those of other men in similar situations, deserve to be heard. In providing a space for these voices to emerge, I hope to make a limited contribution to the ongoing debates about the complexities and tensions of post

separation/ divorce parenting and masculinities. This debate is ongoing, and its urgency and consequences is well illustrated on the Dads in Distress website:

While you read this, a man somewhere is about to throw a rope around the beam in his shed, another is attaching a hosepipe from his exhaust to the window of his car and yet another is about to turn his wheel into the path of an oncoming semi-trailer.

Young separated men are 10 times more likely to die by suicide than through road accident....(Dads in Distress, 2009).

Recorded Focus Group Interview:

Pseudonyms have been used to keep the identity of the participants anonymous.

Bill- (Participant: Focus group interview, 14th July, 2009)

Luke- (Participant: Focus group interview, 14th July, 2009)

Simon- (Participant: Focus group interview, 14th July, 2009)

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