

"I'M PAYING FOR MY SON'S UPBRINGING WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S WAGES". COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PRAXIS IN A SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRE: THE GREAT YARMOUTH FATHER'S PROJECT

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Summary

The Great Yarmouth Father's Project (GYFP) is presented as a community psychology example of 'formulation beyond therapy'. A co-produced formulation is described that attempts to broaden understanding of father's experiences of early-years child and family services.

Context

As the person responsible for the title quote could attest to, it was a tricky time to be a father in the late 2000's, particularly if you did not live full-time with your children. Senator Barack Obama in a widely publicised speech to a Chicago church audience lamented "too many fathers also are missing...They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it." (Barack Obama, 2008). Closer to home a few years later, newly elected British Prime Minister David Cameron was responding to the London Riots. In a speech Cameron singled out absent fathers as being behind the social decay that led so many young people onto the streets that summer; "I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home... if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start." (David Cameron, 2011). The Prime Minister's analysis that poor parenting was at the heart of the 'broken society', was further supported by the policy response to the riots by the Casey Report (2012) which identified nine familial constructs that can be used to identify 'troubled families' and a psycho-social intervention was developed which continues to be delivered in areas of high deprivation today. It appeared that the 'absent father' had replaced the 'single mother' as an explanatory trope for all kinds of societal ills. What was less present was an understanding of where these fathers had gone and whether they recognised themselves in this caricature.

Since their inception in 1998, Sure Start Children's Centres have been bedevilled by a lacklustre engagement by fathers in their early-years programs (Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis, 2003). This coupled with influential research suggesting that father's involvement in early-years services for their children has an impact on child development (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004), means that targeting this has been a national priority. Interventions have focused on the employment of male father's workers and attempts to improve the quality of father-infant interaction using attachment based models, parenting programs and psycho-education (Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis, 2003). However, what happens when some of the root causes of father's alienation extends beyond difficulties in the family system that dominates psychological theories of infant development?

The Great Yarmouth Father's Project (GYFP) was set up in 2010 against this

backdrop. It is a Community Psychology project (Orford, 2008) that was co-founded by a clinical psychologist (DT) and local fathers (one of whom is CMcC) and has involved elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR, Kagan, 2012), local political activism and an educational program developed with a community researcher (SS). In this area the local Children's Centres struggled, like elsewhere, to meaningfully engage fathers in early years parenting services. They had used a range of off the shelf parenting programs (see the BPS discussion paper Technique is not Enough, 2012 for a critique of using programmatic interventions in disadvantaged communities), including some specifically for fathers (McAllister & Burgess, 2012) to varying degrees of success but consistently found that the interventions failed to reach the most marginalised and in need families. One of the authors (DT) worked on behalf of a mental health trust on a joint project with a local Children's Centre. The agreement was that a project would be established that would address issues of concern for local fathers and that it would be co-produced with fathers participating as volunteers, not clients. The approach was formulated using community psychology models that prioritised intervention at a social rather than individual level, but with the aim that there would be concomitant psychological benefits for the fathers and their families (see Holland, 1992 for an influential multi-level approach).

The idea that the members of the GYFP themselves might be in a position to undertake research into issues facing local fathers, and then that they could act upon these findings was initially met with some disbelief within the group. It was only when the rarefied, professionally regulated jargon of research and intervention were broken down that they could see a role for themselves. Therefore, below sections are titled in a way that aims to reflect how the group understood their task.

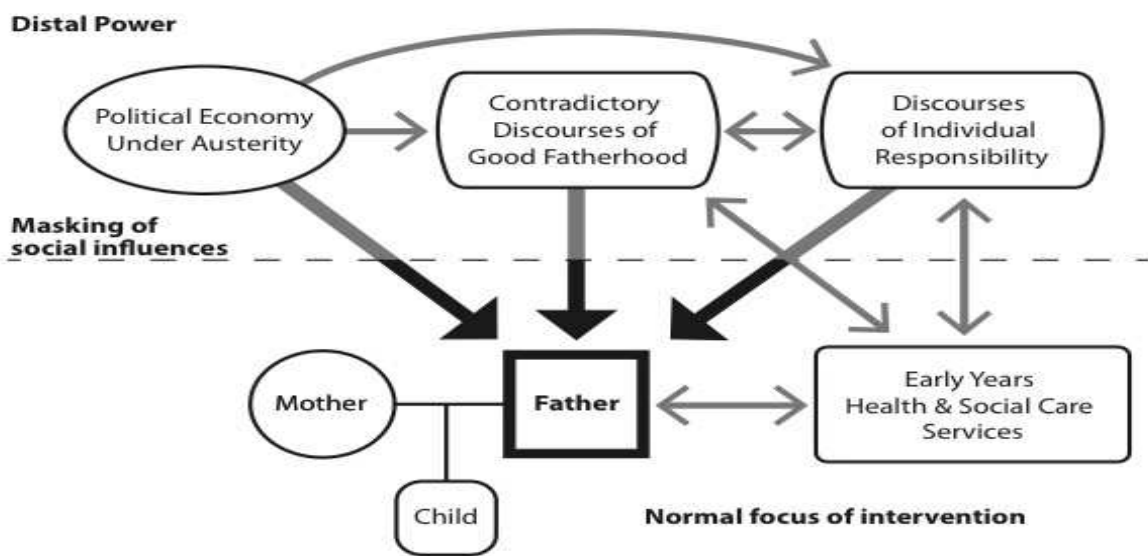
Ask questions...

The fathers registered as volunteers and undertook a community research training program which both equipped them to engage in PAR and to gain a valuable qualification. The research component of the GYFP focused on local fathers' relationships with services for children and families. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews by the researchers with over 40 local fathers. The findings revealed a strong narrative among fathers that they felt excluded from early-years child-care services and often had difficult relationships with the majority female social care and health staff. Fathers described feeling criticised for not fulfilling both provider and child care functions within their family. Based on the finding that fathers have been excluded and had limited experience of working with professionals in the parenting field, they called for fathers to be shown respect and not judged according to a female centric parenting style. It was particularly challenging for those fathers that were non-resident and for some who were involved or had been involved in child protection proceedings. These fathers expressed the view that they felt judged by their past and seen as aggressive. To them it seemed like there was no second chance to prove

themselves as capable and loving parents but were perceived as “ticking time bombs of domestic violence waiting to happen”.

Make sense of answers

Insert Figure 1 about here



The above findings and analysis by the GYFP were used to develop a psychological formulation represented in Figure 1. The formulation initially focuses on the immediate dyadic relationship between father and child then the proximal family

system, as is typical of some approaches to fatherhood research (Braungart-Rieker, Courtney & Garwood, 1999). The next sphere of influence incorporates relationships with early-years health and social care professionals, which in the research findings were often described as conflictual and mutually misunderstanding. Again this aspect of the formulation can be related to existing literature (Scourfield, Cheung & Macdonald, 2014). However, the influences that distally yet significantly affect the more proximal power relationships represent a departure from other models (see Smail, 2005 for a discussion of distal and proximal power). Here, the often masked social factors are treated as constitutive and not merely attendant influences. In other words, the social system in which these fathers live is not treated as a set of psychological variables to be separated out and categorised, to be re-imported later in a decontextualized way as mechanisms to help explain how these men think, feel and behave. Rather it is argued, similarly to other community psychology models, that the social context cannot be separated from how these fathers experience the world as embodied, social, sense making beings. Distal forces of the political economy, public services that increasingly individualise social problems affecting families and repackage them as 'psychological' and contradictory discourses of what it means to be a 'good father' have all converged to constitute the subject of fatherhood both for the men themselves, their families and professional systems charged with their care and control.

Given the above, and the limited and limiting roles consequently available to local fathers under these social conditions, the task for the GYFP was to unmask the essentially social nature of their predicament and to construct alternative identities and communicate these to their families, the community and public services. The task was therefore not to change the ways these fathers thought about themselves, their world or their families, as might be the case with some psychological interventions, but rather to highlight their work as an illustration for themselves and others of what can be possible given conducive social conditions and theorised collective action.

Act...

An initial and significant impact that the GYFP had was in its explicit rejection of an individualised, atomised and disembodied formulation of fatherhood as 'problem'. This 'boundary critique' (Midgley, Munlo & Brown, 1998) insisted that social, material and political influences were at the heart of any discussion of parenting. It challenged a familiar pattern of victim blaming that so hamstrings contemporary social policy, particularly in the areas of child and family (Gillies, 2008) and welfare (see Perkins, 2016 for an example of how psychological theory can be used to harmful policy ends). Connected to this was an alternative 'solution' that the GYFP offered. Rather than relying upon expert knowledge from professionals, the fathers became the answer. Through peer solidarity and reciprocal education they tackled a wide range of issues together including, in no particular order, adult mental health problems, child behavioural issues, interest

rates on payday loans, welfare claims, how to navigate child protection proceedings, adult literacy and relationships with their partners. What unified this disparate range of issues was the recognition within the project that all of these things were relevant in thinking about fatherhood and family life, and that together they had expertise to offer one another.

A further contribution was the points of contact the GYFP had with academic researchers. A productive tension developed here whereby project members would question the authority of what they perceived of as outsiders looking in but were then able to offer researchers a more contextualised understanding. This has gone on to further collaborations with project members offering consultation to academic projects and providing teaching on how to work with fathers to trainee clinical psychologists. What was also of interest in these points of contact was that while academic research and policy influence had undoubtedly reaped benefits for fathers (Paternity Rights being an obvious example), the fathers did not know that this was so. Through these exchanges there were therefore opportunities for fathers to gain an understanding of how invisible processes such as social policy could impact on their immediate experiences and so open up possibilities of more active engagement with other forms of democratic participation.

Conclusion

As can be seen the GYFP offers an example of 'formulation beyond therapy'. Using a community psychology framework, a group of fathers worked together with a psychologist and community researcher to understand and act upon their environment. The project avoided the "cult of the immediacy" (Sedgwick, 1981) whereby many interventions aimed at changing father's behaviour stop their analysis at the individual or immediate system level. It also attempted to avoid the reinstatement of social problems as psychological ones via the back door (see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009 for a high profile example of this), without hopefully denying the very real experiences of these men and their families. The project was not without its failures, not least of which were the stability of some of the relationships that the project was founded upon and the de facto exclusion of mothers and children from participation.

To return finally to the title quote, the GYFP in itself was unable to remedy the reality for many fathers that they have to live with the loss of providing for their family (as it happens though the particular father quoted above did find work). Instead the project attempted to complicate the question by broadening the terms of reference for how such a situation can arise in the UK today, and in doing so it offered these fathers the opportunity to construct other socially useful roles through the life of the project.

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