

# **The Trouble with Fathers: the impact of time and gendered-thinking on working relationships between fathers and social workers in child protection practice in England.**

## **Abstract**

The lives of families entering the child protection arena may be shaped by a range of troubles, including material deprivation, physical and mental health problems, substance misuse or domestic abuse. Despite the interest in whole family approaches, the issue of how professionals fail to work effectively with fathers is longstanding and resistant to change. This paper illustrates challenges in building working relationships with men, including the challenge of avoiding binary thinking in the assessment of fathers as ‘risk’ *or* ‘resource’. Drawing on our qualitative longitudinal study of men’s experiences of child protection in England, we highlight how both organisational (clashing time perspectives) and cultural (gendered-thinking) factors can trouble the potential relationship between social workers and fathers. We argue for a more gender sensitive approach to social work practice, which can respond more fully and effectively to the experiences of fathers and mothers.

**The Trouble with Fathers: the impact of time and gendered-thinking on working relationships between fathers and social workers, in child protection practice in England.**

**Introduction.** Engaging with fathers is yet to be seen as part of the “core business” of social work (Zanoni et al 2013) and the issue of how UK local authorities may fail to work effectively with men in families is longstanding (Scourfield 2014). There is currently a renewed emphasis, in social work, on both relationship based and strengths based approaches, and social workers and other professionals involved in child protection are encouraged to look for the strengths in families and to work collaboratively with them, even when children are at risk of serious maltreatment (Keddell 2014). Working *with* families to achieve change was part of the contentious UK Troubled Families Programme (Day et al, 2016; Author X et al, 2016). It is also a key principle of the ‘Signs of Safety’ approach to child protection work, which has recently been adopted by many English Children’s Services Departments (Turnell & Edwards, 1997; Turnell 2012). The emphasis in both examples is on working inclusively with ‘whole families’ and on balancing the risks to children with the resources brought by the family network.

Yet despite the widely acknowledged and entrenched issue of father engagement, there is a notable absence of discussion about fathers within these models, raising the question of who is included in, or where the boundaries lie for a whole family approach? (Morris 2012). Nor do approaches such as Signs of Safety consider ways in which fathers may be positioned as ‘troubling’ either to the child protection process or to notions of family itself. In addition there is little or no disaggregation between mothers and fathers in terms of their experience of services. We suggest that building constructive working relationships with fathers in child

protection epitomises some key challenges of implementing ‘strengths based’ approaches. This includes avoiding binary thinking, which may position fathers as *either* a risk *or* a resource, in favour of a holistic approach that can recognise and ‘hold’ the combination of risk and protective factors that either parent may present. We also suggest that fathers are more likely than mothers to be on the receiving end of binary thinking from professionals they encounter, which can have profound consequences for men, women and children (Author X, Bailey & Belderson, 2010; Morris, 2013). As a counter to this, strengths based approaches claim to offer ways to both hold families to account whilst also recognising their resources and capacity to improve serious child welfare concerns (Turnell 2012). However, the question remains as to whether, or how, such approaches respond to the particular and different circumstances of mothers and fathers, and what potential strengths based approaches have for addressing father engagement specifically.

In this paper we draw on qualitative findings from a longitudinal study of men’s experiences of the child protection system in England, to highlight how both organisational and cultural factors affect, and can trouble the (potential) relationship between social workers and fathers. The data consists of interviews and case studies from participating men, and focus group discussions with social workers and managers, conducted in each participating authority. We argue the importance of understanding the full context of men’s material and relational lives as fathers for developing inclusive child protection practice. Whilst the prevailing organisational interest in strengths based work with families is encouraging, we suggest that this does not necessarily or straightforwardly offer the solution to the problem of poor father engagement. One general argument we make is for a more gender sensitive approach in order to understand the experience of motherhood and fatherhood, and in turn, design or adapt practice and services that can respond supportively to this.

## **Background and context**

**The complexity of contemporary fatherhood.** In the UK context and beyond, there is both continuity and change in expectations of fatherhood. Increasing attention to the significance of fathers' contribution to children's wellbeing (Lamb 2010) has added to the now widespread expectation that fathers will play an active part in their children's care (Dermott & Miller 2015). Yet, alongside this cultural shift toward 'involved fatherhood', there are continued anxieties about the absence of fathers in families, and more widely, of men in children's lives (Centre for Social Justice 2013). In addition, not all men are comfortable recognising themselves as involved fathers with some men doubting their competence in this role, or feeling a stronger affinity with a commitment to 'providing' (Henwood and Procter, 2003, Norman, 2017). This complexity is, unsurprisingly, also reflected in child welfare services, and more specifically within child protection practice.

**Troubling father engagement.** Professionals in child protection continue to be troubled by difficulties in engaging men (Clapton, 2009; Osborn, 2014). Much of the attention of social workers is focused upon mothers who are held responsible for children's day-to-day care (Dominelli et al. 2010; Ashley et al 2013). Where fathers do receive attention from the authorities, it may be as a potential abuser, in which case the tendency may be to exclude them from the family rather than to address the identified issue (Scott & Crooks 2004; Scourfield 2006). Where men are not excluded, they may be assessed as the source of undesirable behaviour without other needs being taken into consideration (Rivett 2010; Forrester et al 2012). In these circumstances, assessments may not accurately reflect the combination of factors men present for children they care for, potentially endangering children and excluding men. Studies of English serious case reviews (of maltreatment related

death or serious harm) have highlighted inflexible and fearful thinking by social workers about the role of men in families and men's presence in the family home, with the nature of their involvement in caregiving often being overlooked (Author X et al 2010, 2011). Studies examining the safeguarding spectrum, from early difficulties where there are risks of harm through to serious abuse and neglect, have found that although men are often actively shaping family outcomes, they are frequently ignored either as a positive or a negative influence (Brown et al. 2009; Author X et al. 2009; Gordon et al 2012; Zanoni et al 2013).

**Child protection, family life and economic inequality.** The challenging economic circumstances of family life for many in the UK, especially those in insecure or 'precarious' work (Standing, 2011) has implications for men as carers and men involved in child protection concerns. Deeper poverty and the impact of deprivation as well as welfare reforms have been felt most sharply by children and their families (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission; 2014, Sayer, 2016). The inadequacies of the child protection system to take economic hardship into account has been emphasized in recent years (Featherstone et al 2016). In England, there are renewed claims that child protection places a disproportionate burden on those who are already marginalised (Bywaters, 2016). Bywaters and colleagues' study of child welfare inequalities in England, showed that children living in deprived areas are more likely to be on a child protection plan or looked after by the state (Bywaters, Brady, Sparks, Bos, Bunting, Daniel, Featherstone, Morris & Scourfield, 2015). It is increasingly argued that more equal societies and communities have fewer health and social problems than those that are less equal (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007; Wolfe, Macfarlane, Donkin, Marmot & Viver, 2014). Further research may support the suggestion that lower rates of maltreatment be added to the list of benefits of a more equal society (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy & Dineen, 2014).

**Current challenges for child protection practice.** In the UK, financial austerity and government spending reviews have seen successive waves of reduction in the amount of central funds available to local authorities. The requirement to retain statutory provision has seen deep cuts to many non-statutory support services, including services for men. While funds have been dwindling, the volume of child protection work has been steadily increasing. The number of children with a child protection plan rose from just over 29,000 in 2008 to over 50,316 children in 2016, although the year-on-year increase is starting to slow down (DfE, 2016). The increased pressure on children's services to protect children effectively can result in harsh criticisms of these services (Ofsted, 2013; Jutte, Bentley, Miller & Jetta, 2014). This fear of the consequences of being found wanting also tends to fuel the risk-averse policy and practice that Munro was so critical of in her child protection review (Munro, 2011). However, one response to Munro, and challenge to a managerialist risk-management approach to child protection has been to re-emphasise the value of relationships and relational practice (Featherstone, et al. 2016).

Relationship based practice, which has always been a cornerstone of UK social work (Howe 2014) foregrounds the reparative potential of the relationship between the worker and the individual, including, potentially, between social workers and fathers. The adoption of a strengths-based approach to safeguarding children emerged in the UK in the 1990s as a relationship-oriented way of addressing risk of harm whilst also working alongside the family (Turnell & Edwards, 1997). This formed part of the 'refocusing' of child protection, away from drawing increasing numbers of children into the child protection 'net' and towards greater partnership with families (Gibbons, Conroy & Bell, 1995).

More recently, there has been a renewed interest in strengths based models and substantial funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Programme has been directed to promoting and evaluating the 'Signs of Safety' model (Turnell 2012). Over and above the question of whether such approaches can respond to the specific issue of father engagement, other critiques also argue that unless the social, political and economic contexts within which families exist are explicitly recognised and addressed, these models will still focus on individual not structural failings (Roose, Roets, Van Houte & Vandenhole, 2013, Hingley-Jones & Ruch 2016).

So, in this troubling context of complex expectations for fatherhood, child welfare inequalities and political austerity, the persistent problem of developing services and social work practice which responds inclusively to men as fathers, appears multi-faceted and challenging. In what follows we examine particular aspects of this challenge based on our analysis of men's accounts of child protection, and focus group discussions with social workers and managers in the three participating English local authorities. We argue the importance of pursuing a holistic view of men's lives and contributions as fathers, the implications of gendered or fixed thinking about men in child protection, and centrality of relationship building for facilitating men's involvement in child protection planning, and, where possible, in their children's lives. Quotes from men are identified using a pseudonym and age for each participant. Quotes from local authority staff are identified as either social workers or managers.

### **'Counting Fathers In', Methodology.**

Whilst there is a growing literature on the barriers to involving men in social work practice, this has mostly been concerned with service delivery, and investigated from the viewpoint of

professionals (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2012; Skramstad & Skivenes, 2015; Gordon et al, 2012). The aim of our two-year mixed methods project was to interrogate professional perspectives of men as ‘troubling’, by focusing on men’s perspectives and investigating the encounter between men and the child protection system, as a process unfolding over time. The central innovative aspect of the project was the prospective, qualitative longitudinal (QL) study of men’s experiences of child protection in three local authorities in England. This was contextualized by a wider, primarily quantitative, retrospective investigation of men’s involvement in child protection via analysis of 150 local authority case files (50 per participating authority).

**The qualitative longitudinal (QL) methodology.** QL methodology (Neale, Henwood & Holland 2012; Thomson 2007) was used in order to develop a prospective study of men’s experiences of the child protection process over a 12-month period following the making of a child protection plan. The QL study consisted of two in-depth interviews; one at the start and one at the end of the 12 months, with approximately monthly phone calls in between. It involved looking back, at men’s histories, relationships, fathering experiences and past encounters with welfare agencies, and accompanying them forward, into the current encounter with child protection. The QL methodology enabled a mapping of men’s encounters with formal or informal support or monitoring systems, their responses to welfare agencies, the changing material and relational circumstances of their lives, and their strategies for material and psychological coping over time.

**Sample.** Eligible men were identified during the planning of Initial Child Protection Conferences. They were approached by the independent chairs of the conference or the social worker and asked for permission for a researcher to contact them to explain the study. We



contacted 40 men directly and recruited 35 into the QL study, with at least ten from each local authority. These were resident and non-resident fathers, birth and step-fathers (and some who were both). We also recruited men who were in a partnership with the child's mother, and those who were separated from her, men who were seen as implicated in the child protection concerns and those considered by the local authority as a protective factor. Alongside the men, we recruited six mothers into the study (all current partners of participating men and all birth mothers to the child with the child protection plan). These mothers took part in an in-depth interview at the start and end of the 12 months, to offer some comparative data on their experience of the child protection process.

**Limitations of the sample.** Almost all participating men were White British. Only two men were from a minority ethnic group, and one other was White European. However, the sample did reflect the ethnic profile of the three participating authorities. We were also unable to recruit any very young fathers. Our youngest participant (a birth father) was 21, although others were very young when they first became fathers. A further limitation of our sample is that the views and experiences of men who were not invited to, or did not attend, the initial child protection conference are under-represented. Whilst conference chairs and social workers helped us to access participants, the independence of the research was explicit in the recruitment material and in our opening discussion with eligible men. The men's recognition of our position and role as researchers also developed over time as their (trust) relationship with us grew.

### **Significant overall findings**

Our QL design involved thinking methodologically, substantively and theoretically about time (Adam, 2004; Andrews, 2014). A key aim of the study was to examine the child

protection system as a dynamic process that plays out over time, and which may have particular staging points both for the man and for the system. We sought to understand men's perception and experience of child protection practice, with a focus on the timing, pace, and any change of approach by social workers or other professionals (for an early discussion of temporal aspects of child welfare practice see White, 1998). A key finding was the clash of time perspectives between the men and child protection professionals, with each appearing to experience time in a different way.

For men in our study, the child protection process produced a powerful perception of social work as both 'rushed *and* slow'. As time went on, and men began to be able to reflect on what had happened with the child's case, (and in their own personal and family lives), they would describe short or sudden periods of action by social workers followed by what they saw as long periods of delay. One man, Anthony (a non-resident birth father who later came to have shared care of his children) expressed this succinctly: "*there is a cycle of urgency followed by non-action*". This perception was linked to men's tendency to see the reliance on formal meetings as repetitious, but also revealed the significance of men's understanding of both the purpose of child protection practice, and the mechanisms by which it is implemented. Seeing social work as 'rushed and slow' frequently led men to question the credibility or capacity of social workers, and to lose faith in the child protection process. Events that appeared to generate a 'rushed' period of social work activity included the initial child protection enquiry (culminating in the initial child protection conference, or ICPC), and allegations of domestic abuse or violence. In both of these contexts, men in our study commonly perceived social work practice as reactive and also gendered, and drew on both their personal experience and on wider cultural ideas about gender and parenting to explain this. For example, here, William and Kyle reflect on their experience of child protection meetings and how men's emotions and role as a parent was responded to by professionals.

*I feel like I want to say stuff but I tend not to, I just tend to hold back... If I'm chill then people think I don't care but if I really blow up they'll think I'm aggressive (William, non-resident birth father, age 21)*

*All you hear about is how you are going to support the mother and how you are going to help the mother, you don't hear anything about the father (Kyle, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, age 30)*

Our study therefore also interrogates the question of gender difference, and gendered thinking, in child protection practice. The analysis considered which aspects of men's experience related specifically to their position as men, and as fathers, within a wider organisational and societal context. One social worker described this in terms of enduring cultural norms about parenting: *It is such a powerful cultural thing that children stay with their mothers and fathers leave!* The participating men and social workers identified situations in which gender difference may make a difference for men's involvement in child protection. Across the participants' stories and in the focus groups there was recognition that emotions such as anger were interpreted and 'tolerated' differently for men than for women. As indicated by Will's comment above, men's expressed emotion can 'trouble' the encounter between men and social workers, or constitute a form of double jeopardy. Where men perceived such gender difference, there tended to be a corresponding sense of unfairness. This was most often in terms of making comparisons between mothers' and fathers' treatment within the child protection process, including how and when their perspectives were sought, how these were interpreted and included as part of the child protection plan, and what balance of accountability and support was offered. Men's perception of fairness was therefore predominantly related to expectations of equitable treatment or even-handedness on the part of social workers and the 'system'. This included wanting recognition as an involved caregiver, or due consideration as alternative carer for their child (Ribbens McCarthy et al

2003). In the discussion that follows, we examine in more detail some pertinent examples of where the issues of gender and also of time and timing, affected men's involvement in the child protection process and often, in their child's life. We present these using the participant term: 'getting a fair hearing'.

### **'Getting a fair hearing'**

An important context in which men made connections between gender and 'fairness' was in relation to how men's and women's perspectives were sought out and considered as part of the child protection process. Here we draw together examples where men's accounts were contested, either by mothers, social workers or children. In such circumstances, men's concern, and often their experience, was that they would struggle to receive what they viewed as a 'fair hearing'. This initial point is important in that despite the ethos or language of 'enquiry' attached to the compiling of social worker reports for a child protection conference, men tended to view the process as an 'investigation', in which issues including the timing or prioritising of different accounts took on particular significance.

*The investigation has to be as thorough from the father's perspective...you know you should feel you have had a fair trial for want of a better word and at no stage did I ever feel that*  
(Seb, non-resident birth father, age 46)

This suspicion over how enquiries were handled was more heightened where men were non-resident fathers, and/or where they were in dispute with the child's mother. A pertinent insight here comes from the minority of men who experienced a particular organisational strategy for managing the initial child protection conference (ICPC). Sometimes described as a 'split' conference, fathers and mothers can be asked to attend separately, in order to contribute without risking direct contact or conflict. In principle, this strategy is often assumed to constitute an inclusive approach to working with men, but in practice it may be

perceived differently. Seb, Anthony and David were asked to attend the conference separately from their ex-partners. In all three cases, their allotted time was after the meeting with the child's mother, and this was interpreted from the outset as prioritising the mother's perspective.

Seb was the focus of the child protection concern, having slapped his teenage daughter during a row which had escalated. Whilst Seb accepted responsibility for his actions, he felt that he had been strategically excluded from the family, and invited to the conference on a false premise; not to be consulted, but instead to hear a 'verdict':

*I said, you are asking me to come at 5 o'clock so I won't be seeing the panel, so you are actually not asking for my views, you are actually asking me just to listen to the outcome...I said, you know why can't you be honest about it? (Seb, separated birth father, age 46)*

Anthony was not the focus of the child protection concern, but due to ongoing conflict between him and his ex-wife Gayle, he was asked to attend after the meeting with her. Anthony accepted this, but felt that his views were not taken seriously and that this was evidenced by the content of the child protection plan.

*This is the plan...this is the bit that I got them to add in, but it was just the way they noted it down, it just strikes me that all that was in place before I even got in the room, and so my input is very limited. (Anthony, separated birth father who later came to have shared care, age 45).*

Seb's case has additional relevance as he illustrates a particularly challenging circumstance, for both a father, and the social workers involved. Where the child protection enquiries involve the alleged abuse of a child and the man either contests or contextualises the child's (or mother's) account, then the stakes for 'hearing' and deliberating over different accounts are very high for all concerned. Seb acknowledged professionals' prioritising of his daughter's perspective, but still felt shocked, and then angry, at the way his attempts to account for the incident were interpreted. In what follows, Seb is reading from the social

worker's report, and then challenging the judgement he feels is made. He goes on to try to reconcile the role of child protection professionals, alongside his sense of entitlement, as a father, to be heard and included:

*'This demonstrates that Seb shows no remorse for what he has done & blames Claire for everything' ...I never said it was her fault, I said she is challenging to manage and cope with... You know how do you show remorse for something like that? You know what is the correct way to show it to a Social Worker?*

*I thought I would feel able to speak freely and honestly with the social workers and talk about the entire situation, I don't feel that is the case at all and that is the piece I am most disappointed and frustrated with - in my case the father's voice is irrelevant and, I get the fact that it is about child protection so the child has to be respected, I am not naive in that respect, but if you are working in Social Services to help a family, then why are you not actually helping? (Seb, non-resident birth father, age 46)*

Seb's case raises several important questions about social work practice with men. He identifies the issue of 'remorse'; whether, and how, as a father, he will be able to have an account of his actions accepted as remorseful. His experience was that any attempt to explain his family history or cite his daughter's behaviour as a factor was interpreted as an avoidance of responsibility; contextualisation was seen as minimizing. He also raises the issue of a potential tension between 'believing the child' and 'hearing' the perspectives of parents; he calls on social workers to help the family as a whole rather than removing the father from the family and then leaving him feeling isolated. Seb's working relationship with the allocated social worker did not improve. He attended a series of supervised contact sessions with his youngest son, and was then told there were no concerns about his relationship with him, or his eldest son (who was 19).

Seven months after the ICPC Seb and his wife were divorcing, and Seb had only minimal indirect contact with his daughter. He had decreasing communication with the social worker and then withdrew completely from the process. He explained this in terms of an attempt to

exercise some control and to show his contempt for the organisation. Seb was very worried about his daughter, who was now receiving a mental health service, but felt he had no support to try to rebuild a relationship with her. After twelve months, Seb was seeing his sons regularly but still only had occasional indirect contact with his daughter. The case remained open to a social worker, though there was no longer a child protection plan. Seb continued to see the child protection process as “*unbalanced and unfair*” and remained humiliated by his experience. A wider point here may be that whilst there can be clear cases for strategically excluding a highly dangerous man from his child’s life, there is also a need for more nuanced approaches to working with the risks and resources presented by men who may not fall into this category.

Other men in our study, whose fathering and moral identity was not as threatened as Seb’s, expressed a similar sense of there being different interpretations of, or responses to mothers’ and fathers’ actions. This perception of gender difference in how child protection concerns were framed, but also in how the child protection plan was implemented, was again linked to questions of ‘fairness’. Non-resident birth fathers William, Jesse and Mitchell all found the initial child protection conference difficult because they heard more, and sometimes for the first time, about concerns over the mother’s care of their child. What they also shared was a sense of surprise at how, often serious, concerns (including, in William’s case, physical harm of the child by the mother) were presented and responded to by social workers and other professionals. These fathers all expressed this in terms of making a comparison between how they felt they would have been treated had the concerns been directly about them.

*If I’d done what she’s done, I’d be slaughtered” (William, non-resident birth father, age 21)*

*It’s ok for her to put a child in danger, but if I done it... (Mitchell, non-resident birth father, age 28)*

*A mother has a lot of power. She has to do something drastically wrong to lose those kids. They always stick with the mother, really (Jesse, non-resident birth father, age 29).*

The wider point illustrated by these and other fathers, is that mothers' care and also mothers' behaviour in relation to the child protection process, appears to be tolerated and supported in ways that are not so available to fathers. For example, for Anthony, this tolerance was linked, again, to the more general perception of social work as 'rushed and slow' where, a crisis in the mother's care is followed by an extended period of supporting her to cope or improve. As Anthony described it:

*There'll never be enough danger to get more involved, but never enough confidence to get less involved*

Paul, a birth father who had care of three of his four children under the terms of the child protection plan, expressed his sense of a greater tolerance for women's parenting in terms of mothers being able to 'get away' with things. Paul felt that his ex-partner Bex was not held to account for her parenting or for her non-compliance with the child protection plan, and this undermined his confidence in the social worker and the process as a whole.

*Repeatedly Bex broke what was written in the child protection plan and there is no, it says obviously you agree to it blah, blah, blah, but there is no consequences of breaking the plan.*

Paul also saw this tolerance in terms of a protracted period of 'slow' social work, where the original 'serious' concerns about Bex's care of the children appeared to give way to a process of extended 'chances'. Clearly, Bex's own experience of the child protection process is likely to have been different to Paul's. This apparent extended support of mothers by social workers may, in fact, be more an expression of the tendency to hold them *more* responsible than fathers, for children's welfare. Nonetheless, noting these differences in perception and acknowledging fathers' perspectives on the pace and nature of social work intervention is important for retaining men's engagement and confidence in the system.



It is also important to note that the fathers discussed here all acknowledged the importance of mothers in children's lives and did not appear to be seeking an overly punitive response from the social workers. They perceived that the child protection process held mothers and fathers to account in different ways and to different degrees, and that, for them, this could constitute unfairness within the system. Social workers also reflected on the issue of tolerating or persisting with mothers, and recognised this as a point of gender difference. The comment below shows how this issue is directly connected to how social workers interpret and respond to anger and aggression.

*If a woman is angry towards you and she is the sole carer of those children you don't really have a choice but to continue trying to engage with her, so I think it is a lot easier to cut a man out of that process at that point than it is to cut a woman out (Social worker)*

Finally, men's sensitivity to gender difference and getting a 'fair hearing' was prominent in cases where men had some experience of domestic abuse. An important feature of our study is that it offers insight into the range and complexity of circumstances in which men talk about being involved in domestic abuse (n=13). Our sample contained men who had past convictions for domestic violence, or who had been acknowledged as past or current victims of abuse; men who experienced allegations of domestic abuse, and men who raised concerns about mothers' abusive behaviour. It included men who acknowledged fault, and those who did not; men who were separated, and who were in couple relationships; men who had received services and those who had not. In these varied circumstances, two findings are important to highlight. One is that whatever participants' experience of domestic violence and abuse (DVA), there was near universal agreement that, in principle, it was wrong for men to assault their partners. The implication of this is that when men admitted such abuse, some combination of mitigation and/or remorse was required. Secondly, is the point that this group

of men perceived, and sometimes experienced directly, a clear gender difference in how allegations of domestic abuse are handled by social workers and other professionals. As one manager discussed, social workers can find it difficult to notice or question their own thinking about gender, in relation to responding to domestic abuse, particularly alongside their thinking about men and women as parents.

*I had a case the other day where a mum has got bail conditions for not having contact with the children's father and we are having a Child in Need meeting and the social worker is arguing that mum needs to come to the meeting and I am like 'wait no, switch it, she is the guy, she has assaulted mum, switch it, he wouldn't be there would he?' (Social Work Manager)*

The most specific examples of this perceived gender difference come from men who were in a position to contrast experiences of making allegations or raising concerns (about mothers), with having allegations made against them (by mothers). Separated fathers Henry, Kyle and Corey all described their relationship with their children's mothers as conflicted, with additional problems including the mother's drinking or mental health. Each spoke about raising concerns with police or social workers either prior to or as part of the child protection process (or both) and each claimed to have been subject to physical or mental abuse from her. As the child protection process moved on, all three found themselves subject to allegations of domestic abuse from their ex-partners, which resulted in a range of consequences including obstructing them from being considered as alternative carers for their children. These experiences generated or confirmed their sense of unfairness and gendered thinking by professionals which often exacerbated already fragile working relationships with social workers. Corey recalls his anger at being disbelieved over his account of an alleged fight with his ex-partner, and Kyle and Henry refer to wider gender stereotypes that prevent them getting a fair hearing.

*I said 'you called me a liar - it is pointless you talking to me because you don't believe me' (Corey, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, age 37)*

*People take the woman's side...how many men end up with their children living with them? They automatically assume that children will live with their mum (Kyle, non-resident birth father who became the main carer, age 30)*

*Everyone assumes it's the father's fault. They don't even ask, they assume he is bullying...That should change. (Henry, birth father who became the main carer, age 46)*

These three men went on to become the main carer for their children, with varying degrees of support from Children's Services and the Family Court, and in two cases only once incontrovertible video evidence of their experiencing domestic abuse was produced. Whilst the national picture of domestic abuse demonstrates that men such as Kyle or Henry are in the minority (ONS 2016, Myhill 2017), their experiences illustrate the impact of allegations against fathers within the child protection process. For these and other men subject to allegations of abuse or harassment, the consequences are often swift and far-reaching and can significantly delay or prevent men's parenting being considered or taken seriously.

These men's shared perception was that allegations of abuse often produce a reactive response from social workers (instigating a 'rushed' period of social work practice) in which men can find themselves in an isolated position from which it is hard to return. This isolation and mutual mistrust between men and social workers is also likely to be exacerbated if men react with anger, or if social workers are unwilling to reconsider their involvement. Our study suggests then, that when the child protection process involves allegations and/or counter-allegations of domestic abuse there may be a tendency towards a more gendered and binary approach in which men are easily assumed to be 'perpetrators'. Where such fixed or binary thinking about men is more likely to occur, a balanced assessment of the risks and resources a man may present is both much needed and more challenging to achieve.

Our findings also reflect the growing view of domestic abuse as a complex phenomenon, with many precipitating and exacerbating factors (Ali, Dhingra & McGarry, 2016). This includes recognising the diversity in circumstances, types, levels, and consequences of abuse that men, women and children experience, and with which child protection and other services must engage. The timely and full investigation of allegations of domestic abuse is critical, and the prominence of believing a disclosure of such abuse is rightly seen as a cultural and institutional advance. Yet, it is important to remember how both the experience of, and societal response to, domestic abuse remains a flashpoint for gender difference and inequalities. This means that professional responses to domestic abuse have to be able to accommodate complexity and be alert to fixed thinking in what is a serious, emotive and high-stakes problem.

## **Discussion**

The examples discussed above illustrate our attempt to integrate analysis of men's wider lives as fathers with their encounter with the child protection system. The QL approach used has also facilitated a particular focus on the temporal aspects of experience and of child protection as a process unfolding over time. In this paper, we have concentrated on one element of our analysis, where men's perceptions of time and of gender combine to produce a point of heightened tension between them and child protection professionals. This tension troubles the encounters between men and social workers, challenging each to think about gender difference, or resort to fixed and stereotypical thinking about parenting, responsibility and also risk. In expressing a sense of gender unfairness, men sometimes had to reconsider their own (often ambivalent) actions and identities as fathers. In responding to co-parental

conflict and allegations of domestic abuse, social workers were sometimes obliged to reconsider both organisational and cultural assumptions that shaped 'normal' practice.

We suggest that a number of organisational factors have the potential to support or hinder more effective child protection practice with men. In our exploration of men's concerns over getting a fair hearing, the issue around some of these organisational factors is not just about whether things happen, but when, and how they happen. In order to demonstrate both fairness, but also genuine interest in men's perspectives, the time invested in managing this is crucial. So too is the timing of contact with men, and this includes making direct contact early in the child protection enquiry, and also attending to how social worker visits with separated and conflicted parents are managed. In addition, an over-reliance on the formal child protection process, with its schedule of meetings, appears insufficient and sometimes inappropriate for enabling such direct and individual time with fathers. More generally, men's perception of social work as both 'rushed and slow' indicates some combination of misunderstanding or miscommunication about the nature and pace of child protection enquiries and subsequent interventions. Our analysis highlights the significance of temporal aspects of men's experience of child protection for managing fathers' (and mothers') expectations and the need for regular communication about the process.

Men and social workers in our study recognised a wider cultural prioritising of mother-child relationships which is likely to feed implicitly or explicitly into social work practice. This means, for example, that there may be gender sensitivities in play when an enquiry involves conflicting accounts of the child protection concern. Our case examples also showed that such gender sensitivities may shape how the initial child protection conference is managed, and that whilst organisational strategies for minimising conflict exist (for example having a

‘split’ conference), these are not necessarily received by fathers in the way intended. Men in our study also appeared sensitive to fairness in terms of when, and how, fathers and mothers are held to account for child protection concerns, and what level of support and review is provided by the child protection plan. This is a potentially significant and complex difference of perception, in that fathers’ feeling marginalised or frustrated by an apparent ‘tolerance’ of mothers’ care of the child, could be the inverse of mothers’ feeling unfairly burdened by professional scrutiny of them as parents (Gillies, 2006; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Strega, Fleet, Brown, Dominelli, Callahan & Walmsley, 2008). It also points to the paradoxical nature of responsibility in that it can be both a burden and a source of authority or power. In these instances, the challenge for social workers and managers is to be more alert to the ways in which assumptions about gender and parenting affect the service received, and perceived, by fathers and mothers.

The most challenging example considered is that of how allegations of domestic abuse and violence (DVA) are handled in child protection. The men’s views and experiences of DVA raise controversial issues, echoed in the wider literature. On the one hand, courts and social workers are properly open to criticism for sanctioning potential or ongoing harm to children by allowing domestically abusive fathers continued contact (Macdonald, 2016). However, questions have also been raised about the reliability of DVA assessments in the UK because of an inadequate theoretical base and the use of inflexible tools and practice guidance which assume an exclusive male-on-female model of domestic abuse (Ariza, Robinson and Myhill, 2016). In addition, current practice may not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of DVA, overemphasising risk assessment and neglecting managing risks in cooperation with both partners and whole families (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017). Political, legal, and policy debates on this issue can also be limited by an adversarial approach, where advocating the

particular needs or rights of men is seen as necessarily reducing those of women. Such an approach is unlikely to be compatible with strengths based social work, or with addressing gender inequalities in how accountability and opportunities for change are distributed, or with improving outcomes for children (Featherstone et al 2016). Local authority, policy and practice guidance need to respond to the complex pattern of domestic abuse, in which men commit the majority of abuse, *and* a significant minority of men are victims (Myhill 2017). Such complexity also means that assessment procedures, case analysis, and interventions relating to changing, surviving and dealing with the impact of abusive behaviour, have to attend to gender difference in terms of design, delivery and relationship building (Clapton 2013, Scourfield 2014, Zanoni et al 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Our wider argument then, for improving child protection practice with men involves two key elements. Firstly, the development of a gender sensitive approach to practice, supported by organisational and strategic mechanisms and management support. The value of holding in mind that fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, opportunities and constraints around their parenting, is important to emphasise, despite social work's longstanding concern with equality. Our point here, is that the established approach of gender 'neutrality' may have the unintended consequence of ignoring important differences in men and women's experiences of parenting (Clapton 2009). This may lead to, or perpetuate inequalities in how mothers and fathers fare within local authority services and systems and also fails to interrogate the ways that, paradoxically, both fathers' 'presence' and 'absence' can appear troubling to social workers. In this respect we are suggesting a 'both-and' approach for child protection practice, in which both mothers and fathers are routinely and actively involved in the work to safeguard their child. In terms of effective engagement with men, such a 'both-and approach' also involves authoritative and empathic interaction, to both

hold men accountable, and to directly value their parenting on its own terms. Secondly, we argue the relevance of understanding men's wider lives as fathers, as a necessary part of child protection enquiry, assessment and helping practice. The need for professional curiosity, persistence and time to create opportunities for hearing men's stories is directly relevant to decisions and judgements about their competence and safety as parents, but equally, to building a working relationship out of which such decisions may be 'fairly' reached. Our methodology demonstrated the impact of paying fathers the 'courtesy of serious attention' (Back 2016) and also the centrality of relationships, including with social workers, to men's lives as fathers. Given the renewed interest in relationship based social work, and current optimism about the potential of strengths based approaches to build inclusive and collaborative working relationships with families, it is important to consider what difference this may make to fathers. Our suggestion is that responding to fathers as people with needs and concerns of their own, through a curiosity about their lives is also likely to improve their agency and ability to be effective, involved fathers, perhaps rendering them less troubling in the eyes of social workers and in the child protection process.

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