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**The experience of qualitative research with young fathers: Considerations around gender, class and reflexive practice.**

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**Abstract**

Qualitative research into the lives and experiences of young fathers has seen some increased interest in recent years, yet comprehensive understandings of the 'doing' of such research remain absent from the literature. The small existing literature positions young men who are fathers as potentially difficult to research, in terms of access and encounters. This paper draws on experiences and reflections from two UK based research projects with young men who are fathers to explore the practice of qualitative work with this particular group of participants. Through discussion of gender, class, context and authenticity and rapport, the paper argues that researching young men is not inherently problematic but is a practice which requires consideration and substantial reflexion in order to produce fruitful research encounters for both parties. This paper therefore seeks to add nuance and insight into the experience of researching with young men who are fathers, and in doing so, adds sophistication to our limited understandings of qualitative encounters with this group.

**Word Count: 8873**

## **The experience of qualitative research with young fathers: Considerations around gender, class and reflexive practice.**

### **Abstract**

Qualitative research into the lives and experiences of young fathers has seen some increased interest in recent years, yet comprehensive understandings of the 'doing' of such research remain absent from the literature. The small existing literature positions young men who are fathers as potentially difficult to research, in terms of access and encounters. This paper draws on experiences and reflections from two UK based research projects with young men who are fathers to explore the practice of qualitative work with this particular group of participants. Beyond the choice of methodology, there appear to be several elements pertaining to the practice of researching the lives of young men who are fathers that may require consideration. Through discussion of gender, class, context and authenticity and rapport, the paper argues that researching young men is not inherently problematic but is a practice which requires consideration and substantial reflexion in order to produce fruitful research encounters for both parties. This paper therefore seeks to add nuance and insight into the experience of researching with young men who are fathers, and in doing so, adds sophistication to our limited understandings of qualitative encounters with this group.

**Keywords:** Young Fathers, Qualitative Research, Gender, Reflexivity, Marginalised Groups.

### **Introduction**

Whilst researching the lives and experiences of young fathers has seen increased interest in recent years, (see for example Maxwell et al, 2012; Davies and Neale, 2015; Neale and Davies,

2016; Davies, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Hanna, 2018), engagement with methodological issues related to the practice of researching with young men who are fathers remains under discussed. Any existing evidence often explores specificities, in terms of the application of an interviewing technique or broader methodological approach within the context of research into young fathers' lives (Reeves, 2007; Braye and McDonnell, 2012). Whilst Reeves (2007) counsels for the need to move beyond the use of semi-structured interviews to understand the lives of young men, this paper argues that there are aspects relating to the researching of the lives of young men who are fathers that cross cut choice of interviewing method or approach. We instead seek to argue, as McDowell (2014) has done, for an understanding that researching young men is itself not inherently problematic, but is a practice which requires consideration and reflexion. This paper therefore seeks to add nuance and insight into the doing and experience of researching with young men who are fathers, and in doing so, adds sophistication to understandings of qualitative encounters with this under-researched group. A particular and novel focus of the paper is the experience of interviewing young men as an all-female research team. This is of importance for two reasons: firstly, because young men's experiences of family and parenting are under-researched and secondly because family sociology is a field in which male researchers are under-represented.

Previous evidence has suggested that young men who are fathers are a 'difficult' group to research (Swann et al., 2003), further extending narratives around young men as 'hard to reach' (see Davies, 2016) thus positioning the potential research experience with young fathers as problematic from the outset. Such challenges are often narrated in relation to the recruitment of participants (Braye and McDonnell, 2012) and the need to then use gatekeepers (Reeves, 2007), with the current (limited) methodological literature painting a

picture of a challenging environment and experience in trying to access and engage with the experiences of young men within research. Given such perceived difficulties, it is perhaps worth stepping back to consider the value of researching young fathers' experiences.

### **Why research young men who are fathers?**

Young age fathers (across the literature, this term is used to refer to those who have children before the age of 25) are a relatively underexplored group within sociological understandings of family life. Growing discourses around fatherhood focus on the 'good father' (Henwood and Procter, 2003) who is emotionally engaged in his parenting role (Dermott, 2008) whilst often simultaneously maintaining career and work responsibilities (albeit not in the traditional sense of 'breadwinner') which reflect middle class values and biases around expectations of parenting (Klett-Davies, 2010). Thus 'the 'new model father' is an externally generated idea of what a good father looks like' (Faircloth, 2014: 196). Within discourses of this 'idealised' construct of fatherhood, the growing displacement of parenting as 'instinctual' or as common sense (Faircloth, 2014) is evident. Fathers, along with young mothers (see further Macvarish, 2010), are therefore viewed as in need of 'training' for parenthood, with biological detachment from the embodied experience of childbearing and youth respectively seen as specific reasons why this distillation of 'knowledge' is needed in order that they can 'effectively' parent their offspring. Young age fathers face a double bind in relation to their perceived (un) suitability for fatherhood and are therefore marginalised by social narratives which present young men de-facto as 'feckless' or 'absent' and problematic in relation to their children (Duncan, 2007; Lau Clayton, 2016; Johansson and Hammeren, 2014).

Consequently, young age parenthood is viewed as deviant from social norms around reproduction; combined with the marginalisation of young men from notions of fatherhood

this means that understanding young age fatherhood becomes increasingly important. Reasons for this are two-fold, firstly so that young men who are fathers do not experience a double marginalisation, in being excluded or misrepresented in discourses of fatherhood and then being excluded from the research landscape through a prioritisation of young mothers that further supports the notion of young age mothers as needing our 'help' and young fathers as not (Duncan, 2007). Secondly, so that pervasive negative narratives can be challenged through robust research evidence as for some young men, fatherhood can be a choice rather than a 'mistake' (Deslauriers, 2011).

Parenthood can be a catalyst for personal change which can enable young men to feel more integrated within social life (Quinton and Pollock, 2002; Duncan, 2007). For some young parents, being a parent is a way of affirming an adult identity (Coleman and Cater, 2006) in a changing socio-economic environment in which it is often difficult to access other markers of adulthood, such as secure employment and home ownership (for discussion of these issues see Côté and Bynner, 2008). The presentation of more positive images of young men who are fathers can then be powerful and important (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014). Young men who are fathers are also statistically more likely to be of low socio-economic status (Deslauriers, 2011) and thus young men who are fathers are resultantly more likely to experience low educational attainment and have experience of the criminal justice system (Ladlow and Neale, 2015). Research evidence also reveals that those who become parents whilst still young themselves, can face additional challenges in establishing their own fatherhood identity due to the lack of access to secure income and housing that is so commonly experienced by those in their late teens and the early years of adulthood (Neale and Davies, 2016). Thus young fathers can be a group excluded and marginalised in a number

of settings, and therefore understanding their experiences and giving voice to their own narratives, as opposed to the dominant narratives or voices of those who hold and exert power within social life, is pertinent.

## **Background**

This paper seeks to outline our own experiences and reflections on the process of being involved in and doing research with young men who are fathers. We therefore seek to examine some of the relevant class and gendered positions in our researching of young fathers, and, in our own reflective practices, begin to think about how the discourse of young fathers as 'difficult' to research can be unravelled in order to help future research agendas and researchers in the 'doing' of research with young men who are fathers (and also potentially with other marginalised groups).

In order to do so we will draw on the experiences of two different qualitative projects about young men who are fathers. Having worked on different projects about young men who are fathers, we are able to provide insight into all aspects of researching with young men, including the relationship work required to gain access to young men as well as how young men might be represented within analysis and findings from projects. As both authors are also women, there are useful considerations around the gender of researchers that we seek to explore from our experiences.

The two projects drawn on for discussion in this paper are the Following Fathers project (FF) and Supporting Young Dads (SYD) project, both of which were UK based research projects. FF was part of a wider project exploring family lives over time. The project sought to examine the twin life course transitions of young men becoming adults and also becoming parents.



This project conducted longitudinal repeat interviews, engaging with twelve young men to generate three waves of data totalling 33 interviews (3 with ten participants with the attrition of one participant at each stage). This then led to a further follow on project, Following Young Fathers (FYF) which engaged with a wider sample of young men, although it is only the original project we draw on here for our reflections. SYD sought to explore group support for young men who are fathers and explore the use and value that community provision for young men might bring to their lives (Hanna, 2018). Fifteen young men were engaged with project 2 and were involved in individual interviews, pair interviews or small focus groups (totalling 7 interviews- 2 individual interviews, 3 pairs interviews and 2 focus groups (one with 3 participants, the other with 4)) depending on their preference for how the interview was conducted. Both projects involved qualitative interviews as well as diagrammatic (e.g. timelines or relational maps and visual methods (see Hanna and Lau-Clayton, 2015).

The interviews in both projects were analysed thematically, using the method detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), and longitudinal approaches to analysis were overlaid within project 1. The findings of this analysis is however not the subject of this paper, rather the focus is the experience of the 'doing' of such research with young men. The young men in both studies can be described as predominantly white working class young men, drawn from urban areas and who were often marginalised (through material circumstances, but also through lack of social capital and limited life chances and opportunities). Through engaging with young men in qualitative settings, a number of key aspects about the experience of research with young men who are fathers became evident to us as researchers, and it is to these aspects that we now turn to discuss.

### **Key themes about researching with young men**

## Gender

### *Male gatekeepers to male participants*

In both studies gatekeepers, and specifically, male gatekeepers were central to our ability to access and engage with young men who are fathers. In FF the gatekeeper was employed by the local authority with a specific remit to support young fathers. In SYD the worker was employed by a third sector organisation and ran various projects with men based at a community centre in an economically deprived part of a large city. These roles were wide reaching and had a holistic approach to supporting young men as fathers, offering advice, support, the establishment of peer-mentoring programmes and signposting to other agencies. As an ongoing supportive presence in their lives, they were also important role models whom the young men could relate to, trusted in and felt close to. Other papers on researching with young men have discussed gatekeepers, viewing the use of gatekeepers as a central means for enabling recruitment of young men (Braye and McDonnell, 2012; Reeves, 2007). Gatekeepers provided us with a valuable point of contact between researcher and young man, not only helping to access young men but also in actively facilitating participation for young men who wished to be involved in the research. In both projects, the gatekeeper was previously known to the researchers, had very good understandings of the aims and scope of the research and had key roles in helping the researchers to access and engage with research participants. This could include bringing young men to university buildings to meet researchers, arranging space in community settings for interviews, and texting and calling young men in advance to remind them of meetings with researchers. The gatekeepers in these projects went beyond simply allowing researchers into the 'field' and proved to be

extremely important in supporting the practical and pragmatic elements which are often part of the complexity of conducting qualitative fieldwork.

Reflecting on her own study, Reeves (2007) found that gatekeepers were central to her ability to access young men but noted that her gatekeepers (social workers) went 'through an essentially hidden process of assessment regarding the young man's suitability to talk' (:257). This therefore presented what Reeves (2007) describes as another layer to get through. Our experience was less of this censure, perhaps reflective of the role of the gatekeepers who were working in community roles or supportive statutory settings. As their focus was on supporting young men to develop skills and confidence and to foster mentoring relationships between the young men themselves, their priorities differ from those of social workers who are often responsible for large case-loads with their job role usually more focused on protecting vulnerable children and adults. Both gatekeepers were highly committed to supporting the young men to develop their skills and confidence and saw their engagement in research as an opportunity for them to do this. They were also keen to widen awareness of the areas of work that they were involved in, which they hoped could help them to maintain service provision in a climate of local authority cuts and wider austerity. Braye and McDonnell (2012), in discussing the challenges in their recruitment, similarly speak of the positive role of the community workers in facilitating their project. This contrasts with the experience of Reeves (2007) whose gatekeepers were social workers and thus had other motivations for the screening of participants, and whose formal, often authoritarian, position within the lives of young men is markedly different to that of the gatekeepers in our own experience.

It is perhaps worth noting that the gatekeepers in both of the projects discussed here were male. The young men had strong, often role modelling relationships with these gatekeepers.

The specific importance of male role models has been challenged, and it has been argued that role model theory does not capture the complex and sophisticated ways in which gender is reproduced (Tarrant et al 2015) with further research indicating that factors such as trust, commitment, consistency, shared background and social experience are more important than gender in the development of these role modelling relationships (Robb et al, 2015). In these projects, the young men *did* indicate that they found particular value in these relationships with trusted adult men, though in their discussions of this, the impact of gender was not necessarily delineated from the wider qualities of the relationship, particularly around those qualities noted by Robb et al (2015) above. Whatever the basis of it, this rapport between participants and the gatekeepers was undoubtedly helpful to the research experience, allowing researchers to be trusted by 'proxy' by the young men. In that, the introduction of the research project and the question of whether they wanted to be involved was often first posed by the gatekeepers and so enabled recruitment. It is obviously hard to know whether recruitment would have worked differently without the gatekeepers, but the relational approach undoubtedly was productive. The investment of gatekeepers within the research was also vital, and these productive working relationships saw researchers and gatekeepers working towards shared goals in facilitating the research process.

Using gatekeepers has been noted as offering challenges in qualitative research (Miller and Bell, 2002; Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh and Sales, 2007) in terms of their influence on the sample and the ethical issues of ensuring consent is fully voluntary. However, if we want to ensure the voices of young men are included in research, then weighing up the costs and benefits of recruitment via gatekeepers may be necessary. If the gatekeeper provides, as was the case in the experience of the two projects being considered here, a person who young

fathers may trust and who can introduce the idea of research to them in a safe and acceptable way, then this may be more beneficial than attempting to recruit young fathers without gatekeepers. Our experience then echoes the suggestion of Broadhead and Rist (1976) that gatekeepers often have, as a central concern, the positive benefits they believe the research will offer to the participants or organisation they can facilitate researcher access to. Reflexive consideration of how any gatekeepers have intersected within the research experience will however be required in order that the role and position of gatekeepers remains evident in any subsequent analysis and dissemination of research findings.

### ***Women researching young men who are fathers***

In the context of both projects, the research teams were comprised entirely of women. This is not uncommon in family related research, which is often dominated by women, further highlighting men's 'second sex' position in this aspect of social life (Inhorn et al., 2009). Researchers, such as Day (2001) and Pini (2005) have however posed the question of whether a male interviewer would make a difference (either positive or negative) to research with men, and this is perhaps a useful point to consider in relation to work with young men who are fathers. It has been suggested that in 'any research project where a focus is on gender it is likely that male participants will engage in more pronounced gender identity work as their masculine selves may be viewed as central to the research' (Pini, 2005: 212), but in the context of these projects, gender and masculinity were not the main focus, but rather a product of the topic at hand, i.e. fatherhood. Pini (2005) suggests that asking 'who, whom, what and where' in relation to thinking through gender in the interviewer-interviewee relationship is useful. To this end, some young men are suggested to themselves be marginalised from hegemonic ideals of masculinity, and this could often be seen to be the

case with young men who are fathers which will perhaps impact on gendered research dynamics. As Connell (1991) suggests, '...the stress of constructing [masculinity] in a context of youth, poverty and marginality results in a fissured and brittle masculinity that is a far cry from the polished masculinity of, say, a successful businessman' (:168). The masculinity of the young men could therefore be seen more as aligning to notions of 'protest masculinities' perhaps also demonstrating why young men commonly were seen to have been on the margins of or connected to criminal activities of some kind (Connell, 1995; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Researchers then need to consider whether the desire to 'act out' a particular type of masculinity may be an issue within the research context, although whether offering a male interviewer would have facilitated different responses or data feels uncertain.

The notion that parenthood can be a powerful force for facilitating greater social integration for young men (Desluariers, 2011) means that perhaps problematic gendered research encounters may be less relevant for this group of young men. A participant in one of our studies discussed how they found it easier to speak to women about more personal matters, thus, as others have found, men are willing to talk and share with women (Gattrell, 2006). As Arendell (1997) writes, 'these men disclosed their experiences and feelings to me in the depth and emotional detail which they did *because* I am a woman' (:348); being a woman interviewing men can itself be helpful in the elicitation of detail. Others have found that men can be keen to take 'leadership' in interview encounters, with examples given of men telling female researchers what to do or directing the conversation and interview themselves (Arendell, 1997). This has not been our experience and whilst there were some examples of young men behaving energetically during interviews (i.e. unable to sit still, fidgeting, answering mobile phone calls etc.) young men followed the lead of the researcher. It may be

that interviewing the young men within the university setting as well as the age difference between the young men and the researchers, meant that they fell back on norms of behaviour that they were familiar in within that kind of environment and related to us as if we were teachers. Performing roles relating to relative positions of power and authority are ways in which both researcher and participant work through the process of establishing research relationships and interactions (Thurnell-Read, 2016: 26). These relationships reflect gender as well as different capitals within these contexts, and we will go on to further discuss the issues of classed dimensions in doing young fathers' research later within this paper. Similarly, whilst gendered 'talk' sometimes occurred within interviews, no threats to female researchers were felt.

It is important to note here, that there was no expectation of threat or risk to the research team and we did not encounter the issues of sexist or misogynistic talk discussed by Vogels (2019) in her reflection on research with young men about romantic relationships. The researchers in the projects discussed here were committed to approaching the research and interactions with participants from a position that accepts fathers, and young fathers specifically, as valuable and rejecting the notion that youthfulness is necessarily problematic in the context of entry into parenthood. This was informed by a feminist position that values equality and acknowledges the significance of both men and women as parents. Young men also did not seem to be presenting a 'genderwise' (Arendell, 1997) persona, but were very keen to ensure that their discussion of gendered issues were not viewed as 'sexist' by female researchers, reflecting a respectful tone within interviews; again this differs from other female researchers experiences of interviewing men (Arendell, 1997; Pini, 2005). Our experience is similar to Tarrant's (2016) observations that in her research encounters, men's

contributions reflected an awareness that there may be differences between their views and those of the researcher, which sometimes led to forms of self – censorship and/or an offering of justification for them.

However, given the female dominated landscape of family research, giving consideration to who is doing the interviewing is pertinent. Offering a choice of male or female researcher for interviews could be best practice in such contexts, but often teams are limited by various constraints meaning they are unable to do this. Being able to offer a male researcher may have symbolic value within this area, but further exploration of the merit of this would be required. Careful reflexivity to render the hidden explicit (Gough, 2003) is therefore needed, particularly within this area of research where limited evidence exists around the experience of ‘doing’ research about and with young men who are fathers. Ultimately, the notion that ‘...subjecting our research to analytical scrutiny can move us toward greater understanding of the import of gender in group life, generally, and in research, more specifically’ (Arendell, 1997: 365) feels appropriate to this topic. Such scrutiny and reflexivity also needs to be applied not only the process of data collection, but also to the analysis of data. This feels particularly important for ensuring that young men’s lives are fairly represented and not skewed by lenses of gender, or other attributes.

### **Class and context**

Whilst assumptions about the life positions and social status of young men should not be made, or be generalised to the point of stereotype, there are known correlations between lower socio-economic status, lower educational attainment and young age parenthood



(Deslauriers, 2011; Kiernan, 1997). Young men may, then, occupy different class positions to university academics, and such differences may need reflection, even if they do not require action. As others have suggested, class is an influencer on research encounters and perspectives so does require consideration (Manderson et al., 2006). Other researchers have noted features of interviews with young fathers which could perhaps be viewed as being seen through the lens of particular classed positions. For example, Braye and McDonnell (2012) talk about their peer researchers conducting interviews which the research team deemed to be 'too short'. There could therefore be seen to be particular expectations around discourses at play here, the middle-class perception of interviews, as involving fuller narratives, which can be enhanced by further 'probing' to elicit open ended talk, or 'guided conversations'. Young men's way of speaking, may then run counter to ideals of middle class discourses and can present a challenge to researchers which McDowell (2014) usefully notes from her work researching with young men,

'I sometimes found it quite difficult to persuade them to talk...Many of them were not verbally adept, perhaps unused to exploring their views and feelings with a stranger...I had to restrain myself from pushing too much, from prompting and putting words in their mouths, learning instead to wait for a response' (McDowell, 2014: 209).

Whilst we have never found problems in terms of 'not enough' content within research with young men who are fathers, differences can certainly be identified in terms of the way in which young men speak, when comparing to interviews with other groups or research populations. This may reflect age or generationally specific attributes (Hanna, 2018), but in researching with young men who are fathers, researchers need also to be aware of the way that class could influence language and conversational norms.

Researchers should also be aware of their own position in terms of the privilege that the university allows and the differences that may affect their research encounters with young fathers. Whilst there is no value to be gained in researchers trying to pretend to be something they are not when conducting research with young men, there must still be an awareness of class identity and the dynamics that could entail. The lives of university educated academics may be very different to those of our research participants, and, as we will discuss in the subsequent section, authenticity and rapport may be highly relevant to bridging the 'class divide' that could exist in researching with young men. Young men may have suspicion or limited knowledge of what 'goes on' in universities and perceptions that university is not 'for them' may be apparent. In the context of the SYD project young men were interviewed primarily in community venues, but some young men chose to come to the university for interviews. Part of the logic of offering this choice was around breaking down barriers around the university, and being able to show young men 'behind the scenes' of higher education proved to be helpful in achieving this. We must not, however, assume that all young men will feel comfortable in or want to come into the university environment or space. Offering alternative settings which they do feel comfortable in, may be best practice for managing this. Thus allowing participants to make a choice of interview location is important in ensuring that they feel safe and welcome in that environment, as well as allowing them a sense of control over their participation in the project. Of course, we cannot know whether an interview in an alternative location would have elicited different data, but in terms of acting ethically and with a focus on the needs of participants above the convenience of the research team, offering these choices can be seen as best practice.

There is also a dichotomy seen to exist around young men who are fathers as being marginalised in some settings, but also as being self-marginalising from the norms of social life by their own actions and behaviours. Crime, anti-social behaviour and violence (including intimate partner and domestic violence) may be part of the life experience of young men who are fathers. Whilst research must push against assumed positions that see young fathers as inherently problematic (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014) and be mindful that ‘young fathers are quite often stigmatised and treated as the Other’ (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014: 372) there too must be avoidance of presentation of young fathers solely as ‘saints’.

*Most of ‘em are pals like getting in trouble and, I’ve just got y’know since getting my bairn like I was getting into trouble and getting arrested every weekend and, but I’ve screwed the nut on me and I just wanna meet new dads in the area and that (P2)*

*They remind me of myself when I was young, you know what I mean, the way they act, last week especially with the language and plain stupidity really (P3)*

The quotes above from the SYD project, depict some examples of how young men spoke of their ‘selves before children’ and in doing so showed that their previous behaviour or actions were not unproblematic. Many young men, like young mothers (see for example Coleman and Cater, 2006), see fatherhood as redemptive and a means to move beyond their previous lives, offering new possibilities. ‘Parenthood is seen as a way out from previous personal difficulties and behaviour. Hate is replaced with love’ (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014: 378), and researchers must be mindful of this and not seek to over sanitise or avoid such tensions. Forming new identities for young men does not happen overnight (Ladlow and Neale, 2015), and the experience of low socio-economic status or of living in areas of multiple deprivation can often restrict or contextualise the ‘slippage’ that can occur in young men’s lives. Just as

divergence or contradictions in data should not be avoided, so too in seeking to provide balance and perspective on young fathers' experiences a fear of contributing to any further negative perceptions of young men should not mean that researchers adopt rose tinted glasses in their research encounters with young men. Adopting methods which allow for exploration of these complexities should then be sought: others have suggested redemptionist approaches (Meek, 2007; 2011) or lifecourse perspectives as a means for enabling this (Ladlow and Neale, 2015).

### **Authenticity and rapport**

Developing rapport has long been noted as integral to productive research encounters (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002; Crow and Pope, 2008; Clark, 2010; Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007; Sixsmith et al., 2003) and this is perhaps especially true of engaging with young men who are fathers in research, particularly as noted above where the researcher and young person can seem to be different from one another through class, gender, ethnicity or a combination of these and other factors. Whilst we would suggest that gatekeepers can be useful in 'getting in' and developing the first stage of rapport, the 'staying in' work has to be done via the researcher and rapport building work with young men, which often entail significant emotional labour as all qualitative research data collection does (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). Utilisation of gatekeepers can be, as was the experience within these projects, a means for facilitating trust in the first instance. The importance of the presence of the gatekeeper as a known and trusted person in initially explaining what the research is about and for, and in bringing young men to interview encounters or making introductions between young men and the researcher can then be a significant force in beginning to

develop rapport with young men. In the SYD project the researcher was able to visit some of the young men prior to the commencement of the research in order to introduce herself and begin to breakdown any barriers which could have potentially existed. Young men often had questions about being a researcher, what this entails, what sociology is and the meaning of the title of 'Doctor', and again the gatekeepers role in pre-briefing young men was useful in giving them some insight into the research before the initial meeting with the researcher took place.

Ensuring that young men were rewarded appropriately for their time and involvement in the research was important in both projects. The use of 'gifts' as a means for incentivising participation has generally had relatively little discussion within qualitative research (see for example Head, 2009) although it has been noted that ethical issues may arise from the use of incentives as a means for encouraging participation within academic research (Grant and Sugarman, 2004). Whilst due consideration must be given to why and how research is being incentivised, for young men who may be on a low income, offering some token of appreciation for their time in taking part in research can be appropriate and worthwhile. Providing reward or reciprocity can of course occur in other ways. For example, during the SYD project young men who had taken part in the research were invited to come to the university for a Widening Participation taster evening, which involved finding out about the university, taking part in activities and during which refreshments were provided. The project worker and gatekeeper was very keen for this to be a part of the young men's experiences of taking part in the research and this offer was viewed very positively by the young men. Feedback gathered afterwards suggested that their experience of a university environment and taking part in teaching and learning was welcome and valued. Similarly, in FF the authors,

in their own time, provided information and advice to a young man who had participated in the study about returning to university as a mature student, which he subsequently did. In this project, bringing young people into the university was a key aim, with the intention that these research visits to campus would allow young people to experience the environment and feel welcome in what may have previously appeared to be inaccessible or unwelcoming spaces. Therefore, reward or reciprocity in or beyond the research encounter can take other forms beyond the provision of financial incentives and can prove useful in the breaking down of barriers between the university and young men who may not have previously perceived the university as a space 'for them'.

Such considerations around reciprocity and reward perhaps reflects the broader positions of the researchers, but are useful to consider in terms of how to generate productive and mutually beneficial relationships with groups which may sometimes be considered 'hard to reach' within research. The primary factor which seems to be the key component to engaging and positive research encounters with young men who are fathers is taking an interest in their lives. For those who feel marginalised, this is often enough to get a conversation started, and young men, in our experience, are pleased to share their views and experiences, and to be provided with an outlet to enable their opinions to be heard. As others have noted in work with young men it is, as a researcher, a privilege to be 'let in' to the lives of young people and remaining aware of that is important for translating the interview encounters into work that goes out into the public domain (Lloyd, 1999; McDowell, 2014). We found that young fathers were keenly involved in their children's lives, but often felt that services were focussed on mothers and children, rather than themselves. Having an opportunity to talk about being a father, and to share their experiences of family life with someone who was interested in

listening to them, was seen by the young fathers in the research projects as a very positive experience. Taking a warm and engaged approach to interviewing, as with any population group, appears to be the best approach to research with young men who are fathers. As noted above, young men were sometimes boisterous during interviews (fidgeting, getting up and wandering around, answering mobile phones, making paper aeroplanes from participant information sheets) but not being 'put off' by such behaviour, being willing to use humour as a way of engaging and adopting a relaxed approach to the interview encounter appears to facilitate useful data generation. Although we did not use them ourselves, other researchers have found walking interviews an effective method (Clark and Emmel, 2010), and this is something that could usefully be explored in future work with young parents. Such approaches however are probably only effective when they are authentic. Attempts to 'fake' the language or mannerisms of young people is less likely to lead to successful encounters. The lives of young men who are fathers and the academics who are researching them may be qualitatively different, but this in and of itself is not inherently problematic if it is appropriately considered before and during research as well as throughout the analytical process.

## **Conclusions**

Until now, there has been limited methodological consideration or engagement around how best we can conduct research with young men who are fathers. As with other aspects of social life, young men may not be 'hard to reach' but research may be 'hard to access' by those young people (Davies, 2016). There is then a need for reflexivity around the doing of qualitative research with young men who are fathers, specifically in order to consider how our positions as researchers intersect with the lives of those we seek to understand. As Crow

and Pope (2008) note, research relationships are ultimately social relationships, requiring interaction between groups or individuals. Just as with entering new social relationships, research relationships require consideration so that effective interaction can ensue. Research shows that young fathers value people being caring, interested in their lives and non-judgemental in support or service settings (Hansom and Young, 2010; Bellamy and Banman, 2014; Tarrant and Neale, 2017; Hanna, 2018) and this too is perhaps applicable to the research context for the developing of rapport and the maintaining of researcher authenticity. Doing qualitative research with young men who are fathers then requires good research skills, including interviewing skills (if that is the mode of data generation), but it fundamentally requires researchers adopting a human approach to the lives and experiences of young men.

We do not yet know enough about how a male or female researcher may impact on qualitative encounters with young men who are fathers. The dominance of female researchers in family research topics often precludes the offering of a choice regarding the gender of researcher. Evidence does suggest that men may actually be more likely to disclose to women so the over representation of female researchers in family sociology can be facilitating rather than inhibiting within research. We do however need to be clear about the lens through which data is generated and analysed and consider how our own gender as researchers intersects within that. Too often in research the hidden remains just that, hidden, so deeper considerations around reflexive practice would therefore be useful.

Young men who are fathers may find engaging with services difficult, be suspicious of authority or wary about engaging with organisations that they perceive to be part of an authoritative or disciplinary 'system' (Maxwell et al, 2012; Baum, 2015; Boyle et al, 2015;



Davies, 2016; Ewart-Pfitzner et al, 2017) Negative experiences by young men of services, professionals or society more broadly can then create a context in which the development of research relationships need to be carefully considered. As there may be social class and status differences between young men as participants and researchers as members of universities, we need to remain mindful of expectations around discourse, language and modes of communication. Offering alternatives to verbal accounts, such as through the use of creative or visual methods has been successful in work with young people including with young fathers (Bagnoli, 2009; Hanna and Lau-Clayton, 2012) and can provide an antidote to the reliance on in-depth verbal narratives that are often seen as the 'gold standard' of qualitative interviewing, but which can be at odds with the communication levels and desires of those who are participating. So too, we should not assume that young men will want to come into the university environs to participate within research, the intimidation of the perceived 'ivory tower' (May et al, 2016; McMahon et al, 2016) can be very real for some young people. However, for others, opening up that space as a researcher and facilitating a safe first experience of the university can be valuable to young men. Again, careful consideration, discussion with participants (and gatekeepers where appropriate) about their preferences appears to be the key to negotiating this successfully.

Ultimately, "Research relationships are not automatic, they have to be created and sustained" (Crow and Pope, 2008: 813). Gatekeepers can be of value then to creating those relationships, but the experience of gatekeepers in the process of facilitating access to young men who are fathers is notably absent from the (small) extant literature, which concurs with Clark's (2011) suggestion that we know relatively little about why gatekeepers do the work of 'gatekeeping'. Understanding the experiences of those gatekeepers, specifically how and why they play that

gatekeeping role, would then enable us to understand more concretely the use and value of gatekeeping for young fathers. Our experience demonstrates that gatekeepers can be instrumental in terms of both access and in generating and maintaining 'by proxy' rapport for the researchers. There is a need to weigh up the cost/benefits of the use of gatekeepers, but the core question of where would young fathers otherwise be 'found' for research highlights the often integral need for gatekeeping in young fathers research. If there is then a *need* to use gatekeepers to gain access to a sample who are otherwise unidentified or dispersed, then being reflexive, open and considered about the use and any potential influence of gatekeepers on the research is vital.

As Clark (2010b) has usefully noted, people are drawn into research encounters for a wide variety of individual and social reasons. Participants may be interested in the idea of research and the topic, or can have a desire to have their voice heard or see research as a mechanism for bringing about social change. This myriad of reasons for general engagement in qualitative research could help to explain why young men who are fathers engage in research projects, but ultimately as Clark (2010) suggests, we need to know more about why particular groups get involved in research. Understanding further why young men are specifically drawn to being involved in research would further our understandings of what mechanisms facilitate the inclusion of their perspectives within research. Given the relative underrepresentation of young fathers' experiences within society and within research into families and fatherhood, being cognisant of potential barriers and facilitators to doing useful research remains important. Discussion of the 'doing' of such research offers useful insights for also enabling and encouraging those researchers new to the field or who are seeking to research with young men who are fathers. There is however a need to ensure that researchers do not present over

sanitised versions of young men's lives. Balancing the need to 'give a voice' and challenge negative stereotypes of young fathers with the lived realities of being a young person who may be experiencing social disadvantage, marginalisation and the outcomes that this can entail is important. This is a difficult position to navigate and ensuring that difficult topics are not avoided in either data generation or analysis is often central to this.

The 'doing' of research with young men who are fathers does not then have to be difficult. The challenges of working with groups who are underrepresented within research or portrayed negatively within social life are often where the rewards of such work also lie. Through demonstrating our experiences here of researching with young men who are fathers we hope to offer some points for consideration, reflection and practice that will be of benefit to those doing work around young age fatherhood, but also potentially with other groups who could be viewed as excluded or marginalised in some way. Being proactive in considering the way we approach the research encounter, engaging in high quality reflexive practices around key aspects such as gender and class, and consideration of the 'doing' as well as the findings of research appears to be important for ensuring useful research outcomes, for researchers but also importantly for those whose lives we seek to understand.

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