

TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT Project 4: Masculinities, Identities and Risk: Transition in the Lives of Men as Fathers

Introduction

Becoming a father for the first time can be a life-changing experience. The *Men as Fathers (MaF)* project has explored how life-changing it is, by drawing on and extending a previous ESRC-funded project carried out from 1999 to 2001 (referred to as our heritage sample). Our extended project has considered the ways in which men come to terms with becoming a first-time father and any implications this has for their identities, relationships and lives over time. It has advanced the use of QL and psychosocial (visual and narrative case study) methods, along with bespoke analytical frameworks capable of synthesising theory, data and method as part of the craft of QL methodology and temporal study. As it has developed, MaF has proposed ideas about what it means to adopt a relational approach to the study of fatherhood and masculinities, while at the same time underscoring why understanding men's life course experiences and sense-making remains significant as a focus of inquiry. In addition, it has highlighted the interpretive challenges involved when conducting its inquiries into the personal and socio-cultural dynamics involved in change-in-the-making.

Aims and Objectives

Research questions include:

- How do men interpret the changes in their relationships, identities and lives as they enter parenthood, and how do they understand and negotiate masculinities, fatherhood and risk across biographical, generational and historical time?
- How does conducting an interpretive, qualitative longitudinal study illuminate the shifting experiences, patterns of identification, linked lives, and socio-cultural dynamics involved in the making of men and fathers?
- How effective is the strategy of using cultural images to historically contextualise biographical data? What is the utility of a research design combining intensive and extensive tracking of individuals across different life stages?

Methods

Qualitative longitudinal (QLL) data, collected from the heritage sample of men in 1999 (before and after the birth of their first child), has been revisited by the project team, to gain a more focused understanding of the experiences of fathers over a time of intensive change. An additional fourth interview with nineteen participants from this group when their first child was eight years old has allowed us to explore to what extent the men's aspirations and ideas of risk have changed over the years due to fatherhood. Under Timescapes the project sample has also been extended to include a group of 16 men from South Wales who were interviewed three times over an 18 month period covering the transition to first-time fatherhood.

The data - mainly (but not exclusively) collected through semi-structured interviews organised around biographical/life story themes - show the unique potential of QLL study for the collection of temporal data. Development of our questioning strategy within the interviews has enabled us to bring further to the fore issues of biographical and generational (dis)continuities and socio-cultural change, along with participants' complex understandings of time.

Interview general themes:

- Interview 1 – own childhood, partner's pregnancy and hopes/fears about fatherhood



- Interview 2 – birth stories, experience of fatherhood in the early stages
- Interview 3 – the first year of fatherhood, plans for the future
- Interview 4 – significant events in the first 8 years, experiences of fathering an older child

Each round of interviews has involved a different visual method, including; collage, visual narrative, discussion of family pictures, and publicly available images. We have paid particular attention to the use of these supplementary techniques in expanding participants' temporal horizons and have documented this in several project publications. In addition, we have used timelines and temporal questions in order to encourage participants to think about the longer-term past and future.

These additional techniques – and the timing of when they are introduced in the interviews - have brought different benefits to the research. For example, a historical narrative of publicly available images presented before the participants had become fathers enabled a discussion of past modes of fathering and aspects of this they would like to continue, whilst personal images were often preferred later on given their personal significance.

The project research has produced over 130 interview and focus group transcripts and those with permissions have been transferred to the Timescapes archive.

Findings

In addition to methodological insights, we have published on substantive issues from the MAF study in the following areas:

Temporality

A central theme of MAF work has been foregrounding temporal study, accounting for time as both topic and vehicle of analysis. One of our analytic projects explored how men dealt with unexpected life course events and the impact this had on both their present lives and anticipated futures. This work showed how events such as unplanned pregnancy and relationship separation can make people feel out of sync with their peers and reluctant to plan for the future, which can become a force of habit with long-term implications. The paper demonstrates the importance of making time explicit as a tool for elucidating life course transitions. Since publication it has been included in the journal's 'most read' articles list.

Involvement

A significant amount of work on fatherhood to-date has focussed on men's involvement with their children, often comparing this with the behaviour of previous generations. Our longitudinal data set has provided the unique opportunity to explore this issue over the longer-term, comparing how men relate to the ideals of involvement before becoming a father and whilst parenting a young baby or older child. Analysis demonstrated how involvement was linked to perceptions of exclusion (e.g. in the early stages when the mother-child relationship was seen to take precedence) and redundancy (thoughts about no longer being needed by their child/ren). Through this paper, we have sought to emphasise the value of QLL methods for providing a more complex understanding of the lived experience of life transitions and their longer-term implications, contrasting this with existing studies offering a 'snapshot' approach. Involvement has also been a key aspect of our user engagement work, particularly our Timescapes policy briefing on strengthening father involvement.



Intensive parenting

Our most recent publication contributes to the current debates around intensive parenting culture. We move beyond the popular focus on mothers as primary caregivers to consider fathers' experience of intensive parenting in relation to their lives with partners. Whilst men appear to be insulated from some of the aspects of intensive parenting culture as it is currently identified, we argue that other aspects of contemporary parenting may be experienced more intensively by men, which points to gender differentiation in risks related to a moral parenthood identity.

Masculinity, work and finances

The timeline of our research meant that data was being collected as the economic downturn unfolded, providing an opportunity to explore changes to participants' present circumstances and anticipated futures in light of this. We chose to focus on case studies of three men in professional employment in order to explore the significant changes both short- and long-term for those who on the surface may appear to be insulated to the vulnerabilities induced by the recession. Analysis demonstrated that some men were taking financial risks in order to ensure they could provide the kind of family environment they had anticipated before the recession. Others made changes to long-term plans, including revising downwards the number of children they were likely to have. It appears that investment in the child through providing the 'best start' is seen as increasingly important, but can be met with particular risks during a period of global financial crisis.

Our analyses of both intensive parenting and fathering during the economic downturn highlighted the continuing salience of employment to fatherhood identity. In light of this, a recent longitudinal analysis has explored the experiences of men who move in and out of full-time employment over the first few years of parenthood and the impact this has on their sense of father identity. Despite the evidence of women's concerns about unemployment, men across the sample clearly articulated expectations that it was their responsibility to provide financially, often regardless of actual financial and employment circumstances. Stay-at-home fathers appeared to have a unique position in no longer being tied to economic models of fatherhood.

Psychosocial research and intergenerational transmission

Our psychosocial work has drawn on contemporary fatherhood and masculinities literatures to study paternal subjectivity and inquire into men's identificatory dynamics, intergenerational transmissions and affectively charged energised flows. This work assumes the relevance of two key psychosocial concepts: intersubjectivity and relationality which are explored in relation to multiple conditions and flows of time. The term 'psychosocial temporalities', coined by Karen Henwood and Mark Finn in 2009, foregrounded a developing interest in the dynamic (continuous and changing) multi-modal constitution of masculine identity and paternal subjectivity. Subsequently, and taking forward psychosocial aspects of the project's work, Karen Henwood and Carrie Coltart have conducted a QL and psychosocial case based, narrative analysis of the ways in which intergenerational transmissions of classed masculinities affect men's experience of becoming a father (part of the Timescapes special issue of Qualitative Research, due for publication February 2012). This article explores the influence of the past on the present (classed masculine transmissions and inherited paternal identities) and ways in which the present mediates the past (e.g. focusing on the ways novel experiences - such as caring for a new baby - and 'new' socio-cultural and relational contexts can prompt a recasting of inherited paternal identities as a means of seizing new opportunities or to accommodate change). The longitudinal lens afforded by the study allowed fathers' attempts to reconcile 'old' and 'new' discourses and identities to be tracked as they responded to the opportunities, demands and concerns arising



out of particular circumstances. This longer term perspective also shed light on the dynamics of continuity and change in fathers' experiences and subjectivities, including the ways fathers arrive at particular 'settlements' between past, present and future over time.

Implications of MaF work for policy makers and practitioners

- As men are increasingly encouraged to be involved during pregnancy, birth and the early stages post-natally, having good quality information and the opportunity to ask questions can help them to feel more confident in their abilities to both care for their child and support their partner during this time. It would also be beneficial to consider how access to antenatal programmes which provide men-only sessions could be widened.
- After the birth, practical barriers (such as paid work, baby's reliance on the mother for breastfeeding) limit men's involvement. Yet, in addition to practical tasks such as nappy changing and bathing, some men found that activities such as reading stories and playing music to their baby helped them to feel more involved. Policy and practice guidance could do more to highlight these positive contributions to prevent feelings of exclusion amongst fathers and to promote their involvement in family life in the longer term. For example, images of involved fathers in the 'Birth to Five' booklet (NHS) could be reinforced by supporting text.
- Although men continue to see themselves as primarily responsible for providing financially for their families – valuing this as a positive source of paternal identity – the provider role can also represent a source of anxiety (Coalition for Men and Boys, 2009). Recent changes to state support for families may intensify this pressure to provide financially. Ideals of father involvement and commitments to an egalitarian model of parenting appear to be widely upheld amongst fathers. Research will be needed to establish the impact of recent changes to parental leave implemented by the coalition government on patterns of working and caring in different families.
- Fathers in our study saw themselves as making important contributions to family wellbeing and resilience, but the resources fathers offer are shaped by practical restrictions, and many other forces including popular cultural understandings of masculine and paternal 'roles' and identities. Practitioners and policy-makers still need to promote and remove barriers to non-traditional contributions by men as fathers e.g. promoting educational practices aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes and encouraging the social and emotional development of boys and men in ways that improve their capacity and potential to care for themselves and others (as recommended the Council of the European Union).
- Ideas of masculinity inherited from the older generation can be struggled with in times of abrupt social change. This means that engaging men in fathering needs to be done in ways that are sensitive to the pros and cons of upholding gender norms. Men's chances of coming to a settlement with their family legacies in ways that promote self-esteem and positive recognition from family members could also be improved. Such engagements would not only be aimed at improving fathers' experiences but also address how they see relationship risks to help promote genuinely co-operative couple and parenting relationships. Alongside the management of fathers as potential and actual risks to children and mothers, practitioners and policy makers need to keep up their efforts to engage fathers as resources.



- Our research takes a relational perspective to parenting which considers, for example, how the experiences of one parent hold implications for the other, building on recommendations to foreground the mother-father relationship in more joined up approaches. As well as addressing the practical barriers to father involvement, this perspective could create new opportunities for mothers in the work of earning and caring.

Early and anticipated impacts

- A MAF report on ‘Men’s Experiences of Antenatal Services’ was distributed before conclusion of the MaF fieldwork to practitioners within the NCT, and has been used to inform practice in working with men.
- A public press release “Fathers find financial crisis hits family life” initiated correspondence with an author of an article in the Independent on the need to break the silences around corporate masculinities. This correspondence opens up the need for further debate, based on masculinities and fatherhood research, about where the moral compass lies in claims about those fathers who are imprisoned and trapped by successful and opulent lifestyles.
- MaF’s published work has brought fathering to centre stage in the study of the challenges of contemporary parenting, and has highlighted sources of interpretive differences and some highly contentious issues in relation to continuing gender differentiated moral risks in parenting. This source of gender differentiation – ignited at key moments in the lifecourse (such as following the arrival of a child) - poses important challenges to society in relation to supporting life course transitions and managing challenges to the modern family. Although at the end of its period of funding under Timescapes, the MaF team has set up a continuing experiment in cross-project collaboration with two other Timescapes primary analysis teams in an effort to scale up the impact of its findings on the topic of intensive parenting and how it plays out in family culture. This continuing work is also intended to make a contribution to understanding the role and ethics of data sharing and secondary analysis initiatives in QLL study.
- The MaF project has focussed attention onto the ethics of representation in QL reporting, and identified the salience of public debates about parenting science. Both of these issues suggest a need for a more critical awareness of the epistemic spaces that are being opened up for today’s parents. This topic is already the subject of a bid for a PhD studentship in Cardiff. In addition, the theme of “parenting science and engaged citizenship” could be developed to secure considerable media interest to help disseminate existing findings from the MaF project.
- The social policy interest in fathering tends to centre on at-risk families, cycles of deprivation and the need for early intervention. The Cardiff team has met up twice with key members of the Children, Young People and Families Division of the Welsh Government (WG) to find ways for its research findings to reach relevant practitioners and to find its way into policy making. At the first meeting at the WG we distributed our accessible brochure summarising the project’s main findings (which we had produced summer 2010), and this has been found useful. Subsequently, the MaF’s policy briefing has also been provided to the same WG team. Arrangements are in place for contact



details to be provided to us of lead officials in five consortia across Wales delivering the Families First initiative.

- The mental health implications of our work have been commented upon by a practicing clinical psychologist/family therapist. If opportunities arise we will work with her to better articulate the specific issues arising from our initial email discussions.
- Carrie Coltart has submitted a bid to the NISCHR (National Institute for Social Care and Health Research) for a social care fellowship mentored by Karen Henwood. The proposal is to take forward the Timescapes research approach - specifically how it has been developed by the MaF team, and to conduct a further study tracking fathers in deprived families and exploring their contribution to family resilience. Reported as a key issue in MaF's Timescapes policy briefing, fathers tend to perceive that they contribute to family resilience and yet experience many barriers to involvement in and through time. If funded, the fellowship would contribute significantly to creating an impact case for the findings arising from the source MaF study.
- We have received guidance from the Fathers' Institute on how to circulate our project findings as part of their publicity briefings. This is an ideal opportunity to create awareness of MaF findings over the next year.
- Aspects of the rationale for QL and temporal study first developed within Timescapes have informed the research proposal for in a major 4 year ESRC study of low carbon transitions and the dynamics of energy demand reduction in everyday life (ESRC award number RES-628-25-0028; led by Karen Henwood). Awarded as one of only seven projects making up the energy and communities initiative, the study began in earnest in August 2011. In itself, this research award can be seen as evidence for the impact of Timescapes and MaF since it is a groundbreaking initiative taking temporal and QL study into a new field of academic inquiry. The study is also closely aligned with policy objectives about how to support families and communities as they seek to live with significant environmental change. There is a developing network for studying the contribution of family and relationship researchers to understanding the challenges posed to society by global climate change led by Lynn Jamieson, a member of the Timescapes project based in Edinburgh. She has made two funding applications to support the network with Karen Henwood as a co-PI (and involving Fiona Shirani as a named participant).

A Note on staffing changes

Dr Fiona Shirani joined the project in November 2007 6 months after it had started initially as an administrator/research assistant. Subsequently she became the main project research associate, working part time on core project activities until end of July 2011. Dr Mark Finn started in May 2007 and worked full time until leaving the project in September 2008 in order to take up a senior lectureship at the University of East London. Dr Carrie Coltart joined the project in September 2009 as a research associate to take forward the psychosocial strand of MAF analytical work. Her part time contract finished end of September 2011.