



Men, poverty and lifetimes of care

While a growing body of evidence of qualitative research is beginning to emerge about the ‘lived experiences’ of low-income families living in poverty, the experiences of family men (i.e. fathers and grandfathers) and the cumulative effects of living in conditions of poverty and disadvantage, is still a significant gap in knowledge.

In response, two sets of archived qualitative longitudinal data, held in a research archive at the University of Leeds (Timescapes), have been analysed: 1) to explore men’s everyday and long-term experiences of family life when living on a low-income and 2) to generate new research questions that derive from, and take into account, these findings. The first dataset, ‘Following Young Fathers’ (FYF) provides evidence of the experiences of teenage fathers; the second, ‘Intergenerational Exchange’ (IE), contains narratives of the lived experiences of mid-life grandparents (including grandfathers). Both sets of participants live in low-income localities in a northern city in England and when brought together, show the diverse ways in which men experience poverty and social exclusion over time, influencing the extent of support and care that they can provide and that they also receive.

In this pamphlet, I present fragments of the stories of the men from both datasets to demonstrate that men value their roles as fathers and grandfathers but that over time, they struggle to balance their responsibilities within particularly constrained circumstances. My intention is that these findings resonate with you and your own practice and it would be really beneficial to explore those questions that you think will best support you, in both your practice and in policy making. All of the quotations used in this pamphlet are from the participants that were interviewed for the two archived projects and have been anonymised.

Men are committed to the people in their families and value their roles as fathers and grandfathers.

Across the datasets, men engage in a range of care practices. Most of the men are fathers and grandfathers and they value these roles highly. They describe parenting as a process and one that is learnt over time. For young men, fathering is a positive and valued role. Aspirations for fatherhood provide them with motivation and emancipate them from the trappings of their localities. For older men, grandfatherhood is a second chance to parent again and to learn from mistakes made in the past:

It’s changed my personality and who I am and that. I mean I used to be a right little...but yeah I’ve, it’s made me realise that I need to do good and that and try and stay out of trouble and, so yeah. . .I mean if I didn’t have them I wouldn’t have, I probably wouldn’t be like this. I won’t, well I know I would have gone into college and done all that. But it’s made me stronger. It’s made me look towards my life and yeah so it’s changed me a lot yeah. . . yeah motivated. It’s just put in me right direction. It’s made me think ‘oh look I’ve, I’ve gotta show ‘em that, how to be a good dad when they are older. And you need to bring them up right and that. And that’s how I’ve seen it so yeah.

Callum, age 19, father of twins, separated (FYF)

Well, I always say that having grandkids gives you a second chance at life, you know what I mean cos you’ve learned by your mistakes....and now you can only teach them, you know what I mean. Cos when you first get married, you get kids, hey there is no manual you know, saying do this do that. You’ve got to learn by your mistakes, haven’t you?, Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. But I mean once you’ve learned that and you’ve got your grandkids, you’ve realised then that you know what to do.

Bob, age 56, grandfather (IE)

As well as being fathers and grandfathers, men also look out for each other in their localities as uncles and brothers.

Like I’m not close wi’ ma mum at all. We always fight. I’m close wi’ ma grandma but not as close as what I am wi’ ma two uncles. It’s like one a’ ma uncles, he’s always looked after me. And like if anyone’s hurt me he’s always gone and stuck up for me. And ma other uncle, he’s like, he’s always there for me to talk to. And he’s helped me with money and that. Like if I need money, he’ll give me it.”

Jimmy, age 16 (FYF)

Interviewer: ...you stopped [younger brother] doing what you and [Jamie’s twin brother] had done (getting in trouble around the estate).

Jamie: Well that’s obvious, he’s my younger brother, you know what I mean, I wouldn’t let him do the things what I did when I was younger, I might not have been caught for anything like it, you know what I mean, but it still, I didn’t do it, but I still want, I wouldn’t want my younger brother to do it.

Jamie, son of Sheila (IE)

However, over time, men may be unable to fulfill their care responsibilities because of continuing constraints on their resources.

For a variety of reasons, including ongoing constraints on their time, money and relationships, men's choices can become harder and they are not always supported in the fulfillment of their caring responsibilities. Some examples of this are outlined below:

- Geography, relationships with partners and a lack of state support

The young men want to be involved in their children's lives but face a number of constraints. Living on a low-income makes it difficult to see children, especially if fathers are non-resident, like Jake, and if ex-partners and their families are controlling access. In the long term, legal processes are costly and Legal Aid is harder to access, rendering some men additionally vulnerable in terms of being able to fulfill their care responsibilities.

I can't go up there every day and she can't, well she don't wanna come to mine. And like I want to see Riley. So if she don't want to bring him to see me or she won't let me take him out then it'd have to go through courts wouldn't it. And I don't wanna do that 'cause then it'll just cause bigger, worse argument.

Jimmy, age 17, non-resident, in a volatile relationship (FYF)

I: If legal aid was still that in place do you think you would have contacted the solicitors?

Richard: Yeah straight away. She knows that I'm getting cash in hand so she can't like do anything,

I: What do you mean she can't do anything?

R: She like, she's been saying like, 'oh I'm taking you to CSA'. I said, 'go on then'.

I: Oh right.

R And stuff like this. I said, 'listen you aren't getting no money off me. If she [daughter] wants stuff, tell me what she wants and I'll go get it myself so I know you're not wasting money on this, that and the other'. So I know that I'm buying it, the money's going on her, not you'. Do you know what I mean?

Richard, age 16, separated (FYF)

- Men are not just 'absent' dads. They make decisions about their responsibilities in relation to their resources and within complex family circumstances.

The issue of child maintenance is complex and at present, does not support men to fulfill their care responsibilities across the lifecycle. Daniel would prefer to care for his son full time rather than pay child maintenance to his ex-partner. Victor has multiple care responsibilities and is highly invested in the lives of his step-children, foster children and step-grandchild in his current marriage. However several factors mean that he is viewed as an absent father by the Child Support Agency. In both examples, including those above, men's lives remained tied to the circumstances of their ex-partners.

At the moment she hasn't approached me for maintenance, which I feel ... once she either goes into full time work or if she goes....to university or whatever...I think she's going to approach me. I can't imagine why she wouldn't approach me. It seems to be in her favour to get money outta me. Which, is very annoying when I've been forced into this predicament and on top of it, I'm being told 'you're paying this money'. It's like 'well I'll have him full time' [laughs]

Dominic, age 19, separated, works full time (FYF)

*...from when I left my ex, I was paying her maintenance, but she was refusing to let me see [son from previous relationship] ... my ex partner, she's never worked and she's always sat on benefits, which then affected what happened to me, then, with the Child Support Agency... What she did was, she took two part time jobs, the emphasis then was on me...They weren't legal jobs. The emphasis was then on me to grass her up for working on the side whilst at the same time being pursued for maintenance by the Child Support Agency. I couldn't convince them, because they saw me just as an **absent father**, who was disgruntled and would say anything, and, erm, they, the Child Support Agency, although I had four step-children, dismissed [names step-children with Carolyn] and said that they, and they actually wrote to us... They said, "They do not count, you are an absent parent. It meant [current partner] was worse off and her children were worse off than before I moved in, and I thought that was intolerable.*

Victor, age 44, re-partnered father (IE)

The effects of care responsibilities and constraint on men's well being; emotional responses

Despite wanting the best for their children and grandchildren, the balancing of care needs and responsibilities alongside additional external pressures from those that intervene in their lives, can be a struggle for these men and they talk a lot about trying to control their emotions. The daily struggle of finding money to care for young children is also a problem for the younger men and affects finances when parenting. Older men are more at risk of experiencing breakdowns under the pressure of providing care at the expense of being able to work. They require support to manage the emotions that arise from difficult circumstances.

Every day, all the time. All we ever do is struggle. But we figure a way out....I'd like to be able to say when he asks for stuff 'oh yes you can have it'. But most the time I've gotta say 'right, you'll have to wait until we've got enough money'

Darren, in a relationship, receiving welfare benefits (FYF), age 21

[In maternal grandparents care] [son]'s been found to have some bruising on his leg...it's...we've gone to a paediatrician to see, find out if it's non accidental or anything...and they've ruled out that it, it's not an accident, someone's done it deliberately. But I'd rather not think like that. So, but upsetting. So he's back on the child protection plan again which, which was established yesterday. So [his mum] reported it to the social worker who then reported it to, well no I didn't get, I didn't get found out until the next day cause I'm always kept out of the loop by then...So it's a bit, even more frustrating for me... I've had a few times where I could have hit a wall say.

Adam, age 17, (FYF)

I mean I'm quick tempered don't get me wrong I'm very quick tempered because me dad were same but like say if [granddaughter] started and all that I have to walk away. Cos I know I've told her many times I have to walk away and it's hard, it's an' hard thing to do walking away you know what I mean? A little kid's having a go at you and it's, it's an hard, your own grandkid's having a go at you...It's an hard thing to walk away, it is (laughs) you know what I mean it's, it's very hard I find it difficult you know...

...this is the hard part I can't get, get me head round you know what I mean. This is the worst part for me because like [third sector practitioner] said I've worked all me life and like I say I had to give a good job up financially. I couldn't take it, there were so much pressure on me

Geoff, age 59, kinship carer, in care as a child (IE)

Key messages

- Men tend to be painted as dangerous or risky, yet they do play active *care-giving roles* in their families and over time, continue to invest in care-giving,
- Care responsibilities are not limited to fathering and grandfathering. Men look out for the people in their personal networks of care and try to protect them from the trappings of their locality,
- Men do not just become 'bad dads' over time and abandon their children, as broader stereotypes such as the 'absent' and 'feckless' father would suggest. They have strong aspirations to be involved in their children's lives from a young age and when they look back as grandfathers, they relish the opportunity of a second chance to learn from their mistakes,
- They face a number of constraints over time however that impact upon the extent to which they can fulfill their care responsibilities. These include:
 - Negotiating sometimes difficult relationships with the mothers of their children,
 - Balancing multiple responsibilities; Following relationship breakdown in particular, men must make constrained choices about how they spread their resources, both financially and emotionally,
 - Trying to manage the emotional consequences of negotiating care responsibilities in constrained circumstances (as separated or non-resident dads, or kinship carers),
 - Lack of knowledge about rights and dwindling financial and legal support.

New empirical project based on emerging evidence

The evidence indicates that there may be significant cumulative effects for men that influence the extent to which they can fulfill their care responsibilities. These effects might start in the men's early life, and build up over the lifecourse. **We lack research on how continuing hardship and/or changing family circumstances influences the decisions men make about distributing their limited resources within their personal networks of care at different times in their lives.** This study will therefore involve looking at men's care responsibilities in low-income localities over time.

Central question of the research: How do men living on a low income define, experience and balance their care responsibilities over time?

This may break down into these areas:

1. How far do men's personal histories influence their ideas of care responsibilities and their ability to fulfill these responsibilities?
2. How far do men's personal histories shape their hopes for the future?
3. What do men think is 'good' care and what are the key barriers and constraints (perceived and actual) to them providing this care over time?
4. What do you think are the key barriers and constraints on these men?
5. How might your organization better support men in low-income localities when they have multiple care responsibilities?

What should I add?

Who I expect to involve in the research:

- Men living in low-income localities in the north of England, who have circumstances that may be described as chaotic or 'troubled',
- Men across all age groups with multiple care responsibilities, within and across households (fathers, grandfathers),

Who should I add?