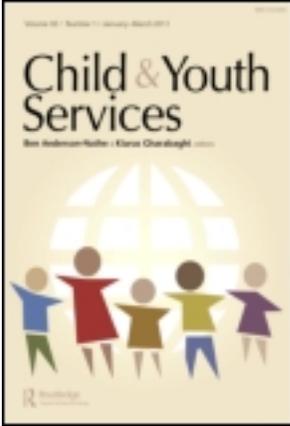


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What About the Dads?

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What About the Dads? Issues and Possibilities of Working with Men from a Child and Youth Care Perspective

Mark Smith

SUMMARY. The importance of fathers in their children's upbringing is increasingly recognised in child and youth care practice. Yet professional interventions in families often focus on men as problems. The experiences of fathers in community settings are applied to a child and youth care context. Workers are challenged to consider the role fathers play in their children's lives and how CYC principles might provide a basis for including men in their thinking about their work with children, youth, and their families. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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A number of strands from my own experience inform this article. It draws upon but does not reflect my practice of twenty years working in residential

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child care in Scotland where, looking back, we failed to engage properly with families. One of the reasons for this was structural. As residential workers we tended to internalize assumptions that we did not do family work, that this was the role of social workers and somehow required the kind of training and knowledge that we believed they possessed and by implication we did not. There was also a persistent confusion between family work and family therapy and an erroneous belief that both required some esoteric knowledge of the inner complexities of family structures and dynamics. More recently, the dominance of the child protection agenda and the location of policies and procedures for this at the level of community-based social work teams has compounded the sense that families were an area of practice demanding particular skills and knowledge.

Of course none of this made sense experientially. Many residential workers engaged skillfully and confidently with families, building relationships and trust that were beyond the scope of so many of those thought to be the experts. The task they performed was not often recognised systematically, nor were the opportunities presented by the strength of relationships they established with families capitalized upon.

If we did not do families, we certainly did not do dads. Where they were featured at all in the families of children, they were generally shadowy figures who rarely attended meetings and, more often than not, made sure they were not at home when we called. In some cases, where children had experienced significant harm at the hands of their dads, there may have been good reason for them not to be involved. However, it can become too easy within the child protection discourse to vilify men and to attribute motives or blame. When a dad did assert a role in their child's life, their approach may have been inarticulate anger, eliciting fear and suspicion amongst the professionals: "What does he have to hide?"

In contrast to this history, throughout my practice in child and youth care I maintained an awareness of the need of children and youth for a strong male figure in their lives and for them to be presented with positive images of masculinity. This view would not be held universally in the profession. Considerations of gender in forums such as the discussion groups on CYC-NET¹ can be sidetracked to focus on the role of men in maintaining control in an establishment rather than on what men, by virtue of their gender, might offer to children and youth. Indeed, the paucity of male workers entering the profession is rightly a growing concern in some quarters (McElwee, 2001).

Most men working in child and youth care, I imagine, can recall the sense of connection between them and particular youth for whom they represented something of what a youth wanted from a father figure. Rightly or wrongly, we took on some of those projections. These dynamics might be especially pro-

nounced at different ages and stages of our own lives and those of the children and youth, reflecting different phases of what we represent to one another. Adolescents in pursuit of the “Who am I?” question might particularly identify with or indeed reject a father figure on the staff group. Moreover, consciously or otherwise, our own experiences of being a father or being fathered, and the beliefs we hold as a result, edge into our relationships.

Much of what we offered to kids, in response to their projections of the father role onto us, was no doubt positive. Developmentally there is good reason to provide a mentoring role to adolescent boys in particular (Biddulph, 1997). The trouble was that, with little real thought as to what we were doing and why, we tended to assume those roles irrespective of wider family circumstances and often substituting for rather than supplementing the position of the natural father.

Having made the move from practice to teaching residential child care in a university setting, I was asked to help out on research project commissioned by a community-based family support service. The organisers of the project had realized the need to support fathers in the parenting role, but early attempts to do so elicited little response from fathers in the area. We, therefore, set out to try and ascertain the views and experiences of fatherhood of local men and to consider the kind of supports they would welcome. The men’s backgrounds were varied. Some were in settled relationships, others were single parents, and still others were involved in custody disputes with former partners. A couple fathers were experiencing parenthood a second time in reconstituted relationships. We also canvassed the views of schools and other local service providers as to how they perceived the issues facing fathers and how they worked with them. The findings were used as a basis for the development of a project to support men in the parenting role.

On completion of this report (Cavanagh & Smith, 2001) we were asked by another family support agency wanting to develop services for men to undertake a similar piece of work. This time we focussed on the experiences of young fathers (Smith & Cavanagh, 2002). Together, the studies involved in-depth interviews with 29 men. While most of those interviewed were fathers to younger children, what was striking was the strength and consistency of views expressed by men from a range of different experiences and circumstances about their hopes for their children and about the pressures of fatherhood. Many of these views can usefully be generalised to the situations of the fathers of youth with whom we work.

Their stories will be used to explore how child and youth care workers might begin to include working with dads more centrally within their work with families.

A CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

Changes in United Kingdom (UK) society have led to a diffusion of traditional expectations for men and have forced a reappraisal of fathers' roles within families (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999). Employment patterns are less predictable and social forces are more complex and this is manifested in a more fluid family composition. The political discourse of the 1990s on both sides of the Atlantic was to seek scapegoats for this challenge to conventional understandings of the family. Single mothers and absent dads took the brunt of the political and media vilification. The Child Support Agency was set up in the UK to ensure that absent dads were not allowed to shirk their financial responsibilities for their children, perpetuating an image of men as feckless "jack the lads" who fathered children and then forgot them.

Little of this reflects the reality of a situation in which 8 out of 10 fathers in the UK still live with all of their biological children, and only 13 percent do not live with any of their children. Of these non-resident dads, 7 of 10 remain in contact with their children, according to Burghes (cited in Daniel & Taylor, 2001). Thus most children can count on regular contact with their dads.

However, the situation is different for children with whom we work in child and youth care and who are involved in child protection. Of these children, only 38 percent live with both parents. Thirty-one percent live with a lone mother, 28 percent in reconstituted families, and 2 percent with lone dads. The figures for those still with both parents drops sharply over time as child protection proceedings continue (Daniel & Taylor, 2001).

Since the late 1990s, the broader policy direction of support for parenting has increasingly been recognised as a cornerstone of the Government's early intervention and social inclusion agendas. A recent study identified as many as 800 initiatives supporting parenting in Scotland (Henderson, 1999). Within this, however, services geared more specifically towards fathers are few and far between. Indeed, in the wider focus on parenting, one study classifies fathers within the category of parents with specific needs (Henderson, 1999).

Practice Questions

- Where are the dads of the children and youth you work with?
- What are their circumstances?

Men as "Other"

In addition to possible marginalisation in the research agenda and in wider debates around parenting, men can also find themselves objectified.

The legal system in Scotland still fails to afford men automatic rights and responsibilities for their children unless they were married to the child's mother at the time of the birth. This situation is reinforced when it comes to service delivery. The social work department, for instance, has a statutory duty to work with parents, and within these parameters mothers generally describe themselves as both the primary carer and also the legal carer (Cavanagh & Smith, 2001). Men also pointed to institutionalized presumptions by the legal profession and the Child Support Agency in respect to a man's role in parenting. According to one father, "When I go to sign on, I am always asked why I'm not working."

Such presumptions can be further reinforced by professional assumptions. In the past, psychoanalytic or attachment theories could perpetuate what Buckley (1997) calls the mothering syndrome. More recently, some feminist perspectives, which have been influential in social work in particular, at times appear to attribute many of society's ills such as domestic violence and child abuse to the expression of a "hegemonic masculinity" (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001). The notion of hegemonic masculinity is that a man's concept of himself and of his role is constructed in relation to an image of masculinity based upon power and dominance, especially over women and children. Such discourses have been incorporated into a practice orientation that can act to exclude men to an extent that O'Hagan and Dillenburg (cited in Christie, 2001) described a "pervasive and endemic problem" (p. 31). It is a particular problem in child protection work where, for a variety of reasons, including at times a legitimate fear of male violence, men can be marginalised in the conduct of investigations and subsequent interventions (Buckley, 1997). This situation can have a number of effects, one of which may be to make men feel cornered and ignored. Their resultant inarticulate and aggressive responses may then be used as evidence to support stereotypical views. Another consequence may, in fact, be to allow men to evade their parenting responsibilities. Yet in some instances, interventions in families point to a failure of the professionals involved to appropriately engage with men rather than reflecting any more rounded assessment of a situation.

Liam was a fifteen-year-old lad whose father had been labelled as violent by the local social work office. As a consequence, Liam's contact with his mum and dad was severely restricted and services to his parents effectively withdrawn. Gerry, his keyworker in the unit, was a particularly skilled, confident, and engaging character. He made contact with the family, built a relationship with them in the course of a number of home visits and joint outings, coping along the way with episodes of dad's drunkenness. Because of Gerry's own sense of himself, he never encountered any violence or threat of it. It was quickly apparent in his "being with" assessment of the family situation that

Liam himself, a big and reasonably together 15-year-old lad, well able to handle or extricate himself if the need arose, was not at any risk of violence. Indeed, he felt a responsibility to be there to ensure that mum and dad's drinking was kept in check, and, perhaps, as a 15-year-old that was fine or, if not fine, at least understandable and something we needed to work with.

The projected fears in this case were those of the social worker and at a structural level, the department's response to a notion of male aggression. As a result, Liam was denied access to where he wanted to be. Yet within a few months, Gerry had him back living at home, probably not in a manner that sat comfortably with our own middle class notions of what family life should be, but happy enough to be there.

This was a dad, upon whom all sorts of negative professional labels had been hung. Yet when engaged by a skilled youth care worker, it was apparent that like most dads, he had a love and hopes for his son. He admittedly was not great at seeing them through but again there was something to work with.

The point of this is not to minimise male violence but to acknowledge that it is not immutable or pervasive and that there can be a context that might change and be more responsive to different workers in different roles. The marginalisation of men within professional discourses often does not reflect the reality, complexity, or indeed the capacity for change within their experiences. There is a need to acknowledge these realities and to see behind the labels. More recent approaches to working with men in social work, while holding into a feminist perspective, do in fact acknowledge the need to work with them in order to help them change their patterns of behavior (Cavanagh & Cree, 1996).

Practice Question

- What assumptions do you make (about fathers that might influence your practice with them?)

The Importance of Fathers

Whilst professional practice and many of the assumptions on which it is based fail to properly engage with men, there is an increasing recognition of the role dads play in child rearing (Lamb, 1997). Burgess (1997) describes a range of benefits to children of positive paternal involvement in families, including better educational achievement. A boy's distance from his father can cause or aggravate any behavioral problems he might display (Pleck, 1996). Indeed, the importance of men in raising boys is seen to be important in the growing literature highlighting concern about the difficulties growing up faced by boys (e.g., Biddulph, 1997; Gurian, 1999; Pollack, 1999). The symbolic

importance of fatherhood is also acknowledged (e.g., McKeown, Ferguson, & Rooney, 1997). This may be particularly important during adolescence when children will need a realistic image of their dad to come to terms with their own identity (Daniel & Taylor, 2001). The intergenerational dimension emerged powerfully in our own research. These men stressed the importance of their own fathers, however imperfect they might have been, in facilitating their rites of passage to adulthood (Cavanagh & Smith, 2001). Several of the young men in our second study in particular defined their approach to fatherhood in contrast to their own experiences of being fathered. The hope of one was "To be a better dad than my own." Another said, "Didn't want to be like my dad and didn't want to get married because it just caused upset and unhappiness." He said relationships were about using people, and it was better to use and not get hurt rather than trust anyone.

A strong message is that young men need to be provided with positive yet realistic images of what it is to be a dad. For many of those interviewed, the images they did have were based upon negative impressions of their own experiences growing up. The oft-repeated desire to be a better dad than their own may be laudable, but it may not have much substance to it unless based on real rather than idealized alternatives.

Practice Questions

- What role did your own dad play in your upbringing?
- What role do you play in your children's lives?

MEN AS DADS

All of the men we interviewed expressed a strong desire to be good dads and could give examples of the kind of everyday activities such as bathing and storytelling they do with their children. Several looked forward to getting home from work to spend time with their kids. Fatherhood went beyond material and practical provision to "thinking about the kids and carrying them in your head." Providing a good and happy home was another key theme.

There was very little evidence in the interviews of authoritarian or disciplinarian parenting styles. Indeed, many of the men interviewed explicitly eschewed such approaches, often in reaction to their own negative experiences growing up. Any virtues that smacking might have were rarely extolled, although many could acknowledge that they did resort to it on occasion in response to their own frustration, anxiety, or sheer desperation.

The ability of men to fulfil the parenting role was also acknowledged by the young mothers we interviewed for the second study. There was an apprecia-

tion that difficulties in their own relationships need not detract from a man's ability as a dad. One of the young mothers describes her child's father as "one crap boyfriend but one brilliant dad."

The aspiration of men to be good dads is not always the image we associate with the dads with whom we work. I began to question whether the small sample we interviewed was representative, even if it did include a number of young men who had been in or on the verges of trouble growing up. Coincidentally, in the course of writing up the report, I bumped into a couple of lads I had worked with, 19-year-old twin brothers, both of whom had been through the whole range of care provision, including secure accommodation. Both had fathered a child. When I told them what I was working on, they were keen to talk to me. One of them told me his child lived with her mother around 150 miles away. I asked if he missed her. He looked at me with evident disdain and said, "Of course I do."

This perhaps should not be that surprising. The desire to be a father is a powerful one, and one not just based on satisfying a sexual need or a primitive drive to procreate. We recognise the strength of this pull when we think about young mothers but can be unaware of or underplay it with dads. Yet young men "go through the same emotional struggle and confusion that young mothers do. Teenage fathers often want babies as much as teenage mothers do, for many of the same reasons," according to the American Psychological Association (cited in Rolph, 1999, p. 63). Daniel and Taylor's (2001) research shows that young dads want to be included in their children's upbringing, particularly as good role models. The emotional pull toward fatherhood is further exemplified in the experiences of birth fathers whose children have been given up for adoption. One man described a sense of physical loss for a child given up at birth: "There is not a day goes by when I don't think of him. I feel as if there is something inside me that has been ripped out and I feel empty and nothing is going to fill that" (Clapton, 2001, p. 57).

All of this would suggest that men, by and large, do want to be involved in their children's lives and that that urge remains throughout their lives irrespective of their level of involvement.

Practice Question

- What hopes might the dads of the youth you work with have for their children?

Men Coping

Professional images of men as exemplars of a hegemonic masculinity were rarely apparent in the interviews we carried out. What was evident was a range

of different experiences and different expressions of masculinity that were raw, often unremitting, and at times poignant.

One area that affected a number of dads was their confidence. Many felt that they would be better dads if they were working. It would provide more money but would also give them a status that they felt they had lost, particularly if their partner worked. The breadwinner culture was still strong amongst all ages interviewed, yet over two-thirds of the men in our first study were unemployed because of illness or disability or by being the sole carer for their children.

All men found that parenting could get on top of them, and whilst there were individual reasons for pressures, there were some common themes. Those dads in the main carer role found it difficult to cope with what they saw as constant demands for attention and felt they were “running out of ideas” to keep their children occupied. Arguments between children drained their energy and confidence. A number of them said they would often lose their temper and shout at the children. Men trying to find work found being around the house difficult. For those who worked it was often an experience of long hours with little return. Two dads in relationships each clocked up 129 hours per week on a regular basis as security guards. Another had to try and keep a small business on the side to fulfill his financial responsibilities for children in two different relationships. All of this severely limited the time they had to spend with their children. The partner of one of these men further restricted the time he was able to spend with his daughter, again casting doubt on images of a dominant masculinity. Those men with a disability felt frustrated that they could not do the things that “normal” dads do: “I can’t even roll about the floor, far less take her for a walk. I feel that I am just lying here watching her life go by.” For dads who were primary carers the fear of falling ill was a constant pressure.

A number of dads had no informal supports and were unwilling to seek help. The absence of regular adult company is a difficulty for men in the fathering role. One admitted there were times he would “sit down and greet (cry).” One man referred to regular visits to his mother as a godsend: “Even though she’s a bit flaky, it’s someone to talk to rather than always kids’ stuff.” Relationship break-ups were seen as a major pressure, particularly in attempting to insulate their children from the effects. Lone dads also found it more difficult than it had been previously, to sustain friendships after their circumstances changed.

Practice Question

- What difficulties and pressures face the dads of the youth with whom you work?

Dealing with the Pressures

Many men said they had little time for spare-time interests to help them relax. Some worked long hours which left them little time to see their children, much less take up hobbies. For dads who had spare time their activities were mostly house-based, solitary pursuits. Most of the men interviewed claimed they did not use alcohol and drugs to relieve pressures. They gave a number of reasons why they did not use alcohol and drugs. One was money. Another was the need to maintain control; alcohol and drug misuse could result in loss of custody or contact. In addition, a number of men had grown up in an alcohol-fueled violent home and did not want to pass this experience on to their own children.

All the men interviewed “bottled up” the pressures. Almost half of them felt they had no one to talk to when things were getting on top of them. A number of them were reluctant to talk to professionals, especially social workers, fearful of being regarded as not coping and of losing their children. Others saw themselves as self-contained individuals who should be able to deal with things themselves. Two men from ethnic minority communities were brought up in strict households that would not allow the discussion of their problems with others. Those with informal and family support living close by had regular contact but would not talk about emotional issues. “I would talk for hours about anything rather than what is going on for me with the kids and her.” The fear of dads about exposing themselves as failures was a strong theme.

Yet carrying the pressure takes its toll. One lone dad stated, “I guess I am gonna’ explode soon—can’t keep all this in my head.” Of the sample interviewed for the first study, 20 percent were diagnosed with depression and another one-fifth stated that they constantly felt depressed. This is consistent with more general concerns about the emotional health of men.

One of the young dads cast an interesting light on why men might not be as involved in their children’s lives as they might be. He recounted his own experience: “They (the mother’s parents) want her to stick in at college—get a decent job—they see me as a waster—not good enough for her. I’m starting to feel they are right and maybe I should just drift off the scene.” This was a lad who felt a responsibility to his child and indeed to his former partner but was unable to negotiate a role for himself. His sense of just drifting away was a symptom of despair rather than evidence of irresponsibility. It is not difficult to imagine that many of the dads of the youth we work with may “just drift off the scene” not knowing how to assert and maintain a place in their kids’ lives.

Practice Question:

- How do the dads of the youth you work with deal with the pressures they are faced with?
- Why might some dads not figure in their children's lives?

Services for Men

There was a persistent perception among men that services to support parenting cater to women. This was most strongly felt by those men who did not have custody of their children and only occasional contact. They said they wanted help to be a better dad but that it was difficult without regular contact and there was nowhere for them to get "training in being a dad." They believed there were a lot of local projects for women where the emphasis was on supporting mothers. The men did not object to this approach but felt they had been left behind and that there was "little advice and support for dads." One respondent referred to the advertising of services as "useless and not directed to men and dads."

The majority of men who access children's centers and nurseries felt uncomfortable because services were so "women dominated." This was a common criticism in terms of staff but also in terms of community space. In one children's center there are a large number of mothers who regularly use the community room, and some dads were intimidated to enter "the women's room" and felt excluded from that resource. This finding is consistent with other research by Ghate, Shaw, and Hazel (2000) which indicates an almost unconscious but institutionalised discrimination against men in children's centers.

Most dads did not think the staff in agencies understood their situation or needs and felt awkward about approaching them. This was particularly true of social work, with some men feeling they would be judged as poor dads because they were asking for help. A couple of men felt that support from social workers was not forthcoming when they had requested it but that the response when it did come was to judge them for the very issues they had asked for help with at an earlier point. The issue of the credibility of the professionals involved was highlighted, with a couple of men comparing social workers unfavorably with the probation workers they had encountered growing up. Where the probation officers "knew the score," the men resented being told about parenting by what one described as "a middle-class woman do-gooder." Men commented that when statutory services were involved with their children, they wanted to deal with the mother. A number of men resented "being frozen out and treated as a bit part."

Almost all the men interviewed felt that having male workers in services would make them feel more comfortable and more likely to use local services.

A number of men observed that they wanted to relate to someone who knew what it was like to be a dad in what they perceived as a women's world. Male workers were few, yet the men interviewed who used a local children's center found the sole male worker there helpful. "I felt I could talk to him easily." For most of the men there was an absence of appropriate services as well as barriers to existing services. Almost all dads were seeking practical help and emotional support. "A place that you could drop into without being 'assessed' a failed dad but could get non-judgmental advice and support with practical stuff as well as 'head stuff.'"

Over one-half of all men said they would value advice and help with parenting in the widest sense but in a way that did not look down on them. Some lone dads wanted effective and flexible child care to assist with return to work and to get some time for themselves to re-establish friendships. Advice about custody, contact, and child support was identified as a crucial area by a number of dads. "Living in a world dominated by women and courts who always take her side" was how one dad put it.

Opportunities for men generally to express their emotions are often lacking. Some of this is undoubtedly a feature of Scottish male culture. However, some of it may also be structural in the sense that few places or opportunities are available for men to talk about their feelings. A number of those interviewed identified a need to do so and indeed did so with some candour and insight to the total strangers interviewing them. It may be that, were services available to dads on a similar basis to those offered to mothers, men might take more risks in talking about their feelings. One older man who looked after his grandchildren said, "I've been there, bottling it up playing the hard man; it takes lumps out of you, and I am past the age of worrying about losing face. It's good to get the other boys to talk about what's eating them, things like custody."

Only one of the twelve surveyed agencies with a role in supporting parenting reported having more men than women on their staff group, a ratio of 3 to 1. Another agency had an equal balance. Staff groups in the remaining ten were heavily skewed towards women, three of them reporting all female staff groups and others ratios of 1 to 10 or 1 to 11. The use of services was likewise skewed heavily towards women. Those agencies for which we are able to provide (or obtain) figures showing men's usage of their services gave percentages ranging from 5 to 12 percent of total usage. There are likely to be many reasons for these figures, one of which may simply be that those men in full-time employment are not in a position to take up many of the services.

Possible attitudinal and cultural factors contributing to the low usage of services by dads emerged in subsequent responses. One agency respondent indicated that men might potentially become involved in nursery trips, for example, but tended not to do so. Another that operated a parents group noted that "no

father has ever shown an interest in attending.” Another did not feel able within their existing resources to offer anything specifically for men, indicating that any services accessed by men would have to be within the framework of existing provision. This would suggest that men are unlikely to access services merely because they are there, because many of the characteristics of the service will institutionally discriminate against them. There is a need to more proactively consider dads in the provision of services.

Practice Questions

- How might your own agency act to exclude dads?
- How might it be more inclusive of dads?

WHAT MIGHT A CYC APPROACH OFFER TO DADS?

From the foregoing sections we might draw the following conclusions.

- Dads are important in their children’s upbringing.
- Most men have a strong desire to be fathers and generally are motivated to be good ones.
- For a variety of reasons, men do not always fulfil as important a role in their children’s lives as they would like to.
- Professional beliefs, assumptions, and ways of working can label men as problems in family situations.
- Existing services are rarely geared towards supporting dads and may in fact institutionally discriminate against them.
- Many men would welcome support that they perceive to be credible and non-stigmatising.

This situation provides a solid base from which to consider a child and youth care approach to working with dads. An attraction of such an approach is that it offers the prospect of shifting views of men as objects to viewing them as subjects in improving the life experiences of their kids. Most men want to be these subjects.

There is perhaps a greater potential for CYC workers to develop roles in working with families and with dads in particular than there is for social workers. The social work role with families is increasingly bound up in the statutory requirements of child protection. As such, the professional focus can be about monitoring and maintaining a less than satisfactory status quo with families. The social work role has become potentially and at times actually stigmatising of families, according to Higham (2001). A CYC approach by contrast proceeds from an orientation towards change as Thom Garfat highlights earlier in this volume.

The CYC approach moreover is about making connections, which involve workers using themselves to connect at a personal level with those they work with. The centrality of “self” and “self in action” approaches in the CYC tradition signifies one of the fundamental differences between CYC and social work where the professional role seems increasingly to be about carrying out certain discrete tasks and following procedures (Fewster, 1990). As such social work, as it has developed, can act to privilege system knowledge over self-knowledge. Indeed the importance of notions of “personal style” in working in a CYC context may be threatening to some workers as it makes it harder to hide behind the professional role and potentially exposes the success or otherwise of their interventions to an assessment of their own efficacy.

Workers in child and youth care settings have something of a head start in adopting “self” and relationship-based approaches to working with families. They do so on an everyday basis with the youth they work with. Paradoxically too, there may even be some advantage in their comparative lack of status and training as this may allow them to maintain a more authentic closeness to those they work with, less distorted by a particular professional lens. The literature in this area tells us the best workers are those who are closest to the backgrounds and understandings of those they work with (Fulcher, 2001). Residential workers in this respect fare better than social workers.

All of this provides a solid basis from which CYC workers might become involved with families.

Practice Question

- What features of your own “personal style” might you bring to working with dads?

PERSONAL STYLE IN WORKING WITH DADS

Working with dads calls for particular understandings of the way men understand and interact in the world. That might often be best done on a man-to-man basis. The views of the dads we interviewed certainly suggest that for many men that is the case. Like it or not, there is a “man code” that is shared with other men. Cultural considerations flavor how it might be decoded. In a Scottish context the code is often pretty unsophisticated. Rituals of encounter revolve around half a dozen words. The first of these is a greeting, either, “How’s it gaun?” or simply, “Awright?” The response to this may be another “Awright” or “Aye” or “Naw.” The worker has to negotiate this initial encounter and to then take the conversation into other non-threatening points of contact, perhaps picking up on environmental cues about what a man’s interests may be or perhaps initi-

ating a conversation around football. In Scottish culture it will be important to understand the profound religious and cultural nuances that surround affiliation to particular football teams. Other cultures will have their own artifacts through which meaning in interpersonal encounters is constructed and which, if understood, may provide a way in for workers to engage with individuals and families.

In engaging with men there is a need to see beyond the taciturn exterior that many present, especially perhaps as a defence against professionals they hold to be judging of them and of whom they are perhaps legitimately suspicious. Engagements around the professional role and its authority are likely to be less productive than those which start from a more routine encounter as the following example illustrates.

Mr. Granger was a gruff, heavy drinking Scot if ever there was one. The image we had of him was as an authoritarian, ne'er do well who spent his time in the pub while mum struggled to bring up four young kids. Pete, the eldest, was with us. We had organised a sponsored cycle run in aid of a couple of charities. Pete asked us if it was okay if his dad put a bottle in the local bar to collect donations towards our sponsored effort. We agreed and later went along to the ceremony in the pub to crack open the bottle. It called for us to take a step back from the professional role for a bit and to put aside judgements about the rightness or wrongness of a family whose interactions and relationships centred around the local pub. The fact that we went along to his local and shared a few beers with him brought our relationship with Mr. Granger onto a more authentic level and was formative in our subsequent contact with him. It called for a particular interpretation of the professional role, however, and one that is frowned upon in social work where there seems to be an increasing suspicion of strong personally based relationships.

The assertion of a role for men in working with dads does not detract from the role many women also play in this area. Annie, a former colleague of mine, is one of the best, most intuitive workers with families I have come across. She exudes directness and confidence and the image of a strong mother figure, which many men need and derive strength from. The trick is to recognise and tune into the different and complimentary roles men and women can play in engaging with families. This may call for a reappraisal of some of the roles we traditionally ascribe to men. For instance, how often do we try and ensure a male presence when we hear that a dad is visiting the unit and may cut up rough? Male workers can enter into family situations of this sort already cast in the role of "bouncer."

In order to reappraise prevailing attitudes, CYC workers need to include dads into their thinking about how they might work with families. An awareness of the importance of dads in children's lives is a good starting point, as is

an appreciation of the different circumstances and experiences of dads and of the roles they might play in their kids' lives. Essentially men need to become subject rather than object in our understandings of how families operate. For this to happen we need to engage them at a personal and meaningful level.

Practice Questions

- What are the roles and expectations of the male staff in your setting?
- How might this affect approaches to working with dads?

Assessment

When CYC workers proceed from the basis of acknowledging the role dads might play in their kids' lives, the initial task becomes one of assessing what that role might be. Before trying to do so, workers need to realise that a minority of men may, in certain circumstances, be dangerous, and a consideration before proceeding to work with dads is to bear in mind the element of safety for both child and worker. In some respects, that risk assessment may only become apparent in the course of ongoing contact. The fact that a man might have abused his children in the past should not by itself exclude him from any future role in their lives. The nature and degree of risk will vary with age, stage, and circumstances. Yet professional labels and assumptions about the ingrained nature of masculinity and of abuse can persist and may in fact impede the belief in the possibility of change, which is central to a CYC approach.

The assessment then needs to center on the particular role a dad might play in his child's life. Daniel and Taylor (2001) offer the following typology:

- *As partner with the mother*—in this category, the worker needs to determine the different roles each parent assumes. This might include an assessment of whether the family is a traditional one in which dad provides and mum nurtures or whether child caring responsibilities are shared. It should also consider issues such as who takes on disciplining and how support mechanisms operate.
- *As an "alternative mother"*—where dads take on child care roles that society would generally ascribe to mothers. This might be in cases where dad is the sole carer or in other situations where there is merit in supporting dad to assume responsibilities that mum for whatever reason is unable to fulfil.
- *As a "luxury"*—in these cases dads might be described as being "good" with the kids or offering support to the mother. In reaching a view as to whether or how to intervene in such situations a worker might want to consider more closely exactly what dad does and the implications of this.

Some men can of course be good with the kids without taking sufficient responsibility for the more mundane aspects of the parenting task.

- *As contributing something unique*—such as being a role model. Given the predominance of adolescents and, in particular adolescent boys, in residential child care, this categorisation may take on a particular significance (pp. 62-65).

A fifth category to consider might be that of the *absent dad*. Irrespective of whether they are currently part of the family or have even had regular contact, workers should actively consider how they might include dads in their children's lives. The views of the men we interviewed would suggest that they still thought about their children and were interested in their wellbeing. Also, the likelihood is that adolescents are going to want and need a realistic picture of their dad. Yet how often do we explore with youth the importance of their feelings for or attachments to their dads?

Practice Question

- What role do the dads of the youth you care for play in the lives of their kids?

INTERVENTION

Once a worker has determined some idea of the role a dad might play in a family, they will be better placed to identify how any intervention might be most effective.

The experiences of dads interviewed would suggest that interventions should generally be of the “being with” or perhaps a “doing with” variety. One of the young dads we interviewed said he would welcome support, “Provided they weren’t going to preach at me about happy families, but it was about handling real life hassle.” He went on to describe his preferred supports as “Somewhere you could get advice without thinking you are failing, just because you ask a lot of things, especially relationship stuff.” This young man probably did want to talk about but his ability to do so was likely to depend on him feeling that any worker offering support was practical, credible, and probably one with whom he had established some sort of relationship and trust. CYC workers might do well to bear such views in mind before giving advice or embarking on counselling.

The most productive interventions for CYC workers might be what Phelan (2001) calls “experiments with experience” whereby workers become involved in families to arrange activities in a way that might allow dads and other family members to reframe their experiences and to retell their stories from a different perspective. Thus, rather than trying to counsel a dad about the desir-

ability of establishing or re-establishing a relationship with their adolescent son, the worker, from the basis of a relationship with the dad, might arrange to go along on a fishing trip or an outing to the pool hall with a dad and son. That way they might pick up the rhythm of a relationship and pace the nature and timing of subsequent contacts accordingly.

The only way Mr. Granger felt he could define a role for himself in Pete's life was to do so on his own territory, the pub. He would probably have loved to be able to go cycling with us. Perhaps the task in working with dads is to try and find those spaces and opportunities where we can step onto each others territories or find neutral spaces where we can connect from a basis of discovering how we as CYC workers can help dads be the kind of dads most of them would want to be.

CONCLUSION

This has been an exploratory consideration of some of the issues that can face fathers. The experiences of men in this role and the difficulties they often encounter from traditional services suggest that the adoption of a CYC approach to working with them holds out a number of possibilities. Our own dads, irrespective of the roles they played in our upbringing, shaped who we are. Those of us who are fathers know the emotional power involved in the role. Yet sometimes, in our work with children and youth, we do not acknowledge that they too have dads and either do not factor them into our work or worse, still actively exclude them from it. As the CYC task is increasingly conceptualized in relation to families, it would be wise to consider how we might include dads in this agenda.

NOTE

1. Child & Youth Care International <<http://www.cyc-net.org>>

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