

'My Son Gave Birth to Me': Offending Fathers—Generative, Reflexive and Risky?

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Abstract

This paper analyses key findings from narrative interviews with 16 (ex) offender fathers. All fathers interviewed served custodial sentences, ranging from 6 months to 14 years, and were on licence at the time of interview. This research focuses on the ways in which this group of marginal men reflect on their perceptions, practices and aspirations as fathers. It seeks to understand how they make sense of fathering in the context of criminality. The research shows that the social, cultural and economic context in which many of these men are parenting is very complex and demanding. It points to the impact of prison on their relationships with their children and partners and highlights the role of their families in supporting their parenting/fathering. In this paper I argue firstly, that the 'costs of crime/imprisonment' for many of these men is very high and secondly, that fathering can be productive, resourceful and generative in the 'context of offending', where the deficit model of fathering is the norm.

Keywords: Generative fathering, offenders, deficit model of fathering

Introduction

Fatherhood has been the subject of extensive scrutiny by academics, practitioners, policy makers and politicians. The changing nature of fathering and the experiences and expectations of fatherhood in the context of shifting family practices are widely debated. This paper contributes to this on-going discussion by focusing on the ways in which a group of marginal, excluded men, namely ex-offenders, reflect on their perceptions, practices

and aspirations as fathers. Their and other similarly marginal fathering experiences, such as those of gay fathers, birth fathers whose children have been placed for adoption and step-fathers, have received scant attention in the literature on fatherhood (Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Yet, understanding the experiences of this group of marginal men brings an additional focus to the wide-ranging literature on fathers: the challenges and complexities of fathering in the context of distrust, separation and social chaos are intense and revealing. It highlights the potentially generative nature of fathering in contexts of significant adversity.

The exponential growth of scholarship on fatherhood over the past two decades reflects significant change in the nature and form of family life in general, including higher rates of fathering outside marriage and the family home. Collier and Sheldon (2008, p. 11) argue that the structural changes (economic and cultural) associated with late-modernity, notably shifts in patterns of work, with more women entering the paid labour market, combined with changing family patterns, have resulted in a 'reassessment of fatherhood and changes in the understandings of the legal rights and responsibilities of parents'. In mapping out what constitutes the 'new fatherhood', the role of fathers in the family is a core focus of enquiry, specifically the competing and conflicting demands some men encounter balancing economic and family responsibilities (Barclay and Lupton, 1999). Relevant literature highlights the changing nature of fatherhood and specifically men's struggle to become successful fathers, where a successful or 'good father' is one who actively participates in the care of his child, promotes equality between men and women, balances work and family life as well as providing for the family's economic welfare, which remains a man's key responsibility (Silva and Smart, 1999; Collier, 2001; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003). In this frame, 'good' fathers are widely regarded as an important resource for their children (Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Collier and Sheldon (2008) demonstrate that law and social policy, post 1997, have played a central role in repositioning fathers more centrally within their families. They argue that 'over the past decade in Britain, there has been an explicit attempt to use law to promote a range of father-inclusive practices in service provision across diverse areas of policy and service delivery' (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p. 22). Politically (and practically) 'good' fathers have increasingly become regarded as a solution to a range of complex social problems. Yet, Collier and Sheldon (2008) argue for the need to go beyond the notion of 'new fatherhood', in which the transition from breadwinner to carer is sometimes represented in rather linear, unproblematic terms. Their framework of 'fragmenting fatherhood' is useful in doing this. 'Fragmentation' occurs in respect of a number of social, cultural and legal processes. It refers to the 'sub-division' of fatherhood in which fathering is shared between men and families, such as following separation and/or divorce. This notion of social fatherhood highlights the involvement of fathers with their non-biological children. Moreover, they argue that 'traditional fatherhood' is tenacious in its continued hold over social and cultural

expectations of fathers, making the tensions for some men between employment and family commitment acutely felt. Fundamentally, they state that there is no ‘one’ fatherhood. Dermott (2008, p. 24) similarly argues that the routes to fatherhood are diverse and multiple, preferring to speak of a ‘collection of fatherhoods’.

Yet, contemporary understandings of fatherhood that remain located in the model of ‘the new/good father’ are situated in sharp opposition to ‘problem’ or ‘bad’ fathers and the ‘crisis of masculinity’ more generally (Connell *et al.*, 2005). Discourse, policy and practice on ‘engaged fathers’ (good fathers) run parallel to those on ‘problem fathers’ (bad fathers), where ‘bad fathers’, particularly those who are absent, unengaged and ‘irresponsible (financially and otherwise)’ are potentially to blame for family conflict and poor childhood outcomes. In analysing the politics of masculinity under New Labour in the UK, Scourfield and Drakeford (2002, p. 634) argue that New Labour policy reflects policy optimism about men in the home and pessimism about men outside the home. Embracing ‘new fatherhood’ and the development of father-inclusive policy is testimony to policy optimism. In the public domain, the attention paid to men in various fields, particularly in the context of criminal justice, is negative: ‘... there is negativity towards men outside the home in the rhetoric of New Labour, particularly in the blaming of working-class young men for the wider social problems of crime, bad health and laddish culture’ (Featherstone *et al.*, 2007, p. 28). This ‘rhetoric’ and the assumptions that underpin it are associated with a deficit model of fathering (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997). Within this deficit model, Collier and Sheldon (2008) suggest that men are variously seen as perpetrators and victims. It is these representations of men that have informed the assumptions and approaches of professionals within a range of practice settings. These assumptions range from viewing men (fathers) as highly risky, of no value, absent and irrelevant or quite simply invisible.

In a study of (vulnerable) fathers/fatherhood in Ireland, Ferguson and Hogan (2004, p. 8) found that:

... the overall orientation of welfare systems to exclude men is so powerful that, even in cases of inclusive practice, clear evidence emerged of men’s exclusion.... The dynamics of such exclusion took many forms, the most common and powerful of which was a view of men as dangerous, non-nurturing beings.

Similarly, Featherstone (2003, p. 239) suggests that, in the context of child protection social work, ‘notions of threat appear more dominant as a theme in relation to men generally’. Ashley *et al.* (2006) point to the need for a much more inclusive approach towards fathers ‘on the part of the very wide range of agencies supporting children and families’ (Ashley *et al.*, 2006, p. 66). Their research indicates that ‘professionals need to engage with fathers’ versions of events in an open and exploratory way i.e. to adopt a position of respectful uncertainty and “not knowing”, avoiding

premature foreclosure and precipitous categorisations' (Ashley *et al.*, 2006, p. 81). In an overview of research in different practice contexts, including probation and child protection, Featherstone *et al.* (2007, p. 33) suggest that 'although there are some traditions (for example in the Probation Service) of ignoring masculinity and not "naming" men, the general tendency in the practice settings studied is to see contemporary masculinity as problematic'. Collier and Sheldon (2008, p. 236) argue that the deficit model of fatherhood 'remains particularly powerful in areas relating to crime and social order'. Indeed, contemporary criminology has been concerned to explore the concept of masculinity and its centrality in understanding men's violence and criminality (Jefferson, 1997). Social policy directed towards engaging fathers, particularly 'marginal and excluded young men', has also been a focus within the criminal justice system, where there has been a growing 'strategic' emphasis on the value of maintaining and building prisoner family relationships (Clark *et al.*, 2005). The importance of children and families, for example, in reducing reoffending is highlighted in the Home Office *Five Year Strategy for Protecting the Public and Reducing Re-Offending* (2006) and a number of significant initiatives have been aimed at prisoner fathers in recent years. Meek (2007, p. 239) suggests that initial intervention and support for parents in prison were aimed at mothers and identifies a shift towards working with young fathers in prison.

The challenges faced by practitioners in key welfare professions such as social work and probation are acute. If the need to 'assess risk and danger', particularly in the context of vulnerable families, is central, so also is the need to shift away from the 'deficit model', which, in the main, characterises fathers as risky and unhelpful, and where the expectation is that men really do not parent. Dermott (2008) argues for a greater understanding of fatherhood in ways that are not polarised or premised on notions of 'good or bad', 'old or new' fatherhood. In the context of social work and social care, Featherstone *et al.* (2007) similarly stress the need for balance:

We should not approach work with men on the assumption that we are dealing with men as a risk or a resource, a perpetrator or a victim. Either/or should be replaced with both/and (Featherstone *et al.*, 2007, p. 3).

This paper analyses key findings from in-depth interviews with sixteen (ex) offender fathers who are placed in one of these polarised positions. The data reveal that, for some men, the 'costs' of offending are very high: their sense of loss and failure is acute, as are the effects of family breakdown and substance use. I argue that fathering is central to some men's positive transition from prison to family life: for some, fathering appears to be a source of reflexivity, strength and generativity. Informed by the work of Featherstone and others, these data highlight the need to render this group of fathers visible to practitioners in ways that move beyond entrenched dichotomies. It underscores the need to recognise their (potential) contribution as parents as well as their context and their crimes—an

approach that is incompatible with the deficit model of fathering, prevalent in the criminal justice and social care systems.

Methodology

The research was conducted in the North-East of England during 2007/08, using a qualitative research design, drawing on qualitative research methods, specifically narrative interviews. The sample of fathers was accessed through National Probation Services (NPS) in the region, who gave permission for the study to proceed. Relevant university ethics committee approval was also obtained. Probation officers identified respondents for the sample from their caseload: fathers, who had served a period of time in custody, initially between six months and four years—later extended in order to increase the final sample to sixteen. This time frame referred to their most recent period in prison. The sentences of men included in the final sample ranged from four months to fourteen years, with the majority (eight) having served sentences of two to three years. All but one of the men were white and their ages ranged from twenty to forty-nine, with most (thirteen) aged between twenty-five and thirty-nine years. Six had served sentences for violent crimes, including murder, manslaughter and rape, six had been in custody for drug-related offences, three for robbery and one for driving offences. All but three of the men were repeat offenders. All interviewees were on licence at the time of interview.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved conducting interviews with probation officers to explore their views on the relationship between offending and fathering, and the ways in which probation officers/services dealt with offenders as fathers. The second phase included the interviews with fathers. Probation officers were given an information sheet describing the study. They approached fathers to see whether they would be willing to be interviewed. If so, a time for interview was arranged. All interviews were conducted at NPS offices—this was a condition of permission for the study. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one-and-a-half hours. The length of interview was shaped by the time respondents had available, the amount they were willing to share and their circumstances on the day of interview; for example, one respondent was highly agitated by conditions at the hostel in which he was living.

Narrative interviews form part of a repertoire of qualitative approaches including case studies, interviews, observations and discourse analysis. Reissman (2001) suggests that a narrative approach is particularly appropriate in research that focuses on crises in individual lives, as it allows the respondent to frame the stories in a way that is relevant to them. I conducted narrative interviews with the fathers, as this encouraged the men to reflect on their experiences of fatherhood in their own way, rather

than through the direction of the researcher. It followed their agenda rather than my own (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Reissman, 2001). This involved asking the men to talk about fathering in general, their views on what shapes their ability to father and the impact of prison on fathering and their families. The interviews were transcribed, coded (using NVIVO Version7) and analysed to identify core themes (Mason, 1996). The approach to the data analysis derived from the grounded theory approach in which conceptualisation and theorisation were located in the interview data rather than pre-existing hypotheses (Yates, 2004).

Findings

The social context of 'their' parenting/fathering: managing the chaotic terrain of family life

The social, economic and cultural context in which these men were 'being fathers' was extraordinarily complex. They all came from, and continued to have, highly complicated, fragmented family circumstances. Seven of the sixteen men had stepparents and described these relationships as 'complicated' and characterised by conflict. Eight described their own dads as 'absent' and said they were 'brought up exclusively by their mothers' and three had themselves been in the care system as children. Eleven respondents had between two and four children and one had more than five. In addition, eight saw themselves as fathers to stepchildren, and children of partners with whom they lived. One father has no biological children but has been a stepfather for sixteen years. The majority of these men were involved in negotiating and managing multiple relationships, family and contact/custody arrangements for their children. For example, one man spoke of the challenge of fathering his three children, as they had different mothers who were all now in different relationships. Some of the men interviewed also had family members in prison: one interviewee's father and brother were both serving custodial sentences, while another had a child in prison (for the same offence as his) and one was on trial. Others had siblings who have also served custodial sentences. Seven interviewees identified that they had struggled with drug and alcohol dependency, three had diagnosed mental health problems and four stated that their partners had mental health problems.

In a recent report on 'Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families', Smith *et al.* (2007) highlight the 'collateral impact' of imprisonment, particularly the social and economic costs to the family on the 'outside'. The men in this study and their families were no exception. They indicated that the 'costs' of imprisonment extended beyond release. All but one of the respondents identified severe difficulties in meeting the costs of maintaining their homes and providing for their children.

Some linked this to their and their partners' mental health problems. At the time of interview, five of the men were employed and three were self-employed. The work they did included building, decorating, catering and factory work. Some men stated that finding accommodation and establishing a home were extremely difficult and many described a kind of nomadic existence in which they were drifting and rootless.

The social and economic context in which these men were parenting was complex and fragmented and the nature of their relationships and family life was often very fluid, transient and constantly changing. They faced competing demands and expectations. The terrain in which they were fathering/parenting was inconsistent and unpredictable and, for the most part, economically impoverished. The base from which they were attempting to parent was, for some, very fragile.

Fragmented relationships: connection and disconnection

The lives of many of the men interviewed were characterised by continual disruption and change. They were constantly forming and reforming relationships with their children, partners, parents and friends. This is an obvious consequence of a prison sentence, compounded by repeat offending. Men spoke about this in relation to their partners and families in general but specifically in relation to their children. Shaun (twenty-seven), for example, was in prison for eighteen months, released and then recalled for a further period of seven months, for breaking a condition of his licence. He describes this as follows:

I always wanted to be a dad. Ever since I was young I've always said that when I had a child I want to be a two parent family, you know, my child to have two parents there all the time. After my upbringing I wanted to make sure that everything was perfect. When he was born, everything was great I was over the moon, you know, she had [his mother] post-natal depression and that but I was quite happy to do all the bathing, the nappies, everything like. I took time off because then I had quite a good job, I took time off work and everything until she got herself back right. We were really close. I loved him to bits all the way up until I spent time in custody. We lost touch when I went to prison. I started fighting through the courts to be able to see him. I fought for phone contact once every two weeks and then writing. Speaking on the phone was not the same as being there all the time. After I started to see him again I was recalled. There was a double impact because I just started to re-build something with him and then I went back in for 7 months. [It was] too painful to continue... we were so close before but not so much now. He is holding back and I can't blame him. I suppose in his own little head he does sort of think why has my dad stopped seeing me, why has he left me. And he's probably a bit apprehensive that I am going to disappear again, so you know it just seems a bit, I can't think of the right words. We have 5 hours now every fortnight.

Shaun's experience was similar to other interviewees: their relationships with their children were punctuated by continual interruption and separation.

Barry (twenty-nine) had been in and out of prison since he was twelve, serving thirteen prison sentences in total. He had four children and relationships with three of them. He described himself as having lost his claim to being a father. He commented:

I guess I am just happy to be called Uncle Barry now. I am not sure it would be right to be any other way. And, they have got their other dads. Their other dads that have raised them. But I don't feel like dad because I'm not their dad . . . not in the emotional sense.

One of the effects of imprisonment, then, was what they described as having to 'pick up the pieces of their relationships'. It amounts to intermittent fatherhood and disrupted relations with their partners, parents and friends. This is a feature of all of their relationships, not just with their children. Thus, Mitch (twenty-seven, adopted at the age of seven after being in care) said:

My adopted dad was very supportive, but he got tired of it. They got tired of it I suppose anybody would. The last time [I was inside] they didn't come in. And I have now't to do with my proper parents.

Similarly, Jake (thirty) reported that:

My relationship with my partner didn't make it. It didn't work out after I was released. We are still living, but not together, if you know what I mean, I am just waiting for a place where I can go but the baby is also going to be born in August and I'll be there for his birth.

Finally, Mark (thirty-one years old and in prison for the first time) commented:

My relationship ended when I was in prison, we just couldn't cut it. She couldn't cut it. The kids just started to go off the rails when I was not there. It has been so hard to move back into that. How do I talk to people I have not seen for 3 years?

The effects of the collapse of relationships for men who were resident fathers prior to imprisonment, like Mark, were particularly acute. This fragmentation was seriously impairing fathers' capacity to parent their children.

Facilitating fathering: the role of family (and mothers)

This research suggests that respondents' fathering was facilitated by others, particularly when they were in prison, but also post release. Some men spoke of continuing to father through the help and support of other family members, particularly their mothers. Their families (mothers) took on the role of parent that the (ex) offender was unable and, at times,

unwilling to do. This role sometimes continued without the knowledge or intervention of the father. For example, Barry reported that:

My family has always been in touch with my children, but not me. I was 19 when my first child was born and I was very immature. I just thought, 'Oh my God, I'm scared to death. That's what it meant then. I have not taken responsibility and I left before the birth of two of them. I suppose I was more of a donor than part and parcel of the process. But my family have done it for me and nobody painted a very bad picture of me.

Mark commented:

My family was good, my sister especially, she helped with money and helped my partner when we split up. My sister [one of 10] really brought me up. I am staying with her now. She has a room for me at her house and that's where I can see my daughter now.

Similarly, Mitch stated that:

My parents stepped in for me. I had no contact with my daughter's mother. I was too young when she was born. I was 19 and in and out of prison. My adopted parents have got contact and I see her now through them. I can see her at their house.

Similarly, Nic (forty-six) said 'my Nan was great. My partner sometimes found it very hard to look after the children. She took it very hard and our house burnt down and it was my nan who . . . she looked after them'. Finally, describing the effects of separation and the role of his mother in keeping him in touch with this son, Shaun said:

When I was on bail I was still allowed to see him every weekend but I wasn't allowed in [exclusion zone] at the time so my mum used to pick me up and like I'd get the train to XXX and she'd meet me in XXX and we'd spend the time there, we used to have a great time together, I mean we were really close even just seeing him every week and when he used to leave he used to sit in the back just staring, waving all the way down the road, it used to break my heart.

These experiences were echoed throughout all of the interviews. I found that it was the women in the family who played a critical role in facilitating parenting relationships on behalf of their sons and brothers. In some cases, this included working with social services to ensure contact with the children. Some mothers acted as the supervising 'grandparent' in supervised visits between fathers and children post release.

It was also the case that families facilitated visits by children in prison. This was particularly the case for men who were either resident fathers at the time of their imprisonment or whose contact with their children had been regular and stable. Peter (thirty-seven) has one twelve-year-old son. He had established rights of access to his son before he went to prison and would see him regularly at weekends and during the week. His

partner continued this pattern of visiting rights with his son while he was in prison. As he commented:

She basically carried on for me. They get on great and she brought him to see me every single week (he served 20 months of a 4 year sentence). She has made such a big difference to me and him. I owe her a lot for that like, a hell of a lot.

This research suggests that fathers' continued interaction with their children or, for some, the initiating of contact with their children appeared to be reliant on the nature of the relationship, in terms of access and residence, prior to imprisonment. It also clearly demonstrates the help and support provided by their families, particularly their mothers, in negotiating access and providing the stability that 'authorities' (such as social services) require in terms of supervised access and arguably in keeping the relationship alive, though this is only one dimension of the role played by families of offenders. This research highlights the key role families play in other aspects of fathers' support, such as financial, both in prison and post release. Facilitating their fathering is just one aspect of a number of functions and roles that families perform.

What does it mean to be a father?

Being in prison: loss and failure

When reflecting on their time in prison, most of the men spoke overwhelmingly about their relationships with their children in terms of loss and failure. They suggested that they had failed themselves in terms of their own expectations of fathering (certainly of wanting to be different from their own dads), they had failed their children and they had failed their families. They were quite simply absent or unengaged and saw themselves as having lost out, missing many of the milestones and developments their children had experienced. Jake (thirty-one) experienced prison before and after his daughter was born. He said:

This last one [most recent sentence], it was the worst prison sentence that I've actually done and I've done a few, you know what I mean. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life. It was devastating. I felt gutted. I mean I deserved to be there, don't get me wrong, but I were gutted, it hurt a lot. Now there is still that gap from when I was in prison. It isn't as good as what it could be. You know you have missed out, although my relationship is good with her I know it should be better and it does hurt a bit, you know what I mean'. I mean when you are doing things, you never think of the consequences and people don't think oh I'm going to get caught or anything like that and when you do get caught and reality hits you, if you care enough about your children and your family, it does affect you. It hit me hard, a year away from my daughter's life.

Feeling powerless to help their children and not being there, particularly if they were ill, was also very difficult. Thus, Mark said:

Some fathers say sod it when it comes to their children and then move on to the next person . . . which is not what I want. I missed her losing her first tooth, and things like that, if there is anything wrong with her at night time, I have to wait, to rely on a phone call to let me know, it's hard like.

In a similar vein, Nic reported:

. . . not being there for them especially if they're poorly or owt like that and then you're sat there worried all night . . . until you ring them up again and make sure they're alright and things like that.

When reflecting on their time in custody, most men felt they had let their children, their families and themselves down—through their absence, through their crime/s and through their drug and alcohol dependency. Yet, they also saw themselves as a resource (or potential resource) and, in some instances, as an active parent. Some men worked hard at fathering from the inside.

Fathering from the inside: fathering from a distance

Some of the fathers interviewed had tried to support their children and their partners while in prison. They had attempted to continue to play a role in the family despite their separation. Their ability to do this had been contingent on many different factors, including money, but also their status as resident fathers or fathers with an established routine of contact prior to imprisonment.

Nic, who had served two years and eight months of a four-and-a-half-year sentence, said that:

The first thing I did when I went in was buy a phone card. I spent all my money on the phone. I called them every day, unless they was at their auntie's. Every day we spoke, I knew about school . . . I didn't like them visiting. It broke my heart when they walked away. They always sent me their school reports and I wrote back saying how proud I was.

Some fathers continued to see themselves as part of their families, recognising the drain on the family that imprisonment caused, yet attempting to provide a resource, or at least mitigate the effects of their separation. Resourcefulness is, on the one hand, about provision, actively providing for other people materially or emotionally. However, for some of the men interviewed, fathering was also about creating an inner resource, a source of focus and strength, arguably a source of generativity. This generativity took on three different but interconnected dimensions, as follows.

Keeping 'me going' (feeling generative)

The fathers I interviewed all spoke of their children and their partners as a key motivating factor in 'keeping them going' in prison. Their children were

a major part of getting through their sentences. For some, it was critical to their well-being and their mental health. Their children made them feel motivated, and productive. As Chris said:

Being separated from them made me want to see them more. I had that liberty taken away of not seeing them. I had pictures of my children and I thought it would be nice just to have a cuddle of them—but I also blanked out the world outside [to get through]. The first thing I did on my release was visit my daughter.

Similarly, Bradley said ‘I really missed my family. If I didn’t have had a family, I’d be in and out of jail all my life. Jail’s hard if you got a family and a missus’. For his part, Ryan commented:

My wall was like a shrine to Jackie and the kids. I weren’t there for Christmas so that was hard Christmas morning. I had to put the phone down and then I had tears in my eyes. I felt like a little girl as I put the phone down.

For some men, the effects of separation were more acute than for others. Mark said ‘I would have killed myself in prison if not for my daughter’.

Keeping ‘me straight’ (being generative)

Second, fatherhood was also about being a productive, generative and positive father. Adopting a fathering role and identity appeared to provide meaning and purpose for many of these fathers. For some, it meant re-evaluating and reflecting on the meaning and value of fathering and, for others, it was about learning to be a father again or, in some instances, for the first time.

Jake talked about it as follows:

When I was on drugs I still loved her. I still cared for her, don’t get me wrong but because I was on drugs other things took precedence over your child but since I’ve got out of prison, I’m clean and I wouldn’t give her up for the world. How do you learn how to be a father while having a problem with drugs and going to prison, no-one teaches you how to be a parent and it isn’t as easy as what people think it is . . . but as long as I try my hardest.

Nic reported:

Without a doubt I should have thought about them before I got locked up and that’s how I look at it now. My children and [partner] are the main thing in my life. I used to be an alcoholic, I used to be in the pub all the time and I would take them with me and then I would take them home and put them to bed and then go back to the pub. I wouldn’t dream of doing that now. I haven’t drunk since going to prison. If I had been drinking now I would have ended up back in jail by now.

In his interview, Harry (thirty) provided a powerful description of what his son meant to him. Harry has one son, who is ten years old. He separated from the mother of his child many years ago and they had had a troubled relationship ever since. As a result of his last offence, he was initially not

allowed access to his son but, over the previous year, with help from his probation officer, he had secured one-and-a-half hours' supervised access every fortnight. He said:

My son means everything to me, I can't really explain [how] I lived my life up until I had my son and then when I had my son I felt like it was almost, and this might sound exaggerated but like he gave birth to me, you know. I didn't know what I did until I had a son because all the time I was with the bairn, and sort of like had him taken away from me I didn't know what to do with myself because my time was spent with my son, so to have him taken away from me, it was horrible, you know so. What I want is to be able to see my lad again, to take him away on holiday, to be to do . . . , to be free with him. Well, I want to be his father again.

Fathering provided meaning and content to these men in ways that may be taken for granted with 'other parents' and in ways that may not be fully considered in the lives of (ex) offenders. Harry said, in respect of many services (social services, prison and probation), 'they didn't entertain me as a dad'. Expressing the desire to father was accompanied by wanting to be involved in the daily business of being a father. Maintaining a generative focus required actively developing the tools of fathering.

Engaging and being there (tools of generativity)

Interviewees also spoke of 'being there' for their children. This involved being 'hands-on', caring for, being interested in and supporting their children. For some men, this included the need to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were 'able' to father.

Mark summed this up, saying:

Fathering is not just about going out and working, it's spending time, even if it's just McDonalds or something like that, it's just spending a couple of hours with them, just say in front of the telly or doing a puzzle or something like that. And surprising them when you pick them up from school, when you've got a day off work or something where they don't know you have do you know what I mean? When they're used to seeing their mum and you both turn up and they're like really surprised.

For many men interviewed, fathering was about being engaged and developing meaningful, caring relationships with their children: providing emotional and material support. Yet, they recognised that the 'tools of generativity' required constancy and confidence that was challenging in the context of personal, social and economic uncertainty. As Jake commented:

I'd just, I'd like it to be a bit better than this, I don't want a lot, I'd just like to be working and knowing that my daughter and my son that's going to be born is happy and they're brought up well, like they're dressed smart and that, that they've got plenty of toys, they're happy in their lives and I'm happy as long as they're alright.

Discussion

The findings of this research suggest, first, that the 'costs of crime/imprisonment' for many of these men are very high and, second, that fathering can be resourceful, productive and generative in the 'context of offending', where the deficit model of fathering is the norm (including for the men themselves).

The costs of crime were high for many of the men interviewed: costs in relation to their children, their relationships and their futures. Barker's (2005) work on working-class (violent) young men in gangs is instructive here. He demonstrated that certain key experiences have the potential to help them construct alternative, non-violent narratives or what he refers to as more 'gender-equitable narratives'. These included, for example, reflecting on the 'costs of traditional manhood' (where this involves carrying knives or using guns); having been victims of violence; having witnessed people being victimised or having engaged in violence themselves. He demonstrates that, in reflecting on the 'costs' of their roles and responsibilities in positive ways, young men constructed coherent life narratives of themselves as different from most men around them (Barker, 2005). My interviews with (ex) offender men revealed a sense in which fatherhood was one of the key dimensions of their lives that caused them to reflect on the high costs of their crimes to their children and themselves. This does not detract from the significant negative impact of the imprisonment of a parent (father) for their children. While this research sought only to explore (ex) offender fathers' perspectives and experiences, others have documented the perspectives and views of their children and noted both the productive possibilities of continued contact and the very damaging effects of rejection and desertion (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). Meek (2007) and others stress the importance of supporting fathers in custody and after release to bolster their confidence in their ability to parent but, importantly, to ameliorate negative outcomes for children.

Drawing on Erikson's (1950, p. 130) concept of generativity in developmental theory, in which he refers to parenthood as the 'prime generative encounter', Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) developed a positive model of fatherhood that seeks to transcend the deficit model of men in families. Good fathering, they argue, is 'generative work', which is also central to the father's emotional growth and well-being. Generative fathering is also possible in 'contexts of 'adversity', such as teenage fatherhood (Rhoden and Robinson, 1997). Similarly, this research suggests that, in this particular adverse context (offending), meanings and understandings of fatherhood can be positive, productive and generative. This is in contrast to the dominant deficit model of 'offender' fatherhood, which, in the main, dismisses the productive possibilities of fathering.

Ferguson and Hogan (2004, p. 54) have commented 'that there is nothing to suggest that, in general, vulnerable fathers love their children any less

than any other men'. In direct reference to fathers who have been in prison, they demonstrate that they 'score highly on every indicator of social exclusion' and argue, as I do here, that 'big problems for fathers begin when they get out' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p. 64). They argue that men (fathers) are often excluded from social intervention because they are perceived as dangerous and unreachable, unable to 'change'. They argue 'it is the most marginal men [e.g. offenders] who are seen to embody danger and risk and are most likely to be judged in this way' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p. 92). Following Connell *et al.*'s (2005) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', Ferguson and Hogan refer to this as a 'hegemonic fixation', where professionals become fixated on images on dangerousness. They argue for the need to get beyond this 'hegemonic fixation' to a 'genuine assessment of the man in himself and as a father' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p. 93). This is not to suggest that men are 'not violent' or, in the context of this research on (ex) offenders, not to discount the offences, but it is to point to the need to approach such men with, first, a stance of 'not-knowing' and, second, from the context of a 'strength's-based', 'father-inclusive' approach, which recognises the generative possibilities of fathering, in the context of multiple 'deficits'.

In his work on the role of generativity in the context of desistance, Maruna (2001, p. 118) signals the importance of 'generative pursuits' in which generativity functions as fulfilment, restitution, legitimacy and therapy. The findings of this research indicate that fatherhood may potentially be one such generative pursuit. In identifying the significance of 'generative commitments' for (ex) offenders in the process of sustaining desistance, McNeill and Maruna (2007, p. 234) argue that 'generativity is hard work'—for offenders and practitioners. Fatherhood requires generating and sustaining the 'tools of generativity'—what some men in this research referred to as 'being there', 'making-up for lost time' and engaging in everyday acts of fathering. Promoting generativity through fathering offers an additional important focus within a strength-based and/or desistance-focused approach when working with (ex) offenders and other 'marginal fathers' and rests in part on the value of productive, generative relationships with practitioners, families and communities.

Conclusion

The research reported on in this article has identified the potential value of making fathers/fatherhood visible in a context of general invisibility or disregard. It highlights the challenge of understanding this group of marginal fathers as much in terms of their possibilities as their crimes and undermines dichotomies in which all (ex) offender fathers are 'either/or'. It underscores the need to situate the (ex) offender fathers firmly in the

context of their families: families that both require and provide vital resources.

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