

Title: “Being a father”: Constructions of fatherhood by men with absent fathers

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Abstract

Family dynamics and parenting styles are influential on children’s wellbeing. Additionally, childhood experiences and how an individual experienced being parented can impact on how individuals as mothers and fathers choose to parent their own children. However, growing up in a home with an absent parent may create challenges associated with parenting for individuals due to not having these

experiences themselves. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to report findings on men who grew up in a father absent household and how their experiences influenced their understanding of fatherhood and becoming a father. Twenty-one men participated in this qualitative study. Findings revealed that although men felt unprepared for fatherhood they attempted to learn to be a father and expressed the importance of not wanting their children to experience father absence. The study findings provide important insights in the provision of support for fathers who have experienced father absence.

Keywords: Fathers, family, parenting, qualitative research

Background

Family and parenting plays a vital role in the early socialisation and development of a child's life in which behaviours are shaped and established. Whilst early empirical attention focused upon understanding the influence of mothering and maternal attachment on child development (Van Rosmalen, Van Der Veer, & Van Der Horst, 2015); more recently, attention has turned to understanding paternal influences on the developmental life trajectory of children, men's provision of children's care and how fathering differs from mothering (Hoffman, 2011). Research has shown that the expectations of men as parents has changed in recent decades, from the more traditional notions of men as breadwinners or disciplinarians, to constructions of fathers as caring, emotional, sensitive and engaged (Braun, Vincent, & Ball, 2010; Shirani & Henwood, 2010). However, literature also suggests that parenting styles and the relationships between parents and the circumstances which characterise these relationships, are influential on children's wellbeing.

Parenting approaches and parental relationships that are turbulent and feature significant discord, can have a detrimental impact on a child's development and wellbeing. For example exposure to harmful parental conflict results in emotional insecurity, reduced confidence, and increases risk of psychological problems and child externalising behaviour (Chen & Johnston, 2012). Moreover, anxiety and externalising behaviour can result from overly authoritarian, distant or rejecting-neglectful parenting styles (Choe, Olson, & Sameroff, 2013). Literature, examining the interaction between parenting style and child temperament, has reported that children high in impulsivity and low in effortful control can be more vulnerable to negative parenting. In turn, negative parenting can increase the presence of these characteristics in children (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011). Tavassolie et al. (2016) note that although children's behaviour and characteristics can elicit specific forms of parenting behaviour, longitudinal research confirms that parental behaviour has a greater effect on children's behaviour than vice versa. Additionally, the differing behaviours between parents and mothering and fathering styles can also be influential on children's health outcomes, behaviours and wellbeing.

Fathering is multifaceted and is influenced by personal circumstances, motivations and the contexts of individual lives (Day, Lewis, O'Brien, & Lamb, 2005). Moreover, parenting is performed in the context of past experience, therefore understanding how men construct meaning from their previous experiences of fathering and the presence (or absence) of father figures in their lives can provide important insights (East, Jackson, Power, Woods, & Hutchinson, 2014). Therefore, in this study, our interest was to investigate how men who had grown up without a biological father in the

home went on to construct their understandings of fatherhood, and how their childhood experiences influenced their life trajectory and parenting.

Methods

Qualitative semi-structured interviews, adopting a social constructivist approach (Cresswell, 2013), were undertaken with adult men (>21years) who had grown up in a household where their biological father was absent during childhood or adolescence.

Following approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee, recruitment occurred via media release and notices distributed through community organisations. Twenty-one men, aged between 24 and 73, provided written consent to participate in the study. The majority were Caucasian (n=20) with one Australian Indigenous participant. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of participants.

Face-to-face or telephone interviews (30-75 minutes) focusing upon men's recollections of father absence, the meaning given to these experiences, and men's perceptions about how these experiences influenced their life trajectory were undertaken in locations convenient for participants. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initially, employing a process of repeated reading, words and sections of the transcribed texts which conveyed meaning about participant's experience were open-coded by the first author (Babbie, 2015). Independently, a second author also undertook the same coding process. Coming together with the whole team, member cross-checking occurred to derive consensus about the coding and emergent themes (Cresswell, 2013). The first author then clustered and condensed the coded text by identifying connections to form categories. Through a process of constant comparison the categories were condensed and the

final thematic interpretation emerged (Pope, Mays, & Popay, 2007). Here we report three themes that relate to participants experiences of themselves becoming fathers. Elsewhere we have reported themes relating to men's experience of grief and loss associated with father absence (xxx), as well as self-esteem issues, anger and difficulty forming trusting relationships (xxxx).

Findings

Many of the men disclosed how becoming a father themselves was a completely new experience that they felt unprepared for. Some men expressed questioning their own ability due to not having been fathered themselves whilst others relayed how they drew on other sources of information and their experience of other parental figures to model their own fathering. The findings from this study are presented under three themes that elucidate the men's experiences. The themes are "I didn't know how to be a good father", "I learned to be a father" and "Breaking the cycle of father absence".

"I didn't know how to be a good father"

Becoming a father themselves, after growing up in father absent households, presented a range of challenges for the participants. The concept of being a father was difficult to come to terms with, not having had an example growing up. For some, there was an apparent disconnect between enacting and understanding fatherhood. Despite being in the role, Bill could only imagine what having a father might be like for his own children:

I've wondered what it must be like to be in their shoes and have a dad. To have a father, that'd never meant anything to me, even for the first couple of years after I was a father 'cause there was nothing, you know, in my growing up.

Jake also reported lacking understanding of what it was to be a father. Despite marrying and fathering children, he had no real concept of what the role entailed. Jake stated:

One of the things that I didn't realise before is I just I did what I did to be what? A parent. And since I've remarried, mainly just talking to my wife about just different things. I've realised that so many perceptions of what I think a parent does, should do; I don't have.

Pierce doubted his ability to be a good father to his two sons, which he attributed to his experience of father absence. Reflecting on being a father, he expressed that he would have liked to be more supportive and demonstrative and have exhibited a warmer and more caring demeanour towards his children:

... in my own mind, I sort of think, I probably wasn't much of a father. Others may disagree with that, and they probably would and I'm probably just being very hard on myself, but because I had no one to sort of— I didn't go through the process in effect, so therefore I didn't know how to be a good father or that's the way I thought. ... I might have been a little more sort of spontaneous, warm, that sort of thing. I probably did all the right things but I've sort of observed other people and they're a

lot—were a lot sort of warmer towards their kids. So, if I were to change something that's what I would love to have changed. ... a little more emotionally involved, yeah.

Ike reported feeling disconnected as a father. He acknowledged that his relationship with his daughter was not close, which he attributed to his own deficiencies as a parent. Ike stated:

My relationship with my daughter ... it wasn't what I call a real relationship in the sense that I wasn't a very supportive parent. Most of the time [partner] would do all the hard yards and I didn't give much support whatsoever to [daughter] in her infancy.

Charles assumed, that because he did not have a father figure to learn from, he had made errors in his parenting. However, he saw his enduring relationship with his children as proof that he must have done some things right:

And I don't know if I've been a bad father, but probably a lot of things were very hard now, but they all still talk to me. So, that's good! ... we have a really fantastic relationship ... with all of them actually. ... So, I must've done some good.

Similarly, Kambara who also had positive relationships with both his daughters, revealed that although he perceived he provided for his family in a traditional sense, he was unaware of how to be what he considered a 'proper' father. Kambara shared:

... I've got two daughters ... and a granddaughter, but, as I said, my marriage failed and although I went through all the proper family procedures: I provided the homes and I worked and the kids had everything they wanted. I suppose, looking back on it now, there's a lot of things I didn't really know properly about being a father.

For some, there was ambivalence regarding the importance of the role. Having grown up without a father, there could be difficulty accepting the premise that fathers were even needed. Frank stated:

My daughter is quite a lot closer and she's got two kids and we see them very regularly. But ... my son ... we don't see much of him. ... I've got a fairly liberal view on relationships and I don't think that having a father is necessarily important as long as you've got somebody in your life who is stable and is there and is caring and that sort of thing.

Conversely, despite not managing to maintain a relationship with his children, Ike felt that parents were vital for a child's wellbeing:

I guess, I'm trying to say is that I think every child deserves parents and unfortunately, very regrettably, that doesn't always happen and consequently, that child or children will, in some ways, suffer. It doesn't matter which side, if it's the mother or the father, but there is going to be some kind of suffering.

For Oliver, father absence and the associated life adversity influenced his choice to reject the father role entirely. Reflecting on his life and experiences, Oliver stated:

Looking back at it and talking to you about it, I'm coming to the – and I'm thinking while I'm talking, but I'm coming to this belief that no doubt, there was some influence on my choice to have or not have children, which was probably influenced by my experience.

“I learned to be a father”

Having experienced growing up without an active biological father in their lives’, the men expressed having to learn how to be a father. To do so, the men modelled their fathering activities on a variety of sources, including drawing on fond memories of men who were influential in their own childhoods. For example, Jake recalled his grandfather reading to him, and included this activity into his own parenting repertoire. Jake elucidated:

I remember when grandfather did that for me ... so I did that for her [daughter]. My own kids, I read to them all the time ... So I was shown by my grandfather that a father figure reads books to kids. Even ask my step kids, I always read to them now. [Stepson] will come out and ask me “Can you read this bug book for me?” He loves insects. So I read this encyclopedia that’s about bugs. It’s boring as all get out but he loves it.

Hugh discussed how he drew on the protection and support afforded him in childhood by his uncle and grandfather. His narrative revealed that the transmission of family values does not necessarily have to come from parents, but rather the wider family.

Hugh reflected:

I didn't really doubt the strong connection between those values that I got from my family looking after me, taking me under their wing to some extent, my uncle and my grandfather, me wanting to do the same. So, there's got to be some carryover of those values.

Despite not being fathered themselves, examples of fathers and fathering were everywhere. In addition to using examples from films, Ross learnt to father from watching his best friend interact with his own father. Ross stated:

My idea of being a father and other people's idea like people that have had a father full time, all their lives, there is a real difference in our attitudes ... My best mate, he is best friends – well not best friends with his father but they're very close. And him and I are like chalk and cheese. But I learned to be a father from watching movies and watching how my mate's fathers acted.

Reflecting on his father's absence and possible influences on how he fathered his own daughter, Zach drew on the only parenting example available to him, which was his mother:

I guess it has because I'm more – I look at the way mum – my mother has done with both my brother and myself and needed to learn her techniques and the way she has done things and the things that mum did to bring up two boys on her own.

“Breaking the Cycle of father absence”

Growing up in a fatherless home inspired these men to be better fathers than their own fathers had been. They spoke of wanting to be there for their children, being present in their children's lives and wanting to break the cycle of father absence they had experienced. As Ross stated ... *I'm just glad I broke the cycle, with my kids knowing me.* Eric spoke of wanting to be an active, present parent, and his desire to be influential and present in his daughters' lives. Eric stated:

I think I wanted to be someone that was around all the time. Someone that's like, when my girls were young and playing sport, I was someone that was always there to lend a hand like coaching or if I didn't coach, made sure I transported them and their friends to events and what have you. So, I was just really a person that wanted to be around and that, I guess, be influential in their lives. ... I'd make sure that they had a father and they knew who he was, what he was about, and I still maintain a really good relationship with both of the girls.

Likewise, Sam was determined to be active and present in his daughter's life despite the dissolution of his marriage. Sam spoke of sparing his children from his own experiences of father absence and the resulting loss of self-esteem:

... my ex-wife knows all about my father absence stuff. She was always, you know, understood my, 'I had that done to me, and I don't want to do it my daughter' ... I guess in a sense that does affect you when you're older. There's always that thing in the back of your mind and it's a shit thing to have. And I don't want any children of mine, past or present, to feel this way, to have that in the back of their head, questioning, 'Why aren't I good enough?' or anything like that. ... Well, to me it's a drive ... it's my drive to make sure I'm a good dad.

Larry characterised his father as abusive before he left the family home. Having experienced childhood trauma himself, he wanted to spare his children the same sort of adversity:

... I understand how that felt so I try not to do it with my kids, with my stepson and also my daughter, that if they do something wrong, you don't abuse the crap out of them and all that, 'Hey you know, that's alright, just look at this and blah blah blah,' so kind of look at it sometimes, I mean you know, how it's made me a better person and I would think it out.

Reflecting on becoming a father and his own experience of being fathered, Jake set out to recreate the positive aspects of his own intermittent father-son experiences and reject the negatives:

You become the father and then you got the relationship father-son you still got that continuity of how it all works and you learn. I may have had a relationship with my father as father-son and I thought I like this, don't like this and pulled that relationship apart so I wanna keep all the good things out of that and correct the bad things and then when I flip around to being a father to a son and trying to correct it.

Although Nathaniel had no children of his own, he chose to provide mentorship to a boy through a mentoring organisation. Nathaniel explained that for him father absence meant not having a reliable male figure available for guidance and to provide support. This motivated him to try and make it different for another child, despite not

having a son of his own. For him, fatherhood meant consistency, reliability, support and protection:

So, we've been hanging out for the best part of 11 years. And my promise to him when I met him and took on the one-on-one mentoring role was that, simply I would be there, you know, in good times and bad, that I would actually be there, you know, there would be – he wouldn't have to second guess himself as to whether I was a person he could ring in a situation. And so, for me, the critical thing around that was to make him feel safe in this world and to feel protected and like somebody for want of a better expression 'cause I don't like it much, but is that someone's got your back.

Discussion

Findings from this study illuminated the various ways that these men from father absent households constructed fathering as they grew into adulthood. Men in this study developed an appreciation of fathering by drawing on examples from male relatives such as grandfathers and uncles, observing their friends interact with their fathers, from watching television and movies and by drawing upon their mother's parenting.

Although researchers have frequently explored the involvement, social and financial support of non-resident fathers and the impact of father absence on juvenile delinquency there is currently a dearth of literature exploring how father absent men construct fatherhood. In one of the few studies located, researchers in South Africa, also found that men who had grown up with an absent father reported the importance of extended family and other social male father-figures. Frequently, these social

fathers were other male relatives (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013; Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes, 2012). These researchers therefore defined fatherhood as being “a set of behaviours far beyond biological reproduction” (Ratele et al., 2012, p. 558). However, similar to the current study, having a replacement father figure did not negate the sense of loss expressed regarding the absence of the biological father (Clowes et al., 2013; Ratele et al., 2012).

In other research from Norway, Nilsen and Sagatun (2015) also found that friends fathers, and their father-son interactions provided examples of fatherhood, that father absent boys drew upon. Observing friends’ fathers provided concrete examples of what fathers do and say, albeit in the context of company. Whether these observed men fathered differently when alone with their children is impossible to say.

What can be said is that representations of fathers portrayed on television and in films are highly influential. These depictions of fatherhood are increasingly diverse and demonstrate how swiftly conceptions of fatherhood are evolving (McGowan, 2012; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Conceptions of fatherhood are undergoing change. While the instrumental support fathers have traditionally provided for children in Western cultures is still expected, there is an increased emphasis on fathers being expressive and nurturing carers (Schmitz, 2016). Contemporary fathers are pictured as more nurturing, more likely to share childcare, and more emotionally involved with their children than previous generations (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Although there is debate regarding the changing culture of fatherhood translating to conduct (Wall & Arnold, 2007), for father absent men, depictions of fatherhood in mass media are likely to provide more positive examples than often available in real life, which could

potentially make the sense of loss even stronger. Furthermore, fathering examples in film are absorbed consciously and unconsciously by men, and the combination of the portrayal of family life, encompassing the inherent moral challenges and drama or comedy, make the examples more palatable and meaningful to viewers (McGowan, 2012).

It is often reported that boys are more affected than girls by father absence due to the loss of a gender role model (Nilsen & Sagatun, 2015). However, this view privileges the biological, nuclear family model, discounting other family structures, for example, single parent households, which are on the rise (Clowes et al., 2013). As in the current study, in other research with boys being raised primarily by women, it was found that parenting examples offered by mothers closely corresponded with contemporary constructions of involved and caring fathers (Nilsen & Sagatun, 2015).

In several of the men's narratives, it was evident that they felt their own father's absence had negative effects on their own ability to effectively parent their children or on their father-child relationships. It must be highlighted that the men's descriptions of relationship difficulties with their children were not explored in-depth, so contextualizing factors beyond their own fathers' absence were not elucidated. What is apparent though, is that issues with their relationships with their children were raised in their narratives in the context of father absence, highlighting that for these men, the issues were interrelated.

Men cohabiting with, and in a relationship with a child's mother, are much more likely to be involved with their children than non-resident fathers (Castillo, Welch, &

Sarver, 2011, p. 1344). Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the men in this study, who did not live with their children had difficulty maintaining positive relationships. The fathering role is vulnerable, more contextually sensitive than the mothering role and more likely to be impacted by external factors (Hoffman, 2011). Some non-resident fathers may have stressful and chaotic lives. Unemployment, poverty, lack of education, addiction, mental illness, insufficient social support, or living separately from his children will all affect a man's capacity to parent effectively and maintain relationships (Castillo et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2011; Rossiter et al., 2017). Fathers who do not live with their children also face structural barriers to involvement such as distance, time and expenses (Castillo et al., 2011). Additionally, for fathers not living with their children, there is also a risk of impaired relationships associated with difficulties between them and the parent (or primary carer) with whom the child resides (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Hoffman, 2011).

In this current study several of the men expressed difficulty understanding what it was they were meant to be doing as fathers, and verbalised little understanding of the role. Some saw themselves as ambivalent, unsure and uncertain, disconnected and/or uninvolved fathers. The literature suggests men are often less prepared for parenthood than women (Hoffman, 2011). Peer support and social networks for new fathers are less developed and accessible than for new mothers (Hoffman, 2011). In a large Canadian study, fathers who felt supported by their own parents were "40% more likely to report optimal levels of positive parenting behaviour and 70% more likely to express confidence in their parenting than fathers with lower levels of support" (Russell, Birnbaum, Avison, & Ioannone, 2011 p. 9). The men in the current study were highly unlikely to feel supported by their own fathers. Despite some research

concluding that having an engaged father is good for both children and the fathers themselves (Hoffman, 2011), Frank's belief that fathers were interchangeable with other supportive people is supported by work in South Africa by Ratele, Shefer and Clowes (2012) who found that children were less affected by growing up in single-headed households when there were nurturing and engaged alternative care givers present in their lives.

Parenting a child is providing developmental support to ensure the child can eventually fulfil the social expectations required to take their place in society (Nilsen & Sagatun, 2015). These social expectations also include fatherhood for most men. Thus, it is the province of adult caretakers to model behaviour and demonstrate what it is socially and culturally to be a parent, and in adult men's cases, to be a father. Schmitz (2016) found that fathers continually reflect on their experiences and try to do a better job than previous generations. In addition to supporting children economically, men are increasingly emphasising the importance of nurturing children emotionally through teaching, guiding and spending time (Schmitz, 2016). Similar to some of the fathers in the current study, Nilsen and Sagatun's (2015) participants, who had also experienced father absence, aspired to being present and involved as fathers. Like some participants in this study, practical availability was important to ensure that children felt secure and supported.

Similar to the current study, other research investigating parental role models revealed that men who had uninvolved fathers, were either incapacitated in their own parenting or rejected the example they were given and had increased motivation to be engaged, present fathers who sought involvement with their children (Hoffman, 2011). We

need to acknowledge more fluid versions of fatherhood (Clowes et al., 2013), in addition to finding ways to support all fathers in the role, regardless of their personal circumstances.

Conclusion

What it is to be a father is changing, as evidenced by the increased focus on presence and nurture. Apparent in our findings is that although some men who experienced father absence are thriving and overcoming what they believe to be deficiencies from the past, others are unsure and insecure in the role. These findings have implications for any healthcare professional coming into contact with men who are fathers, or who aspire to fatherhood.

The transition to parenthood is a sensitive time when men may require a lot of support (Hoffman, 2011). This is especially true for men who have experienced father absence. The unique challenges facing men attempting to father in the absence of a father role model must be acknowledged and accommodated. Typically aimed at new mothers, “prenatal and parenting classes do not always consider the needs of young fathers, nor do they necessarily provide education and support appropriate to the distinctive roles that young fathers are taking on” (Castillo et al., 2011 p. 1348). There are also opportunities to find ways to support non-resident fathers in the role, while simultaneously attempting to assist them to overcome other challenges they are facing.

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