

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Low-skilled, low socio-economic, young, co-
resident, working fathers: Their experience of
fatherhood

A thesis presented in fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

At Massey University,
Turitea, Palmerston North,
New Zealand

Gareth Rouch
2009

Abstract

Low-skilled, low socio-economic status, young, co-resident, working fathers: Their experience of fatherhood

Using open-ended interview techniques, 23 low-skilled, low socio-economic status fathers aged 20-29 were interviewed about their experience of fatherhood. All participants were in unskilled jobs and all lived with and supported their partners and child/children. This population of fathers is generally overlooked by researchers. Because they take responsibility for some of society's most vulnerable families and children, understanding how they conceive of their role as fathers can promote the welfare of those families and children.

Participants were recruited by casual connections, snowballing and advertisement. The interviews explored the participants' experience of fatherhood and their reasons for being active and committed family members. Focus was given to how they made sense of fatherhood in terms of their life course. Participants had two interviews, the first generic and the second idiographic. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. A social constructionist approach was used: transcripts were analysed by identifying and examining the primary domains in which participants experienced fatherhood. Participants spoke of fatherhood as an affective activity, the primary object of good fatherhood being to maintain an emotional bond with one's children. Being a good father was thought to involve eschewing deleterious family practices such as those which had marred their own childhoods. In this regard, participants saw themselves as repairing their family-of-origin's dysfunctional style.

Providing was described as a core feature of fatherhood – subsidiary to, but corollary on, being an emotionally-engaged father. Good fathers were described as committed providers, albeit participants did not consider their own limited earning capacity to compromise their fatherhood. Obtaining a job and providing for one's family was one of the 'pro-socializing' effects of fatherhood. Participants considered fatherhood to not only improve but to also redeem their lives, giving a purpose and focus they had lacked prior to their becoming parents. Being a good father also involved being a good partner. For many of the participants, this involved adopting non-gendered roles in the home. The

sharing of housework and childcare improved home life by reducing the partner's workload. Those who failed to adopt the gender-neutral stance acknowledged this as a personal shortcoming that they planned to remedy.

Fatherhood for these 23 interviewees was one of the few means by which they could obtain social value and status as adults. They lacked access to financial resources, education or supportive family connections, but fatherhood was a domain in which they could present themselves as significant members of society. It also provided a network of emotional relationships which promoted their sense of self-worth and their social and emotional wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

My greatest debt is to the 23 men who were prepared to share their lives with me. For this I am enormously grateful. I sincerely hope the findings of this research may in some form improve the circumstances of these men and men like them.

Many thanks to my supervisors, Prof. Kerry Chamberlain and Prof. Andy Lock, for their direction and suggestions.

I am also very grateful for the sagacious and avuncular direction provided to me by Prof. Ian Evans, Head of the School of Psychology. I am particularly grateful for the input Assoc. Prof. Keith Tuffin has had into my work.

I am very grateful to the Massey University Scholarships Committee for the very generous support they afforded me. Having been given a doctoral scholarship by this committee, I was able to pursue my research without undue financial strain on my family. In a similar regard, I am indebted to the generosity of the New Zealand Vice Chancellors Committee, which awarded me the Claude McCarthy Fellowship.

Many thanks to Warwick Pudney who made some very valuable suggestions.

I must thank the staff at the Massey University Library, Turitea campus.

And many thanks to Lisa Mrkusic, my wife, who has been very patient while I attended to this work. And the five children whose lives I have been either fully responsible for, or partially responsible for.

Also, what's more, thanks to some kiwi blokes who supported my efforts by just being friends. They are: The Wayno, Neils, Paulo, Alisteer, Randie, Dr. Derek, Mar-die, Gero the dero, How-wid, the Waddo and Jace Furguson.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Chapter 1: A Background to Fatherhood in the 21st Century.....	1
Father-child relationships in history	2
Modern gender roles	4
Contingencies promoting gender distinctions	4
The post-World War II economic boom and hegemony of the Male-breadwinner family	6
Fathers edged out of the family's emotional workings	7
Socio-economic homogeneity	8
Decline of the male-breadwinner family hegemony	9
The post-modern/post-industrial father	10
Critiques of the post-modern father	13
Conclusion	16
Chapter 2: A Paucity of Literature about Low-skilled, low socio-economic status Co-resident Working Fathers	
Background to fatherhood research	17
Difficulties investigating fatherhood amongst low-SES co-resident NZ fathers...	19
A psychological investigation of fatherhood	22
A lack of literature focusing on fathers in the lower socio-economic stratum.....	23
A paucity of New Zealand research into fatherhood	27
Conclusion	32
Chapter 3: The Culture of Low-skilled, Low Socio-economic Status Fathers	33
Early family formation	33
The emotional effect of new fatherhood on younger fathers	36
Providing for low socio-economic families	37
Scholarly interest in the lives of 'the poor'	39

The demise of the traditional working-class workplace	40
Effects of the neo-liberal global economy	41
The end of social mobility for those in the low socio-economic stratum	42
Conclusion	42
 Chapter 4: The Working-class Family and their Socio-economic Circumstances...	44
Commonplace attitudes in relation to those in the lower socio-economic strata. .	44
Applying a nomenclature to this population	47
Family Gender Politics	47
The family is an inherently conservative institution	49
Features of the working-class family	50
The effect of co-parental acrimony on the paternal position	49
The post-modern family operation possibly hampered by economic demands.....	53
Economic stress	53
Gendered responses to the bearing of family economic stress	54
Domestic effects of economic stress	55
The pressure of hyper-consumerism	57
Fatherhood exercised in extreme economic environments	58
The socio-economic environment of New Zealand at the time of this research ...	60
Conclusion	61
 Chapter 5: Methodology	63
The nature of discourse	64
A background to interviewing	65
The turn to language in psychology	66
The operation of interviews	67
Researcher input	68
Authorship	69
Apposite techniques for researching fatherhood experience	70
The nature of analysis	72

Multiple subjectivities.....	72
Conclusion	72
Chapter 6: Method	74
Participant criteria	74
<i>Co-resident/biological</i>	75
<i>Working</i>	75
<i>Low social status/human capital</i>	76
<i>Young fathers</i>	77
<i>Youngest child is older than twelve months</i>	78
Recruiting participants	78
Interviewing	80
Transcription and the second interview	85
Interviewing low-skilled, low socio-economic status New Zealand men	86
An ethnographic advantage	87
Being alert to distorted accounts	88
Analysis	90
Feedback to participants	94
Chapter 7: Affective Fathering	95
The father-child relationship provides an emotional domain for participants.....	96
Explaining the emotionality of the father-child relationship is very difficult....	100
The father-child connection is reported to be generated at the birth.....	103
Good fathering involves bonding and ‘being there’	107
The object of good fathering is to raise well-adjusted children	110
Participants obtained great delight being fathers	114
Good fatherhood is performed within a family	116
The father-child bond is independent of the co-parental bond	118
Discussion	119

Chapter 8: Intergenerational Repair	123
Fathers were mostly to blame for childhood unhappiness	124
Prioritizing spending time with your children	129
The effect on a son of neglect by his father	132
Exposure to positive parenting models	134
How participants explained their fathers parenting style	137
Atavism	140
Distancing the birth family to limit intergenerational transmission	142
Discussion	144
 Chapter 9: Good Fathers Provide for their Family	 149
Good fathers provide for their family	150
Fathers provide, mothers care	153
Kick-starting the provider role	155
Good fathers provide an independent home for their family	159
The stress of providing for a family	161
The pressure to provide consumer goods	166
The participants' view of their long term economic prospects	169
Discussion	171
 Chapter 10: The Pro-socializing Effects of Fatherhood	 178
The causes of participants' anti-social youth and early adulthood	179
Participants' lack of preparation for adulthood	181
The effect of unplanned family formation on participants	186
Fatherhood prompts participants to cease self-injurious behaviours	189
Fatherhood causes a pro-social self-concept to emerge	190
Female partners provide fathers impetus to change	192
The 'off the shelf' male provider role	194
Once they become fathers participants discard old peer groups	195
A small sub-group of pro-social participants	197
Pro-socialisation can be incremental and reversible	197

Discussion	199
Chapter 11: Fathers' Contribution at Home	203
The male-breadwinner/female care-giver family format	204
The de-gendered family form	208
The dual income family ideal	213
Discussion	215
Chapter 12: Final Discussion	220
Fatherhood offers participants a viable niche in greater society	220
The fatherhood niche is contingent on wider social arrangements	227
The long term prospects for participants as a population	230
Some shortcomings of participants approach to fathering and family life	231
Social policy implications and possibilities	233
Limitations of findings and possible further studies	235
Final conclusion	237
Appendices	238
Appendix A. Notices posted at select worksites, businesses and offices, crèches, Kindergartens, church notice boards, calling for participants	238
Appendix B: Notice appearing in trade union newsletters, crèche newsletters, and men's group newsletters	239
Appendix C: Information sheet for potential participants	240
Appendix D: Participant consent form	242
Appendix E: Interview schedule	243
Appendix F: Feedback to participants	246
Reference List	247