MEN'S STORIES
AN ANALYSIS OF MEN'S TALK OF SEPARATION

Ross D. Kendall

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ABSTRACT

This study, examining men's talk about separating from relationships, uses a hybrid model of discourse and structural analysis. The research identifies four dominant discourses: a legal system discourse, a discourse of morality, a discourse of masculinity and a discourse of journeying. The men construct their experiences as negative occurrences: destructive and painful; but also as positive events: necessary, timely and ultimately beneficial. Their use of the discourses serves two opposing purposes: to position them as relatively innocent and vulnerable in the breakdown of their relationships, and as resolute, determined and in control of their lives. The dialectical clash of these themes leads in most cases to a position where the men can act as moral agents with clear aims and goals.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that divorce and separation are now so common as to be conceptualised in terms of family life cycle narratives (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Robinson, 1991), the intensity of the loss and abandonment of hopes experienced by both partners of a failed relationship are as real as ever they were. However, the material in New Zealand and other countries on this subject in both academic journals and the popular press has focused mainly on the greater negative impact of separation on women (Burkhauser, Duncan, Hauser & Bernsten, 1990; Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Smock, 1994; Smock, Manning and Gupta, 1999). These accounts relate the difficulties and obstacles of women trying to protect themselves from abusive men, bringing up children on reduced incomes (Bianchi, Subaiya & Kahn, 1999), finding suitable housing and appropriate employment, providing emotional care and material sustenance for their children, and often battling their ex-husbands and partners for maintenance and child support (Amato, 2004; Smock, Manning and Gupta, 1999). Stories are told of the hardships of juggling work and childcare in an attempt to provide a loving household where children and mother can create a new life, free from the unhappy differences that beset the former relationship (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

What of men undergoing separation? How do they cope with their removal from the household, often into a life impoverished of material comforts, emotional support and the sudden absence of partner and children? There is a considerable body of work investigating these questions in countries other than New Zealand (in the USA, for example: McManus & Diprete, 2001; Baum, 2004; Staudacher, 1991; Litton & White, 1995) but there is little New Zealand research about the pain and distress of men undergoing the dissolution of their relationships. Men suffer from losing their partner and they suffer from being deprived of their children (Burgess, 1997). Importantly, Lynch and Kilmarton (1999) cite male socialisation as a significant factor in the ability to overcome grief. Because men lack the social networks that women often possess (Phillips, 1981), it is plausible to suggest that the grief of separation is greatly damaging, affecting men's outlook and health Taylor, 1998; Mannion, 1990; Stacey, 1990).

Most men experience significant difficulty coping with separation, yet they do not commonly seek support or advice. Often they hide behind a façade of stoic self-reliance and independence. Forster (1998) writes about such issues in her New Zealand case studies and Legat (2001) examines the issue of child custody following divorce and inspects the belief of some men that the courts are biased against fathers, while Hallett (2002) offers a distinctly one-sided vituperative attack on women and the Family Court. Phillips exposes many of the myths surrounding the New Zealand man (1996) and provides historical explanations for the New Zealand masculine identity. Others, like King, 1988; Daley & Montgomerie, 1999; and Law, Campbell and Dolan, 1999, though they say little on the subject of men experiencing separation, explore constructions of New Zealand masculinity.

A survey of relevant research relating to descriptions of situations of men after relationship breakdown reveals little critical discussion in New Zealand on the effects of separation on the male partner or on discussion of alternatives to the child support formula (Burgess, 1997). Mothers rather than fathers are assumed to be the ones best able to provide for the care of their young children, and so, in relationship breakdown, New Zealand courts have conventionally awarded custody to the mother, often discounting or minimising fathers' pleas for shared custody or guarantees of improved access (Pipe & Seymour, 1998).

On children, Fleming (cited in Baker, 2001) writes about detecting an implicitly punitive attitude towards non-custodial fathers, and Birks (1998) discusses how lobbyists such as Divorce Equity argue for an 'equity of outcome' principle in law reform with reference to income-generating capacity as matrimonial property. This seems to be an example of selecting evidence to show disadvantage for women while ignoring factors which discriminate against men. If men accept the responsibility of financially supporting their partners in a relationship and raising a family, then there is a clear benefit as well as sacrifice for the woman in this, but the man's sacrifice is not equally recognised. Instead, it is suggested that he continue to contribute to the ex-partner's well-being in addition to child support while losing the benefit of his partner's unpaid work or the pleasures of family life. In a later paper, Birks (2001) states that family law

negatively affects children and their fathers in New Zealand. Here, he argues for a move from the 'micro' process of family intervention toward the 'macro' implications of social policy. Tichbon (1995), a spokesman for FARE (Families Apart Require Equality), outlines the prejudiced nature and major flaws of the Child Support Act and its positioning of inequality between parents. Ludbrook (cited in Birks & Callister, 1999) urges concerned parents to shift the focus from terms such as 'guardianship', 'custody' and 'access' which perpetuate the notion of parental ownership and control of children' to shared parental responsibilities and duties. He observes that before 1970, court disputes concentrated on the 'culprit' in marriage breakdowns. The plight of children was not considered because women in almost every case got custody. This focus has shifted in subsequent years towards couples vying to be the most responsible parent.

When the Family Court was introduced in the early 1980s, it heard cases in private. Since July 1 2004, however, The Care of Children Act allows the media to enter the court. Proceedings usually cover access and custody, day-to-day care, holiday and travel arrangements and international 'tug-of-love' disputes. At each hearing there is one lawyer for the father, one for the mother and another representing the interests of the child. One reason for opening the court has been claims of gender bias. Doherty, Kouneski and Erickson (1998) have claimed that substantial barriers stand in the way of supportive fatherhood. These authors state that '[r]esearch demonstrates the particular vulnerability of fathering to contextual and institutional practices' (p. 287). Julian (1999) finds a common belief in New Zealand that the Family Court discriminates against fathers. Tapp and Taylor (2001) by contrast, argue that, as the mother is the primary caregiver in marriage, it is appropriate that she continue to be responsible for the major care of the children after a separation. In both Tapp and Taylor (2001) and Julian's writings, however, 'primary care' in the New Zealand system tends to become 'sole care'.

The issue of fathers and children is one often overlooked in the studies about separation. Lareau (2000) states that the father's presence is a significant factor in family life and expresses concerns about recent family studies, finding 'the

study of family life to be disproportionately skewed to selected, usually easily quantifiable, topics and to privilege the views of mothers' (p. 431). One effect of the mother having sole custody is the creation of a power advantage. Unduly influencing the children in her care can lead to parental alienation syndrome, as described by Burgess (1997). Amato (2004) argues for improved access and cooperative parenting, making a case for the necessity of authoritative parenting for positive child development. McLoughlin (1993, 2003) investigates the flaws in the 1991 Child Support Act and examines cases where people (mostly men) have been adversely affected by the Act's inflexibility. In a later article (2003) he criticises the provisions of the Act. In similar vein, Abernathy (1991) discusses the relationship between access and maintenance.

In addition to the custodial debate, on a wider level, a limitation of these earlier studies is that researchers have tended to ask the questions within a particular, often narrow, field of enquiry, rather than allow men to speak on what interests them. The frame of reference is therefore circumscribed by the researcher's focus and interpretation and not by what the men want to say. Consequently, the value and reliability of the conclusions is limited. Moreover, it is in the nature of such investigations that they occlude the social context of decision making and the larger discourses that influence what men speak about. There is discussion in previous studies on the effects of separation on men, particularly on parenting issues, but little on the context surrounding the issues, little on how men experience these effects, and less on their talk about these experiences. Research in this area has been largely of a descriptive nature, whereas this research, in contrast, investigates the consequences of separation for men through their own stories. Contemporary awareness of men's difficulties in articulating their concerns presents the challenge of formulating an investigation that foregrounds the liberatory potential of their stories. Identifying their positionings in dominating discourses and making visible alternative transforming subjectivities from their talk is a way forward. The men in this study do not accept descriptions which place them in positions where there are few resources to act in new ways. They define themselves as being in the process of devising new identities that are better explained by different stories, more

appropriate than the old ones and more empowering for their new lives. Their stories function to disrupt old practices and generate new ones.

Chapter 1

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research Aims

The thesis began as a research topic examining what men had to say about paying child support to their ex-wives. It segued into a study investigating men's talk about separating from their wives or partners and children following relationship breakup, making the child support issue just one part of a larger story. Listening to work colleagues talking about their anger, frustrations and fears following separation, I wanted to learn about the world of separated fathers as this world is experienced by them, what their new lives were like and what changes and developments they had made that were meaningful, reasonable and productive.

It seemed to me that men's voices were marginalised. The literature on the subject, for instance, demonstrates a relative paucity in this area. And the men claimed a lack of support from friends or professional agencies. When I asked where they obtained help, they spoke of support mostly from women friends and colleagues, but from other men, silence rather than sharing, disdain rather than understanding, advice rather than listening. Listening to them, it became clear that the men wanted to tell their stories. And so the research became 'Men's Stories'.

My aim was to access the men's understandings of the impact separation had on them; how they make sense of the past and present and what agency they say they possess enabling them to create their futures in new contexts. How do they hold on to being the author and main actor in their own narratives about the past and the future, while simultaneously taking a supporting rôle in their children's and ex-partners' narratives? What resources do they draw upon and how do they use language to develop these stories? So the study investigates how men talk about their experiences, and this, in turn, focuses on the discourses the men draw upon to validate their experiences. The research compares and contrasts the language the men use to talk about their

circumstances and events surrounding relationship breakdown and the factors influencing the decisions they made, and it examines how language functions to construct and manage personal and social meanings and identities. The functions of the men's talk, including the formulation of identities, challenging the institution of marriage and the positioning of men in socially constructed gender roles, together with the constructive nature of the discourses and the ideological functions they serve, were also investigated.

I wanted the interviews to be empowering for the men because in the area of separation men's stories are rarely heard and often minimised. In their role of non-custodial parent, the men's major function seems to be to pay child support. But the men have, in a sense, erupted into non-compliance, loosening the grasp of conventional expectations and taking upon themselves the opportunity to build 'reality' anew. In their resistance to old labels, the personal and political dimensions of the men's situations are inseparable; disrupting the *status quo* by adopting those parts of society's discourses that offer empowerment makes it possible for them to puncture prevailing notions of marriage, divorce and child support and effect change at various levels.

Interviewer and interviewee were positioned as partners in a collaborative enterprise. I wanted the men to speak in their own voices, tell their own stories and elaborate meanings in accordance with their own interests and goals. The men's task was to tell their stories, my task was to listen carefully. However, rather than adopt a neutral position, I aligned with the participants, attempting to understand the world through their words. I tried to avoid making judgements of their stated behaviour, orienting rather towards understanding the functions of their constructions, attempting to enter their subjectivities and share their experiences and understanding as much as I was able without over-empathising. Entering the research in this way made the stories more meaningful. In the later analysis, ambiguities and contradictory statements obliged me to constantly question my interpretations, often providing fresh insights and more accurate descriptions. I found that the men were able to discuss their experiences with relative ease. Expressions of anger were

uncommon, perhaps because of the passage of time, and talk of emotions, like sadness and fear, was spontaneous, if sometimes painful.

Engaging in the interviews and interpreting the data was therefore personal and empathic, without, I believe, distorting the ideas the men expressed. The content of the men's stories was the primary source of investigation, while foregrounding the formal structures, properties and functions of their stories provided insights that reveal the fabricated nature of their talk. My strategy in investigating the men's stories was to combine a discourse analysis approach with the understandings of a 'narrative' framework, allowing me to investigate the assertions and oppositions the men expressed in ways that seemed facilitative and enlightening.

In listening to the talk of the separation process, I tried to suspend apportioning blame or taking sides. I am conscious that the research did not involve women's discussion of the experience or the children's views. I am conscious too, that the analysis presented here, drawn from problem-focused stories, may obscure broader relations of power and control lying beyond the domain of this study.

Participants

For the study, seven men – coded here as Ted, Fred, Ron, George, Jack, Henry and Sam - told their stories about their separations in an informal interview situation. Some researchers (for example, Laslett and Rapaport, 1975) maintain that an on-going relationship, developed over repeated interviews, develops a trust that yields richer material. Others, for example, Seidman (1991) and Brannen (1988) state that researchers can more easily broach sensitive topics with respondents if interviews are 'one-off' affairs, involving a transitory relationship, as against a more enduring association. The interviews in this study took this latter approach, on the view that lack of familiarity provides a space for anonymity and thus the greater likelihood of self-disclosure towards an interviewer uninvolved in respondents' lives. I felt the men would be more forthcoming and have less apprehension if they believed they would be unlikely to be involved with me, the interviewer, again. For these reasons and because of time and availability issues I chose this interview

approach with an open-ended, unstructured format. Focusing questions were asked at the beginning (for example, 'How old are you? What is your present occupation? etc) and then the men talked about those aspects of separation they were most interested in, with interjections being used largely to elaborate points of interest. I wanted the interviews to be nondirective and non-threatening, unhurried and supportive.

Recruiting and interviewing participants was conducted in two parts. Having gained approval from Massey University Ethics Committee, the first part involved placing a notice on staff noticeboards at my workplace to solicit interest. Men interested in taking part contacted me and informed me of others who might also be interested. Three in this latter group were contacted by their friends and agreed to be interviewed. I subsequently informed the first seven men of the nature and scope of the research and provided them with an information sheet which included mention of their rights, together with a consent form. I also arranged access to a registered psychologist after the interview for participants, should they require his services. None took up the offer.

An information sheet and consent form (Appendices B and C) were provided for the participants in the study. Respondents were informed of their rights and the purpose of the study, their right to decline or withdraw at any point and to refuse to answer any particular question. Consent was asked for the interviews to be recorded and for non-identifiable portions of direct speech to be used in the report of the study.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants, the interview data were coded with pseudonyms and were made available only to my supervisors. Information such as addresses, type of work and names of children that might convey the identity of participants was excluded.

I had privileged access to the people in this study because of the availability of separated men at my place of work and because turning lunchtime conversations into a research programme seemed a natural progression of my

interest. Adding to my interest was the overlap between the respondents and me in areas such as age, social class and occupational experience.

The location of the discussions was a factor that was significant in helping respondents feel comfortable. Because the research dealt with sensitive and emotional issues, albeit viewed through the distance of time, it was important that interviews took place in private areas where respondents felt at ease. Accordingly, interviewees nominated the place and time that was most convenient to them. In this study, three interviews occurred at respondents' offices at their workplace, one at the respondent's home and three in a neutral hotel room in Wellington. I used a small but powerful digital recorder that was placed obliquely away from both interviewer and interviewee and I took the seat that respondents offered me.

The research was a complex undertaking, not least because of the one-off nature of the interviews. The stories are slices of behaviour located in specific social histories and reveal, no doubt, resolutions built on the rehearsed solutions of childhood. I tried to develop a sensitivity to emergent issues as well as to the elusiveness and silences that implied significant barriers to expression. Sometimes I thought that the facile parts of participants' experiences were being offered in order to avoid opening up deeper and more interesting awareness, only later discovering that significant and poignant features *were* being displayed, obscured but in the foreground. I tried to remind myself of these questions throughout the course of the interviews:

- Do I understand what the participant is saying?
- What impression is he trying to create of himself?
- What do I find surprising? contradictory?
- What does the participant find troubling? dismiss? ignore?
- What does the participant want to discuss? What does he consider important?

At the time of the interviews, the men ranged in age from 43 to 66 and were all staff in polytechnics in New Zealand. Three have re-married after their initial

separation, three are in new relationships and one has had no long-term partner since his divorce. All but one have children from their first relationship. Participants came from four polytechnics in New Zealand and the interviews took place in the first half of 2005.

After explaining the aims of the research and inviting participants to read the outline and ask questions about it, we began the interview. Transcribing the interviews, I identified four themes: talk about legal constraints and the ramifications of separation, talk about morality, talk about old and new masculine roles and talk about journeying and the construction of new identities. These themes are interwoven and fit into and draw upon the discourses available to the men in their linguistic environment. That their talk is often similar seems to be due to the similarity of their life experiences, age and group membership. All participants enthusiastically endorsed the research and gave their full approval for publication in the interests of having their stories heard and helping men in similar circumstances. They encouraged me to believe that the benefit to prospective readers was greater than any sensitive issues that might be raised.

Transcription

Questions and responses play an important part in discourse analysis. I used a recorder to capture discussion, then, for the reasons of security and developing a close connection with the participants' talk, I transcribed the recordings. In the process, I arranged the utterances in vertical form, respondent and interviewer above the other in a single column to express an impression of equal status between participants.

Many analyses of talk are interpretive rather than strictly quantifying. Interpretation is required in order to capture discussion where it is meaningful in the context but where it may be too subtle to register by physical measure. The transcription notation is governed, of course, by the level and type of investigation being undertaken. This research did not require the detailed minutiae of enunciation, inflexion, pace or volume to make it amenable to analysis, but a clear, comprehensive and accurate transcription of all the

dialogue occurring in the interview was necessary in order to maintain the integrity of what was said. The transcription notation used in this study uses features from Jefferson's version (in Wood & Kroger, 2000). A list of the notation symbols is given in Appendix E.