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open space • editorial

Seeing young fathers in a different way

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> I think it's absolutely outrageous that so many young men in our society feel they can go out, get women pregnant, allow them to have children, make them bring them up by themselves, often on benefits, and then just disappear. It is utterly shocking and I hope … the ministers will get hold of some of these feckless fathers, drag them off, make them work, put them in chains if necessary.… (David Davies MP, 12 November 2013, House of Commons; Cornack, 2013)

The entry of young people into early parenthood has long been regarded as an issue for social policy and for professional practice in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally. Despite a downward trend since 2007, the UK still has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe, concentrated in the most socially disadvantaged areas of the country (ONS, 2014a, 2014b). The majority of these pregnancies are unplanned, with about half resulting in the birth of a child (ONS, 2014a), although the extent to which this should be a cause for concern is a contested issue (Duncan et al, 2010). Considerable research evidence exists on the experiences of young mothers, with a range of policy and practice interventions designed to meet their needs. However, young fathers (defined as those under the age of 25, the majority of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds) have, until recently, been largely neglected both in research and in practice; we still know relatively little about their circumstances and the nature and extent of their involvement as parents The notion of 'feckless' young men, who are assumed to be disinterested in 'being there' or, worse, regarded as a potential risk to their children, continues to hold sway, particularly in popular, media and some political discourses, as our opening quotation reveals (see Neale 2016 for a more detailed discussion).

In the UK, New Labour's 10-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (SEU, 1999) provided a national policy framework for responding to young parenthood. Central aims were to reduce pregnancy rates and increase the take-up of education, employment or training among young parents. The strategy provided a useful framework around which wider policy and practice responses could cohere, and it made good progress, particularly in supporting young mothers. However, services were often less effective in engaging with young fathers. Under the recent coalition administration, policies for young parents were fragmented, resulting in patchy and uncoordinated service provision, and an over-reliance on isolated 'local champions' operating outside, or on the fringes of, statutory provision. In the current climate, the potential for young

fathers to make a positive contribution to their children's lives, and to improve their own life chances is only slowly being realised.

The idea for this Open Space developed through the practitioner strategy group convened to advise our Following Young Fathers study, funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) (www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk). One aim for this research was to enhance the existing knowledge base by bringing together small pockets of evidence on young fathers from both research and practice communities. For this collection, we have assembled a range of perspectives on young fatherhood, from:

- policy makers and think tanks (Lammy; Osborn);
- statutory services (Davies and Neale);
- voluntary sector organisations (Colfer and Turner-Uaandja);
- the individual and collective voices of young fathers themselves (Daniel Johnson, and Lemar Johnson in Colfer et al).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the collection spans varied narratives and styles of writing, from the mildly polemical to the autobiographical; all find their place here in enriching understandings of young fathers and the challenge they present for policy.

A basic insight from these papers, which is supported through the emerging research evidence, is that young fathers matter (Kiselica, 2011, Cundy, 2012; Neale and Lau Clayton, 2014). They care about and want to 'be there' for their children; they aspire to being treated as clients of services that will support their parenting; and there is mounting evidence to suggest that where they are positively engaged in these ways, this is beneficial to them, their children, the mothers and the wider families (Wilson and Prior, 2011). This major counterbalance to the rhetoric surrounding 'deadbeat' fathers and 'problem' youth has been slow to gain ground, but, as these papers testify, it is beginning to filter through to policy and practice, and also find its way into mainstream media discourses (Roberts, 2013).

At the same time, however, these authors acknowledge that young fathers may face a raft of challenges in developing and sustaining a parenting role and identity. The majority have few material resources to contribute to parenting, while their youth can lead to negative perceptions of their capacity to be responsible and trustworthy, to sustain positive adult relationships or to take a direct caring role. The barriers operate in multiple ways. Lammy, for example, reveals a legislative framework in the UK that still assumes a primary caring role for mothers. In his compelling autobiographical account, Daniel Johnson recounts the challenges of entering parenthood at the age of 16 and becoming a single young father a year later, when he resorted to the law to re-establish regular contact with his son. He also faced a common hurdle for young fathers – the need to combine paid employment to support his son, with part-time studies to complete his education. His account shows that an unplanned pregnancy does not mean an unwanted child. Indeed, the arrival of a new generation can be transformative, providing a fundamental source of meaning and identity, and opening up new pathways and aspirations to enhance one's life chances (Edin and Nelson, 2013). Perhaps, above all, Johnson's account shows that blanket assumptions that young fathers are all the same are mistaken. In making choices for his life as a parent, he received crucial help from a specialist practitioner, along with sustained support from his family. Not all of the young men in the Following Young Fathers study

were this well supported. Some, for example, were drifting in and out of temporary accommodation, without a stable base to care for their children; others lived in persistent poverty, without opportunities to engage in paid employment, and were adversely affected by the current climate of austerity and welfare reform. Where young men face a combination of relational, socioeconomic and environmental constraints, these can be overwhelming in their struggle to gain a foothold as a parent.

Most young fathers will need some level of professional support. However, those living with material disadvantages and/or a lack of family support, may have extensive needs, ranging from parenting and relationship skills training, to help with housing and employment; one young father in our study was engaged with multiple agencies, yet with little coordination of support. Across the papers in this Open Space, the implications for service provision clearly emerge. The evidence presented by Osborn reveals that statutory services continue to be shaped by negative perceptions of young fathers, a factor that, in itself, represents a major barrier to their positive engagement. In settings such as children's centres, young men may be politely shown the door, effectively barred from establishing their credentials as parents, let alone invited to express or discuss their needs. In other statutory settings, for example health services that focus on the maternal, or social work with its surveillance remit, a policy vacuum exists that creates a culture of discretion for professionals in their dealings with young fathers. This may mean that they are unseen, unrecognised or perceived only as a risk. Those placed on the margins are not accorded and cannot command the basic conditions of 'young' social citizenship: recognition, respect and participation (De Winter, 1997). The challenge, then, is one of changing the culture of professional practice so that young fathers are no longer discounted as 'hard to reach', 'disinterested' or 'risky', but sought out and welcomed as clients with a valuable contribution to make. Indeed, Osborn argues that there is a pressing need to include young fathers in mainstream strategic planning and service delivery, rather than seeing them as the sole purview of specialist teams.

In the current climate, however, supporting young fathers may mean more than bringing them into the fold. It may also mean meeting them halfway, through creative initiatives that rely on an appreciation and acceptance of their lived experiences (Hogg, 2014). Professional training is a vital part of this changing culture. But perhaps the first step in making young fathers 'count' is the simple expedient of counting them. The importance of this is underlined by both Lammy and Osborn. New auditing tools, developed by the Fatherhood Institute for local authority use, are showing that the process of identifying young fathers can be highly effective in fostering a new culture of engagement (Osborn, 2014). Beyond this, the nature and quality of service provision itself is vitally important. Davies and Neale show that innovative support – in their case one-to-one mentoring provided in a statutory setting – is highly valued by young fathers, not least because it is non-judgemental, flexible, comprehensive and delivered by people who care. However, they also show the challenges for local authorities in seeking to embed specialist provision within universal family services, particularly in a climate of funding cuts.

Support for young fathers can also take a different form, as Colfer, Turner-Uaandja and Lemar Johnson reveal. In their paper, they trace the development of Young Dads TV and the establishment of the Young Dads Council, initiatives that are designed to change and challenge dominant narratives through the development and mobilisation of young fathers' collective voices. This serves to increase the capacity of young fathers

to exercise their agency, to gain confidence as 'experts by experience', to speak out about their identities and values, and to develop the skills to provide peer support, advocacy, advice and mentoring services. The transformative effect of becoming an 'expert by experience' is well described by Lemar Johnson. At the same time, the authors astutely observe that enabling young men to develop a collective voice requires strong professional support and guidance.

To return to our overarching theme, bringing together the diverse voices represented here has been a valuable exercise, enabling a fresh appraisal of lived experiences in relation to policy responses, and helping to reframe debates about the nature and value of young fatherhood. The papers identify some key areas of good practice and policy developments, pointing the way for future developments. While these initiatives rely on a number of structural building blocks – legislative change, sufficient resources and funding, better coordination of services and staff training – perhaps the key insight to emerge from this collection is that effective policy responses rest, fundamentally, on our capacity to 'see' young fathers in a different way.

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