



Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

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Love, fatherhood and possibilities for social change

This briefing focuses on how fathers experience loving relationships with their children. It identifies some cultural and class differences between involved fathers in Scotland and in Romania.

Background

Research has shown that Western-European and North-American fathers want to be more involved in their children's lives (Dermott, 2008). However, rates of shared parental leave uptake by fathers continue to be small in comparison to mothers' uptake. What are the reasons for this lack of change in shared parenting? Some researchers have argued that social policies continue to focus too much on motherhood rather than fatherhood (Featherstone, 2009). Others have found that both women's and men's increasing workloads in their jobs create tensions in parenting and planning caregiving (Doucet, 2015). It has been suggested that enabling fathers to be more involved could be transformative, helping men transition from a culture of violence and stoicism to one of nurture, anchored in love and increased personal wellbeing, creating a more just and peaceful social world (Hooks, 2004). This research tried to explore these issues by looking at the personal experiences of fathering amongst 47 men from two different cultures.

The study

This study asked about the emotions experienced by involved fathers - white Scottish and Romanian fathers living in two urban locations in Europe. Fathers self-identified as 'involved' and were acknowledged as such by the people who helped recruit them for the study. Being involved meant that they were actively engaged in hands-on-care for their children,

Key points

- Involved fathers experience love as something they 'do', as a verb.
- Loving their children took time to develop.
- Ways of displaying love varied with social class and cultural background.
- Maintaining a loving relationship with the child required emotional effort.
- Fathers prioritised their unconditional love for their children over the often conditional love for their partner and own parents.
- Children had a positive influence on involved fathers' health and engagement with work.

emotionally accessible to children and made changes in their work life to adapt to their children's needs. The study explored whether the idea of 'the involved father' was an equally influential discourse in Eastern and Western Europe and whether this influenced fathers' emotions. A key aim of the research was to understand what fathers' love for their children means to them, how fathers value it, and how they feel they can or cannot express it.

The research design involved combining Burkitt's (2014) theory of emotions as social relations with Charmaz's (2013) adapted version of grounded theory methodology. This

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approach was developed to keep as close to the participants' interpretations as possible and explore their views on a variety of intimate relationships, while keeping the relationship with their child as a main focus.

Personal contacts were used to recruit fathers who felt they were particularly 'hands-on'. In Scotland some additional participants were recruited through attending father-child groups. Diversity was prioritised to ensure a range of views; fathers from the same class, culture and profession might describe love in a similar way.

The final sample included qualitative interviews with 47 men, aged between 28 and 56 years. 27 Scottish fathers, the majority living in Edinburgh, and 20 Romanian fathers, the majority living in Bucharest, participated. Twelve of the participants were working-class men (six from each culture), while 35 identified as middle-class. 33 fathers were married or partnered with their children's mothers and 14 were single or separated.

Interviews were carried out during 2015, in a variety of places, mostly offices and public cafes. In six situations interactions between fathers and children were directly observed, as the children were present.



Findings

Fathers' perceptions of child-focused love

For some fathers, love for their child was experienced as an immediate powerful emotion. However, for the majority of fathers, love took time to develop, happening gradually as they got to know the child's personality. For all fathers, the loving relationship with the child was what mattered most to them.

For the majority of fathers participating in this study, love is a verb, it is something that they do, rather than what they talk about. This was especially so for working-class fathers and Romanian fathers compared with Scottish middle-class fathers, who spoke extensively about verbally communicating love.

The picture that emerged from their narratives was one of class distinctions in how fathers could visibly display love. Because the fathers talked about how love should be demonstrated, not just spoken about, those who had more resources (to buy toys, to go on holidays, to pay for fun after-school activities for their children) could show love in public places more than fathers who had jobs with lower incomes.

However, fathers who had fewer resources spoke more frequently about spending time with their children at home.

Creating an emotional identity as a father

Cultural differences were apparent in how fathers created their identity. Romanian fathers identified themselves collectively with their other family members (they mentioned 'we' often), while Scottish fathers referred often to 'I' - having an individual take on their role as a father.

Maintaining a happy, close relationship with their child required emotional effort from fathers. Putting in the effort to be loving in spite of being challenged by the child in what were described as difficult moments happened through a process called 'emotional bordering', which refers to men's emotional ability to shift between stoicism (defined as strength and emotional control) and intimacy (defined as caring and openness to dialogue), as they interact with close people in their environment. Time was again important, because bordering was something learned in different contexts, and through paying attention to how other people responded to them.

Fathers tended to understand their love for their children as being unconditional, compared with the at times conditional love for their partners and their wider family, even if they relied on these close family members on a daily basis. Fathers who described relationships with their children as enriching and meaningful, tended to believe they were different from their own fathers, although some were ambivalent about their own father's parenting and others felt that they were similar to their own fathers in how they parented.

The value of fathers' love

Scottish fathers believed that their love made their children warmer and more sociable in their environment, while Romanian fathers thought that their love made their children confident and active in their social environment.

Having children played an important role in getting fathers to stop bad habits such as smoking, in recovering after drugs, and in driving more carefully, as fathers wanted to remain healthy and present in their children's lives for longer. This is a side of a father's responsibility which has received little attention from sociologists of family life to date.

Fathers also reported being more engaged at work if they had time to talk, play and help children after the working day.

“ Fathers Network Scotland welcomes this insightful research. Furthering men’s involvement with their families, and showing the world the benefits of this, is a key practice and policy goal. Drawing attention to the benefits to men will boost effort among men themselves. Findings that having and caring for children can help fathers stop smoking, recover from drug misuse and even, drive more carefully, will surely be hugely influential. ”

Gary Clapton
Fathers Network Scotland/The University of Edinburgh

Policy implications

- Given that fathers report that their love for their children takes time to develop, social policies could be changed to increase the limited provision for leave for fathers in both Romania and the UK.
- Lack of time spent together with the child is a barrier to expressing love and developing a close relationship, and it is circumscribed by social policies in both the UK and Romania which do not take into account the emotional connections fathers want to establish with their children.
- Creating inclusive public social spaces where men and women can fully express love towards their children without gender-stigma can further social change.
- Detaching fathers from a principal responsibility to provide for their families, and pressures to match their masculinity with the breadwinner role, can further create opportunities for them to be involved in childcare. Equating manhood with care, can be written not only into gender-equality discourses, but also into public policies and work-place culture.

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Author and acknowledgements

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