

MEN TALKING ABOUT FATHERHOOD: DISCOURSE AND IDENTITIES

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Fathers and fatherhood have become an important topic of public interest and debate in recent years, with autobiographical accounts by fathers and explorations of the state of contemporary fatherhood a staple of the news media and popular culture (Lupton and Barclay 1997). This concern has been reflected at the level of public policy, particularly since the election of the first New Labour government in 1997. Encouraging fathers' active involvement in family life has been a consistent strand in a range of Labour initiatives (Home Office 1998; Toynbee and Walker 2001), which in turn has led to a greater emphasis on involving fathers in health and social care services, for example, in the work of family centres and in child protection (Ghate 2000; Ryan 2000).

This new focus on fatherhood reflects a number of diverse ideological strands, including an egalitarian agenda that is concerned with promoting gender equality (Cameron *et al.* 1999; Robb 2001), as well as the influence of New Right thinking on the supposed link between fathers' absence and family and community breakdown (Murray 1990; Dennis and Erdos 1993). What these different discourses have in common is an emphasis on promoting the active involvement of fathers in family life, as something that is seen to be good both for children and for men themselves.

Despite this increasing focus on fatherhood, comparatively little is known about men's experience as fathers, particularly at a time when ideas about fathers' roles are undergoing such dramatic change. This is not to say that research on fatherhood has been lacking. However, until quite recently the main focus was on fathers' influence on their children (Lamb

1997; Warin *et al.* 1999). Although some recent studies have begun to explore the subjective experience of fatherhood (for example, Plantin *et al.* 2003), there is a need for more detailed exploration of what fatherhood means to men, and of the ways in which personal meanings intersect with wider and changing public discourses.

FATHERS, IDENTITIES AND DISCOURSE

This chapter reports the findings of a research study that used a discourse analytic approach to explore the meanings that men attach to their experience as fathers. The research involved in-depth interviews with a random sample of British fathers of young children and made use of methods drawn from critical discursive psychology. The study was rooted in a poststructuralist understanding of identities as constituted in and through discourse. In Stuart Hall's words:

identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting discourses, practices and positions.

(Hall 1996: 17)

This applies to gender identities, including masculinities, which need to be understood as plural and dynamic, rather than as fixed and immutable (Connell 1995).

Critical discursive psychology, while sharing these basic poststructuralist assumptions, provides a methodological approach that enables an examination of the specific mechanisms whereby individuals produce their identities in discourse. Discussing the ways in which masculinities are discursively constructed, Nigel Edley makes the claim that:

when people talk, they do so using a lexicon or repertoire of terms which has been provided for them by history.

(Edley 2001: 190)

From this perspective, understanding the meanings that fatherhood holds for men involves paying attention to the ways in which they talk about their experience as fathers, analysing the frameworks and strategies that they utilise to make sense of their experience. Edley describes three distinctive concepts offered by discursive psychology as tools for analysing spoken discourse:

- interpretative repertoires;
- ideological dilemmas; and
- subject positions.

In what follows, I will use these concepts as a framework for summarising the findings of my own research with fathers.

INTERPRETATIVE REPERTOIRES: FATHERHOOD AS PRESENCE AND INVOLVEMENT

The concept of interpretative repertoires was imported into social psychology from the sociology of scientific knowledge by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, who have defined them as:

basically a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events.

(Potter and Wetherell 1987: 138)

Interpretative repertoires can be described as culturally-available frameworks that enable individuals to make sense of their experience. As such they have something in common with the Foucauldian concept of discourses, though according to Edley:

compared to discourses, interpretative repertoires are seen as less monolithic ... they are viewed as much smaller and more fragmented, offering speakers a whole range of different rhetorical opportunities.

(Edley 2001: 202)

In describing their experience as fathers, the participants in this study drew on a number of shared meaning-making frameworks. Perhaps the dominant framework was one that saw the essence of fatherhood as simply spending time with one's children:

I see a lot of fathers who are, they come home from work, the kids are there, 'Hi, how are you doing, blah blah', and then down the pub and, you know, to me, giving your kids everything, I mean you can give your kids everything, Playstation, you can give them bikes, you can give them everything, but what they need, what they want is your time

and well, it's time with you and for you to show them, you know, what you think about them. They want to be with you.

(Paul, Mauritian, 37)¹

Tony (white, 48) also distanced himself from fathers who are 'absent a lot of the time, you know, they leave the house at seven in the morning, or whatever, and don't get back until seven at night'. By comparison, he says: 'I do feel that, most of the time, I'm there for them'.

Building on this underlying sense of fatherhood as 'presence', participants echoed public rhetoric on fatherhood in their repeated use of the word 'involved' to describe their role. Involvement tended to be both practical and emotional. When asked to describe their experiences of fatherhood, interviewees often began with a list of the practical tasks that they regularly undertook. As for emotional involvement, Paul claimed: 'I think there's a strong bond, a strong relationship between us', while Sean said:

I don't think there's anything wrong, and I think on the contrary it's good for men like myself to try and have this meaningful emotional relationship with their children, and that we also try and do the practical domestic tasks.

(Sean, white, 33)

Sean talked about the 'emotional adjustments' required by fatherhood, 'having to put your children's needs over your own feelings'.

All of the participants in this study described their own fathers as emotionally distant:

I don't think he had much time to be a loving father, if you see what I mean. He was a father figure and that was it, yeah, he was the head of the family, and it was his responsibility to bring up the family.

(Paul)

Comparing himself with his father, Gordon (white, 42) said: 'My own father wasn't really affectionate towards me, but I would see that element in the relationship with Charlie [his son]'. Sean stated that his aim as a father 'is to be close to my children, closer than my dad was, on an emotional level, that kind of thing'.

These responses demonstrate that, in developing their own personal meanings of fatherhood experience, the men in this study drew heavily on the dominant ideal of the actively involved and emotionally engaged father.

IDEOLOGICAL DILEMMAS: FATHERHOOD AND AMBIVALENCE

The concept of ideological dilemmas was first developed by Billig *et al.* (1988) as a way of capturing the fragmentary and contradictory nature of everyday common sense. In this view, lived ideologies are inherently dilemmatic, or structured around contradictions. Everyday discourse tends to revolve around sets of oppositions that have to be worked through and resolved. The ways in which the participants in this study discussed their experience as fathers reflected at least two shared ideological dilemmas.

The most obvious tension was between responsibility and freedom. Paul claimed that becoming a father had made him 'grow up' and 'become a lot more responsible than I used to be', and he described himself as being 'responsible for two children that I've brought into the world'. At the same time he admitted to being envious of men who were not fathers and confessed: 'I'd just like to be able to be my own person every now and then and just be free enough to, you know, do whatever I want to do, whatever I have to do'. Tony's talk, too, was balanced between an acceptance of responsibility and keen regret at the loss of personal freedom:

Well, it's completely changed my life, actually. Um, because before, yeah, I had the time to do anything I wanted, virtually. Um, yeah, it's just not having the time, I mean you just have to switch your commitment to the family, really, and I actually resented the loss of my leisure time a lot [...] You know, it's quite good fun, really, picking them up from school, you feel that, the responsibility, I think weighs quite heavily. You do feel very responsible for them and very scared that something might go wrong for them, you want to protect them.

(Tony)

Gordon's ambivalence was neatly encapsulated in this response: 'I enjoy being with Charlie. You have less personal time, you have less personal space'. Sean repeatedly described fatherhood in terms of 'responsibilities', commenting:

I think it's an enormous change to your lifestyle in the sense that without children, whether you're single or in a partnership, you have enormous amounts of sort of freedom, freedom of your time, freedom of the structure of the day. Freedom in social life and so on.

(Sean)

The other main tension in these men's talk was between a sense of fatherhood as struggle, and a contrasting sense of the pleasures of being a father. For Tony, the sense of fatherhood as a difficult experience was especially keen: 'I've just found it more of a strain than I thought it was going to be, to be quite honest [...] I have struggled with aspects of it, really'. Sean mentioned the 'difficult adjustments' involved in becoming a father, but added: 'I really enjoy my children ... It's enjoyable just looking after them doing simple things'.

These dilemmas point to a fundamental ambivalence in men's experience of fatherhood, and to the importance of discourse (in this case the research interview) as a means of working through these perceived tensions.

POSITIONING: OTHER MEN AS POINTS OF REFERENCE

Interpretative repertoires offer individuals subject positions from which to view themselves and make sense of their experience (Edley 2001: 209). The negotiation of personal identities involves positioning oneself in relation both to external discourses and to other people, whether real or imagined (Davies and Harré 1990). The men interviewed for this study frequently defined themselves as fathers by comparing and contrasting themselves with others. Sometimes the 'other' was the man's partner, but often it was other men who were the point of reference:

I've never been a stereotypical man, I mean, I'm not into football, I'm not into going to the pub all the time, every now and then I do, but I'm not the stereotypical type of man.

(Paul)

Interestingly, the most significant 'other' in relation to whom all of these men positioned themselves was their own fathers, despite an almost universal sense of their fathers' emotional distance:

My father's dead, he died about ten years ago. He wasn't an affectionate person, because he didn't know how to be. He never touched me [...] Well, I'm not saying ever, but probably the only memories I've got of him touching me is probably hitting me.

(Gordon)

The accounts presented by other participants were more ambivalent. Paul told the story of his Mauritian father's migration to Britain and his aspirations for his children: 'Dad knew what he wanted for us [...] he put us through different schools'. Paul added, more negatively: 'I don't think he had much time to be a loving father'. Despite this, Paul clearly admired his father for other qualities: 'but considering the way that my father was, he never discouraged me in doing things [...] my dad always said I can do whatever I think I can do'.

This kind of complex relationship was replicated in the responses of other participants, including Tony who stated: 'My father was very strict, very strict, he came from a Catholic, working-class background'. Although he was frightened of his father, Tony also claimed that to he 'enjoyed' him as a father. Sean's account of his father articulated a similar ambivalence. On the one hand 'he was very much a get up and go to work, come home, tea on the table, didn't have a lot to do with us, type father', but at the same time he remembered his father as joking and humorous. While describing him as absent both physically and emotionally, Sean admired his father's 'responsibility' as a breadwinner:

So, in that sense, he was doing his job and given the choice of being like my father, being like I am, or being like a young man now with no responsibilities, I think I'd rather be like my dad, than be like a dad who shirked both sets of responsibilities.

(Sean)

For all of these men, their own fathers were crucial but ambivalent points of reference in their own construction of fatherhood identities, neither completely disowned nor unequivocally admired.

NARRATIVES OF FATHERHOOD EXPERIENCE

According to Davies and Harré, 'conceptions people have about themselves are disjointed unless they are located in a story' (Davies and Harré 1990: 270). Although not featuring in Edley's outline, narrative is a concept that has become increasingly important within social psychology and in the social sciences more generally. Kenneth Gergen proposes a 'relational view of self-conception, one that views self-conception not as an individual's personal and private cognitive structure but as *discourse* about the self' (Gergen 1994: 247). Individuals do not produce narratives out of thin air, but using resources from the wider culture: 'To possess an

intelligible self – a recognisable being with both a past and a future – requires a borrowing from the cultural repository’ (Gergen 1994: 257).

It is possible to identify a number of shared narrative strategies, as well as some significant variations, in the talk of the fathers interviewed for this study. While drawing on shared frameworks reflecting dominant discourses of fatherhood, each participant did so in a distinctive way. The men interviewed interwove their individual narratives of fatherhood with other kinds of personal narrative, which in turn drew on wider cultural resources. Thus, Paul’s story of his experience as a father was closely bound up with, and influenced by, narratives of class mobility and cultural migration. Paul’s sense of what it means to be a good father was grounded in a story in which he saw himself moving away from the activities that he associated with working-class masculinity (going to the pub, ‘spoiling’ his children with material things) and towards a more middle-class lifestyle, which involved spending more time at home and finding ‘good’ schools for the children. Paul also contrasted his memory of the way Mauritian men shared in domestic tasks with the lack of such involvement among men whom he knew in Britain. In other words, Paul’s fatherhood identity was closely interwoven with his class and cultural identities. A very different kind of narrative was developed by James (white, 38), a part-time Christian minister, whose account of his experience as a father was woven into a story of spiritual development, in which the struggles and challenges of fatherhood were viewed in part as a means to personal growth.

The variability in fathers’ narratives is a reminder of the diversity of meanings that fatherhood can attract to itself, while making use of a shared pool of cultural meanings. It demonstrates, too, that notions of what it means to be a ‘good’ father are never culturally neutral, but are bound up with factors of class, ethnicity and culture. The examples quoted here raise questions as to whether the ideal of the practically and emotionally ‘involved’ father currently being promoted by public policy, in fact reflects a particular kind of white, middle-class experience.

CONCLUSION

The research findings discussed in this chapter suggest that, in attempting to make sense of their experience of fathers, men draw on some common frameworks that reflect the influence of dominant public discourses about fatherhood. In negotiating their identities as fathers, men appear to face similar sets of dilemmas and to articulate a shared ambivalence about their roles. Other men, and especially their own fathers, play a complex but powerful role as points of reference in the construction of individual fatherhood identities. Finally, men’s narratives of fatherhood experience, while drawing on shared resources, are variable and diverse, reflecting

differences of class and culture. More generally, the findings of this study demonstrate the complex ways in which men's identities as fathers are produced in and through discourse and the complex interaction between personal narratives and public discourses.

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NOTE

- 1 All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Details of ethnicity are drawn from participants' self-descriptions.

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