

Fathering and Poverty: Uncovering men's participation in low-income family life

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It is perhaps an undisputed fact that at a superficial, and rather insensitive level, many fathers consider themselves somewhat financially impoverished rather than focusing on the riches that come from being a father. However, the need to tackle poverty and its impacts on men's participation in family life have been brought into stark relief in recent times, since the imposition of austerity measures from 2010 and the addition of COVID-19 in 2020 and 21. Austerity has a greater and deeper impact on people already on low or no income and the cynical imposition of such measures alongside blaming people for their poverty is reflective of a society in which only some, the economically viable and politically palatable, are valued. Traditionally, men have not been considered an integral part of the family in respect of child rearing unless it serves the political ends of blaming them for either their absence or, contradictorily, their inability to provide adequate financial support.

Tarrant's book addresses the complex relationship between fathering, poverty, and social policy and adds to our understanding of this often hidden and fraught area. It stems from her pre-COVID, Leverhulme-funded study *Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care*, undertaken between 2014 and 2018. She covers the stigma and marginalisation of fathers describing how 'dad deprivation' has been blamed for numerous social ills, including the 2011 riots. She uncovers the discourses and assumptions made of 'feral' parents and the 'underclass', pointing out the political vilification of single mothers beforehand. The ambivalent social attitudes towards fathers, as male and therefore potentially dangerous and abusive and yet being irresponsibly absent from children's lives are called out in this research which recognises that our current evidence base on male participation in family life is lacking.

Tarrant foregrounds fathers' voices across the lifespan, shifting the debate away from embedded social anxieties and negative discourses. Her interviews with 26 men in a range of generational positions, from young fathers to older fathers a, grandparents and carers was completed against a backdrop of austerity and welfare reform and in a period of rapid social change. Her interviewees were mainly white, only one came from an ethnic minority background, and heterosexual. However, they reflected the population of the particular area of multiple deprivation in which the research was conducted. Tarrant is not aiming to generalise and is aware of the limitations of the research but she seeks to present alternative narratives to the stories propagated by politicians who seek to deflect attention from complex and difficult social circumstances onto more vulnerable others. Using life journey interviews and photovoice, including a wider 'walking photovoice' that reflects the broader ethnographic approach, she widens the debate and sets men's participation in its socio-historical context, the shifting sands of masculinities and care and poverty. The narratives show that prevailing discourses of blame, absence versus presence, irresponsibility and crises of masculinity obscure the varied ways men participate as fathers throughout the lifecourse and the ways in which material resources have an impact on that participation.

The book is written in two parts, although these are not formally separated. Firstly, the social and historical background is given to what we know about fathers experiencing poverty. Tarrant highlights the connections between formal welfare and Poor Law treatment, and current assumptions and blame. These understandings are cast within a theoretical framework that draws on family diversity, shifting gender roles and the development of masculinities research. The problematic, hidden nature of care-giving and fatherhood, subsumed under patriarchy, makes theorisation through history difficult but this research brings it to the fore.

In the second part of the book Tarrant reports how professionals perceive men as fathers in poverty. Her work brings out the perpetuation of myths of the men as bad, irresponsible and troubling as fathers. Services have developed around such assumptions although those

professionals she interviewed were well aware of influence of such views and distanced themselves from them. The men she interviewed described how material circumstances shaped their care-giving and demonstrated complex, shifting patterns of care over the life course. Their economic vulnerability was overridden, however, by their sense of responsibility to provide care despite the daily practices of it being subject to their economic circumstances. Importantly, Tarrant explores how the men's engagement with and use of a community centre was transformative and helped to repair their social connections whilst also gaining support.

The context of social ambivalence towards men as carers and having parental responsibilities, as blameworthy for being absent or dangerous when they are not, has marginalised support for them. This contains an important message for social work in laying bare the assumptions and ensuring that voices are heard for developing policy and in everyday practice. This is perhaps even more pressing as the impact of COVID-19 and Brexit contribute to our future socio-economic outlook.

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