‘His mam, my dad, my girlfriend, loads of people used to bring him up’: the value of social support for (ex) offender fathers

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ABSTRACT
This research analyses key findings from qualitative research conducted with (ex) offender fathers and their probation officers. This paper focuses on the critical role of family and social support for (ex) offender fathers who seek to build and maintain relationships with their children. The research reported in this paper shows that the men receive social support, both formal and informal from a wide ranging and complex network of family, friends and practitioners, which facilitates and enables their commitment to fathering. Drawing on social support theory, I argue that identification of support networks recognizes the productive possibilities of vulnerable families which constitute a source of strength and connection to be nurtured in contexts of adversity. This strengths-based paradigm advocates the need to identify and facilitate family, friendship and professional networks in the context of social work with offenders and their families.

INTRODUCTION
Concepts of the family and family support are widely contested and extensively debated by academics, practitioners and policy-makers. What constitutes the family and the role and function of family support is highly complex and constantly changing (Katz & Pinkerton 2003). Featherstone (2004) suggests that traditional models of the family, male provider and economically dependent wife, have become destabilized, creating dilemmas and conflicts for practitioners (p. 39). This paper contributes to these debates by focusing on the critical function of family and social support for (ex) offender fathers who are seeking to build and maintain relationships with their children. Pinkerton & Dolan (2007) highlight the value of exploring networks of support with people who are regarded as difficult to work with and hard to reach (p. 219). (Ex) offender fathers are one such group. Yet, the ways in which their informal/family and formal support networks facilitate their fathering shed light on the ‘capital’ that networks and support can and do provide.

Discourses of inclusion and support are key tenants of government family policy (Home Office 1998; Department for Children, Schools and Families 2003) and fathers and fatherhood are increasingly regarded as central to family well-being and positive childhood outcomes. Recent social policy such as Every Parent Matters (Department for Education and Skills 2007) and legislation, including the ChildCare Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2006, publicly promote the involvement of fathers in the family (Featherstone et al. 2007; Collier & Sheldon 2008). Collier & Sheldon (2008) argue, ‘over the past decade in Britain, there has been an explicit attempt to use law to promote a range of father-inclusive practices in service provision across diverse areas of policy and service delivery’ (p. 22). Despite this, Brown et al. (2009) argue that within child welfare, fathers are generally ‘not just discounted, they are often not seen at all even when they are present’ (p. 25). In their review of how fathers are recorded and regarded in the context of child protection in one Canadian agency, Brown et al. (2009) demonstrate that fathers are either considered
irrelevant or a risk to children. In the context of family violence, mothers are blamed for their ‘failure to protect’ children and ironically dangerous fathers are disregarded when assessing risk (Coohey 2006; Strega 2006; Cavanaugh et al. 2007). In a study of fathers in Ireland, Ferguson & Hogan (2004) found clear evidence of men’s exclusion in welfare systems (p. 8). Featherstone et al. (2007) argue that in different practice contexts, including child protection and probation, ‘the general tendency is to see contemporary masculinity as problematic’ (p. 33).

The absence of fathers/fatherhood in the training of social workers is one explanation (Roskill et al. 2008). So too, is Ferguson & Hogan’s (2004) contention that the gender and class composition of the profession (reflecting predominantly white middle-class values) shapes understandings and responses to fathers and fatherhood. Consequently, traditional perceptions of the family often remain intact and unchallenged. Clappison (2009) suggests that compared to other professionals involved, social workers have been slower to respond to the positive contribution that fathers can make in welfare provision. Clappison (2009) demonstrates that ‘in key literature, policy and educational texts the same implicit and negative messages about fathers can be found’ (p. 19). The result, according to Clappison (2009), is three-fold: women’s oppression is heightened by according all child care responsibilities to mothers, fathers are overlooked and absolved of responsibility and children are denied access to potentially ‘positive assets’ in their lives (p. 27). These negative representations of men are associated with a deficit model of fathering (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997). In this model, men (fathers) are variously viewed as highly risky, irrelevant or completely invisible. Collier & Sheldon (2008) argue that the deficit model of fatherhood ‘remains particularly powerful in areas relating to crime and social order’ (p. 236). Similarly, Arditti et al. (2005) state that ‘incarcerated fathers and their families are embedded in a broader sociocultural network that stigmatises involvement in the criminal justice system’ (p. 270). This, they suggest, may result in a ‘lack of social support, ambiguous relationships and the avoidance of relations with the incarcerated father’, which, their research suggests, continues upon release, resulting in a ‘stigma that never fades’ (p. 270). The deficit model of fathering/fatherhood and associated stigma has the potential effect of rendering (ex) offender fathers invisible at worst or, at best, regards their capacity to father as limited. Highlighting the effects of the deficit model of fatherhood in welfare provision should not detract from the recognition of the burden of violence and neglect experienced by many women and children. In detailing the experiences of this marginal group of men and their families, this research seeks to make a critical contribution to the ongoing discussions and dilemmas on the role of fathers in contexts of extreme family adversity. The starting point for this paper is in line with Featherstone et al. (2007) who state, ‘we should not approach work with men on the assumption that we are dealing with men as a risk or a resource, a perpetrator or a victim. Either/or should be replaced with both/and’ (p. 3).

My own and other research demonstrates that many (ex) offender fathers are committed to fathering their children (Boswell & Wedge 2002; Clarke et al. 2005; Meek 2007; Walker 2009). In the context of a growing prison population, prison is reshaping and defining family life. In May 2009, the prison population in the UK was 82,965, 95% of whom were men (HM Prison Service 2009). Exact numbers of fathers in prison are not available. However, The Prison Reform Trust (2004) estimates that 59% of men in prison have dependent children under 18 (p. 24). Writing about offenders in the USA, Roy & Dyson (2005), state that ‘many men strive to develop relationships with their children [and] they may rely on mothers as important catalysts for these relationships’ (p. 290). They suggest that mothers are gatekeepers who can both block and facilitate fathering. Similarly, Arditti et al. (2005) argue that ‘incarcerated fatherhood implies a unique dependence on children’s mothers or caregivers for contact and encouragement for men to remain involved’ (p. 283). They conclude that discouragement is the more likely scenario, leaving the father feeling powerless in respect of their children. Clarke et al. (2005) suggest that ‘in the case of fathering from prison, a key interpersonal relationship is with the mother, who plays a central interface-moderating role, since her presence is needed to accompany children on prison visits and her influence is crucial in facilitating letter writing or telephone calls’ (p. 222). The work of Arditti et al. (2005) and others emphasizes the centrality of the mother/offender father partnership in the development of the offender’s relationship with their children. The research reported in this paper suggests that (ex) offender fathers receive social support, both formal and informal from a wide ranging and complex network of family, friends and practitioners, which facilitates and enables their capacity to father. These networks provide systems of social support and family capital that hold productive possibilities for (ex) offender fathers and their families.
Social support for (ex) offender fathers I. Walker

Writing about vulnerable children and young people, Pinkerton & Dolan (2007) suggest, that thinking ‘about young people holistically and in their systemic context requires attention to the social support systems that they are already a part of and to the relationship between their formal and informal supports’ (p. 219). In this paper, I suggest that thinking holistically about (ex) offenders involves a similar focus on social support networks that Pinkerton & Dolan (2007) argue provide the connection between the external conditions of vulnerable people’s lives, their social capital and their internal emotional worlds, their ‘resilience’ (p. 220). They suggest that social support theory, as both a method of assessment and form of intervention brings together social capital and resilience in a way that supplements existing networks of support (Pinkerton & Dolan 2007, p. 226). Drawing on the work of Cutrona (2000), Pinkerton & Dolan (2007, pp. 220–221) outline the key tenets of social support theory, in which four main types of support (formal and informal) are identified. These include concrete support, which refers to practical forms of help and assistance. This type of support, it is suggested, is often ignored by professionals. The second type of support is emotional support, which includes acts of empathy, and listening. Advice support (information and reassurance) and esteem support (communicating respect and regard) are the remaining types of support identified. These types of support reflect family relationships and networks that are both measures of assessment and areas of development. Drawing on this typology, Pinkerton & Dolan (2007) develop a ‘nested model of support’ for vulnerable young people, which this paper suggests can be more broadly applicable. Their ‘nested model of support’ comprises multiple layers of support with the primary aim of meeting the needs of vulnerable people in the family, within a broad social, institutional, policy and legislative framework. Their layers of family support include: immediate family; extended family; friends/neighbourhood; formal organizations; national policy and legislation (p. 221). The research outlined in the following discussion explores the meaning of social support for (ex) offenders.

There is little doubt that families, especially children of (ex) offenders, suffer the negative consequences of separation and stigmatization. Smith et al. (2007), for example, identify the ‘collateral impact’ of imprisonment, in particular, the social and economic costs to families on the ‘outside’. The short- and long-term consequences of parental imprisonment for children and the ongoing emotional effects of abuse and criminality cannot be underestimated (Gorman et al. 2006). There is no doubt that these vulnerable families require support and intervention (which may deliberately exclude fathers, particularly if it is not in the best interests of the child), however, they also, importantly, provide a critical source of strength and purpose for (ex) offender fathers: a source of support which may be unexpected and consequently overlooked (Gilligan 2003).

This paper, drawing on research material from a wider study on (ex) offender fathers and their transitions between prison, family and community, focuses on one key theme, namely, the role and function of social support, for (ex) offender fathers. Analysis of in-depth interviews with (ex) offender fathers and their probation officers (POs) reveals that networks of support, informal and formal, family and professional, are central in facilitating their desire, capacity and ability to be fathers. The research suggests that social support (existing and potential) facilitates fathering in a context of risk and vulnerability.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the north-east region of England in 2007–2008 using a qualitative research design, drawing on qualitative research methods, specifically in-depth face-to-face and narrative interviews. The samples of POs and fathers were accessed through National Probation Services (NPS) in the region, who gave permission for the study to proceed. The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved conducting 13 interviews with POs to explore their views on the relationship between offending and fathering, their experiences with ex/offender fathers and the ways in which POs/services managed offenders as fathers. All POs in the region were contacted by email, informed about the study and asked to volunteer to participate in the study: five POs contacted me initially. They facilitated further introductions and interest in the project and a further eight agreed to participate. Of the 13 POs who participated, 9 are women and 4 are men.

These interviews also served to identify fathers for the sample. POs interviewed were requested to examine their case loads to identify respondents for the sample of fathers. The sentences of men included in the final sample ranged from 4 months to 14 years, with the majority (8) having served sentences of 2–3 years. All but one of the men was white and their ages ranged from 20–49, with most (13) between the age of 25–39. All fathers interviewed were on licence at the
time of interview. POs interviewed were given an information sheet, for the fathers, outlining the aims and objectives of the study. They approached fathers to see if they would be willing to be interviewed. If so, a time for interview was arranged. All interviews (with POs and fathers) were conducted at NPS offices throughout the region. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Interviews in phase one lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Interviews in phase two lasted between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours.

Reissman (2001) argues that a narrative approach to conducting interviews is appropriate in research that focuses on crises in individual lives, as it allows the respondent to frame the stories in a way that is relevant to them. I conducted narrative interviews with the fathers, encouraging the men to reflect on their experiences of fatherhood in their own way, rather than through the direction of the researcher (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). This included asking the men to reflect on their fathering in general, their views on what informs their capacity to father, and the impact of prison on fathering and their families. The interviews were transcribed, coded (using NVIVO 7) and analysed to identify core themes (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Mason 1996). The approach to data analysis derived from the grounded theory approach where theorization was located in the interview data rather than pre-existing hypotheses (Yates 2004). Relevant university ethics committee approval was obtained.

FINDINGS

Complex families: challenging and supportive

Complex families present both challenges and opportunities to themselves and practitioners. In their study of fathers in English prisons, Clarke et al. (2005) describe their sample of fathers as heterogeneous, ‘with a mixed partnership and parenting history’ (p. 226). The fathers in my study are no different. The social, economic and family context in which these men are fathering is complex, intricate and fragile. This complexity is a feature of their fathering both in and outside prison. For seven of the men, their parents had been separated or divorced and they describe their relationships with their step-parents as complicated and conflictual. Eight described their dads as ‘absent’ and three had been in the care system as children. Most described themselves as fathers to a number of children. Eleven respondents had between two and four biological children, one had more than five, and eight were step-fathers. One father had no biological children but had been a step-father for 16 years. Five men had children from more than one relationship; one, for example, had four children with four different mothers. Their children ranged in age from unborn babies to adults in their early 20s. Four had children who were currently or had been in care. At the time of interview, 11 participants had partners, 5 had no current partner and 7 were living with their partners.

The majority of the men were involved in negotiating and managing multiple relationships, family and contact/custody arrangements for their children. Their relationships were fluid, unpredictable and fragile. However, their intricate family networks can be seen as simultaneously challenging and supportive. It is precisely from within the complexity of their family context that the men derive their support: their support networks facilitate their capacity and desire to be committed fathers.

Being a father – contact with children

With two exceptions, all the men interviewed were expressly committed to fathering their children. While a full discussion of their perceptions, aspirations and understandings of fatherhood are beyond the scope of this paper (Walker 2009), the men reflected on the high costs of their crimes to their families and themselves and identified the positive meaning of fathering in their transitions from prison to family. The findings of my research echo earlier work on (ex) offenders and rehabilitative processes (Maruna 2001; Maruna & Immarigeon 2004).

Both in prison and on release, their fathering was facilitated by networks of support, both formal and informal. Their partners, mothers, siblings, other family members, friends, prison and probation services variously enabled and negotiated their relationships with their children. When still in prison, the men attempted to father ‘from a distance’ and they did this in a number of ways. Letters and phone calls were the most common form of communication with their children. Ten of the fathers sent and/or received letters or cards from their children. Three had school reports sent in and then responded with letters to the children. They said:

“They used to send me their reports and things like that and then I made sure I wrote them a letter telling them how pleased I was with them doing all that.”


“She used to write little notes and that and send me them with me mam’s letters.”
“Used to write every day, every day, like I got letters every day as well like.”

Where children were very small, their mothers wrote to provide news. One said,

“So yeah, I got a few letters while I was inside letting me know she was alright and what she was up to and what she was doing and how long she was and that, what a pain in the arse she was being.”

Others found it more difficult to maintain relationships through letters. One father had written to his son but did not receive a reply and two others had corresponded for a short period only.

“I wrote letters but whether they got to him or not, he was only a young lad, so I didn’t get a reply see, so whether they got to him I don’t know, I’ve always tried no matter what to be in touch with him, all the time.”

“We kept in touch, writing to each other, and I’d phone her when I could and then towards the middle of my sentence, after I’d been in like maybe two years, the writing had practically stopped, the phone calls had stopped. I was getting a bit of grief from her mother at the time.”

One father took legal action in order to write to his son. He said,

“I had to start fighting through the courts while I was actually in prison just to be able to get to write him a letter once a month.”

Phone calls with their children were another important method of contact and communication. Eight fathers mentioned phoning their children to stay in touch, some as much as every day. They said,

“It was the first thing I ever bought is a phone card so I could ring up every day. So she used to hear off me every day on the phone.”

“I did have lots of contact with them, rung them every night, I was a bit naughty and I had one of them [mobile phone], so I rung them every night.”

However, one father said that his child found it very hard to understand why phone calls were restricted. He was used to phoning his father when he wished and could not understand why that was not possible while he was in prison. Another said that phone calls were good but not the same as being with the child.

“He’d speak to me on the phone for ages but it’s still not the same as being there all the time and it’s not the same as seeing him once a week either.”

Most of the fathers welcomed visits from their children.

“I’d seen them all nearly every week, do you know what I mean, so yeah it was alright.”
“When I was up in XXXs where the babies could come up, two hours every Monday, playing with them and all. That was good.”

Prison visits did pose difficulties for some fathers and their children.

One father did not want his children to see him in prison. Another said that he did not want his daughter to know he was in prison because she might find it embarrassing. Fathers commented:

“But on the second time [in prison], I only let my kids come once because I didn’t want them in that environment because I don’t, I don’t want them to see me walking out the prison doors, you know what I mean?”

“I think the visits were a pain in the neck for him, he just sat there, it is hard, you don’t really know what to say”. 

Visiting was also difficult because of the travel time involved. For some who were at prison locally, this was a question of the poor public transport service, while for others who were in prison at a distance, there were problems even by car.

“She brought my daughter on the bus, she was on the bus two hours there and two hours back because it was an hour one way to get to XXX and she had to catch another bus to go from the, there’s a bus station to the prison, which was another forty five minutes and then the same, exactly the same on the way and I was only getting half an hour, do you know what I mean?”

“My dad could only get like there once a month because he’s a lorry driver. . . . he’d have to come up on a Saturday and he had to be there in the morning, so he’d have to set off at half five, six, pick my girlfriend up and that and it was, when he got home he were exhausted because of the pure going up there, just to see me for an hour and a half, to come all the way back home, yeah.”

The role of family, friends, significant others in facilitating fathering

The men in this study relied heavily on family and friends to maintain and build relationships with their children while they were in prison and upon release. Roy & Dyson (2005) suggest that the child’s mother is the catalyst (and gatekeeper) in shaping this relationship. This research supports this assertion but also identifies much wider networks of support, particularly the role played by paternal grandparents, underscoring the need to conceptualize family support in its widest context.

In some instances, the fathers’ parents, particularly their mothers, negotiated access to their children,
providing the stability and security required, at times, by social services. Describing the contact he has with his child at present one father commented:

“I had to build it up through the court, like I had to have like supervised contact, I had to take it up through the court, so I had like supervised contact to start with and that progressed on to my mum supervising contact at home for a few hours and then it become like a weekly contact but with my mum present.”

Family members played a critical role in keeping the fathers relationships with their children alive. They commented:

“My dad started bringing them up every fortnight, for the like, for the rest of my time there, like two years he brought them up for.”

“My eldest son came with my mum and my sister to the jail that I was in.”

“As far (son)’s been, no problem, my brothers kept him in constant touch with me, throughout my prison sentence and my brother has always brought him up, brought him every visit. He has done a good job.”

“She used to come up once a month as much as my dad could get up.”

“Two of my nieces in my family had decided to bring (daughter).”

Parents, family members and friends also got involved with the fathers’ children in other leisure activities and in times of crisis. One father commented:

“Really, you know because he’d have missed out so much but like my best mate used to take him footballing and, my step-dad, who I go watch football with he started taking him to football then, so.”

Another respondent spoke about the importance of his older sister, who also brought him up as a child, in helping him maintain his relationship with his daughter.

“I am staying with her [sister] now. She has a room for me at her house and that’s where I see my daughter now”.

One man acknowledged his absence as a father and was grateful for the role played by his family in the lives of his children:

“Even though I wasn’t there my family has been pretty active in their life, so I’ve been pretty lucky in that sense.”

Another said:

“My family has always been in touch with my children, but not me. My family have done it for me”.

A number of the fathers interviewed, particularly those who were resident fathers at the time of their imprisonment, relied on their child’s mother for contact while they were in prison, and with only one exception, all mothers facilitated the relationship. This was also the case in one instance where the relationship with the mother had ended and she had a new partner.

“I actually got to see [daughter] on two of the occasions, her mother and her mother’s partner actually brought [daughter] when I came to prison.”

“I’ve seen her [daughter] a couple of times on visits and that but I know its hard for like other partners when you’re in prison to get up there regularly and all that, it did play a part. . . . a couple of times, I maybe didn’t see her as often as I wanted to but just enough to keep recognition there and that really, I wanted it a bit more but it didn’t happen. I can see it from her [ex-partner’s] view.”

One father did not have contact with his child while he was in prison because the mother did not permit it. He said,

“[Son]’s mam, would not let my brother bring [son] back to the closed conditions because now he was at an age where he was five, five year old and he was, he was more curious as to where he was going and why his daddy was in this place, so she wouldn’t have it and I spent the last fourteen months of my sentence back in a closed prison where that fourteen months I didn’t actually get to see [son] at all. It’s better now, now I see him.”

Non-resident fathers with previously established routines of contact also saw their children regularly. In one instance, the respondent’s current partner maintained the same contact routine. She continued to see his son regularly during the week and at weekends. He said,

“I mean she still picked him up same nights as I did. She basically carried on for me. He does seem to get on with [partner] because while I was actually on recall she took him to Pleasure Island and stuff, went on all the rides with him, so they made that kind of connection. Yeah, yeah, I owe her a lot for that like, a hell of a lot.”

This research demonstrates that (ex) offender fathers’ ongoing contact and interaction with their children is highly dependent on two important factors. The first is support and facilitation from a wide range of family and friends. Networks of support, which often extend beyond their immediate relationship with the child’s mother, are critical: critical to their children, their identity as fathers and potentially their desistance from crime. The second influential factor is the nature of their contact with their children prior to imprisonment and their status as resident/non-resident fathers. Established relationships were more sustainable.
Whilst it is clear that family and friends provided valuable informal support networks, these were not the only means of support available to the father, who also relied on more formal systems to facilitate ongoing relationships with their children.

The role of formal support in facilitating (ex) offender fathering

In addition to informal support networks many of the (ex) offenders interviewed relied on the formal intervention, and support of prison and probation services. This support was wide-ranging and included formal, mandated programmes, assistance with skills training, accommodation and employment. All these interventions assist with fathering as they contribute to the development of a stable, resourced context in which the men live following release from prison. Two particular areas of support for fathers were highlighted in this research. The first was the negotiator role often played by POs in relation to a number of individuals and agencies. The second was the relationships of support POs provided for (ex) offenders, which extended beyond perfunctory, mandated monitoring.

The centrality of the ‘officer–offender’ relationship in assisting offenders in the context of desistance has been well-recognized (Burnett & McNeil 2005; McCulloch 2005). This research confirms the potential value of formal support in the context of (ex) offender fathering.

POs interviewed identified some of the ways in which they worked with (ex) offenders around issues of fathering; sometimes their support included discussing the emotional challenges of being a father. For example,

“I have been working with somebody. He’s got two children and we’ve done loads of work around how he’s relating to his son, because he has found his relationship with his daughter totally different to that he has with his son”.

One PO described his work with (ex) offender fathers thus,

“I mean some of my cases, they are in and out, five minutes, because you know they tend to be monitoring exercises or they tend to be at the tail end of their orders, all the work’s been done, but in the early months with complicated cases, it can be an hour, hour and a half and I’ve sat with XXX for as much as two hours. He’s a big strapping lad but I’ve seen him cry like a baby, about [his son] and when somebody’s in that kind of turmoil you need to be with them. We’ve got a good relationship now, and he’s doing really well, we looked at his problems with his son, targeted specific areas and he is working hard for access”.

Sometimes support was specific and concrete:

“I’ve got him to go for skills for life here, so he can improve his English, so he can help his children out with their homework. He’s making a positive difference. His son is just doing his SATs”.

“I do shopping lists for him because he’s really struggling at the minute with his benefits and things because he’d got behind on his rent and his bills and things”.

All POs interviewed identified that probation services/officers managed fathering in a rather haphazard, ‘individual’ way. Fathers and fathering, it was argued, were largely invisible, and down to individual commitment and views of individual practitioners. Some interviewees suggested that the service was focussed on women.

“It depends; it’s down to individuals I think. When you write a report on a female offender, you take childcare in to account. If a female offender rings up and says I can’t come in because my son or daughter is poorly, we tend to believe that more than if a male offender rings up. There isn’t as much provision for male offenders as carers, in any form I think, as parents, grandparents, or partners. For example, when you look at an offender going on an evening programme, if they’ve got children, you wouldn’t consider this if they were men”.

Another expressed a sentiment echoed by all interviewees,

“I don’t think enough is done for fathers. I think a lot of the time services are set up for mothers. I really do”.

The importance and personal rewards of working with fathers was regularly identified. One PO commented:

“You know the biggest thing that made me smile at Christmas? He’d saved as much of his dole money as he could and he had enough money, he had £40 and he bought her, her first pink Barbie bike, and he was so chuffed, he saved and saved”.

A critical support function provided by POs was that of negotiation, particularly with partner agencies including social services. Two fathers commented:

“Someone from Probation was there for me with the Children’s Services and sort of sat down and thrashed it all out and my probation officer reassured him, you know I wasn’t in for any offences against children, it wasn’t a sex offence.”

“I’ve had a hard time to get to see my son. I have been so angry with social services; they just took her [ex-partner] side all the time. I couldn’t be in the same building as a social worker but he’s [probation officer] been there and helped me. I’m getting better at it, but it’s taken a while you know”.

POs stated that they regularly negotiated with local authorities about housing and quite often saw things differently from social services. One commented:
“Sometimes with social services the shutters come down. I think they would just rather see fathers wander off and disappear, it makes their job easier and that’s wrong. I know they are thinking about the children, but they have to see the fathers as well”.

POs and other agencies provided critical additional support to this group of (ex) offenders: support which identified, and made visible, the value of their role as fathers.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this research suggest that the combined effects of the informal support provided by extended family and friends and formal support provided by POs proved central to these men’s ongoing commitment to fathering. The starting point for understanding the role and function of support networks for this group of men is to make fathers visible, whether it is as potential risks or assets: failure to do so ignores productive possibilities and/or creates potential dangers and reinforces the deficit model of fathering. Brown *et al.* (2009) identify ways of doing this, which include challenging traditional understandings of gender roles, paying attention to fathers in social work education and taking a father-inclusive approach to all forms of social work practice (p. 31). Yet, this research also underscores the need to look at vulnerable families as both requiring and providing vital resources. Vulnerable families (particularly women and children) are victims of crime, abuse and its consequences, yet to see them only in this way denies their strengths and productive capacity, which may involve engaging with fathers/men or not. Gillies (2005) suggests that the middle class perspectives and expectations of parents and families which are embedded in family policy and practice may account for the current disregard of some parenting styles and family practices more generally. It is inadequate to view vulnerable and complex families in terms of deficits. It is their strengths, in this context, their mechanisms and networks of support, which are essential to indentify and reinforce. The experience of the interviewees in this study indicates the need to recognize strengths (support) as well as critical needs.

The findings of this research reveal that (ex) offender fathers developed and drew on critical networks of support, which included all of the types of support identified by Cutrona (2000), namely, concrete, emotional, advice and esteem support. These forms of support were reflected both in informal and formal relationships, and functioned at different levels, which when combined, provided the opportunity to develop support networks which were central to fathers’ continued relationships with their children. The ‘nested model of social support’, outlined by Pinkerton & Dolan (2007) provides a means of identifying and building networks of support, where those relationships are present and working to establish them where they may not exist. Identifying support networks recognizes the productive possibilities of vulnerable families and these support networks constitute a source of strength to be developed and nurtured in adverse contexts.

In the context of offending and probation this is consistent with the ‘desistance-focused’ or ‘strengths-based’ paradigm, McNeill & Maruna (2007) argue that ‘the strengths-based approach is less concerned with a person’s [offender’s] “deficits” and more concerned with the positive contribution that the person can make. How can their lives become useful and purposeful?’ (p. 234). The emphasis in this framework is on the role of ‘relationships, networks, social capital and generativity’ (p. 236). Strong relationships are positioned at the heart of social support theory and/or strengths-based paradigms: relationships between (ex) offenders and practitioners; (ex) offenders and their families; (ex) offenders and the community, and its institutional contexts. It is the potential (in this case, of fathering), which is significant and not only the questions of risk and punishment, which very clearly need addressing, particularly in the context of social work with offenders and their families, when children’s best interests are paramount. A model of social support and a strengths-based paradigm thus involves supporting the (ex) offender to father, and reinforcing their family and friendship networks, and relationships to enable this. This is also consistent with the ‘Relational Social Work’ approach, which advocates the need to identify all those who may have a role in problem solving and put them in contact with each other and further emphasizes the need ‘for a conscious facilitation of such networks’ (Barnes & Morris 2007, p. 195). It is, therefore, the cumulative effect of ordinary, everyday informal and formal networks and mechanisms/relationships of support that provide the generative possibilities for (ex) offender fathers and their families.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This research was funded by The British Academy (SG-46093).
REFERENCES


