

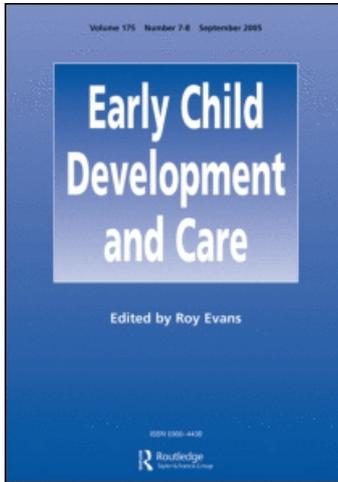
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Flora Macleod ^a

^a University of Exeter, UK

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Why fathers are not attracted to family learning groups?

Flora Macleod*

University of Exeter, UK

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Accounts of fathers' reluctance to engage with locally based family learning groups rarely acknowledge the relationship between learning and identity. This tends not to be the case in parallel accounts of women's reluctance to become involved in groups or networks where the mainstream clientele is male. Drawing on the case study of a national initiative aimed at developing family literacy in local communities throughout the UK, it is argued that decisions to join or not to join these groups is primarily social and cultural rather than individual. This means that the attendance of fathers at family learning events needs to be understood in context. It also means addressing the complexities underpinning their reasons for not attending from a lifelong perspective. When this approach is taken the implications for policy and practice become clearer. What works for some will not work for others. Rather than relying on a standard provision for all, what is needed is a range of high quality dedicated provision that caters for different requirements, specifically in this case, the differing needs and preferences of mothers and fathers.

Keywords: *Cultural context; Family learning; Fathers; Gender; Identity; Lifelong; Non-participation*

Introduction

Provision of family learning opportunities does not in itself create a desire to become involved amongst both fathers and mothers, but especially fathers (Macleod, 2000). There is now a significant body of literature that makes clear that parental or family involvement in school means different things to mothers and fathers. This literature documents the gendered nature of the terms 'parent' and 'family' that positions

*Learning Lives Project, University of Exeter, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Heavitree Road, Exeter EX1 2LU, England, UK. Email: f.j.macleod@ex.ac.uk

mothers as the key parent in the success of their children's schooling (e.g. Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998; Vincent & Warren, 1998; Crozier, 1999).

There are, of course, many factors that cause mothers to be positioned as the mainstream clientele for family learning programmes. Fathers, for example, not being resident in the family home as the number of female-headed households rise. But, even where fathers are present in the home, more mothers than fathers see it as their duty to know about their children's daily lives regardless of their work involvement. Findings such as these, which come from British Attitude Surveys conducted annually, are perhaps not surprising given that, only three decades ago, the norm was for mothers to be around the home and local area during the day looking after the children and maintaining the patterns and routines of everyday socialising within local communities. Although this is no longer the reality for many women, these norms and expectations for women, reinforced by both genders, are slow to change (e.g. Robertson *et al.*, 2008).

Based on mounting evidence that father involvement has a positive impact on their children (e.g. Fagan and Iglesias, 1999; Lamb, 2004), there is much concern nowadays to acknowledge the crucial role of fathers in bringing up their children. This is apparent in recent UK government policies aimed at encouraging schools to make greater efforts to involve fathers in family learning and parental involvement activities. Despite this, all the available evidence points to the fact that fathers (defined to include biological fathers whether or not they are resident in the same home as their children, step-fathers and partners of women with children) are either reluctant attendees or, more usually, absent from family learning events (e.g. Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Macleod, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to explore this reluctance on the part of fathers from a social and cultural lifelong perspective by drawing on evidence from a national family literacy initiative. This perspective allows me to explore the complex issues that underpin the different responses of fathers and mothers to family learning provision. Crucially, by taking a cultural perspective the focus shifts away from conceiving low participation by fathers as a product of the barriers that individuals face onto long-term social processes as well as those that derive from the immediate context. To do otherwise is not to fully appreciate the nature of the problem.

Theoretical framework

I draw on Jerome Bruner's 1990 seminal work, *Acts of meaning*. Bruner's interest was in understanding *situated action*, that is, how we act in our everyday lives, the conditions for the action, and the constraints upon it. The main tenet of his theory, set out in *Acts of meaning*, is that our actions are not based on how things are, but on how we believe things should be. So as to give coherence to our lives and reconcile the irreconcilable, Bruner argues that our beliefs influence how we perceive things to be as opposed to how they actually are. His theory is an attempt to encapsulate how we live as we go about our everyday lives and the 'dispositions that characterize [us]: loyal wife, devoted father, faithful friend' (Bruner, 1990, p. 39). He suggests that when

things in our lives are as they should be, that is in congruence with our beliefs, we have no need to explain or give reasons for our actions. However, when things are not as they should be, that is, there is an incongruence between how we perceive the state of the world around us to be and our beliefs such that we need to modify our plans and what we do, then we need to offer an explanation for our actions. This is because, according to Bruner, the world about us is not under our control, but what is under our control is how we respond. We can decide, for example, how what we do and plan to do based on our knowledge of what is appropriate and acceptable and what is inappropriate and unacceptable. Whilst the circumstances of our external worlds are not under our control, our actions are.

But, as the beliefs, rules, scripts and protocols under which we operate as we go about our daily activities are often implicit, we have to justify our actions retrospectively. For example, when asked why we acted in the way we did we give our reasons some time after the actions have occurred. According to Bruner, it is through this process of justifying what we do retrospectively, that we give coherent meaning to our actions. And, since justifying what we have done inevitably involves interpreting what we have done, our justifications are always normative and dependent on context. This means that the stories we create about what we have done are not only about justifying past actions but also about anticipating what we will do in the future. This, in turn, means that reasons for our actions are not only dependent on the rules and norms of our immediate context, but also on who we are, where we have come from. In this sense our actions are always dependent on our individual biography, our life history, including what we intend to do in the future, as well as the context in which the act took place. Our integrity thus needs to be taken account of in understanding the reasons for our actions. This is because we justify our actions in such a way as to ensure that it is not at odds with who we are.

Bruner sees the process of justifying our actions to ourselves and others as involving the construction of 'the longitudinal version of self' (Bruner, 1990, p. 120). This, in effect, means that the reasons we give for our actions can only be understood against the larger picture of our whole life which includes an anticipated future that inevitably will be constrained by the events we have experienced in the past. Although the reasons for our actions are given in the present, they are fused with past events which, in turn, are re-constructed in the light of subsequent events. In other words, the reasons we give for our actions are inseparable from who we are, our identity.

One implication of taking this theoretical perspective to address empirical questions is to shift the focus away from the short-term experiences that might have shaped actions onto a life's past and future trajectory. A second implication is that the interest must be in exploring *reasons* for action rather than the *causes* of actions. Causes, as opposed to reasons, are more about the factors (internal and external to the person) that configure to bring about a certain outcome often from the 'objective reality' perspective. Whereas reasons puts the emphasis on folk psychology which is about people 'doing things on the basis of their beliefs and desires, striving for goals, overcoming, or not overcoming, obstacles, as they go along' (Bruner, 1990, pp. 42–43).

For Bruner, this is an important distinction. But for him the key difference is not so much between the external (objective) and internal (subjective) perspective but that in getting at *causes* we are about unravelling facts whereas in understanding *reasons*, fact and fiction become blurred. This is because the reasons (justifications) we give to ourselves and others for taking a particular course of action are contaminated by how we believe things should be or believe others think things should be. In this sense *reasons*, but not *causes*, are inevitably caught up in (implicit) social and cultural norms, scripts and protocols. Bruner maintains that any departure from the ordinary (what is normal and expected) to the exceptional requires a reason to be given. That is, an interpretation and justification is necessary to explain an incongruent action (an action that is out of step with what is appropriate or that would normally be expected). In this sense, when we justify our actions we not only recount them, we also give reasons that are morally, socially and psychologically acceptable to us and others for why we did what we did. This, in effect, means that we craft a personalised vision linked to a course of action we have taken or propose to take that has its source in the temporal and structural conditions of our lives as well as the immediate context of the action.

Using this theoretical perspective to help understand why fathers, but not their partners, were diverted away from family learning groups means exploring the reasons they give for their actions. This is because the reasons they give for attending, or, more usually, not attending would have made sense to them in terms of how they lived their lives in the past and intend to in the future, what they expect of themselves and what they felt was expected of them by others. This means that the reasons they gave for their actions were not just related to the immediate context of their lives, but also, in complex ways, to their biography. Although the action of attending or not attending took place at a particular point in time, this action, and the reasons given for it, were inseparable from who they were, where they had come from and what they planned to do in the future. Put simple, their self-identity—their integrity as a person over time—had to be taken account of when making sense of their actions.

Case study

The case study evidence used here comes from a UK-wide drive that targeted families with low basic skills and was supported by matched national and local funding. Whilst the initiative targeted families, it was, in practice, a place-based initiative. Like similar initiatives, families were targeted according to where they lived. They were identified through local schools which, according in certain indicators, were deemed to be serving socially and economically deprived areas. All families living in these areas were deemed to be considerably disadvantaged in terms of access to economic and social resources such as provision of adult learning to improve their prospect of employment and their general wellbeing. The initiative aimed to: provide family learning; encourage fathers to attend especially those who were neither employed or engaged in any other sort of adult learning; use the adult accreditation system to give the adult

attendees formal recognition for their learning; encourage intergenerational learning through structured, relevant and enjoyable joint activities.

Whilst different approaches to delivery of family learning were encouraged, the main intervention model was made up of a 10-week programme of weekly sessions working with parents and their children in separate sessions followed by a joint session which brought them together to practise reading and writing. In the parent sessions there was a discernable adult education dimension to the programme which was normally led by an adult basic skills tutor. But, unlike many other adult education initiatives, these meetings were held in preschool or primary school settings during the school day so that they were in close proximity to their children to move straight into the joint (adult and child) family learning session. This meant that the recruitment of family members spanning two generations was in keeping with the intervention's intentions and fundamental to its success.

Despite one of the stated aims being to encourage fathers to attend, in the event, and in line with other such projects, mostly only women participated. Detailed case study data gathered from 18 randomly selected sites drawn from across the country showed that less than 2% of those who were recruited were men and all but one of these dropped out after one or two sessions. The parallel dropout rate amongst women was significantly lower. This was the case even though the men in the household appeared to be playing an important role in their children's daily lives. Often men could be seen, sometimes more so than women, being about the community during the day, pushing young children in buggies, dropping off and picking up older children at school, chatting and shopping locally with children in tow.

This was not surprising as, in many of the targeted communities, men were less likely than women to be at work as a result the decline of the manufacturing base in the UK. Although male unemployment tended to be high, there was plenty of low-paid, often part-time, work for women. Many fathers were therefore obliged to carry out tasks traditionally performed by mothers whilst their womenfolk worked. Yet, even though men had a regular presence at the school gate at the beginning and end of the school day, they showed little interest in participating in the family literacy programme. However, this high profile by uninvolved men meant that we were able to access their views with relative ease. Through numerous informal encounters and conversations with these uninvolved fathers, we gathered data on their reasons for not getting involved. It is these data that form the basis of this paper alongside interview data more formally collected through taped interviews from those who did attend, most of whom were mothers.

Across the 18 sites from which data were collected, a total of 163 women and 6 men attended at some point during the 10-week programme. Without exception the principal reason mothers gave for attending was to help their children with their school work and improve their own level of education and training. The handful of men who became involved, albeit briefly in five out of six cases, had various principal reasons other than this for being there. One father, a single parent, who attended with his new partner whom he had met at the school gate, wanted to gain custody of his child and was hoping that by attending he would get a good reference from his child's teacher.

In the event, from the 18 sites that provided data, he was the only father who stayed the course. Three of the other men were referred, along with their partners, by their local Social Service Departments. But, after the initial session, none showed up again even though their partners continued to attend. The remaining two men attended only briefly. One was newly cohabiting with a mother who attended and wanted to come along with her and the other was amongst the 'recently unemployed' and was looking for something to improve his skills, occupy his mind and fill up his days before being re-employed. Neither attended more than twice out of the 10 sessions and the recently unemployed male dropped out after the first. In both cases their partners continued to attend.

Most of the mothers said they preferred not to bring their own partner or husband with them and expected the other mothers to do likewise. Staff were also aware that mothers were not keen on having men present. Although their reasons were complex they included the desire not to bring 'couple issues' into the group. Unfortunately, we did not interview any of the five men who dropped out after they had left so we do not have their views on exactly why they left. Although we do have the views of two of them based on interviews conducted with them whilst they were attending. We evidenced that the attendance of men, however brief, had been a source of contention amongst some of the mothers. The two involved fathers we spoke to were both aware of this. They felt that if women were having problems with their partners the presence of men would make the group more tense. Early years' staff also mentioned in interview that the presence of men could make the group 'a scary place' for some women. By this they may also have been talking about themselves and their own feelings of being inhibited by the presence of men which is likely to have stemmed, at least in part, from the deeply feminine culture of their training (Colley *et al.*, 2003; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2007). The two briefly involved men and the uninvolved men we spoke to all said they felt ill at ease in a predominantly female environment. Some also said they felt tense in the presence of female staff as they sensed that they were nervous in their presence and unaccustomed to dealing with fathers.

The uninvolved fathers we spoke to, without exception, viewed the idea of a man attending family learning groups with suspicion. They believed that they would be regarded with suspicion if they showed interest in spending too much time hanging around a place where there were young children. They feared women and other men would suspect their motives. The suspicion of men who became involved was reflected in comments made by some of the mothers who attended and also members of the early years' staff who were responsible for running elements of the programme. Apart from the adult basic skills tutors who were accustomed to teaching mixed groups, generally it was felt that men who were attracted to this type of provision were in some way different to most men—usually this was in terms of their masculinity being open to question. According to the uninvolved men and some involved women, they were either hen-pecked by their womenfolk or (too much) in touch with their feminine side (not intended as a compliment). On the other hand, heterosexual males opting to attend were also not above suspicion as they might be preying on the women or, worse still, on *their* woman.

The strong focus on early years' activities (the family learning tasks on offer) were unattractive to men. As they saw themselves as practical and active they were not interested in participating in sedentary-type play activities with children or sitting around with women who were gossiping and drinking tea. Their preference was to participate in something more action-orientated activities such as going swimming or playing football. We were not able to investigate whether a change in the types of activities on offer would actually have made any difference. However, evidence from a different study suggests changes in the 'landscape for action' including the types of activities parent are expected to engage in can make school-based groups more attractive to men (de Rijke, 2005).

It seemed that any man daring to attend would risk being taken the wrong way by men, women and staff. For many mothers and fathers interviewed, any interaction between men and women was perceived as being potentially loaded with predatory intentions. Some fathers did not feel at ease talking to mothers at the school gate because it would make their own partner jealous and cause trouble. This potential for sexual tensions between men and women was frequently mentioned amongst the reasons given by mothers who preferred not to have their partners, or anyone else's, join the group. These mothers felt that if men were around they (the mothers) would need to present themselves differently by making more of an effort to dress nicely and put on their make-up. Also they believed men would inhibit the conversations that took place amongst mothers and between mothers and (female) staff. Part of what attracted these mothers was the opportunity the sessions provided for 'women's talk' and this would not be possible if men attended as well. A few women, staff and mothers, said they were uncomfortable in the presence of men and some mothers in female-only groups said they would probably leave the group if men joined it.

Those who stayed the course were rewarded for their efforts. We documented a range of benefits which included: an increased understanding of the ways in which they could support their children in literacy and language development and a better understanding of the relationship between home and school in children's education; an increased confidence and competence in providing more opportunities to interact with their children in the home around shared literacy activities; accreditation for adult learning and, in some cases, progression into further education, vocational training or employment. Although most programmes had a stronger focus on children's achievement, with less emphasis on parents' own learning, we documented examples of good practice in helping parents improve their own basic skills with related accreditation. Based on the information available to us, around 50% of the mothers and one father who attended the 18 sites studied, achieved accreditation of one sort or another by the time we had completed our fieldwork. This success, however, served to highlight the fact that the uninvolved had missed out on high quality local provision of adult and parent education. It is important, therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons why this sort of provision was unattractive to men. Although the focus of this analysis is on fathers, it is important to note in passing that this provision did not appear to be attractive to a significant number of mothers either.

Discussion

For the mothers who attended the family learning group meetings, the group became a shared public experience that gave them identity. The activities they engaged in were closely bound up in how they saw their role within the community as mothers and it fitted with how they wanted to be perceived by others. They had been brought up to take pride in fulfilling the role of mothering. But these same group meetings were regarded by many fathers, mothers and female staff, as 'no proper place for a man'. For the uninvolved men, it was alien territory and somewhat threatening. It was a feminised atmosphere that catered only for women. Attending would be an ordeal they preferred to avoid as it prevented them from being true to 'themselves' due to the 'femaleness' of the physical space. This 'hidden curriculum' manifested itself in the lack of male presence amongst staff and participants. The designers and providers of the curriculum were, without exception, women. Staff were without exception female and many admitted not having prior experience of working with men. Tasks/activities were heavily gendered. They were heavily rooted in 'mothering'. Fathers were expected to take on the role of both nurturing and teaching their young children. A process of putting men in touch with their feminine side. As the uninvolved men saw it, it was not just a matter of acquiring skills and competencies, as these were deeply embedded within the feminine culture but that attending was seen as a feminising process. Most men felt that this was not for them and most women felt that it was not for *their* men.

But most men, according to Ghate *et al.* (2000), feel, when given the option, they want time away from the family rather than time with them. Although a lot of women probably feel this too, they may be less inclined to say so publicly given the normative expectation of the mother's role. Even though these same men were quite content to be seen around the school at the opening and closing points in the day, chatting with one another and flanking the entrances, sitting around a table as part of a group mainly made up of women, drinking tea and gossiping, was not something they wanted either their womenfolk or other men to see them do. It was evident from this that none of the more superficial and easily removable barriers prevented them from attending, such as childcare, the time of day or being in work as few had any prospect of being in work. Childcare was provided and group meetings were conveniently tagged on to the beginning or end of the school day to make it possible for parents to attend without having to make a special trip.

The reasons for their non-attendance were much more deeply rooted than would be amenable to the 'quick-fix'. Uninvolved fathers and involved mothers had different preferences and priorities which were inseparable from who they were. Even though the environmental conditions around the uninvolved men had changed and the way they were spending their days had also changed from, for example, their fathers' generation, their justifications for their actions had not. This did not mean that they were not adapting or able to adapt to the changing conditions of their lives, they just preferred not to. Uninvolved men, spurred on by their partners and others around them, were crafting reasons for their non-attendance that defined themselves in relation to the group with which they identified.

In the one exceptional case of the male who stayed the course, the female staff and participants seemed quite relaxed in his presence. It is therefore of interest to consider why he was treated sympathetically and with less suspicion than was generally around/towards (the prospect of) male attendees. Perhaps this was because he appeared to be comfortable in their presence and, as sole carer, did not have the choice of sending along his partner instead. But he too, like the men who were not there, had crafted a good story and one that fitted because it was linked to a course of action that he proposed to take which was socially acceptable. Female staff and participants were all made aware, as were we researchers, that he had an ulterior motive for being there (his desire to create a good impression in order to gain custody of his daughter) and we all seemed happy to support him in this venture. Also his (new) partner was present in the group so he neither fitted the stereotypical image of the male predator nor the feminised male. In this context he was quite happy to become 'one of the girls' for a short while and for his own very particular reasons. But this did not put him in a good position to help pave the way for other men to attend.

Seeing the lone male attendee as not being a pioneer means that those who see the attendance of one or two men as a step towards achieving father attendance in greater numbers are deluding themselves. Few men we spoke to aspired to be 'like' their female counterparts. Either they had to remain a 'real' man as defined by other men and women or become something else by blending into a female-dominated environment. But to do this would be in some way undermining or putting aside their masculine gender identity (Faulkner, 2000). The act of joining the groups would thus be problematic as it would indirectly imply that they had made a 'bad' choice or they were of the 'wrong' gender. To convey an image of being competent in the skills normally associated with motherhood would be hard to reconcile with their affinity with a male culture. Joining would mean they would have to balance their identities of being male and also doing women's work. The way the male who stayed the course did this was to put to one side for a temporary period only his concern to be 'one of the lads' and he had a socially acceptable justification for doing so. It would seem that the assumption that the isolated case of a father who attends will somehow and in some way point the way for a greater influx is a false conclusion. Rather, a fresh perspective is required that acknowledges the reasons (justifications) uninvolved and involved fathers give for their actions.

Trying to integrate fathers into existing provision is not a fruitful option as there is now convincing evidence that a 'mainstreaming, one-size-fits-all' approach just does not work. Instead greater gender sensitivity is essential. Whilst a handful of men may be prepared to distance themselves for short periods from masculinity and take on the norms of the dominant group, there is no evidence that the majority of men are willing to do so. If a male were to join family learning groups as they are currently conceived they would be seen not to fit the typical image of masculinity. Whilst the image for women in the reverse situation, the lone female in a male dominated environment, is often a strong and positive one, the reverse is the case for the lone male in a female-dominated environment. The problem, however, with dedicated provision appealing to men is that the script for family learning has already been written by women and

the evidence is that both fathers and mothers are sticking to particular versions of their roles for normative reasons. The sense of what is right and appropriate and what is wrong and inappropriate is deeply engrained in men and women's biographies. For both the fathers and mothers we spoke to whilst conducting our fieldwork, this was a matter of normative judgement. This script is: 'women (mothers aspiring to become perfect) define the landscape for action, the tasks are designed by female early years' workers, and it is in this space that men are supposed to act out being a father'. The challenge for policymakers and practitioners is to re-write the script for father only groups rather than relying on only one template.

Conclusion

This paper was written in the context of UK central government concern to acknowledge the crucial role of fathers in bringing up their children. This concern, at least in deprived communities, has been extended to involving fathers in school-based family learning programmes. The dominant perspective here would appear to be that participation in these events by fathers is desirable and highly valued with little attempt to problematise the issue even though recruitment has been negligible. The conclusion that most research comes to is that, if men are to be engaged in family learning events in greater numbers, current strategies need to be modified (e.g. Ghate *et al.*, 2000). By shifting the focus from the individual onto the cultural, the conclusion of this analysis is more radical.

It has been argued that the reasons for the lack of interest amongst fathers lie in the apparent failure amongst researchers to appreciate fully the nature of the problem that they are addressing. Consequently, there has been much goodwill and tinkering at the edges. So long as the problem of low attendance by fathers is conceived of as an individual and institutional and not a cultural problem then the policy response will remain in the current vein. Researchers, like policymakers and practitioners, work within a social milieu where what they do is severely constricted by the political pressure to produce a 'quick-fix'. This reinforces the need to focus on that which is amenable to change such as timing of sessions, local provision and childcare issues and, consequently, can only give limited attention to addressing the deeply embedded feminine scripts of most family learning provision even though the available evidence suggests that the removal of barriers affecting individuals makes very little difference.

Looked at from a lifelong perspective, the picture that emerges is very different. Here father reluctance to attend is seen as the product of quite fundamental social processes that derive from their experiences in the wider social and cultural milieus of their lives. The analysis offers a direct challenge to relying solely on problem-focused policy research that is inclined to deal with the issue in isolation by assuming that individual and institutional factors can be separated from the social and cultural. In a sense, the call for greater father involvement is based on the claim that it is good because it is a desirable social value that all fathers should aspire to. This is in contrast to the more complex, but perhaps more appropriate; it is good because it is fulfilling

for fathers, mothers, and children and, because of this, it can also make a difference to their social wellbeing.

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