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Framing fatherhood: the ethics and philosophy of researching fatherhoods

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This chapter presents a reflection on some of the interconnected philosophical, ethical and methodological challenges that have arisen in my own research on fatherhood and in response to my engagement with fatherhood research. In it, I draw on my personal and interdisciplinary perspective as a bioethicist conducting fatherhood research that combines philosophical, legal, sociological, empirical (qualitative) and ethical questions and methods. The themes that I have chosen to focus on represent topics I have come to think of as important and interesting in the context of my own research, and which I hope will be of relevance, interest and import to most contemporary fatherhood research.

1) Framing fatherhood research for funding

It should be no surprise that, in a book about fatherhood research, I shall not be arguing that fatherhood research is a poor use of resources. However, neither is it clear to me that fatherhood research ought always to be a priority where resource is scarce. On a global scale, and from a broadly utilitarian perspective, this should be obvious. When we compare the urgency of humanitarian need across the globe, the massive benefit that would be gained from increasing access to clean water, basic medicines, food and decent housing, it is not hard to see that the comparatively very minor problems associated with fatherhood in economically advantaged countries must be a pretty low priority. However, unless we accept the requirements of moral sainthood (Wolf, 1982) and redirect all our resources in ways that maximise global welfare, we can still think that it is justifiable to direct resource to research that addresses contemporary issues and problems in our own society – and research that supports parenting, parents and children seems to be *prima facie* justifiable. Even compared, however, to other forms of parenting research, fathers may come out relatively far down the list of priorities, and fatherhood researchers (certainly in my experience) often seem to struggle to make the case that research into fatherhood ought to be supported or prioritised.

The case for research funding may be easier to make if the proposed research addresses a clear area of need and/or addresses issues in vulnerable populations. If there is resistance to fatherhood research, then, it is potentially influenced by the idea that fathers, as men, are already relatively advantaged, both socially and economically – and research that benefits an already advantaged group may be less important than research that benefits a more advantaged group. This depends, however, on who the putative beneficiaries of fatherhood research are.

In my experience, particularly of attempting to attract research funding related to fathers, health and health services, I have found that the only justificatory narrative that has been effective is one that views fatherhood research as a means to benefitting groups other than fathers themselves; on the assumption that by researching and understanding fathers we can enable them to better fulfil their role in supporting others. This narrative can be framed, broadly, in two ways. One is in terms of fathers failing to do the minimum and therefore failing their families and society (the so called

‘feckless father’ or the ‘deadbeat dad’ – see Westwood, 1996). The other is in terms of fathers being positioned to prevent or fix various problems. Either way, I have been increasingly troubled by the thought that this kind of framing implies something about the value of fathers as subjects of research. It implies that fatherhood is valued as a function – a means to achieving an end – but fathers as people are not important in their own right.

The failing father

This narrative addresses the putative problem of fathers who fail to perform economically or pastorally. Fathers who fail to perform economically are those fathers who do not contribute to the functioning of the family as an economic unit – in terms of financial provision or undertaking domestic labour. A father who does not contribute economically to the raising of his children creates a problem for the welfare state, which must pick up the bill. By engaging in research that understands and enables fathers to better fulfil their economic role, the state benefits.

A father who fails pastorally is unable or unwilling to provide the emotional and psychological support that generally typifies a ‘healthy’ father/child relationship and, it is argued, leads to optimal outcomes for children. Research that links sub-optimal child development to uninvolved fathers or negative father/child relationships, or that shows positive outcomes flowing from father engagement (for a good overview see Lamb, 2010 or Sarkadi et al, 2008)) can be used to suggest that fathers who fail in their role create a problem for their children and for the state. By engaging in research that understands and enables fathers to better fulfil their pastoral role, the state and society benefits in terms of well-adjusted children and adults, and children benefit from having healthy paternal relationships that allow them to develop to their full potential.

The fixer father

This narrative frames fathers as able to prevent or ‘fix’ certain problems that contribute to negative outcomes for mothers and children. For example the Fatherhood Institute, a UK based organisation that lobbies for father friendly practices, produced a report in 2008 that presented the case for greater father involvement and engagement in the perinatal period, citing studies that show the impact fathers can have on, *inter alia*, mother and infant health behaviours, impact and recovery from post-natal depression, and breastfeeding success (Burgess, 2008). With regard to post-natal depression the report outlines the deleterious effect on mothers and infants, and says of fathers:

The father’s functioning as a support person is key, since depressed new mothers receive more support from their partner than from any other individual, including medical staff. Can intervening with these men prove fruitful? Few interventions have been rigorously evaluated, and sample sizes are small. However, indications are positive. (pp10)

It then goes on to say:

Fathers’ own depression is also an issue for concern, not least because of its potential to exacerbate maternal depression. (pp11)

and then later asks:

When, and how, can fathers' behaviour 'buffer' the negative effects of mothers' depression on their babies? (pp13)

This kind of narrative, which focuses on the father as someone who can fix a problem for others, can be used to justify fatherhood research. It also, however, suggests the primary reason we are interested in, for example, the mental health of fathers is because of its outcomes for mothers and children.

My own experience of applying for funding for fatherhood research reinforces the unsurprising truth that, as with any other research area, there is no magic formula. Neither of these narratives guarantee success, but anecdotal experience suggests that because they frame the need for fatherhood research in terms of goods that go beyond those that accrue to fathers themselves, they may be more attractive to funders. Sometimes, of course, a different approach might be tried. For example, I have been involved in a bid for funding to explore fathers' roles in birthplace decision-making. This project arose through discussion with health service providers, and the justificatory narrative that was developed placed fathers as neither failing in their role nor fixing a problem, but as a barrier to good decision-making. Anecdotal experience suggested that fathers-to-be tend to be risk averse when it comes to birth-place decisions, favouring the perceived safety of a hospital setting to the home. This attitude, so said the narrative, influences birthplace decisions, leading to women choosing a hospital setting when it was not indicated – putatively leading to sub-optimal birth outcomes and higher costs. This seems plausible, but I recall being concerned that this narrative seemed to judge fathers. It appeared to take a problematic normative position that assumed a risk averse approach was wrong, and *a-priori* reduced what is likely to be a very complex process to a simple 'us and them' problem. Despite the fact that this 'barrier' narrative was focussed on goods for others, rather than for fathers themselves, my feeling is that it seemed to go too far by framing fathers themselves, *a priori*, as the problem - which may be an interesting gender-political statement in itself, but may also create something of a hostage to fortune. All of these narratives – father as failure, as fixer and as barrier - nonetheless are part of a wider 'problem' narrative, and this remains, to my mind, most likely fundable rationale for fatherhood research. This does, however raise a series of interesting ethical questions.

What these 'problem' rationales have in common is that they premise the need for fatherhood research on fathers as a means of achieving some other good, and rarely on the needs of fathers. In other words, fathers are the subject of research because they are instruments that achieve other ends, not because they are ends in themselves. This is also reflected, for example, in the justifications offered in policies to engage fathers in maternity care. The UK's Royal College of midwives provide the following rationale (emphasis my own):

Since fathers are important influences on mother's health choices and experiences before, during and after the birth, it benefits the whole family when maternity professionals make fathers feel welcomed and involved and prepare them for their role at the birth and afterwards. (Royal College of Midwives, 2011. pp12)

This raises an interesting ethical question insofar as this rationale for fatherhood research (and engagement with fathers in general) appears, at first blush, to be in tension with a key and relatively uncontroversial ethical principle that permeates western ethics (most famously grounded in Kantian ethics (Kant, 1997)) – that persons should not be used as means to the end of another, but treated,

and valued as ends in themselves. This is an ethical principle that grounds, for example, contemporary notions of autonomy, justifies the requirement for informed consent, and undergirds the wrongness of exploitative practice. The potential risk with framing fatherhood research in terms of ‘problems’ that can be solved using fathers is that it reinforces the idea that fathers are not important in themselves, and only instrumentally valuable – like a tool. This is a question I have struggled with personally, across the research with fathers I have undertaken and attempted to do. Thinking again of the proposed study on birthplace decision-making mentioned above, one of my main concerns when the rationale was being constructed is how we tell participant fathers what the research is about, and why we are doing the research, without telling them that we are talking to them because we think fathers are a problem. Is it permissible to say to participant fathers, or allow the implication, that we only want to speak to fathers because we want to change their behaviour so that others will benefit? There are a few things to say in response to this, which draws on some moral philosophy and principles of research ethics.

First, a great deal of research uses people, to some extent, as a means to an end. Whilst sometimes research participants benefit directly from participation in research, very often they take part because they are happy to contribute to some social good. So, fatherhood is not a special case here. Furthermore, the ‘wrongness’ in using a person or a group as a means to an end lies in the fact that in using them we fail to acknowledge them as autonomous moral agents and treat them instead as things to manipulate. The putative wrong in ‘using’ fathers in this way depends upon the ends of the research being contrary to the ends of the fathers themselves, or the presence of deception or coercion. Some of my own research might shed light on whether father’s ends are contrary to those of research that seeks to achieve benefits of mothers and children. My study on transitioning fathers (see Ives 2014), suggests that some fathers at least are content to see themselves as supporters, whose primary role is to look after the interest of their children and partners. If it is the case that the ‘problem’ rationale for fatherhood research is compatible and consistent with men’s own views about their role as fathers, then some of the sting seems to be taken out of the criticism. Essentially, so long as the purpose and reason for the research is clear, so that fathers can freely consent to participate in research that they feel is of value (or not, as the case may be) there is no deception or coercion that might lead to them being improperly ‘used’. An example from my doctoral work springs to mind. During recruitment for focus groups with fathers for research exploring the basis of paternal responsibilities and rights, I was contacted by a man who angrily demanded that I had better not (I paraphrase) ‘be one of those men who does research on fatherhood to support the anti-men feminist agenda’, because if I was he would use all his ‘influence’ in fathers’ groups to make sure that I never got a single participant for my study. Speculation about his motives and threats of sabotage aside, this highlights the fact that potential participants may be cognisant or wary of research having an agenda, and the importance of such agendas being made explicit so that participants can make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to ‘participate to support’, ‘participate to challenge’, or just to ‘participate’.

A second, more concise utilitarian argument can be made. Even if there is some sense in which fathers are used in the way described above, and even if there is a risk that this sends a negative message about how and why we value fathers, the goods that might accrue for mothers and children, for fathers themselves, and even for society, are likely to outweigh the potential harms in real terms. If we need to use the problem narrative to get research done, then doing so is arguably justified because if it weren’t for their instrumental value, fathers would not likely be researched at

all. Even if the problem rationale is not good or desirable in itself, it is arguably a justifiable means to an end.

2) Framing 'fatherhood'

It may seem trite to say that researching fatherhood requires us to know what a father is, but the question of how we define fatherhood, and the answer we give, can have significant ramifications; for the data obtained and the resulting analysis, but also for the fatherhood research agenda. 'Fatherhood' is not a homogenous practice, and 'fathers' are not a homogenous group of practitioners. In fact, if we interrogate the question for a moment, it begins to get remarkably unclear how 'father' ought to be defined. My doctoral work, which examined concepts of fatherhood in terms of rights and responsibilities, sought to explore and define necessary and sufficient conditions for fatherhood. This ended up supporting a fragmentation thesis of fatherhood, with different kind of fathers having different sets of rights and responsibilities (see Ives 2007, Ives et al. 2008, Draper & Ives 2009). This work highlighted various ways to theorise fatherhood, which stipulated different necessary and sufficient conditions for fatherhood, and each of which has different implications for who the 'subject' of fatherhood research ought to be. Accounts of fatherhood found in the philosophical literature can be broadly categorised in the following way:

Genetic –proprietary: the father is the man from whom the child is genetically derived, and is a father in light having provided the genetic material from which the child grew. (e.g. Hall, 1999)

Genetic –causal: the father is the man from whom the child is genetically derived, and is a father because he provided the genetic material that caused the child to exist. (e.g. Callahan, 1996; Nelson, 2000)

Causal-intentional: The father is the man who intended to create the child, and is a father by virtue of that intention to father. (e.g. Hill, 1991)

Causal-responsibility: the father is the man whose voluntary actions led to the foreseeable creation of a child. (e.g. Fuscaldo, 2006)

Custodial – welfare: the father is the man who performs day-to-day care for the child and looks after the child's interests. (derived from e.g. Locke, 2003; Kaebnick 2004)

Sweat-equity: the father is the man who puts in the work of caring for the child. (derived from e.g. Moody-Adams 1991; Narayan 1999; Laquer 1996)

All these accounts have their advantages and disadvantages; and none, at least to my mind, seem able to provide a complete account of fatherhood (Ives 2007). Each account can generally accommodate some important feature, but fails to accommodate others. For example, a genetic account might explain why a man should be responsible for financial maintenance regardless of his relationship with the child's mother, but the same account cannot explain why sperm donors do not have that same responsibility and excludes the possibility of fatherhood by adoption. A causal account can explain why a one night stand leads to paternal responsibilities whereas sperm donation does not, but also seems to implicate others as fathers (for example the IVF clinician or the hotelier who provided the bed where conception occurred). An intentional account can explain why a man can become a father by adoption and using donor sperm, but it also means that there can be no paternal accountability from accidental conception. What is clear, however, is that even in relation to one single child we might be justified in calling a variety of men 'father' depending on our chosen account of fatherhood. It is important, therefore, that the ambiguity of the term is recognised in

fatherhood research, and that it is clear how fatherhood is defined and for what reason. This might simply be considered the same as having clear inclusion and exclusion criteria – but it seems more than simply a point about methodological rigour. The inclusion and exclusion criteria we choose makes a statement about what we believe fatherhood is, and what kind of experience and relationships are important, making a political, philosophical and ethical statement that could have implications beyond the immediate research objectives, as well as influencing the narrative used to justify the research. For example:

Fatherhood as a biological or genetic fact

One way in which we might frame fatherhood is in terms of a genetic relationship. Researching fathers, then, would involve research with men who have passed on their genes. The implication of framing fatherhood in this way is that the category ‘father’ might include men who have never seen, or been involved in raising, a child, such as sperm donors or ‘absent fathers’. This might be exactly what is needed and intended, but it is always worth considering that in framing ‘fatherhood’ in this way we are making a statement about who does not count as a father (such as ‘adoptive fathers’).

Fatherhood as a social or economic performance

Another way we might frame fatherhood is as social and/or economic performance. Researching this kind of fatherhood would involve researching people who perform a social fathering role, or perform the economic work associated with fatherhood. The implication of this kind of framing is that it excludes people who are not performing a social or economic role (however that is defined) and includes, or example, adoptive fathers; but it might also allow for the possibility of a single child having ‘multiple fathers’. Further, it does not link ‘father’ to gender or sex – allowing in theory the possibility that women might participate in fatherhood research. This is not as counterintuitive as it might first appear, as illustrated through reflection on a problem that arose in one of my own studies. While recruiting men transitioning to first time fatherhood, a woman whose partner was pregnant with their first child asked if she could participate in the project. This sparked a lively debate within the project steering group, with the decision ultimately being made that the project was set up to explore men’s experience and so she was ineligible given the original terms set out in the project. I was, and remain, unsatisfied with this decision. By *a priori* defining fatherhood in a way that was tied to gender, rather than simply in terms of role performance, the study could not (or would not) access a perspective that could have provided a great deal of insight. This is particularly striking given the key findings of the project were connected to the role a father played in relation to his pregnant partner, leading me to conclude that a

valuable continuation of this work would be a repeat of this study with the female partners of pregnant women. This would allow an exploration of whether the findings reported here are a reflection of a specifically male experience or the experience of being the partner of a pregnant woman. (Ives, 2014. pp1014)

In defining fatherhood in a particular, gendered way I excluded the possibility of obtaining insights into accounts and perspectives that could have shed new light on, or challenged, dominant understandings of male gender as central the experience of fatherhood.

Fatherhood as gendered a practice

The final way of framing fatherhood I will consider here is as gendered or embodied practice. This sees a father as someone very distinct from a mother, and ties the practice of fatherhood to the

body of the practitioner. This might, at first glance, mean that fatherhood is seen as parenting through a male body, and therefore research with fathers will only involve men. It will quickly become complicated, however, if we are interested in, for example, transgender parents; and seems to close the door on questions about whether men can mother (Doucet, 2006) or, as asked above, whether women can 'father'.

The point to take from this brief (and certainly incomplete) discussion is that the assumptions we make at the start of a research project about what a father is and how fatherhood is practiced will dictate both how we articulate and justify our research aims and who we include/exclude as research participants; and we need to be careful to align our *a priori* definitions of fatherhood with our research aims. If, for example, our rationale for fatherhood research is based on achieving better birthing outcomes for mothers, then we should be defining fatherhood for the purpose of this research in terms of 'the partner of the pregnant women' – and this has nothing to do with gender or genetic relatedness to the child. It would seem odd to make the research so specific as to only focus on the support that men can give, because this does not speak to the broad agenda of bringing benefit to labouring women. Alternatively, that kind of research perhaps should not be considered fatherhood research at all – allowing us to preserve (if we feel it is important) a gendered conception of fatherhood. However we decide to respond to this issue - and there may be various justifiable responses – it is something that demands consideration.

3) Framing the conversation

It is widely understood, or perhaps assumed, that fathers are difficult to research because they are challenging to recruit and, once recruited, are not forthcoming about their thoughts and feelings. This is certainly tied to assumptions about the way that fathers practice hegemonic masculinity; that they are reluctant to talk about their emotions and feelings; and that they will tend to present themselves as conforming with dominant masculine discourse. My experience of conducting research with fathers bears out these concerns in some respects, but challenges them in others.

The two issues that strike me as particularly worth focussing on are (1) access and recruitment, which are obvious prerequisites to having a conversation, and (2) having the conversation itself.

Recruitment and access

One way I have come to think of the challenges in recruiting fathers is in terms of being either 'logistical' or 'motivational'. The challenges here are arguably no different to those we would come across researching any social group that is large and diverse, and there is nothing, to my mind, particularly unique about how they can or should be met when recruiting fathers. Nonetheless it is always worth considering how we might respond to these challenges in the context of a specific research population.

Logistical

Logistical challenges are perhaps in theory the easiest to address, because they tend to centre on institutional and structural issues that can be overcome to some extent with enough thought. Accessing fathers can be straightforward if all that is required is a convenience sample of men who have children. Men who have children can be recruited through schools or almost any other public

or private institution. However, this convenience approach has risks. It is rarely the case that just 'any old father' will do, and often a specific kind of father is needed, or sample comprising wide demographic variation. Accessing specific groups of fathers directly can be problematic, because it is relatively rare that fathers *qua* fathers will gather in a group, or interact with a public service, that can be targeted for recruitment; but targeted strategies may involve, for example, accessing fathers through specific interest groups (as in a recent study I was involved in with fathers of Autistic children – Burrell et al, 2017), recruiting IVF fathers through IVF clinics (e.g. Ives et al, 2008), recruiting separated fathers through fathers support groups ((e.g. Ives et al, 2008), recruiting transitioning first time fathers through maternity units and community midwives (e.g. Ives, 2014). Even then, however, such strategies will only be successful in accessing those fathers who already engage with specific groups or services – which makes the sample less heterogeneous in important ways. Additionally, in all the studies of mine mentioned above there is a clear demographic skew in favour of white, well-educated men, which seems to be a feature of much fatherhood research that does not exclusively target minority groups.

Assuming that an appropriate population of fathers can be accessed, another significant logistical barrier is time and timing, which is linked to location. Parents and parents to be are busy people, and participation in research can be difficult if only for the reason that time is a scarce and valuable resource, taken up with both paid work and family 'work'. This problem cannot be removed, but the best way to respond to it is to be as flexible with timing as possible, and make clear in recruitment material that interviews can be held at any time to suite the participant. In my own research I have conducted interviews early in the morning before work, late at night, or during the day, on weekends and weekdays. This is linked to location because the time available to participants will be linked to the time and ease of travel to the interview location. For this reason, similar flexibility is essential with regard to location. Arranging interviews close to a place of work, for example, will be helpful, as well as being willing to interview in participant's homes. I have conducted interviews in my own home, on occasion, as participants were travelling past and it was more convenient for them to drop in. Overall, the key to mitigating the logistical barriers of time and location is to be flexible and responsive, and to reinforce this at every stage of the recruitment process. This level of flexibility is not possible, of course, in the absence of conversations with potential participants that allow you to understand their logistical barriers and co-develop solutions. This is a demanding and time-consuming process but, in my experience, essential to successful recruitment of fathers.

Motivational

If we think of logistical barriers as issues that must be overcome in order to convert interest in participation to actual participation, motivational challenges are barriers to expressing that interest in the first place. These are arguably harder to overcome because, by definition, they have to be anticipated and managed prior to having any conversations with individual potential participants, and so strategies have to be aimed at 'fathers in general'.

One point I find myself making repeatedly when talking about fathers is that they are not a homogenous group, and their motivation to participate in research (or in anything) will be as varied as there are varied people. Anecdotal evidence, and my own experience, suggests that men take part in fatherhood research for many different reasons, including curiosity, a desire to help, having a

platform for their voice to be heard, to learn, having an opportunity to talk, the potential for catharsis, and for inducements that may be offered – but this will not be an exhaustive list.

One key observation is that any strategy to motivate men to take part in research must be multifaceted and/or directed to the kind of father needed – without excluding anyone. One good (or perhaps bad) illustration springs to mind. In an effort to encourage fathers to attend special ‘dads and kids’ sessions, many groups I have come across advertise free bacon and/or sausage sandwiches. In fact, in the years I have been researching fathers and paying attention to how fathers are encouraged to engage and communicated with, I have noticed a general assumption that a good way to attract fathers is to offer them food – usually bacon or sausages. On a personal level, and as a father myself, I have always found mildly offensive the putative assumption that I will only be motivated to spend time with my children if it is accompanied by a bit of pig. That aside, and also to my annoyance, I have also noticed that, to some extent, it seems to work – on myself and others. It may not be, of course, so much a matter of thinking ‘give a father some pork or else he will not spend time with his children’, but rather ‘if we want a father to spend time with his children *at our event* we need to offer something to entice him to us rather than do something else’.¹ Putting aside any personal indignation at the thought I can be anyone’s for a bacon sandwich, there is a different kind of problem here. Assuming that this offer of food will be a motivational factor (even if nothing more than a nudge), it will only motivate fathers who eat bacon or sausages. It would be entirely ineffective on, for example, vegetarian, Muslim or Jewish fathers (who may, of course, take part regardless). The point is that whilst not every motivational strategy will attract all fathers, it is quite possible that a single motivational strategy might put some people off or be entirely ineffective for some groups of fathers. Hence, unless there is reason to exclude certain groups, a multifaceted and inclusive approach is going to be needed. Whilst we all might be aware of, and accept, the motivational pull of free lunch, we still need to think carefully about what kind of lunch we offer.

It is also important to briefly note the essential, but in practice often blurry, ethical distinction between encouragement (a motivational strategy) and a coercive strategy. Whilst a motivational strategy will seek to give men reason to think it desirable and worthwhile to take part, a coercive strategy will seek to make it difficult for men to not take part. A motivational strategy might to be emphasise, in recruitment literature, that the research is important and will help others. A coercive strategy might be to state or imply that not taking part will make him a bad father or bad person. Both strategies mentioned rely on a potential participant’s ethical sensibility, but with different emphasis. A more difficult issue, perhaps, is financial inducement, compensation or payment. Depending on the time commitment involved, some kind of financial compensation might well be appropriate, but often it will not function as compensation for lost earnings but as an inducement without which a potential participant might not think participation worth their time. My view is that there is nothing wrong with offering a financial incentive or inducement, and calling it such, because to do so acknowledges the value of participant’s time. In my longitudinal study of transitioning fathers, participants (taking part in up to ten interviews) were offered £100 pounds in supermarket vouchers of their choice. Settling on an amount was difficult, which had to be sufficient to make it worthwhile (motivational), but no so much as to be impossible refuse (coercive). One worry I had

¹ There is, of course, more going on here, as there is an assumption that there are better spaces to engage with your children, and so it is a good thing that men are encouraged into these shared spaces – but there is not space to deal with that here.

was that transitioning fathers may be concerned about money (financial concerns are something that few new parents can avoid), and so I had to consider whether offering this financial incentive was taking advantage of men's vulnerability at that time. Another way of looking at it, however, was that through this research I was in a position to provide participants with a small amount of extra resource, which whilst unlikely to make the difference between solvency and insolvency would nonetheless be appreciated (£100 can buy a lot of nappies, for example). The option of offering more was available, but my concern was that the more I offered the more likely I was to recruit men whose sole motivation was financial and who had no other interest in the study. This, I felt, could result in poor quality data and high risk of attrition. I wanted men to *also* be taking part because they had an interest in the research and thought it valuable in itself - if only for the very practical reason that such men would be more likely to stay the distance. This wouldn't have been such a concern if participation involved a one-off interview; but for a longitudinal study requiring commitment over a period of approximately 9 months it seemed important. This strategy worked, but it did nonetheless result in a sample of men who seemed relatively financially secure and committed to fatherhood – which of course affected the conclusions that could be drawn.

Having the conversation

The question of how to have conversations with fathers is both an ethical and a practical one. In the final section of this chapter I will outline one of the main challenges I experienced when interviewing fathers for my transitions study, and then draw on the work of Oakley (1981) to think about my response.

The fathers I interviewed were excited and optimistic, but also nervous and uncertain. They had few opportunities to talk about their impending fatherhood. Whilst the majority of participants were happy and willing to talk about intimate aspects of their lives, they were also cautious, guarded, and reluctant to talk about thoughts and feelings that they feared might be judged or reflect on them badly. This reflected one of the central themes to come out of the data, which was that participants were reluctant to make the pregnancy and process of transitioning to parenthood 'about them'. As I reflected at the time:

Generally, the men in this study appeared to be attuned to the moral risk of expressing disquiet or discomfort about their own situation. They felt that their own problems could not be compared to the experience of their partners and that complaining would be inappropriately self-centred. (Ives, 2014, p1011)

This reflects a relatively brutal experience of my own, when after giving a talk with a colleague that asked questions about the ethical imperative for men to be involved in antenatal care and labour (which referred in part to difficulties men can experience in response to birth) I was heavily criticised in the media for focusing on the challenges for men. A typical response (I paraphrase, and put it slightly more diplomatically than the colourful way it was often put to me) was to ask the rhetorical question 'so, I suppose you think it's easy for women do you?'. This reflection almost brings us back full circle to the research agendas discussed at the start of the chapter. The charge put to me was essentially 'how dare you focus on fathers when they have it so easy'. The aim of the talk, and of the paper that was subsequently published (Draper and Ives, 2013) was to: explore ethical justifications for men's involvement and then look at the problems that can flow when each justification seems to specify a particular role; consider the frustrations and role ambiguity this might lead to; and then to highlight how

these problems were only really manifest in a medical setting; suggesting finally that the medicalisation of the transition to fatherhood, just like the medicalisation of pregnancy, was not an unambiguously positive thing. In the media, however, the subtlety was lost, and was reduced to a so called male expert bleating about how tough it is for fathers. This experience made me very wary for a long time, and still affects and informs the way I talk about my research today.

Given that one of the aims of my study was to explore the frustrations and dissatisfactions that were part of becoming a father, and considering my own experience of being exposed to criticism for talking about it, I felt it was important to create a space for participants to talk freely without fear of criticism or judgement. I found, during these multiple interview encounters, that the more I shared my own stories about being a father the more participants shared, and this reciprocity both built trust and showed that this was a safe space. I began to think about it in terms of ensuring that participants felt they had permission to talk about anything, and with a few participants the only way I could do this was to show that I was also willing to put myself out there and take the 'risk' of talking about my experiences, thoughts and feelings – making it possible to establish “a trust and mutual understanding that made possible intimate disclosures” (Ives 2014, p1014).

This experience is similar to that described by Oakley (1981) reflecting on her research with expectant mothers. Oakley highlights the problems of using, with mothers, the dominant (masculine) approach to interviewing, characterised as one that maintains a one-way flow of information from participant to interviewer and encourages the deflection of participant's questions rather than engagement. Oakley found, in a series of interviews with expectant mothers, that they often 'talked back' to her, asking questions, seeking advice, and generally wanting to hear her own thoughts. This, noted Oakley, runs contrary to the dominant interviewing paradigm, described by her as 'masculine', which saw an interview encounter as a unilateral flow of information, and in which the interviewee had to maintain absolute neutrality to avoid corrupting or biasing the data. Of the many examples Oakley uses to illustrate this paradigm, she feels that the following, from Goode and Hatt (1952) is the most detailed:

What is the interviewer to do, however, if the respondent really wants information? Suppose the interviewee does answer the question but then asks for the opinions of the interviewer. Should he give his honest opinion, or an opinion which he thinks the interviewee wants? In most cases, the rule remains that he is there to obtain information and to focus on the respondent, not himself. Usually, a few simple phrases will shift the emphasis back to the respondent. Some which have been fairly successful are 'I guess I haven't really thought enough about it to give a good answer right now', 'Well, right now, your opinions are more important than mine' and 'If you really want to know what I think, I'll be honest and tell you in a moment, after we've finished the interview'. Sometimes the diversion can be accomplished by a head shaking gesture which suggests 'That's a hard one!' while continuing with the interview. In short, the interviewer must avoid the temptation to express his own views, even if given the opportunity. (p198)

Oakley found this response unacceptable for three reasons, which I think can usefully be described as ethical, ideological and pragmatic:

1. Ethical: it is unreasonable to adopt a 'purely exploitative' attitude toward participants.

2. Ideological: her role was to create a new sociology for women, not to preserve sociological interviewing norms, and if this demanded movement towards an interviewing practice that was more co-productive and enabled women's voices to be better heard, then this was justified.
3. Pragmatic: refusing to engage in reciprocal dialogue, or answer participants' questions, was detrimental to developing the rapport necessary to gather good data and maintain participation.

Oakely's response is essentially the one that I adopted in my interviews with fathers, and to my mind it worked well. The risk is, of course, that when interviewers enter this two-way conversation and start to talk about their own experiences, there is always the possibility that they will influence the data, create expectations that the participant feels obliged to meet, or that the interview is turned on its head and becomes an advice session. The latter risk can and arguably ought to be avoided, as at that point the interview loses sight of its purpose. The risk of creating expectations in participants about what you want to hear can also be mitigated by talking about your own experiences in very personal way, focusing on 'I felt' or 'in my experience', talking about the range of experiences that have come up elsewhere in the research, and avoiding evaluative or pejorative language.

The first problem, of influencing the data, is to my mind a 'non-problem' that only manifests if we assume a very naive account of knowledge generation in an interview context. Given that I tend to see all interviews as encounters in which knowledge and understanding is co-constructed (see, for example, Dunn and Ives, 2010), the idea that as an interviewer I might affect the data is neither news nor at all troubling. This epistemic position needs, however, to be engaged with seriously and reflexively, especially in my own case given that my research aims to interrogate and challenge the normative (understood in an ethical sense). I find myself, again, turning to feminist writers and research practices to help make sense of my role and my responsibilities in relation to this. Before I close with an extended quote from Leach-Scully, which seems to tie together the various strands of this chapter neatly and far more eloquently than I could hope to, my return to feminist writers raises the question of whether, at the end of this reflection, I ought to be considering whether fatherhood researchers (or at least those with bioethical leanings) need also to be feminist researchers. Given the focus herein on the need to be conscious of how we frame our research subject, understand our research agendas, and the need to be conscious of (and draw on) our own perspectives and understandings, then if the essence of feminist research can be characterised as below, then I think the answer is a resounding yes:

Feminist epistemology takes social, cultural and historical position to be important to the formation of distinct epistemic perspectives that need to be taken into account when others' moral practices and choices are evaluated. But feminist epistemology also recognises that the forms of knowledge taken for granted by moral philosophy and philosophical bioethics are not immune to this epistemic distortion. Feminist bioethical approaches necessarily also involve the critical examination of the positions from which we, as bioethicists, carry out our empirical investigations and reflect normatively, of the empirical methods used, the epistemological and sociological assumptions that the use of them reveals, and so on. The inescapable human reality is that all of us are situated observers whose observations are shaped not only by explicit moral beliefs but by much of what we take for granted experientially, socially, institutionally and culturally. Feminist or any other approaches cannot offer a foolproof way around this, other than the constant and necessary reminder that all thinking is thinking from a particular vantage point. This includes the thinking of the moral philosopher: bioethics, whether empirical or theoretical, necessarily is done from a perspective that is dependent on bioethicists' own personal backgrounds and biographies, and also their disciplinary and

professional training, and their institutional roles within national and cultural environments. (Scully, 2017. p212)

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