



UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL
& POLITICAL SCIENCES

Creating Impact from Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care

A qualitative longitudinal
study of men's care
responsibilities in low
income families.



The Leverhulme Trust

Acknowledgements

This booklet shares some of the emerging findings from the research study 'Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care' (MPLC), funded by the Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship scheme between October 2014 and June 2018. As the Principal Investigator for the study, I was interested to learn more about how men in low income families fulfil their care responsibilities and to question otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions that men in low income families are largely absent and uninterested in family life. The MPLC study allowed me to do just this; giving me the opportunity to talk to men in a number of different generational positions that are providing, often invisible care to children, in the most challenging of circumstances. Just a fraction of these inspiring experiences are presented here, but for the first time, I hope they give voice and challenge what we think we already know by revealing that men are capable of care too.

A huge thank you to Katie Smith whose work has made this impact initiative possible.

As well as supporting me to advance substantive and methodological debates in the social sciences, the Fellowship has also enabled me to meet and work with some truly inspirational colleagues. This includes Dr Esmee Hanna, Dr Laura Davies, Dr Sarah-Marie Hall, Dr Michael Ward, Prof. Sarah Irwin, Dr Nick Emmel and Dr Carmen Lau Clayton. I have also had the pleasure of working closely with Prof. Bren Neale. As a result of this Fellowship, we have developed work together on a closely related study called 'Responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way'. This has enabled us to engage with a number of professionals to develop new ways of working more effectively to support young fathers. I continue to be inspired by your work and touched by your generosity. My special thanks however, go to Dr Kahryn Hughes, whose support throughout the Fellowship has been unwavering. You have provided a critical voice throughout the project and guidance when it has been most needed. Where you initially supported me as a mentor, you are now a trusted and valued colleague – thank you!

Finally, my greatest thanks go to all the men and professionals who agreed to take part in the study. It has been a pleasure to build this project with professionals and practitioners that are so dedicated to their work and to developing more appropriate support for families. To the men who participated in the study, you gave your time willingly and spoke with honesty and openness about the joys and challenges of raising children on a low income. This research is for you and I hope I have done justice to your stories, which deserve to be heard.

A qualitative longitudinal study of men's care responsibilities in low income families

Dr Anna Tarrant
Co illustrator: Katie Smith

About the research

'Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care' (MPLC) is a research study funded by the Leverhulme Trust between October 2014 and June 2018. Initially based at the University of Leeds, the last year of the study has been conducted at the University of Lincoln where Anna now does teaching and research. The study examines men's care responsibilities, support needs and patterns of care across the life course in low income families in the UK. Drawing predominantly on data generated from semi-structured interviews with twenty-six men in different generational positions living in a Northern city in England, the research examines the social and relational dynamics of low-income family life, over time, from men's perspectives. The men interviewed were young fathers (aged 25 and under); mid-life, predominantly single fathers with primary care responsibilities (aged 25 – 45); and kinship carers (uncles, grandfathers and a great-grandfather), who were providing support for family members in contexts of state intervention.

A bit about Dr Anna Tarrant...

Anna is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Lincoln. Her research interests include men and masculinities; family life; and methodological developments in qualitative secondary analysis. She previously worked at the University of Leeds where she began the Leverhulme Trust funded study, 'Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care' (2014–2018). Affiliated to Following Young Fathers, this project led to a funded impact project called 'Responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way'. This study supported developments in more effective support for young fathers. Her overall aim as a researcher is to explore ways of working towards a more socially just and caring, society in which all citizens are able to meet their full potential. This means challenging what is taken for granted and giving voice to those that are marginalised or vulnerable.

A bit about Katie Smith...

Katie describes herself as a socially engaged artist with a research based approach to her practice. She predominantly works with marginalised communities and is a passionate advocate of enquiry-based learning. Katie uses a variety of creative media from pinhole and Polaroid photography to collage, low-tech print and stitch to engage with and stimulate social processes.

This year in addition to working with Anna, Katie has also been collaborating with artist Kate Genever. As Smith-Genever, the pair have been awarded Arts Council funding to explore resilience as a concept within Ash Villa, an inpatient unit for young people experiencing acute mental health issues (the project is supported by MMU, Axisweb and York Teaching Hospital). They are also amongst 100 UK women artists commissioned by Artichoke and 14-18 NOW to create a centenary banner for PROCESSIONS, a mass participation artwork to celebrate one hundred years of votes for women.

You can learn more about Katie's work here: www.katiesmithartist.co.uk

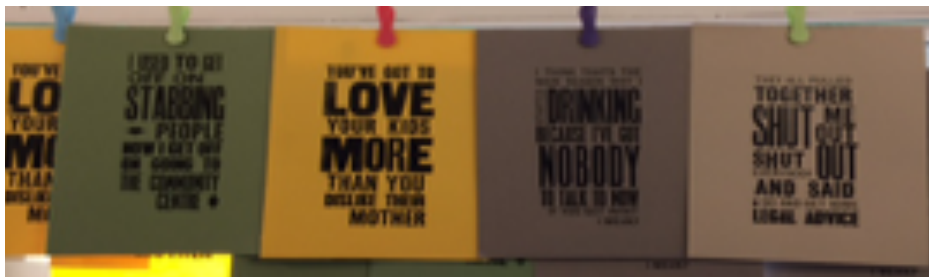
Our work

Katie and I met towards the end of 2017. We bonded immediately over a shared passion for tea, cake, and the desire to think creatively about how we might work towards a more inclusive society by speaking directly to, and challenging, broader structures of inequality and power, using research. We decided to explore ways in which we could work together to produce creative outputs from the MPLC study that would have the potential to raise awareness about men's capabilities to engage in care across the life course, albeit in often challenging financial circumstances and with limited state support.

A key intention for producing the prints that are presented and explained in this booklet is that they give voice to men in low income families who are usually marginalised and vilified by policy makers and the media (Neale and Davies, 2015) and constructed as largely absent, feckless and disinterested in family life. The quotes presented have been carefully selected to challenge these 'commonsense' ideas, by foregrounding men's voices. This has been done to demonstrate the capabilities of each of these men to participate in family life, while also raising awareness of the specific challenges they face, in a way that does not contribute to this vilification.

This booklet

This booklet is designed to accompany the prints that Katie and the Small Print Co have produced; to provide context to the quotes chosen; and to highlight key emergent themes from the MPLC study. Explanations are provided with each quote, including a brief pen portrait about the participant who voiced each view. N.B. Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to avoid the potential for identification.



The process of identifying quotes and themes

Following an initial conversation, Anna shared some emergent themes from the research and her overall vision for the outputs with Katie.

Anna shared two anonymised transcripts from participants from the study with Katie, who began to draw out key themes that interested her as an artist. Together, ten quotes were selected from the set of transcripts that reflected the aims, themes and outcomes of the research. These were selected to;

- Raise awareness that men care too and often in circumstances that make them vulnerable,
- Highlight diversity in the circumstances in which men provide care in low income families and the issues they face that impact on their care responsibilities, including job insecurity and unemployment; poor/ill health; welfare conditionality and work insecurity; limited state support; disabilities (child and carer); and locality,
- Recognise the care men provide in an austerity context and to widen understanding of men's lived experiences of austerity/poverty.

The quotes are presented in this booklet to achieve the stated aims and to tell the story of low income fatherhood and the contexts shaping men's care responsibilities in low income families across the lifecourse.

The narrative begins with a focus on male kinship carers. While the older of the men in the study, their narratives make visible and exemplify both men's capabilities and intentions to provide care for their family members and also the complex challenges they face in securing and sustaining these responsibilities. The quotes that follow reveal the ways in which fathers make sense of their role and of the challenges of their otherwise invisible familial responsibilities, including how they respond to the personal circumstances and contexts that render them, and their families, vulnerable. Narratives of loss are prevalent but so too are examples of emotional intelligence whereby care for children, is prioritised over and above personal challenge and prejudice. The story evolves to explore the significance of locality, community and the histories of place in men's narratives that impact on and explain, the variety of ways in which they navigate low income life. Engagement in behaviours of harm, like alcohol dependency and violence are intimately linked to the social isolation and violence of low income localities and can serve to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of fathers and undermine their care giving efforts. Yet localities also offer important spaces for community, support and belonging that are increasingly being stripped away under the conditions of austerity.

The experiences of male kinship carers

Kinship care is a term used by local authorities and in official documents to define family or friend's carers to children when parents can no longer provide adequate care (Grandparents Plus, 2018; Hunt, 2018). Six of the men interviewed for the MPLC study were kinship carers, including one uncle, four grandfathers, and one great-grandfather. Despite the reported benefits of raising children in kinship care, recent evidence suggests that three quarters of all children in kinship care in the UK live in a deprived household (Wellard et al. 2017). Current evidence about kinship carers is primarily based on the experiences of women (see MacDonald et al. 2016). Not only are women more likely to be primary care givers, they are also particularly vulnerable and at risk of impoverishment (see also Bennett and Daly, 2016), ill health and poor housing conditions (Hunt, 2008). However, we also know that kinship carers are far from a uniform, homogenous population. They vary greatly according to their characteristics, roles and statuses (MacDonald et al. 2016). The MPLC study offered new insights into men's gendered experiences of kinship care and associated financial precarity.

The process of securing responsibilities to care

Kinship care has not been researched as a specifically gendered issue so these findings are novel in that they offer insights into some of the challenges faced by men in engaging with the child protection system and in seeking recognition as potential carers. Where men's experiences of the child protection system have been explored, effective engagements with men are not seen as part of the "core business" of social work (Brandon et al. 2017; Zandoni et al. 2013). Quotes by Sam exemplify the challenges he faced in being recognised as a suitable placement option for his vulnerable grandson.



Sam is 51 years old. He is father to five children and has a Special Guardianship Order for his grandson, age 4. Securing this order for his grandson was very challenging. Sam's son, the father of his grandson, has learning difficulties. Sam considers the mother of his grandson to be 'streetwise' and claims she had her son to secure housing and welfare

support. She was also a product of the care system and both she and all her siblings are care experienced. Sam's grandson was born prematurely, weighing just 1 lb 11 oz. This vulnerable baby was released from hospital into the care of his mother and grandmother. He later presented with signs of abuse not long after and returned to hospital. Sam, who had been expressing concerns to social services about his grandson on a daily basis, describes a complicated and drawn out process in which he tries to raise concerns and secure primary care responsibility.

He describes feeling shut out and pushed towards the justice system. Social services become more helpful after a successful application in court but remain cautious, which he sees as positive and wishes they'd done when his grandson was released to the maternal family. His example demonstrates how kinship carers have to rely heavily on the justice system rather than the state to support them.

The process of securing responsibilities to care



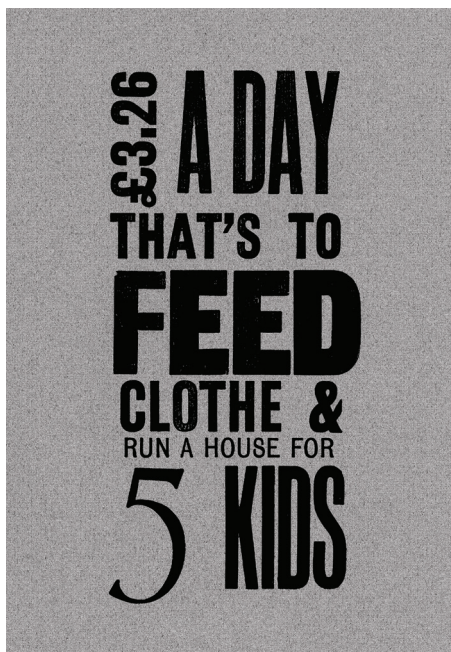
Sam suggests that the caution evident in interactions with social services during the assessment process became intrusive, reflecting a distinct gender bias.

While Sam is the most resourced and capable individual to care for his vulnerable grandson, during one assessment by a social worker in his home, she raises concerns that his house is “manly”, lived in as it is by Sam and his son and furnished to their tastes.

Such comments require challenge, especially given that where men are deemed incapable carers as a result of gender, the consequences can be extreme i.e. children might enter the care system. It is essential that men are considered and accommodated in care decisions and gender bias is addressed and challenged in decision-making.

Complex family structures and financial precarity

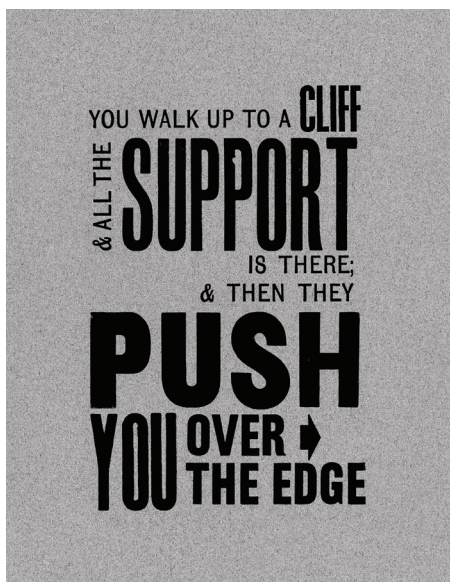
Theo is 39 years old. He is a father and stepfather to two children (aged 12 and 2). At the time of interview he was also providing informal kinship care to his niece, great-niece (aged 16 and one years old) and nephews (aged 19, 8 and 5) following the death of his sister and of his father 16 months prior to that. He has left employment to provide care for his two youngest nephews in his sister's rented accommodation, one of whom has suspected learning difficulties. While a decision is being determined about whether he will obtain a care order for his two youngest nephews, he is spending five days a week in his sister's home that he is paying for out of his life savings and with some money borrowed from his mum, who is 61 years old, has Crohn's disease and is incapable of providing support. He is spending weekends with his partner, son and stepson at their privately rented home when he can. He feels like he is being forced by social services into securing a Special Guardianship Order because it is cheaper for the local authority. While all this is happening (over the school summer holidays) he has just £3.26 a day to support all five children.



Theo's quote is indicative of the pressures that individual families experience in the process of decision-making around the appropriate placement of children. Theo is the most resourced and capable person in his family and is the best placed to ensure that the two younger children remain in the family. Yet to do so, comes at an immense financial and personal cost for him. Despite trying to keep these grieving children together and in the family, while also grieving himself, he is also being plunged into poverty and forced to split his time and resources between two households. Financial and emotional state support is severely lacking and is inadequate for addressing the complexities of this family's structure and circumstances.

When financial support ends

Kinship care is characterised by a complex and diverse set of caring arrangements that range from occasional caring to legal guardianship (Tarrant et al. 2017). The distinction between formal and informal kinship care is important because this influences the extent of financial and social care support carers receive (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013). Informal care is usually organised between family members and relatives without state intervention or support from welfare agencies (MacDonald et al. 2016). There are three formal statuses: 1) a child or children that are 'looked after' by the local authority and placed with kinship foster carers; 2) children placed on a Child Arrangements Order; 3) Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Financial entitlements for SGO's are discretionary and means-tested and these participants were largely responsible for the financial precarity they found themselves in (also see above examples).



Pearce is 57 years old and is married. He and his wife have a Special Guardianship Order for two of their grandchildren, who were neglected by his son and partner. When his own children were young he was employed as a lorry driver; his wife

didn't work until their children were grown up. Pearce and his wife decide that Pearce should leave his job to provide care for the two grandchildren while his wife remained at work. He describes becoming a kinship carer as a huge learning curve and one that has made him appreciate the care his wife provided their children since their divisions of labour have reversed.

In a later interview he reveals that without warning, the local authority has stopped the financing attached to the Special Guardianship Order. He is now looking for flexible employment to avoid childcare fees and so that he can provide care to the children during holidays. He is aware that his options are limited both by his age (he is near retirement) and lack of flexibility in the work he is able to secure. He describes the withdrawal of financial state support as like being pushed over a cliff edge.

The emotional dynamics of an invisible role

Low income fatherhood remains relatively invisible and is a role that produces vulnerability for men, and distinct emotional challenges, linked to the diverse circumstances and backgrounds they report. The notion of loss, and of feeling lost, was a particularly powerful narrative for the young fathers (aged 25 and under) in the study. This was linked to uncertainty about how to manage the multiple responsibilities of fatherhood in early adulthood while also trying to work through the longer-term effects of otherwise chaotic childhoods linked to intergenerational experiences of deprivation. In contrast, some of the older fathers in the study had developed a more sophisticated language for expressing their emotions and their philosophes for raising children.



Joe is a young father. He is 22 years old and has two children by two different partners. His dad, who was violent to his partner and children, left home when Joe was 15 years old. Joe's mum then 'kicked him out' when he was 16 years old when his behaviour, linked to the locality in which he lives, becomes problematic.

He has spent some time in prison linked to drinking, violence and anger issues. He found the break up of his parents very difficult but his stepfather advised him to lock these emotions away. He now wants to seek counselling because he does not find that easy to do. Joe recognises that he needs to look after himself first before he can look after his children properly but palpable in his narrative is a feeling of having lost his way and being unsure how he can balance his responsibilities for his children while also securing stable housing and employment and nurturing his own well-being.

The emotional dynamics of an invisible role



Shaun is 38 years old and has primary care responsibility for his two young daughters. He is unemployed and so raises his girls using social support. Shaun has had a chaotic childhood and early adulthood. His parents divorced during Shaun's childhood where he spent some time living with his maternal grandmother as a result.

Despite being close to his mother, he was abused by his stepfather. He therefore leaves home and lives in hostels, where he becomes addicted to heroin. Following a freak accident he decides to get clean. He finds stable but low paid employment as

a carer and then a DJ and meets the mother of his children. Both Shaun and his partner become alcohol dependent but this escalates into violence towards one another that is witnessed by the children.

When the relationship breaks down, social services intervene and award Shaun custody of the girls, determining the mother's ongoing alcohol dependency to be more problematic.

In reflecting on his parents' relationship and the way that they put their disagreements ahead of the welfare of Shaun and his brother, he explains his philosophy for managing his relationships with his ex-partner and ensuring a stable upbringing for his girls. As an older father, Shaun is attuned to the emotional needs of his children, albeit while managing the stresses of raising his children alone on a low income.

Strategies for coping with the violence and isolation of low-income families

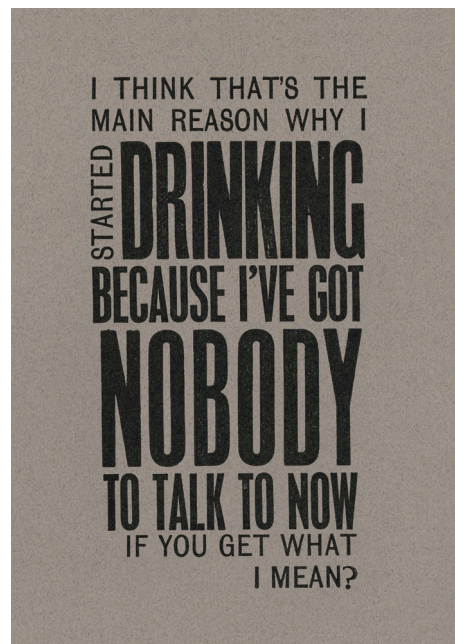
Despite being a study that focused on men's care responsibilities and social and familial relations, the majority of men interviewed made sense of their experiences in the context of the low-income localities and their communities. As well as providing care for their families, they were also negotiating the distinct challenges of these contexts. The fathers responded to these challenges in several different ways. For some, providing care, especially as single fathers, isolated them and led to dependencies on alcohol and other stimulants. Others responded with violence. Over time however, community spaces like community centres take on a renewed significance and for some, offer the companionship and resources required to survive as an older man in low income localities.

Joseph is 49 years old and has primary responsibility for his two daughters, aged 17 and 14. He is divorced and has diabetes neuropathy, which has disabled him.

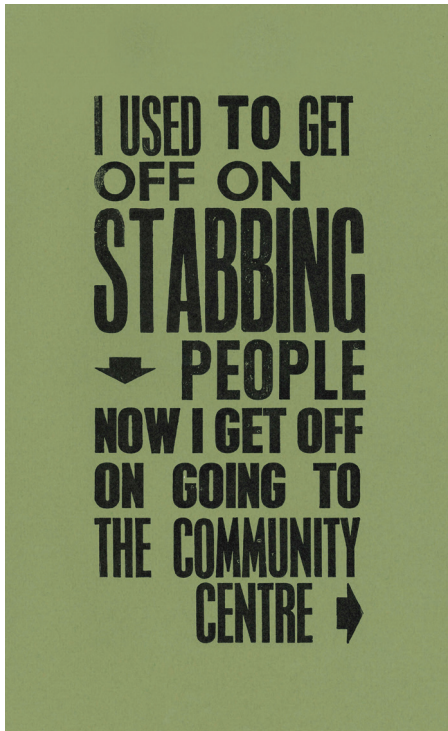
Despite being physical immobile and being cared for by his 14-year-old daughter, he has been deemed fit for work at a work capability assessment.

Joseph was especially close to his own father who was his main confidant. When his father died, Joseph became socially isolated. This was the result of a combination of pressures including his divorce, his care responsibilities for two young daughters as a single father, unemployment, his disability and the loss of his father lead, all of which lead to a period of alcohol dependency in order to cope.

He eventually stopped drinking to better support his daughters but remains lonely.



Strategies for coping with the violence and isolation of low-income families



Graham is 45 years old and is a non-resident father. Both of his children are now 'looked after'.

Graham is unemployed and has learning difficulties, but spends a lot of his time at a community centre near his home. Here he describes how the mechanisms for survival in his locality have changed for him over time.

Where he once engaged in violent behaviour in order to obtain the resources necessary to provide for his family, he now engages in community life at the local community centre.

As an older man in the locality, this provides a source of friendship, belonging and the ability to acquire key resources and skills.

Community spaces such as these are increasingly at risk under austerity.

Key Findings

- The aim of the MPLC study was to offer novel insights into men's care responsibilities in low income families and localities, in order to establish a new evidence base from men's perspectives and to trouble prevailing assumptions that working-class fathers are largely absent, feckless and disinterested in family life,
- Evidence from men of different generational positions (young fathers, mid life fathers and kinship carers) moves us beyond the current policy orientation towards absent fathers, to reveal otherwise invisible patterns of care and family participation by men across the lifecourse and the distinct challenges they encounter at different times,
- These rich, qualitative sources of evidence have been carefully selected to demonstrate men's capabilities to care, but also to highlight the very pressing, challenging and constrained circumstances in which men are care-giving, for which they often receive very limited practical, financial and emotional support,
- The story of low income fatherhood is characterized by struggle. Male kinship carers are met with suspicion and must battle to access support and recognition, especially from the state. The justice system, rather than the state, is often a more effective route for obtaining recognition. If financial support is secured via a legal order, it is time limited and compounded by the requirement for men to leave employment and then to try to return, often not long before retirement age, once financial support ends. This results in the feeling of being pushed off a cliff,
- The care responsibilities of all men in low income families are also largely invisible. Where some men are able to balance the challenging emotions of broken down partnerships with love for their children, they also report feeling lost. In low income communities, men have a variety of different coping strategies; some may become socially isolated and turn to alcohol dependency; for others, survival is about violence. Over time, social spaces in the community become a vital resource for support and belonging, yet these are also under systematic attack under austerity,
- Overall, the study demonstrates that despite living in diverse, varied circumstances and facing numerous challenges, men are capable carers. Yet they are not receiving the support they need. Austerity has created conditions in which men are required to care but also do so in contexts of precarity and financial constraint that can to undermine their efforts,
- It is vital that practitioners and policy makers who work with and support families, recognise men's capabilities to care and that they work towards a policy and welfare environment that is gender inclusive and values and encourages men's positive contributions to families in all their diversities.

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