

Peripheral Fatherhood In Finland

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the scientific knowledge and guidelines on cultural ‘good fatherhood’, mostly derive from research on middle-class men, living in hetero-normative families. But what are the consequences for fatherhood, if a man is unable to meet the standards of an engaged, caring and 24/7-present father?

What if he, and perhaps also his partner, have an insecure life situation or difficulties in life management or are in prison? What does this mean for fatherhood, and what kind of help and support does such a father need and receive?

PERIPHERAL FATHERHOOD

Caring and active fatherhood and the engagement of fathers in equally shared parenthood are ideas widely supported by legislation, family policies and parental everyday life practices (2, 4). Unfortunately, this is not the whole picture. Finland and the other Nordic countries have also their share of fathers who, for example, behave aggressively, have serious mental and substance-abuse problems and can be a danger to their partner and their children or are serving prison sentences (3).

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

In our study, which is still in its early stages, we ask:

- **What does it mean to be a father ...**
- **What kind of help you need and receive** when you have problems that prevent you from fulfilling the demands of contemporary fatherhood?

DATA

The data comprise two sets of interviews with fathers conducted in 2015-2016:

- 13 fathers who are clients of male-specific social services, interviewed by their practitioners
- 14 fathers in prison (both open and closed prisons), interviewed by the researchers

All 27 fathers had experienced various difficulties in life management and had major problems such as

- substance abuse
- violence and mental problems
- personality disorders
- prison sentence

Background	Fathers in FMCHS (n= 13)	Fathers in prison (n= 14)
Age (years)	24-47	26-48
In a relationship	12	10
Single	1	4
Children 1-7/ man. Altogether:	25	38
Children (ages)	1 month to 26 years	2 month to 19 years
Education		
• secondary school unfinished	-	2
• secondary school (only)	3	4
• highschool graduate (only)	-	2
• vocational education	7	5
• BA or MA degree	3	1
Employment		
• Working	8	
• Unemployed	2	
• Student	2	
• Stay-at-home father	1	

Most of the fathers were white lower middle-class native Finns. In many cases, their spouses also had similar problems. These fathers were willing to seek help, either from male-specific social services or from the fatherhood counseling groups run in prisons.

ANALYSIS

The preliminary analysis was inductively based content analysis implemented in a narrative framework. Narrative methods have been widely used to find out how people experience, live, and talk about sensitive life experiences (5). Our aim was to identify the themes and key narrative threads informing the meanings attributed by the fathers to their fatherhood and the (male-specific) help services they had received.



RESULTS

Two dominant storylines were identified: Hope and Surrender. The key narrative thread running through the client fathers’ and prisoners’ talk about the help and support services they had received was **Hope** for a better future. In this narrative, hope was present in three main areas:

1. Surviving and understanding the meaning of (everyday) life and fatherhood
2. Receiving help
3. Individual growth

My previous life was like ‘use or die’, and... This guy, my male practitioner, Chris, gave me so much help, when we just talked, like, about why my situation had turned out like this and stuff. (Jake 24 years, FMCHS).

There were also stories of **Surrender**, where feelings of despair, frustration and giving up arose when the father hadn’t been able to get help or had been misunderstood. In this storyline, fathers reported not being heard because of their problems, of being stigmatized and that social or family services were too mother-focused. In this storyline surrender was narrated in three different ways:

1. Overlooked fatherhood
2. Giving up
3. Distrust and feelings of inferiority

I hope that eventually in this country we can see the day when fathers in crises and such, they’re not always in second place because of their gender. Instead things could be arranged according to which one (parent) is most capable, or even less bad. (Phil 37 years, FMCHS)

CONCLUSIONS

- Male-specific services targeted to fathers living with various problems have been experienced as eminently meaningful, and productive of positive outcomes for both the men themselves and their fatherhood.
- Men want to be seen and heard as parenting equals and they want services that acknowledge their thoughts and needs (1).
- When men receive help this concretizes the meaning of fatherhood, as they understand themselves better and can feel hopeful about the future.
- When men feel that their voices are not heard, that they are distrusted, they may just give up. In this storyline, the future seemed to be more chaotic, including fear and even a sense of hopelessness.
- This empirical pilot study sheds some light on peripheral fatherhood, in particular its diversity and contrasting outcomes. It seems that many fathers with social problems are willing and able to change, if they are taken seriously.

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