

# Photovoice: Facilitating fathers' narratives of care

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## **Abstract**

*This paper critically explores the power of photographic images and photovoice research methodology to support the emergence of narratives of care amongst twenty Irish fathers. In the context of economic recession, the breadwinner role for these men was exchanged with one of at-home father. Men's daily care of children included language and literacy development, a role traditionally construed as feminine. Reflections on the feminist, adult education methodological approach used to discuss men's role in family literacy suggest that photovoice contributed to the disruption of patriarchal norms. It supported men to talk fluently and empathetically to one another about masculinity, care and fatherhood thereby freeing them to engage in counter hegemonic narratives of masculinity.*

**Key words:** Adult Education, Masculinities, Photovoice, Family literacy, Care

## **Snapshot of photovoice workshop**

*Six men, sitting in a circle around a central table, myself amongst them. We all are dressed in similar clothing, jeans, sweatshirts or tracksuits. Tea and sandwiches are on a side table. Camera bags and cameras are on tables around the room. A projector and screen is to the side of the circle. Some of the men are sitting back in their chairs, balancing on two legs, chatting to one another. Others are leaning forward, focused on the screen where one man's photograph of three children has just been projected. The colour photograph shows children sitting with their heads close together. A boy is in the centre flanked by his two sisters. They are seated at a kitchen table, which is strewn with colouring pencils, sheets of drawing paper and a pile of newspapers. In the research session the father of the children presents their image to the rest of the group. The discussion begins. The first question is posed: Why did you take that photo?*

**Source:** Research fieldnotes

## Introduction

This paper draws on an empirical study into the relationship between ideals of hegemonic masculinities and fathers' involvement in family literacy learning care work. Whilst the wider study is in the context of family literacy, this paper focuses on the adult education methodology employed to engage educationally disadvantaged men in the research. Situated within a Freirian pedagogical approach and feminist critical adult education context, relationships, individual and collective dialogue, critical reflection and praxis were all central to the research process (Connolly, 2008; Freire, 1972). Photovoice, a methodology conducive to supporting vulnerable men to speak fluently about their lives (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Slutskaya *et al.*, 2012) was a core methodological strategy in this enquiry. Critical reflections on the use of photovoice, are discussed below.

The global economic crisis has resulted in some disruption and restructuring of patriarchal, socially constructed, gendered parenting roles and such changes bring both challenges and opportunities. In Ireland, as the recession deepened, high levels of unemployment spread across the male-dominated construction industry (Barry & Conroy, 2012). The one-time breadwinner now finds himself in the unfamiliar role of fulltime family carer whilst his partner, often in poorly paid and part-time employment, provides financially for the family. These at-home fathers are the focus of the study reflected upon below.

*The State of the World's Fathers Report* (Levtov *et al.*, 2015) found that whilst men may want to be more involved in the lives of their children, the demands of a neo-liberal marketplace and inflexible workplaces preclude many from involved fathering. This institutionalised view of men as carefree actors consequently leaves women doing most of the caregiving. Women now make up 40 percent of the global workforce yet they also continue to do ten times more caregiving and domestic work than men (Ibid.). The marketplace, and in turn nation states, gain exponentially from the largely un-resourced, uncompensated caretaking work of women (Fineman, 2004). As such, they are 'free riders' on the backs of female care labour and this unpaid care work underwrites male power (Hanlon & Lynch, 2011, p.47).

Literacy and literate activities have been construed by ideals of hegemonic masculinities as of little value (Francis & Skelton, 2001; Renold, 2001). They are viewed as passive and belonging in the feminine, therefore subordinate, domain (Martino & Berril, 2003). By association, the relationship some men have with

literacy effects their involvement in family literacy learning care work (Karther, 2002; Hegarty & Feeley, 2010; Nichols 2002).

### **Study background**

The research aimed to address unequal gendered care constructs and to explore the relationship between constructs of hegemonic masculinities and fathers' involvement in family literacy care work. A primary goal was to surface and discuss issues relating to men's gendered identities as fathers. Embedded within disparaging discourses about working-class parents, fathers are depicted as uncaring, absent and 'feckless' (Hewett, 2015). Unlike their middle-class neighbours, stigmatised disadvantaged parents may not have the resources or capitals to do this learning support work. Furthermore, deficit views of parents from poor communities are compounded through media portrayals of them as uninterested in their children's education (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010). Yet research shows that all parents value literacy skills and regardless of parents' own literacy levels, they report that they want their children to do well and to support their learning in school (Ortiz, 2004; Hegarty & Feeley, 2010).

### **Research participants**

Existing networks within the adult literacy and community education sector in and around Dublin were used to recruit fathers to the project. Following meetings with adult education and community based project co-ordinators, information meetings with prospective groups were undertaken which resulted in four groups agreeing to participate. Each group committed to three research workshops over a period of three weeks and these were located within familiar community learning settings.

In all, twenty men contributed to the research. Between them they had 56 children ranging in age from twelve months to 41 years. The youngest research participant was 27 years old whilst the oldest was 65. Eighteen of the men were born in Ireland and the remaining two were from Morocco. Together they had a wealth and diversity of experience to draw from.

The men lived in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city. These areas are characterised by multiple inequalities and state neglect that is evidenced by high levels of poor housing, long-term unemployment, educational disadvantage and ill health. Research participants had first hand experience of social harm, including drug and alcohol addiction, sexual and physical abuse, imprisonment and damaging experience of institutional care, homelessness and depression.

### **Photovoice: rationale and process**

The arts have the power to reveal our richly inhabited imagination and the visual image can connect with deeper levels of consciousness than is the case with words alone (Harper, 2002). For those who have unmet literacy needs and experience a lack of confidence around the written and spoken word, arts based methodologies, like photovoice, have been found to offer empowering, inclusive ways to access individual and collective stories (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Slutskaya *et al.*, 2012). Mobile technologies have opened up the photography medium to many and photographs are a familiar visual medium providing an unthreatening tool in participatory research (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010).

Research has highlighted the challenge of encouraging men to fully participate in enquiries where they express their emotional selves (Sattel, 1976; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001) yet photovoice has been shown to support men to discuss their intimate emotions, giving rise to open talk and deep levels of reflective thinking (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007).

Within the context of an adult education facilitative group research practice photovoice enquiries provide cameras to research participants who are free to construct images relating to the research topic. The prompt for participants in this case was to take photos of family literacy. These photographs were then the basis of individual and group conversations with the researcher and photographs and discussion both formed the data to be coded and analysed. In photovoice there are no 'wrong' interpretations of a research participant's photograph. The one they offer is valid as they are the experts in their own lives (Freire, 1972). The viewing of the photograph and its interpretation gives rise to the co-construction of knowledge. As such, photovoice is congruent both with feminist adult education and with ideals of hegemonic masculinities, which construe men as active and knowledgeable.

### **Viewing photographs: building connection**

Collier (1957) described the compelling effect of photographs on research participants and this is verified in the research data. Men were heard in the audio recordings to be excited to show the photographs of their family's literacy work. They were curious about one another's photographs and eager to comment. The men interpreted one another's images. They participated. There was laughter. Some expressed worries about having taken the 'right photo'. Others described their pleasure at having 'mastered' the cameras. Participants were asked to choose three photographs to share with the group, and in so doing they

set the agenda for what was to be discussed. The photographs were displayed on a large screen. They showed children involved in many activities: reading books, playing football, working on computers and iPads, smelling flowers, banging drums, attending Tae Kwando. Some children were alone; siblings surrounded others. Partners and wives were present, sitting beside children doing homework, hugging children and doing their own studies. Home settings included kitchens, sitting rooms, bathrooms and children's bedrooms. External and community settings showed a boxing club, a park, a garden, and a local streetscape. The images provided a window into the lives of the men and uniquely helped to bridge the gap between the lifeworld of the researcher and the research participants (Harper, 2002). Photos were pored over, discussed, interrogated and served to act as a spark for wide ranging discussions which revealed intimate, hands-on knowledge of children's lives; concerns about children's diets; whether they were regularly washing their teeth; the demands of consumer society on fathers who were struggling financially; the men's desires to be good fathers; to 'do it right'; concerns about whether the levels and intensity of housework the men were involved in was 'normal'; all were voiced alongside collaborative interrogations of the meaning of family literacy. These stories expanded outwards. The photographs acted as a springboard for conversations, for reminiscence and these conversations yielded fascinating data as well as empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible (Hurworth, 2003).

Fathers spoke of the enthusiastic participation of children in the research. Children were 'excited' to be included. They got dressed up. Wives and partners too were closely involved. Photographs were displayed on bookshelves, and on walls of participant's homes. Badboy's (participants chose pseudonyms) son loved getting his photograph taken. Batman took his son (and camera) on a day-long outing to visit his parents from whom he had been estranged. Jack and his son spent an evening together trying to compose a photograph which would show his son holding the setting sun in his hands. Messi, a father of ten, captured an image of five of his children around a kitchen table working together on their homework. Albert, a man who had grown up in institutional care took his family to the local park where his male neighbour commented on the pleasure of seeing a family spending time together. Rory planted seeds with his two-year old daughter. There was a sense of photovoice bolstering families and allowing the research activities to ripple out beyond the core conversations involving the researcher.

Loading photographs to computers from digital cameras takes some time, requires certain skills and is reliant on equipment that works well. My pains-

taking pace caused much comment from the men. Some encouraged me to join them in their computer classes; others took the role of reassuring me and encouraging me. 'Technical hitch spaces' provided an opportunity for the men to talk informally to one another about their photographs, their children and their lives. In the foreground of the audio recordings I can be heard working with cables, projectors and computers. In the background, different conversations can be heard. Men shared experiences of access arrangements to children, concerns over children watching pornography on the internet, praise for children and their sporting achievements. In these moments connections were being made, mutual understanding was growing, relationships were being formed and these all served to contribute to the collaborative, creative and affirming peer learning research environment.

### **Photovoice and adult and community learning**

The photovoice process is rooted in what Connolly (2008, p. 55) posits is the 'Golden Rule' of adult education: the process begins with participants' lived experiences. Dialogue and trust building were the foundation stone on which the research relationship was built. This supported rich reflection and often revealing stories to emerge. Participants' collaborative viewings and collective conversations about their photographs uncovered new understandings and helped to create an open dialogical culture amongst the men. Conversations and critical thinking became a conduit for reflections on the men's roles as fathers and brought to light the impact of confining constructs of hegemonic masculinities on men's lives. The borders of self-understanding shifted. Such transformation Todd (2014) argues is not only the hope of education, it is the pedagogical act of living *par excellence*. Through this critical feminist adult education process, photovoice participants came to view their individual experience as linked to a wider structural context. In so doing a new view of their social existence was articulated and their subjective realities were fortified (Freire, 1998; Harper, 2002).

Mirroring hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, the photovoice research methodology was described as highly absorbing by the men. Many talked about their involvement, their families' involvement in terms of fun, of enjoyment, of 'craic'. One father described his participation as having his 'brain on the go'. Within a context where working class experience is most often discounted and disparaged in educational settings (Giroux, 1993), participants in this research process described enhanced personal and social capital. Their experience of adult learning as a positive empowering process is of particular significance

when one considers that the majority of participants had harm-full experiences of childhood education.

The study had a material presence through photographs displayed on fridges and elsewhere in the men's homes. Furthermore, there was wide participation on a range of levels; personal, group, family, extended family and community level. Photovoice promoted a model of research in working-class communities which visibly involved adult and community learning for transformation and raised the profile of family literacy learning care work.

### **Cross gender research: performances of hegemonic masculinities**

Cameras and photographs were closely associated with pornography by the men and sexually loaded remarks, which objectified women, were sometimes exchanged. Remarks made by individual men were inflated by much group laughter, which signified group affiliation and the construction of a mutuality of masculine understanding (Grønnerød, 2004).

In the background of the workshop audio recordings, the men were often heard boasting to one another of their sexual prowess. In so doing they were engaged in affirming their heterosexuality. These ongoing references to heterosexual masculinity distanced the men from the fear of appearing gay, of being weak and feminised in the eyes of other men and signified the exaggerated masculinity referred to by Kimmel (1994). It is important to acknowledge that not all men made these remarks.

Displays of hyper masculinity (Ibid.), and robust masculine selves (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) were most often directed towards other members of the group rather than the older female researcher. They were situated in a wider context where men instinctively looked to one another for respect and recognition (Connell, 1995).

My own responses to these remarks varied greatly. As a reflexive feminist researcher I am cognisant, like Etherington (2004) and Gemignani (2011) of the rich learning to be gleaned from the researcher's personal responses. In this instance I found myself making a pragmatic decision not to challenge sexist, misogynistic remarks but to make the 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). However this decision had a cost for me. I often felt uncomfortable and vulnerable about the comments I heard and indeed some were deeply offensive to me. Casually sexist and homophobic remarks are not only heard within the

research relationship. They are part of the wider everyday patriarchal soundscape in which gender is performed. As a woman I have found many strategies to live with, to block out and to challenge this patriarchal din, as appropriate. Within the research relationship, I mostly handled such comments with humour or on occasion I appeared to ignore them whilst refocusing conversations on the research topic.

My dilemma as a feminist researcher became one of setting research participants display of 'patriarchal dividends' (Connell, 1995, p. 79) to the side whilst trying to see and relate to each man's unique subjectivity. I believed that the men's stories and experiences were of value and I wanted to honour their voices. In recognising my own humanness and vulnerabilities in the research relationship I similarly chose to recognise and relate to each man's authenticity (Etherington, 2007). I sought to understand through dialogue the underlying gendered experiences that had led to his worldview.

This approach, I argue, allowed me to continue to develop relationships with the men, and to support the emergence of 'many layered stories' (Etherington, 2004, p.23). In giving voice to their experience in a collaborative adult education setting, I hoped that participants would gain useful insights into their new realities as at-home fathers. I believed their stories would make a valuable contribution to understandings of men's gendered experiences as fathers involved in what has traditionally been viewed as women's work.

### **Alternative narratives of masculinity**

Men who told me they were unused to talking about themselves as fathers spoke fluently and tenderly of their children and of their family learning care work. The displaying of the photographs in the collaborative and collective space, the viewing of the images on the large screen, seemed to free men from fear of what Connell describes as 'the constant careful scrutiny of other men' (Connell, 1995, p.128). The photographer had full authority over his images, he owned them, and could confidently talk about them and respond to questions with assurance. Men engaged in self-revelation, they spoke of their children, of their emotions, they invited others to encounter them in new ways. Men unself-consciously demonstrated to one another an alternative masculinity, one that allowed their emotional and vulnerable selves to be glimpsed. They risked the display to one another of transformed subjectivities. It was in these moments that the strength of photovoice as a method became apparent and where the 'shield' of masculinity, as it was termed by Badboy, began to soften. Such revela-

tions, I contend, would be unlikely to emerge in response to more traditional one-to-one or focus group interviews.

### **Stars are yellow, hearts are red, and the tree would be green**

Effort toward mutual understanding, empathetic listening and supportive interjections were all features of the puzzling out of the men's images. Conversations supported the emergence of the meanings men held of family literacy work and of their changing role, from breadwinner to care giving, at-home father. The men bore witness to the dilemmas and delights they faced as fathers, as men, doing this care work. They shared strategies, they admired and praised one another's photos. They spoke of the pride they felt in their children and the hopes they had for them. They encouraged one another in their roles as fathers. These were revealing conversations, ones where the shield of hegemonic masculinities was further fractured and where caring, nurturing masculinities were tentatively displayed.

Batman spoke eloquently of the love he had for his children and of the particular attention he devoted to his seven-year-old son who had mild autism. He described his return to education as being one part of his supportive efforts. The fathers in Batman's group had experienced high levels of social harm: two were recovering drug addicts, one was an ex-prisoner, others had experienced extreme levels of violence as young men and two men left their homeland in search of economic opportunity in Ireland. These experiences had honed masculinity, which was hard and tough, where expressions of vulnerability were often decried and conceptualised as a feminine, therefore subordinate trait. The transcript, which follows, displays an alternative, reflective masculinity enabled I believe through the combination of photovoice and an engaging critical adult education process (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1984).

Batman: *Being around him all the time, see, I do loads of work with him. Constantly. That's why I'm doing this as well. It's specifically for him. Also me other daughters, but they're grand see I want him to be able to lead, like us here, a normal life...* [Interrupted]

John S: *...that's all he wants.*

Batman: *See I don't want him to think he is hampered because he has autism. We don't bring it up to him about...* [Interrupted]

John D: *...you don't mention it?*

Batman: *I don't. There's nothing wrong with him and it's not his fault an' anyhow. If he starts they'll all help him and they don't treat him like he is special and they never say to him whatever. They're just normal around him...* [Interrupted]

Badboy: *...so he can be himself!*

John D: *An' would you notice if he came in here?*

Batman: *It's not that you would notice it. It's just that he has a few little things that he does. Like he tenses himself like this. He does do that when he is happy, do you know what I mean? Or he would jump around for a minute. Now if he's happy he'd run around, over into the floor and run back...* [Interrupted]

John D.: *...that's good!*

Batman: *And just do a jump, that's how he shows he's...* [Interrupted]

John D.: *...happy?*

Batman: *You know enjoyment. That's just one of the things he does.*

Badboy: *That's the way he shows excitement. Like being happy?*

Batman: *Yeah. See he takes everything in. He's not like me two daughters. He has a great memory.*

John S: *He absorbs everything, yeah.*

### **Group 3**

Prompted by the viewing of his photograph, Batman's sharing of this story connected the men. A bond was formed. Their tones and listening were empathetic. They were involved in the small interactions of dialogue as espoused by Freire (1972). They were affirming Batman's efforts to be a good father. The photograph, its discussion and Batman's own willingness to share his lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) with the other members of the group, their responsive and attentive reaction, all contributed to a reflective environment where men opened up to one another (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). Stories shared revealed intimate family lives. In speaking of themselves as involved and caring fathers

they made themselves vulnerable, they allowed others to see them (Ibid.). Showing vulnerability involves emotions and requires of men that they give up some control to others, that they open themselves up to connections, to relationships (Kimmel, 1994). In so doing they demonstrated the fluidity of masculinity (Connell, 2011; Reeser, 2012) and challenged current constructions which preclude the loving enactment of fatherhood (Morrell & Richter, 2004). The men transformed their identities (Mezirow, 2000) , at least for a time, from macho men to involved, caring fathers. Reconfiguring ones gendered identity in a group setting can be a risky business (Connolly, 2008). It can open one up to ridicule and attendant feelings of shame. In this adult education context this did not happen. The shield of hegemonic masculinities further dissolved (Connell, 1995). The discussion progressed. Batman proudly described the cards his children were making in the photograph,

*Batman: Like, am I a lovely drawer? You're all missing that! He wanted hearts and stars and a couple of bells down the bottom. Little Emma there, I done her one. Then see, when he seen them bells on that he wanted them on his and he asked me what colours to do so I told him stars are yellow, hearts are red and the tree would be green! Then I done a bigger one for him that was about that size for him, you know double pages and he had good fun colouring that one!*

### **Transcript Group 3**

Batman felt comfortable enough to give voice to a different type of talk, one which was imbued with affection, with whimsy, and where gender norms were disrupted. In other contexts this might have posed a threat to him, opened him up to ridicule and attendant feelings of shame (Sattel, 1976). In this context, photovoice and an engaging pedagogy (hooks, 1994), bridged a divide between a private and public gendered self, bringing both together, revealing the intimate lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) of a loving and involved father.

### **Conclusion: Photovoice empowering men, disrupting patriarchy**

I argue that prescriptive and confining patriarchal gender identities cannot be deconstructed if they go unnamed. Freire (1972) reminds us that naming the world is the first step in transforming it. Photovoice, the images produced and the collaborative discussions surrounding them ably supported the men in this research enquiry to name their world and challenge dominant and damaging (mis)representations of fathers from inner-city communities.

Men involved in the research were affirmed in their role as caregiving and involved fathers. They grew in status in their families and their communities. As such, on the one hand photovoice was congruent with patriarchal constructs of hegemonic masculinities and gave recognition to men's role as fathers. On the other hand, it transformed individual men's prevailing notions of masculinity which prohibit the display of men's emotions, of what one participant termed their 'soft spots' to other men. In responding to the photographic images, men retrieved the language needed to speak of their emotional and caring selves and to engage in collective reflection and self-disclosure (Freire, 1970). In so doing they opened themselves up to vulnerability with other men and the female researcher thus challenging taken for granted ideas of men as inexpressive and reticent. A counter narrative to that of hegemonic masculinities emerged, one which presented masculinity as infused with tenderness and care.

Through a Freirian, feminist pedagogical adult education approach, photovoice has illuminated the social and emotional lives of men (Barr, 1999). Furthermore it has supported men, who were poorly served by the education system, to engage in a collaborative, affirming and transformative adult learning process where their experiences were valued and their emotional and affective selves acknowledged and supported new understandings of unequal, gendered roles emerged through a process of conscientisation (Freire, 1972). A commitment to be more involved in the care of their children's language and literacy development was an articulated outcome of their participation in the research. This in turn lightens the responsibility on mothers to engage in this role and has the possibility of contributing to gender equality at a micro level. Transformation such as this is congruent with feminist and Freirean endeavour.

Connell (2009, p.137) reminds us that intimate politics underlie more public politics. Reflections on the impact of institutions such as the family and education on gender formation illuminate the influence of gender inequality in the wider social context and can expose the ways in which the patriarchal gender system can oppress both women and men. Such insights are the first steps in bringing about transformation at a macro level, strengthening individual subjectivities, critically naming the world, identifying connections between the personal and the political and planning collective actions for change in order to bring about a more socially just society.

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