

The Unheard Gender: The Neglect of Men as Social Work Clients

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Abstract

This critical review shows that, despite increasing attention to fathers in social work practice and research, men are still largely the ‘unheard gender’. Almost all the social work literature that deals with men discusses them as fathers, namely in terms of their function in the family. Very little of it looks at men in other roles or situations or concerns itself with men’s experiences, feelings or needs. Similar neglect of men characterises social work practice and training. The review points to a vicious circle in which the neglect of men in research, practice and training reinforce one another. It offers explanations for the neglect and suggestions for how to better include men as social work clients.

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Introduction

Gender has been a major issue in social work since the 1980s. The focus, however, has been on the female gender. Ample professional literature has been devoted to the development of social work interventions to empower women and meet their needs (e.g. [Norman and Wheeler, 1996](#)), and abundant resources allocated to developing curricula focusing on women (e.g. [Leung, 2007](#)). The same has not been done for men. An informal survey of the main social work journals (e.g. *British Journal of Social Work*, *Journal of Family Social Work*, *Journal of Social Service Research*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Research on Social Work Practice*, *Social Service Review*, *Social*

Work and Social Work Research) and of frequently cited interdisciplinary journals that publish papers relevant to social work (e.g. *Affilia*, *Child Maltreatment*, *Children and Youth Services Review*, *Family Process*, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*) reveals that, when men are written, the focus is usually on specific problems, such as unemployment, drug abuse, domestic violence, criminality and others, in which men feature prominently. However, until the twenty-first century, very few papers have been published on men from the perspective of their gender.

The lack began to be noted, and change urged, in the mid-1990s. In the Introduction to the book *Working with Men*, on social work with men who exhibit aggressive behaviours, the editors [Newburn and Mair \(1996\)](#) declared that 'it is as least important to deal with these offenders as men as it is to deal with these men as offenders' (p. 3). In his study of the construction of masculinities in the probation services, [Scourfield \(1998\)](#) exposed the gap between social workers' rhetoric, which supports focusing on their clients' identity as men, and their case files and reports, which tend to ignore the men's gender or to collude with oppressive masculinities. [Kosberg \(2002, 2005\)](#) points out that social work literature may either not include content on men or portray them in a stereotypic manner. [Winnett et al. \(2012\)](#) emphasise the importance of considering gender in hospital care and suggest ways of working with hospitalised men. [Leung and Chan \(2014\)](#) point to a 'masculinity crisis' and critique the lack of 'gender consciousness' in the social services for men in Hong Kong.

The beginnings of change

The twenty-first century has seen a partial remedy of the neglect, with dozens of papers published on fathers. These describe programmes and interventions with divorced fathers (e.g. [Cowan et al., 2007](#)) or discuss such topics as fathers who have mental illness (e.g. [Montgomery et al., 2011](#)), the fathering of violent men (e.g. [Perel and Peled, 2008](#)), fathers of children removed from home (e.g. [Schofield et al., 2011](#)) and working with fathers from various ethnic groups (e.g. [Greif et al., 2011](#); [Makusha and Richter, 2014](#)). However, as [Dominelli \(2002\)](#) pointed out, 'social workers engaging with men in family-based interventions have been the exception rather than the rule' (p. 84). Indeed, empirical studies in England ([Roskill et al., 2008](#)), Canada ([Brown et al., 2009](#)) and Israel ([Davidson-Arad et al., 2008](#)) show that fathers are still rarely included in child welfare interventions. Moreover, much of the literature on fathers has an agenda: to improve the fathering of men who are perceived as reluctant to fulfil their parenting obligations (e.g. [Greif et al., 2011](#)).

Scholars contend that the inclusion of fathers in social work will contribute to the well-being and development of their children, by fostering their involvement in their children's lives, encouraging them to meet their financial obligations to the family, and helping to maintain and improve the spousal relationship (e.g. [Cowan et al., 2007](#)). They also argue that involving fathers in

social work interventions will provide a necessary corrective for the finger pointing at mothers in cases of child maltreatment and make clear the responsibility that fathers have for the care of their children (e.g. Davidson-Arad *et al.*, 2008).

Many suggestions have been offered for ways of changing the ‘unintentional gender bias’ in the social services (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan, 2003; O’Donnell *et al.*, 2005). Policy changes aimed at including fathers in the welfare system have been made in England, continental Europe and North America (e.g. Featherstone *et al.*, 2007; Ewart-Boyle *et al.*, 2013). One is using the term ‘fathers and mothers’ instead of ‘parents’ (e.g. Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan, 2003; Scourfield, 2014). Numerous programmes have been established to help social workers include and better relate to fathers in their practice (for comprehensive reviews, see Maxwell *et al.*, 2012; Ewart-Boyle *et al.*, 2013). Training courses have been established to help social workers engage fathers in child protection work and to encourage non-custodial fathers to become more involved with their children (e.g. English *et al.*, 2009; Scourfield *et al.*, 2012). Some guidelines have been formulated for practice with fathers (e.g. Ghate *et al.*, 2000). These initiatives are indicative of a changing trend.

However, as scholars point out, fathers are still largely outside social workers’ field of vision (e.g. Zaroni *et al.*, 2013). A study conducted in Sweden found that social workers there regard single fathers as less deserving of support than single mothers (Kullberg, 2005). Fathers are not perceived as a parental resource that can be mobilised in problematic family situations (e.g. Featherstone, 2003). Moreover, even when they are not completely left out, they are viewed almost exclusively in terms of their paternal functioning, which is regarded as less relevant than maternal functioning (e.g. Bellamy, 2009).

This narrow perspective not only affects how social workers treat fathers. It also conveys a negative message to all family members (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2009): that little is to be expected of fathers in the way of care and responsibility for their children. The perspective is harmful to all concerned. Where children are maltreated, the mother is usually automatically blamed. Fathers who have difficulties are not helped. Fathers who might be able to give needed support to the mother or become the primary parent are not identified or given assistance.

Fathers have feelings, too

With fathers viewed almost exclusively in terms of their function, their emotions and needs have tended to go unrecognised and unacknowledged in social work literature and practice (e.g. Höjer, 2011). Thus, with rare exceptions (Baum, 2003), the literature on divorce pays scant attention to fathers’ feelings of loss, grief and pain when they are distanced from their children.

This is so even though many more fathers than mothers lose custody, and even though the psychology literature observes that fathers are ‘the unrecognized victims of divorce’ (Arendell, 1992, p. 580).

The literature on court-ordered removal of a child has similarly focused mainly on mothers (e.g. Freymond, 2007) and largely ignored fathers’ feelings. Schofield *et al.*’s (2011) study of parents whose children were placed in foster-care found that both parents reported feelings of loss and grief, but made no attempt to look separately at the feelings of mothers and fathers. Baum and Negbi’s (2013) study of fathers in Israel is the only study I found that focused solely on fathers. It found that all those interviewed reported experiencing the removal as a traumatic event, which utterly devalued them and annihilated their paternal identity.

The loss and pain revealed to the researchers do not seem to meet with a listening ear from social workers in the field. Dominelli and colleagues (2011) found that accounts by fathers of ‘looked after’ children showed that they felt they were not actively listened to by social workers. Höjer (2011) cites a father’s moving testimony telling that, when he cried at the court-ordered removal of his children, the social workers looked at him and ‘didn’t understand how such a bad father as I could show such feelings’ (p. 119). The import of such testimony may be easy to minimise, as coming from only one father in a moment of exceptional pain. However, the paucity of testimony does not necessarily indicate any rarity of the occurrence, but rather the very small number of fathers studied. Only one of the thirteen parents interviewed by Höjer (2011) was a father.

In short, Dominelli’s assertion that ‘Men’s emotional needs have to be brought centrally into the equation’ (Dominelli, 2002, p. 104) is still relevant at the time of this writing, some thirteen years later.

Why are men neglected in social work?

As scholars have noted, all the parties involved contribute to the neglect of men in social work. Fathers often create barriers to engagement with social workers (e.g. Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Some mothers do not want their partner to engage with social workers (e.g. Zanoni *et al.*, 2013). The professional discourse on fathers in child protection work paints them variously as useless, irrelevant, absent and a threat (e.g. Scourfield, 2001).

Various factors contribute to social workers’ neglect of men. One is that most social workers are women and find it easier to work with women, whose outlook and language are usually closer to their own. Another, ironically, is the commitment of the social work profession to help the weak, powerless, oppressed and discriminated. For all the social changes in the last decades, men as a group are still socially dominant and more powerful than women. A third factor is social work training. In few if any social work courses are men—their needs, their gender-related ways of manifesting

and coping with distress, and interventions specifically geared to them—an inherent part of the curriculum. A review of thirty-two undergraduate social work programmes in Canada found that fewer than 5 per cent of the courses relating to social work with children and families mentioned fathers or fathering in any way (Brown *et al.*, 2009). One outcome of such gaps in training may be seen in Ryan *et al.*'s (1995) longitudinal study of attitudes. The first phase of the study was conducted when the respondents were social work students, the second phase three years after graduation. The findings showed that, irrespective of gender, most participants did not want to engage in a therapeutic relationship with men and that some even refused to do so.

Various explanations may be provided for the fact that, even when they do work with men, many social workers have difficulty providing them with the emotional support that they much more readily provide to female clients (e.g. O'Hagan, 1997). One is that social workers believe that men are less receptive of emotional support than women. Another is anchored in differences in how and when men and women manifest their distress (e.g. Baum, 2003). Whereas women tend to manifest sorrow and pain in words and gestures (e.g. crying) that are readily identifiable indications of distress, men are less inclined to verbalise such feelings and more inclined to convey their distress through anger, rage and acting out. Some professionals fail to identify the latent distress that lies behind such manifestations, and do not recognise such behaviours as overwork, drinking and engagement in sports as means men employ to diffuse their distress (Martin and Doka, 2000).

The one notable exception is the extensive social work intervention with men defined as deviant: battering husbands and fathers (e.g. Baynes and Holland, 2012), disengaged fathers (e.g. Kruk, 1994) and fathers in prison (e.g. Meek, 2007). Social workers' apparent readiness to work with such men may be accounted for by social work's dual commitment to the well-being of the individual and the well-being of society. Work with these men addresses major social problems, even where interventions are individual.

Gender imbalance in social work research

Men have received limited attention not only in social work practice, but also in social work research. The psychology and sociology literatures deal extensively with men's experience both of normative life transitions (e.g. marriage, parenthood, retirement) and of crises or stressful events (e.g. migration, divorce, unemployment). These literatures show that men, no less than women, face difficult challenges as they move from one life phase to another and underscore the many stresses and emotional difficulties men encounter.

The social work literature has barely touched on these matters. The above-noted survey yielded very few articles specifically on men. Leung and Chan's (2014) paper on the impact of unemployment on men in China and Winnett *et al.*'s (2012) paper on men's coping with health problems are

among the few exceptions. I found only a handful of papers on the emotional stress experienced by men following divorce and separation (e.g. [Erera and Baum, 2009](#)). Moreover, with the exception of studies of the fathering of violent men (e.g. [Perel and Peled, 2008](#)), most of the studies on parenthood in social work journals are based on samples of women (e.g. [Shapiro and Krysik, 2010](#)) and only a small proportion of those based on samples of men explore or describe the men's emotions (e.g. [Perel and Peled, 2008](#)).

A partial explanation for the imbalance in research is that women are easier to investigate. Generally, they make themselves more accessible to researchers, are more willing to co-operate, and usually provide more detailed and comprehensive answers. The outcome is a vicious circle. The extensive knowledge on women accumulated by researchers has enhanced awareness of their needs and distress. This, in turn, has fostered the development of interventions for women. Some of the interventions are published and thereby made available to other social work scholars and practitioners, who are thus further encouraged to pay attention to women. In short, training, practice and research combine to reinforce social work's focus on women and its largely blind eye to men.

A key question that arises is how to better extend social work services to men.

Remedying the imbalance

To right the imbalance and address the needs of men, social work must, first of all, acknowledge that men have unique problems, needs and unique ways of manifesting their distress (e.g. [Baum, 2003](#)). The principles are the same as with any underserved population. In the absence of sufficient knowledge, research is required on men's needs and problems (e.g. [Guterman and Lee, 2005](#)), as well as on effective ways of offering and providing help to men so as to increase the chances that they will accept it (e.g. [Osborn, 2014](#)).

Moreover, to establish a good helping relationship with their male clients, it is essential that female social workers take account of the possible effects of the gender of the two parties. They must recognise the impediments on both sides, understand the difficulties many men have in acknowledging their problems and expressing their feelings (e.g. [Robertson, 2001](#); [Englar-Carlson and Shepard, 2005](#)) and not take at face value men's declarations that they have no problems and need no help (e.g. [Sonenstein *et al.*, 2002](#); [Featherstone *et al.*, 2007](#)). They must be aware of how men respond to and deal with painful and stressful situations, learn to identify men's non-verbal manifestations of distress, and allow their male clients the time and space they need to open up. It is also essential that they work through their own preference for working with female clients (e.g. [Duggan *et al.*, 2004](#)). Although these changes are unlikely to be easy, it is important for female social workers to rise to the challenge.

The call for change in this review is anchored in the core social work value of an equal, non-discriminatory approach to every person and group in need. Social work's commitment to gender equality and social justice makes it essential for the profession to address the needs not only of women, but also of men—in practice, research and education (Kosberg, 2002). Ignoring or minimising the distress, problems and needs of men will only replace the former injustice to women with injustice to men. Moreover, just as the social work profession has developed models for working with persons from religious, ethnic and cultural groups that differ from those of the social worker, so too models should be developed for working with persons of a different gender.

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