

# Reflections: On Being a Man in Social Work

by Fergus Hogan

The title of this paper holds the two sides of being a man in social work. On the one hand we have the issue of working with men as clients. For too long men have been the "hidden gender in terms of social intervention and helping processes." (Ferguson, 1998, p.33). While men have been left out of the provision of social work services, men, in general, have also absented themselves from such services. Many men considering this to be "women's business" (Milner, 1996). A critical challenge to social work must now be to find new ways to work with, engage and support men and fathers in families. (Hogan, 1998; McKeown, Ferguson, Rooney 1998; Ferguson, 1998). At a basic educational level we may need to teach men and new fathers how to be a good parent. (McKeown, Ferguson, Rooney, 1998; Carr, 1998). At a structural level we need to put into place the types of supports which will encourage and allow men to be parent/child and other meaningful relationships. Recent recommendations made on behalf of men and fathers to the commission of the family (1998) must be followed through. Recommendations such as paternity and parental leave for fathers; legal changes to the Constitution to recognise the rights and position of fathers as well as mothers; changes to statute law to encompass all fathers' rights to guardianship and shared parenting of their children where this is seen by the court as being in the best interests of the child.

In relation to child care and family support much of the direct social work provision seems to have focused on the issue of working with, and supporting women and mothers. In doing so, we have in part, maintained and perpetuated the notions of gendered division of labour in terms of child care. We must begin at all levels to involve men as fathers in families. I am constantly amazed at how often in practice we forget to consider the supportive role of fathers in families. This may be because so often our focus as social workers, working with men, has had to be about issues of neglect, violence and abuse. While it is right that we are involved in this type of work we must remember that although it accounts for a large amount of our work, it constitutes only a very small number of men in real terms. The second side of being a man in social work is the side less often talked about, that is of being a man social worker. As a focus for this paper I want to draw attention to what can, occasionally, be a tension between being at the same time, both a man and a social worker. In this paper I will examine how the social construction of masculinity, while it has an individual influence on each man, also carries threads of connection which have a shared influence on how we are as men in society.

I believe that the two sides of being a man in social work are connected, that men social workers and clients are similarly influenced by the dominant discourse in the social construction of masculinity. That is to say, we, as men, are all taught from an early age to be strong, independent, capable of looking after ourselves. In terms of language, conversations and relationships, we are expected not to ask for advice or support, or to talk about our vulnerabilities or intimate feelings in any public way. My hypothesis is that, in working with men we must find ways to invite men to talk about their intimacies and vulnerabilities in a new way (Hogan, 1998 (a) and (b)). As a first step in this we, as male social workers, must reflect at a personal level on how we as men communicate, talk, share, give or take support,

express our vulnerabilities and celebrate our masculinity.

By way of an example I want to offer a personal reflection on one of my own early experiences of social work supervision, to highlight how I, at a personal level, was influenced by some of the dominant notions of masculinity.

## A Case Example of Supervision

I remember my first supervision as a newly qualified social worker, energetic, excited, proud of my qualification and new found employment and terrified – absolutely terrified – with new responsibility, isolated, I thought, by the fear of failure, constantly worried that my practice could become the subject of the next enquiry. For all of these reasons I had chosen to work in a team that offered the promise of regular supervision.

"How are you getting on?" he asked. I can still see the look on my team leader and supervisor's face, how it changed when I began to answer.

"It's tough" I said, "I'm not so sure. I think I'm doing OK but I'm worried about some things ...". His expression changed enough from quizzical to worried that I slowed down in what I was saying. He interrupted, "Describe some of the cases, your steps, the action plan." All logical, rational, accountable but nothing that allowed me the space to talk of my vulnerabilities, my fear of not being good enough, my struggle to present myself as a competent and complete social worker. Our conversation continued, but in a singularly focused way, wherein we discussed action plans for each case. My supervisor concluded the supervision, without ever again asking the question, "How are you?" He summed up, "Things seem OK. Keep a close eye on these cases. Be clear next time which cases you can close. Find out a bit more on age-related child development and don't be afraid to come and ask."

I left the room wondering if I would ever ask again. Writing now, I wonder if I have ever been very good at asking? In fact I think very many men are not good at asking for advice, let alone support.

As I walked away from his room I knew that I needed something in supervision which I had not been offered and which I had not clearly said I needed; space to talk about my fears, worries, vulnerabilities and hope of being a newly qualified social worker. His look of worry when I spoke of my worry had, in some way, been enough to stop me talking. I wonder now which one of us I most wanted to protect from the vulnerability of such talk. Soon afterwards I spoke more openly with a woman colleague. "How was supervision?" she asked. "I don't think he is very sure about me, I spoke of the cases and my worries but I don't think he liked that."

It was explained to me that supervision on the team was case management, due to the pressures of time on all involved. More than this though, it was explained that newly qualified social workers had to constantly show that they were capable of the job. "Be careful not to try out the same type of supervision as you did as a student, he will just think you are not fit for the work. You need to let him know all of the time in supervision that you know how to do the job."

Without ever asking my supervisor directly about the type of supervision on offer, I never again spoke in that supervision about worries or feelings. As if overnight I became complete and competent in my social work practice. I reported that I knew

exactly what I was doing, except, in truth, I still didn't know everything. I was still unsure, I still needed to talk about how I felt. The constant pressure of needing to prove myself became too much for me – I left to change jobs after six months. Many men live their lives based on conforming and performing in ways which try to satisfy the socially constructed notions of what it means to be a man – a real man!

The analysis of gender from a social constructionist perspective is something relatively new. Predominantly, gender difference has been understood as being biologically pre-determined and fixed. (Vance, 1992). Sex differences are biological. Gender differences are not. Colm O'Connor, an Irish family therapist and poet, considers "The danger of talking about differences is that you see them as biological rather than socially constructed. Men and women are more similar than different. We are packaged differently." (O'Connor, 1997, p.28).

The commonly held belief that men are unable for intimacy, are not in touch with their feelings, are into competition rather than connection, are social constructs. We, as social workers, must become involved in debunking these myths. Dominant notions which construct men as uncaring and unable for intimacy keep men on the margins of meaningful relationships, families and society in general.

There are many categories or ways of being a man. "Gay men, heterosexual men, celibate men, working men, unemployed men, house husbands, macho men, new men new lads and so on." (Ferguson, 1997). All categories can share a common thread of connection in what the sociologist Bob Connell terms "the social construction of hegemonic masculinity." (Connell, 1995), whereby society imbues in all men dominant notions of what it means to be a man. Talking on this very subject, Harry Ferguson outlines these "four key rules to be a real man." These are, that men must conform to: "no sissy stuff; be a big wheel; be a sturdy oak; give 'em hell." (Ferguson, 1997). In short men must be tough, independent, able to care and protect and provide for themselves and others. Men must not ask for advice or support; must not show any signs of emotion, other than manly emotions such as anger, rage. The idea of these rules for real men is almost farcical yet it is the very attempts to comply with these notions of masculinity that lead so many men to live shorter lives than women; for men to live more dangerous and accident-prone lives; to suffer more stress-related illness and to hide their pain and isolation in self-abusive behaviour, such as drug and drink addictions.

It is a dangerous myth that perpetuates the notion that men are invulnerable and can live lives of isolation. Men, as much as women need to live lives of connection with others. The single most frightening consequence of men's attempts to live up to these rules of real masculinity of toughness, invulnerability and consequent isolation can be seen in the very high numbers of men's suicides in Ireland. Of the 433 people who killed themselves last year (1997), 355 (82%) were men.

In a wonderful book, "I don't want to talk about it: overcoming the secret legacy of male depression", the American family therapist, Terrance Real argues thoughtfully and caringly that the social construction of masculinity both creates specific forms of depression in men and also causes men to hide the face of depression from others and themselves. Real argues that the results of "not talking about it", are negative to men, women and children. "Many covertly depressed men, unwilling to face the vulnerability of their own hidden pain, and unwilling to be intimate with their own hearts, cannot face intimacy with anyone else." (Real, 1997, p.151).

### Conclusion: Implications for practice

The challenge to social workers must be to work with men, not only as fathers in the family, but also as men in their own right, to deconstruct the dominant narratives that tell men they must live lives of isolation based on myths of invulnerability. Work of this nature must, I believe, begin for us men in social work at a personal level. Taking the feminist adage that the personal is political we must begin this process with 'I' statements.

We must say what we want and need from supervision. In my opinion, good case management alone is not adequate supervision in a job that is personally and emotionally demanding. We need to co-create spaces in individual supervision and team meetings which recognises the value in all of us talking about our hopes and fears in social work. Such intimate talking in public spaces may be new to many men, even social workers. We often pride ourselves on being competent, capable, able to protect ourselves and others. We often consider our personal niche as being able to protect and rescue everyone else. We must, I believe, begin by being gentle and caring for ourselves and each other in this very demanding work. A specific suggestion in this regard, which many men in social work are currently examining is that of joining a personal men's group. Such groups are offering men space together to challenge and support each other within a context of mutual support, trust and commitment.

Central to this paper I have argued that the social construction of masculinity is such that it makes it difficult to be a man in social work. Men social workers and clients share the experience of dominant notions of masculinity. A resource in the challenge of working with men is ourselves – men in social work. We must, I believe begin this work with 'I' statements, taking personal steps to express our vulnerabilities in our efforts to care for ourselves and other men.

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