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Towards an Understanding of the Separation and Mediation Experiences of Western Australian Fathers: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

Carly Mercadante

Edith Cowan University, carlymerc@gmail.com



How does the typical experience of fathers who have recently been separated (particularly those who didn't initiate separation) prepare them for mediation and other legal procedures that are now required since the Amendments to the 2006 Family Law Act?

Carly Mercadante

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

SUPERVISORS: Julie Ann Pooley & Myra Taylor



Rationale


- Studies have found that women are twice as likely to initiate separation compared to men (Hewitt, Western & Baxter, 2006).
- Initiators experience more positive post-divorce adjustment than non-initiators (Wang & Amato, 2000)
- The 2006 Amendments default position is shared parental responsibility of children after separation and former partners are required to attend mediation over parental disputes if they wish to apply to court (Fletcher & Visser, 2008).
- Even with legislative changes, fathers most often become non-residential parents and some disappear from their children's lives altogether (ABS, 2008).
- Service providers have acknowledged that men are most often not prepared for mediation. (Men not getting results from mediation).
- Therefore, it is important to know about men's typical experience of separation, encompassing initiator status, and to understand if their experiences prepare them for mediation.



Research Design

Design: An in-depth qualitative design was used to explore fathers' experiences of separation and to understand if their experiences prepared them for mediation.

Participants: The present study involved 6 (soon to be 8) fathers who had been separated in the last 5 years, aged between 24 and 50 years old. The men ranged from low socioeconomic status to high socioeconomic status.



Research Design

Procedure:

- Participants were recruited from men's service providers such as Lifeline, Meerilinga and Men's Advisory Network.
- Data was collected through interpretive phenomenological interviewing. Phenomenological interviewing is an informal, interactive process comprised of open-ended questions and comments (Moustakas, 1994).
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. IPA is a suitable approach when a researcher is trying to discover how individuals perceive situations and how individuals make sense of their life world (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Preliminary Findings

- Most fathers did not initiate separation
- The fathers that jointly initiated separation undertook preparation for mediation.
- Men were more likely to seek help if a male friend suggested it.
“Look mate you gotta check this out”


Typical Experience included:

- Difficulties coping with disruption to routine ‘Normal to not normal’
‘Impossible to cope’
- Frustration with legal process: bounced, bullied and going for whatever contact arrangements they can get.
- LOSS: Not being able to carry out fathering role
- Fathering Identity ‘I’m a good guy’
- RESOLVE: They’ll come back, I just have to be ready for them.
- Journey of self-discovery



Findings

Five potential themes have been identified:

- Control
 - Loss
 - Fathering Identity
 - Self discovery
 - Discomfort with disengaging
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Conclusions

Overall the study was successful, in particular for its contributions toward:

- Denoting men's experiences of separation
- Understanding that men are often ill-prepared for mediation and less likely to seek help than women.
- Providing men's descriptions of what separation services would be helpful.

Possible limitations include:

- The representativeness of the sample. Most of the men were linked with service providers already therefore the sample might be more inclined to seek help than other men not linked with services.

References

ABS

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