



University of the
West of England



SPAN

Single Parent Action Network

Single Parent Advancement and Learning Opportunities – Participatory Research

Research Summary



Background

There are 1.9 million single parents in the UK caring for 3.1 million children. Single parents make up a quarter of all families with dependent children (ONS, 2009). Single parent families continue to face a very high poverty risk. Although the risk of living in poverty in a one-parent family has fallen from 58% in 1999 to 47% in 2003, in 2006/07 52% of children living in a lone parent family were living below 60% of the median income after housing costs, compared to 23% of children who live in a 2 parent family (DWP, 2008a - HABAI, 2006/07).

The parent(s) working status is an important predictor of child poverty: a child living in a household where no one works has 3/4 chances to be poor (Hirsh, 2006). In 1998, when the current government made its historic pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020, the employment rate for single parents was low, and associated with low levels of human capital, high risk of ill health and disability, expensive and inflexible childcare and limited work-life balance policies. Single parents became one of the key groups on which the government focused, setting a 70% employment target to be achieved by 2010. This was to be achieved through voluntary employment programs such as the New Deal and by boosting childcare provision and flexible employment. Also through the *making work pay* strategy which saw the introduction of a minimum wage, and various tax credits. The latter has resulted in a significant redistribution towards the costs of raising children, and has been key to increasing the employment rate of single parents from 40% in the early 1980s to 56.6% in 2006 (DWP, 2006).

Despite the success of this largely voluntary approach, since 2007 the Government has shifted towards a conditionality approach (DWP, 2007a; 2007b). Although the voluntary approach worked well with those that were in work already, it did not do so well with those single parents who were not in work, either because they are experiencing multiple or acute barriers to employment, and/or because they do not want a job because they want to care full-time for their children. The current welfare reform (DWP, 2008a; 2008c) informed by the Gregg's review on conditionality (Gregg, 2008) seeks to ratify this by adopting a much stronger conditionality approach. The principle underlying the reform is that most claimants require more personalised support, matched by stricter benefit conditions. At time of writing the welfare reform bill is being debated in parliament. In respect to single parents the bill proposes to move all single parents onto JSA. Conditions vary according to the age of the youngest child. Those with children under 1 will have no conditions imposed. Those whose youngest child is aged between 1-2 will be required to attend a work-focused interview to develop an action plan with their adviser. Those with children aged 3-6 will be required to undertake the work-related activities specified in the action plan. Failure to do so will result in heavy benefit sanctions.

In November 2008 parliament approved changes to social security regulations which means that from November 2008, lone parents whose youngest child is at least 12 years old will no longer be entitled to rely on Income Support (IS) solely on the grounds of being a lone parent, but will be moved onto Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and expected to seek work. From October 2009, this will apply to those whose youngest child are at least 10

years old, and from October 2010, to those whose youngest child are aged 7. These changes do not apply to single parents who are long-term ill or disabled, or have children who are severely disabled. JSA regulations have also been modified to safeguards single parents' caring responsibilities (DWP, 2008d). For example single parents are not expected to take up a job unless they can find suitable childcare, and are entitled to seek work for 16 hours a week even if there is not much demand in the area.

Research questions, aims and objectives

It is on the transition from IS onto JSA and the requirement to seek work for single parents with children over 7 years old that this research focuses on. The impact of this policy change is as yet uncharted territory. The research aims to provide participatory evidence of the lived experiences of single parents affected by this change, and in particular it seeks to address the following question:

How do single parents on Job Seekers Allowance experience the support and training opportunities in place in facilitating their learning, well-being and advancement into sustainable employment?

The research focuses on training and support that facilitates single parents' learning and advancement into sustainable employment because once in employment lone parents are twice as likely as any other comparable group to cycle back to welfare (Evans et al., 2004). As yet we have no conclusive evidence on why this is, but we know that cycling is also associated with low qualifications. It is also an issue of unequal market structure with high-turnover, low-pay, part-time and for the low skilled (Hirsh in Bell et al., 2006) and/or for with child rearing responsibilities. Part-time work tends to be low-paid, it can involve atypical hours, is more insecure, provides less working rights, and fewer opportunities for advancement (Millar et al., 2006). In SPAN recent participatory research (Giullari, 2007) 68 single parents identified opportunities for good training and higher education as the best way to move into sustainable jobs. Unfortunately their experiences of the NDLP confirmed large-scale evaluation findings, which suggest that the program has tended to move single parents into low-paid and low-skilled jobs (Evans, 2003).

SPAN participatory research (ibid) also identified the single-handed juggling of employment with parenting responsibilities as one of the barriers to sustainable employment. This is confirmed by a number of other studies (Gill and Davidson, 2000; Hoggart et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2000). Single parent participants talked of their experiences of being very time poor and their concerns of the negative impacts that this has on their and their children well-being. Indeed child centered research on children's social exclusion has shown that parents' time poverty has a negative impact on their children social exclusion, leading some to question the value of increased income as their result of their parents' employment (Ridge and Millar, 2006; Taylor et al., 2007). Policies to eradicate child poverty need to be informed by a better understanding of the interplay between financial and time poverty that affects single parent families.

Aims and objectives

Adopting a participatory approach to research, this project aims to:

Build the capacity of 10 single parents to undertake research and disseminate findings to policy makers

Generate participatory evidence on the impact of this policy change on single parents' opportunities and well-being

Its main objectives are to:

Increase participation and representation of disadvantaged single parents in decision-making arenas by:

Disseminating participatory evidence on the experiences of 60 disadvantaged single parents

Increasing the capacity of 10 single parent peer researchers to create change at a personal, service and policy level

Influence national policy makers and local service providers to adopt the research recommendations to improve training and employment programs for single parents on JSA

Increase well-being and advancement opportunities for single parents on JSA

Methodology

The research adopts a participatory approach for the following reasons. Much policy is not neutral; on the contrary it aims to change behavior. Single parents should have a chance to have their say on a policy that requires them to seek work by imposing benefit sanctions as well as personalizing support. Increasing the capacity of single parents to define their own experiences of this policy is not only an issue of social justice but it is also about improving the effectiveness of policies and practices.

One of the key underlying principles of research that draws on participatory action enquiry is that participants are co-researchers as well as co-subjects so that participants are not researched on as in the traditional sense of research but it is research with and by co-researchers (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Heron, 1996). The project is committed to equalising the, often disempowering, relationship between the researcher and research participant (Beresford, 2003). Co-researchers are engaged in a process of cycles of reflection and action (Bray et al., 2000; Heron, 1996) since new ideas are adopted, utilised, made more aware and inquired into during practice then reflected upon, generating the construction of knowledge which in its turn generates new actions and new reflections.

Participatory methods draw on direct experience, which can highlight issues that are not easily apparent otherwise (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). Lone parents experience the effect of policies and services. This direct experience means that they have a particular insight about how these policies may or may not work. Policy issues are expressed in the words of, and grounded in the reality of, those who experience their impact. Policies that make sense to lone parents and that can fit with the complexity of their everyday lives are more likely to work.

Increasing the capacity of lone parents to engage with local and national decision-makers creates a learning dialogue. Lone parents gain more information about policies, a sense of ownership, and in so doing they are more likely to take-up services. In turn policy-makers gain more holistic understanding of the impact of policies on single parents.

Data generation

An analysis of JSA policies for single parents, and related policies will be undertaken in order to develop a contextual framework to the research. By critically reviewing key messages and policy emphasis, we will draw out underlying narratives and discuss those in relation to the experiences of single parent interviewees.

The study is based on two areas of Bristol which have high numbers of single parent households on income support, but with different demographic makeup: The inner-city wards of Easton and Lawrence Hill, and Filwood and Hartcliffe situated in the Southern periphery of the city. To better understand the context in which single parents are accessing training and support we will conduct a mapping exercise to identify service providers in the areas of study. We will conduct informal interviews with managers and frontline staff and analyse service documents, flyers and any other relevant information. The support needs identified in SPAN's Participatory One Parent Proofing (POPP) project will inform interview questions, and key themes identified in the analysis will be reviewed against the criteria for one parent proofing set out in the POPP Toolkit (SPAN, 2007).

Ten single parents peer researchers will be recruited from the two areas of study and trained in research methods by staff from the Faculty of Health and Social Care at UWE, Bristol, which has been at the forefront of developing support for Evidencing Work Based Learning (EWBL) since 2000. The relationships between the academic research staff and the single parent researchers will mirror the participatory philosophy of the overall research in that power relationships are minimised and a collaborative approach is taken.

The Peer researchers will then undertake qualitative semi-structured interviews, designed in collaboration with research staff at SPAN and UWE, with 30 single parents in each locality of study. Each one of the 10 peer researchers will interview six single parents – a total of 60 interviewees. They will interview the same parent three times during a time period of 9-12 months at key stages of the policy: following initial interview at Jobcentre; once they have started training/employment placement; once they have started a job or if they have failed to secure employment. Once again the findings of POPP will inform the design of interview questions. After each set of interviews, designated staff from UWE and SPAN will meet with the single parent peer researchers to validate the data gathered. Data

analysis and reflective practice will be part of an iterative process informing the construction of interview guides for each set of interviews.

The longitudinal element will allow us to track the complexity of experience over time. It will also allow for the interviewer and interviewee to build a relationship and record rich narratives of complex life stories and factors contributing to the success or failure to secure sustainable employment through the support services on offer. Furthermore, we would be able to gain a better insight into the initial fears and expectations as well as progress over time. All interviews will be recorded verbatim and will take place in the home of the interviewee or in another location agreed by both parties beforehand.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts will be analysed using a recognised qualitative data analysis approach of sorting quotations from the transcripts into data categories, themes and sub-themes. The researchers, through identifying meaningful data, coding and indexing data, developing categories and themes, act as interpreter and analyst drawing the research together. Once the research team, including the single parent peer researchers, have collectively agreed the established coding framework, coding will be carried out on all the transcripts. This will be done by using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis package NVivo. Summary analysis reports will be provided for validation by the peer researchers as part of regular group meetings.

The findings from the interviews with single parents will be analysed in relation to the findings from the mapping and scoping exercises carried out in phase one of the project. In this way we will be able to identify strengths and weaknesses within existing services as experienced by single parents themselves. Bibliographical data on the single parents and the comparison between two different areas of Bristol will further allow us to identify contributing factors to different levels of success in improving life chances of individuals within the target group.

A maximum of 5 focus groups with single parent interviewees will be undertaken in each locality (10 in total) to validate key research findings. Each single parent peer researcher and one researcher will co-facilitate a focus group with the 6 single parents they have interviewed. The focus group will adopt a workshop style format using semi-structured questions and will be audio recorded. Through the focus groups we hope to gain a more general, and less individual, view of experiences of support and opportunities offered so far.

The final phase also includes an 'exit strategy' to ensure participants are able to build on the newly acquired skills. Single parent researchers will be given the opportunity to develop a peer research group. This group will be led and managed by the single parent researchers and supported by SPAN.

Dissemination

A national strategy building on SPAN and POPP's key contacts and influencing avenues will be planned in the first year of the project. Influencing work will take place throughout

the duration of the project, in the first instance promoting the research. In the later stage of the project the single parents peer researchers will be trained in presentation and influencing skills. Whenever possible a participatory approach will be adopted once peer researchers feel ready to do so. Although a central mission of the team is to disseminate high quality research findings to national and international research, policy and practice audiences, preliminary findings will be used if a key influencing opportunity arises. A launch of the research report is planned in Westminster to attract key policy makers and politicians. Local disseminations will be achieved by establishing a local provider framework in year 1 in conjunction with the mapping exercise. Again single parents peer researchers will be supported to disseminate the final findings with the objective of influencing change.

In addition to interim and final research report an accessible executive summary will be written for a range of audiences including single parents themselves. Drawing upon the study, the team will produce multiple conference papers and at least two international peer reviewed research articles during and beyond the course of the study. Staff from UWE would attend relevant conferences and events with members of the SPAN team including where appropriate peer researchers.

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