

Fatherhood Research in Australia Symposium II 2017 Day 1 Report

If not us then who? – Fatherhood Research Symposium 2017

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Engagement, technology, connection and collaboration; these were the key themes that emerged from the second Fatherhood Research Symposium held in Melbourne on April 20 – 21st. Run by The Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, in partnership with The Centre for Social and Early Development at Deakin University, the symposium was a chance for more than 40 fatherhood researchers, service providers and media outlets from across the country to come together and discuss their projects, make connections and build collaborations for the future.

Matthew Roberts from Mercy Health O’Connell Family Centre described the symposium as the academic equivalent of Tinder where attendees could “swipe right” and build connections with other researchers and collaborative working relationships. “I think connection is key. It can be quite an isolated journey swimming against the current of fatherhood exclusion. So for me to meet a whole bunch of people to whom fatherhood inclusion is pretty much second nature, I found it really recharged my batteries and helps me keep putting one foot in front of the other,” Roberts said.

“I’m going to be swimming for a long time, the tide is slowly turning but I think we have to keep paddling like crazy. We know this stuff in this room, but out there in that world we have this challenge of actually bringing everyone else with us.”

Chris May from the Family Action Centre at University of Newcastle also spoke of the importance of connecting with likeminded individuals in what can feel like an isolated field. “It can feel like you’re in a very small group trying to achieve some really obscure outcomes and address an obscure issue so it’s a wonderful thing to find yourself amongst more than 25 people who are sharing your interest and enthusiasm for something that is important to way more than 50 percent of the population,” he said.

“What I was really impressed with today was to see there is some sort of skeleton or structure developing around this work in Australia. I think with the combination of longitudinal data, the inventions that are fitting with the context of modern society and the development of some really genuine attempts of measures of outcomes, it’s still a long way off it but I feel that the boat isn’t as full of holes as I thought it was.”

The breadth and diversity of the research being done in the area of fatherhood and fathering inclusion was a key feature of the symposium, with researchers tackling it from a number of angles; from sleep to parenting conflicts, breast feeding, SMS based interventions and the best ways to bring the support to where the fathers are. This diversity really stood out for Sarah Hunter a Phd candidate at the University of Adelaide. “I’m actually quite shocked by the breadth of research in this area,” she said.

“Especially after doing a Phd you get really bogged down in your specific topic that you forget and don’t realize there is so much variety in the same topic so that has been really interesting.”

Tess Knight from Deakin University took the opportunity to learn from the diversity and take what she can to apply to her own research. “I’ve learnt a lot from the methods people have been using, maybe some of the gaps in what’s being done and work out what could be done and who to connect with.”

For Tom Nightingale founder of the fathering website, dadstuff.com.au, the symposium was a chance to build connections of mutual benefit. “The reason I’m starting this project is because there is nothing out there at the moment and I’m a dad of young kids myself and I got sick of waiting for someone else to do it,” he said. “Its early days for this website but hopefully in time I can offer the people doing the research, the people at this symposium, a reasonably sized audience of dads and they can get their message out to the people who are going to hear it, act on it and hopefully make their own lives a bit better.”

Through the poster presentations, the break-out groups and discussions the importance of the need to continue to work together to advocate for change shone through. “We need to be champions for fathers, fathering and fatherhood research,” said Jan Nicolson from LaTrobe University.

“One of the things that emerged really strongly today is that we do have great richness of data available to us...we are leading the way in terms of good quality longitudinal data on father and there is just enormous potential that that brings us.” Roberts agreed and added that it was up to the people in the room to be the advocates for change. “I think it was one of the early nuns from Mercy, Catherine McAuley who said, “if not us then who?’ And that should be over our door. ‘If not us, then who.’ We shouldn’t assume that someone else is going to do it. And we’re all in the room here, we’ve come from all parts of the country, we’re voting with our feet and we’re going to support each other.”

The Fatherhood Research Symposium II: Theory, Measurement, Policy and Practice was held on April 20-21st 2017 at the city campus of Deakin University.