

Cocreating with Young Fathers: Producing Community- Informed Training Videos to Foster more Inclusive Support Environments

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Abstract

Our contribution draws upon a collaborative project called ‘Diverse Dads’, which ran between October 2020 and April 2021, during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. The team comprised members of the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) Project, advisors from support organisations that champion inclusivity, and the Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) research team. ‘Diverse Dads’ sought to identify and address gaps in service provision for young minoritised

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The Diverse Dads Collaborative (2021) *Researching inclusive support for (young) fathers: A community-led study*, Full Project Report.

dads in the North East, and to promote cross-sector conversations concerning inclusive support for young dads from diverse communities. With support provided remotely by the FYFF team, peer research was undertaken by three young men from NEYDL. Our work highlights how methods of coproduction and cocreation were achieved during the pandemic. NEYDL is also embarking on an ambitious new digital service journey with partners DigiDAD, producing digital outputs that are made by and for young fathers. Working collaboratively, the peer research team and DigiDAD produced a set of videos designed to support training for professionals in mainstream, family, and statutory services. Showcasing one of these creative outputs, our contribution will discuss the continued value of coproduction and cocreation with young people and using creative, digital methods to support productive discussions between young fathers, professionals, and researchers.

Keywords

coproduction, creative methods, minoritised fathers, participatory methods, young fatherhood



Research summary

‘Diverse Dads’ was an innovative peer research project (funded by the University of Lincoln QR Strategic fund, November 2020–April 2021) that addressed a community-identified gap in knowledge about how services might improve outreach and support for young fathers from minoritised communities. The project focus was driven by observations by a specialist support organisation for young fathers called the North East Young Dads and Lads (NEYDL) about an absence of representation from minoritised communities among the young fathers being reached and engaged. Drawing on existing peer research expertise of two young fathers and a senior peer link worker at NEYDL, the research element of the project comprised an exploration of existing support provision for minoritised communities and the local demographic profile of the North East region.

A set of five training videos were also cocreated as key outputs, designed to engage and educate national welfare professionals about the importance of identifying and engaging proactively with young fathers, including those from minoritised communities. Prompted by the new conditions of the pandemic and requirements for delivering services online, NEYDL were embarking on an ambitious new digital service called DigiDAD and advancing plans for a creative digital support and training offer for young fathers. Led by a young man with video production skills, DigiDAD produces online, education, and peer-led films, made by and for young fathers. With the production expertise of DigiDAD, the 'Diverse Dads' visual outputs were produced collaboratively and were achievable using the digitally mediated forms of communication available in the context of the pandemic.

Conducted remotely, the entire research and production process was supported by an advisory group comprising the peer research team, professionals from NEYDL, the Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) team at the University of Lincoln and representatives of local and national support organisations. This included Future Men and Connected Voice, champions for young fathers, and inclusive practice with minoritised communities. As reflected in the project structure, the design and delivery of 'Diverse Dads' aligned with the principles of participatory action research (PAR) and coproduction that also underpin the wider work of FYFF. Established early in the project, the shared aim of the collective of partners was to encourage social transformation in relation to how young fathers are constructed and responded to.

Aims and objectives of the video outputs

Collectively, the five training videos offer an important corrective to pervasive deficit ideas about young fathers, including that they are 'feckless', uncaring and 'hard-to-reach' (Neale et al., 2015). They do so by creating a unique platform for young fathers as peer researchers and 'experts by experience', who challenge professionals to consider the assumptions they make, including how their services and support offers might be 'hard-to-access'. For minoritised communities this includes encouraging professionals to better understand and explore diversity in their localities and address the pervasive myth that the communities they serve lack diversity.

The selected video for this article is one of these five short videos, developed to promote and share good practice in the support of minoritised young fathers, as well as methodological approaches to research that directly involves them. The first featured the peer research team describing the project; the second ('I was a Boy who brought a boy into the world'), our selected video, featured minoritised young fathers being interviewed by the peer research team discussing their experiences of fatherhood and support services; the third featured professionals providing advice about good practice when working with minoritised communities and fathers; the fourth featured a conversation with the advisory team; and the fifth featured the FYFF researchers. We chose the second of the five videos for this piece as it is a unique platform for minoritised young fathers to voice their lived experience, and this video also illustrates the participatory peer research.

Attentive to, and building on the skills and expertise of young fathers with lived experience, as well as the combined knowledge of the project partners, the videos were designed to do three things:

1. to render visible the lived experiences of minoritised young fathers and to challenge deficit constructions of young men, including those from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds,
2. to educate and promote good practice among professional communities through young fathers' stories of lived experience, and
3. to create a study legacy, promoting the value of community- and peer-led research with young fathers.

Filed by DigiDAD, the selected video uniquely features the NEYDL peer research team interviewing minoritised young fathers. The video was filmed in the NEYDL support space, which adhered to social distancing requirements at the time of filming.

The cocreation process: democratic participation

The value of cocreation as a methodology, especially with diverse young fathers, is yet to be fully explicated in discussions of sociological theory, practice, and method. However, as a distinctive form of coproduction, it constitutes and facilitates both creative and inclusive collaborations with multiple stakeholders to produce innovative, community-identified responses and solutions (Kreiling and Paunov, 2021). The cocreation of digital, creative outputs is therefore an underdeveloped area methodologically. In addition, young fathers experience marginalisation, both at a broader societal level and through being under-researched in family and parenthood research (Davies and Hanna, 2020). Nevertheless, there are notable examples in academic research of creative, participatory methods with young fathers including the use of photovoice (Sopack et al., 2015), participant-led time maps, relationship maps and self-portraits in interviews (Neale et al., 2015), and peer research (Braye and McDonnell, 2012).

Applying the key principles of these approaches, the cocreation process adhered to a principle of 'democratic participation' (Alminde and Warming, 2020; Mackey and Vaealiki, 2011) throughout, whereby the broader project team and participants, comprising individuals from a range of backgrounds including diverse, marginalised identities, were supported to contribute meaningfully to decision making, in accordance with their skill set, interest, and expertise. With the guidance of FYFF and the wider project team, the peer researchers identified minoritised young fathers and professionals from their community, conducted interviews with them, identified key messages from the interviews via the editing process and co-disseminated the videos at an online webinar.

The webinar was developed for, and attended by, professionals from UK-based third sector and mainstream support services. Prompted by the videos, reflective conversations were facilitated with professionals about the importance of inclusive practice for young dads. Professionals' feedback on the videos following the event suggested that they had achieved their intended aims in raising awareness about how and why inclusive, sensitive, and proactive support for minoritised young fathers is important, prompted by the expertise and experience shared by those with lived experience. In feedback following the launch of the videos, one community worker said that they valued 'the openness and willingness from the young dads to share their experiences'. Another said they would 'continue to attempt to challenge/be aware of my assumptions that can creep in when

dealing with young dads/men', while a health worker commented that they intended to 'consider the intersectionality, think about who is not in the room more'.

Ethical principles and considerations

Chaired by the FYFF team, ethical principles and considerations were negotiated and explored at weekly meetings with the peer research team as part of a process of research training and advice. These sessions were important for the peer researchers to report on their experiences and concerns and to discuss decisions and ethical approaches that were either anticipated or experienced throughout the research and cocreation process. The wider 'Diverse Dads' project team who met monthly also benefitted from the input and insights of the professional expertise of the NEYDL manager and project advisors, who helped to anticipate and address potential concerns around power (im)balances, vulnerability and safeguarding. For example, questions of vulnerability and safeguarding were heightened for both the peer research team and participants in the interviews conducted by the peer researchers, which we acknowledged might prompt conversations about emotive and politically sensitive issues. These concerns were ameliorated in part by the short time frames required to film the videos and clarification for the peer research team that complex issues must be discussed with and deferred to the wider project team. The framing of the interview schedule and questions were also carefully managed to mitigate these risks. The frequency of conversations and negotiations between the project and advisory teams consequently enabled ongoing reflection and careful proactive ethical management about the sharing of outputs and potential impacts of the project for all involved.

Given the substantive focus of the project, the democratic participation process also comprised regular and frank discussions among the project team about the importance of using anti-racist and anti-discriminatory language both in the interviews, videos, and written outputs. These decisions were supported by training delivered to the project team by Connected Voice, who provided expertise around inclusive and empowering engagement with minoritised communities. As an example, the team elected not to use the 'BAME' acronym on the basis that it lacks specificity (Milner and Jumbe, 2020) and 'continues to reduce the identities of victims of White supremacy to a single, three to four-letter abbreviation whilst remaining divorced from the long history of racial subjugation' (Rayvonn Shaleigha D'Clark cited in Milner and Jumbe, 2020: 419). Instead, the project team use the term 'minoritised' to acknowledge how minoritisation operates as 'a social process shaped by power' (Milner and Jumbe, 2020: 419; Gunaratnum, 2003). We also recognised that minoritisation is intersectional (Collins, 2015; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991) and that young fathers' identities and fathering practices are often situated at the intersections of gender, class, age, religion, sexuality, and disability.

Before promoting the video outputs to a wider audience, we carefully negotiated consent with all featured participants and had anticipatory conversations about the attendant politics of 'letting go' (Fink and Lomax, 2016), namely, that once videos are promoted, it is harder to manage audience responses, some of which may be challenging or indeed, exclusionary. Following Howarth et al. (2021), the team negotiated with participants how, when, whether, and why they wished to have their contributions publicly acknowledged. Informed consent forms developed by the DigiDAD team and the FYFF team (with approval from the university ethics committee) were signed by participants to

cover both research and production ethics and risk assessments were carried out to ensure that the filming complied with government guidance about social distancing while also remaining responsive to what felt comfortable for those involved.

It was determined that the videos should be promoted predominantly to professionals and on project websites in respect of participants' wishes to have both their voices and experiences heard and the aim of raising awareness about the value and necessity of inclusive practice in the support of young fathers. It was clear that visibility and voice were deemed more important to participants than the desire to remain anonymous, so we explored ways to manage the balance of participant voice/visibility versus audience reaction. The videos have been made available on the FYFF and NEYDL websites for at least the duration of the study (until 2024). After this point, they will only be accessible publicly on a site that requires sign up membership owned by NEYDL. They are also available on the DigiDAD YouTube channel. However, given the sensitivities of the topics discussed, comment facilities are switched off to avoid the potential for anonymous trolling and harm to participants.

Conclusion

In the context of the pandemic, 'Diverse Dads' simultaneously facilitated the cocreation of new evidence about young fatherhood with minoritised young fathers, as well as the production of innovative visual outputs that promote inclusive practice and empowering representations of diverse young fathers. The cocreation methodology, combining young father involvement in both research and the creative output production, is premised on existing epistemology associated with PAR and coproduction, but represents a novel and empowering approach for illustrating the capabilities of a marginalised group who are frequently subject to stigma and deficit views. It does this by showcasing how young fathers can advocate on behalf of themselves, generate and deliver research findings, and transform how young fathers are seen by society.

Related outputs/publications

Video 1 – Diverse Dads – Peer Researchers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78NynAV0gt4&list=PLS-wMhJQuiUj0GiSEwOsNNRT8NRVNx-Wz&index=10>

Video 2 – 'I was a Boy who brought a boy into the world', interviews with minoritised fathers: https://youtu.be/Szxb5_kAO_o

Video 3 – Diverse Dads: Interviews with professionals: <https://youtu.be/KexWr3s7W6E>

Video 4 – Diverse Dads advisory team: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBJDeQLOxGE&list=PLS-wMhJQuiUj0GiSEwOsNNRT8NRVNx-Wz&index=1>

Diverse Dads (webinar video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExQGxZ4yTMM>

The report can also be accessed through the FYFF website: <https://followingyoungfathersfurther.org/asset/written-reports/>

DigiDAD Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkAeSuiuO3JJpEf71p7uxhA>

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Accessibility

As a digital, open access output, the videos are an accessible way of sharing information and findings. The production team developed them so that they could be accessed by visually impaired persons and those with hearing difficulties (subtitles provided).

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author biographies

Laura Way, University of Lincoln, is a research fellow on the 'Following Young Fathers Further' study. She holds post-graduate qualifications in both sociology and education and has been teaching across the further education/higher education sectors for the last 12 years. Laura's research interests include gender and ageing, subcultural identities, creative qualitative methods, and punk pedagogies. She is also on the steering committee of the Punk Scholars Network.

Anna Tarrant is Associate Professor in Sociology in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Lincoln and UKRI Future Leaders Fellow with the 'Following Young Fathers Further' study. Her research has broadly focussed on men's care responsibilities and support needs, particularly in low-income families. Anna's previous research, 'Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care' was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (2014–2018) and findings from this study have recently been published in a research monograph called *Fathering and Poverty*, with Policy Press.

Linzi Ladlow, University of Lincoln, is a research fellow on the 'Following Young Fathers Further' study. Her research interests include youth transitions, family life, young parenthood, and housing. Linzi's PhD research is a qualitative longitudinal study of disadvantaged young parents' housing pathways and support needs.

Jonah York is a 27-year-old trained Actor and Director originating from Brighton and Hove. He is currently a creative associate with 'Seven Stories', The National Centre for Children's books, and 'Peer Support and Education Officer' at 'The North East Young Dads and Lads'. Jonah graduated from the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts with a first class honours. Jonah also has trained as part of the graduate programme with Tmesis Physical Theatre company and received the Poel Event Prize with The National Theatre and The Society of Theatre Research. Jonah is committed to creating work across the country and often works with a variety of artists, theatres, art's buildings, and communities.

Adam Gorzelanczyk was a peer link support worker for the North East Young Dads and Lads at the time of the project, supporting young dads to engage in research. He is a peer researcher for the Diverse Dads project.

Dylan Brown is 21 years old and became a young dad at the age of 16. He has one daughter. He is a peer researcher for the Diverse Dads project.

Will Patterson found out he was going to become a dad at 17 and has three children. He is a peer researcher for the Diverse Dads project.

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