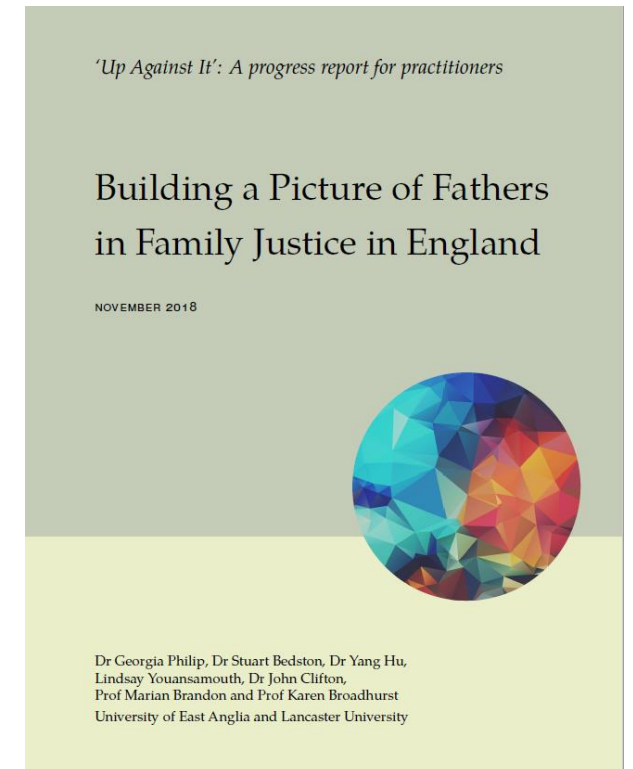


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'Counting Fathers In'
Understanding men's experiences of
child protection



'Up Against It'
Fathers' experiences of recurrent
care proceedings

Fathers and father engagement – the wider research context

- UK: **Scourfield** (2006, 2014, 2016) **Clapton** (2009, 2013), Featherstone et al. (2009)
- US and Canada: Coady et al (2013), Saleh (2013)
- Recent Lit reviews: Gordon et al (2012), **Zanoni et al** (2013) – but also see **Brown et al** (2008) for the concept of ‘ghost fathers’
- ‘Fathers **not the ‘core business’; fathers as ‘hard to reach’, services as ‘unwelcoming’** or failing to consider/involve men.
- Tendency to focus on professional/practitioner perspectives

Socio-political context...

- Think about the politics of social work, or the ways in which social work is political (radical?)

Risk management, early intervention, risk 'prediction', more individualistic perspective (see for example, Graham Allen report 2011, or recent Children's Commissioner report 2018)

In contrast with

Social inequalities perspective, 'social model' of CP, relationship based SW (see for example, Paul Bywaters 2015, Featherstone et al 2018, Hingley-Jones & Ruch 2016)

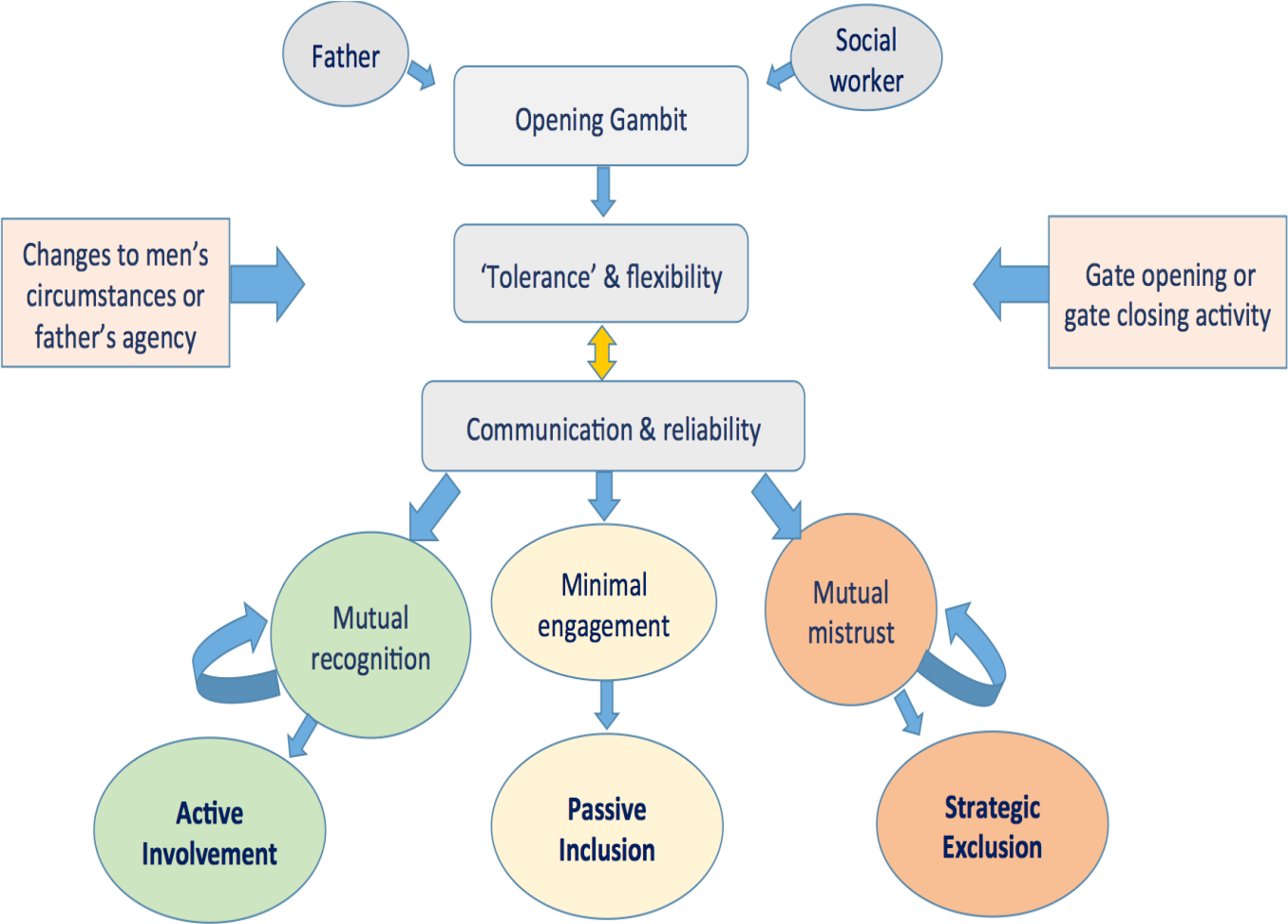
Father engagement – What's the (ongoing) problem?

- Equality Act 2017, 'Working Together', 'whole family' approaches, 'strengths or relationship based working'

And yet...

- Needs to be a convincing argument to alter practices and use scarce resources – even more so in the current context of 'austerity'.
- Tendency for services aimed at men/fathers to be short term, rather than strategic (pockets of good practice, not systemic/organisational or cultural change)
- Enduring theoretical and cultural ideas about parenting: e.g. hierarchical attachment theory; the primacy of the 'mother-child' relationship; prescribed (or 'determined') gender roles.

Dynamic model of father engagement



Other barriers to relationship building with men/fathers

- **Less confidence** and greater perception of risk/threat
- **Binary thinking** – *either risk or resource*
- Less willingness to work with or ‘tolerate’ problematic behaviour
- Tendency to interpret or ‘see’ risk rather than vulnerability or need
- Greater effort required to generate **time** and opportunity to build relationships.
- Greater effort required to avoid **mutual mistrust**, defensiveness or avoidance.

Tools- for thinking and doing...

- Gender sensitivity and critical questioning.
- Analysing men's 'agency' as fathers.
- Being alert to Gatekeeping.

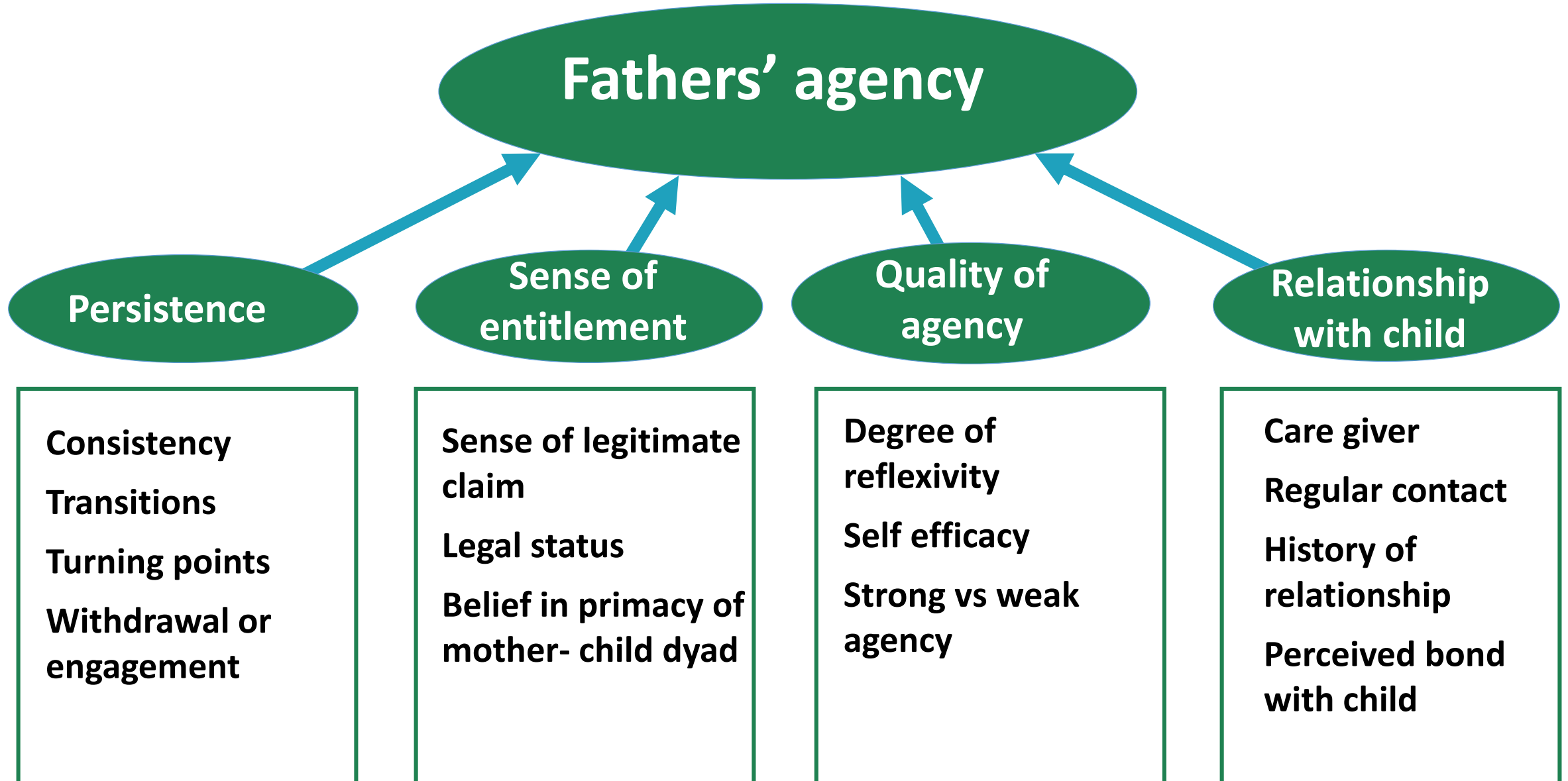
Gender sensitivity Vs gendered thinking

- Working with men in CP requires that attention be paid to parenting as a gendered experience, and to how assumptions can be made or left unquestioned.
- Men were sensitive to when gender difference amounted to unfairness, such as how allegations of abuse are handled, where different levels of support or sanctions are afforded to mothers, or where fathers' involvement was stalled or discounted.
- Overall, the men did not generalise about gender bias in social work. Our findings support the view that it is not the gender of the worker per se that can improve working relationships with men.
- But, if relationships deteriorated, then a language of gender discrimination was readily available as a powerful justifying mechanism, which could entrench mutual antagonism.

Gender matters (2)

- **‘Switch it’** – think about a case, a story, an interaction, a conversation, an account, and switch the sex of the parent.
- See if this reveals anything, offers insight, or unlocks something. This may be challenging...

Evaluating fathers' agency in the child protection arena



Five key ideas

- Supported by our research evidence
- Relevant to a range of practice settings/organisations
- Relevant to us as individuals...

Taking a 'Both-And' approach

Effective engagement with fathers has to *both* hold men accountable *and* directly value their parenting on its own terms.



Most fathers, like most mothers are a combination of *both* strengths *and* weaknesses, or 'risk' *and* resource factors.

They are rarely 'all good' or 'all bad'

Gender matters

Father engagement requires thinking critically about parenting as *gendered*: fathers and mothers encounter different expectations, sanctions, rewards, opportunities and constraints as parents.



We argue for a more **gender sensitive** approach to case work, to service design and delivery.

We see this as one way to build more effective working relationships with fathers and to support men's parenting.

Time and Timing

The fathers in our study described social work as *'rushed and slow'*.

Important to think about father engagement not just in terms of *whether* things happen (and whether a father is included), but also to look at *when* things happen.



Gatekeeping

Child protection services and processes produced *gate-opening* and *gate-closing moments* for men – opportunities created, or at other times missed, to include fathers, to be curious, to respond, or to review, what their involvement could be.

Sometimes this gatekeeping was to do with formal or procedural factors, but at others it was to do with attitudes or assumptions about men and parenting.



Persistent curiosity

Social workers *can*, and *need*, to apply curiosity, persistence and skill to hearing fathers' stories.

Achieving some means of hearing a man's story should also be seen as routine and valuable, rather than as an additional or unmanageable task.



Individual workers need to be supported, at an *organisational* level, to achieving direct contact, and build relationships - particularly with non-resident fathers.

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Short film presenting five key ideas from *Counting Fathers In*

- To download the *Counting Fathers In* study report, click here
- <https://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family/child-protection-and-family-support/current-projects/-counting-fathers-in->
- Link to Research Gate page:
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328957622_Building_a_Picture_of_Fathers_in_Family_Justice_in_England