

Constructions of primary caregiving fathers and masculinities

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Abstract

This thesis presents a discursive analysis of constructions and representations of primary caregiving fathers in popular parenting texts and Australian newsprint media. Primary caregiving fathers are increasingly the focus of both academic and cultural interest and this interest stems from the argument that there are shifting understandings and practices of fatherhood. Fathers are argued to be shifting away from traditional, provider models of fathering, toward a new and involved model where fathers can express a more nurturing side.

In addition to the changing nature and practice of fatherhood, there have been arguments that this change reflects and contributes to simultaneous changes in masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity – the form of masculinity that maintains men’s dominance – has long informed traditional definitions of fathers as the distant, financial provider. However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity cannot account for the experiences of primary caregiving fathers, as these fathers typically step away from the financial provider role. The literature therefore argues that there has been a shift away from hegemonic forms of masculinity and towards one that has been termed a “caring masculinity”.

The analyses in this thesis draw on a social constructionist and discursive approach to explore the constructions of masculinities and primary caregiving fathers in order to better understand and account for the experiences of these fathers. Taking this approach allowed for a focus on how fatherhood is a complex cultural and ideological construction that is continuously negotiated and constructed. In particular, three analytic chapters are concerned with the constructions and accounts of primary caregiving fathers in parenting texts published for

these fathers and Australian newsprint media. The analyses focus on interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and membership categorisation devices deployed in the data. The analytic findings indicate that:

- Despite claims to encourage and promote primary caregiving fathers, parenting texts suggest very specific ways in which it is deemed appropriate for men to take on the primary caregiving role.
- Media accounts of primary caregiving fathers rest upon a principle/practice dichotomy of endorsing new and involved fathering in theory, but reproduce considerations that suggest it is unrealistic and impracticable.
- The category – primary caregiving father – is fluid and flexible and can be reworked to position these fathers as both within and transgressive of normative masculine and fathering boundaries.

This thesis concludes by discussing the implications of these constructions in relation to contemporary conceptualisations and practices of fathering and masculinities.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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