

ACCEPTED VERSION

Sarah C. Hunter, Martha Augoustinos, Damien W. Riggs
Ideological dilemmas in accounts of primary caregiving fathers in Australian news media

Discourse, Context and Media, 2017; 20:116-123

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Final publication at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.09.005>

PERMISSIONS

<https://www.elsevier.com/about/our-business/policies/sharing>

Accepted Manuscript

Authors can share their accepted manuscript:

[24 months embargo]

After the embargo period

- via non-commercial hosting platforms such as their institutional repository
- via commercial sites with which Elsevier has an agreement

In all cases accepted manuscripts should:

- link to the formal publication via its DOI
- bear a CC-BY-NC-ND license – this is easy to do
- if aggregated with other manuscripts, for example in a repository or other site, be shared in alignment with our [hosting policy](#)
- not be added to or enhanced in any way to appear more like, or to substitute for, the published journal article

11 June 2020

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/116187>

Ideological dilemmas in accounts of primary caregiving fathers in Australian news media

Sarah C. Hunter

The University of Adelaide

Martha Augoustinos

The University of Adelaide

Damien W. Riggs

Flinders University

Abstract

Norms and expectations regarding fathers are changing, with fathers now expected to be more involved in caregiving. One consequence of this is an increase in fathers who assume the primary caregiving role. The study reported in this paper involved a discourse analysis of 176 Australian newspaper articles that focused on primary caregiving fathers. Three recurring interpretative repertoires pertaining to primary caregiving fathers were identified, suggesting contradictory and dilemmatic accounts of this role. These were: 1) advocating for primary caregiving fathers, 2) comparing the past and present, and 3) barriers to father involvement. Overall, when describing the “typical” father who provides primary care, the articles promoted the evolving cultural ideal of fathers as involved and nurturing caregivers, however they nonetheless justified continued gendered inequalities in parenting. Therefore, despite claims that new models of fathering are

encouraged and promoted in western cultures, the analysis demonstrates that media accounts construct and reproduce hegemonic masculinity. The paper concludes by suggesting that a more critical lens should be applied to claims of support for greater father involvement, as despite structural and social support in favour of involved fathering, this support is comprised of contradictory elements that simultaneously undermine this emerging ideal.

Keywords: involved fathering; hegemonic masculinity; primary caregiving fathers; ideological dilemmas; contemporary fathering

Introduction

In recent years, what are seen as seismic shifts with regard to father involvement have been of increased academic and cultural interest (Doucet & Merla, 2007; Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008). In particular, there has been a focus on the growing number of fathers who assume a primary caregiving role, referring specifically to men in heterosexual relationships who take the lead in providing day-to-day care for their children (Chesley, 2011). Such fathers, it has been suggested, break away from the traditionally held assumption that fathers are the “secondary” parent, where caregiving is predominantly considered “women’s work” (Fleming & Tobin 2005; Maurer & Pleck, 2006).

To date, research on primary caregiving fathers has focused on exploring 1) what motivates men to take on the primary caregiving role, 2) negative reactions and attitudes toward men who undertake this role, 3) the various coping strategies such men use when faced with negativity, and 4) how they negotiate their fathering and masculine identity (e.g., Burkstrand-Reid 2012; Chesley 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Dunn, Rochlen & O’Brien, 2013; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2011; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo & Scaringi, 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008). Understandably, much of this research has focused on constructions of masculinity amongst primary caregiving fathers given paid work – and the assumption that men will be financial providers – has long been understood as fundamental to the fathering identity (Hanlon, 2012; Medved, 2016; Petroski & Edley, 2006; Whelan & Lally, 2002).

This subject position of father-as-provider legitimates a socially valued form of masculinity and therefore can be viewed as hegemonic. As such, and despite ambiguity and debate surrounding the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson,

1993; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Speer, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), it is a theoretically useful tool for conceptualising the experiences of primary caregiving fathers. Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as an ideology that mandates certain forms of masculinity as most laudable, in comparison to all women and men who are depicted as effeminate (Connell, 1987). Few men achieve the hegemonic ideal, of course, however all are measured against it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Plantin, Mansson & Kearney, 2003). This is perhaps especially true for primary caregiving fathers who step away from the financial provider role, who are then by default located outside the hegemonic norm for fathering.

In order to account for how primary caregiving fathers negotiate a place within the hegemonic norm, the notion of a “caring masculinity” has emerged to account for how contemporary fathers are encouraged to explore a more nurturing and caregiving aspect of their fathering identity (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Elliott, 2015). The idea of a “new” father has been extensively discussed in the literature, and there is considerable emphasis on the benefits of a father who is attentive, caring, and involved (Henwood & Procter, 2003). For primary caregiving fathers, the idea of a “caring masculinity” both offers them a space within a new norm, whilst still positioning them as outside the more traditional hegemonic position of the father-as-provider (Medved 2016).

One cultural site where tensions between a caring masculinity and more traditionally hegemonic masculinities are evident is in the media. Popular culture plays a significant role in the production of discourse, which in turn can create pressures and expectations that men must navigate (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Necessary, then, is research that considers how discourses of fathering are constructed and reproduced in the media, and the implications of such discourses. The present paper thus reports on a discourse analysis of Australian news media reports focused

on primary caregiving fathers. Before presenting the analysis, an overview is first provided of previous research on primary caregiving fathers in the media.

Previous research on primary caregiving fathers in the media

Lupton and Barclay (1997) argue that news media constitutes a crucial source of information on fatherhood. How fathers construct ideas of what it means to be a father is largely based on what intelligible identities are made available to them. The media is one site in which regulatory notions of what is appropriate, expected, and normal with regard to fatherhood are presented (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001). Despite the media's claims to objectively report on world events, these accounts should more properly be understood as social constructions, drawing upon existing norms and available discourses (Eldridge, 1993). The discourses deployed in these accounts have repercussions and consequences, often not intended or understood by the writer (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). It is therefore important to examine the ideological consequences of how primary caregiving fathers are constructed.

Even though research has documented the positive effects of involved fatherhood (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005), a relative lack of fatherhood presence within the media reinforces the long standing assumption that fathers are secondary, and sometimes, unnecessary, to the caregiving process (Schmitz, 2016). For example, a study by Winter and Pauwels (2006) analysed all newspaper articles focused on primary caregiving fathers published in 2004 in Canada. They identified how the articles focus on both current and previous paid employment when describing primary caregiving fathers, highlighting the need to demonstrate an "other", more traditionally masculine, role. Similarly, Liong's (2015) study of representations of primary caregiving fathers within Hong Kong newspapers found that such fathers were depicted as remaining tied to the

public sphere, especially middle-to-upper class fathers. This connection to the public sphere, while undertaking the primary caregiving role, served to position these fathers as aspiring to return to paid employment, demonstrating that they were still invested in their provider role, thus demonstrating a legitimate and socially valued masculinity. This provider ideology was not challenged within the news articles examined by Liong, instead, it was used to praise primary caregiving fathers for their sacrifice to giving up their economic power and careers.

In the limited research conducted on Australian media representations, Stevens (2015) found that primary caregiving is not framed as a personal choice for fathers, but instead results from circumstances. The news excerpts examined by Stevens suggested that if it were not for structural constraints or economic hardships, primary caregiving fathers would prefer to be financial providers. Overall, the news media examined by Stevens emphasised the traditionally masculine attributes of primary caregiving fathers, specifically by framing involved fathering as an addition to paid employment. Therefore, the ideal image of a contemporary father is one who is both a financial provider and an involved father (Stevens).

Whilst the present study is situated within the broader context of research that has been conducted in a variety of countries, this does not suggest an aim to identify a universal construction or experience of all primary caregiving fathers. There are limitations inherent in attempting to draw comparisons across different national and cultural contexts, as fathering is constructed through specific social, cultural and historical contexts. As such, the study reported here sought to further focus on news media representations of primary caregiving fathers within the Australian context, reflecting as they likely do the specificities of Australian discourses, policies and practices with regard to fathering, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Method

The data examined in this study are derived from news media accounts of primary caregiving fathers. Articles that focused specifically on the lives and experiences of these fathers were included for analysis: articles that only fleetingly mentioned them were excluded. Further, it was decided to exclude the search term “house husbands” due to the number of articles retrieved relating to the popular Australian television series *House Husbands*. Such articles focused largely or exclusively on the actors, ratings, season renewals, etc. of this series, and were therefore not deemed relevant for this analysis.

A search was conducted of all Australian newspapers within the Factiva database. The articles analysed were sourced from the two major Australian publically-listed newspaper proprietors (Fairfax and News Ltd), which represent the political left – right spectrum of newsprint journalism in Australia respectively. The following search terms were used: "stay-at-home dads", "stay at home dads", "stay-at-home fathers", "stay at home fathers", "caregiving dads", “caregiving fathers”, "men who mother", “Mr. Mom”, and “Mr. Mum”. These search terms are the most commonly used terms as identified by the academic literature reviewed in the introduction to the present paper. The search was restricted to articles published over a 5 year period, between 1st January 2012 and 20th October 2016.

In total, 351 articles were found using these criteria. After excluding 101 articles due to being duplicates, and excluding articles that were not relevant, 176 articles remained for analysis.

Analytic Approach

There are many forms of discourse analysis, but all share a concern with the meanings that people negotiate in social interaction, and the ways in which everyday talk is shaped by cultural

forces (Gough & McFadden, 2001). This paper draws on discourse analysis in a way that focuses on the socially constructed nature of fathering. Such an approach enables the analysis to capture the complex, inconsistent, and contradictory accounts of masculinity and fathering. In particular, it allows us to appreciate how contemporary fathering is organised around ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). Billig et al.'s (1988) defines ideology as common sense thinking that is frequently dilemmatic and contradictory. This understanding of ideology as inconsistent and contradictory is important, as it demonstrates that ideology is not simply a set of attitudes, but rather, is form of sense making. Analytically, then, ideological dilemmas are useful as they are a means of exploring competing and conflicting accounts of sense making.

Initially, all 176 articles were read by the first author, to identify key interpretative repertoires pertaining to primary caregiving fathers. Wetherell and Potter (1992) define interpretative repertoires as “broadly discernable clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images” (p. 90). As they go on to note, identifying and examining interpretative repertoires is “a way of understanding the *content* of discourse and how that content is organized” (original emphasis). The initial analysis conducted found that the news articles examined framed interpretative repertoires pertaining to primary caregiving fathers through a series of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). Specifically, the initial analysis produced findings that mirrored previous theorisations of gender inequality, such as Wetherell et al.'s (1987) investigation of how university students endorsed equal opportunities for men and women, whilst at the same time, emphasising practical considerations that justified continuing inequality, and Edley and Wetherell's (1999) investigation of the ways in which young men described desiring an involved fathering experience in theory, whilst at the same time providing reasons why this may not be practical.

The patterns identified by the first author were then reviewed by the other two authors, with the latter agreeing with the patterns identified by the first author. The analysis that follows, then, is structured around the ideological dilemmas identified, and exemplary extracts were selected for further in-depth analysis. The analysis below also examines rhetorical devices and discourse analytic concepts derived from discursive psychology (Potter, 1996). This allows for a closer examination of the contents of the ideological dilemmas by focusing on the constructive and action-oriented nature of the language used, thus considering what the text is doing, accomplishing, and constructing (Potter, 1996). Through this approach, the analysis demonstrates a principle/practice dichotomy, endorsing primary caregiving fathers in principle, but undermining this by arguing that such caregiving is constrained by what are construed as practical considerations.

Analysis

The analysis is organised into three interpretative repertoires, all of which demonstrate the principle/practice dichotomy of endorsing primary caregiving fathers in theory, but suggesting it is difficult in practice. The first repertoire relates to how primary caregiving fathers are advocated for within the newspaper articles. The second focuses on how the news articles construct the past and present as either/or contrasts in order to argue that contemporary fathers have come a long way. Finally, the third repertoire pays attention to three particular barriers to fathers' inclusion in caregiving.

Advocating for primary caregiving fathers

Overall, primary caregiving was framed positively within the news media articles. The articles all advocated and promoted primary caregiving for fathers. However, this advocacy was framed more as an ideal, rather than a realistic or practicable goal. The following extracts demonstrate how the news articles present fathers in contemporary society as no longer adhering to inequalitarian models of fathering. Parenting is constructed as a mutual and egalitarian relationship between a mother and father. This account works to justify and promote primary caregiving fathers, as such fathers are positioned as not departing from the norm, but rather are aligned with the shifting and contemporary norms and expectations of fathers.

Extract 1

“Manning up For Role Change” – Wentworth Courier (28/09/2016)

There was a time when it would have seemed odd for a husband to stay at home with the children when the wife went to work. But Jonathon Smith, of Clovelly, said he was part of a growing number of stay-at-home-dads embracing the role of the primary carer.

Extract 2

“My Dad, Phil Hillier, Passed Away Last Week” – Wyndham Weekly (18/03/2015)

The parental roles today are so much more flexible and shared, and I am so glad that this is the case. In so many families now, dad is not the one who brings home the bacon and mum is not

chained to the kitchen. We have learned to share the responsibilities of parenting and working.

These two extracts attend to the political and social context of contemporary parenting, where fathers are now expected to be more involved due to changing norms. Fathers taking on the primary caregiving role are represented largely in a positive, even admirable, light. In Extract 1 the contrast between framing primary caregiving fathers as odd, with fathers now embracing this role, suggests that there has been a shift in thinking in society, demonstrating that inegalitarian gender roles in parenting are no longer acceptable.

Further, Extract 2 states that there is more equality, with partners now sharing the roles and responsibilities of parenting. The departure from inegalitarian expectations is emphasised through the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that things “are so much more flexible and shared”. This formulation works to argue that there has not been just a slight change, but rather a significant improvement. Furthering this claim to change, other news articles also argued that it is no longer rare or unusual for fathers to be primary caregivers:

Extract 3

“Emotional Send-Off” – Port Macquarie News (03/02/2014)

“I noticed that there's a lot more dads working part time and doing the Mr Mum thing these days, which I think is fantastic”

Extract 3 works to de-emphasise the non-normative status of men as caregivers, by positioning it as no longer rare or unusual. The extract also demonstrates some interesting fact construction work. Drawing on features of the empiricist repertoire (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), the

construction “I noticed” works to position the following claim as merely a report of what is happening; of the facts, rather than an opinion or belief. The positive evaluation of this claim (“I think is fantastic”) provides a strong endorsement of fathers’ increasing involvement in the caregiving role. However, at the same time the extract draws on the category “Mr Mum”, which reinforces the normative gendered expectation that mothers are primary caregivers, as opposed to a gender neutral account such as “parenting”. Not only does this reinforce the construction of mothers as caregivers, but it feminises men who are caregivers. As such, when men take up a primary caregiving role, an interesting and complex situation unfolds. Whilst individual men are feminised for their uptake, caregiving roles are simultaneously reappraised and gain some social value in a broader sense, due to men taking on these roles. This is an example of men bringing their power and privilege to traditionally feminine and devalued roles.

The following extract demonstrates how despite positive and favourable representations of caregiving fathers in principle, many newspaper articles simultaneously reinstate inegalitarian gender notions of mothers and fathers by positioning them as distinct and not interchangeable roles.

Extract 4

“Strewth” – The Australian (02/06/2015)

We are all equal. But no Dad can be a Mum or Mum, a Dad.

Here we see a typical use of a disclaimer (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). By prefacing the disclaimer with an egalitarian statement (“we are all equal”), the disclaimer works to prevent any accusations of sexism and serves to legitimise the argument that mothering and fathering are

distinct roles. This works to position this argument as a fact, rather than a potentially sexist value judgement. This rhetorical strategy of explicitly endorsing liberal ideals, only to be juxtaposed by dubious and arguably sexist constructions of parenting, was a typical and common feature of the data corpus.

This section of the analysis demonstrates how despite advocacy for primary caregiving fathers in newspaper articles, this positive slant was at the same time undermined by reproducing inegalitarian norms of fathering and mothering that questioned the interchangeability of these parenting roles. In these constructions mothers and fathers were positioned as distinct roles that relied on inegalitarian gendered notions of what it is to be a mother or father. Arguably, such accounts, although advocating for the changing role of fathers, at the same time function to limit and constrain primary caregiving fathers.

The past and present – “Fathers have come a long way”

The news articles also suggest that as fathering has progressed so much, we need to focus on celebrating contemporary fathers. Therefore, even though the news articles endorse primary caregiving fathers, they argue that there is no need to expect fathers to be more involved, as they have already achieved so much. Therefore, the news articles set up the past and present as either/or contrasts in order to renegotiate the ideals of father involvement. This is reminiscent of the findings of Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987), where they discuss the discursive strategy of focusing on how “times are changing”, thus situating the present as better than the past. The need to focus on the present and contemporary fathering is undoubtedly important. Nonetheless, traditional fathering and contemporary fathering are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, setting up the past and the present as either/or contrasts functions to justify and

legitimate the argument that contemporary fathers are highly involved and that there is more equality in the gendered division of carework, and this needs to be celebrated.

Extract 5

“Dads Take Charge of The Home Front” – The Sun Herald (29//03/2015)

“There is no doubt men are more comfortable changing nappies, taking their child to the shops and organizing their dinner than previous generations”

In Extract 5 contemporary fathers are contrasted with fathers of the past. This works to refocus attention away from the continued limitation of men’s involvement, and rather emphasises how there is perhaps no need for change or more involvement. A three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) is employed, describing how contemporary fathers are highly involved through “changing nappies”, “taking their child to the shops”, and “organizing their dinner”. It is interesting to note here how parenting is limited to simple tasks. Whilst trying to emphasise contemporary fathers’ uptake of involved nurturing, the evidence supplied is relatively task focused, which is arguably masculine, and ignores the emotional and feminine aspects of caregiving. Further, a factual tone is established through the use of a rhetorically self-sufficient argument. The claim that there is “no doubt” that men are more competent caregivers than fathers of the past constructs it as a fact that contemporary fathers are meeting the expectations of an involved father. By framing uninvolved fathers as those of “previous generations”, it establishes that contemporary fathers, irrespective of their depth of involvement, do not behave in a way that reflects old-fashioned and outdated values.

Extract 6

“Daddy Issues” – Herald Sun (05/09/2015)

“Fathers have come a long way since the days when they were distant authority figures. Young dads are showing their determination to outdo their own fathers, by seizing on the role with energy and enthusiasm”

The contrast between the past and present is further established in Extract 6, where it is outlined how fathers have actually “come a long way”. This account contrasts contemporary fathering with inegalitarian modes of fathering, in which fathers are negatively framed as distant authority figures. The implication from this extract is that contemporary fathers do not need to be measured on the amount of their involvement; rather we should focus on praising fathers for how well they are doing, and how involved they are, in contrast with fathers of the past.

Significantly, this new and involved model of fathering is depicted as a form of competition with inegalitarian models of fathering. Fathers’ “energy and enthusiasm” is not framed as stemming from their interest in being a father, rather they are depicted as more interested in competing and winning at fatherhood. This account masculinises new and involved fathering by drawing upon ideas of determination and seizing opportunities. In a sense, it is implied that fathers who adhere to and approximate inegalitarian models of fathering are less masculine, as they do not seize the opportunity or are not determined. These are all hegemonic masculine norms, and therefore work to embed hegemonic masculinity within this new, involved form of being a father. Therefore, this account trades on traits of hegemonic masculinity in order to normalise a departure from hegemonic masculinity, which is a previously documented form of masculine identity negotiation (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). It is ironic, however, that fathers are

constructed as wanting to be more and better than fathers of the past by not adhering to hegemonic masculinity. However, at the same time, they are drawing upon hegemonic masculinity in order to be “better” fathers.

The ideological dilemma of advocating primary caregiving fathers in theory, but not in practice, is discursively managed by the news articles through this contrast between the past and present to renegotiate ideals. The interpretative repertoire discussed here contributes to the argument made by Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987), namely that contrasting the past with the present and claiming that things are slowly improving may in fact justify and rationalise the status quo and continuing patterns of gender inequality.

Barriers to inclusion

The two previous interpretative repertoires focused on the ways in which the articles advocated for primary caregiving fathers in theory. This final repertoire, however, focuses more specifically on the variety of practical reasons and explanations that the news articles mobilised to justify why, in practice, it is unrealistic for fathers to be primary caregivers. These particular reasons were presented as unavoidable facts or just the way things are. Despite their being a degree of legitimacy and weight behind some of these barriers, the news articles mobilise them in a way that presents primary caregiving for men as too difficult, as opposed to providing a critical account of these barriers. In particular, three barriers were argued to prevent or constrain fathers from taking up the primary caregiving role: 1) economic barriers, 2), mothers behaving as “gatekeepers”, and 3) struggles and difficulties.

Economic barriers

The legitimacy of primary caregiving fathers as a cultural ideal rests upon the assumption that men and women can equally look after children (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). This, however, challenges a long standing expectation that fathers should be financial providers in order to be considered a “good” father. Therefore, and not surprisingly, this expectation was frequently invoked to justify why, in the end, it makes more economic sense for fathers to engage in full-time paid work rather than caring for children.

Extract 7

“Pay Parity Will Help Stay at Home Dads” – Herald Sun (06/08/2012)

Australian women are paid on average 17 per cent less than men who are doing equivalent jobs, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. So when kids come along, it makes economic sense for the woman to stop working while the man continues to slog it out in paid employment

This article draws on quantification rhetoric to validate the claim that it makes more economic sense for fathers to take on the provider role (Potter, Wetherell & Chitty, 1991). As outlined in the extract, the gender pay gap is a socioeconomic reality that can have influence on the decisions of the division of carework in heterosexual couples. However, rather than critique this situation or push for social and structural change, the news article presents this issue as just the way things are. The following extract further demonstrates how statistics were used routinely to argue that financial considerations are paramount when it comes to whether fathers can take on caregiving responsibilities.

Extract 8

“Why Not More Stay-at-Home Dads” – The Age (06/09/2015)

More than half of fathers said parental leave would have to be paid at replacement wage rates if they were to look after their child when the mother went back to work. If they were paid a replacement wage, fathers said the ideal length of parental leave would be nine to 12 months. If they were paid minimum wage, they would take only up to six weeks off.

In Extract 8, fathers are presented as though they do not factor in emotional or personal interests when considering primary caregiving. It is presented as though it simply comes down to economics. If they get paid the “right” amount, they will take on caregiving, if not, it is viewed as not possible. These accounts maintain and reinforce the cultural privilege often afforded to fathers. They are in a position where they can decide if caregiving is worthwhile, and they are able to put a price on their time, whereas women have long been in a position where they do not necessarily get that choice. Yet again, quantification rhetoric works to make this reproduction of inequalitarian gender roles and hegemonic privilege more rhetorically robust. There is opportunity here for the media to put forward an argument that social policy needs to be re-evaluated in order to encourage father involvement. However, this extract demonstrates how the media instead reproduces the privileged position fathers are in, which only serves to legitimate social policies that hinder father involvement.

Mothers behaving as “gatekeepers”

Another practical barrier offered up to justify why it is unrealistic for fathers to be primary caregivers, is that mothering acts as a form of gatekeeping. Fathers are depicted as not being in a position to take on caregiving unless the mother has chosen to step away from it first. Extracts 10 and 11 demonstrate how mothers are positioned as being in control of whether fathers become involved in the care of their children.

Extract 10

“Women Need to Back Away From The Housework” – Mail Online (26/02/2014)

“‘Women must step back so men can step up,’ is the message from Clint Greagen, Australia’s most successful ‘daddy blogger’.”

Extract 11

“Unsung Heroes” – The Sun Herald (06/09/2015)

Hey, superwoman, it’s time to give credit where it’s due, says Tracey Spicer. They [men] are our secret weapons, but we dare not speak their names.

Extract 10 depicts fathers as not being in a position to take on caregiving unless mothers first “step back”. This description has accountability built into it. Rather than position fathers as responsible, this account presents fathers as wanting to be more involved, but mothers are actively preventing them from doing so. Extract 11 makes the assumption that it is normative for mothers to solely take on the caregiving responsibilities and not acknowledge that fathers can and do play an important role. Fathers are presented as simply helping or assisting mothers, as they are represented here as a mother’s “secret weapon”. Fathers’ secondary role is further

emphasised through the category “superwoman”, as it positions mothers as having control, power and agency, while fathers are constructed as assistants or helpers. Moreover, mothers are presented as hesitant to acknowledge that they receive help or support from fathers, where they are said to “dare not speak their names”. Mothers are constructed as though they desire the full credit for child rearing.

This account of mothers as “getting in the way” of fathers can also be seen in the following extract.

Extract 12

“Unsung Heroes” – The Sun Herald (06/09/2015)

However, many men feel uncomfortable in traditional female roles: some simply don't want to do it; others are excluded. One day, my hubby watched in horror as every mother and toddler in the Gymparoo circle moved away from him

This article draws on the category entitlement of the author as a “mother” and her partner’s first-hand experience of being excluded by other mothers at “Gymparoo” to demonstrate how many men feel uncomfortable due to feeling excluded. Again, although the article appears to advocate for primary caregiving fathers, it also positions women as their own worst enemy by making it difficult for men to be accepted into a caregiving role. It is interesting that this construction of mothers behaving at “gatekeepers” sets up paid work and care work as binaries. Within a heterosexual relationship, fathers are positioned as though they cannot be involved in caregiving unless mothers relinquish the role. There is not a discussion of shared parenting with joint

responsibilities, which arguably reflects many contemporary family dynamics and also undermines a more equal model of parenting.

Struggles and difficulties

The final barrier accounting for why it is impracticable for fathers to be primary caregivers is that they are likely to face struggles and difficulties beyond those identified already. This account justifies why it may not be a good idea for fathers to take on primary caregiving. This was a rather prominent account, to the extent that there was one article devoted entirely to outlining the variety of difficulties faced by fathers, aptly titled “*Daddy Issues*” (Herald Sun – 05/09/2015).

Extract 13

“Let’s Now Sing Mothers’ Praises” – Illawarra Mercury (21/03/2015)

Over the past 22 months I’ve questioned my sanity, experienced chest pains, I’ve punched my own head with self-pity and frustration and I feel like I’ve aged by at least a decade

It is clear to see how fathers are positioned here as experiencing negative consequences when taking on the primary caregiving role. Emotive and extreme descriptions such as describing fathers as questioning “their sanity”, and experiencing feelings of “self-pity and frustration”, function to depict caregiving as extremely challenging. These descriptions could be seen in a positive light, demonstrating the deserved acknowledgement that care work is difficult. Now that men are engaging in care work there is acknowledgement, and the value of carework becomes

visible. This, however, is another example of men's increasing involvement bringing privilege and social value to previously feminised work. The focus on the difficulties, however, may also function to depict men as unsuitable for the caregiving role due to their purported inability to manage the stress and responsibilities of caregiving. This extract misplaces feelings common to parenting in general, and rather repositions them as struggles unique to men.

Fathers are also depicted as experiencing adverse reactions from society when taking on the caregiving role, which serves to make it difficult and almost undesirable for a man to be a primary caregiver.

Extract 14

"Father's Day" – Sunday Mail (07/10/2012)

He said it was "an unfortunate fact of life" that men were viewed suspiciously when seen with children in public. "All the nasty stuff that you hear, abuse and violence towards children, it's largely perpetrated by men so people are naturally suspicious," he said. Mr Wilson said there were practical issues he faced while looking after his children early on. "You would go to change their nappy and you'd find the change facilities were in the ladies' toilets."

Extract 14 describes how fathers are viewed with suspicion when they are seen with children in public. The risk of being perceived as a potential child abuser is highlighted as a serious problem that primary caregiving fathers face. However, rather than critically examine the prejudice fathers may face and put forward an argument that they deserve better, it is rather framed as an

“unfortunate fact of life”. This account potentially justifies, normalises, and legitimises why people are apprehensive about caregiving fathers. To further substantiate the difficulties faced by fathers, the extract proceeds to suggest that there are “practical issues” for fathers as well. The extract outlines how change tables are commonly found in female rather than male toilets. Therefore it becomes difficult, and almost impossible, for fathers to take care of their children in public. Again, there is significant accountability work going on in this construction. Two examples are provided, outside of fathers’ control, to argue why fathers are compromised in taking on the primary caregiving role.

Conclusion

The initial aim of this paper was to broadly identify the ways in which the news media construct and represent fathers who take on the primary caregiving role. What became apparent, however, was that representations in the news articles were contradictory and inconsistent. Drawing upon the work of Billig et al. (1988), the discourse analysis presented in this paper demonstrates how accounts of contemporary fathering are built upon ideological dilemmas, more specifically the principle/practice dichotomy identified by Wetherell, Steven and Potter (1987) and Edley and Wetherell (1999), and that this occurred through three interpretative repertoires, namely 1) advocating for primary caregiving fathers, 2) comparing the past and present, and 3) barriers to father involvement.

The three repertoires identified in this study all rest upon an ongoing ideological dilemma: gender equality in principle, but practical constraints in practice (Billig et al., 1988). This dilemma seemed largely to be a product of the fact that advocacy for primary caregiving fathers was constructed as being at odds with the normative expectation that fathers should be financial

providers. Accounts of practical barriers thus served to reproduce inequalitarian norms and expectations associated with fathering, thus further demonstrating how fatherhood continues to be a contested site of competing societal discourses (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Merla, 2008; Stevens, 2015).

Like Liong's (2010) findings, the news articles examined in the present paper praised fathers for their contribution and their participation in traditionally feminine roles. However, particular to this study is how the news articles positioned fathers almost as victims of the practical barriers, and rewarded fathers for their desire to be involved, irrespective of their level of involvement. This construction is especially problematic in relation to the positioning of mothers as gatekeepers. This positioning works to hold mothers responsible for fathers' lack of involvement, whilst fathers are praised for their purportedly unrealised desires to be more involved in the care of their children.

Due to the concern for gender equality and work-family balance in contemporary society, policymakers in Western and Nordic countries have directed their efforts toward increasing levels of father involvement (Dermott, 2008). However, the current study demonstrates that support for primary caregiving fathers and increased father involvement continues to be tempered by an invested in perpetuating hegemonic accounts of masculinity. That is not to suggest that practical constraints identified as barriers to greater father involvement should not be recognised as legitimate barriers. However, there is an important distinction between the media simply reproducing these constraints as justification for current fathering practices, and utilising these constraints to argue for social change and policy revisions that promote equal access to caregiving. For example, the analysis identified how the news stories drew on the

gender pay gap to explain why many Australian men remain the primary financial provider. However, the stories did not then utilise this example to push for social or structural changes.

Despite the increasing number of men becoming primary caregivers, the gendered division of carework and housework in Australian families remains unequal, and policymakers are seeking to resolve this through structural and policy changes (Stevens, 2015). There are multiple schemes in Australia to encourage father involvement, such as the Dad and Partner Payment (DaPP) (Stevens, 2015). However, despite these structural changes, social policies and gendered assumptions continue to disincentivise fathers and reproduce the notion that fathers are not primary caregivers, and the current study demonstrates how this is perpetuated via the news media. Greater social and academic discourse needs to be directed at critiquing and debating these gendered assumptions.

In conclusion, the study reported here highlights the need to pay ongoing critical attention to discourses that endorse and promote primary caregiving for fathers. Whilst appearing to support and encourage such fathers, the analysis reported in this paper demonstrates the ability of the news media to endorse involved fathering in theory, whilst reproducing and maintaining hegemonic masculinity and inegalitarian models of fathering. These findings support previous research that demonstrate how this type of accounting arguably upholds patriarchal privilege (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell, Steven & Potter, 1987), whilst exploring some of their specific iterations in the Australian context. Overall, the findings reported here have broader implications for understanding contemporary social norms and ideals, especially the claim that fatherhood is evolving and the claim that a “caring masculinity” is challenging inegalitarian norms of fathering, with the findings suggesting that as much as there is change, much still remains the same (Hunter, Riggs & Augoustinos, 2017).

References

- Ammari, T., & Schoenebeck, S. (2015). Understanding and supporting fathers and fatherhood on social media sites. *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, ACM, 1905–1914. doi: 10.1145/2702123.2702205
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Blackman, L. & Walkerdine, V. (2001). *Mass hysteria: Critical psychology and media studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Burkstrand-Reid, B. A. (2012). Dirty Harry meets dirty diapers: Masculinities, at-home fathers, and making the law work for families. *Texas Journal of Women & the Law*, 22(1), 1-44.
- Chesley, N. (2011). Stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers: Gender, couple dynamics, and social change. *Gender & Society* 25, 642-664. doi: 10.1177/0891243211417433
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin Australia.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829-859. doi: 10.1177/0891243205278639
- Dermott, E. (2008). *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Donaldson, M. (1993). What is hegemonic masculinity? *Theory and society*, 22(5), 643-657. doi: 10.1007/BF00993540
- Doucet, A., & Merla, L. (2007). Stay-at-home fathering. *Community, Work & Family*, 10(4), 455-473. doi: 10.1080/13668800701575101
- Duckworth, J. D., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2009). Constructing work-life balance and fatherhood: Men's framing of the meanings of both work and family. *Communication Studies*, 60(5), 558-573. doi: 10.1080/10510970903260392
- Dunn, M. G., Rochlen, A. B., & O'Brien, K. M. (2013). Employee, mother, and partner: An exploratory investigation of working women with stay-at-home fathers". *Journal of Career Development*, 40, 3-22. doi: 10.1177/0894845311401744
- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1995). *Men in perspective: practice, power and identity*. New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1999). Imagined futures: young men's talk about fatherhood and domestic life. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(2), 181-194. doi: 10.1348/014466699164112

- Eldridge, J. (1993). *Getting the message: News, truth and power*. London; USA; Canada: Routledge
- Elliott, K. (2015). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, 1-20. doi: 10.1177/1097184X15576203
- Fischer, J. & Anderson, V. N. (2012). Gender role attitudes and characteristics of stay-at-home and employed fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 13, 16-31. doi: 10.1037/a0024359
- Fleming, L. M. & Tobin, D. J. (2005). Popular child-rearing books: Where is daddy? *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 6, 18-24. doi: 10.1037/1524-9220.6.1.18
- Gilbert, G. N. & Mulkay, M. (1984). *Opening pandora's box: A sociological analysis of scientists' discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gough, B. & McFadden, M. (2001). *Critical social psychology: An introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Hanlon, N. (2012). *Masculinities, care and equality*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Henwood, K., & Procter, J. (2003). The 'good father': Reading men's accounts of paternal involvement during the transition to first-time fatherhood. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(3), 337-355. doi: 10.1348/014466603322438198
- Hewitt, J. P. & Stokes, R. (1975). Disclaimers. *American Sociological Review*, 40, 1-11.
- Hunter, S., Riggs, D.W., & Augoustinos, M. (2017). Hegemonic vs. a caring masculinity: Implications for understanding primary caregiving fathers. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 11, 1-9.
- Jefferson, G. (1990). List construction as a task and resource. In G. Psathas (Eds.), *Interaction Competence* (pp. 63-92). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Latshaw, B. A. (2011). Is fatherhood a full-time job? Mixed methods insights into measuring stay-at-home fatherhood. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, 9(2), 125-149. doi: 10.3149/fth.0902.125
- Latshaw, B. A., & Hale, S. I. (2015). 'The domestic handoff': Stay-at-home fathers' time-use in female breadwinner families. *Journal of Family Studies*, 1-24. doi: 10.1080/13229400.2015.1034157
- Liong, M. (2015). Sacrifice for the family: Representation and practice of stay-at-home fathers in the intersection of masculinity and class in Hong Kong. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1-16. doi: 10.1080/09589236.2015.1111200

- Lupton, D., & Barclay, L. (1997). *Constructing fatherhood: Discourses and experiences*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.
- Marsiglio, W. & Pleck, J. H. (2005). Fatherhood and masculinities. In M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn & R. W. Connell (Eds.), *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (249-269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maurer, T. W. & Pleck, J. H. (2006). Fathers' caregiving and breadwinning: A gender congruence analysis. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 7, 101-112. doi: 10.1037/1524-9220.7.2.101
- Medved, C. E. (2016). Stay-at-home fathering as a feminist opportunity: Perpetuating, resisting, and transforming gender relations of caring and earning. *Journal of Family Communication*, 16(1), 16-31. doi: 10.1080/15267431.2015.1112800
- Merla, L. (2008). Determinants, costs, and meanings of Belgian stay-at-home fathers: An international comparison. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, 6(2), 113-132. doi: 10.3149/fth.0602.113
- Petroski, D. J., & Edley, P. P. (2006). Stay-at-home fathers: Masculinity, family, work, and gender stereotypes. *The Electronic Journal of Communication*, 16(3-4).
- Plantin, L., Mansson, S.-A., & Kearney, J. (2003). Talking and doing fatherhood: On fatherhood and masculinity in Sweden and England. *Fathering*, 1(1), 3-26. doi: 10.3149/fth.0101.3
- Pomerantz, A. M. (1986). Extreme case formulations: A new way of legitimating claims. *Human Studies*, 9, 219-230.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Potter, J., Wetherell, M. & Chitty, A. (1991). Quantification rhetoric – cancer on television. *Discourse and Society*, 2, 333-365.
- Rochlen, A. B., McKelley, R. A., Suizzo, M.-A., & Scaringi, V. (2008). Predictors of relationship satisfaction, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction among stay-at-home fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 9(1), 17-28. doi: 10.1037/1524-9220.9.1.17
- Rochlen, A. B., Suizzo, M. A., McKelley, R. A., & Scaringi, V. (2008). "I'm just providing for my family": A qualitative study of stay-at-home fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 9(4), 193-206. doi:10.1037/a0012510

- Schmitz, R. M. (2016). Constructing men as fathers: A content analysis of formulations of fatherhood in parenting magazines. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 1-21. doi: 10.1177/1060826515624381
- Speer, S. A. (2001). Reconsidering the concept of hegemonic masculinity: Discursive psychology, conversation analysis and participants' orientations. *Feminism & Psychology*, 11(1), 107-135. doi: 10.1177/0959353501011001006
- Stevens, E. (2015). Understanding discursive barriers to involved fatherhood: The case of Australian stay-at-home fathers. *Journal of Family Studies*, 21(1), 22-37. doi: 10.1080/13229400.2015.1020989
- Wetherell, M., & Edley, N. (1999). Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 9(3), 335-356. doi: 10.1177/0959353599009003012
- Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. (1988). Discourse analysis and the identification of interpretative repertoires. In C. Antaki (Ed.). *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Casebook of Methods*. London: SAGE.
- Wetherell, M., & Potter, J. (1992). Mapping the language of racism: Discourse the legitimation of exploitation. New York: Columbia University Press
- Wetherell, M., Stiven, H. & Potter, J. (1987). Unequal egalitarianism: A preliminary study of discourses concerning gender and employment opportunities. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 59-71.
- Whelan, T. A., & Lally, C. M. (2002). Paternal commitment and father's quality of life. *Journal of Family Studies*, 8(2), 181-196. doi: 10.5172/jfs.8.2.181
- Winter, J., & Pauwels, A. (2006). Men staying at home looking after their children: Feminist linguistic reform and social change. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 16(1), 16-36.