

Interchangeable Parents? The Roles and Identities of Primary and Equal Carer Fathers of Young Children

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Abstract

Against the context of enduring gender inequalities in early years' parental care, this paper examines the experiences of UK fathers who had taken on primary or equal care responsibility for children aged three or under. Informed by qualitative interviews with 24 such fathers, the paper explores a discourse of parental interchangeability that pervaded their accounts before outlining the ways that, in practice, most caregiving tasks did tend to be allocated to them or their partners primarily on the basis of factors other than gender. The men's comfort in presenting themselves and their partners as interchangeable equivalents, along with the range of caregiving approaches they were taking on suggest, we argue, that they had begun to move beyond clearly differentiated motherly or fatherly roles. We go on, however, to show that certain emotional, organisational and social aspects of parenting sometimes continued to be centred on mothers. In explaining the endurance of these areas of maternal responsibility within otherwise interchangeable partnerships, we outline mutually reinforcing sets of maternal pressures and paternal barriers.

Key words

family; fathering; masculinity; parenting; gender

Introduction

The persistence of stark gender divisions with respect to caregiving responsibility for young children continues to disadvantage working women and reinforce broader gender divisions. Although it has developed in some respects, the participation of fathers tends still to equate to providing support, while significant male adjustments to work are unusual (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011; Wall and Arnold 2007). Progress, therefore, towards Fraser's 'universal caregiver model' whereby mothers and fathers share caring and breadwinning equally, is slow (Fraser 1997). Yet, in some families, fathers *do* adjust work to take on unusual levels of caregiving and examining such scenarios can tell us much about the possibilities and challenges for a more egalitarian future. Building on a growing literature on such fathers, the current study is the first, we believe, to examine the experience of UK fathers in dual-parent, heterosexual households who had taken on *either* primary or equal care-giving responsibilities for young children. Focusing on how these fathers understood and discharged their roles, this paper examines a discourse of parental interchangeability that pervaded their accounts and explores the extent to which their arrangements challenged established motherly and fatherly roles.

Gender-Neutral Parenting?

Although men increasingly aspire to be involved fathers, their participation in early years care normally remains limited to a support role (Parke 2013; Wall and Arnold 2007). Dermott (2009) argues that, while fathers increasingly embrace intimacy as an ideal for relationships with children, this rarely translates to equal involvement in everyday care tasks or an understanding of themselves as equivalent to mothers. Miller (2011) shows how initial egalitarian aspirations among expectant

fathers tend to dissipate when they become primary breadwinners soon after birth. Thereafter, fathers' occasional endorsements of gender-neutral parenting are eclipsed, she argues, by consistent emphasis on the primacy of maternal bonding and expertise. As a consequence, caring remains central to mothers' self-understandings, while paid-work continues to dominate the identities of fathers' (Miller 2017: 156). In particular, mothers continue to take responsibility for overall coordination of care, even where fathers contribute heavily to care delivery (Christopher 2012; Miller 2017; Parke 2013). Such responsibility connects to ongoing mental work and emotional labour, articulated in Ungerson's distinction between *caring for*, which equates to practical care tasks and *caring about*, intended to capture this all-encompassing affective and mental dimension (2006).

The question with which we are concerned here, however, is to what extent such gendered roles and identities have the potential to be 'undone' (Deutsh 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987) in situations where fathers ostensibly move beyond a support role. While recognising significant reconfigurations of gender, some existing studies of primary carer fathers indicate that, as a result of the ongoing significance of a 'gendered habitus' (Doucet 2009) in which they have to 'navigate the current gendered norms of parenting and paid work' (Locke and Yarwood 2016), such fathers tend to resist comparisons with mothering and embrace distinctively masculine fatherly identities (Doucet 2006; Chelsey 2011). The retention of breadwinning as central to identity is important here, whether through part-time work or understandings of their situation as a temporary career-break (Brandth and Kvande 2002; Chelsey 2011; Merla 2008). A related theme is an emphasis on compensatory masculine unpaid work such as home-maintenance activities - in preference perhaps to more intensive and all-consuming forms of mothering (Doucet 2004). Emphasis also is placed by Doucet (2009) on the overwhelming belief, even among full-time stay-at-home fathers, in a unique emotional bond between mother and baby. Fathers' own embodied care remains, it is argued, focused on traditionally masculine physical activities, risk-taking and playfulness. Finally, such fathers report difficulties discharging some dimensions of 'mothering', including engaging with female-

dominated parent communities (Doucet 2006; 2009; Merla 2008). The reconfiguration of traditional fatherly (and motherly) roles and hegemonic masculinities in such households, then, is regarded as partial, at best (Chelsey 2011; Doucet 2006).

Some recent studies, however, have emphasised with less qualification the gender-undoing potential of fathers caring alone and the notion that intensive everyday caregiving may prompt the development of caregiving masculinities centred on nurturing, emotion and relationality (Elliot 2016). Research on unusually involved fathers by Soloman (2014), Brandth and Kvande (2016) and Ranson (2015), for example, highlights the emergence, through practice, of embodied, emotional and all-encompassing caregiving identities. Competences developed through care practice, argues Ranson (2015) were translating for her fathers into long-lasting affective commitments to care that traditionally are the preserve of mothers.

In Soloman's study of stay at home fathers, emphasis also is placed on fathers' gender-neutral understandings of their parenting. Of significance to the current discussion, the notion of parental equivalence between mothers and fathers has also been a feature of isolated existing studies that - like our own - include fathers who share care equally. Risman and Johnson-Summerford (1998), for example, outline how roles and responsibilities were distributed largely equitably in what they term 'post-gender marriages'. Ranson (2010) takes the argument further, arguing that the range of non-traditional Canadian caregiving couples she studied had often established an 'interchangeable' care arrangement. As well as implying a significant 'undoing' of established notions of mothering and fathering, the term, she suggests, implies a 'fluid exchange of care-giving responsibilities and a frequent blurring of gender boundaries' (175). Such interchangeability, she argues, can be described primarily as functional, centring on the everyday practicalities of care. Nevertheless, it is deemed to indicate a shift in such families from distinct mothering and fathering to broader notions of parenting, with remaining gender differences understood primarily as a matter of parental 'style'. Here, men may sometimes parent more 'like a man' and women more 'like a woman' but the deeper substance of parenting and distribution of

responsibilities has become practically interchangeable. Importantly, however, such fathers may continue to face significant challenges to their gender and identity in social worlds outside the home, where traditional categories weigh more heavily, prompting them to find themselves positioned - and/or positioning themselves – through a more established gendered lens (also see Locke and Yarwood 2016). In such circumstances, Ranson suggests, they find themselves positioned parenting ‘as a man’, with their gender front and centre, rather than merely ‘like’ one (Ranson 2015).

In the discussion that follows, we draw on Ranson’s valuable work in exploring a discourse of interchangeability in the accounts of fathers in our study of UK primary and equal caregiver fathers. That is - rather than emphasising their distinctiveness as fathers, they tended to present themselves as the equivalent of their partners, able to switch in and out of caregiving tasks according to need. Developing Ranson’s discussion somewhat, our analysis initially centres on the symbolic significance of interchangeability for how fathers saw themselves as parents, before going on to focus on its practical application. Here we outline the role of an ostensibly gender-neutral expediency as the primary driver of most role allocation - and on fathers’ apparent embrace of approaches to caregiving that indicated movement towards affective, caring masculinities. We go on, however, to outline how the men’s partners were sometimes continuing to bear a disproportionate burden for certain emotional, organisational and social aspects of care. Drawing on existing work care and gender, we explain this with reference to enduring maternal pressures and paternal barriers that apparently were sometimes preventing women from letting go and men from taking full hold.

Methodology

Our research involved in-depth interviews with 24 fathers in heterosexual dual-parent households who regarded themselves as primary or equal caregivers for children aged three or under. Eligibility was determined via an information sheet and a set of screening questions. We defined primary and equal parenting on the basis of the amount of time fathers felt they spent

caregiving as compared to their partner and the extent to which they had made adjustments to paid work. For all respondents, caregiving responsibilities were connected to such work adjustments, including periods of parental leave, adjusted hours, working flexibly or part-time, changing job or becoming unemployed. The decision to focus on both equal and primary carers reflected the neglect of fathers in the former category by much existing research and a desire to understand and compare the range of ways fathers can move beyond a secondary or support care role. Fathers were recruited by combining a snowballing approach with a range of local and online advertisements. Locations for the latter included children's centres, nurseries and various online locations, including the web sites of parenting groups and organisations. The sample included considerable diversity in terms of caring arrangements, including 14 fathers who said they were sharing care equally with their partner, eight who regarded themselves as the primary caregiver (most also working part-time) and two who were on shared parental leave. The sample was, however, white and middle-class in orientation, with most of the fathers currently or recently in professional occupations. Half the 60-90 minute interviews were carried out in person, while for the other half we used Skype, which enabled inclusion of fathers in a variety of UK regions. Interviews were transcribed in full and anonymised. Transcripts were coded thematically in a manner that was informed by existing concepts and questions, but centred on allowing themes and understandings to emerge from the data. Patterns across the coded material were identified and explanations developed.

Interchangeable Understandings

When the fathers were asked about the division of responsibilities in their household, we were struck by their consistent evoking of a discourse relating to parental interchangeability between themselves and their partners. The responses below from Anthony and Brian were typical:

we really sort of settled down into a nice routine and I think we... are sort of completely interchangeable as parents in terms of his [son's]... care... in terms of his you know preferences or

desires of parenting, he doesn't seem to be bothered (laughs) which one of us it is that does anything!
(Anthony, equal caregiver)

it's whoever is closest to the door if she wakes up screaming... it all kind of just falls into a sort of a natural rhythm of one doing one bit while the other's doing the other... if one is getting her tea ready, the other would be playing with her in the garden, you know, one's running the bath, the other one's sorting out her clothes to go to grannie's the next day... (Brian, equal caregiver)

Our use of interchangeability to make sense of such accounts draws on Ranson's use of concept to understand situations in which 'practices usually associated with mothering or with fathering [are] considered separately from the person conventionally associated with their execution' (2010: 177-8). Importantly, our use of the term ought not suggest the fathers felt that their caring practices were identical to those of their partner, that every task was split evenly or that either they or we regarded their parenting as gender-free. Rather, it encapsulates how they presented themselves and their partners as equally able/willing to discharge the various tasks associated with care according to need, regarded gender as largely unimportant in this and understood themselves as broadly equivalent to their partner in their role as parents.

In contrast to some earlier studies of caregiving fathers, then, there was little evidence that most of the fathers wanted to highlight their distinctiveness as male caregivers, or place primary emphasis on their breadwinning credentials or compensatory masculine pursuits. On the contrary, many explicitly outlined that work had become more important to their partners' identities than theirs. And, in some cases, overtly gender-neutral understandings of parenting were endorsed. Patrick, for example, disliked the label 'stay-at-home dad' on the basis that it implied something distinct about being a father:

Stop focusing on it as being a stay at home dad and just either parent can be the stay at home parent and just kind of normalising it into the middle... all I am doing is parenting my children and fulfilling the role of the parent who keeps the house running... that's all it is really (Patrick, primary caregiver)

While it could be regarded as unsurprising, we want to suggest that these fathers' comfort with describing themselves as interchangeable with and broadly equivalent to their partners is of

some significance, in its indication of a shift away from the more clearly differentiated motherly or fatherly identities identified in many existing studies of both secondary (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011; 2017) and primary (Doucet 2006; Chelsey 2011) carer fathers. It also suggests, we argue, that as well as having significant practical implications (Ranson 2010), the notion of interchangeability can also capture something more symbolic - how most of the fathers saw and wanted to present themselves - as substantively equivalent to their partners and able to discharge myriad tasks as needed.

Interchangeability and Expedience

In a minority of cases, parental interchangeability was understood primarily in normative terms. Some emphasised how it reflected long-held ideals relating to parenting and gender equality. In other cases, it was through a discourse that juxtaposed parental with external sources of care that the notion of an interchangeable equivalence between partners was articulated. Here, the foregrounding of a somewhat conservative approach to the parent/non-parent dualism contributed to a progressive orientation to mother/father distinctions: 'I think we are a better family for the parents parenting the children... I don't think there is a specific advantage... that it's me doing it, but there's not specifically disadvantages, it's just this is the parent that's doing it. (Patrick, primary caregiver)

More often, our participants' notions of interchangeability were understood not in terms of pre-existing beliefs but, rather, an expedient approach to (often unusual) practical circumstances. Thus, in accounting for their unusual care arrangements, many turned to the detail of earnings, costs, working hours, commutes, child-care practicalities and career prospects. Jason's emphasis on an ongoing pragmatism with respect to current and prospective earnings, for example, illustrated how for him this tied in with an understanding of their roles as interchangeable:

...it comes down to just basic prioritisation in the end, people think, look, can you earn more, yeah, then go for it... I've got no problem with it, as long as whoever's earning more brings it back, if you bring it back then that's great, if it's me, if it's her, it doesn't matter. (Jason, primary caregiver)

In other examples, the emphasis was on partners' stronger prospects for career progression, the incompatibility of their working hours with daily caring or the lack of availability/affordability of suitable childcare.

Consistent with this emphasis on circumstances and expediency, it is noteworthy that parenthood, for many, had begun in a less exceptional manner, with the mother taking several months of exclusive maternity leave and the father as primary breadwinner. The willingness of parents to adapt pragmatically to unusual circumstances, rather than an attachment to unusually strong pre-existing ideals, had apparently created the space for the development of interchangeable parental identities, then. Importantly, narratives of expediency with respect to finances and careers have often been shown to justify or mask more traditionally gendered care arrangements (Orgad 2015). What our study suggests is that, in more egalitarian families willing to adapt flexibly to (more unusual) circumstances, expediency can become equally important as an explanatory logic for interchangeability.

Expediency in Daily Role Distribution

An emphasis on the eclipsing of traditional gender roles by a flexible, expedient approach also dominated fathers' accounts of how daily tasks were distributed in practice. And, sure enough, hegemonic masculinities and femininities seemed to play little role in who responded to children at night, got them dressed, put them to bed, made them food, played with them, read to them or ferried them to and from childcare. Only two of the fathers were caring for children under a year old, meaning the impact of breastfeeding and of the particular discursive emphasis on mother-baby bonding during this time (Doucet 2009) may be somewhat underrepresented. Yet, even for these two fathers, they - like fathers in Ranson's work (2015) - appeared to be coming somewhere close to doing 'everything but breastfeeding'.

Across the sample, then, roles largely were allocated on the basis of availability and convenience, particularly in relation to paid-work commitments. Because most of our sample were

in dual-earner households, this included childcare arrangements. Nursery drop-off and pick-up, for example, would reflect timing and location vis-à-vis home and each partner's work. And the same applied to who would pick-up and care for the child if they became ill while at day care. Thomas recounted how he had postponed work appointments to pick up and look after his son for a day, and that his wife had then taken the following day off.

it was myself that went to fetch our son from the nursery... I'm the closest to the nursery anyway, and because my wife, she works... forty five minutes by bus... So yeah, I fetch him and took that day off, the rest of that day off. So I arranged with my clients and then my partner took the other day...
(Thomas, equal caregiver)

Similarly, when we asked who would normally accompany children to hospital if they had an accident or were seriously ill, the answer often hinged on which partner was at home or available. For stay-at-home dads or those on parental leave alone, this meant there was a greater likelihood that they would do this whereas, for others, it would depend if the need arose on one of their or their partner's days at home. Somewhat to our surprise, proximity and availability seemed more important here than gender. As Jason put it,

It would entirely depend on the situation, whoever's free... I mean if she [daughter] needs to go, she needs to go and we'll organise to go there... If my partner's free, she'll take her, if I'm free, I'll take her. (Jason, primary caregiver)

When it came to fathers' descriptions of their approaches to parenting, we did identify apparent gender differences in some cases, but emphasis on familiar masculine approaches was inconsistent, while the embrace of traditionally feminine aspects of emotional care was widespread. As discussed earlier, some studies of primary caregiver fathers (Doucet 2006; Parke 2013) have noted an emphasis on risk-taking, physical and outdoor activities, for example. Consistent with this, some of our fathers made reference to imposing fewer rules or encouraging their children to play independently, while several made specific mention of 'rough and tumble' or physical play. Such accounts may reflect gendered differences of parenting 'style', the like of which prompt Ranson's concept of 'parenting like a man' (2010; 2015). Yet others said they placed more emphasis on rules

or structure than their partner, or that they were more likely to stay indoors. Another group struggled to identify significant or consistent differences between them and their partners.

Most importantly, there was little evidence that most of the fathers were struggling with discharging emotional aspects of caregiving – and some emphasised the equivalence between themselves and their partners in this respect, as here:

if my [older] daughter fell over and hurt herself and needed to run to someone for comfort, I think she is as likely to come to me as my wife, so there's no ... there's no one of us who provides comfort and solace in that way more than the other I don't think. (Chris, Shared Parental Leave)

While we shall later see that not all the families were quite so interchangeable in this respect, there were few signs that fathers were reticent about discharging more 'feminine' aspects of care and most talked positively about how their enjoyment of this side of their parenting and the emotional bonds they had developed.

The fathers' perception of themselves as interchangeable with their partners, then, often seemed to be borne out in the expediency that seemed to govern the allocation of most roles in their household and, to some degree at least, the ways they were approaching these. Their symbolic sense of themselves as interchangeable, then, was connected to a 'functional' interchangeability whereby, as Ranson proposes, 'caring work is shared in a way that defied neat gender-categorising' (2010: 177-8) and where, we suggest, an expedient approach to practicalities is often understood as the primary driver of role allocation. With respect to both their identities and care practices, then, the men were, like those in Brandth and Kvande's work (2016) and Ranson's later study (2015), clearly beginning to embrace the 'affective, relational, emotional, and inter-dependent qualities of care' regarded by Elliot as the foundation of 'caring masculinities' (2016: 252). While they may not have equated to gender-free parenting, the interchangeable roles and identities described here were indeed contributing to a significant shift from traditional motherly and fatherly identities.

Limits of Interchangeability: Enduring Maternal Responsibilities

While fathers' presentations of themselves and the roles they were taking on represented, we argue, a clear shift away from established motherly and fatherly expectations, we also identified three particular aspects of caregiving that still could be disproportionately centred on mothers. These indicate, we suggest, the capacity of some familiar dimensions of maternal caregiving to endure even where arrangements are comparatively gender-neutral in other respects. While they ought not eclipse the extent of the symbolic and functional interchangeability that had been embraced by the fathers, they go significantly beyond differences of style, prompting consideration of the enduring significance of maternal responsibility – and of the way discourses of interchangeability may have the potential to obscure this.

Mother as Emotional 'Go To'

As outlined earlier, the fathers offered few indications they were experiencing discomfort with discharging emotional care. Nevertheless, while some felt they had become fully interchangeable with their partners in this respect, in other cases, children had retained a preference for their mother when they were upset. Ed explained that, although things were gradually improving, his girls still tended to call for their mother, even when he was caring alone, something that had clearly affected his confidence:

... although I would like to think that I have a very, very strong connection with the girls and a good solid bond, mummy is still ultimately the go to... my ability to kind of comfort the girls is not as great as [partner's]... And [child shouting in background] she may be shouting daddy but she may also be shouting mummy... It's quite gutting, but... I do have to deal with that reality that I will never (laughs)... be mummy! (Ed, primary caregiver)

In Ed's case, this had precipitated a broader sense that, despite his overall competence at discharging the range of activities associated with caregiving (about which he spoke at length), his children's mother might still have been the more ideal full-time caregiver, had circumstances been different: '...at the moment I just feel as though I do as, as well as I possibly can to sort of make up for not having a mum around almost.'

Ed's sense of inferiority to his partner was only shared by one other father, however, and others who felt their children had a maternal emotional preference cited other factors, including the initial mother-baby bonds developed during children's early months. Consistent with this, there sometimes were signs that maternal preference was diluting as they spent more time with their children. Jason felt his daughter gradually was becoming happier turning to him for comfort when he was caring alone, helping him become more confident with this dimension of his role:

mum's still her favourite, if she's feeling a bit down and under the weather... But now, if mum's not there, she'll happily come to me, and it is nice, whereas before she'd be a bit hesitant... it's really nice that now I know that I get the benefit of having more time with her. (Jason, primary caregiver)

The achievement of parity with their partners with respect to emotional care, then, seemed a work in progress rather than a lost cause in most cases where it was raised – and was also somewhat offset by the comfort with which most fathers described their own discharging of emotional forms of care. Nevertheless, while it did endure, the disparity exerted disproportionate emotional pressure on mothers who remained the primary focal point for emotional response, while also creating issues of confidence for fathers.

Mother as care coordinator

In a number of cases, mothers were continuing to take on a good deal of the responsibility for the coordination of parenting. The location of organisational responsibility with working mothers is a consistent feature of existing literature on care (Christopher 2012; Irwin and Winterton 2014; Miller 2017; Parke 2013) and our findings suggest this may sometimes endure even when, in other respects, parental roles are interchangeable.

Pleck and Steuve (2001) have usefully distinguished between 'infrastructural' aspects of maternal coordination, concerning management of everyday activities and people in children's lives and 'executive' components that relate to overall direction. With respect to the former, while some fathers were taking on a substantial proportion of everyday planning, our impression across the

sample was that mothers were tending to take greater responsibility for things like setting up appointments and organising activities, parties or playdates. In Michael's case, although he was doing most daily caregiving and domestic tasks, his partner still coordinated parts of his routines:

she's the sort of organiser of our unit... she will either organise and book it, or she will say to me, here's the information, this is what you need to do... money-wise I actually have no real clue as to what's going on because [partner] does all that, I know what budget I need to keep to for the shop on a Tuesday and do that! (Michael, primary caregiver)

When it came to executive responsibility, while most fathers indicated that significant decisions were taken jointly, mothers seemed more often to be the ones to raise issues for discussion and to research issues in order to inform such deliberations, as here:

...my wife is a lot more willing to spend time reading material, which is good for me because she reads it and then... she'll say what do you think about that? ...and I'll, you know, I'll say, well what, what do you think and what have you read? And we'll tend to agree, what she reads and then takes from that I tend to agree with, it makes sense, certain ways of parenting, so my wife very much leads that. (John, equal caregiver)

Alongside their everyday infrastructural planning, the tendency for ultimate responsibility for the direction of children's upbringing to lay more often with mothers indicates that even in these unusually egalitarian households, they may have been often taking on more of the '24/7 thinking responsibility' (Miller 2017) of parenting than their partners, and the emotional labour associated with this (Ungerson 2006; Doucet 2009).

Women's retention of such responsibilities sometimes connected with their prior responsibility for care during maternity leave (Doucet 2009). Once responsibilities and connections had been established, their continuation sometimes seemed to reflect convenience or force of habit. Scott explained his partner's ongoing responsibility for liaising with health professionals in these terms:

Yeah, I'd say it's primarily my partner, mainly because she had the first six months, that's when you know the first, those first sort of checks were done... so with sort of health professionals, etc, it just happened just because she took the first sort of six months... she sort of, she ended up sorting out that. (Scott, equal caregiver)

Others, however, spoke of barriers to their own taking on of infrastructural aspects of care coordination, barriers that related to how they were positioned by others outside their immediate family. Several alluded to awkwardness faced when dealing with midwives, health visitors and doctors, or the tendency of professionals to communicate with their partner only – something that, in Chris' case, had prompted responsibility for liaising with them to default to his wife:

I think my wife tends to take the lead with those [health/support professionals] and I think that is partly because that's the expectation on the part of the people offering those services... I remember situations where I had been trying to arrange a health visit or something along those lines, but they wanted to speak to my wife, not me... so it's just easier for her to lead those conversations. (Chris, Shared Parental Leave)

As we elaborate below, however, these specifics form part of a broader gendered environment or habitus (Doucet 2009) that encourages mothers, fathers and those that surround them to regard women as ultimately responsible for children's care.

Mother as parent networker

One particularly striking aspect of mothers' infrastructural coordination was the organisation of social events with other children and their parents, including parties, playdates and meet-ups. In their explanations, fathers typically emphasised how their partners were at an advantage, having already forged relationships with other mothers during maternity leave:

That's [organising playdates, parties] generally my wife... And that's because... a lot of the parents with younger children from the NCT [pre-natal] group, the baby groups that my wife's on her year's maternity... And that's still the friendship group at the moment, so she's in contact with them all. (Kevin, primary caregiver)

Others cited the broader domination of parent networks by women as making it easier for their partner to communicate with them: 'it might just be because most of the other people who drop off and pick up are female... and its only really my wife who's kind of arranged with people we don't know that well' (William, equal caregiver).

There was also a broader tendency for the fathers to be isolated from other parents on the days they cared for their children (Brooks and Hodkinson, under review). Most attended far fewer meetups or events involving other parents than their partners. Some noted that the gendered marketing of such events made it unclear whether fathers were welcome while many recounted stories of awkward experiences on those occasions where they had attended them and, sometimes, broader experiences of feeling judged in daytime public spaces: 'People react differently because you're a dad doing things... And the amount of weird looks you get you know... because you're the dad doing this thing (Andrew, equal caregiver)'.

The question of fathers' relative lack of contact with other parents and engagement with what Doucet terms 'community responsibility' (Doucet 2006; 2009; Merla 2008) constitutes a further limit to the men's functional interchangeability with their partners, then and also perhaps a significant symbolic reminder of their strongly gendered status as men undertaking a role associated by the outside world with women. Again, the extensive maternity leave taken by the men's partners following birth seemed to have played a role, enabling the establishment of networks at an early point rather than a need to initiate contact with established groups later. It is equally clear, however, that gender-specific factors relating to fathers feeling marginalised in largely female spaces and social groups was of significance (Merla 2008). This provides a strong example of the way that, outside the safety of the domestic sphere, caregiving fathers find that the significance of their gender - and the hegemonic expectations associated with it - come once again to the fore, raising challenges to their developing caregiving roles and identities (Ranson 2015; Locke and Yarwood 2016).

Maternal pressures and paternal barriers

These enduring areas of maternal responsibility need not eclipse the way our respondents' unusually interchangeable understandings and practices had begun to challenge traditional mother/father distinctions. Neither are we suggesting fathers were entirely absent from the areas

identified or that the disparities were uniform. Yet repeated instances of women retaining primacy with respect to aspects of caring often highlighted within broader literatures, even in the midst of otherwise interchangeable identities, warrants consideration. In part, the explanation lies with the rootedness of maternal pressures, particularly with respect to organisational responsibility and associated mental work. Yet it is also important to highlight barriers that may be making it difficult even for unusually involved fathers to take on full responsibility in these particular areas.

Maternal pressures

It is likely mothers' retention of certain primary responsibilities reflected well-established maternal pressures to feel and be responsible for caregiving (Doucet 2009; Ranson 2010, 2012; Parke 2013). That working mothers often continue to understand themselves primarily in relation to their maternal role – and continue to be held morally responsible for children's upbringing, is well established (Christopher 2012; Hochschild 1989; Miller 2017; Ranson 2013). As Doucet points out, mothers often feel guilty returning to work because their gendered habitus has engendered internalised sets of embodied understandings that prompt them to feel 'pulled towards care' (2009). This often leads them to resist 'ideal worker' expectations with respect to working hours, for example, and retain primary caregiving responsibilities (Christopher 2012). What our study indicates is that such pressures can endure even in the unusual circumstance of fathers assuming otherwise interchangeable care roles. In particular, mothers may continue to feel and discharge greater responsibility than their unusually involved partners for mental and emotional aspects of caregiving - aligning with Ungerson's notion of 'caring about', Miller's '24/7 thinking' and Christopher's coining of the term 'extensive mothering' to describe retention of overall maternal control and emotional labour even where delivery is carried out by others (Christopher 2012; Miller 2017; Ungerson 2006). Such maternal pressures have escalated with the rise of intensive mothering, whose demand for hyper-involved caregiving is argued to have impacted more on women than their partners (Hays 1996; Shirani et al 2012). As well as helping explain their retention of responsibility for long-term

coordination, intensive mothering may partly explain mothers' greater tendency to take children out to activities and classes that connect them to parent communities (Brooks and Hodkinson, under review).

While such pressures establish themselves as part of women's gendered habitus, as Doucet (2009) calls it, well before they have children, our study also suggests they were substantially reinforced during the period of exclusive maternity leave that most of our participants' partners took on. It is well-established, of course, that maternal dominance in the first period of babies lives helps set in train enduring hegemonic parental roles (Doucet 2009; Miller 2011; 2017; Rehel 2014). What our findings suggest is that it also may contribute to the endurance of specific areas of disparity within families that adopt otherwise more interchangeable approaches and identities. Several fathers spoke about how, by the time they had taken on equal or primary responsibilities, routines, emotional bonds and relationships with other people in children's lives had been established, as had an overall sense of responsibility for care. The retention of some of these by mothers was thereby experienced as an unquestioned continuation, in spite of the shift to more interchangeable care delivery. Equal or greater involvement from caregiving fathers right from the beginning of babies' lives, then, may make it easier for them to share all, rather than most, tasks and responsibilities going forward (Doucet 2009; Maggararia 2012; Rehel 2014; Ranson 2013; 2015).

Paternal barriers

As well as showing how maternal pressures can endure, our study identifies barriers that discourage some otherwise interchangeable fathers from taking as much responsibility as their partners with respect to organisational and social aspects of parenting. One such barrier emanates directly from the retention of such roles by their partners. The self-reinforcing impact of mothers' control of primary responsibilities sometimes is understood through the notion of maternal gatekeeping (Fagan and Barnett 2003; Puhlman and Pasley 2013) but this can imply a one-way controlling of access by mothers and, in our research, the situation was more complex. Firstly,

women clearly *had* relinquished much care time, responsibility and control to their partners, even if they sometimes retained organisational and social control. Secondly, while maternal role retention may have dissuaded fathers from encroaching into particular areas, this seemed to involve a two-way process whereby mothers retained control but, equally, fathers seemed willingly to cede it (see Miller 2017). Sometimes this reflected the force of routine or habit, while on other occasions fathers justified deferring to their partners due to their perceived greater competence in the area in question. Others were conscious of partners' anxieties about relinquishing everyday care and seemed keen to avoid monopolising responsibility themselves in order to ensure their partners had space to remain involved. The ways mothers and fathers mutually reinforced certain maternal responsibilities, then, was complex and interactive. And, specifically, this may reflect not only the pressures on women to retain caregiving responsibility, as Doucet (2009) puts it, but also the likely absence of such a pre-existing, internalised sense of care responsibility in the gendered habitus even of many unusually care-centred fathers.

There are also more direct external barriers that can dissuade otherwise interchangeable fathers from taking full responsibility for some organisational and social aspects of care. These relate to the ways people and institutions outside their families can position and respond to them, pushing their gender back to the centre of things (Ranson 2015). Fathers sometimes felt bypassed or ignored in favour of their partners by early years' professionals, and this influenced whether infrastructural care responsibilities were embraced. Others commented on the gendered presentation or substance of some parent and toddler events. Such instances might be regarded – alongside a range of other examples - as contributing to an institutionalisation of maternal responsibility - whereby paternal access to certain organisations and spaces is rendered more difficult through their gendered or 'matrifocal' (Castelain-Menunier 2002) orientation. Fathers' particular reticence to engage with female-dominated parenting spaces, however, also reflected broader feelings of being out-of-place within 'public spaces not often well set up for fathers and babies' (Ranson 2015: 176) – or indeed

fathers and toddlers. This particular set of barriers connects also to broader dynamics of gender and public space (Brooks and Hodkinson, under review).

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the emphasis placed on interchangeable parenting in the accounts of fathers who were primary or equal caregivers for young children. We have suggested that fathers' apparent comfort with an understanding of themselves as broadly equivalent to their partners contrasts with existing studies of primary carer fathers that emphasise the endurance of more distinctly masculine roles. We also emphasised the range of the caregiving roles the fathers were taking on, dwelling on the expedient basis on which they understood and played out such roles. Contrasting with its more hegemonic use in discourses that justify maternal care, the somewhat gender-neutral deployment of expediency discussed here formed a key facet of interchangeability and a central driver of participants' approach to role-sharing in practice. Our use of interchangeability here drew upon Ranson's valuable earlier use of the concept to make sense of domestic situations in which roles are practically shared in a manner that challenges traditional notions of mother and father. As well as developing this further through our emphasis on expediency, we sought to extend use of interchangeability beyond the everyday practicalities of care to capture also the significance of fathers' sense of broad equivalence with their partners as a facet of their developing parental identities.

That fathers typically expressed such overall comfort with both practicalities and identities they saw as interchangeable is of significance, we suggest, because it indicates that, through their everyday routines, they were moving towards the development of 'caring masculinities' that replace protection or provision with a focus on interdependence, relationality and positive affectivity (Elliot 2016). And, in turn, this was helping their families move towards Fraser's universal caregiver model (1997), which envisages shared participation of both women and men in both paid and unpaid labour – a scenario that, argues Fraser, compares favourably with universal breadwinning models,

whereby women adopt paid-worker roles while transferring weekday care responsibilities to low-paid female care workers and filling gaps themselves (Doucet 2006). In contrast to such a maternal second shift, the more interchangeable arrangements we have described typically involved men reducing or adjusting *their* paid work to develop extensive and, to some degree, interchangeable caregiving roles and identities.

We have also identified, however, that - notwithstanding this significant link between identity and practice - beneath discourses of interchangeability there also lay three substantive areas of enduring disparity. Fathers had not always reached parity with their partners when it came to children's emotional responses, while mothers seemed often to be primarily responsible for aspects of the organisational and social dimensions of care and, perhaps, the emotional labour associated with these. While fathers were far from inactive in these areas, the primacy of mothers in many cases indicates the endurance of maternal pressures to be and feel responsible even in these 'best case' scenarios - and the potential for such pressures to be concentrated by initial periods of maternity leave. We suggested, however, that a focus on barriers that may be preventing fathers from embracing full responsibility may be equally important. Such barriers, we suggested, particularly concern the ways fathers can be positioned by external organisations, professionals and other parents - institutionalising and socially reinforcing maternal responsibility. Also identified in other studies (Doucet 2006; Ranson 2015), our study suggests that a distinction between the domestic and more public/social aspects of parenthood may remain significant in understanding the challenges caregiving fathers can face and the limits to interchangeability outside the home.

Notwithstanding these significant limitations and challenges, there remain grounds for cautious optimism in the interchangeabilities outlined here, the ways they challenged established notions of mother and father and the apparent contentment of most of the fathers with the roles they described. Many spoke in highly positive terms about the bonds they were developing with their children, the benefits of enabling their partners to pursue careers and the self-sustaining nature of interchangeability itself. That is, children's familiarity with either parent and with parental

role-switching was deemed to have generated close relationships with both that would endure, while enabling roles to switch with minimum difficulty. Equally important, in many cases and particularly for equal sharing couples, both partners felt able to experience a balance between domestic life and society outside. As Jeremy put it, ‘we feel like we get the best of both worlds, and we both get to have quite a lot of time with the kids, we both get to go out and do things in the world’ (Jeremy, equal caregiver).

It is difficult to be certain, of course, whether fathers’ comfort in the interchangeable roles they described reflected an unusual pre-existing openness to this and it remains possible the sample’s white middle-class composition may have elicited different results than a more socially diverse one. Importantly, however, the circumstantial factors that often had prompted the fathers’ arrangements may suggest they were more unusual in the interchangeable roles they had ultimately developed than their pre-existing orientations. An expedient approach to such circumstances, then, may have opened up spaces of opportunity for the taking on of counter-normative roles and, in turn, the discharging of such roles to gradually affect the development of interchangeable parental identities (Elliot 2016; Ranson 2015). It also remains to be seen whether, if their roles endure, more of the fathers might achieve/exceed parity with their partners within the areas of enduring maternal responsibility identified. While substantial challenges are likely to remain, not least relating to how they are positioned within parental worlds outside the family, it is not implausible that, as Elliot (2016) suggests, the greater fathers’ involvement in everyday caregiving, the greater the possibility of them increasing the scope of their caregiving identities.

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