

# Silently panicking: a thematic analysis of a UK-based online peer support forum for fathers of pre-school children

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I declare that this thesis is my own work  
and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere

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## Abstract

In the United Kingdom, professional-led parenting support is largely aimed at mothers (Donetto *et al.*, 2013). Gender expectations on men may result in barriers to fathers seeking advice or support about parenting. Increasingly, people are turning to the internet for advice and information, and also to share their experiences (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012).

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how fathers of pre-school children sought help by using a UK-based online discussion forum, and what the messages indicated about how they negotiated the competing demands and expectations on them. Taking a constructionist perspective, a thematic analysis of 835 posts explored themes of fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support.

The findings demonstrated that fathers experienced challenges during the transition to fatherhood, and in the early years of parenting. Within the discussion boards, they sought and received information and social support, and both self-disclosure and self-help mechanisms were evident. The fatherhood roles that the men practiced were nuanced and fluid, and the fathers drew upon a range of strategies to mitigate their help seeking and thereby maintain their masculine status. The online nature of the communication also removed some of the constraints of expected masculine behaviour. However, as engagement with the discussion board developed, reciprocity and universality became stronger characteristics of the communication. The interplay between configurations of gendered practice was articulated.

The thesis concluded that online peer support is an acceptable and appropriate form of support for fathers. Recommendations for health professionals were made, and a model of the fathers' engagement with the discussion forum was developed.

*Key words:* Father; fatherhood; masculinity; peer support; online support groups; help seeking; United Kingdom

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## Preface

During a home visit as a health visitor to a family with a three-week-old baby boy, I led the conversation to assess the health of the family, particularly the mother and baby. Having examined the baby and returned him to his mother, I caught the father's eye. He had hardly engaged with the discussion to this point except to answer some general questions. I commented to the father that he had a lovely healthy baby boy, and that he must be proud. He replied:

“Yes, I can't wait until he is old enough to kick a ball around – then I can really get to know him”.

I was struck by how the father perceived he had no major role in the early years of rapid development of this young baby, and that his fatherhood role would only commence in a few years' time. I was also concerned that even as a male health visitor, it was difficult to engage fathers, who normally excused themselves if they were present when I arrived to visit. Many years later, after I had become a father myself, I was also surprised in my circle of new father friends that our discussions rarely centred on information or advice seeking about parenting. Finally, I am aware how often I turn to the internet for information and advice, whether this is a problem with my phone, planning a trip, or to diagnose a malady in one of my children. The internet was not commonplace during the years I practiced as a health visitor, but now it seems to be that as a mode of connection and communication, it may provide a source of support for fathers seeking to be engaged and involved in their young children.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The context of the research

There has been an increase in interest in the study of fatherhood (Plantin, Olukoya, & Ny, 2011). This is in the context of societal changes in family structure, including divorce and non-resident fathers; debates on gender equality; and increasing involvement of fathers in family life (Craig, 2006). Much of the research has assumed a deficit model of fatherhood by being focused on negative aspects of men's parenting, such as shortcomings of their involvement (Craig, 2006), destructive behaviour including domestic abuse, and men's expression of power and control through remaining the family breadwinner (Plantin *et al.*, 2011). However, other literature has highlighted the benefits to mother and child of father involvement during the pregnancy and at child birth, and also to the father himself (Plantin, 2007). One limitation is that much of this literature does not tend to consider fatherhood roles and involvement in the first years after childbirth, rather it is focused on divorced or separated fathers.

At the same time, it has been recognised that the current professional-led parenting support in the UK is aimed at mothers (Donetto *et al.*, 2013). However, men undergo a potentially challenging transition when they become fathers, and develop as parents. Issues of masculinity and gender expectations or gender roles may result in barriers to help-seeking behaviour as men, in particular when seeking advice or support about parenting.

The internet has become part of social life, with internet penetration in the UK at 94.8% (Internet World Stats, 2017). Increasingly, people are turning to the internet for advice and information, and to share their experiences (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012). Online communities have emerged, and these often consist of people facing a similar life situation. The literature identifies different sources of virtual (as opposed to face to face) support. This study has used the term online support group, which has been defined as "web-based online services with features that enable members to communicate with each other" (Malinen, 2015 p. 228).

This computer mediated social support can be derived through a range of different platforms, such as Facebook (asynchronous communication) or chat rooms (synchronous communication). One of the most commonly used platforms for online support groups is the forum, which is a web based discussion board, where users can start conversations (threads) and post responses to others. These threads remain on the site so they can be read at any time. Usually, the forums are moderated. These moderators may remove posts that do not meet the rules of the site (for example if they are offensive), or they may move messages if they are posted to the wrong discussion board. This study draws on a specific forum-based online support group.

There is evidence that these communities can provide support, empathy and information for others. Several studies taking a virtual ethnography approach have focused on online support for people with health conditions, but very few have looked at groups for fathers (Niela-Vilén, Axelin, Salanterä, & Melender, 2014). Since fatherhood is an important yet potentially poorly supported role, it is important to understand how social support is communicated through these online support forums<sup>1</sup>. Engaging and supporting fathers to maximise their interaction with their infants, and adjust to their role as father is an important public health objective (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2011; Wave Trust, 2013), and using online discussion groups may overcome some of the barriers amongst men to health advice-seeking behaviour.

### 1.1.1 The problem

Despite recognition that engaged well-adjusted fathers have a beneficial effect on the development of their children, fathers in the UK are largely unsupported by the maternal and child health system. In addition, men's performance of masculine roles may discourage them

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<sup>1</sup> The plural form of forum can be forums – a meeting or place for the exchange of views (Anglicised), or fora - particularly referring to (in an ancient Roman city) a public square or marketplace used for judicial and other business (Latin form) (OED). For the purposes of this theses, the Anglicised version will be used

to seek support. There is little information on whether online peer support discussion boards for fathers in the UK provide access to support, although this may be a useful alternative source of support for fathers, considering their lack of engagement with professional-led parenting support and their tendency not to seek help for issues about which they are concerned.

## 1.2 The purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate a sample of postings on a UK father-to-father web-based discussion board. It was anticipated that through an exploration of the characteristics of online peer support for fathers, and the issues they raise, there is potential for better understanding of the lived experience of fathers in the UK. Specifically, it would increase knowledge about how they negotiate the competing demands and expectations on them, and how they seek and receive support using the online peer support discussion boards.

The following research questions were addressed to shed light on the problem:

- A. How do posts reflect men's experience of fatherhood in the UK, specifically in the early years?
- B. What do the discussions on the forum demonstrate about fathers' expression of masculinities, with specific consideration of help-seeking behaviour related to parenting?
- C. To what extent does the online forum provide supportive or helping communication between members of the peer group?

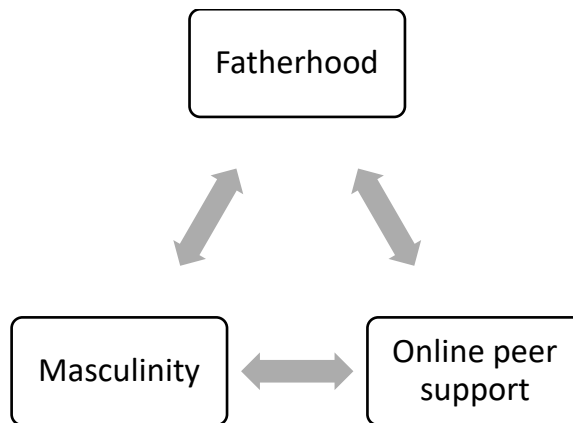
### 1.3 The theoretical framework and conceptual framework for this investigation

The theoretical framework is a key element in the research process. This framework is the blueprint of the thesis, informing the philosophy, epistemology, methodology and analytical approach (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This thesis sought to explore men's use of an online support group for fathers, and this was approached using masculine theory.

Gender is one of the most important sociocultural factors associated with health-related behaviour (Courtenay, 2000b), since health-related behaviours are one means of practicing masculinities and femininities (Courtenay, 2000a). Masculinities are constructions of practice by men that largely seek to negotiate status and power. Hegemonic masculinity, a socially dominant gender construction, particularly seeks to maintain dominance over femininity and subordinate forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, the masculine practice of working and earning is seen as superior to the masculine practice of staying at home as the main carer of a young child. However, this changes over time, and individual men's masculine identity and practices are constructed and reconstructed, resulting in plurality of masculinities. Taking the stance that masculinity is a social construct, the philosophical basis of this study is one of social constructionism. Men's response to issues related to the transition to fatherhood, and early parenting, are influenced by their masculine practices. Indeed, fatherhood identities are constructed by fathers (Yarwood, 2011). Therefore, the epistemological approach to this thesis was that there is no single reality or absolute truth. A qualitative exploration of men's experience, as expressed in the forums, and interpretation was a valid approach to explore the phenomenon (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was taken, using a conceptual framework drawing on three main concepts: fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support (figure 1.1). This illustrates that performance of masculinities, and father identities, are interrelated: masculine behaviours do change when the man becomes a father, and certain fatherhood practices (as opposed to parenting, *per se*) can be seen through the lens of masculinity. Furthermore, the

seeking and receiving of peer support occurs for fathers, and this can demonstrate both masculine and non-masculine behaviours. Starting from the social constructionist perspective that both fatherhood and masculinities are fluid roles constructed and performed by individuals and influenced by society and context, the experience of the fathers as expressed on the discussion boards were analysed. In addition, evidence was sought of self-help mechanisms, identified in studies of online support groups for health-related conditions.



**Figure 1.1 The conceptual framework for this study**

## 1.4 Rationale and significance of this study

This study set out to develop an understanding of how fathers use the online peer support in the United Kingdom to inform and support themselves during the transition to fatherhood and in their child's early years. This came from the researcher's desire to identify appropriate and acceptable approaches to supporting fathers that are not necessarily professional-led. Since there have been no published studies of online peer support groups or peer support forums in the UK, this study aimed to add to the evidence base for approaches to support fathers, and through dissemination, guide professionals working with families to possible resources to help fathers help themselves.

## 1.5 An overview of the structure of this thesis

### Chapter 2: Literature review

The next chapter sets out the discursive and empirical research that acted as the foundation for the study. Initially the importance of father involvement is identified as being beneficial for the child, and for both parents, since this is the driving issue for this study. The chapter explores the interplay of masculine practice and fatherhood, relating to the transition to fatherhood, the conflict between being a hands-on father versus the breadwinner, and men's

help-seeking behaviour. The literature review demonstrates that the focus of professional-led parenting support is usually mothers, and explores online support groups for health-related conditions, including a range of self-help mechanisms evident in these sites. Parenting online support groups are considered, and then the limited literature on online support forums for fathers is identified and analysed. Finally, the gaps in the literature related to this topic are set out, which provide an opportunity for this study to add to the knowledge in this field.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 explains the study design, including the rationale for the selection of the site, threads and posts. The chapter sets out the deductive approaches to thematic analysis undertaken, drawing on the conceptual framework. The study's position on consent, privacy and anonymity is justified within the context of ethical issues in online research. Since the researcher's background was significant, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the researcher's background, and an exploration of how this might influence the interpretation of the results.

### Chapter 4: Results

The results of the deductive thematic analysis are presented in Chapter 4. Initially, the sample of data is described, and the characteristics of the authors of the posts are explored. Here the main themes identified during the analysis are presented within conceptual framework, and each main theme is explored, particularly the interrelation between fatherhood and the expressions of masculinity online. The results demonstrate that despite normative gendered behaviour, fathers did seek help on the discussion boards, and self-disclosure was an important element of this. The nature of the online discussion is examined.



## Chapter 5: Discussion

Building on the results, Chapter 5 identifies the four key findings of the study. Relating the results and analysis back to the literature, the tensions for fathers seeing to be involved with their children in the early years are explored. The chapter also discusses how the discussion board provided a forum for fathers to explore the meanings of fatherhood, with the discourses demonstrating the fluidity of fatherhood practices within the context of multiple masculinities. The fluid nature of fatherhood and masculine practices are presented as a fathers as men, men as fathers duality. Help-seeking behaviour and self-disclosure are further examined, and mechanisms employed by fathers on the discussion board to mitigate their help seeking and disclosure of their vulnerabilities are characterised.

One notable element of the results was the large number of people viewing but not posting on the discussion boards, and this is discussed. The findings are synthesised into a model of engagement with the fatherhood discussion board. Finally, the limitations of the study are discussed.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and recommendations

Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the key findings of the research, emphasising the findings that early fatherhood is a challenging yet largely unsupported time in many men's lives. The case for father focused peer support online is made. Several recommendations are made, and the contribution of this study is identified.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### 2.0 Introduction to literature review

This study sought to examine the nature of UK based online peer support for fathers of preschool children, particularly drawing on masculinity theory. The conceptual framework that underpins the study identifies fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support as key themes. Two approaches have been taken to this literature review. In order to set the study in context, this review first presents the discursive and empirical literature relating to fathers. The review begins with an analysis of the literature about the benefits of father involvement in parenting, moving away from the deficit approach to the study of fatherhood. Factors influencing father involvement in parenting are explored, and the position of fathers in UK social policy is considered. This is followed by an exploration of fatherhood in the context of masculinity, which considers three key areas where performance of masculinity and the father role interact: hands-on versus breadwinning; the transition to fatherhood; and men's help-seeking behaviour. The subsequent section of the review examines parenting support provision within the UK and then online support for people with health-related conditions. This latter field presents a range of self-help mechanisms observed in these online support groups, which was used to inform part of the analysis of this study.

The second approach for this literature review is to identify literature specific to online support for fathers. This is presented within the context of online support for parents, recognising that the majority of studies are about groups specifically aimed at mothers. The rare studies on father-specific online support forums are considered at the end of this chapter.

## 2.1 Literature search strategy

The first approach taken to searching the literature was to facilitate an understanding of the context of fatherhood in the UK, masculinity particularly as it relates to fatherhood, and online peer support. It was important to explore the three themes of the conceptual framework. The terms used in the search on Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Medline and PsychINFO databases, with publication dates between 1996<sup>2</sup> and 2017 were

- father OR fatherhood OR fathering OR paternal
- and
- masculinit#

And separately

- online support group OR online support community

The results from these searches gave the literature to provide the context of this study. Key literature cited in these articles was also obtained. To identify UK social policy related to fathers, the government website [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) was searched with the term 'father'.

There is a growing body of literature about fathers, however, for this study, it was important to identify literature specifically about fathers engaging online with peer support sites to discuss fatherhood and parenting issues. For the second approach to searching the literature, a range of terms were identified for the search, relating to fathers, the online setting, and peer or social support (see table 2.1). The latter terms were chosen to move away from information-providing websites. The terms were searched for in abstracts in Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Medline and PsychINFO databases, with publication dates between 1996 and 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> Reading of the literature at the start of the study identified that there were articles about online research and computer-mediated communication from as early as 1996.

**Table 2.1 The literature search terms for articles specifically about parenting peer support online**

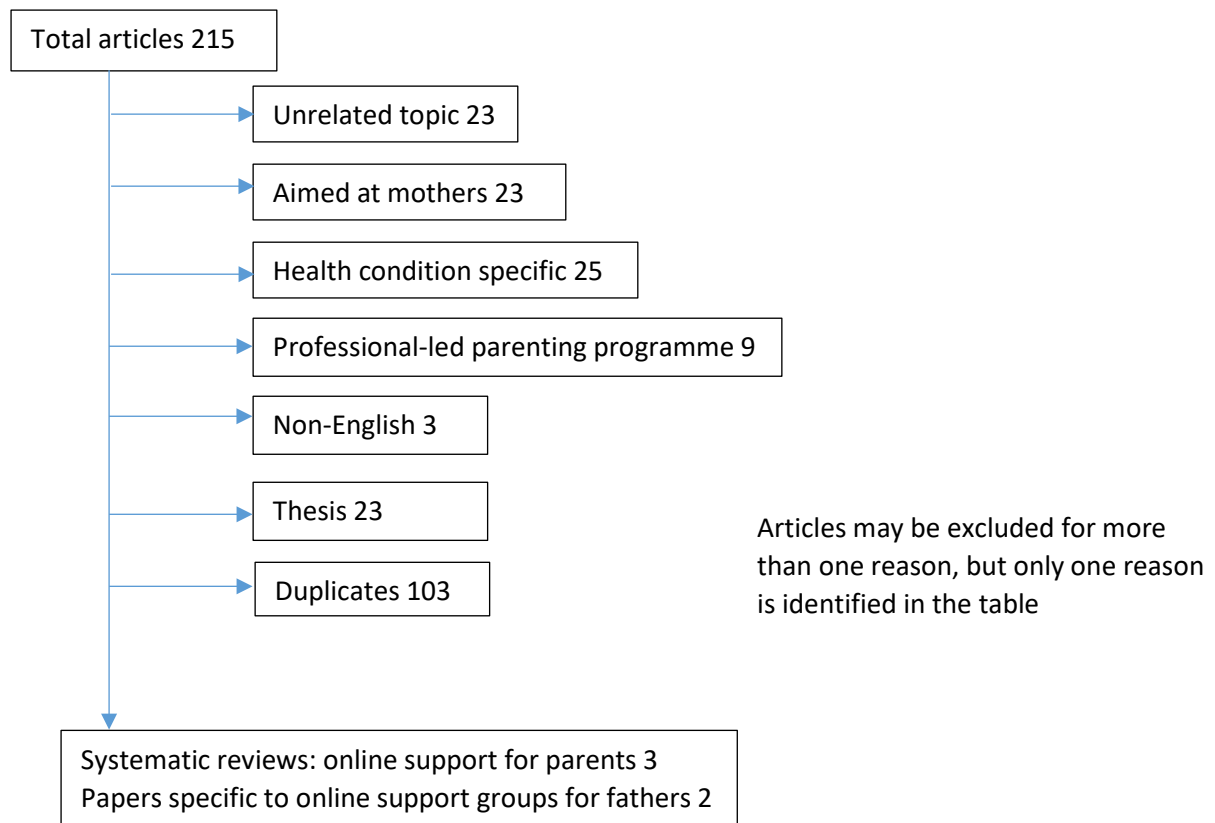
Terms used:

- father OR fatherhood OR fathering OR parenthood OR parenting
- internet OR online OR web
- "Peer support" OR "social support"

Some of the literature identified by the search reported about sites that were set up in order to deliver a health professional intervention (such as a parenting programme); these were reviewed for any content about peer support, or excluded. In addition, online groups that were for fathers of children with a specific medical condition, for example, spina bifida, were excluded, as the motivation for engaging with these sites would be different under those circumstances. Articles about sites that focused explicitly on mothers were also excluded (see figure 2.1).

The search identified two articles that focused on peer support online forums for fathers. It also identified two systematic reviews on online support for parents. Each of the articles in these reviews was considered for inclusion. The very small number of articles that precisely met the parameters of the search demonstrates that online peer support for fathers is a little researched area. However, in order to inform the literature review, other literature was reviewed in order to place this study in context of fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support.

**Figure 2.1 The literature search outcomes, specific to parenting peer support online**



### 2.2.1 Benefits of father involvement in parenting

“There is dissimilarity in the way fathers and mothers parent” (Craig 2006, p.274).

A variety of different measures are used in research to indicate the involvement that fathers have with their children, including time spent together, activities carried out by the father when with the child, and the quality of the father-child relationship (Allen & Daly, 2007). However, much of the research contrasts father presence with father absence. Father absence can occur in a variety of contexts, such as divorced fathers, and fathers who are present may be the biological father or step-father, although the research often aggregates these contexts (Pleck, 2010).

Much of the literature explores father involvement simply by measuring the time the father spends on caring for the child. However, the quality of father engagement activity is also important: for example, warmth and responsiveness. Positive parenting beliefs are

associated with a reduced risk of childhood behaviour problems, (Kroll, Carson, Redshaw, & Quigley, 2016). Fathers may interact with their infants by spending more time on social interaction and stimulating or even boisterous play and less time on caring than mothers (Thomas, Bonér, & Hildingsson, 2011). This type of play can be particularly salient for children as it is novel, thereby increasing fathers' influence out of proportion with the amount of time they spend with their children (Lamb, 2010). However, highlighting the predominant qualities of fathers and mothers narrows the views of mothers' and fathers' roles. Either parent can parent in a sensitive way: teaching, encouraging, responding and nurturing, and there is considerable variation in roles and activities between fathers, and for individuals over time. Nevertheless, Jacobs & Kelley (2006) argue that there is a specific father influence over social and cognitive development which is different from the mother's influence. Indeed, it is good fathering, amongst other factors, which contributes to positive child development.

Whilst child development is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors, children's cognitive abilities benefit from having two highly involved parents, from both the diversity of stimulation from interacting with each parent, and potentially because highly involved fathers make it possible for both parents to fulfil their roles in a secure family context (Lamb, 2010). There is evidence of improved emotional security, language and motor development in babies and young children when there is early involvement of fathers, and these children may be less prone to depression and aggressive behaviour when older (Allen & Daly, 2007). Father involvement in reading to their children has positive education outcomes for the children later at school (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008; Flouri, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a, 2003b). Father involvement correlates to children's social development from early years into adolescence and adulthood (Allen & Daly, 2007). Fathers who adjust well to the role and feel secure as fathers, rather than the quantity of direct involvement early in their child's life, are associated with positive behavioural outcomes in children (Opondo, Redshaw, Savage-McGlynn, & Quigley, 2016).

Fathers can influence the physical health of children indirectly by contributing to the health and wellbeing of the mother. Father involvement has a mediating effect on the impact of maternal depression during early childhood (Mezulis, Hyde, & Clark, 2004). Fathers have a role in protecting the mother's mental health and an important role in supporting breastfeeding (Bryan, 2013; Rowe, Holton, & Fisher, 2013). Benefits for children of father involvement includes reduction in risk of maternal depression, and economic hardship, but there is little research into the benefits of involvement for fathers themselves (Bryan, 2013).

### 2.2.2 Factors influencing father involvement

Father involvement is influenced by the father's motivation, skills and self-confidence, social support, and workplace factors (Bryan, 2013; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b; Mcallister, Burgess, Kato, & Barker, 2012). Particularly important for father involvement are the father's skills and self-confidence. Specifically, parenting self-efficacy, which is the extent the father believes he can master parenting tasks, develops in infancy but predicts future interaction with the child over time (Bandura, 1977; Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek, & Shipman, 2003). However, low parental self-efficacy and parental dissatisfaction can be the result of a difficult transition to fatherhood (for first time fathers), and this is not associated with the father's general self-efficacy, for example in the workplace (Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2010). In other words, even highly self-efficacious men in the workplace may find fatherhood challenging, and this will reduce the involvement he has with his infant.

The level of father involvement is also influenced by the level of mother's involvement (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008). This could be as a result of modelling parenting behaviour by the mother, by teaching by example or setting the baseline level of expectation. Additionally, paternal involvement is influenced by the father's perceived appraisal of his care giving behaviour by the mother, and by his perception of care giving behaviour by other fathers (Maurer & Pleck, 2006). There is no research on whether mother's parenting behaviour is modelled on the

father's. Father's motivation towards involvement is more important than their spouses' beliefs, and this level of motivation is influenced by men's identification with the fatherhood role, especially if their beliefs about fatherhood are more progressive, and also how emotionally invested the man is in his job (Jacobs & Kelley, 2006). Marital conflict is associated with lower levels of father involvement, although this is also linked to lower maternal involvement. Being a stepfather is associated with lower father involvement (Pleck & Hofferth, 2008). Larger families, lower parental socio-economic status and low parental educational achievement were negative indicators of father involvement with children at age seven in a large UK study (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b). The context of fatherhood is increasingly varied, such as married, divorced, never married, stepfather, and multiple partner fertility. Although fewer men now conform to the traditional model of fatherhood where all their children are brought up in an enduring marriage, there is little research into the implication of these role changes for men (Astone & Peters, 2014; Cabrera, Hofferth, & Chase, 2012).

### 2.3 Fathers in UK Policy

Recent UK policy (Department of Health, 2009; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2015), identifies engaging with fathers as core business for health visitors, especially for vulnerable families. However, policy that refers to 'parents', whilst intended to mean both parents, is usually interpreted as 'father-blind' by practitioners and commissioners (Fatherhood Institute, 2013). Despite highlighting the importance of the time from conception to age two for the long term health of children, the 1001 Critical Days manifesto (Leadsom, Field, Burstow, & Lucas, 2013) specifically mentions fathers only once. However, involving fathers in prevention and early intervention is advocated to improve one of the Public Health England's *high impact areas in the early years*: the transition to parenthood (Public Health England, 2016). Unfortunately, the NICE guidelines on antenatal and postnatal mental health clinical management does not mention fathers (National Institute



for Health and Care Excellence, 2014), despite paternal perinatal depression now being recognised (Baldwin, 2015).

Fathers were able to take unpaid parental leave in the UK from 1999, and this became an entitlement to two weeks paid paternal leave immediately after the birth from April 2003. Additional Paternal Leave allowed fathers to take an extended leave from 20 weeks post birth. Although there was a lack of flexibility regarding when this could be taken, fathers were entitled to the maternity pay that would have been paid to the mother. However, uptake beyond the first two weeks was limited, and the subsequent lengthening of maternity leave entitlement reinforced the norm that childcare was the mother's responsibility. Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced in 2015, whereby either parent could take the full maternity entitlement. However, by not setting a minimum paternal element, an opportunity to challenge the male breadwinner / female carer model was missed (Atkinson, 2017). There are also concerns that the level of Statutory Shared Parental Pay was lower than maternity pay, dis-incentivising fathers from taking SPL for financial reasons. The uptake remains extremely low, between 1-6% of eligible employees taking SPL (Hutchins, 2017)<sup>3</sup>. The additional financial cost of caring for children maintains the prevalence of the breadwinner role for fathers (see below). As gender hierarchies weaken in post-industrial societies, it may be expected that there will be more flexibility in the role of the father and mother in these societies (Dette-Hagenmeyer, Erzinger, & Reichle, 2014; Wood & Eagly, 2002), although the poor uptake of Shared Parental Leave by fathers suggests this has happened less than might have been expected.

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<sup>3</sup> In March 2018 a cross party committee of MPs recommended the introduction of 12 weeks paternal leave, including the first month at 90% of pay, to replace SPL (The Women and Equalities Committee, 2018), recognising the financial pressures preventing fathers balancing their parental responsibilities and work.

## 2.4 Meanings of fatherhood within the context of masculinity

In order to analyse the interrelationships between fatherhood and masculinity, the alternative meanings of the concepts need to be considered. Fatherhood can be viewed in terms of parental *status*: being a biological or social father (with stepchildren or taking parental responsibility). Parental fatherhood has important dimensions such as age at becoming a father, number of children, and whether or not he is the biological father (Pleck, 2010). Research into fatherhood using this construct includes exploring into the effect of transition into fatherhood. The second meaning of the term fatherhood refers to fathers' parenting *actions*, although some authors differentiate with the term fathering (Meah & Jackson, 2016). This focuses on paternal involvement, including the amount and quality of interaction (such as responsiveness). Importantly to this study, this aspect of fatherhood encompasses fatherhood self-identity. It is the engagement of the father in actions, whether caregiving or other activities, that has positive outcomes on the child (see above). Even non-biological fathers, such as stepfathers, can engage in fathering activities which are beneficial to the child.

### 2.4.1 Masculinity: the theoretical basis of this study

A study of fatherhood would not be complete without placing it within the context of masculinity, and masculine theory underpins the theoretical approach to this study. Masculinity can be considered as the biological gender status of being male, rather than female, but also encompasses the socially constructed definition of being male. The second interpretation is that masculinity, or indeed masculinities, are configurations of social practices that are ordered hierarchically (Robertson, 2008). According to a social constructionist approach, the variation in sex-typed behaviour across cultures is influenced by a variety of contextual factors, such as power imbalances that favour men (Wood & Eagly, 2002).

“Masculinities are configurations of practices that are constructed, unfold, and change through time” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 p.852). Therefore, men can perform different masculinities depending on their context. Hegemonic masculinity is when dominance is maintained, usually by white, educated, heterosexual affluent males over women, and other groups of men (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). The key aspect here is the idea of superiority and domination which encourages the embodiment of unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2012). This is a form of masculinity that is embedded in cultural practices, yet can be shaped by local conditions (Lohan, 2010) and other power relations, such as age and ethnicity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Cultural assumptions and constructions encourage hegemonic masculine practices such as the denial of weakness, emotional independence and stoicism, as well as being capable and in control, in order to maintain a position of strength. Whilst not all men can meet these hegemonic ideals, these practices sit at odds with other social constructions of what it means to be a good father, so the interplay between masculinity and fatherhood forms a key consideration for this study. These performances of masculinity also influence men’s approach to seeking help (which is explored in section 2.4.4).

## 2.4.2 The good father

An important tension exists for the performance of fatherhood in modern society. Fathers who are in employment face the challenge of balancing their role as breadwinner with what society increasingly expects as a hands-on father. The notion of good father, both providing and being involved, also relates to the father’s performance of masculinity. This is a key tension for new fathers in particular, and is explored in this section.

#### 2.4.2.1 Fathers and the labour market

Social constructions of fatherhood vary between cultures, individuals, and across time. After the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, the role of the father has traditionally been that of primary breadwinner for his family (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010), although over recent decades fathers are expected to be more involved in childcare. Modern changes in society, for example women's employment, have led to changes in family roles for both men and women, with women contributing more to the household. Currently, in the UK, most couple families have both parents in employment, and the majority (1.8 million families) of these have the father in full time and the mother in part time work (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2017a). The employment rate for fathers in a couple who have dependent children is 93%, with 85% of fathers with very young children being in full time employment. The poor uptake of Shared Parental Leave has been attributed to the lack of affordable childcare for young children, or that taking this leave was financially disadvantageous, particularly because of the gender pay gap (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010). In some cases, fathers felt they might be discriminated against at work if they ask for shared paternal leave (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2016). In addition, employers did not actively promote it. Individually and socially, the role of the breadwinning father remains strong in the UK (Ranson, 2012).

Unemployed fathers spend more time with their young children (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b), but this can cause conflict: low income men find it hard not only to fulfil the provider role but also to meet the cultural expectations of being an involved father (Bryan, 2013). In Bryan's study, whilst low-income fathers in the United States identified the importance of providing economically for their children, these fathers felt that the emotional investment and time spent with the children was at least as important, providing emotional support and security. This particularly challenged the fathers in the study on low incomes feeling the pressure to earn by working long, late or unpredictable hours, meaning they were less able to be available for their children. Therefore, wider socio-economic factors influence how fathers

are able to carry out their fatherhood role. Similarly, workplace culture may be unsupportive to worker's parenting responsibilities, especially in some sectors of the job market (Holter, 2007; Machin, 2015). Therefore, men negotiate and construct their identities of a good father whilst potentially conforming to the stereotype of provider, which may create conflict for men (Cooper, 2005).

#### 2.4.2.2 Expectations on fathers

In Western societies, there is a social and cultural transformation in the way that fatherhood is understood, including the promotion of the 'new' father, where he is involved in hands-on care giving (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Ranson, 2012). This may be as a result of mothers returning to work sooner, or geographical isolation from the extended family network who might provide childcare (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). There is an increased understanding of the benefits of father engagement reflected in policy (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2011; Wave Trust, 2013), and in men's aspirations or their perceived pressure to be more involved (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Machin, 2015; Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). There has been an increase in active involvement of men in both care and emotional support for their children (Banchefsky & Park, 2015), although the extent of this increased involvement is questioned (Craig, 2006; Hamilton & de Jonge, 2010). Men's contribution to childcare may have increased slightly, but women usually still provide the majority of this care. The hands-on father, if measured by equal or major contribution to childcare, remains an ideal construction, rather than a reality (Miller, 2011).

#### 2.4.2.3 Fathers and the performance of masculinity

However, the hegemonic masculine construction (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) of men being the provider for the family still persists too: specifically, having the role to support their children financially (Biggart & O'Brien, 2010; Ranson, 2012). Men may feel more comfortable

in this role rather than a caring, nurturing role, since the latter is considered in society as more feminine, and the breadwinner role contributes to men's masculine social identities, as they conform to a dominant masculine practice (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). This demonstrates a contradiction in the expectations on men from society: to be a new father whilst also maintaining their expression of masculinity as breadwinner. Indeed, men's antenatal intentions to be involved are not met if circumstances lead to new fathers falling back on gender norms (Miller, 2011), although the necessity to maintain a wage and the lack of support from the workplace may influence this (Machin, 2015).

This duality of men as provider and men as involved, caring fathers demonstrates the plural nature of masculinities (Miller, 2011). Caring masculinity, for example, is demonstrated in friendship and in gay partnerships, however this shift in expression of masculinity is not universally supported by the labour market, which in the UK is characterized by pressure to overwork, especially for men (Holter, 2007). In Holter's European study, there was a notable finding that the majority of men did not support the notion that the man's role should predominantly be that of breadwinner, instead acknowledging the need for involved fathers. However, the participants were dissatisfied at the support given by their employers to their childcare tasks. Milner (2011) identifies policy discourses that identify absent and non-providing 'bad fathers', and set legislative means to ensure responsibilities, which are usually financial, are met. These policies and discourses influence societal definitions of good fathering.

Therefore, there remains a mismatch between fatherhood ideals and fatherhood practices, in particular relating to the family-work balance, despite family policy development such as the introduction of paternity leave and shared parental leave. Yet, as being financially active remains linked to the concept of being a good father in the UK, fathers must negotiate the complex identities as they attempt to balance fathering and work (Yarwood, 2011).

### 2.4.3 The transition to fatherhood

“The transition to fatherhood brings about more profound changes than any other developmental stage in a man’s life” (Deave & Johnson, 2008, p. 632)

During the prenatal period, fathers can experience feelings of unreality (Asenhed, Kilstam, Alehagen, & Baggens, 2013; Premberg, Hellström, & Berg, 2008), and a desire to develop an emotional bond with the child. First time fathers in this period also experience a shift in their identity, from partner to parent (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). This shift in personal identity may explain why fathers-to-be are found to identify the pregnancy as more stressful than the labour itself. First-time fathers report that becoming a father was “an emotional roller coaster” (Asenhed *et al.*, 2013, p. 4), suggesting a dizzying and disorientating journey up to the child’s birth. If the birth is traumatic, fathers feel traumatised, whilst also guilty because they were not the one giving birth and they felt they had to be the strong one (Etheridge & Slade, 2017). This is compounded by a sense of exclusion and non-participation on a father’s return to work (Chin, Daiches, & Hall, 2011). Therefore, fathers need support during their first year (Premberg, Carlsson, Hellström, & Berg, 2011).

Fathers express both responsibility and helplessness when managing babies (Coles & Collins, 2009). Fathers identify a range of barriers to fathers feeling prepared for the role: for example, fathers feel excluded from gaining knowledge from healthcare professionals, identifying antenatal groups as “women’s world” (Coles & Collins, 2009 p.22) and the challenge of balancing their work and fatherhood responsibilities (Biggart & O’Brien, 2010; Bryan, 2013; Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2012; Chin *et al.*, 2011; Hamilton & de Jonge, 2010). In addition, work commitments can be barriers for men to access parenting programmes (Bayley, Wallace, & Choudhry, 2009; Deave & Johnson, 2008). Yet, at the same time, as men experience a transformation into the role of father, they search for a sense of “utility, agency and control” which can be a particular challenge when they return to work (Chin, Daiches, & Hall, 2011 p.21). Transition can result in a loss of social support networks, especially if existing peers do not understand the new situation, which may in turn

lead to stress (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013). Chin *et al.* (2011) found that fathers reported uncertainty about the practical aspects related to being a new father, yet appeared more assured of their long-term approach to fatherhood. In this study, some fathers suggested that they might benefit from speaking to other new parents about their experiences, which is supported by the findings of Deave and Johnson (2008). This is an indication of the value of peer support for new fathers.

The role transition from partner to father is particularly felt by men after the birth, as he assumes his new social status. At this time, potentially difficult is the renegotiation of work both in employment and household chores at home (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009), or the “twin responsibilities of providing economical and emotional support for their family” (p.315). At this time, men experience difficulty reconciling their family needs with their personal needs. This is a period of social transformation during which they may need support (Ives, 2014).

#### 2.4.4 Men’s help-seeking behaviour

The denial of weakness and vulnerability is used by men to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity (Courtenay, 2000a), promoting ideals and behaviour that is acceptable in a patriarchal culture. Men are socialized into this behaviour, which can have an adverse effect on their health (Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005). This includes men’s reluctance to be health conscious, in relation to their own health promoting behaviour, and acknowledging symptoms and seeking medical help. If help seeking involves opening up to others and relying on them, this behaviour goes against men’s learnt masculine behaviour of self-reliance and being tough (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This is particularly the case in depression (Sierra Hernandez, Han, Oliffe, & Ogrodniczuk, 2014), which itself is important since paternal depression has a significant negative effect on parenting behaviour by fathers (Wilson & Durbin, 2010). This, in turn, is associated with behaviour problems in their children



(Ramchandani *et al.*, 2008, 2013; Sethna, Murray, Netsi, Psychogiou, & Ramchandani, 2015), yet perinatal depression in men is not routinely tested for.

Men are faced with a dilemma when considering seeking help or accessing health services, as their beliefs about appropriate behaviour of real men conflict with their beliefs about being a good citizen, where they should be responsible for their own health (Robertson, 2007; Robertson & Williams, 2009). Men seeking help may legitimise their departure from stereotypical masculine behaviour, for example by relying on other masculine qualities, such as being logical and rational. Whereas women's identities may allow them to seek and receive help more easily, men need to construct legitimate masculine reasons to engage in self-help, such as seeking camaraderie with like-minded men, in the case of a group intervention for men with cancer (Adamsen, Rasmussen, & Pedersen, 2001; Seymour-Smith, 2008).

Help-seeking behaviour is a complex process that is dependent on the context: the seeker, the provider, the type of help and the situation. Drawing on the construction of masculinities, help seeking is moderated by several psychological processes. The first is whether the man perceives the problem as normal, since the risk to self-esteem is greatest if a problem is perceived as abnormal (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This may include observations of what other men are seen to do in that situation, and cultural norms that define expectations that men should not have problems. For example, fathers who found childbirth traumatic thought their experiences were unjustified, and therefore tried to cope with them through avoidance (Etheridge & Slade, 2017). Another moderating factor is the opportunity to reciprocate such a helping transaction can preserve status, avoid indebtedness and highlight one's own strength (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Sierra Hernandez *et al.*, 2014). Being able to reciprocate support is an important aspect of online support groups (e.g. Attard & Coulson, 2012; Montesi & Bornstein, 2017). If other men in their social network are perceived as disparaging to help seeking, this can be a disincentive to seeking help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Finally,

perception of loss, such as loss of control to a professional, may be a demotivating factor for men seeking help (Goode *et al.*, 2004).

The construction that hegemonic masculine characteristics of control, self-reliance and the denial of physical or emotional weakness are the main reason for poor health-seeking behaviour in men has been questioned (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Galdas *et al.*, 2005). Men's reluctance to seek help regarding their health is influenced by more than their internalised beliefs about appropriate masculine behaviour. Other social determinants such as lack of control at work and social isolation may account for much of the differences in help-seeking behaviour between men and women. The empirical evidence to this is limited, especially amongst different groups of men, since the evidence that is there is often based on white, middle classed men. In addition, since health help-seeking behaviour is a complex phenomenon, it is likely to be influenced by a range of factors in addition to gender, such as age, occupation and socioeconomic status (Farrimond, 2012; Galdas *et al.*, 2005; Tyler & Williams, 2013), and ethnic group (Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011).

## 2.5 Support for parents

This section of the literature review considers support for parents, identifying that health service support is largely mothered centred. The increase in health related online support groups is explored, particularly the peer-to-peer support that these media provides. Then the online groups that provide support for parenting are discussed.

### 2.5.1 Parenting support provision

The period from conception until age two years is described as the first 1000 critical days: crucial to creating a secure positive environment and family for a baby to develop (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2011; Wave Trust, 2013). While it is

important not to medicalise the transition to fatherhood (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Lee, 2010; Tyler & Williams, 2013), men as well as women find this period stressful (Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004) and men have gender-specific issues as discussed in the previous section. Socioeconomic factors are important relating to parenting support. Lower income fathers are half as likely to attend antenatal classes than higher income fathers, and 55% of low income fathers feel that they had been left to pick up the information and skills for fatherhood on their own, compared to 29% of higher income fathers (Centre for Social Justice, 2016).

Yet studies have identified a lack of father-centred or father-friendly support. Currently, parenting support (practical, emotional and social) is overwhelmingly aimed at mothers (Fagerskiold, 2006; Salzmänn-Eriksson & Eriksson, 2013; Thomas *et al.*, 2011). Parenting support from professionals, in the UK, is provided by midwives and health visitors (Department of Health, 2011) although when it is targeted towards the father, it is typically aimed at promoting father's physical presence, emotional involvement and an equal division of responsibility (Ives, 2014), rather than supporting the father's specific needs. In their transition to fatherhood, first time fathers look to professional support but find this lacking when they seek information on parenting (Deave & Johnson, 2008) and on lifestyle and relationship issues after the birth (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011). Fathers in various countries report being excluded from professional care, with a lack of father-centred support, and when services use the term 'parents', they fail to include fathers and address their specific needs (Carlson, Eldeson, & Kimball, 2014). Fathers feel excluded from antenatal appointments. This is compounded by difficulty in taking time off work (Machin, 2015). Men's main sources of information are from their partners feeding back from their antenatal appointments, and the information leaflets and *Pregnancy Book* (in the UK) provided by midwives. They also rely on information from friends, family, work colleagues and the internet (Deave & Johnson, 2008). In the UK, support for first time fathers by NHS

professionals is lacking, with fathers being treated as part of a couple or as a mother, or even being ignored (Machin, 2015); there is minimal support aimed specifically at fathers.

Studies of health visiting practice in the UK demonstrate that although health visitors claim to be working with families, the contact and interaction is predominantly with the mother (Chalmers, 1992; Donetto *et al.*, 2013). One reason is that fathers return to work after two weeks paternity leave and the visits were during the working day. However, the studies also demonstrated uncertainty about whether the father should be involved during the health visitor's visit: the father himself felt that the issues were not his domain (or specifically, they were the mother's responsibility) or did not want to have contact with the health visitor, or the parents did not know whether his presence was considered desirable by the health visitor. In other situations, health visitors did not consider it necessary to interact with the father, for example because the visit was 'routine', or the health visitor was not concerned about the health of the father, so contact with the father was not sought. This may suit some fathers (Ives, 2014), who prefer to defer to the mother, but direct the mother to contact the service if there was a concern about the baby (Donetto *et al.*, 2013). It is not surprising, then that health visitors in the UK describe fathers as a marginalised and hard to reach group (Coles & Collins, 2009). In the same study, fathers themselves reported feeling marginalised *by* the midwifery and health visiting service. Therefore, whilst health visitors may see their role as supporting the family, in practice there are many barriers to involving the father, and in reality, their work is predominated by supporting the mother and child.

### 2.5.2 Online support groups

In recent years, the *users* of health services have become the *providers* of health information and advice (Hardey, 2001). Increasingly, people, especially women, are turning to the internet to seek health information (Anker, Reinhart, & Feeley, 2011; Cotten & Gupta, 2004; Percheski & Hargittai, 2011; Song & Chang, 2012), and this may be from a wide range of sources. Health-related websites have proliferated on the internet, and one aspect of these

are online support groups, which feature computer mediated communication rather than face-to-face communication (White & Dorman, 2001) between peers rather than from health professionals.

Previously, concerns have been expressed about a digital divide where people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have less access to information on the internet because of the cost of access, and lack of digital skills (van Dijk, 2005). However, a survey of a large Swedish parenting website found little evidence of social bias because of issues of internet access (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005). Recently, access to the internet has become increasingly common. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), 99% of 16-44 year olds in the UK used the internet in the last three months (ONS, 2017), and 89% of adult UK internet users describe themselves as confident online (OFCOM, 2017). Therefore, the internet is a good potential source of information and support for the majority of parents of young children.

Support groups can provide information and empathic support for members which can be beneficial to health (Dennis, 2003), and social support which may reduce isolation. In this context, social support can be defined as: “any process through which social relations might promote health and well-being” (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000, p.4). According to Cohen *et al.*, one process of social support is when a person perceives another is in need, perhaps because of illness or a stressful experience, and provides emotional, informational or practical resources in response to them. In this case, non-professionals provide social support, either formally or informally. However, the literature reviewed in the earlier sections identifies that men find it difficult to access social support in their usual circles regarding fatherhood, because either they do not choose to access support, or they feel that the existing parenting support is not appropriate for them because it is aimed at mothers.

Many health-related online support groups (OSGs) have received attention from researchers (for example Malik & Coulson, 2010; Nicholas, Mcneill, Montgomery, & Stapleford, 2004; Perron, 2002; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). These are frequently focused on a specific health

issue, for example carers, people with a mental illness, a chronic condition, or those experiencing infertility. These online groups have several advantages over traditional face-to-face support groups, including 24 hour availability of support, providing a greater level of convenience, and the online nature allows geographical boundaries to be overcome (Coulson, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007; Winzelberg, 1997), providing a more heterogeneous group. In contrast to the immediacy of a face-to-face support group, the online participant can carefully consider and compose their postings.

Many users of online support groups appreciate the greater level of anonymity (Cotten & Gupta, 2004). Anonymity may be particularly valued when discussing sensitive or taboo subjects (White & Dorman, 2001). This anonymity may lead to greater levels of self-disclosure (Perron, 2002) because the support group is felt to be a safe environment. Alternatively, site users may 'lurk', whereby the individual reads messages but does not post onto the board (van Uden-Kraan *et al.*, 2008). In online groups, participants can choose how much to reveal about themselves, and Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler (2008) compare this to the anonymity in successful face-to-face support groups for alcoholics, suggesting that online groups take anonymity "to a new level" (p.1870), allowing disinhibition. The authors caution that this may go too far and lead to rude language, or harsh criticisms which may disrupt the cohesion of the group, although this is not necessarily the case (O'Connor & Madge, 2004). Disinhibition is also caused by the invisibility of the members, since the communication is only by text, without the accompanying visual cues of face-to-face contact. Similarly, the status of participants is neutralised in OSGs, since there are no visual clues to a person's status, such as clothes, or the setting from which they are communicating. The delay in reactions, when a response to asynchronous communication on an OSG can come minutes, days or months to come, is another disinhibiting characteristic of OSGs (Barak *et al.*, 2008).

Malik and Coulson (2010) developed previous work that identified self-help mechanisms in online groups for people with a disability (Finn, 1999) or caregivers of people with mental

health issues (Perron, 2002). They identify ten characteristics of self-help mechanisms that are similar to those used by traditional face-to-face support groups, including requesting information, empathy and universalism, suggesting that exchanges on the online groups may be supportive. These self-help mechanisms were used as part of the thematic analysis for this study. The majority of posts on OSGs that are focused on health conditions involve giving or receiving social, emotional or information support (Coulson *et al.*, 2007; Winefield, 2006; Winzelberg, 1997). Members of an OSG for people living with HIV received useful information and social support, but also found positive meaning and helped others (Mo & Coulson, 2012). These processes are empowering as they develop increased self-efficacy, a belief in one's own abilities which then influences one's own future behaviour (Bandura, 1977), an approach that has been successfully applied in face-to-face parenting programmes (Allen, 2011; Whittaker & Cowley, 2012) and could lead to adaptive coping (Mo & Coulson, 2012; Nicholas *et al.*, 2004). A meta-analysis of research on health-related online support groups demonstrated improved social support, self-efficacy and increased quality of life for users of the site (Rains & Young, 2009). Adaptive coping in men counters deficit-model masculine norms relating to the avoidance of help-seeking (Seidler, Dawes, Rice, Oliffe, & Dhillon, 2016). This adaptive help seeking in which help is sought beyond the professional provision, from experienced others presents an opportunity to an increase general self-efficacy and parental self-efficacy that would be beneficial for men as they adapt to their role of fatherhood (Murdock, 2013), which in turn may improve father involvement in parenting (Tully *et al.*, 2017).

### 2.5.3 Parenting online support groups

Some OSGs are aimed at parents of children with long-term conditions (Clifford & Minnes, 2012; Paterson, Brewer, & Stampler, 2013). The majority of general (not condition-specific) parenting online support groups are aimed at mothers (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Niela-Vilén *et al.*, 2014), or predominantly used by mothers (Sarkadi &

Bremberg, 2005). Three systematic reviews of online parenting resources (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Niela-Vilén *et al.*, 2014; Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013) identified studies about websites that are professionally led interventions (for example parent training programmes), seeking to support parents of children with specific conditions, such as autism or cancer, or aimed specifically at mothers. Studies looking at online parenting support groups which are aimed at *parents* usually find the forum an almost exclusively female domain (Brady & Guerin, 2010). Brady and Guerin's study did not include the 'Just for dads' forum on the Irish website under investigation.

The most popular parenting sites in the UK are *netmums*<sup>4</sup> and *mumsnet*<sup>5</sup>, but these do not have specific forum spaces for fathers. Social capital and support, including the reduction of isolation (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Evans, Donelle, & Hume-Loveland, 2012; Ley, 2007) and empowerment (Madge & O'Connor, 2006) have been identified as positive outcomes for users of discussion boards for mothers. Interestingly, Pedersen and Smithson, (2013) describe *mumsnet* as a "woman dominated site [that] seems to offer its users the freedom to adopt what has previously been identified as male styles of online communication, including aggressive language, swearing and flaming<sup>6</sup>" (p.97). Online forums were a useful space for mothers to ask questions, gain reassurance and even openly discuss their negative emotions towards parenting (Porter & Ispa, 2013). In Sweden, parents' use of the internet for information and support is increasingly prevalent, although it is first time middle class mothers aged 30-35 that are the most active (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). This increase may in part be due to reduced influence from the parents' own parents, and an increased familiarity with the internet. In particular, mothers seek experience-based information, for example, how other people have managed parenting challenges, as opposed to professional-sourced information. Sarkadi & Bremberg (2005) studied a Swedish

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<sup>4</sup> [www.netmums.com](http://www.netmums.com)

<sup>5</sup> [www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com)

<sup>6</sup> Flaming: posting insulting messages on the internet (techterms.com). Interestingly, there was no flaming observed in the sample of posts on the fathers support forum under analysis



parenting website and they noted that there was a distinct lack of fathers interacting with the website, despite the level of gender equity in that country, and the general tendency for men to use the internet more than women. The men reported feeling marginalised because the discussions focused on motherhood. The female bias is noted on other parenting websites, and reinforces the message that the mother is the care provider and the father her assistant. Many parenting sites reproduce traditional gender roles (Rashley, 2005), or the view that fathers are an inadequate source of support (Brady & Guerin, 2010).

Analysis of an Irish parenting website identified a lack of male forum users, and indeed some conflict between the male and female posters, as a male poster criticising on the chattiness of interactions between two female posters was seen as challenging the supporting norm of the forum (Brady & Guerin, 2010). These authors also identify a lack of study on specific online support for fathers. Those papers that were identified for this study as having a focus on online support for fathers are discussed in the next section.

## 2.6 Fathers seeking support online

In the USA, fathers engage in online activity significantly more for general purposes than for parenting-related activities (He & Dworkin, 2015). However, 38% of fathers of under-fives in the UK go online for information and advice, according to an opinion poll (Centre for Social Justice, 2016), with a fourfold increase in 'Google Dads' using the internet as a guide to parenting since the last decade.

Father focused online support groups do exist, for specific groups of fathers, for example those with children with a specific health condition (Nicholas, Mcneill, Montgomery, & Stapleford, 2004; Nicholas *et al.*, 2012). In these US groups, men moved beyond being recipients of health information to engaging in dialogue, although this was largely about their own child who had a serious illness. While there was mutual consideration of the issues affecting them, the declared motivation was to do something for their child. This view gave

the fathers a clear role to contribute to the family. Additionally, communication moved from information sharing to provision of emotional support. However, these online networks were part of time-limited studies, were facilitated by a professional, who suggested topics for discussion, and were for fathers of seriously ill children. Therefore, the fathers would have specific motivations to participate because of their situation, and on joining the research study there was an expectation for them to post on the forums. Fathers noted that their fathering practices had changed following the child's diagnosis, including a deepening of their involvement. Interestingly, in a different study in Iceland of a four month anonymous asynchronous email network for parents of children with cancer, it was observed that both mothers and fathers read the messages, however, most fathers never wrote messages to the network (Bragadottir, 2008). In order to examine the potential for online groups to provide peer support for fathers, non-health condition-related sites, which do not form part of a parenting intervention, are considered next.

There is only limited research into online peer support groups or forums<sup>7</sup> specifically for fathers (see literature search strategy at the start of this chapter), and only two studies exploring fathers' use of online support groups which were not part of a wider parenting intervention were identified: Fletcher & StGeorge, (2011) in Australia, and Eriksson and Salzmann-Erikson (2013) in Scandinavia. Both of these studies are now considered.

Fletcher and StGeorge, (2011) examined posts from a fathers' chat room (discussion board) on an Australian government website that provided parenting information. They took a convenience sample of seven topics (threads), with posts from 243 men and 22 women. They note that the activity on the fathers' discussion board was much lower than the mothers' chat room. The study identified a lack of resources, information and support for new fathers. The fathers sought meaning to their experiences online, and encouraged others

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<sup>7</sup> The findings demonstrated that the users of the fatherhood discussion boards are transitory, with very few posting over a long period. The commonly used term in the literature is 'online communities', but this could imply a characteristic of continued belonging, which may not be the case for the forum under investigation. Therefore, in this thesis, the part of the site consisting of discussion boards for peer-to-peer exchange on fatherhood is referred to as a forum, or as discussion boards

to embrace fatherhood. Personal stories were provided as responses to requests, for example for advice on soothing an unsettled baby. Fathers also explored the tension between availability for the child and being the breadwinner. This study focused on the social support between fathers using the site. In particular, humour was used to offset negative emotions as the fathers described challenging situations they had experienced. Finally, Fletcher and StGeorge identified that 'encouraging fathers' was both a process and an outcome of the interaction on the board, and conclude that sharing experiences is a key mechanism for social support.

Eriksson and Salzman-Eriksson (2013) focused on care giving for infants in their study of Scandinavian OSGs for fathers. They analysed 200 threads from an unspecified number of forums, and identified communication of support through encouragement, confirmation and advice. An important aspect was fathers getting things off their chest (the writing of the concern being cathartic), and then being told others are in a similar situation, confirming their experiences. However, this disclosure was largely limited to discussions about care giving, and, according to the authors, rarely moved to major life crises, such as thoughts of divorce or alcohol abuse, or to the meaning of fatherhood. This study identified that the fathers were largely information sharing online, including directing to other sources of information. Reciprocal sharing of information and concerns was theorised as a 'pay forward' approach where experienced fathers were passing on experiential advice to the newer fathers.

The two studies above are key texts for the research for this thesis, since they are the only studies into online peer-led support specifically for fathers. They demonstrate that fathers do interact on father specific boards in Australia and Scandinavia. Both identified information sharing, and the sharing of experience as the main mechanisms for support, and described reciprocity as an important characteristic of the online communication. However, neither study based its theoretical framework on masculinity, which meant neither study had significant consideration of help-seeking behaviour for the men involved.

Other papers identified by the literature search looked at father-focused online support groups or forums as part of wider interventions to promote parenting. Hudson *et al.*, (2003) recruited 34 new fathers with internet access and used established scales to measure their parenting abilities (self-efficacy) and parenting satisfaction over the first few weeks of the baby's life. This was a study into a parenting intervention, consisting of a discussion forum plus a library of health information and email access to specialist nurses. However, as part of the intervention, fathers were *told* to use the discussion forum for a minimum of 20 minutes per week. Therefore, this is not equivalent to fathers freely choosing to access an online peer support forum. In addition, the comparison group scores of parenting self-efficacy were higher than the intervention group, and no explanation was offered in the study.

The above examples refer to asynchronous communication: a message is left and sometime later, a response may be sent. A study enabling three fathers in rural Sweden to communicate synchronously using video conferencing during their child's first year found that fathers were initially insecure talking to others about fatherhood, but this improved over time (Nyström & Ohrling, 2008). The participants said it was unusual for them to have discussions about being a father, and that sharing experiences was informative. However, the sessions were at fixed (organised) times, and the group was very small. These latter studies demonstrate some promising benefits for father-to-father communication online, where information exchange and support occurs, but the studies relate to interventions by health professionals. In these studies, the participants have a different motivation to engage compared with fathers seeking help about parenting, and they are not UK based.

## 2.7 Chapter summary and conclusion

The importance of supported, engaged fathers is recognised in the literature and current public health policy in the UK. However, the existing provision of professional support for parents does not meet the needs of fathers. There are barriers to health advice seeking

behaviour for men, which are particularly important during the transition to fatherhood, and in the early years as a parent, while the father addresses conflicting societal expectations of fatherhood, such as the dilemma between the breadwinner role and that of hands-on caring father. There is evidence that online support groups provide information and support for those experiencing health issues, and computer mediated peer led support overcomes some of the barriers to support fathers in the early years, by providing a 'father friendly' method of self-help. In particular, peer-to-peer support is more acceptable to fathers than professional-led support around fatherhood.

### 2.7.1 Addressing the gaps in literature

The majority of the literature reviewed on online support for fathers is either about professional-led support, as part of an intervention, or it is for fathers of children with specific health conditions. The evidence about peer-to-peer online support forums for fathers currently is limited to two studies from Australia and Nordic countries. Many online support groups for specific health conditions have been studied, and found to be beneficial in terms of self-help mechanisms, yet the existing literature on father focused online support does not draw on self-help mechanisms beyond reciprocity and support through shared experience. This thesis analysed the online discussions to identify whether these self-help mechanisms were evident. Neither of the identified studies has explored the phenomenon of father-to-father discussion boards from a masculine theoretical perspective, which this thesis proposes is a significant element influencing the decision to post, how experiences and questions are posed on the discussion board, and how support is expressed. This thesis takes a social constructionist paradigm, therefore recognising that the performance of both masculinity and fatherhood is fluid and dependent on culture and time. The social expectations and culturally defined roles of men and fathers in Australia and the Nordic countries are different to those in the UK, and the lack of support for fathers is an important issue currently in the UK. Therefore, a study of a UK online support group for fathers is

necessary if recommendations are to be made to address lack of support for fathers in this country. This thesis addresses this gap in the literature and presents a timely exploration of the characteristics of online peer support for fathers in the UK within the context of masculinity and help seeking. In order to do this, the following research questions are considered:

- A. How do posts reflect men's experiences of fatherhood in the UK, specifically in the early years?
- B. What do the discussions on the forum demonstrate about fathers' expression of masculinities, with specific consideration of online help-seeking behaviour related to parenting?
- C. To what extent does the online forum provide supportive or helping communication between members of the peer group?

Having reviewed the literature related to the interplay of fatherhood and masculine practices, and the literature on parenting support, including online peer support for fathers, the following chapter presents the epistemological standpoint and methodology used for this study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.0 Introduction to methodology

This chapter sets out the theoretical and epistemological basis of this study, followed by the study design. The selection of the site, and posts is outlined, followed by an account of the approach taken to thematic analysis. Key ethical issues relating to online research methods, particularly consent, privacy and anonymity are discussed, and finally a reflection on the author's influence on the study is provided.

### 3.1 Theoretical approach and epistemology.

This study sought to explore the characteristics of UK-based online peer support for fathers, specifically how the concepts of masculinity and of online peer support come into play in this setting. In order to achieve this, the theoretical framework drew on theories of masculinity, particularly hegemonic masculinity and the plurality of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and a conceptual framework consisting of themes of fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support was developed (see section 1.3). The standpoint of this thesis was that the roles of fatherhood and masculinity are both constructed by society, and performed by men. These social constructions of fatherhood centre on what is expected of a 'good father', as defined by social discourses, policy and the media (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Schmitz, 2016), and this varies over time and in different societies. Ideals about what is expected of a man is similarly constructed. Therefore, this thesis took a social constructionist stance: knowledge of the world exists in culturally situated social processes, rather than being predetermined by some natural order (Gergen & Gergen, 2012; Slater, 2017). This stance is particularly appropriate for this study, since the study explored how online interaction supports men to negotiate their masculine and fatherhood identities and roles.

The social constructionist epistemology suggests that no one view of the truth is more objective than any other in its depiction of the world (Slater, 2017). The lived experience of

the fathers, as presented by posts on the discussion board, presents the fathers' reality, and reflects the performance of fatherhood and masculinity by fathers within their perceived social reality. The performance of multiple masculine and father roles is in response to concepts of masculinity and fatherhood adopted from their culture. Taking this interpretivist position, whereby the world, in relation to this study, is socially constructed (Gilbert, 2008), suggests that meaning is interpreted from the data. To this end, this study sought to explore the social processes of fatherhood and masculinity, specifically related to online peer support, by drawing out themes that convey the social processes at work.

Ethnography is an approach to social research that involves studying behaviour of a social group in its natural setting, usually involving immersion and participation in the lives of others (Bloor, 2007; Robson, 2011) in order that the researcher may observe overtly or covertly those being observed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Virtual ethnography is an approach that moves into online spaces and online communities, although the terminology related to virtual ethnography has become wide ranging (Hine, 2000; Paech, 2009). Kozinets identifies that *netnography* refers to a series of analytical approaches where a significant amount of the data collected consists of "the data shared freely on the internet" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 79). There are mixed views as to whether analysing existing data online constitutes netnography. One view is that without the need for human presence and engagement with the research subjects, this approach is not synonymous with online ethnography, since there is no presence of the researcher online as they develop relationships with participants (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017). Indeed, Kozinets (2015) redefines netnography to move away from "unengaged content analysis" (p.96) to be more participative. This allows co-creation: if members of the online community are engaged with the research, then theory and meaning can be constructed by the community members with the researcher (Costello *et al.*, 2017). By this definition, this study does not take a true netnography approach.

Whilst there are multiple forms of online ethnography, different approaches are suited for different online platforms (Hine, 2016). The call for the researcher to be engaged with the



online community (Kozinets, 2015) may be desirable and practical for busy social media platforms and very active discussion groups. Within this thesis, a huge quantity of existing social interactions, and live posts during the data collection period has been analysed. This can be seen as naturalistic data<sup>8</sup>, from a less active online discussion forum with a large number of viewers, and a much smaller number of long-term users. Therefore, reviewing the existing and current posts was appropriate here, since engaging with site users who may be already dealing with issues about help seeking would be ineffective. This position was confirmed in initial discussions with the owners of the selected site.

By using mainly existing data, and also including live data posted during the data collection period, the researcher is not interacting with the site users, nor influencing the contemporaneous users' interaction with each other, since the people under investigation are not aware that they are being studied. This is non-invasive and non-disruptive data collection (Janetzko, 2016). Using naturalistic data gives several advantages, including avoiding encouraging subjects to provide normatively appropriate responses (Potter, 2008) to the researcher (although in the case of an online forum, posters may be adjusting to what is expected, or perceived to be expected, within the group).

Therefore, this thesis takes a social constructionist stance about the topic, using posts from relevant discussion boards as naturalistic data for thematic analysis. The following section sets out the selection of the website containing the discussion board, and the selection of the threads and posts that became the data for analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> Naturalist data are records of human activities that are neither elicited by nor affected by the actions of researchers (Potter, 2008)

## 3.2 Study design

### 3.2.1 Selection of site

A particular focus for this study was fathering young (pre-school or under 5 years old) children, since issues of transition to fatherhood, returning to work, and the novelty of the father role have been identified as important to this study. It was decided to exclude online support forums for parents or fathers of children with specific health conditions, since this situation would influence the fathers' engagement with the forum. Various websites offering parenting support were considered for this study. Two of the most popular in the UK are *mumsnet* and *netmums*. However, while both sites had discussion boards allowing people to post their questions about parenting, and there was frequent use of gender-neutral terms such as parenting, these sites were clearly aimed at, and used mostly by mothers. Other sites, such as the National Childbirth Trust, requires paid membership to access any discussion boards. A Google search using the terms "online" "support" "father" and "dad" identified several sites (see appendix A). Since the focus of the study was to explore the online peer support for fathers, the criteria set out in table 3.1 were used for selection of the site.

**Table 3.1 Criteria for selection of site for study**

- The site is primarily aimed at fathers, or there is a clear section for fathers
- The site has discussion boards, not simply pages of information or blogs by selected authors
- The discussion boards include space for discussion about fatherhood and parenting issues
- The site is not evidently a commercial interest (e.g. solicitors providing advice on child contact and promoting their practice)
- The site does not require paid membership to post on the discussion boards
- The site does not require registration to read the posts
- The site is in English
- The site is UK based

One UK site, specifically aimed at fathers, was identified. In addition to providing articles on fatherhood and separation, it has a forum consisting of discussion boards on a variety of topics. Site users do not need to log on to read the posts, but do need to create a free account if they wish to post or reply to other's posts. Since it provided the opportunity for fathers to discuss issues relating to fatherhood with other fathers, this site was selected for the study.

### 3.2.2 Data collection: selection of threads and posts

The data consist of posts (individual messages) in threads (conversations) on discussion boards (topic areas). Since the significance and meaning of individual messages is derived in part by the context, specifically the preceding messages in the thread (Thomsen, Straubhaar, & Bolyard, 1998), taking the message out of context for analysis was avoided. This means that purposive sampling (such as messages by thread or period), rather than random sampling was most appropriate (Herring, 2004). For this study, the relevant discussion boards and threads were selected in order to maintain the context of individual posts.

The titles of discussion boards from the selected site were read, and the thread titles examined in order to identify which discussion boards were specifically related to fatherhood with younger children (or the antenatal period). Eight discussion boards had threads largely related to fathering pre-school children (see table 3.2).

Each of the threads on these boards were then read, and those that were not related to parenting, or the role of the father, were excluded. The main reason for excluding threads on boards pertaining to be about fathering preschool children or expectant fathers was that the posts were largely about contact issues with children, or separation from the partner. Indeed,

**Table 3.2 Inclusion and exclusion of discussion boards**

<b>Discussion boards included</b>	<b>Discussion boards excluded</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-school fathering</li> <li>• Expecting?</li> <li>• Behaviour management</li> <li>• Building self-esteem</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Why dads matter to kids</li> <li>• Childhood issues</li> <li>• Child safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-teen fathering</li> <li>• Teenage fathering</li> <li>• Legal Eagle</li> <li>• Men's health</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Child maintenance</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Families</li> </ul>

the majority of posts in all of the *issues for dads* section appeared to be about access and contact with children, related either to the ex-partner or to the progress of their case through the courts. This was despite there being specific boards for threads on relationships and legal advice. On some boards, for example behaviour management, there were topics raised about children who were clearly above pre-school age, so these were excluded from the analysis. Four threads were excluded because there were no responses to the initial post during the sample period. Additionally, commercial posts, specifically promoting a product, were excluded. In contrast, where the post appeared to be a genuine personal recommendation, judged by the context and content, this post was included (see table 3.3).

**Table 3.3 Exclusions of posts or threads**

<b>Reasons for excluding specific threads or posts</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About access or maintenance, or progress of court case</li> <li>• About relationship with ex-partner (and not relating to parenting)</li> <li>• About parenting children above pre-school age</li> <li>• No response to original post (i.e. a single-post thread)</li> <li>• Specifically aimed at promoting a commercial product or service</li> </ul>

Posts of any age were included, as there is a lack of guidelines for the number of posts to include in research into computer-mediated support groups (McCormack & Coulson, 2009). This had the risk of producing an unmanageable number of posts for analysis. However, since some threads ran over several months, it was decided to keep the selected threads intact, so ensure the full richness of discussion on the topic was obtained. No maximum age of thread was imposed for selection, so all relevant threads were included, up to the end of sampling on 1st September 2015.

The selected threads were imported into NVIVO 10 qualitative data analysis software (QSR Software), and the files were password protected to ensure data protection. NVIVO facilitates the recording, coding and cross-referencing of qualitative data, and has been used for studies of online communities (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011; Gallagher & Savage, 2015).

### 3.2.3 Thematic analysis

There appears to be little consistency in how researchers study online communities (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010). Researchers may use the virtual space to recruit participants, or to distribute questionnaires. However, discussion boards provide a rich source of written communication. According to Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2012), there is a variety of ways that qualitative data in the form of text can be analysed. Text can be seen as an object of analysis (for example the use of language itself), or as a proxy for experience, which may give insight into the participants' feelings, knowledge and behaviour as it is represented in the text. Much qualitative health science research is based on the latter approach, which can be subdivided into analysis of words or themes. Drawing on data from interviews, focus groups, or, in this case, discussion boards, the text may be analysed quantitatively, using word counts, theme frequency and co-occurrence analysis, and the results can be compared between different groups. This method, content analysis, is becoming increasingly popular in the study of

social media, for example Twitter (Robson, 2011). However, an alternative is to analyse the themes deductively, identifying emergent<sup>9</sup> themes related to the main conceptual framework, or using *a priori* categories of themes based on theory or the literature to test a hypothesis. Therefore, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes, or patterns within a body of qualitative data (Guest et al., 2012).

The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics of online peer support for fathers, particularly in the antenatal and pre-school period. Specifically, the subjective lived experiences and online activity by fathers was investigated. Therefore, a qualitative approach to thematic analysis was used. This study used a deductive thematic analysis of selected postings from the OSG, since this approach is a useful method of providing a framework to organise and describe the data, framing the data in terms of the conceptual framework's key themes of fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support. *A priori* codes relating to self-help mechanisms in online support groups for health-related issues (Malik & Coulson, 2010; Perron, 2002) were used to identify posts that contained these types of communication (table 3.3). However, masculinity and fatherhood are also components of the study's conceptual framework, so the posts were analysed to identify relationships and meanings between these components. Therefore, two approaches to the analysis were undertaken simultaneously, as illustrated in figure 3.1 (on page 46).

**Table 3.3 Self-help mechanisms used as *a priori* codes (from Malik & Coulson, 2010)**

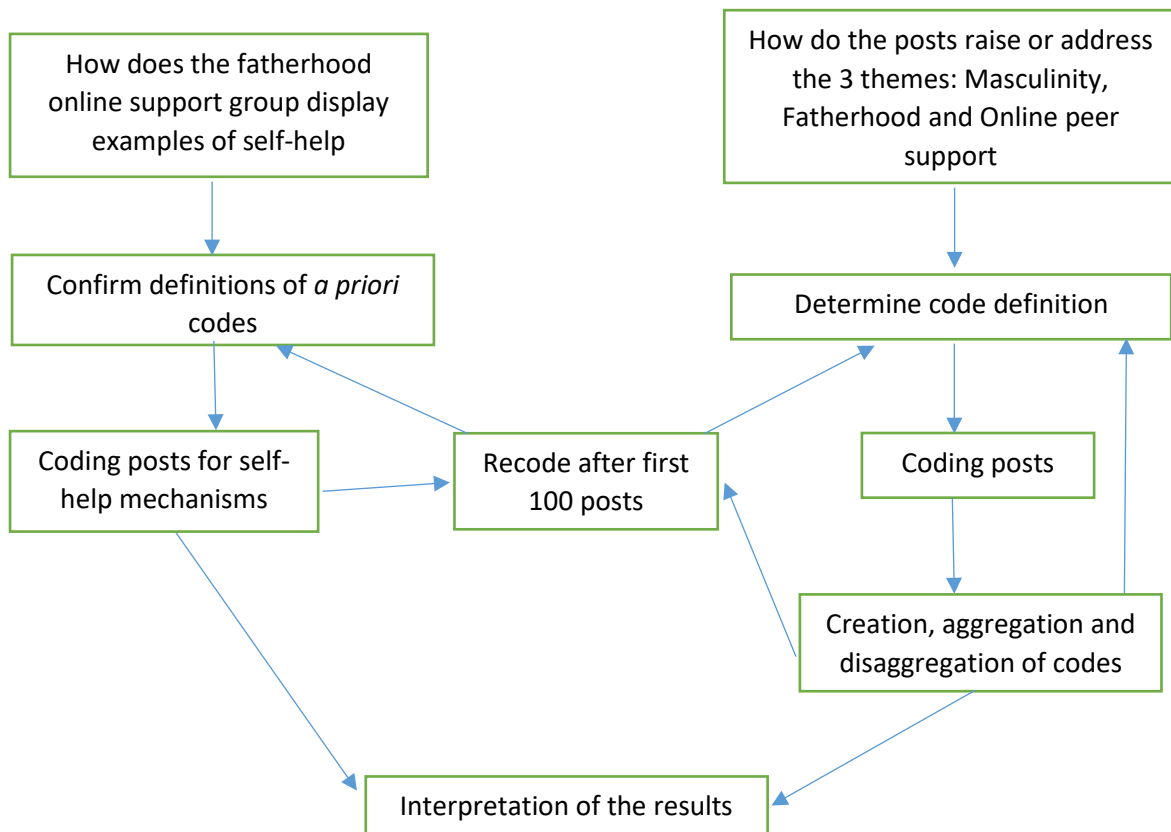
- |                                      |                                |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| i. Support or empathy                | vi. Universality               |
| ii. Requesting information or advice | vii. Friendship                |
| iii. Providing information or advice | viii. Chit chat                |
| iv. Sharing personal experiences     | ix. Gratitude                  |
| v. Creative expression               | x. Negative comments to others |

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<sup>9</sup> Despite suggestions that themes “emerge naturally from the empirical data during analysis” (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016 p.106), theme identification is an active process conducted by the researcher, whether this is informed by a theoretical or conceptual framework derived from a review of the literature, or based on their existing knowledge of the phenomenon or their own context and position (Dean, 2017)

### Thematic analysis using *a priori* codes

### Thematic analysis using emergent codes



**Figure 3.1 The deductive approaches to thematic analysis**

Coding is a process that manages and describes the data elements. All of the selected posts were coded, to include a code to identify the person who made the post (describing the post), and subjectively identifying the meaning of the post. Each post could contain more than one code, for example, a post could contain an expression of weakness, and a request for help. As more coding took place, it was possible to aggregate or disaggregate codes and refine the code definitions. The author undertook all coding, and after coding 100 posts, returned to the first posts to be coded, and recoded these to ensure that codes identified at this point were applied. By this point, the author was familiar with the codes. A thematic coding book is presented in appendix B.

As the process of coding continued, and as the posts were reread, it was possible for the researcher to identify codes that were linked and interrelated. These themes were more

implicit and abstract groupings, drawn from interpretation (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). The broadest themes were already defined by the conceptual framework: fatherhood, masculinity and online peer support, however, other subthemes were identified, and these are discussed in the results chapter.

### 3.2.4 Accessing the site for research

Many online communities grow organically, as a virtual space for people with a shared interest to meet and discuss issues important to them. This means that the site moderators may not support requests from researchers who wish to contact site users to recruit them into their studies, if the moderators feel that the presence of researchers (as outsiders) could inhibit the site users. For other sites, owners may not have policies for research requests, or staff with an understanding of research processes who can deal with enquiries. Since this study was to use the written communication (existing and 'live') on the discussion boards, the owning organisation of the site was contacted and their research application form was completed and approved. After a long period of communication, the site owners granted permission for the posts to form the data for this research.

## 3.3 Ethical issues

Despite the great potential for the internet to offer both a medium and environment for research, it is important that ethical dimensions are carefully considered along with the methodological challenges (Kozinets, 2015; Waskul & Douglass, 1996). Despite the origins of medical research ethics having its foundations in protecting the human subject, internet research ethics raise the question of whether one's personal digital information is an extension of the self (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). In particular, there is still a potential risk that the research participants may be harmed, for example if identifiable information was published, even if this was only identifiable to other members of their online community



(Hine, 2008). Additionally, it could be foreseeable that publication of negative findings about a web forum, for example, may lead to people leaving that forum, therefore disrupting the context of the research as well as affecting individuals. However, qualitative research based on internet communications and resources can be beneficial, as it may codify needs, values, concerns and preferences, and improve the understanding of experiences of people that would be relevant to health (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) have produced guidelines for researchers using the internet as a source of data or conducting research online (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). The authors note that there are no nationally adopted codes on internet research ethics. The authors recognise that because the internet is a social phenomenon, a tool and a site for research, and that the types of interaction varies across devices and social spaces, it is necessary for researchers to apply ethical principles inductively, depending on “practical judgement attentive to the specific context” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012 p.4). These situational judgements are addressed in the following sections (Attard & Coulson, 2012; Coulson, 2005).

### 3.3.1 Consent, privacy and anonymity

The issue of consent for the analysis of the discussion boards poses an ethical challenge. Communication on online forums takes place in an arena that provides anonymity by a user-created pseudonym, and this can lead to more open sharing than in a face-to-face setting with a researcher (Asenhed et al., 2013; Suler, 2004). However, there is a debate as to whether online spaces constitute public or private spaces (Elm, 2009). The British Psychological Society (BPS) (Hewson *et al.*, 2013) suggests a public space is where individuals would expect to be observed by strangers. Eysenbach and Till (2001) point out that members of internet communities do not expect to be subjects of research, yet their postings are publically available. Analogies are made with public spaces: would a researcher

be required to obtain informed consent from everyone in a busy bar? The guidance on the discussion board under study reminds site users that it is a public site where posts are accessible by others. On these terms, the discussion boards would be considered public spaces. The fact that no passwords or subscriptions are required to access the discussion boards in this study, and the size of the OSG, (the numbers of members and guests are displayed at the bottom of each page - frequently thousands of guests) indicates that this is a busy and large forum, with a very large number of non-registered readers. The sense of privacy may be greater for participants of a small group with, say, 10 members (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Therefore, for this study, the discussion boards were considered a public arena. An ethical position of implied consent is taken for this study since the posts are freely available and not password protected (Bradley & Carter, 2012).

Kraut *et al.* (2004), in their advice on conduct on internet research, suggest that the requirement for consent can be waived if the research involves no more than minimal risk to the participants, and that the research cannot be practicably carried out if consent was required. The decision not to obtain consent from the site users in this study was for practical reasons: the data were from historical posts, and so the contributors may no longer engage with the site, and when they did post, they used anonymous user names. No contact details are available on the site.

Qualitative research papers usually present the participants' words in order to provide meaning and richness to the presentation of the data (Guest *et al.*, 2012). However, both the BPS and AoIR warn researchers to weigh up the benefit of the research against the potential harm to the participants, especially regarding sensitive issues or particularly vulnerable groups (Hewson *et al.*, 2013; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Eysenbach and Till, (2001) argue that, in order to maintain the confidentiality of the posters, verbatim quotes should not be used since it is possible to use a search engine to trace verbatim quotes originating from non-password protected sites on the internet. The probability of harm to the original site user if this happens is linked to the level of sensitivity of the post and the personal information it

contains. However, Robinson, (2001) describes the existing text on discussion boards as 'unsolicited narratives'. As such, Robinson suggests that since these data are existing (and not specifically generated for the proposed research) and publicly accessible, (specifically that site users have posted information to a freely accessible forum expecting 'persons unknown' may read, share and comment on them) then verbatim quotes are acceptable, unless there is particularly damaging content. Verbatim quotes help to reduce the risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the participant, which could be introduced by paraphrasing by the researcher (Germain, Harris, Mackay, & Maxwell, 2017). Indeed, the actual choice of words used by the participant may have specific significance and meaning, and the author felt this meaning should be preserved, in order to establish the veracity of the researcher's interpretation. The possibility of using very short quotes was considered, but it proved possible to find the source of a two word phrase using Google. Since the posts are freely available on the forum under study, the position is taken for this study that more will be lost by paraphrasing the posts, than the reduction (if any) in potential harm to posters who may not even have engaged with the site for several years. For this study, direct quotes are used (retaining spelling, punctuation and grammar), pseudonyms are given, and personal information is removed from the quotes presented. This was in order to achieve a balance: preserve the meaning of the quotes, yet also providing a level of anonymity, whilst recognising that someone with enough motivation could put the quotes into a search engine or just look through the posts on the publically available discussion boards, and read the posts with the poster's original username. The addition of potential harm caused by the reporting of this research is felt to be minimal.

Finally, ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty of Health and Medicine Research Ethics Committee (FHMREC) at Lancaster University.

### 3.3.2 A note on pseudonyms

Each named participant in the sample of posts for this study was allocated a pseudonym in order to improve privacy, and to overcome the usernames that are intentionally or unintentionally related to the poster's real name (Kraut *et al.*, 2004). In the case of those participants identified as fathers, a random male or unisex name was allocated, generated from a website. Pseudonyms that were similar to the actual names chosen by other posters in the selected discussion boards were removed. There is no intended correlation between the country of origin of the name and the background of the poster. For other posters, who have been identified as mothers or parents, or those who it was not possible to classify, a female or gender non-specific name was randomly allocated, but these are presented in italics to indicate that it they are not, or may not be a father.

### 3.4 Reflexivity: the author's influence

I have chosen an approach to studying the online support forum for fathers in a way that I felt was most appropriate to meet the research questions, as set out in the introduction chapter. However, I recognise that not only the reading of the data (since this is a qualitative study), but the methodological choices, and indeed topic choice, is influenced by who I am and what makes me *me*. Whilst another researcher might chose a different approach, or identify other themes and meaning in the data, my background and positioning is presented below, with a reflection on how my values may influence this study.

I am approaching this study from the position of a health visitor academic. Having worked as a health visitor for several years, I took up a post in a UK university as a lecturer in public and community health. I bring my professional background into my work at the university, and into this study. I continue to be involved in the study of the importance of supporting the early years. I was always aware of the focus of health visiting towards the mother and the baby, and the almost implicit mutually agreed exclusion of the fathers in the support my

colleagues and I were able to provide. Then, as a new father myself, being visited by our health visitor, I was aware how I was being sidelined from the visits.

Particularly for qualitative research, researchers are unable to achieve the epistemological state of pure innocence and should not hide behind the mask of objectivity (Dean, 2017). In addition to the 'voices' of the site users who posted on the discussion boards, it is important to recognise the author's (researcher's) voice, as the interpretations made in this study are made through the lens of my personal history and professional position. I am a white male, trained as a nurse who practiced as health visitor, and I became a father after moving to a post as a lecturer in public and community health. Therefore, I have worked in the UK maternal and child health system, providing advice and support to families with young children, although I observed that both the 'system' and families' expectations were that my role was largely for the mother and baby (see Preface). This view was usually also accepted by the fathers that I met during my practice. During my teaching at the University, I also developed an interest in the value of peer-education and peer-support (particularly with young people). These interests and experiences position me, as the researcher, in a context where, despite accepting the world view that generally men exert power over women, fathers of young children are largely side-lined by support systems while they face the conflicting pressures to return to work and be hands-on with their child.

In addition, my experience to date has been limited regarding empirical research, yet the idea of using online methods appealed, because this is a growing area (Kozinets, 2015), and I perceive online approaches may be important for public health and health promotion. Much of the literature about online approaches to supporting parenthood focused on interventions (for example training packages or information giving) *by* professionals *for* the parents. At this time, following many high profile cases of medical professionals or institutions causing harm, there is move away from unquestioning trust of health professionals, along with the public turning to the internet to find information for themselves. Peer support online therefore seems to be a useful mode of supporting fathers.

Reflecting on the knowledge that is cited to support and build upon for this thesis, it is recognised that the majority of the literature is drawn from a white, Western perspective. I have not focused on fathers in prison, fathers in the army, drug using fathers or fathers separated from their families. My avoidance of these specific cases in the literature suggests my own definition of 'normality', which undeniably reflects my own, lived experience of fatherhood. However, fathers who are not in prison, separated or violent towards their partners appear to be underrepresented in the literature relating to parenting. Nor have I sought research on fathers in same sex relationships, or from black and minority ethnic groups. Whilst this study does not seek generalisability, it is hoped that the findings may inform practice for some elements of the maternal and child health service (specifically health visitors) in the UK. It is my aim for the findings to be useful for my previous profession, and wider services to support fathers.

In selecting the threads for discussion, and the subsequent coding, I used the conceptual framework of overarching themes, and coded using both *a priori* and new themes that I identified. This latter process will have been informed or coloured by my own personal perspective, as I seek to identify whether online peer support is a potential source of support for fathers. My personal biography would need serious consideration should I have been interviewing the site users regarding their hopes for their interaction with the discussion boards. As a new researcher in this field, I have no previously published opinions to support, yet my position in hypothesising that online peer support may overcome the masculine barriers to help seeking could influence my interpretation. To reduce this risk, I sought deviant cases in the data.

In addition, there were only limited proxy indicators of the site users' socio-economic status, such as specific in-post references to leaving school, job held, or reference to benefits, and language used in the posts. However, my data were existing posts, and therefore, my own context's influence on the research is pertinent to the selection and interpretation of the data, and the selection of the quotes presented to support the analysis. My own lived experience

of masculinity, help seeking and fatherhood undoubtedly influences my response to the posts. I endeavour to take an interpretive constructionist approach, understanding that men perform the role of father (and man) in a fluid way, influenced by normalising factors (including culture and experience). However, I also recognise that my background as a public health nurse, while generally equipping me with experience of people's lives being ambiguous, has probably instilled some notions of the correct and incorrect approaches to parenting (some of which have been thoroughly challenged in my own practice as a father).

By setting out the above thoughts on my background, I seek to be reflexive, identifying those values in me that may have relevance as I look at the data and attempt to identify meanings and patterns in the posts by fathers on the discussion board.

### 3.5 Methodological reflections

At the outset of this study, it was planned that current members of the parenting discussion boards would be recruited to a separate phase of the study, which would use asynchronous email interviews (Kivits, 2005) to triangulate the findings from the posts, and to ascertain how the user came to post initially, and their views about the discussion boards. This was to allow deeper exploration of the experiences of the fathers who posted, including their reasons for moving from lurking to posting. On discussion, the site owners suggested that a post requesting research participants was not appropriate. They identified that previous requests for research participants on the forum had usually yielded minimal response levels. They did offer to forward an email request from the researcher to site users who had indicated on the site's annual survey that they would be interested in participating. However, it later emerged that for technical reasons, the third party managing the site survey was not able specifically to identify the users who were parents of pre-school children, so this phase of the study was not carried out. It was felt that the data obtained from the selected parenting

discussions were sufficiently rich for meaningful analysis. However, the analysis remains the interpretation of the researcher and has, therefore, not been triangulated.

### 3.6 Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter has presented the rationale and detail of the epistemological and methodological approach to this study: a thematic analysis of posts related to fatherhood and parenting in the antenatal and pre-school years. Coding was based on a combination of *a priori* codes (relating to self-help mechanisms) and others identified by the author. Reviewing these codes and revisiting the data has enabled the author to identify themes, and review the meaning of the posts within the context of the conceptual framework: masculinity, fatherhood and online peer support. This methodology chapter provides the rationale for this study's position on the ethical issues for online research using existing and current posts as data. The next chapter presents the findings, using selected quotes from the data to present the identified themes.



## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.0 Introduction to the results

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of UK-based online peer support for fathers. Specifically, posts relating to fatherhood from the antenatal period to pre-school children were analysed. This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis. Initially, this chapter gives an overview of the contributors, threads, and posts that were selected. The majority of the rest of the chapter presents an analysis of the posts, and how they illuminate the interplay between masculinity and fatherhood. Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 examine the use of the boards through help seeking and self-disclosure: two important components of father engagement with the discussion boards that demonstrate the nuanced fluidity of masculine behaviours. The chapter moves on to consider how posts reflected issues experienced by fathers: transition and expectations, the challenges of early fatherhood, and the perceived need to do 'man things' and other responsibilities of the father. Section 4.4 analyses how the posts reflect masculinity issues experienced by fathers; specifically work-life balance and the experience of being a man in a predominantly women's world. The subsequent section (4.5) analyses the peer support elements evident in the discussion boards. Finally, the conceptual framework is revisited, with key themes identified in the analysis being placed within the three conceptual framework themes of masculinity, fatherhood and online peer support.

#### 4.1.1 The sample of posts

As the focus of this study is on the transition to fatherhood and fatherhood in the early years, threads were selected from eight discussion boards on the basis that they related to either the antenatal period or parenting pre-school children (Table 4.1). No maximum age of thread was imposed for selection, so all relevant threads were included, up to the end of sampling on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015. The website displays the approximate age of the posts at the time of

viewing, in years and months, months, or weeks and days. The oldest threads selected were seven years and six months old, and the most recent ones were posted one month and one week before being captured.

Details of the selection and exclusion of threads and posts are in section 3.2.2 of the previous chapter. After exclusions were removed, a total of 130 threads, comprising of 835 posts, were analysed. This represented nearly one-third of the threads on the eight discussion boards. The breakdown of posts selected from the different discussion boards is presented in table 4.1. The greatest number of posts relevant to this study came from the threads 'pre-school fathering', 'behaviour management', 'work-life balance' and 'building self-esteem'.

**Table 4.1 Overview of threads and posts in sample**

<b>Discussion board topic</b>	<b>Total threads on discussion board (Sept 2015)</b>	<b>Number of threads analysed</b>	<b>No. of posts analysed</b>
<b>Pre-school fathering</b>	48	33	175
<b>Expecting?</b>	23	18	88
<b>Behaviour management</b>	105	27	176
<b>Building self esteem</b>	60	16	110
<b>Work-life balance</b>	37	18	142
<b>Why dads matter to kids</b>	62	9	90
<b>Childhood issues</b>	51	5	41
<b>Child safety</b>	60	4	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	446	130	835

Threads and individual posts were excluded from these selected boards if they were not directly about fathering issues related to pre-school children or the antenatal period. For a

summary, please see table 3.2. For example, many threads under behaviour management related to older children.

#### 4.1.2 Context of the findings: characteristics of those who posted on the sampled threads

It was possible to identify 192 unique poster names. Each identified poster was categorised, based on available data, by their gender. From the majority of named posters, it was possible to identify if they were a father, mother, parent, grandparent, or professional (such as midwife). This was based on an explicit statement, implied content of the posts analysed, information in a tag line on that person’s post, or sometimes in the name the poster had chosen, such as ‘Hannahsdad’<sup>10</sup>. Where it was not possible to infer this information, it was categorised as not known. Moderators and administrators were placed in a separate category, since their engagement with the site was different. The breakdown of roles identified by the writers of the selected posts is in table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 Self-declared roles of writers of the posts in sample**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Number of posts in the sample by this group</b>	<b>Total participants identified in sample</b>	<b>Moderator / administrator</b>
<b>Father</b>	678	151	8
<b>Mother</b>	11	7	3
<b>Parent</b>	9	7	1
<b>Grandmother</b>	47	3	0
<b>Expert</b>	7	3	0
<b>Not known*</b>	51	20	1

\* excluding anonymous posts: the poster was named, but it was not possible to identify their role (e.g. father, parent) from the content of their posts.

<sup>10</sup> A fictitious example to illustrate how a username might indicate a specific role

By far the largest group of participants in the sample were fathers, who contributed most of the posts. Eight of the 12 site moderators or administrators self-declared as fathers. There were 77 posts by anonymous contributors in the analysed sample. For individual posts, it was sometimes possible to identify the poster as a father based on the content of that post. The particular focus of the study is online peer support between fathers, although the site is open to all. For example, healthcare professionals would have different motivations to access the site, and the literature suggests there are certain issues related to masculinity that men need to address before they post, that are not issues for women. Therefore, to retain the focus on the conceptual framework, the examples provided in this chapter were from posters who this study identified as fathers, or who were likely to be fathers, based on the content of their posts.

The majority of the messages in the sample of posts about parenting from the antenatal period to the pre-school years were posted by fathers (as opposed to other relatives, or healthcare professionals). Therefore, this virtual space provides a forum for fathers to interact. The majority of identified individuals posted between two and seven posts in the sample, usually on one or two threads only. The majority of posters interact with the site for a short period, for example, when they reach crisis point and their threshold for help seeking is reached. In this way, they take a task-focused, problem solving approach to the site. They have moved from lurking (see 4.2.3) to posting, usually for a specific reason. This move to help seeking is analysed in the following section.

However, a minority of fathers remain site users for longer, with one posting 39 posts within the sample, contributing to many discussions raised by others, and offering their own advice and support. This increased level of engagement is analysed in section 5.5.

#### 4.2.1 Using the site: the help-seeking behaviour of online fathers

In order to consider why and how men as fathers seek support on the discussion boards, the following sections present the findings from the sample posts, which demonstrate fathers overcoming two important stereotypical masculine behaviours: seeking help and self-disclosure of weakness. This sets the foundation for the later sections of this chapter to explore the wider issues raised by the questions and discussions in the posts.

Masculinity is often linked to issues regarding help-seeking behaviour in the literature (e.g. Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Seidler, Dawes, Rice, Oliffe, & Dhillon, 2016; Tyler & Williams, 2013), suggesting that men are reluctant to seek help as this is a sign of weakness. However, this presents a conflict for men as fathers who seek to protect and support their family yet have need of support themselves as they adapt to the challenges of fatherhood. The discussion boards demonstrated that the authors of posts sought help, and this was frequently in a straightforward format. Many threads started as posts requesting information or advice. These included questions relating to general parenting, such as what to expect during birth and how to cope with a crying baby who would not settle. Many of these requests were not threatening to the man's identity as a successful father, since they were largely practical. Indeed, the requests sometimes acknowledged the greater experience of the wider online community, seeking alternative suggestions: "So my question is - what tactics have other dads used successfully to get your kids to listen to you? Or even what didn't work?" [Melvin]. In this case, Melvin was suggesting he would weigh up the advice and make an informed decision about what to do in order to retain control. Others asked for help because the issue had finally moved to the top of the 'to-do' list: "But any advice would be most welcome as we're trying to now get this sorted!" [Logan]. These demonstrate the father placing the help seeking within the context of him remaining in control. These characteristics of practical approaches and remaining in control suggest normative gendered behaviour (Miller & Nash, 2017). Interestingly, Logan also apologised for his enquiry: "Many thanks for this and sorry if it seems to go over old ground" suggesting

he felt that he should not be asking the question. This demonstrates discomfort in asking, as the father steps out of the masculine norm in order to seek help, but also that it is possible to do, through acknowledgement that it may be an inconvenience to other site users.

In some cases, the site user would emphasise the severity of the situation, giving an indication that the poster had tried, and been unsuccessful in solving the issue, and was getting increasingly desperate for assistance or advice, or doubting their own abilities, for example, Alan posted: "I am in complete despair. I just cannot do the right thing." This demonstrates two processes. Firstly, Alan has reached a threshold, which has led to him posting on the discussion board asking for help. This phenomenon has been identified in the current discourse of men's help-seeking behaviour in depression (Johnson, Oliffe, Kelly, & Ogrodniczuk, 2012). Secondly, emphasising the extremity of the situation provided a reason why his seeking help would be seen as acceptable despite admitting a lack of competence. Failure in parenting tasks was presented on several occasions in contrast to the mother's perceived high level of ability. By doing this, the father is emphasising the otherness quality of caring for an infant.

On the other hand, some requests for advice were downplayed or minimised. For example, Byron pre-empted his question, suggesting that there was no expectation was that there was a simple answer: "First off, I'm gonna say that I know that no-one can give me the real answers I'm looking for at the moment". This example was despite the author titling his thread "Silently panicking", as he and his pregnant partner awaited test results regarding the unborn baby's health. This illustrates well his situation of being in fearful distress yet containing it because he is unable, or unwilling, to express it, and thereby demonstrate weakness.

Another example of help seeking was expressed as part of the father's role in supporting his partner: despite help seeking, he is demonstrating his masculinity by taking the role of protector:

“Our newborn is crying so much at night it is untrue. we have tried the remedies for Colic but are still having trouble settling her and now the wife is upset cos she feels she should be able to solve this problem, any help guys?????????” [Irvine]

The trigger here was his wife becoming upset, so he now had to support her. The maximising or minimising of difficulties that the father was experiencing are examples of mitigated help seeking, suggesting that they would not usually ask, but they were presenting an extreme case. If the help seeking was under these unusual circumstances, or trivialised, then it did not threaten the standing or experience of the father, and therefore the man. This represents subtle nuances of the performance of masculinity, which can be fluid and complex depending on the presenting context.

#### 4.2.2 Self-disclosure

Threads commonly started with a post that set out the father’s personal circumstances, often going into some detail. This self-disclosure would often move beyond the basic biographical details, such as the poster is the father of two girls, to include the sharing of personal difficulties or their own perceived lack of experience. Fathers articulated weakness to those reading the posts, for example acknowledging that they were fearful as a father, depressed or angry. Orlando ended his posting by describing how he felt himself: “I know this doesn’t sound like much compared to some people’s probs on here but it hurts all the same” [Orlando]. Self-disclosure goes beyond the help seeking evident in the posts analysed, as the participant identifies information personal to themselves. High levels of self-disclosure, when participants present their anxieties or how they are not coping with the situation, is in contrast to the hegemonic masculine ideal of presenting a strong image. In some cases, the writer of the post identified that the process of telling others about his situation was beneficial, helping him to unload. The anonymity provided by communicating on the discussion boards may be a reason why the men were able to reveal personal issues, without challenging their lived masculine role in the real world, although none of the posts analysed acknowledged this.

Within posts containing self-disclosure, there were examples of limitation: when the poster identifies the difficulties as occasional lapses whilst establishing that the rest of the time he copes, maintaining the masculine ideal. One anonymous father acknowledged that he was finding it difficult to keep control of his temper (a stereotypically masculine behaviour) as his young child was not sleeping at night, noting that his wife remained calm. This may underline the fact that remaining calm with a crying baby is seen as feminine behaviour, which, through effort, he manages the majority of the time:

“This, to not put to fine a point on it, can drive me up the flamin' wall. About 80% of the time I just get on with it and everything's fine, but occasionally it just really gets to me and I lose it.” [Anonymous father]

Other posts identified that the failure to cope was contextual, for example, following a particularly hard day in the office, or in the early hours of the morning.

These examples of self-disclosure, as part of help seeking within the discussion boards, demonstrate that fathers were willing to describe their own weaknesses, shortcomings and fears. Taking on the role of father creates a sense of responsibility that can allow the father to ask for help, and the request may be supported by further self-disclosure. Admitting one's weaknesses may be outside of the expected practice of masculine norms of behaviour, but doing so can increase the legitimacy of the request. In many cases, self-disclosure was used in the responses to the questioner.

Finally, humour, and the suggestion of humour through emojis<sup>11</sup> such as winking face or eye-rolling face, was used to highlight the difference between the reality of parenting (for example sleepless nights and dull, repetitive tasks) and the ideal model of parenting. This approach authenticates the fatherhood experiences of the site users, and may reduce the apparent seriousness of the post.

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<sup>11</sup> Emojis are small cartoon pictures of faces with different expressions, such as 😊, often used in social media



### 4.2.3 Lurking

The website displayed the real time level of usage across the discussion boards. The statistics on the final day of data collection, at the time of viewing, showed two registered (named) users on the discussion boards, and 690 guests (unregistered users) browsing the forums. This indicates that while the activity of posting onto the discussion boards was going on by registered and anonymous users, a large number of other unregistered internet users ('lurkers') were accessing the posts. It is not unusual for online groups to have a large number of lurkers compared to posters, even up to 99% of users not posting (Lai & Chen, 2014; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). These site users were potentially seeking and finding information and support from the existing posts without posting themselves. This is a key observation as, from a masculinity perspective, this allows help seeking at an even higher level of anonymity, as one of the crowd of lurkers. It is not possible to determine whether the readers of posts found the site supportive or helpful, but the high level of anonymous non-participants viewing the site shows that, if many are fathers too, men seek help online anonymously. By reading the questions and responses posted by others, they gain the information or advice that they seek, but do not threaten their masculine standing by demonstrating their weakness or lack of control.

The above sections demonstrate that men are able to seek help and disclose weaknesses. Although these findings potentially challenge existing expectations of masculine behaviour, there is evidence that fathers used strategies to mitigate the help seeking, by maintaining anonymity by lurking, or by how they ask for help. Once help is sought, some of the site users were able to disclose shortcomings and weaknesses, within the context of the online forum. These strategies suggest that there is a fluidity to the expression of masculinity, and this is explored further in the discussion chapter.

### 4.3 Fatherhood: role change, identities and expectations

“I'd never even held a child before I became a Dad and really have no idea what i'm doing. Anyone out there been through anything similar?” [Nathaniel]

The previous section considered how the posts on the discussion boards demonstrated that fathers were overcoming stereotypical masculine behaviours to seek help and to disclose their anxieties and difficulties in coping with being a father. Many messages sought help regarding practical parenting issues, as reported earlier in this chapter, but others centred on issues with fatherhood itself. This section explores how the findings demonstrated that the fathers used the boards to help them to seek support as they made sense of their identities as fathers.

#### 4.3.1 Transition

Fathers discussed their expectations regarding the transition to parenthood and the change in role, and there was clear commitment to the father role expressed in many messages:

“when we found out we had a sproglet on the way, she told me she was happy with me getting as involved as I want. I was over the moon because I, like every one of you, aim to be the best daddy in the world, from the word go!” [Boris]

Boris demonstrated the ideal expectation of a high level of father involvement with the baby. Fatherhood was seen as a positive state, recognised by peers, according to Boris, and also influenced by personal experience, as suggested by Rob:

“my goal is simple...to be the father to my child like my father is to me...my hero”  
[Rob, now separated from the mother of his child]

However, when the baby arrived, the transition to fatherhood was a challenging time of change. There were several threads asking what to expect or what were the biggest challenges. There were many instances of fathers reflecting on their role transition as a significant change in their lives, and in response, experienced fathers provided support.

Fathers wrote messages describing their feelings of frustration and stress, often relating to feeling out of control. One father described the transition:

“The biggest, most unimaginable change to your life. Your outlook and priorities to be turned on their heads. Financial meltdown; confusion and fatigue. A house full of crap. A pretty much constant feeling of being out of your depth. But all of the above is so massively worthwhile and paid - back a million times in cuddles, giggles and that long awaited "loveyou daddy".” [Dean]

This suggested that Dean recognised some of the challenges to traditional masculinity, such as losing control and a sense of incompetence. Interestingly, Dean demonstrated a limitation to his disclosure: he has survived the ordeal successfully. Acknowledging this reinstated his competence as a loved father. The sense of disruption was confirmed by threads that were seeking support or reassurance, rather than information, often relating to the experience of being a father to a new baby. Byron posted the following two days after the traumatic birth of the baby: “I know it's early days and that this is the hard bit but does it get easier? did anyone else out there have a similar experience? or feel any of the things I am?”[Byron]. In fact, there were many examples of fathers seeking reassurance that their experience or difficulty was normal. Normalising the temporary loss of control with the new baby was an important part of supporting the transition to fatherhood, and the many messages on the boards supported fathers to make sense of their situation, by providing a narrative that their own experience was also one that other fathers have gone through.

#### 4.3.2 The challenge of early fatherhood

There were instances when the father compared themselves to the mother of the child, often expressing the view that the mother was more natural at parenting, and in contrast, recognising that the father was not competent. These messages showed a level of self-doubt, which could lead to difficulties such as guilt or tension in the relationship:

“I know that my wife has the best interests of our babies (ive got twins) at heart and to be honest she probably does know the correct way to care for a baby but like you it used to drive me mad cos i never seem to be doing the right thing and she made me aware of it” [Jules]

In many cases, it was clear that the men found that the nurturing role with young babies was particularly challenging; babies and toddlers appeared to cause frustration, and even anger. Clearly, fathers were able to present their perceived incompetence and challenges with parenting young children to peers on the discussion boards, often with the implication that they should be assisting the mother. Other fathers posted in response, reassuring them that the situation would improve.

Anger issues appeared several times in discussions. Fathers reported feeling angry towards their children or their partner, and disclosed that they felt this was difficult to manage or that it was happening too often. In some cases, the site user also identified that he had been slow to acknowledge the temper issues to himself, and to others: "It has taken me a long time to admit I have a temper problem and could do with some help. If there is any dads or places that can offer my help then that would be great" [Barnie]. Feeling anger towards one's children was recognised as a taboo subject in contexts beyond the discussion boards, but it was dealt with sensitively on the site. Fathers responded to posts about anger by recognising anger in themselves, and associated guilt and even tears. Fathers gave their peers suggestions on how to manage these situations. Generally, the posts did not legitimise anger in fathers, but recognised that it was an issue for some, and that there were strategies to tackle the issue.

For male dominated spaces, including the discussion boards on fatherhood, there is a potential danger that if the majority values expressed are traditional male values, this may legitimise hegemonic positions and inhibit other views (Robinson & Robertson, 2017). In cases where fathers acknowledged fears, anxiety or depression, the responses were supportive, and recognised that such acknowledgement was not easy: "well done for posting and bringing your fears forward it could of been easier to say nothing" [Elmer]. The supportive response to fathers presenting views outside of the hegemonic values challenged the normative discourses, and engendered a sense of trust among network members

(Robinson & Robertson, 2017). This, in turn, encouraged other fathers to express their own concerns about their fatherhood abilities.

### 4.3.3 Doing 'man things'

Whilst there were many examples of requests for information or advice regarding general parenting in the sample of threads, the longest thread in the sample consisted of reflections on why fathers matter to children. Some of the posts related to doing 'man things', which would centre on various pursuits, as opposed to more nurturing activities, which might be seen as more feminine roles.

“dads are good for things such like;going to the park, getting them running around with the football or throwing sticks for the dog,learning to ride a bike,and in my case painting or drawing and showing themhow the guitars work and letting them write songs, going looking for tadpoles and frogs and all the wierd stuff thats all free and kids love all that” [Den]

A particular aspect of doing man things was evident in the discussions about bringing up boys, for example: “How do I get my 5 year old son to start peeing standing up? How did you teach your sons to pee standing? I would like him to stand before school starts” [Isaac]. Fathers saw being a role model as important, instilling masculine qualities into their male children and passing on masculine practices the father thought appropriate.

Fathers held a view that there were certain activities that fathers were expected to be able to do with their children, particularly as the child became more able to be involved in physical activities, including rough and tumble play. Indeed, one new father referred to the fact that he saw his role as a dad doing such activities to be something that would be developed once the child was older, yet the very early stages of fatherhood were proving to be a great challenge for him:

“I know fully that I will be a great Dad when he is slightly older. I have an interest in everything the world has to offer [...] but right now it is just really, really tough. I totally didn't expect this part at all and wasn't prepared.” [Jeremy]

These posts demonstrate the postponing involved fatherhood, which avoids challenges to traditional masculine roles of providing nurturing care, by fulfilling the male role activities once the child is old enough to participate in them. This sense may be transitory, as after two months, Jeremy's situation had somewhat settled as his child was smiling, so he felt rewarded for contact at this early stage. However, by this time many fathers have returned to work, so the opportunity to be involved in nurturing may have diminished.

#### 4.3.4 Fathers' responsibilities

There were examples of the father identifying his responsibility for his children, as protector, source of knowledge, and source of discipline. These masculine behaviours were enacted by the fathers in contrast to the self-doubt reported by some related to the care of babies.

Stan posted about when he saw his daughter bitten by the family dog:

"I kinda turned into DAD HULK and the path between the couch and the back yard was filled with fists, kicks, and the fury of a thousand suns" [Stan]

"I would imagine that your first instinct is to protect your child." [Taylor, administrator]

The role of protector was seen as an acceptable masculine behaviour in this example, even if it also suggested losing one's temper (see discussion about anger, above). Other fathers expressed expectations about the role of the father being the firm parent: "i find it hard to express how much i love my girls i feel that i gotta be the big tough daddy" [Crispin]. This clearly illustrates the difficulty in expressing emotional connections to his daughters, and the expectation Crispin has about his own behaviour that he has to be firm, which confirms to masculine ideals. Fathers discussed smacking, representing a range of positions which reflect the changing views of society about corporal punishment of children. Several fathers felt that a certain level of smacking was acceptable, and suggested that they know the limits: "I sometimes smack her on the bottom (Not overly smack her but a normal smack just to let her know)" [Finn], referring to a 'normal smack' as a socially acceptable level. However, another posted about how shocked he was after talking to a work colleague who was an

advocate for smacking. Some fathers remembered receiving corporal punishment from their own fathers, several supposing it had not harmed them in the long run, but felt this was no longer appropriate:

“I [...] would have got dads leather belt at home when I stepped out of line. [...] I don't think it did me any harm. I suppose in those days that's how things were done. These days its a different story. Parenting techniques have come along way in the last 30 years so much so that I don't feel its necessary to use a leather belt to punish a child.” [Maxim]

Related to this, one father, who disclosed that he had been bullied himself at school, was concerned that the philosophy of ‘turn the other cheek’ might mean that his children could be bullied themselves. These examples demonstrate that the performance of masculinity by fathers, and the transfer of masculine behaviours and values to children, is influenced by the fathers’ own experiences as children (particularly their experience of their own father), and also influenced by cultural values and norms.

These discussions recognise the father’s role in discipline, and reflect the gradually changing societal expectation of what methods are acceptable. Whilst the role of protector and disciplinarian are classic roles for the father, the discussion boards provide an opportunity for fathers to explore and validate their views on the issue.

#### 4.4.1 Masculinity: work-life balance

Work-life balance was a frequent topic in the discussion boards, indeed there was a whole discussion board devoted to this issue. The posts generally reflected the commonly held belief (gender stereotype) that the father should provide for the family. This imperative to be the breadwinner included the drive to promotion and develop career prospects, and thus, earning potential, whilst maintaining time with the family:

“Basically, I'm wondering if I can have my cake and eat it... The job is leading me forward into a career which I can enjoy, and can happily provide for my family and myself. But, I feel as though I'm stretching myself thin and this is impacting both my work and my time with my family... Is it possible to do both, or am I going to have to ditch my career?” [Bruce]

Bruce suggests that the promotion would be an enjoyable job, but recognises that family time ought to take precedence, although he is seeking validation amongst his online peers. Other fathers acknowledged in the posts that they were good at their jobs, and that they paid well. In these cases, fathers are returning to work where they are seen as competent and successful, therefore feeling secure and achieving status, even if their partners resented their long hours at work.

The conflict between being the breadwinner and being available at home was clear. Returning to work after the baby's birth conflicted with fathers' desires to support or protect their partner: "I am trying my best to support her, trying to do the most I can, however I am now back at work. [...], it's really hard because my wife is basically falling apart" [Jeremy]. Others reported that working long hours made them feel tired and less willing to be involved in childcare on their return home, despite recognising the benefits of this, and these posts suggested a sense of guilt about returning to work and leaving the partner with the baby.

There was some discussion about the planned introduction of Shared Parental Leave. There were mixed views, as summarised by Michael: "As a dad - Brilliant!!!!!! That would be amazing - but no it's a silly idea." identifying the practical barriers as an employer in a small business. Others expressed the view that the opportunity to spend more time with their young children was good, although several fathers expressed concerns about the financial impact. These views are congruent with the fact that Shared Parental Leave uptake is very low in the UK.

The discussions demonstrated that the expectation for fathers to work, to provide for the family and in some cases, return to their status, was stronger than the expectation to be involved and hands-on. There was a strong drive to return to what was seen by fathers or society in general as the masculine role evident in many posts, and various posts explored the experiences of men in largely female settings. These findings are explored in the



following section.

#### 4.4.2 A man in a woman's world

In addition to the transition to fatherhood, and discussions about aspects of the fatherhood role, there were several threads discussing particular challenges experienced by fathers in mother-dominated settings. An anonymous poster, in response to the question what are the biggest challenges for new dads, identified that baby-changing facilities were frequently in the ladies' toilets. Another father identified that support services for postnatal depression were aimed at mothers, which was felt to reflect society's expectation that men do not need support:

"The whole child rearing experience so far has really emphasised something I feel, about the way men are treated in modern society. I'm not trying to say poor me at all, but I do feel that everything about birth is all about the women. Everyone has heard of post natal depression in women but not men. I would say i'm not exactly your stereotypical John Wayne type man. I'm not completely weak but I do have feelings too." [Jeremy]

Jeremy recognised that society and the health service expect mothers to be the users of services, and that men are expected not to have any needs. He identifies that his own performance of masculinity is more nuanced.

Several fathers, who were full time at home bringing up the children (known as 'stay at home dads') either by choice or necessity, reported the isolation they felt:

"I have found it really REALLY Really difficult to bump into another Dad at home with a kid - just to share a coffee/beer/walk/visit to the swings and slides. It would give me the motivation to get out of the house in the dark months and chat to another ADULT." [Trevor]

Whilst mothers on other websites also identify isolation on parental leave, there was an additional notion that this was out of the ordinary for fathers, and that as a father it was difficult to become involved with the group of mothers:

"where i stay its a small village, where it is all the woman stay at home and the men go off and work every day, there's about 2 of the mums that speak to me when i see them but the others a bit cleaky if you not what i mean" [Derek]

Derek explained how he was feeling as his wife was working full time and he had lost his traditional role of breadwinner, and that he had therefore moved from being self-sufficient to having to rely on his partner. This effect was particularly evident in his village, where traditional gender roles were performed. This had a profound effect on his sense of masculinity “i feel at times as if my manhood has been destroyed” [Derek]. Others had had similar feelings, but had rationalised their new role:

“it took me a long time to realise that so much of my own internal sense of importance/ or a big part of my self worth was attached to me having clear tasks, responsibilities and goals in the workplace, and people coming for assistance.” [Trevor]

Trevor had improved his confidence and self-worth by learning about child development from the information pages on the website, and by identifying how he could contribute to his children’s development. This is an example of adapting a traditional feminine role by focusing on the ‘technical side’, learning the theory and identifying his responsibilities, much in the same way he had at work. Defining his parenting role in terms of his approach to work, he masculinised parenting at home.

Several stay at home fathers had made friends with mothers. Some had comments from their male friends eluding to the stereotypical male view that contact with ‘yummy mummies’ – attractive women with young children- was a positive, but the fathers recognised it was specifically contact with other men that was lacking. In contrast, another father noted that it was fathers who were avoiding contact with each other in case it compromised their position:

“it is like dads want to be secret and are too shy to chat as it will ruin their macho street cred image !!!” [Bringham].

Baby and toddler-focused activities that are largely attended by mothers emphasise the rarity of fathers engaged with their children during the working week, and therefore reinforce to the father that their activity is against gender norms. The lack of face-to-face contact with fathers in a similar position, or keeping this activity undercover by avoiding contact with other men, even if it is to maintain their masculine status, increases the sense of isolation and means that there are limited opportunities for normalising discussions with their peers.

However, in an online environment, peer-to-peer support is available, in a context that does not challenge the masculinity of the father in the same way that face-to-face encounters might, and this is explored in the next section.

#### 4.5 Peer support

A key aspect of the discussion boards was that the majority of posts were by fathers to their peers. This represents a key difference to information-based websites (for example, those provided by the NHS). Here the users generated the content, and as discussed in previous sections, solutions to questions were not presented as authoritative, but instead were from other fathers presenting their own views and experiences. This section will explore the peer-related characteristics of the discussion boards.

Fathers who posted appeared to benefit from others' shared experience: "its nice to hear of similar experiences, im enjoying this site already" [Douglas]. Being in contact with other fathers was seen as a positive source of support, including by Nathaniel's wife, as he was struggling with his temperamental three year old:

"I feel like we are doing everything right but I have a haunting feeling that I must be doing something big wrong. My Wife says that it's all part of the course of parenting and that I should speak to other Dads about it. Unfortunately the reality is that I am quite a solitary person and don't have many friends. And none who have children of a similar age." [Nathaniel]

This demonstrates that the website provided contact between fathers even when there were no other fathers in the father's own personal network. One of the benefits of an online community is that it exists beyond geographical and time boundaries. Fathers were able to use it at any time, which may be cathartic. Not all fathers refused to talk about their issues face-to-face; several posts identified the desire to make friends or start groups to overcome the isolation they felt as fathers:

"I know there is lots of us out there, but i don't have any male friends that i can talk too in my area. I am in [place name] and would love to meet up for a jar and talk about dad's stuff with dads in my area, but I don't think there is anyone out there."  
[Hank]

“If I was closer pal, would happily join you for a few beers and put the world to rights”  
[Tirrell].

The language used in the two quotes above positioned this face-to-face support within a masculine context. It suggests that a peer-to-peer father orientated discussion that would sort out the problems, in a traditionally masculine setting over beers.

Having identified the importance of the peer-to-peer nature of the online discussions, the following sections explore the findings related to peer support, specifically self-help mechanisms, empathy and support.

#### 4.4.1 Self-help mechanisms: information giving

This section considers how support is given on the discussion boards in response to requests for advice and support that have been discussed in earlier sections. Information, advice and support were sought and provided on the fatherhood discussion boards. This was commonly for practical issues, and support often came from several site users.

Therefore, frequently the posts were functional, in an attempt to resolve difficulties, and this practical, task-focus approach, which provided minimal challenge to masculine role.

Many responding messages on threads presented the poster's own, similar experiences, without stating that the person who requested advice should necessarily follow this approach: “Boys learn through their active play. I have found it is better to work with him and make his "active" play as safe as possible rather than trying to stop it.” [Curtis]. This gives ‘permission’ for the father to decide whether to try the suggested approach and, as such, maintains his control of the situation.

If advice or suggestions were provided, these were regularly phrased as questions such as ‘Is it worth trying’ or as a potential approach ‘maybe you could’. Advice could be reassuring: “I've been going through the same thing with my wife but i think im coming out the other side now” [Jules]. Again, this normalises the difficulties for the father, reducing the challenge to

his success and competence. For some fathers, reminiscing on difficult times, which they had come through, were almost a badge of honour. Considering the turbulent transition to fatherhood, and the particular challenge that fathers experience in the early years, coming out of the other side indicates that a resolution had been reached, and the father, by asserting this, re-establishes his competence and control of the situation, regaining his masculine status. Again, the performance of masculinity is nuanced and fluid for fathers.

Messages on threads often presented different suggestions or approaches. Occasionally, one participant might actively disagree with the advice from a previous participant, for example, whether or not to cross off a star from a star chart if the child subsequently misbehaves.

“I'd disagree with part of this [name 1] - mainly the part about crossing a star off [...] Having said that, if it worked for you, then we simply have different opinions, and maybe [name 2] can try both and see which works best for him.” [Xavier, Moderator]

It is clear that the posts on the threads created a forum for different views. However, they were presented positively and there were no examples of flaming or trolling: where posters are critical or abusive to other site users, despite negative comments being one of the *a priori* codes (Malik & Coulson, 2010).

Having considered the practical advice requested and provided on the discussion boards, the next section considers the emotional support exchanged between site users.

#### 4.4.2 Empathy

Empathy, universalism and reciprocity were characteristics observed in the sample of posts. This level of sensitivity might not be expected in a male dominated discussion forum. There were messages that demonstrated clear examples of support empathy, acknowledging the difficulties expressed, and the challenge of acknowledging the issue to others:

“Mate sounds like a really hard situation to be in.” [Stuart]

“First off well done for saying this publicly (even if none of us know you personally) [Anonymous, unknown role]

The second quote demonstrates that the discussion boards are seen by site users as public space, albeit anonymous, and recognises the challenges for men to express their difficulties even under these circumstances. Other messages were aimed at raising the self-esteem of the original questioner, suggesting respect and confidence in their abilities as a parent:

“You are NOT a bad parent IMO [in my opinion] (and talking about it and asking for help proves that you aren't 100%)” [Anonymous, unknown role]

Many posts included messages of belonging and universality, promoting a ‘we are in this together’ type of support, which may be particularly beneficial to those fathers who expressed feelings of isolation and helplessness. This included salutations and closures:

“Hi there my fellow dad” [Crispin]

“let me know how it goes bro ☺” [Stuart]

Universality was a useful characteristic of the posts in the context of men seeking help as fathers, since it reduced the isolating effect: the father was not alone, and others have experienced similar feelings and situations. This gave permission for the father to step outside traditional masculine behaviour to admit weakness and seek help, allowing him to find a more nuanced performance of his masculine role within the context of fatherhood.

In one thread, the original poster was very open about his own feelings of depression and being a failure, and this produced a cascade of responses from others, expressing

sympathy, empathy and affinity with his situation. This included self-disclosure by other posters, and invitations for him to update the thread from moderators:

“Dont give up, your daughters need you, your wife needs you. You CAN make a difference, a positive one, to their lives, and to your own as well. From another Dad who's often thought he was a failure too.” [Ahmed]

“I can't really add much to what has already been said, except to say that you are not alone and if you need to talk we are here. How are you doing today?” [Tayor, Moderator]

There were also messages confirming that the process of posting one's problems on the discussion board, and the responses, had been beneficial:

“This forum was a good help to me too in dark times. The words of support from others helped me to feel less alone.” [Ahmed]

Therefore, once the father had reached the threshold point and posted, empathy was expressed and support was given by peers. Some of those who received support went on to provide support to other site users. This is an important transition phase for the site users' engagement with the site, which is explored further in the discussion chapter.

The online nature of the communication was occasionally referred to in messages. The website lists the named contributors who are logged on in real time, which can promote follow up messages: “Hi [name] Saw you were online - how you doing today ?” [Herby]. There were some cases where a response or follow up question was posted a while after the main discussion. This demonstrates the asynchronous nature of the discussion boards, where threads can be picked up again at a later time by other site users who come across them. The asynchronous nature means that the discussion threads are more than simply a record of the discussion, instead the conversation can become active at a later date: “I hope people are still reading and contributing to this topic thread as I can really do with some tips.” [Finn].

Another self-help related communication observed was gratitude. Various threads included the original contributor posting a message of thanks after one or more others have made

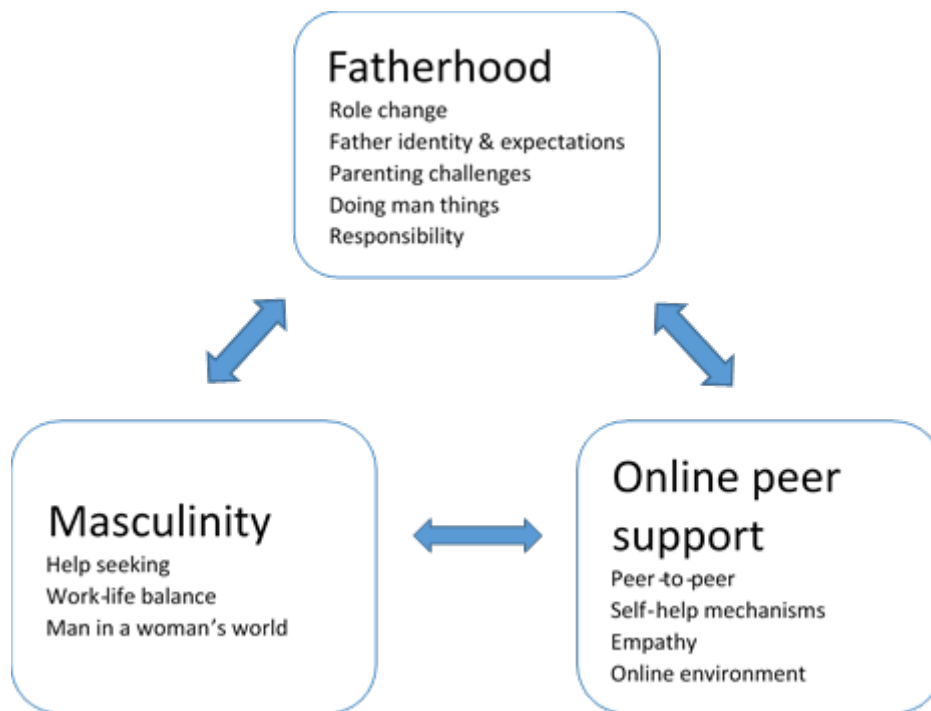
suggestions or given advice. However, frequently, the original questioner, especially when they were a minimal poster to the site, would not post again after starting the thread.

#### 4.5 Revisiting the conceptual framework: fatherhood and the expression of masculinities online

The thematic analysis of the data identified several themes relating to the interplay of fatherhood, masculinity and peer support within the online setting of the discussion boards. Key themes specific to fatherhood were that of the change in role, and the consideration of their identity as fathers. Another recurrent theme was about the challenges of parenting, practically, emotionally and in relation to their expectations. Two other important themes identified were related to their expression of masculinity through their fatherhood activities (fathers as men), specifically doing ‘man things’ (which generally referred to activities other than caring and nurturing), and the importance of responsibility, for the child and towards the family. The second key theme is masculinity itself, and it was possible to identify three themes that posed challenges to being a father for the men (men as fathers): help seeking, managing work-life balance, and being a man in a women’s world. Performance of masculinity by the fathers, as represented in the posts, was nuanced and fluid.

The third element of the conceptual framework is the online peer support received on the discussion board. Key themes relating to this were that the communication was generally between peers, that self-help mechanisms were evident, as was empathy. This element includes contextual factors related to the discussion board being an online environment. The overarching theme of online peer support clearly influenced the discussion of the other two themes. The key aspects of the three main themes that were identified from the data have been incorporated into the conceptual framework (figure 4.1, on the next page), which has been developed from the outline presented in Chapter 1.





**Figure 4.1 The main themes identified from the data**

#### 4.6 Chapter summary and conclusion

The thematic analysis of 835 posts from 192 site users, selected because they were about parenting in the early years, demonstrated that despite what might be expected from normative masculine behaviour, fathers did seek help on the discussion boards. Many posts demonstrated self-disclosure of personal issues and difficulties. The posts illustrated issues for fathers as men, and for men as fathers, as the interplay of fatherhood and masculinities was performed. The transition to fatherhood was clearly challenging, and fathers were seeking support to overcome the conflict between being hands-on, where they felt unskilled, and being a breadwinner for the family. The posts gave an insight into the fathers' perception of fatherhood roles and responsibilities, and to the experiences of men in a women's world when they were the main carer of the child. Moreover, the online discussion boards provided an environment where self-help was exchanged. Fathers gave emotional support and empathy to each other, notably by developing a sense of empathy and universality as they explored their own fatherhood experiences.

This thematic analysis of the posts has enabled the conceptual framework to be developed further. Having presented the key findings of the investigation into the online support forum for fathers in this chapter, the following chapter presents further analysis and synthesis of the findings by linking the findings to the literature.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.0 Introduction to discussion

This study explored the UK based online peer support from discussion forums of a website aimed at fathers. Discussion threads on topics relating to the antenatal period up to fathering of pre-school children were identified and a thematic analysis performed. Drawing on the results and interpretations presented in the previous chapter, this chapter presents discussion of the four main findings and argues their substantive significance (Patton, 2015) in relation to the wider literature.

The four key findings are as follows:

1. The posts demonstrate that the current societal context creates tensions for men who seek to be involved fathers
2. The discussions on the forums represent discourses on fatherhood and masculinities, supporting the fathers to identify or negotiate their fluid subjective positions
3. Fathers are able to use help seeking and self-disclosure, influenced by online anonymity and mitigation, although these influences may serve to maintain masculine status
4. Peer support is sought and received, specifically self-help mechanisms are evident in the postings

This chapter presents detailed discussion of each of the findings, and relates them to the literature, the theoretical framework based on masculinity theory, and the conceptual framework. The first three sections explore the first three findings, demonstrating the interrelation between masculinity and fatherhood. Section 5.4 specifically considers self-help mechanisms observed on the discussion boards. The chapter also presents a model that

describes fathers' different levels of engagement with the discussion board. Finally, the limitations of this study are discussed.

## 5.1 Tensions for fathers seeking to be involved

The first key finding of this study is that men in early fatherhood identified several areas of tension connected with their roles and place in society. The transition to fatherhood was a time when not only the man's circumstances change, including sleep, finances, and his relationship with his partner, but also the construction and definition of his role changes. Compared with fatherhood, the shift from woman to mother is more clearly defined by society, understood by women, and supported by professionals around the mother during and after the pregnancy, and support is specifically focused towards her during the birth: men feel side-lined (Deave & Johnson, 2008) or dissatisfied with available support for parents (Carlson et al., 2014; He & Dworkin, 2015). Men initially held high expectations of their own involvement and commitment to being able to balance a nurturing role with providing for the family, looking forward to "having it all" (Bettany, Kerrane, & Hogg, 2014 p.1547), or at least being 'good enough'.

The transition to fatherhood is gradual, disruptive and often stressful (Asenhed *et al.*, 2013; Chin, Hall, & Daiches, 2011). Both during the antenatal period and once the child was born, fathers identified a lack of readiness and lack of competence, especially when they compared themselves to the mother. In some cases, criticism from partners reinforced the man's belief that he was not competent in the practical tasks of childcare (Kowlessar, Fox, & Wittkowski, 2015), resulting in the potential for 'postponing' fatherhood engagement, where the father's intimate interaction with the child would be largely delayed until the child has reached an age to do 'man things' with the father. This is in contrast with the recognised benefits to child, and parents, of early father engagement (Jacobs & Kelley, 2006; Lamb, 2010; Opondo, Redshaw, Savage-McGlynn, & Quigley, 2016).

The fathers using the site were aware of strong societal messages reinforcing the idea of hegemonic masculinity (Coles, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) which position men as the material provider of the family, displaying emotional resilience, strength and lack of vulnerability, over and above other roles within the family such as nurturing and care giving (Courtenay, 2000a). The loss of competence following the birth of a baby disrupted the status quo and challenged the hegemonic masculine ideal of the powerful man in control. This led to role dissatisfaction, role confusion, fears and anxiety. Feelings that fatherhood was much harder than expected in the early days were clearly expressed by fathers, with fathers falling back to normative gendered behaviours, particularly returning to their role as breadwinner (Miller, 2011).

The study demonstrated that fathers were experiencing a contradiction between the expectations on them. Social expectations were seen by the fathers to link 'good' fatherhood with involved fatherhood (Chin et al., 2011; Deave & Johnson, 2008), whilst at the same time masculine behaviour expectations pressured fathers to provide financially for their family (Habib, 2012). Fathers returning to work experienced a sense of escaping from the uncertainty, returning to a more clearly defined role as breadwinner. However, for many there remained a tension between providing for the family and remaining hands-on with their infant, and this was evident in the forum posts. The masculine ideal of a competent father was managing to combine work and family, and striving to manage both caused anxiety. Fathers often gave precedence to contributing to the family through working and earning over the unpaid childcare at home. This allowed the man to return to his pre-existing role and social status, performing where he was competent and in control. Yet these competing objectives were evident in the data, especially when opportunities arose for promotion; men justified pursuing promotion because it would lead to greater earning potential or met career aspirations even while recognising that this would mean less time with the child and less support for the partner. The desire to conform to this masculine pattern of behaviour still created tensions. Returning to work provided an escape from the childcare environment, as

he retreated into normative behaviour (Miller, 2011), but it also placed additional strains on relationships at home.

This study found that fathers using the UK based forum who were seeking to be involved experienced the reality that health and support services were largely mother-focused. Formal support for first-time fathers was limited, both in availability and effectiveness (Carlson et al., 2014; Carlson, Kendall, & Edleson, 2015; Deave & Johnson, 2008). Fathers felt excluded, both in services run by health professionals such as health visitors and midwives, and they felt incongruous at informal services, such as playgroups. When they did attend services, there was a sense that they, as men, were out of place. There was little in the way of father-specific support, for example regarding paternal perinatal mental health. This demonstrates that the challenges that the fathers experienced included systemic barriers to father involvement created by social and cultural conditions and expectations.

The expectation (Finn & Henwood, 2009) dichotomy of breadwinner versus hands-on father was evident, however, 'stay at home dads', who are a prime example of involved fathers, experienced isolation and a sense of being something out of the ordinary (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016). Fathers caring for young children in public spaces, or in mother-dominated arenas were felt to be awkward or disruptive to the social norm (Doucet, 2006). This was overlaid with a loss of their sense of importance, as childcare was seen to be less valued than 'paid' work.

The finding that fatherhood is a challenging time is congruent with the literature, as the fathers sought to balance and perform societal and their own expectations. Whether or not the fathers were heavily engaged in childcare of their baby, this study demonstrated that forum provided opportunities for further help seeking for practical issues, and for men to explore the fatherhood role. Fatherhood identity and discourses on fatherhood represented in the forum posts are discussed in the next section.

## 5.2 Fatherhood as fluid identity and practices: Discourses on fatherhood and masculinities

Masculinity was understood, experienced and performed differently by individual men, or by men when they were in different contexts (Coles, 2009). Similarly, fathers performed a variety of roles and practices. Some of these father roles mirrored masculine gender norms, such as being responsible, providing discipline, protection of the family and toughening up of the children (especially boys). Performing 'man things' with the children, such as rough and tumble and outdoor activities that may have a small element of risk represented male embodiment in care giving (Doucet, 2006). Fathers also demonstrated stereotypically feminine activities related to nurturing, such as feeding, bathing and settling the baby to sleep, although posts on these subjects were usually related to the father having difficulty in this task, which may have been the trigger to post. The practices of fatherhood within the context of masculinities were therefore fluid. This was particularly illustrated when new fathers expressed intentions to be highly involved with the nurturing care of their baby but often fell back into normative gendered behaviours, leaving the nurturing largely to the mother, and returning to work, with their caring practices restricted to the evenings and at weekends.

Fathers needed to manage and make sense of their complex and fluid identities (Yarwood, 2011). Much of the literature focused on early fatherhood identifies the transition to fatherhood as a stressful and demanding time for new fathers. Fathers on the site reported anxiety - "silently panicking"- about the role and responsibilities, but also elements of role confusion and an inability to seek appropriate help. Fathers were required to adapt their behaviours to conform to a greater or lesser extent to society's norms and expectations, whether to complement the mother's caretaking parenting style with a playful rough and tumble, or, later, a disciplinarian. At the same time, they may have lost the opportunity to perform activities such as sport and socialising that they previously used to define themselves. There were examples of a "decent father" narrative (Eerola & Mykkänen, 2015),

in which the responsibilities of paternal masculinity centred on economic responsibility and *assisting* the mother in caregiving, supported by images in popular media (Schmitz, 2016). This maintained gendered differences in the responsibility of parents. The challenge many fathers experienced in early fatherhood in some cases acted as an additional incentive to return to work, or at least disengage with childcare.

The literature and the findings suggest a lack of readiness for the role, role dissatisfaction or confusion, and conflict between being the hands-on father and the breadwinner. The body of nursing and health literature presents these difficulties of early fatherhood as individualistic problems requiring individual solutions (Barclay & Lupton, 1999), assisted by experts with some form of intervention, usually education. However, this study demonstrated that the online forum presented opportunities for fathers to explore their experience of the challenges of fatherhood, including reflections on the conflict of roles. The forum provided men with both information and support during the transition to fatherhood and subsequently, as the fluid nature of fatherhood roles were negotiated and reconstructed by the fathers (Yarwood, 2011).

Fathers explored fatherhood through reference to their own childhood experience and relationship with their parents, specifically their own father. This referential exploration reflected the challenge of work-life balance, with site users recounting how their own father was largely absent because of paid work, and how they themselves wished to be more available for their own children now (Miller, 2011). Memories of an unsatisfactory relationship with their own father provided an incentive to be more involved with their own children (Habib, 2012). In contrast, some posts showed that the hegemonic primacy of breadwinning over caregiving continued with this new generation of fathers, although this was less common in the sample. This demonstrated a difference between intentions antenatally, and the eventual outcome as the father returns to work, often influenced by financial pressures.

Other references about site users' experiences of their own father were about the previous generation of fathers' approach to physical discipline, concluding that it had not done any



harm, and therefore justifying this approach, or shifting the context of this paternal behaviour, by identifying that society had changed, and the practice of physical punishment was no longer acceptable. Fatherhood practices were therefore flexible between individuals, and in some cases, shift over time (Meah & Jackson, 2016).

Shifting, or plural masculinities were evident when fathers remember their pre-children selves, when they had time to pursue their own choice of activity, and had greater financial resources. Some of the site users recounted how they have moved from 'laddish' masculine behaviour to incorporate a more caring masculinity to include intimacy and emotional displays, alongside a greater sense of responsibility. This new state, especially in the early stages of fatherhood, again demonstrated the contradictory, dynamic and plural nature of fatherhood: both less gender differentiated (caring, nurturing, emotionally available) and more gender specific (strong, wise, and in control).

Fatherhood identity, like masculinity, was not a fixed entity, and included caring masculinities (Miller, 2011). The findings illustrated shifting characteristics of fatherhood roles, which overlapped the shifting masculinities. Fathers reported being involved in nurturing activities traditionally identified as feminine roles, suggesting dynamic stereotypes (Banchefsky & Park, 2015), whereby men move into non-traditional roles. Nevertheless, when fathers identified themselves as incompetent, imperfect, and out of control, this was usually relating to tasks associated with traditional feminine roles. However, they also identified themselves as being a source of knowledge for their child – especially on traditionally male topics and activities, a role model, and a provider of discipline and protection. This illustrated that the lived experience of the fathers varied, with fathers responding to the perceived role changes of mothers and fathers in society. Whilst there remained a strong resonance with male-gendered activity, it was acceptable for them as fathers to strive to take on roles that were traditionally more feminine. The body of literature on masculinities suggest multiple masculinities, however, this study identified nuanced fatherhood behaviours mirroring fluid masculinity performance.

Discourses on fatherhood emerge from a large range of texts and portrayal in the media, although there is much less representation than the discourses on motherhood (Barclay & Lupton, 1999). Fathers made sense of their father identity by drawing on a complex network of frameworks (Finn & Henwood, 2009) including masculinity, normative parenting discourses, and personal histories. The online forum provided an opportunity for men to discuss their views on fatherhood, enabling the site users to negotiate and construct fatherhood identities based on the representations in the posts.

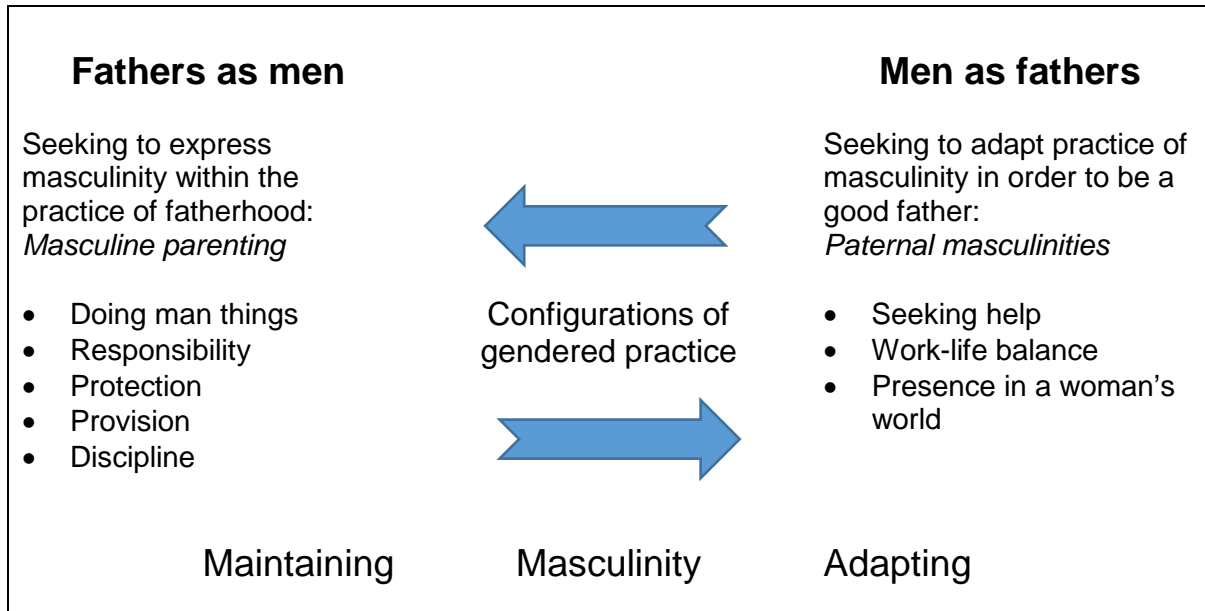
One key area of hegemonic masculine behaviour is the reluctance to seek help or to admit one's weaknesses (Galdas et al., 2005; Robertson & Williams, 2009), yet many of the posts were by fathers seeking advice or support. Seeing this allowed the readers of the posts the opportunity to consider help seeking as an acceptable practice for fathers. However, two factors are important here. First, fathers may only have actively sought out the forum as a source of support when the threshold for help seeking has been met, and therefore they were ready to transgress the masculine expectation (made easier as it was an anonymous virtual environment). Secondly, there was little evidence that once they have requested help they had reconstructed their masculine fatherhood practices sufficiently to continue to request help. Instead, the majority of site users within the sample posted only a few times. Nevertheless, many of the sampled posts do demonstrate help-seeking behaviour and self-disclosure, and this is explored in section 5.3.

### 5.2.1 Fathers as men, and men as fathers

The previous section has explored how both the practice of masculinity and the practice of fatherhood are fluid and nuanced. For example, the men in this study identified how they performed essentially masculine roles such as protection and provision as they were fathers. However, they also identified how they adapted their practice of masculinity in order to be a 'good father', both in their intentions antenatally, and in their activities once the baby was

born. Figure 5.1 depicts this interplay: *fathers as men* seeking to maintain their masculinity, while *men as fathers* are adapting their gendered practice. The performance of either fathers as men, or men as fathers, is not exclusive.

**Figure 5.1 Fathers as men, and men as fathers**



The fathers' discourse in the forums suggest a fluid and nuanced configuration of gendered practice, by performing both masculine parenting and paternal masculine behaviour. Expectations from within, their family and social context, and demands from society, influenced how they practiced in both domains. A key consideration with regard to online support groups, however, is that in a virtual space, men may feel more able to adapt their performance of masculinity. A clear example of this is through help seeking and self-disclosure.

### 5.3 Breaking the silence: help seeking and self-disclosure

The posts on the forums demonstrated that fathers are willing to request help from peers online, and the requests for help, and the responses, frequently involved self-disclosure of issues and vulnerabilities. Often, the request for help produced a response stating that the responder had experienced similar issues themselves. This section seeks to explore this

observed phenomenon, within the context of masculinities and peer support, suggesting that the forum encouraged some men to seek help and to disclose their vulnerabilities.

The findings revealed that fathers sought information and advice on the discussion forums. The literature theorises that men have a tendency to deny weakness and vulnerability in order to maintain socially defined masculine behaviours (Courtenay, 2000a), although it is recognised most men do not fit this ideal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This includes men's reluctance to seek help, especially with regard to health matters (Galdas *et al.*, 2005), and specifically health promoting services (Robertson and Williams, 2009), since men need to legitimise their help seeking as they depart from the masculine behaviour norms. The online forum supported the fathers to construct legitimate masculine reasons to engage in help seeking, which resonates with literature about online health sites (Robinson & Robertson, 2017). Such strategies included taking control of the situation (Tyler & Williams, 2013), being a responsible father, and protecting the child and mother.

Reluctance to seek help is particularly relevant to men's help seeking for depression, since masculine norms such as stoicism conflict with depression, and these norms may also inhibit help seeking, potentially reinforcing mal-adaptive coping mechanisms (Seidler *et al.*, 2016). Several of the fathers in this study acknowledged their own history of depression. One of the site users considered that there was no support for fathers experiencing perinatal depression, although this is beginning to be acknowledged as an important issue in the UK (Baldwin, 2015).

Importantly, the site was anonymous. Invisibility can embolden people to say things that they might otherwise not (Barak *et al.*, 2008). Whilst a minority of users created their username to approximate to what was probably their own name, the majority remained abstract or unidentifiable. This anonymity preserved the man's masculine status in his own social circle. Nevertheless, the difficulty in opening up in what was considered a public, albeit virtual, forum was acknowledged by site users. The ultimate anonymity was afforded to those site users who browsed the site without registering in order to post their own question. This

suggests that fathers who were lurking (discussed later in this section) were seeking and potentially finding information without having to demonstrate any of their own vulnerability.

For the site users who did post, there were additional mechanisms that allowed fathers to maintain their identity as strong and usually competent men. In some cases, the posts presented mitigating contexts to the help seeking, with site users identifying exceptional circumstances that made this action necessary. This is similar to findings from research on men with depression, where men expressed the view that they needed to have exhausted their own resources and passed a threshold of suffering before seeking help from professionals (Johnson, Oliffe, Kelly, & Ogrodniczuk, 2012). In other cases, the problem was minimised, so as not to make a big issue out of it. This gave the message that the father was competent and had tried everything that was reasonably expected, therefore discharging his obligation to be competent, yet he was simply checking with his peers to see whether there was another solution that he had overlooked. Some posters appeared to feel uncomfortable about seeking help, either by apologising for asking, or by subsequently re-exerting their masculine status.

Another mitigating factor suggested by some site users as justification for requesting help, was his desire to support his partner. This could be considered supportive, but alternatively, this behaviour meets the masculine role of the protective male (Miller, 2011). Once his partner started to become emotional about the issue, the threshold was reached for the father to seek help in order to return to the status quo.

These mitigated circumstances provided sufficient justification for the father temporarily to step out of his assured role and request advice, while maintaining his general sense of masculinity and not losing face. In addition, the anonymous nature of the help seeking offers a temporary and hidden transgression of the hegemonic norms in virtual space, whilst allowing the father to maintain face and masculine status in his real social space. Therefore, new fathers performed fluid masculinities, and were able to seek help (contrary to masculine norms) in order to perform an overarching masculine role by discharging the father's role as

being responsible for the welfare of his family. Existing literature about father focused online support groups (Eriksson & Salzman-Erikson, 2013; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011) has not considered fathers posting using mitigation, therefore this study adds to the understanding of fathers mechanisms for online help seeking. This is incorporated into the model of online engagement presented in section 5.5.

The findings demonstrated that there were posts that went beyond simply requesting information and support. Fathers described their situation and difficulties in many posts. Disclosing personal information has been shown by Bae, Jang, and Kim (2013) to positively affect the willingness of strangers to provide social support on computer mediated social networks. This was particularly notable with the disclosure of emotional information, and resulted in the provision of emotional support, specifically conveying emotional concern, and informational support, which is the giving of information and advice.

In a similar vein to seeking help, hegemonic masculine norms would suggest that fathers are not expected to disclose their vulnerabilities and shortcomings; instead, fathers as men should present themselves as resilient and in control. The findings challenge this view, since there were many examples of self-disclosure in the posts. Some fathers described their difficulties in order to demonstrate that they have experienced a sufficient level of difficulty, thereby legitimising their request for help (Johnson *et al.*, 2012). This is particularly pertinent with the increased awareness of paternal perinatal mental health issues (Baldwin, 2015), where there are already issues of the stigma of mental health issues in men, compounded by the fact that postnatal depression is usually considered a female only illness.

It was common for site users to respond to fathers' requests for help – not with directive advice telling the questioner what they should do, but identifying themselves with the issue, and acknowledging that they had experienced something similar. This may have had the effect of establishing the responder as a successful veteran of the problem, who had come through it and solved the problem, thereby re-establishing his competence and masculine status. However, posters were performing a more supportive role by invoking a sense of

shared experience and universality, resisting the hegemonic position and communicating camaraderie, which authenticated the fatherhood experience (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011), and normalised the reality of fatherhood as opposed to the expectations.

Another masculine trait, camaraderie, was evident in the posts between regular site users (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011; Seymour-Smith, 2008), and this is also evident in mothering discussion boards (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). This appeared between regular users, who had previously used self-disclosure and expressed empathy to each other, and was demonstrated by the use of friendly terms (e.g. 'mate'), mutual understanding and respect, thereby creating a sense of belonging.

In exploring the online disinhibition effect, Suler, (2004) identifies factors that enable people to say things online that they would not say in a face-to-face context. Anonymity was a feature on the fatherhood discussion board since fathers could chose a pseudonym or even post anonymously. But the nature of the board also meant that the communication was asynchronous: a response to one's post may come in hours, days or weeks. Therefore, the sender did not need to deal with the reader's immediate reaction, removing the continuous feedback, which may have encouraged the posters to conform to social norms. In addition, the writer could construct their message over a period of time. The invisibility of encounters online removed the visual cues (such as a bored expression in the listener), and therefore disinhibited the sender. Suler (2004) suggests that online disinhibition can be benign, enabling the poster to share personal emotions and fears, which may account for the fathers' openness in many of the posts. However, the online disinhibition effect can be toxic, leading to harsh criticisms aimed at other site users. Interestingly, none of the latter were observed in the sample posts.

Preece (2001) defines an online community as "any virtual space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn or to find company" (p. 348). In the parenting discussion boards, the interaction with the site by fathers was transitory: most of the site users who posted did so only a few times. The majority of the posts from newly

registered users were questions seeking advice, support or information. A few site users were regularly posting welcoming and responsive posts, as well as starting more contemplative threads. This core group of engaged site users constituted more of a community.

The real time data of the number of registered users and unregistered guests viewing the site demonstrated that there were large numbers of lurkers observing but not posting. This has been observed in other health-related online peer discussion groups where the majority of posts are made by a small percentage of members (for example, see Carron-Arthur, Cunningham, & Griffiths, 2014). Lurkers find support by reading messages but not posting in online support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS (Mo & Coulson, 2010), and this is seen as a valid mode of participation in an online community (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). Surreptitious support has been identified in women lurking on mother-orientated discussion boards (Johnson, 2015). Surreptitious support may be particularly desirable for some fathers since they do not have to admit any shortcomings to others, and therefore can maintain their masculine status.

Gallagher and Savage (2015) identify a variety of characteristics in posts used by newcomers to demonstrate their legitimacy when joining online parenting discussion groups. Legitimacy suggests conforming to the norms and values of the online community. Legitimacy can be established by demonstrating an understanding of the context of the board (for example by posting in the right section), testimonial legitimacy by using the personal pronoun and disclosing personal information, and lurking legitimacy, when the newcomer describes how they have read posts before posting themselves. Once legitimised, the poster is demonstrating their similarity with the group, which fosters a sense of social community and engagement between the newcomer and community. In the case of the fathering discussion board, whilst all these examples of legitimising behaviour were evident, it was not clear that the aim for the majority of the posters was to obtain legitimacy of membership in order to belong to the online community, since many of the site users post



only a few times within the selected posts, and so many did not move from newcomer to regular user. However, amongst some fathers, there may have been another legitimacy agenda: to legitimise their masculine status in spite of acting against hegemonic behaviours by admitting weakness and seeking help.

For fathers who remained on the site as experienced posters, responding to questioners could be seen as a mechanism to reassert their masculinity by demonstrating mastery of fatherhood: they were back in control and competent. If this were the case, however, the responding posts would be directive, telling the questioner what the solution to their problem was. This was not the case in the sampled posts. Advice was usually given by sharing personal experience and what had worked for the poster, without suggesting the questioner should do the same. Providing peer support to others on the board by the minority of frequent participants on the site led to positive personal feelings in those individuals, such as self-confidence, self-image and optimism (Barak et al., 2008). Thus, these men developed a more secure father identity, without the need to assert their masculine status. Secure father identity is associated with positive outcomes in children (Opondo et al., 2016). The fathers had successfully reached the point of confidence and comfort in posting contemplative and reflective posts that included recognising their own shortcomings. For these men, their security in fatherhood was demonstrated by their openness and willingness to share their experiences without setting themselves up as an expert.

The fathers' discussion boards examined by this study provided largely father-to-father peer support, allowing fathers to gain information and support 'from the horse's mouth'. This was in contrast to much of the literature which explores professional-led interventions to support fathers (e.g. Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009, and see Doty and Dworkin, 2014). This section has explored how the discussion boards under analysis demonstrate help seeking and sharing of concerns between users. Whilst both of these activities have been observed by other studies on father-based discussion boards (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2013; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011), even the Scandinavian study of an online forum for fathers was

presented as a complement to professional-led support (Eriksson & Salzman-Erikson, 2013). Also, in contrast with other studies, masculinity has formed a key element of the theoretical framework used here. This study moves beyond analysing masculine topics of discussion (e.g. posts about drinking beer or fathers taking on caring activities): this study has considered how help seeking and self-disclosure represents performances of adapted masculinity, through mitigation, and it introduces the concept of the threshold of difficulty which needs to be reached before fathers request help online, which will be developed in section 5.5 .

#### 5.4 Self-help mechanisms: the giving and receiving of peer support online

The fourth key finding of this study was that self-help mechanisms, present in face-to-face and online support groups for people with health-related conditions (Malik and Coulson, 2010), were evident in the sample posts, with the exception of negative statements aimed at another poster. The lack of insults and critical comments between posters, despite the anonymous setting, may indicate effective moderation by the administrators (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012), or may result from the positive, supportive virtual environment of the discussion boards. The presence of communication demonstrating the self-help mechanisms have not previously been demonstrated specifically on an online support group for fathers (or parents) in the literature, and therefore this constitutes an important finding of this study.

Information or advice seeking, and provision of advice on practical issues were common, and both of these mechanisms frequently involved sharing personal experiences. The discussion boards provided fathers with an opportunity to hear stories from other fathers, rather than professional mediated information. Since the communication was internet-based, forum members were able to draw on a wider range of viewpoints and perspectives beyond their real-life peer group. Support was often expressed using accepting, understanding and encouraging statements in posts, demonstrating that fathers were empathetic towards each

other. In particular, there were strong messages of universality in the posts, assuring the site user expressing concerns or seeking help that they were not alone, and that others had experienced similar situations and feelings. This universality is an important aspect of mutual help (Bragadottir, 2008) supporting the father posting the question after he had potentially made himself vulnerable by disclosing weaknesses or shortcomings, and reducing feelings of isolation (Braithwaite & Waldron, 2009).

Many of the discussions were not about immediate practical problems, but instead about difficulties within the practice of fatherhood, such as work-life balance, relationship with the mother (Chin et al., 2011), or lack of support for stay at home dads (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016). Struggles with these issues frequently cause fathers to retreat into their traditional roles, resulting in their providing little practical help to their new families (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). These authors identify the postnatal period as the most challenging for fathers interpersonally and intra personally. The discussion boards demonstrated the potential for both interpersonal and intrapersonal therapeutic factors leading to change. While studying online support groups for cancer patients, Lieberman, (2008) identifies group interactions including guidance and universality as interpersonal factors, and insight, catharsis and self-disclosure as intra personal factors. These factors may support cognitive mechanisms of emotional adjustment. The study of online support groups is often focused on patient groups with specific conditions (e.g. women who have had multiple miscarriages, people with COPD). Wentzer & Bygholm, (2013) suggest that the meta-narratives of the discussion boards create a collective identity, and belonging to such a group with shared interests and mutual support can be empowering for members of the group. The value of reciprocity through peer support sets the peer-to-peer support group apart from professional-led support groups, where the professional may not have the same understanding of the situation as the group members (Munn-Giddings & McVicar, 2007), or even where the professional may have their own agenda. Reciprocity has the benefit of

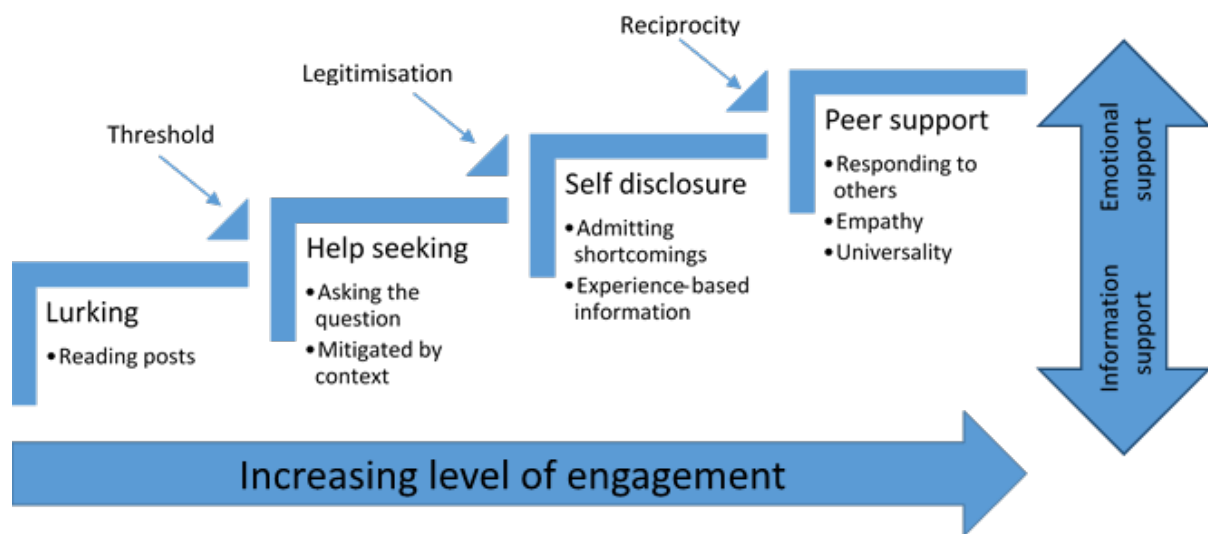
relieving the father from any sense of indebtedness, and if the opportunity to replicate support, this may legitimise help seeking in men (Sierra Hernandez et al., 2014).

Although the level of engagement for many of those who access the site is limited, this study therefore demonstrates that the fatherhood site provided information support, emotional support, and the encouragement of others, which was evident in many other health-related online support groups. Social media can afford therapeutic communication such as connection, exploration, narration and self-presentation for people with long-term conditions (e.g. Shoebottom & Coulson, 2016). Therefore, the online group provided a viable source of support for fathers, who were a group who have challenges in accessing support related to fatherhood from other sources. In addition, the collective identity derived from the meta-narratives of the posts allowed fathers to construct and adapt their own father identities.

## 5.5 A model of engagement with the fatherhood discussion board

A range of levels of engagement with the discussion boards was identified in the findings of this study. The study demonstrated that the online discussion boards were more than a forum for exchanging practical information, with many of the posts showing support, empathy and caring. In addition, there were threads exploring the meaning of fatherhood and allowing discussions of different views on issues related to the role, such as work-life balance. This provided fathers with the opportunity to negotiate and construct nuanced and fluid masculine and fatherhood roles during what has been established as a challenging time for fathers.

The findings from this study have led to the development of a model of engagement (figure 5.2), which shows the varying levels of participation and engagement on the fatherhood discussion boards.



**Figure 5.2 A model of engagement with the fatherhood discussion boards**

A large number of lurkers viewed the posts without registering or posting themselves. These observers of the boards gain a level of information support, taking on board practical suggestions or even understanding that their own experience was one that others had experienced. However, they decided not to post themselves. This represents a minimal engagement with the discussion boards, although this may still provide information support for the person lurking.

A number of site users passed a threshold and sought help by posting a question. At this point, they had overcome the barriers of social expectation by admitting that they were not in control of the situation. The threshold may have been that the father felt a certain level of desperation or that the level of need exceeded the cost of posting a question and demonstrating vulnerability and weakness. By spending time reading the existing posts, the lurker may have decided that posting questions about parenting challenges was acceptable in this environment (Gallagher & Savage, 2015). At this stage, the context of the situation was often given to mitigate or minimise the father's departure from the masculine norm by asking for help.

Fewer participants moved onto the next level of engagement, representing self-disclosure, when fathers further admitted their struggles and shortcomings, giving details that were more intimate. Whilst this displayed their vulnerability, it also helped to legitimise their intent to be caring, involved fathers, and legitimised their involvement with the discussion board. The information at this stage was more experience-led, with increasing levels of emotional support provided by other members of the forum.

The final level of online engagement, with even fewer participants, was reached by those providing peer support, responding to the requests of others with messages of empathy and universality. These individuals have all been through similar experiences themselves, and much of their response was self-disclosure, and the posts demonstrated reciprocity (O'Connor & Madge, 2004; Orgad, 2005), since these fathers have received support from others on the site previously. At this highest level of engagement with the discussion boards, the support received moved from information support to emotional support.

The model of engagement with the online discussion boards was developed from analysis of posts on the fathers' peer-to-peer forum, however this model could be tested beyond this specific online group. It would be particularly useful to consider what the boundaries to engagement and thresholds are in a different context. If the different forum was for men in another context (for example a health issue such as testicular cancer), then some of the boundaries around help seeking and self-disclosure would be similar.

## 5.6 Limitations of the study

As a result of the nature of the data consisting of messages posted by people who had the choice of username when they registered, it has only been possible to assume the role of the poster (as father or otherwise) based on self-reporting and content within their posts. However, it could be questioned what benefit anyone would gain by untruthfully posing as a father. Similarly, it was not possible to identify the ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds of

those who posted. Therefore, it was not possible to demonstrate whether the site users were from a range of backgrounds, or largely from a higher socioeconomic group. This study does not distinguish non-majority fathers (Pleck, 2010), and therefore the findings that they gave and receive peer support and can overcome masculine barriers may be because the fathers in this study were of a particular group of men.

It is recognised that the messages on the site are from a self-selecting group who have reached the point where they posted a message. This study therefore does not reflect the experiences of fathers who have not found the site, or those who have read posts on the site but not posted. The most active areas on the forum covered subjects related to divorce, separation and contact. This study has not traced back the first posts by the authors of the posts in the sample, to see if they were first posting on the discussions about contact etc., before turning to the parenting discussions that formed this study. Similarly, the study recognised that a large number of 'guests' were viewing the discussions. It was not possible to determine whether they were viewing predominantly the separation discussions or the parenting boards.

There were no examples of flaming or rude comments in the sample of posts. This may be because such posts were removed by the moderators. Finally, the selection of threads and posts for inclusion to the sample was completed solely by the author. In addition, the coding of posts was completed solely by the author, although there was some discussion with the supervisors of the study. This could lead to a bias of inclusion/exclusion and biased interpretation, which could have been reduced by using multiple coders, working to maintain inter-rater reliability, for example by looking for agreement in the sampling and coding (e.g. Porter & Ispa, 2013; Smedley & Coulson, 2018).

## 5.7 Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter discussed the four main findings of the study. The transition to fatherhood and the subsequent early years of their child poses a range of challenges for fathers. The discussion boards represented discourses for those who contributed, and also for those who just read the posts, that allowed fathers to negotiate their father identity. The online landscape, with its anonymity and asynchronous communication, provided a virtual space where fathers could explore and construct their understanding of fatherhood, and seek and receive support, in contrast to their offline, real-time world, where performing to the masculine values of strength and confidence would make this much more difficult. While masculine issues influence whether and how messages are posted, self-help and peer support is evident. There was clear interplay between the performance of fluid fatherhood roles and masculine identities, and the interplay of fathers as men and men as fathers, in which men seek to maintain and adapt their practice of masculinity, was presented. The findings of this study demonstrate that the UK based online support group for fathers is a useful source of both experience-based information and emotional support. In addition, this chapter has presented a model of fathers' engagement with the online discussion boards, which could also be applied to different online settings.

The final chapter brings together the discussions to form conclusions and recommendations, and identifies the contribution of this study.



## Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

### 6.0 Introduction to conclusions and recommendations

This study took a social constructionist perspective to undertake a thematic analysis of posts to explore the characteristics of online peer support for fathers of pre-school children, drawing on masculine theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Courtenay, 2000a; Messerschmidt, 2012). This chapter responds to the research questions by setting out conclusions that are drawn from the major findings of the study. Recommendations are made, and the significance of this study is stated. A matrix of the research questions, key findings, conclusions and recommendations is in appendix C.

### 6.1 Fathers experience tensions in transition to fatherhood and in the early years

The first finding of this study is that men in early fatherhood identified several areas of tension connected with their roles and place in society. New fathers indicated that they seek to be involved but they feel poorly prepared, they experience a lack of confidence and competence in delivering care, especially when compared to the mother, and at the same time, recognise the need to return to work to earn money for the family. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that fathers need support, especially in the transition to fatherhood and in the early years. The shift in their role is less socially defined than that of the mother, with conflicting father – masculine expectations, and in some cases this led to fathers suggesting they would postpone their engagement with the baby until the child was old enough for the father to do ‘man things’ with them. The financial and cultural imperative to return to work may account for the poor intake in Shared Parental Leave.

The second conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that services in the UK that are professional-led, such as health visitors and midwives, are of only limited value to fathers

because they are not father specific. Fathers reported feeling sidelined by professionals. Fathers desire information, and generally want to be involved. If professionals understood and responded appropriately to the father's specific needs, they could give guidance and support, or direct them to resources that are accessible and acceptable to fathers.

## 6.2 Discourses and fluid identities

The second finding was that the forum provided a venue for the exploration of masculinity and fatherhood in a virtual setting that was safe, accessible and acceptable for fathers. Thus, it is possible to conclude that by using the discussion boards, fathers construct and test their understanding of their subjective positions in the social context in which they find themselves. This included debating the advantages and disadvantages of taking a work promotion, and reflecting on the changes in fatherhood practice since they were children themselves. Different traits associated with masculinity were explored by the fathers, notably anger, and the forum provided a non-judgemental space for these issues to be examined. If they are to be involved as fathers, they need to reconstruct their identities and masculine practices, finding their own blend of father role and masculinity (Yarwood, 2011). This interplay of *fathers as men* and *men as fathers* can change over time.

## 6.3 Help seeking and self-disclosure

Uncertainty relating to fatherhood can result in anxiety that may not be freely expressed: "Silently panicking" [Byron]. This illustrates the concerns of a father who did not feel that he had a source of support in the midst of stressful events, but also the attempt he was making to maintain a masculine show of strength and control, by keeping his internal state hidden. The posts revealed that fathers were able to ask for help on the forum. The help requested was sometimes practical information, and other times it was for emotional support, for example reassurance. Questions, and often responses, contained self-disclosure. The

fathers used personal experience as an important source of information and social support, and the real lived experience of peers was valued. Help seeking and self-disclosure of failings or weakness are not stereotypical masculine behaviours (Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall). There are two conclusions that are drawn from this finding. First, through certain mitigation practices, fathers can disclose vulnerability and seek help whilst maintaining their masculine status or without losing face. Second, the online environment of asynchronous, anonymous conversations supports men to step out of their regular masculine identities, allowing different performances of behaviour through online dialogue with strangers. In particular, being online removes some of the constraints of expected masculine behaviour (Robinson & Robertson, 2017).

#### 6.4 Peer support and self-help

The posts demonstrated that peer support was sought and received on the fatherhood discussion boards. Specifically, self-help mechanisms identified in studies of health condition-related online support groups (Malik & Coulson, 2010) were evident in the fatherhood discussion board. These have not previously been demonstrated explicitly in forums for fathers. Notably, humour and universality were often communicated in posts. The conclusion drawn from this finding is that the online peer support forum for fathers can provide support that is appropriate and acceptable for fathers, since it is peer-to-peer and not professional-led.

#### 6.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings, analysis and conclusions of this study, recommendations are made. This exploratory study has demonstrated that the UK-based fatherhood online support forum provides peer support for fathers, which appears to be beneficial for those who engage with the discussion group. There is also the potential for those who read the posts but do not post

messages themselves to benefit, although this has not formed part of this study. However, this study has identified wider issues, and therefore wider recommendations are made. The recommendations are presented for health professionals working with families with young children, and for further research.

### 6.5.1 Health professionals working with families with young children

Health visitors and midwives should work to engage fathers when they are present during contacts with the family. This should move beyond seeking information from the fathers, to a recognition that they face specific challenges in early fatherhood, and an assessment of their personal health needs (including paternal mental health).

A second recommendation for practitioners is that they need to recognise that mother dominant services are not automatically father-friendly. Both parents should be invited, and opportunities to attend outside office hours should be made. In addition, health professionals should signpost fathers to the UK online peer support forum.

### 6.5.2 Further research

In order to develop a deeper understanding of online peer support for fathers, and in light of the limitations of the current study, further study should be carried out with current users of the discussion boards to explore the factors that led them to post, and their experiences of engaging with the discussion board. This could include exploration of the significance of their socioeconomic and educational background. In addition, research should be conducted with the moderators of the online peer support forum for fathers, to explore further their views on reciprocity and engagement.

Further research into the issues found in this study, such as conflict between breadwinning and being hands-on, feelings of loss of competence, doing 'man things' and challenges to seeking support should be undertaken with same sex couples adopting a young baby, and

with families where the father is the main carer, to increase understanding of masculine / feminine and main carer / main income earner effects on parenting roles and satisfaction.

The model of engagement with online support groups developed in this study should be tested in other online settings, particularly those focused on men, especially around sensitive issues, such as testicular or prostate cancer and infertility. An understanding of the dynamics of engagement with the online forum may be useful for these service providers.

## 6.6 Contribution of this study

This study makes an important contribution to the understanding of UK-based online peer support for fathers from a masculine perspective. The study moves away from the deficit-based fatherhood research of absent, separated or problem fathers. It identifies that fathers experience challenges beyond the transition to fatherhood and their possible return to work. It presents a diagrammatic representation of the fluid and nuanced performances of masculinity and fatherhood: men as fathers, fathers as men, whereby masculine parenting and paternal masculinities are practiced. It demonstrates that fathers were able to seek, receive and, in some cases, provide information and emotional support in an online environment. The study identified that self-help mechanisms, identified in health-related online support groups, are also evident in the fatherhood forums, demonstrating the benefit of the forums. This study suggests possible mechanisms such as the threshold of need and the mitigation of vulnerability in help seeking, but also identifies that self-disclosure was evident in the postings. The discussions enabled the fathers to move beyond practical information requests and explore online the meanings and experiences of fatherhood, and thereby construct their fatherhood identities, without the constraints of having to appear as a strong, competent male. This demonstrates the fluid nature not only of masculinity, but also of fatherhood, and identifies that there are issues resulting from the enactment of both social constructions. This study also presents a model for father engagement with online peer

support, which aids understanding of the mechanisms and barriers to online self-help for fathers, and makes recommendations for a range of stakeholders in order to improve support for fathers of preschool children.

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## Appendix A: Site suggestions

The following table presents the sites suggested by a Google search for possible online support groups for fathers. Please see section 3.2.1 for the selection criteria

Site	Country	Specific group(s)	Type of Communication
dadsonline.com.au	Australia	Fathers	Blogs with comments
Just4dads.org	Not stated	Parenting Single dads Christian dads Gay dads	Articles
supportgroups.com	USA	Fathers (One of many support groups)	Threads of messages Not ordered into boards
Families need fathers (fnf.org.uk)	UK	Lone parents	Forum. Charity membership required
Beats (beateatingdisorders.com)	UK	Fathers supporting a child with an eating disorder	Live chat (fixed time 1 evening per week)
Gingerbread <a href="http://www.gingerbread.org.uk">www.gingerbread.org.uk</a>	UK	Single parents	Forum
Shared parenting information group ( <a href="http://www.spig.clara.net/">http://www.spig.clara.net/</a> )	UK (part of US site)	Parents after separation and divorce	Articles
Only dads (onlydads.org)	UK	Separation advice for Fathers	Articles
Thedadnetworkuk	UK	Fathers	Twitter
Dailystrength.org	n/a	Single Parents (one of many support groups on this site)	
Fathers for justice ( <a href="http://www.fathers-4-justice.org">http://www.fathers-4-justice.org</a> )	UK	Campaign for fathers equal rights after separation	Forum: login required to view
Dads rock (dadsrock.org.uk)	Scotland	Musical playgroup for dads and pre-school children	Site advertising services
National at-home dad network (athomedad.org)	US	Fathers as primary care givers	Blog, articles
Dads Matter (dadsmatteruk.org)	UK	Parents suffering from anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress	Leaflets and factsheets
<b>SELECTED SITE [name withheld)</b>	UK	Fathers	Discussion boards sorted by themes

Other sites listed face-to-face support groups

## Appendix B: Thematic coding book

Name	Definition	Example
<b>1) Fatherhood</b>		
a) Father identity		
i) pre father role	Statements looking back to before fatherhood	I don't think anything prepared me for the back seat i now have in my own life!
ii) paternity	Statements related to being the biological father	find myself in the position of my girlfriend being pregnant and not knowing if the child is mine or not.
iii) expectations of father role	Statements suggesting expectations of fatherhood role (in the future)	I know fully that I will be a great Dad when he is slightly older.
iv) comparing self to mother	Statements when the father compares himself to the mother	I knew before I had a kid that I would not find it easy. My wife however seemed to be the 100% perfect mum and housewife. It is what she has always wanted to do, it's something she has pushed for from the moment we met.
v) own childhood experience	Statements relating to their own childhood experience	I was quite badly bullied in secondary school and it is a big issue with me that this does not happen to my boys though I am becoming aware that my own concern may not be helping.
vi) reflection on the role of fatherhood	Statements reflecting on the role of fatherhood	i'm just a Dad going through hell to see his child grow up and become a decent man and human being.....my goal is simple...to be the father to my child like my father is to me...my hero
b) Role change		
i) preparation for fatherhood	Statements relating to preparation activities before the birth of the baby	I personally found the task of deciding upon which pushchairs are best to buy one of the most frustrating preparatory things
c) Parenting		
i) contact issues *	Statements about contact access with children (coded only if post largely about another issue)	I currently see my daughter 4 hours a week
ii) seeking expert advice	Requests for advice specifically aimed towards professional members of the group	Just wonder if one of you midwives can give me some advice/help with something pls?
iii) discipline	Statements about discipline	I have a mate who reckons it is ok to smack his kids - I thought this was illegal here?
iv) views on groups	Statements on support groups, e.g. toddler groups	It helps me to get out and go to toddler group(s) in the area. Some ladies are a little bolder and try to have a conversation - that helps me to relax. I tried quite a few until i found 2 that i like the most (one was

		almost anally over structured and I felt like a naughty boy when they regularly told us to 'do the playing at the table NOW').
v) lack of knowledge	Statements where the writer recognises a lack of knowledge	As a new dad, I surf around and tend to go with the advice put across by the majority of website, but even so, I'm still confused as to what is right and what is wrong.
vi) lack of support (outside forum)	Statements where the writer identifies a lack of support (outside the forum)	Always felt that all services are fully geared to the mother (she is the one having the baby....but...) but not particularly geared to the father. Most if not all of the message boards are weighted towards the mother with a tiny little section for dads.
vii) Lack of experience	Statements where the writer identifies a lack of experience	realised I needed to find out more from experienced Dads
viii) mental health	Statements about mental health issues	I cried for the first 3 days pretty much. Just needed a good nights sleep and my whole perspective shifted
ix) practical difficulties	Statements about practical difficulties	Our newborn is crying so much at night it is untrue. we have tried the remedies for Colic but are still having trouble settling her
x) communication with partner	Statements about communication with partner	The best thing I did was force myself to talk to my wife. When you can tackle these things as a team it makes all the difference. Instead of feeling like you're alone, at least you'll have someone else on your side. Also, (and what I've found hard) is that she'll be able to help you and give you advice. I learnt that I don't have all the answers all the time (shock, horror!).
xi) communication with ex-partner *	Statements about communication with ex-partner (coded only if post largely about another issue)	I have spoken to my ex but she is unwilling to change the venue
xii) antenatal	Statements relating to the antenatal period	First time here. so looking for advice me and my partner are expecting our first baby in feb 2015, just had the 20 week scan etc.
xiii) health professional services	Statements regarding services run by health professionals	For example, evening and weekend antenatal classes are pretty much non-existent, and if you want to attend you need to rely on getting time off work.
xiv) caring statements relating to parenting	Statements that suggest emotional and nurturing aspects of parenting	Earlier today my little one took two biscuits when offered the box. Then gave me one and said "do it". He wanted me to eat it. Soooooo cute.
xv) positive experience	Statements relating to positive experiences of parenting	He is now 3 months old and has started smiling and giggling, you can't imagine unless you've had one what a difference



		this can make.
d) others attitudes to fathers	Statements about other people's views towards fathers	This isn't a major issue really, more just office mickey-taking that I can deal with, but I can imagine that if other new dads, especially young ones, feel they have no-one to share the trials and tribulations of being a parent it must be tough.

Name	Definition	Example
<b>2) Masculinity</b>		
a) Help seeking		
i) expressing difficulties	Statements that identify difficulties that the writer is having	I'm a new first time father to my beautiful baby boy [name] and I'm finding that he has a lot of wind and he might be even colic. We are using many things to solve this but I'm really finding it hard to cope with his constant crying, it makes me feel useless and I'm getting angry with myself and almost losing my patience with my son.
ii) minimising	Statements which serve to make the issue seem smaller	I know this doesn't sound like much compared to some people's probs on here but it hurts all the same
iii) requesting help	Statements that ask for help from other members	This is my first time on anything like this, but I need help/advice and opinions.
iv) expressing fears	Statements that express fears and anxieties	now i'm a dad i am fearful that my sons will see me for who i perceive myself to be, a shallow, fearful, timid kind of guy who doesn't quite fit in
b) men in a woman's world	Statements about being in a woman dominated environment	i can honestly say in the entire time since i got laid off, ive not meet a single over stay at home day, where i stay its a small village, where it is all the woman stay at home and the men go off and work every day, there's about 2 of the mums that speak to me when i see them but the others a bit cleaky if you not what i mean
c) maleness	Statements highlighting typically masculine behaviour (including attitudes)	Anyway i find it hard to express how much i love my girls i feel that i gotta be the big tough daddy
d) non-maleness	Statements highlighting typically non-masculine behaviour (including attitudes)	Anyway, worse trouble this morning and I sitting in car in tears.
e) Work-life balance	Comments relating to the interrelation of working and home life	Your description of your working week is not uncommon and you shouldn't beat yourself up over it, I was fairly well organized until my twins came along and like you've worried that I'm not keeping on top of things. when they were first born I was only seeing them in the morning and at weekends but now I've made more time for them. I know my work has suffered but now I don't worry so much. I think it's more important that when you spend time with your child you're in a good mood and the long hours that you work can't be helping.

Name	Definition	Example
<b>3) Peer support</b>		
a) Online communication		
i) moderator encouraging responses	Statements from a moderator encouraging members to expand further on their	Interesting [ <i>name</i> ]. How would you have liked the classes to have gone? What would have been more helpful? What wasn't covered?
ii) drawing out further info	Statements from members encouraging other members to add further information from previous posts	Wow what a stressful birth no wonder you felt so emotional. I would imagine that you would have found the whole experience very scary, being both scared for your baby and your wife. It sounds like time has allowed your bond to form, how are things going now? Thanks for sharing your experience with us.
iii) this forum	Statements specifically about this forum	its nice to hear of similar experiences, im enjoying this site already
b) Peer-to-peer		
i) Reciprocity	Statements suggesting giving and receiving of support	also I came to this site cos i was having my own problems and it does help to have people who are in a similar situation so if you want to chat more drop me a line
ii) Expert advice	Statements of advice offered by someone declaring that they are a professional	I have encountered many women and infants who have been in a similar situation to your wife's in being treated with fluoxetine and other medications for depression.
iii) views of others	Statements on views of others (not from forum)	We have encountered much criticism for the choice (not from health professionals), although ironically we often find that with a bit of digging you find that the person criticising you did it as well
iv) update on previous posts	Statements providing further information from previous posts by the same author	Just thought I would update on my other posts, we had our 20 week scan today, everything was fine
v) Disagreement	Expression of disagreement with another post	I'd disagree with part of this Joe - mainly the part about crossing a star off
vi) Expert inviting questions	A site user stating that they are a health professional or parenting expert inviting comment or questions	I am a registered midwife. If you have any further queries regarding these test results or anything in pregnancy and/or becoming a dad again, please feel free to ask.
vii) endorsement	Statements confirming comments from another	I agree. Potty training or Toilet Training can be really difficult
viii) salutation	Statements greeting other members	Hello mate,good to see a your enjoying it all

ix) Stating own position	Statements that presents the author's position, including the justification of that position	To me it's a case of you don't start it but if someone else does then its ok to defend yourself both verbally and physically - don't let people abuse you.
x) humour	Statements that contain humour	My toddler was sick during the night and I caught myself saying "good boy" after he vomited
c) Self-help mechanisms		
i. <sup>12</sup> <i>support or empathy</i>	statements of understanding, acceptance and encouragement or contain comforting words	The fact that you want to be a good dad makes you a pretty good dad in my books
ii. <i>Requesting information or advice</i>	Statements asking if others can provide factual information, guidance or advice for dealing with an issue or solving a particular problem	Our newborn is crying so much at night it is untrue. we have tried the remedies for Colic but are still having trouble settling her and now the wife is upset cos she feels she should be able to solve this problem, any help guys?????????????
iii. <i>Providing information or advice</i>	Statements providing other participants with factual information, guidance or advice for dealing with an issue or solving a particular problem	One thing we (my wife and I) do hold very stongly is our word, and what we say, we will do. But this is one of the things that I find trickiest in the early morning hours. As you say, don't back yourself into a corner. Is it worth saying "I'll deal with it in the morning" when you've got more of a rational (gracious) hat on, or should you deal with it straight away? I know for younger kids it's sometimes difficult to understand if the discipline occurs too far after the event.
iv. <i>Sharing personal experiences</i>	Sharing personal experiences and thoughts or messages expressing emotions and feelings	I guess my point is that although we just have to wait and see, I'm getting sick with worry, all the while trying to keep a positive view on things, both for myself and the wife. Even if there are problems, I know we'll love this one just as much as the other 2, I'd just rather be prepared.
v. <i>Creative expression</i>	Comments expressing thoughts and feelings through creative means, e.g. the use of poetry or prose	If only I can write a piece of line to save the purpose of a soul when I am long gone than be a noble of a thousand readers in my life time.
vi. <i>Universality</i>	Comments expressing the idea that 'you are not alone' and that people have or are experiencing the same or similar feelings and situations	Thanks for being so open & honest. It sounds like this is a hard adjustment for you. Just to put your mind at ease, it pretty much is for everyone. It can be a pretty emotional time, with ups & downs.
vii. <i>Friendship</i>	Statements that recognise others as friends, or discussions about making	hi mate, I feel for you - I am in exactly the same situation. If I was closer pal, would happily join you for a few beers

<sup>12</sup>3 c) i-x (in italics) are *a priori* codes from Malik & Coulson, (2010)

		friends, or meeting outside group	and put the world to rights
viii.	<i>Chit chat</i>	Everyday conversation between group members not necessarily related to parenting	I think that an Alpha is something you should own and drive at least once, if you buy new or nearly new at least you would have warranty,
ix.	<i>Gratitude</i>	Statements that thank other participants for their help and support	Thank you both again, just being able to talk about this is a huge help for me. I do recognise that I am getting several things wrong here and your help is sincerely appreciated.
x.	<i>Negative comments to others</i>	Disrespectful or sarcastic comments directed to other participants in the group	No examples

## Appendix C: Matrix of research questions, key findings, conclusions and recommendations

Questions	Key Findings	Conclusions	Recommendations
A How do posts reflect men's' experiences of fatherhood in the UK, specifically in the early years	1. The posts demonstrate that the current societal context creates tensions for men who seek to be involved fathers	a) Fathers need support b) The current professional-led support that is not father specific is only of limited value to fathers	i. Father engagement and specific health needs assessment (H) ii. Sources of appropriate support promoted (including online peer resources) (H) iii. Existing services should be father friendly (H)

<p>B What do the discussions on the forum demonstrate about fathers' expression of masculinities, with specific consideration of help- seeking behaviour related to parenting</p>	<p>2. The discussions on the forums represent discourses on fatherhood and masculinities, supporting the fathers to identify or negotiate their fluid subjective positions</p> <p>3. Fathers are able to use help seeking and self-disclosure, influenced by online anonymity, and mitigation, although these influences may serve to maintain their masculine status</p>	<p>c) Fathers use the online forum to support them to construct and test their understanding of fatherhood</p> <p>d) Through certain mitigation practices, fathers can disclose vulnerability and seek help whilst maintaining their masculine status / without losing face.</p> <p>e) This is supported by the forum environment and responses received from others.</p>	<p>iv. Promote the site more widely (H)</p> <p>v. Further research into site users' experiences (R)</p> <p>vi. Further research into role responsibilities and gender (R)</p> <p>vii. Application of model of engagement with online support groups to different settings (R)</p>
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<p>C To what extent does the forum provide supportive or helping communication between members of the peer group</p>	<p>4. Peer support is sought and received, specifically self-help mechanisms are evident in the postings</p>	<p>f) OSG can provide support that is appropriate and acceptable for fathers since it is peer-to-peer and not professional-led</p> <p>g) Self-help mechanisms evident in health-related online support groups are also evident in the fatherhood forums</p>	<p>viii. Further study to explore how to increase engagement with site (R)</p>
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Key for the target of the recommendations:

(H) Health professionals

(R) Further research