FATHERHOOD IN CONTEXT: EXPLORING MEN’S PARENTING IN MULTIPLE SETTINGS

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Abstract

This thesis draws upon 'in-situ' ethnographic research to explore how fatherhood is performed and perceived across various social settings. Using data collected through participant observations at 'dad groups', 'go-along' interviews and semi-structured interviews with fathers, this research highlights the nuanced practices performed by fathers in the care of their children, while drawing attention to the impact of social 'space', discursive expectations, and embodied factors in shaping fathers' dispositions towards available and acceptable practices. Analysis of the data presents several key changes and continuities in the perceptions and practices of fatherhood. Findings across domestic, public, and groups settings suggests that men's parental interactions appear to facilitate a partial blurring of traditional 'mothering' and 'fathering' practices. This is evident in greater involvement by fathers in hands-on, embodied practices of care, including cuddling, soothing, or feeding their child, where meanings of fatherhood appear to be founded upon notions of egalitarianism or 'interchangeability'. However, traditional divisions of parental responsibilities were evident in relation to practices of 'interactive' care in leisure-based settings, including 'father-only' groups, with fathers retaining idealised responsibilities of moral guardianship and involvement in physical activities in conceptions of fathering practice. Traditional ideals were also present in conceptualisations of mothering practices, with female partners positioned in primary care roles, seemingly 'choosing' to fulfil the 24/7 responsibility of childcare. While it is argued that fathering practices are incorporating a greater sense of embodied care in men's relationships with their children, these represent partial 'glimpses' of change. Reified perceptions of father involvement, as such, continue to present opportunities for fathers to 'pick-and-choose' parental roles and responsibilities, questioning men's egalitarian ideals. Fathering practice appears to reflect the 'bricolage' identities of contemporary masculinity, incorporating caring ideals while retaining a sense of agency in how care is performed. This research, in sum, significantly advances the sociologies of fathering in revealing the ongoing complexity of the intersections between masculinity and fathering practices.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed J.Preston

Dated 28/01/2022

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout my doctoral study, I have encountered several situations whereby I have been required to recount my 'elevator pitch' – a short and distinct outline of my project, designed to dazzle the listener with its social impact and methodological innovation. Indeed, as a doctoral researcher studying fatherhood, I have found it to be an intriguing topic for the various people I have met, be these academics, fellow doctoral colleagues, stakeholders, or even fathers themselves. Interestingly, though, I have noticed that these conversations will inevitably lead to two concurrent questions. Firstly, I am asked if I myself am a father which, I will explain, I am not. My status as a 'non-father' is then usually greeted with expressions of surprise, before a follow-up question of "well, why study fatherhood, then?". These questions have been a source of much curiosity as I reflect upon the meanings of my position as a non-father. The presumption that I must *be* a father to have an interest in fatherhood is perhaps the most intriguing aspect, arguably reflecting broader assumptions of the status and visibility of fatherhood as a social phenomenon, with related issues reserved solely for those identified as fathers. Yet, as will be outlined and discussed throughout this thesis, fatherhood as a state of being is intrinsically linked to several wider social concerns, including understandings of gender and masculinity, shifts in family relationships and dynamics, and political discourses of neoliberalism and individuality. The study of fatherhood, in other words, offers a distinct lens through which social processes can be observed and the social world understood.

Setting the Scene

Over the past 50 years, understandings of fatherhood have been underpinned by a narrative of change and transition (Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Burgess 1997; Miller 2011; Dermott 2008). Across generations of men, the ideals of being a father have steadily shifted from models of authoritarian, patriarchal fatherhoods towards more nurturing and caring ideals (Dermott & Miller 2015; Lupton & Barclay 1997; Williams 2008; Dermott 2008; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). Indeed, heterogeneity in fathering discourse and practice has been recognised in recent years, with differences acknowledged in culture (Wall & Arnold 2007), class (Gillies 2009), ethnicity (Gill 2020), and sexuality (Henriksson 2019). Prior to the late-twentieth century, social prestige for fathers was primarily seen to emerge from one's status as a provider, not only in terms of breadwinning and economic provision but in terms of moral guardianship and the teaching of traditional masculine values, such as stoicism or resilience (Anderson

2012; Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003; Connell 2005; Segal 2007). Men, in this sense, were seen to perform instrumental roles, influenced by capitalist relations and gendered divisions of labour between work and home, demonstrating their fulfilment of fathering expectations through their graft and effort at work (Anderson 2012; Burgess 1997; Lupton & Barclay 1997; Collinson & Hearn 2001). As Anderson (2012:26) summarises, "being a breadwinner, regardless of the working conditions upon which one toiled, was a labour of love". Subsequently, breadwinner status has formed an enduring association with masculinised ideals of care, to the extent that work and fatherhood are almost "synonymous", particularly within heteronormative contexts (Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003:21; Brown-Bower & Zadeh 2021).

Yet, social changes since the 1970s can arguably be seen to have eroded such associations; for example, shifts in labour market participation of women and growth of dual earner households have seemingly contributed to shifting expectations for mothers and fathers (Bradley 2016; Miller 2011; Hochschild 2012). Such ideals have coincided with new conceptions of multiple masculinities which structure men's lives across several cultural contexts alongside a growing awareness of the potentially damaging impact of unemotive forms of traditional masculinity (Connell 2005; Connell & Messerschimdt 2005; Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Gough 2018). As such, it is possible to trace the emergence of 'new' forms of fatherhood, in contrast to patriarchal ideals. 'New fathers', as Wall and Arnold (2007:509) argue, "are ideally more nurturing, develop closer emotional relationships with their children, and share the joys and work of caregiving with mothers". In the past 20 years in particular there have been significant shifts in both the language and practices of fatherhood, with the 'involved' or 'intimate' father now seemingly a normative expectation, as reflected in structural changes such as the introduction of paternity leave (O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Kaufman 2018; Gregory & Milner 2011; Miller 2017). Fathers are now arguably more visible than they once were, occupying maternity wards, attending parenting groups and classes, and taking part in the school run – a father's 'being there', in a physical and emotional sense, underpins the changes in fatherhood over the past half a century.

It would appear that the increased presence of fathers on the parental landscape is significant, as caring fathers continue to attract attention across social and cultural settings. As will be explored in Chapter 2, the 'involved father' is a prominent cultural figure, with fathering transitions portrayed within pop culture through television and films (such as *Kramer vs Kramer, Mrs Doubtfire,* or *Marriage Story)*, advertisements, or parenting texts (Podnieks

2016; Sunderland 2000; Lupton & Barclay 1997). This cultural status has, in turn, seen a rise in celebrity fathering role models, with sportsmen, actors, and politicians lauded for their involvement and commitment to the care of their children, setting a standard for other fathers to achieve (Miller 2011; Podnieks 2016; Smith 2018). Across the cultural lexicon, then, it is now commonplace to see celebrity fathers presented as emotionally expressive and 'hands-on' in their performance of childcare, while also retaining a sense of mystique, confidence, and self-assurance (Smith 2018). What is evident in this sense is a blurring of the values of care and masculinity as part of transitions to 'involved fatherhood'. Just as mothers in the 1980s and 1990s were portrayed as 'doing it all', managing their careers and childcare, so too can we observe similar themes in the portrayal of 'new' fatherhood. While fathers are presented as more caring and hands-on, this is commonly not at the detriment of traditional masculine values such as strength or athleticism (Gorman-Murray 2017). As Smith notes (2018), such ideals have led to an increased 'sexualisation' of fathers in the media as the caring practices of celebrities such as David Beckham or Chris Hemsworth are juxtaposed with muscular, masculine physiques. This balancing act between the values of care and masculinity arise in everyday fathering through the navigation of breadwinner and carer identities (Burgess & Davies 2017; Henwood et al 2014; Henwood & Procter 2003; Williams 2008), demonstrating the conflicting nature of fatherhood identities and subject positions (Lupton & Barclay 1997).

This new cultural status of fatherhood has, in turn, seen fathers foregrounded as key figures in promoting and supporting social change. As will be explored in Chapter 2, the perceived absence of fathers has been linked to growing political concerns for child development and wellbeing in light of rising levels of child poverty (Dermott & Miller 2015; Main & Bradshaw 2016). Underlying this concern are a series of government-led papers which have pinpointed family instability as the chief cause for the decline in child welfare, linking family breakdown and divorce with poor child outcomes (CSJ 2006; 2013). The aim of policy, as Field (2010:5) argues, has been to implement measures to "prevent poor children from becoming poor adults" by focusing upon families and the actions of parents. It is within this broader context of parental intervention that the roles of fathers have received increased attention within policy, as evidenced in the emergence of 'heroic' narratives of the *fixer father* which frames increased father involvement as the solution to societal issues (Ives 2018; Gregory & Milner 2011; Scheibling 2020a).

Academic research has to some extent supported this agenda. In line with Field's (2010) recommendations, greater father involvement during pregnancy and early years has been demonstrated to improve the wellbeing and health behaviours of both mother and child, lessening the likelihood of mental health issues such as post-natal depression, and improving child development (Ives 2018). The impact of father involvement in the latter has received significant attention in recent years, with fathers increasingly encouraged to engage in 'intensive' parenting practices associated with the 'concerted cultivation' of their children to improve their life chances (Faircloth 2014b; Shirani et al 2012). This is evident in the Fatherhood Institute's (2016) *Fathers Reading Every Day* (FRED) programme, in which fathers, in collaboration with early years settings and libraries, are challenged to read with their children for 15-30 minutes a night to contribute to their child's literacy development. Broadly then, increased father involvement has been argued to improve children's mental health, academic achievement, and social and emotion development (Chung 2021; Amodia-Bidakowska et al 2020; Sarkadi et al 2008). The extent to which this developmental impact can act as a motivation for increased father involvement is questionable, however, with alternative parenting styles – such as 'natural growth' approaches – often adopted (Lareau 2011; see also Chapter 5).

Similarly, in the social sciences, the increased involvement by fathers in the practices of care have been identified as reflecting tangible means for challenging enduring divisions of domestic labour, particularly among heterosexual couples. Specifically, scholars from both feminist and critical masculinities studies have sought to explore how this division of labour produces and maintains gendered inequalities in terms of the hegemonic status of masculinities and the subordination, devaluing, and exploitation of femininities and other marginalised masculinities (Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003; Whitehead 2002; Bradley 2016). Of particular focus here is the enduring association of femininity with relations and practices of care, with feminist scholars exploring how caring ideals have been used within medical, political, and policy discourses to regulate womanhood, shaping permissible behaviours and confining women to the domestic sphere or low-paid caring occupations (Skeggs 1997; Glenn 2000; Oakley 2005; Bradley 2007). The pioneering work of second-wave feminists between the 1960s and 1970s is of great significance here, contributing important social scientific understandings of the unequal gender relations which emerge from this construction of care as 'feminine' (Bradley 2016). Ann Oakley's (2005) *The Sociology of Housework*, for example, played a crucial role in recognising women's domestic labour as

‘work’ and akin to men’s paid employment. Through in-depth interviews with mothers, Oakley (2005) presented a nuanced understanding of the often arduous and monotonous labour conducted in the home, with discussions exploring the repetitive routines, experiences of social isolation, and long working hours.

Oakley’s research, alongside the work of other feminist scholars of ‘care’ (such as Delphy and Leonard 1992, Skeggs 1997, Hochschild 2012), demonstrated not only how women’s domestic labour was constructed as *selfless* (i.e. for the benefit of others), but ultimately *valueless* in the context of capitalist structures as this ‘work’ was unpaid. As such, through this work, feminist scholars highlighted that the discussion of women’s inequality and exploitation should not be restricted to the public sphere and paid employment but should focus on the often over-looked and taken-for-granted caring relations that occur in the home (Oakley 2005). Consequently, a number of theorists within critical studies of men and masculinities have focused on the potential of men’s engagement in caring practices for challenging unequal gender relations (Elliott 2016; Whitehead & Barrett 2001). In short, it has been suggested that changes in the expectations and practices of men’s care, such as the increased involvement of fathers in childcare, represents a potential ‘regendering’ of care and domestic relations (Boyer et al 2017), alongside an ‘undoing’ of normative constructions of gender which have maintained inequalities between masculinities and femininities (Dermott & Miller 2015; Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007). The caring practices of fathers, in other words, "can be seen as central to the project of reimagining possible and permissible masculinities" and gender identities more broadly (Boyer et al 2017:60).

It is at this juncture in which my interest in fatherhood as a social and cultural phenomenon arises. Broadly, the rationale for this research is twofold. Firstly, I aim to investigate the relationship between discursive framings and expectations, prevalent among cultural imaginings, and the identities and practices of fathers in their everyday lives. In this sense, I aim to observe the ways in which fathers navigate cultural meanings as part of sense-making processes in the transition to fatherhood. As part of this exploration, I aim to trace the extent to which fathers perceive themselves as challenging traditional divisions of labour or providing unique approaches to support the positive development of their children – while also considering how such perceptions are negotiated in practice. Relating to this latter point, I also seek to explore fathering practice with a contextual lens, observing the potential role of material localities and spaces in facilitating or restricting the endeavours of fathers. What is key here is investigating the claims of ‘universality’ to fathering practices prevalent within

political discourse – challenging the notion that social and cultural resources do not matter in the performance of 'good' fathering. A key aspect of this research, then, is to explore the dual processes of discourse and structure in shaping the everyday lives of fathers. Such an approach is underpinned by specific theoretical frameworks which are discussed in further detail below (see also Chapter 3).

Theoretical Framework

Broad understandings of fatherhood within the social sciences have emerged from a range of theoretical influences, most prominently in relation to feminism, postmodernism and post-structuralism (Ives 2018; Gatrell & Dermott 2018; Lupton & Barclay 1997). While the foundations and philosophies of these theories may differ, they share a critical opposition to notions of 'truth' about the social world, arguing that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed, rather than pre-determined and unchangeable (Burr 2015; Whitehead & Barrett 2001). As such, fatherhood is understood as a fragmented concept, emerging from a complex array of social, cultural, and historical conditions, alongside intersections with meanings of gender, class, and race (Kay 2009; Dermott & Miller 2015). In other words, the understandings attributed to fatherhood are derived from specific social and historical structures and discourses which frame what we define as fathering norms and ideals (Kay 2009; Miller 2011). Developing a social scientific understanding of fatherhood, then, requires tracing and interrogating the various contexts by which fatherhood has become 'known' and defined over time.

Social Constructionism, Discourse, and Narrative

While the theoretical approach applied in this thesis seeks to account for the nuanced and layered ontological complexity in the production of knowledge, the principles of social constructionism represent perhaps the key foundational framework in the understandings of fatherhood adopted here. Underpinning this approach is a critical opposition to notions of 'truth' about reality and the social world, challenging ideas that our 'being' in society is in some way pre-determined and unchangeable (Burr 1998, 2015; Weinberg 2014). As Burr (2015:3) outlines, "[s]ocial constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be", for example, the categories by which human beings are divided such as race, social class, or gender. This latter distinction – i.e. the essentialist 'traits' by which male and female are defined – is intrinsically tied to taken-for-granted understandings of the parental roles of mothers and fathers (Miller 2017; Lupton &

Barclay 1997; Dermott 2008). The ability to care for and nurture a child, for example, has been historically understood as an 'instinctual' trait held by mothers simply by virtue of the ability to become pregnant and carry a child (Draper 2003; Ives 2014). In this sense, social characteristics, practices, and interactions are defined as a product of biological and anatomical features, inherently shaping expectations for behaviour in everyday life. In light of such assumptions, the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis subscribes to the social constructionist arguments of Lupton and Barclay (1997:10) who state,

> any type of knowledge and understanding of reality, scientific or otherwise, is inevitably constructed and understood through social and cultural processes … This recognition has led to the insight that those aspects of human experience that were previously considered to be fixed, natural, and immutable, such as gender and the human body, are rather the historical products of shifting social forces and power relations.

Lupton and Barclay (1997) contend, as such, that motherhood and fatherhood should be understood as socially constructed categories in society and products of social, cultural, and historical contexts. Such an understanding is ultimately necessary as a means of challenging commonly held beliefs about the world, and of re-evaluating normative assumptions "in ways that might be more facilitating" for oppressed members of society (Burr 1998:18). Social constructionist principles, therefore, provide the theoretical tools for challenging established assumptions about parental roles (such as father breadwinner/mother carer dyads). *How* this can occur requires further clarification on the function of power relations in society, however.

Foucault's poststructuralist work regarding power and discourse has been utilised as a means of extending and developing broader social constructionist accounts, offering nuanced explanations of the function of power in contemporary societies (Burr 2015; Whitehead 2002; Lupton & Barclay 1997). Broadly, the aim within Foucault's work was to examine "the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves", and how this 'knowledge' is regarded as an unquestionable 'truth' (1994:224). Within this process, Foucault (1994) identifies four 'technologies' (production, signs, domination, and self) through which meaning, 'truth', or *discourse* are produced. Much of Foucault's early work concentrates on the means by which the technologies of domination and power shape and define the possibilities for individuals, akin to Marxist and structuralist conceptualisations of power (Whitehead 2002). However, in his later work, Foucault (1994) acknowledges the determinism inherent in this conceptualisation, and instead focuses upon the means by which individuals interact with 'knowledge' and discourse to formulate the 'self'. Key to Foucault's

work here is the assumption that 'knowledge' is not tied to universal structures (e.g. capitalism or patriarchy, discussed further below), but is instead fragmented, producing multiple and often competing forms of discourse at a micro level which individuals navigate within the social world (Foucault 1994; Whitehead 2002; Lupton & Barclay 1997). However, while certain discourses may hold greater power or hegemony, for Foucault, these are supplemented by counter-discourses through which individuals can exert power: "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (cited in Alsop et al 2002:84).

While Foucault did not directly discuss gender in his work, the multiplicity and contestability within discursive theory and relations of power has contributed significantly to contemporary conceptualisations of gender and fatherhood (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Miller 2011; Faircloth 2014a). Drawing broadly from Foucault and poststructuralist feminism, fatherhood meanings are understood as deriving from discourse: i.e. the multiple and varied means by which the world is 'known', comprising of cultural representations of social phenomena which produce and mediate social practices and interactions (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Miller 2011; Whitehead 2002; Wall & Arnold 2007). Discourses are, in effect, the 'knowledge' drawn upon to construct normative ways of being within *multiple contexts*: "Fatherhood is a continually changing ontological state, a site of competing discourses and desires that can never be fully and neatly shaped into a single identity and involves oscillation back and forth between various modes of subject positions" (Lupton & Barclay 1997:16). In other words, the social practices of fatherhood are aligned with the normative expectations of discourses within a given context, adapting to culturally recognisable perceptions of "how things are or should be" (Miller 2011:22). This, in turn, implies fundamental features of the 'nature' of fatherhood, parenting, and gender in society, presenting social practices as *performative* or something that we 'do' in response to discursive framings (Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007).

This notion of performativity is a key area of contention, however, owing to a poststructuralist emphasis upon language as the central form of social action and the primary means by which identity and meanings can be conveyed (Burr 2015). The ability of social scientists to capture and represent tangible social practice and interaction is discussed further below (see also Chapter 3), however, the centrality of language in social constructionist and post-structuralist theory means that performativity has primarily been understood within the framework of narrative construction (Burr 2015; Reissman 2008; Bold 2013; Fontana 2003). From this perspective, it is the *stories* we tell about our experiences, events, and encounters

in everyday life which provide coherency to our sense of selfhood or identity, presenting our actions in culturally recognisable ways as a means of performing to discursive expectations (Miller 2011; Plummer 2001a, 2001b). The fathering narratives produced in this research, as such, represent a sense making process, a navigation of the choices, constraints, expectations, and circumstances within their family lives, constructing reflexive perspectives and perceptions of fatherhood (Fontana 2003; Reissman 2008; Miller 2011). As a performance of fatherhood, then, narrative accounts can reveal the key discourses which underpin contemporary perceptions of fatherhood alerting us not necessarily to *the truth* of experience but rather *what* representations, expectations, and assumptions are dominant in defining the "boundaries of the plausible, the possible, and the acceptable" practices of fathering (Wall & Arnold 2007:509; Lupton & Barclay 1997). Yet, as discussed below, the boundaries of fathering practice are equally shaped by material and structural relations present within societies; in this sense, while language and narrative represent a means of discursively performing identities, these accounts are told within specific social conditions which can enable and prevent forms of practice and action (Smith & Elger 2012).

Social Structures, Practice, and Embodiment

A key critique of social constructionist perspectives is that the focus upon language and narrative as the primary means of 'knowing' about the world risks slipping into realms of pure relativity and subjectivity within which meanings and identities cannot exist outside of the context within which they are told. By abandoning the notion of an external or objective reality – or at least the ability to represent this epistemologically – we, as social scientists, are left with a multiplicity of competing subjective perspectives, each vying for recognition (Smith & Elger 2012; Burr 1998). Without a foundational base beyond that of language alone, subjective perspectives are ultimately denied legitimation – as Burr (1998:18) explains, "how can we say, for example, that certain groups are oppressed if these 'groups' and their 'oppression' are constructions which have no greater claim to truth than any other?". Similarly, Smith and Elger (2012) argue that this lack of legitimate grounding in radical social constructionist approaches means that the lived realities of social structures and societal mechanisms are overlooked. They argue, in turn, for an ontological approach which can account for determination beyond that of language alone, acknowledging the presence of an objective social structure. As such, social action, they explain, "takes place in the context of pre-existing social relations and structures, which have both constraining and facilitating implications for such action. In this sense the social world has an external reality and exerts

powers over the way we act" (Smith & Elger 2012:6). In light of such critiques, my aim as part of this research is to not entirely abandon the notion of external realities through the use of social constructionism, but to adopt strategies which draw upon the principles of critical realism (Smith & Elger 2012; Miller & Glassner 2011) or constrained relativism (Verweij 2007) to acknowledge and represent through research data how everyday lives are determined by *both* discourse and social structures.

What needs to be accounted for in this sense are the ways in which external realities are structured at both the macro and micro levels of being and the social conditions, contexts, and spaces that are subsequently produced. In relation to motherhood and fatherhood specifically, then, gender and its associated inequalities are a key social structure in determining divisions of labour for parents, as they are tied to historical relations of patriarchal-capitalist systems (Walby 1989; Hartmann 2002; Whitehead 2002; Connell 2005; Carrigan et al 1985). The macro structure of gender, or what Connell (2005) defines as the 'modern gender order', is underpinned by relations of power and production in society. Power relations in this context refer to systems of patriarchy or hegemonic masculinity which privilege specific forms of (white) masculinity, allowing for social advantages for men who meet this particular criterion (Carrigan et al 1985; Connell 2005). The consequence, as such, is the subordination, oppression, and devaluing of those who are 'othered' by hegemonic masculinity within social institutions on the basis of gender identity, sexuality, and race. A key example in relation to parenting in this case is the devaluation of care ethics in Western societies, with the 'work' of care actively underpaid and "relegated to those who lack economic, political, and social power and status" i.e. women, people of colour, and immigrants (Glenn 2000:84; Oakley 2005; Tronto 1998). It is here that the relationship with capitalism and the economy is evident, with men granted greater privileges in terms of access and control of economic capital (Bradley 2016; Connell 2005). This is not just in terms of wage differences, but broader differences in the valuation of men's work in the public sphere compared to the private or domestic work of women which, in turn, contributes to engrained gendered trajectories in the division of labour.

As will be discussed in Chapter 2 (and explored within the findings of this research), the performance of parental roles is inevitably structured by the time dedicated to working commitments, with fathers in particular most likely to be engaging in parental responsibilities in 'pockets' of time across mornings, evenings, or weekends (Miller 2017; Henwood et al 2014, Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). This structure of family life, in turn, reaffirms traditional

understandings of parenthood, with mothers perceived as the primary and most knowledgeable carer, and fathers adopting a secondary or supportive role (Sunderland 2000; Miller 2011; Dermott 2008; Williams 2009). What we see, then, is how the practice of everyday parenting roles, as dictated by structured gender relations and heteronormativity, serves to (re)produce dispositions, understandings, and expectations in the divisions of parental labour. It is, in other words, evidence of the process by which, as Bourdieu (1977:72) argues, social structures generate a specific *habitus*, “systems of durable, transposable dispositions … principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations”. Performativity, in Bourdieu’s terms, is derived from everyday encounters and lived experiences, or the ways in which social encounters are navigated by individuals in society (Adams 2006; McNay 2003; Skeggs 1997; Burke et al 2015). Individual biographies and intersectional characteristics are key to social practice in this sense; our history, the spaces navigated, the resources accessible, and the people encountered combine to produce a tangible sense of being in the world, determining not just *what* can be done but what is *perceived* to be plausible and possible social action (Skeggs 1997; McNay 2004; Bourdieu 1977). Fathering habitus, as such, can be regarded as a dual process of internalised sense of ‘being’ alongside a practical and embodied performance within specific parental ‘fields’ or contexts.

In recent years, embodiment and its associated dispositions have been highlighted as a “critical missing link” in the study of parenthood and gender (Doucet 2006:697, 2009, 2013). Throughout her research, Andrea Doucet describes the variety of ways in which fatherhood is presented as a ‘state of the body’, with fathering practices seemingly dictated by men’s physical being. Primarily, this embodiment is seen to manifest in the types of caregiving activities men engage in, such as physical or rough-and-tumble play, utilising masculinised traits of strength or athleticism as part of fathering (Doucet 2006; La Rossa 2009; Coakley 2009; Wall & Arnold 2007; Jordan 2020). In this sense, fathering roles are made sense of and negotiated through bodily dispositions, with men’s own engagement in physical activities in childhood shaping their perceptions of fatherhood meanings (Doucet 2006). What is key, however, is that while such negotiations may appear to be founded upon essentialist or biological ideals, it is rather a product of sustained action over time or, in other words, internalised dispositions as a result of practice and interaction. The persistence of such gendered trajectories resulting from habitus or dispositions also seems to imply an inevitability when determining parental roles – the enduring associations between femininity

and care is a key example of this. Yet, the emancipatory potential of embodied practice has been argued by scholars of gender and masculinity (Hanlon 2012; Elliott 2016; Gough 2018). Such arguments draw upon Bourdieu's later work, in which habitus and dispositions are presented as adaptable or malleable as new contexts or 'fields' are encountered (Bourdieu 1990a, 1990b, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Atkinson 2010, 2018). Such ideas are key to Elliott's (2016) theory of 'caring masculinities', whereby men's increased engagement in the practices and provision of care is argued to contribute to the development of new caring dispositions and ideals of masculinity more broadly. In this sense, it is through interactions and negotiations within fields of care, such as domestic or early years settings, that men can develop and embody caring 'personas' (Elliott 2016; Tarrant 2017; Miller 2017; Norman 2017). Practical engagement in care by fathers, then, can be seen to actively challenge taken for granted assumptions of traditional parental roles, evoking gendered shifts by virtue of their embodied 'doing', developing an understanding of care responsibilities, and a competency in the performance of this practice. Investigating this notion is, as such, a key feature of this research, and is explored in contextual detail in Chapter 2 and discussed as part of analysis chapters.

In summary, a key aim of this thesis is to explore the various ways fathering perceptions and practices are negotiated and understood. This will involve tracing both the subject positions made available to fathers in the process of identity formation, alongside the forms of embodiment performed by fathers in their everyday practice, and the ways these are interpreted. In this sense, my research seeks to account for both the macro and micro influences in the definition of fathering roles and responsibilities, engaging with the fields of discourse, culture, the spatial, and the material, to present understandings of fatherhood 'in context'. As outlined below, three research questions have been formulated to guide this research.

Research Questions and Aims

The purpose of this research is to develop a nuanced understanding of fatherhood in relation to different social 'spaces' including geographical and social class contexts. To achieve this, I have developed the following research questions:

1. How do discourses regarding the roles and responsibilities of 'good' fatherhood effect men's practices and perceptions of fathering?

2. To what extent do geographical contexts, localities, and places shape a father's perspectives and practices regarding parenting?
3. To what degree are fathering perspectives and practices informed by embodied resources?

The first research question seeks to explore the impact of cultural and discursive constructions of fatherhood in society, focusing on meanings of 'good fathering' as represented in the media, government and policy discourse, and support services aimed towards fathers. The aim is to observe the extent to which discursive framings influence not only fathers' practices, but their expectations and perceptions of fatherhood meanings and identities.

The focus of the second research question is to explore the multiple 'spaces' that fathers inhabit as part of their parenting practice. This means exploring the different geographical contexts and places within which fathers interact to establish how they might influence fathering practices and perceptions. A key focus here, are the ways in which fathers navigate and embody these settings as part of fathering performances, establishing how practices are defined and mediated within social contexts.

Finally, the third research question seeks to explore the influence of embodied resources in defining fathering practices and perspectives. Specifically, the aim here is to observe how fathering is performed through or in relation to embodied factors, including material aspects such as varying levels of wealth or affluence, and cultural resources, such as masculinity or cultural capital, to define not only what is deemed possible or plausible but what is idealised in relation to fathering practices.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter 2, the current landscape of fathering is discussed in further detail, developing upon points raised in this introductory chapter. Here, research and literature relating to transitions in fatherhood are outlined, identifying key arguments and debates which underpin our contemporary understanding of changes in the attitudes and practices of fathering. As addressed above, fatherhood theory is derived from a range of theoretical approaches which can broadly be categorised into two concurrent pathways. Firstly, there is the 'culture' of fatherhood – the norms, values, and discursive representations which shape taken for granted assumptions, defining the boundaries of expected practice (La Rossa 1988; Wall & Arnold 2007; Dermott 2008). Key discourses and cultural representations are traced as part of this

chapter, exploring the social construction of fatherhood in popular culture, current UK political contexts, and fathers' own perceptions and ideals. Following this discussion, research relating to the 'conduct' of fathering is explored. Here, research and literature focus more explicitly upon the everyday practices of fathering, tracing the organisation of parenting demands among families. This section is structured in a chronological form, outlining fathering research across the different stages of parental transition, including ante-natal and pregnancy experiences, early fathering with newborns and infants, and established fathering roles as children reach school age.

The methodological approach adopted in this research is outlined in Chapter 3, discussing in particular the use ethnography in fatherhood contexts. Several key debates are addressed in this chapter, focusing firstly upon significant developments in the philosophy of social science, tracing the shifting meanings of 'representation' during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These debates are then applied to the theoretical approach adopted in this research, outlining the principles and practices of ethnography as set against a backdrop of social constructionism, critical realism, and reflexivity. The purpose of this chapter, as such, is to illustrate and illuminate not only my ontological and epistemological orientations, but to demonstrate a reflexive understanding of the forms of data constructed as a consequence of these assumptions. It is, in other words, a means of 'mapping' the processes of data production. Chapter 3 will then turn to a descriptive account of my research design, outlining the ethnographic methods utilised for data collection, alongside an outline of the data analysis methods and procedure adopted. Accounts of fieldwork sites, as well as participant details, are also provided before a discussion of the ethical considerations negotiated as part of this study.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are dedicated to analysis and discussion of the data collected in this study, identifying key themes within the data, and outlining interpretive insights. The three chapters each cover a specific context in relation to fatherhood in order to capture the nuances and complexities across the different terrains of parenting. Chapter 4 uses narrative data collected as part of semi-structured interviews with fathers to trace domestic and home life, focusing upon the co-ordination of everyday childcare and housework practices and the meanings attached to these. In order to retain the narrative conventions of these accounts, this chapter is structured chronologically to capture key themes in relation to the transitions of fatherhood, as childcare needs shift as children grow and develop. A particular emphasis of this chapter is the extent to which fathers narrate and define their engagement in physical or

nurturing care, such as cooking or changing nappies, outlining their experience of 'caring for' their young children. In Chapter 5, attention shifts to fathering experiences in outdoor or public settings, exploring how fathering practice is navigated outside of the home. The focus here turns primarily to the fathers' engagement in interactive care – the playful or leisurely activities engaged in as part of non-working time, typically on weekends. Two aspects of this data are analysed. Firstly, the ways in which father-child time is framed within fathering accounts is explored, discussing key themes in relation to discursive expectations and personal motivations. Secondly, the normative dimensions of these 'parental worlds' are analysed, tracing the fathers movements through these spaces and exploring the more 'mundane' aspects of everyday fathering. The themes of parental spaces are explored in further detail in Chapter 6, as data gathered through participant observations in father-only groups – referred to informally as 'dad groups' – is analysed. These paternal spaces offer interesting insights into fathers' negotiations of sole care of their children. This chapter, as such, investigates the ways in which fatherhood is constructed, interpreted, and performed within paternal communities, and when relatively free of maternal influences. A particular focus here is upon the discursive influences which underpin father-only groups, alongside the types of practices engaged in by fathers within these spaces.

In Chapter 7, the findings of this research are discussed in relation to existing fatherhood literature, exploring the contributions to contemporary theory and the wider implications of the research findings. Three key contributions are identified here. Firstly, the relations between fatherhood and care are discussed, exploring the ways in which father performances of care potentially contributes to challenging ingrained ideals of gender and parenting. Specifically, the localities in which changes and continuities have been observed as part of this study are explored, tracing the contexts in which fathering care is both facilitated and restricted. Secondly, the ways in which paternal identities can be utilised to evoke a reified value to fathering practices are discussed. Here, fathers' use of cultural resources, such as masculine or social class capital, is traced as part of constructions of fathering roles and responsibilities. Thirdly, the ways in which divisions of domestic labour are presented by the fathers are discussed, focusing upon the implications of enduring gendered trajectories in fathers' conceptions and understanding of parenting. Here, contributions to theories of gatekeeping practices by mothers and fathers are explored, observing the means by which assumptions of primary motherhood are maintained.

Finally, Chapter 8 provides a summary of the key debates explored as part of this thesis, offering concluding thoughts and perspectives upon key findings and contributions, alongside methodological reflections, and wider implications of this study.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Fatherhood in Culture and Conduct

In recent years, social scientific interest in the roles and practices of fathers has heightened. Central to this increased focus is the apparent shift in the meanings and expectations of fatherhood across parental and public landscapes, with fathers now perceived as key figures in tackling a range of social issues, including children's poor educational outcomes and unequal divisions of domestic labour. This seemingly sudden realisation of the impact of father involvement within social, political, and cultural spheres alerts us as critical sociologists to the socially constructed features of contemporary fatherhood, and how shifting expectations and assumptions can powerfully underscore everyday practice. Equally, such expectations can be resisted or challenged in practice, as fathers utilise their agency in the form of discursive subject positions to construct their own meanings of fathering practices – assuming, that is, that they are able to navigate the multitude of structural and material barriers set in place such as workplace demands and parental policy. Understanding this complex landscape of fatherhood is, as such, the focus of this chapter, introducing key approaches as developed from fatherhood and family research. Firstly, theories and research in relation to the *culture* of fatherhood are outlined; specifically, the focus here will be to address the discursive and cultural representations of fatherhood, exploring the socially constructed meanings and narratives across various social contexts. Secondly, work relating to the *conduct* of fatherhood is explored. Here, the emphasis is upon the performance and practices of fathers in everyday life, addressing the ways in which contemporary parental demands are negotiated and navigated. Across this chapter, key ideas related to fatherhood theory are outlined, including definitions of paternal 'involvement', the influence of 'intensive parenting' demands, and broader shifts in the meanings of care, masculinity, and gender in society.

The 'New Father' in Culture, Discourse, and Society

As a cultural phenomenon in Western societies, the narrative of the 'new father' can be traced back to its emergence around the mid to late twentieth century (McKee & O'Brien 1982; Burgess 1997). Underpinning the emergence of this narrative were cultural and discursive shifts in the expectations of masculinity and fatherhood, with traditional ideals of the stoic, breadwinning, patriarchal father seemingly replaced by 'new' ideals of the compassionate, nurturing, and involved father. Prior to the late-1980s, however, there was considerable scepticism regarding the existence of this new paternal figure, with Lewis and

O'Brien (1987:3) arguing that "discussion of the "new father" far outweighs evidence to demonstrate his existence". This sentiment was reflected in the second wave feminist work of key figures such as Ann Oakley, whose accounts of domesticity, housework, and motherhood positioned fathers as uninvolved in the labour of care (see Oakley 2005 for key works). In terms of broader relations of gender, care work has historically been conceptualised not only as a feminised trait but as in direct opposition to the idealised traits of masculinity (Tronto 1998; Glenn 2000; Connell 2005). The emergence of 'new' forms of fathering, then, have been engaged in an on-going struggle with traditional or hegemonic definitions of masculinity (Miller 2011; Dermott & Miller 2015; Hunter et al 2017) contributing to the enduring narrative of 'change' across subsequent conceptualisations of fatherhood from the 1990s and beyond (Dermott 2008; Podnieks 2016).

Accounts of Fathering

While a 'slow pace' of change is acknowledged among scholars (Segal 2007), in the years following Lewis and O'Brien's assertion, social scientific research has demonstrated tangible shifts in the cultural and discursive landscape of fatherhood (Dermott & Miller 2015; Lupton & Barclay 1997; Williams 2008). A useful starting point here are the accounts of fathers themselves and the various fathering identities that are drawn upon and expressed when conceptualising their role, with a discernible shift in the language of fathering clearly evident. A recurring theme among men's definitions of 'good fathering', for example, is an emphasis upon their 'hands-on' involvement, with engagement in the practical tasks of care (such as changing nappies) regarded as more important than a traditional breadwinner role (Williams 2008; Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Miller 2011). In this sense, the fathers' accounts across the studies reflect a shift in the perceived responsibility of caregiving tasks, with mothers no longer regarded as the *sole caregiver* and fathers expected to share this labour and participate in domestic life (Henwood & Procter 2003). Here, enacting values of domestic equality are seemingly an important motivation for fathers, demonstrating not only their willingness to engage in the tasks of care but also their competency in performing care and understanding their child's needs (Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Henwood & Procter 2003). Fathers' accounts of their care role, as such, evoke what Hodkinson and Brooks (2018:4-5) describe as "parental interchangeability", with fathers positioning themselves as equally adept in the task of caring as mothers, and reflecting more gender-neutral parenting ideals than previous generations.

However, what is perhaps more significant among accounts of fatherhood are men's expectations in forming close, emotive relationships with their children, with 'good fathering'

described in terms of 'bonding', 'intimacy', and 'love' (Miller 2011; Dermott 2008; Finn & Henwood 2009; Mooney et al 2013). What many fathers regard as important, in other words, is not necessarily their involvement in practical tasks of caring *for* their children but demonstrating that they care *about* them through their 'open' expression of loving and intimate emotion (Dermott 2008). A common motivation for such 'intimate' fathering is a rejection among men of the perceived emotionally distant approach of their own fathers. As Finn and Henwood (2009) outline, the fathers in their study expressed a sense of 'missing out' on a close relationship with their own fathers, and so sought to position themselves as a positive and emotionally present paternal figure in the lives of their children. As such, fathers 'being there' for their families forms a key element of fathering identity (Miller 2011). Dermott (2008) suggests that perhaps the most pertinent example of this is a father's 'being there' at the birth of their child, a symbolic representation of their physical and emotional presence. Yet, what is also interesting is the sense in which this presence does not automatically imply any form of 'doing' – while a father may be 'present' at the birth they are inevitably distanced from the act of giving birth (Ives 2014). Subsequently, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which men's definitions of 'being there' can be somewhat nebulous or vague and representing a 'state of mind' rather than an embodied 'doing' (Barclay & Lupton 1999). This is a common theme highlighted throughout this thesis, the notion that 'good fathering' is defined by an attitude or 'sense of being' rather than quantity of time dedicated to domestic and care responsibilities (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011).

Despite the emergence of new fathering ideals, many traditional identificatory imaginings – most often tied to hegemonic masculine ideals – continue to endure (Dermott & Miller 2015; Finn & Henwood 2009; Wall & Arnold 2007; Hunter et al 2017). Breadwinner identities are a common source of discussion across studies of fatherhood, and while these are positioned as in conflict with caring ideals, they are nevertheless commonly regarded as key features of 'good fathering' in fathers' own accounts (Yarwood 2011; Henwood & Procter 2003; Williams 2008; Dermott 2008; Stevens 2015). Particularly interesting are the ways in which fathers negotiate and legitimate their working commitments, presenting the provider role as an instrumental function, i.e. 'for the family', ensuring that their everyday lives were materially comfortable, providing food, warmth, and shelter (Henwood et al 2014; Henwood & Procter 2003; Yarwood 2011). While this implies a sense that work was a 'means to an end', Dermott (2008) suggests that the type of employment is still important to fathers, with the nature of their job needing to be 'interesting' or 'worthwhile'. In many ways, this desire

for meaningful work reflects notions of fathers as role models to their children, with their 'moral worth' tied to what they *do* in public settings (Finn & Henwood 2009; Yarwood 2011). Such forms of virtuous fathering identities are tied to ideals of fathers demonstrating and passing down moral values to the children, whether this be through craft and skill or hard work and graft in working environments, or 'resourcing' their children with knowledge and wisdom through various cultural endeavours and explorations of the social world (Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003; Finn & Henwood 2009; Vincent & Ball 2007).

Fathers own interpretations of their role are, as such, comprised of what Yarwood (2011) describes as 'pick and mix' identities, drawing upon fluid conceptions of fatherhood meanings. While this implies a certain degree of agency in the construction of fathering identities, perceptions, assumptions, and expectations of fatherhood in society are, in turn, powerfully shaped by wider cultural imaginings across various forms of media and 'pop culture'. As such, attention will now turn to the emergence of two key cultural figures in the social construction of fatherhood: the 'hapless father' and 'dad 2.0'.

Popular Culture: Hapless Fathers and Dad 2.0

In recent years, the 'involved' father has become a prominent figure in the cultural landscape of Western societies, with men's caring and nurturing practices gaining increased visibility across a range of cultural texts. Inherent to these representations, however, is a negotiation between the meanings of 'involvement' and the often-conflicting ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which present a range of conflicting depictions of fathering performances (Wall & Arnold 2007; Podnieks 2016; Hunter et al 2017). An enduring image from the late-twentieth century, for example, is that of the 'hapless father', whose apparent incompetent negotiation of the domestic sphere is emphasised for comedic purposes (Humphreys 2016). Central to such portrayals – as evidenced in advertisements, films, and television programmes – is the assumed incompatibility between hegemonic masculinity and the labour of care and domesticity, with men depicted as ineptly changing nappies, misunderstanding the needs of their child, or generally unable to manage or organise everyday domestic life (Humphreys 2016; Podnieks 2016).

While masculine incompetency is the central focus, this depiction arguably serves a wider purpose, (re)establishing mothers as the 'experts' of care, in turn (re)affirming traditional carer and provider binaries, and distinguishing femininity from hegemonic masculinity. Such dichotomies in the representation of the competency of care are visible within the growing

range of parentcraft texts, typically aimed at new parents, offering advice and guidance for effective childcare. In their analysis of parenting magazines, for example, Sunderland (2000; 2006) highlights that while it is expected for fathers to be involved in caregiving tasks, this is framed within a 'mother as main parent/part-time father' discourse. What is key here is the language utilised in such texts, with three clearly identifiable subject positions for fathers. First, is that of the father as 'line manager' (Sunderland 2000; 2006), with fathers described as performing a *supportive* function for mothers – 'stepping in', 'helping out', 'giving mum a break' – and fulfilling a secondary care role. While presented as sharing care, fathers were also positioned as uncertain carers and requiring guidance from their partners, again evoking images of the 'hapless father'. Sunderland (2000) suggests that fathers are presented as less knowledgeable in this sense, with their involvement choreographed and managed by mothers. Fathers are thirdly portrayed as playmates or entertainers for their children, with fathers reminded to 'have fun' with their children and to enjoy their time together (Sunderland 2000). As I discuss later in this chapter, this final positioning of fathers is interesting in terms of the shift in such framings over time, with fathers involvement in 'play' granted greater credibility and importance through links to discourses of child development.

While the 'hapless father' remains a culturally recognisable figure, this image of fatherhood has, in recent years, received considerable criticism from a newly emerging online community of fathers, both in the US and UK. Known collectively as 'Dad 2.0', these fathers actively seek to undermine what is regarded as the patronising portrayal of the 'hapless father' by using internet blogs to recount their involvement – and competency – in the everyday care of their children (Scheibling 2020a; 2020b). As Scheibling (2020b) explains, underpinning this movement are ideals of re-working gendered assumptions, with the fathers demonstrating that they can be both caring *and* masculine. A 'good' fathering identity, in this sense, is based upon redefining traditional masculine ideals, such as strength, within caring ideals. Through their blogs, then, 'Dad 2.0' fathers seek to demonstrate – again often in nebulous ways – that 'real strength' derives from the expression of emotion or sensitivity, evoking vague notions of 'intimate fatherhood' discussed above (Scheibling 2020b; Dermott 2008).

This deployment of 'intimacy as strength' is also evident in recent advertising campaigns – *Dove,* for example, have recently rebranded their men's toiletries products as 'Men+Care', signifying the now apparent incorporation of masculinity and intimacy (Gorman-Murray 2017). As Podnieks (2016) outlines, such campaigns reflect wider shifts in the ways that

fathers are positioned as domestic consumers and targeted by large brands and corporations through the development of products aimed directly at fathers. For Humphreys (2016), this focus on fathers as consumers represents clear shifts in the culture of parenthood, with fathers presented as visible figures in domestic contexts. Through her analysis of TV advertisements in the United States, Humphreys (2016) demonstrates the shift in the depiction of fathers as users of a range of domestic products, utilising both caring and masculine imagery in their navigation of household chores. Ultimately, while domestic contexts are increasing regarded as shared environments, how these are negotiated is still determined within highly gendered discourses. As Wall and Arnold (2007:521) argue, the emphasis upon masculine traits in domestic settings serves to reaffirm "the fact that warm, loving, and involved parenting and primary caregiving are still considered feminine". Arguably, this implies that for care to imbue any form of value, it must be incorporated with hegemonic masculine traits (Lomas 2013).

Returning to the 'Dad 2.0' bloggers, Scheibling (2020b) demonstrates how such fathers draw upon 'heroic' imagery in presenting themselves as "pro-feminist" and fighting for gender equality; here Scheibling (2020b:12) highlights how the bloggers caring sentiments of equality are manifested through a masculinised sense of moral duty, using social media to share stories of how "real heroes care". Underlying the 'Dad 2.0' community, then, is a moralised sense of responsibility to enact change for the benefit of themselves, their families, and society more generally. For example, Podnieks (2016) highlights the attempts by 'dad bloggers' to incite structural change through social media campaigns demonstrating the need for more accessible nappy changing facilities for fathers and enable more 'hands-on' fathering. Similarly, Friedman (2016) explores the ways that 'dad bloggers' express and narrate their emotional and intimate engagement with their children as a means of challenging what is perceived as damaging patriarchal ideals of the unemotive, 'macho' father. Ultimately, Ives (2018) argues that this sentiment of fathering responsibility to enact change and better the lives of those around them reveals broader assumptions regarding the meanings of fatherhood – that the value of fatherhood derives from the ability to support others, often in ways that evoke masculinised notions of self-sacrifice (Jordan 2020). As explored below, such ideals regarding fathering responsibility have formed key aspects of political discourse in recent years, with the transformative impact of father involvement emphasised.

The Politics of Fatherhood

Shifts in the cultural images of fatherhood – in particular, representations discussed above which construct ideals of responsible, moralised, and supportive fathering – arguably reflect broader shifts in Western political contexts since the 1980s. In many ways, the changes and continuities in the construction of 'good fathering' emerge from within a framework of neoliberal discourses, ideals, and expectations against which fathering practice is defined and judged (Miller 2017). Broadly underpinning neoliberal ideals is a shift from the state to the individual – what Davies and Bansel (2007:248) describe as a "transformation of the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being" to an individualised state that "installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives". In terms of parenting and family lives more broadly, such political shifts coincide with the emergence of an 'intensive' focus and scrutiny upon the individual choices and practices of parents (Shirani et al 2012) and how these, on the one hand, contribute to a range of perceived social problems such as teenage pregnancy, child poverty, and anti-social behaviour (Miller 2017; Crossley 2018; Gillies et al 2017; Main & Bradshaw 2016), and conversely, how engagement in specific parental practices can be beneficial in solving these identified issues (Chung 2021; Faircloth 2014b).

In relation to fatherhood, then, the influence of neoliberal discourse in the UK can be traced back to debates regarding teenage pregnancy and social exclusion in the late twentieth century. As Neale (2016) explains, concerns surrounding early parenthood were underpinned by the social issues claimed to result from teenage pregnancy, in particular what was perceived as the potentially limited educational and employment outcomes for young mothers, and the subsequent strain this could place upon the welfare state owing to a reliance upon government support and welfare benefits. In this context, fathers were typically framed as 'absent' and uninvolved, with their perceived 'feckless' attitudes and failure to provide for their children economically positioned as the root cause of blame (Ives 2018; Neale 2016). Policy interventions implemented by the then New Labour government, as such, focused upon the perceived ignorance of young fathers towards the consequences of parenthood, and stressed their responsibility as financial providers to support their children (Neale 2016).

By the mids-2000s, these individualised assumptions were paralleled by the more intense, moralistic rhetoric of the then opposition Conservative Party, with their leader Iain Duncan-Smith chastising young parents, framing them as an anti-social "underclass" dependent upon handouts from "hard-working taxpayers" (Neale 2016:79). This 'dependency' discourse, in

turn, formed the foundation of solutions proposed by right-wing think-tanks – such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) – which aimed to tackle the apparent 'crisis' of poverty and the 'social breakdown' of values in the UK (Slater 2012; CSJ 2006a, 2006b, 2013, 2016). *Breakdown Britain*, a report on the issues of social justice published by the CSJ in 2006, outlined five supposed "pathways to poverty", of which economic dependency and family breakdown were prominent alongside educational failure, debt, and addiction (Slater 2012; CSJ 2006a:2, 2006b). Father absence was framed as central to this professed social issue with welfare dependency linked to a rise in "dysfunctional", "fatherless" families, unable to provide the "core needs" of economic provision, care, and authority (CSJ 2006a:52). Such individualised rhetoric has, in recent years, led to the emergence of discourses relating to 'troubled families' and 'failing fathers' whose poor morals and values have supposedly contributed to their own disadvantaged status (Edwards & Gillies 2011; Crossley 2018). Neoliberal discourses, in other words, have contributed to a political context in which "personal shortcomings" are framed as the cause of social problems, and thus, are the focus of interventions rather than material inequalities in society (Main & Bradshaw 2016:40; Davies & Bansel 2007; Edwards & Gillies 2011).

Since the turn of the new millennium, then, government and policy discourse has increasingly utilised neoliberal ideas of parental determinism to explain the prevalence of deprivation and the subsequent poor life chances of children (Gillies et al 2017; Edwards & Gillies 2011; Lee 2014; Faircloth 2014a). Family life, as Gillies and colleagues (2017:4) argue, has become a "formative site" through which child outcomes are measured, owing to the influence of a series of government papers emphasising the link between parental behaviours and child development in the early years. Underpinning reports such as *The Foundation Years* (Field 2010) or *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (Allen 2011) is a neuroscientific discourse highlighting the potentially damaging effects of parental neglect upon child brain development, utilising the supposed authority of neuroscientific evidence to argue "that social problems such as inequality, poverty, educational underachievement, violence and mental illness are best addressed through 'early intervention' programmes" to educate parents with regards to 'good' practices (Macvarish et al 2014:793; Macvarish 2014).

Broadly, the emergence of this deterministic discourse signals key shifts in the expected strategies and styles utilised by parents, moving from traditional practices of 'child-rearing' to more intensive and concerted interventions to stimulate the physical, cognitive, and social development of children (Miller 2017; Hays 1996; Lareau 2011; Lee 2014; Shirani et a;

2012). ‘Intensive parenting’ discourse, then, can be seen as entwined with the broader neoliberal project espoused by successive New Labour, Coalition, and Conservative governments, with parents – typically mothers – expected to take individual responsibility for the management of self and risk in society, planning for the future and controlling family trajectories, particularly those of their children (Shirani et al 2012; Vincent 2017). In this neoliberal context, children are framed as a parental ‘project’ with specific skills and talents to be fostered or ‘made-up’ through engagement in extra-curricular or leisure activities ranging from music lessons, sports coaching, or private educational tuition (Vincent 2017; Lareau 2011). As such, ‘proactive parenting’, underpinned by detailed, planned interventions, represents the normalised expectations of ‘good’ parenting in the UK and beyond (Vincent 2017; Vincent & Maxwell 2016). While fathers have been seemingly insulated from such intensive demands in the past (Shirani et al 2012), evidence of the benefits of father involvement have been employed by government discourse in recent years as an apparent ‘catch-all’ solution to a range of social problems. In particular, this discourse of the ‘fixer father’, as defined by Ives (2018), has been prevalent in discussions for preventing poor child outcomes and child poverty, alongside positively impacting the well-being of mothers and challenging domestic gender inequalities more broadly. In relation to improved child outcomes, father engagement in specific practices with their children, such as physical ‘rough-and-tumble’ play, has been associated with providing targeted improvements for specific elements of child development, including the self-regulation of emotions and, for boys in particular, the ability to form stronger emotional ties with friends (Amodia-Bidakowska et al 2020; see also Chung 2021 for review).

In recent years, this focus upon increasing father engagement in practices of intensive parenting have been reflected in the growth of a range of early years and childcare services aimed directly at fathers, including ‘father-only’ parenting classes, activity groups, and social events (Dolan 2014; Potter & Carpenter 2010; Potter et al 2013). As ‘cultural spaces’, such services can offer interesting insights into the social construction of fatherhood, particularly in terms of the meanings and practices promoted within these settings. For example, father-only groups have been identified as a key site in shifting the caring ideals of fathers, particularly in relation to challenging traditional perceptions of ‘stoic’ masculinity (Dolan 2014; Chawla-Duggan 2011; Potter & Carpenter 2010). As Dolan (2014) notes, fathers who attended a ‘father-only’ parenting programme found new ways of expressing practices of emotive or intimate fatherhood, engaging in more tactile and affectionate practices as a result

of their experience. Similarly, father-only activity groups have been found to encourage greater engagement by fathers in practices which support child development (Potter & Carpenter 2008); in particular, such services have been highlighted as a means of increasing the confidence and competence of fathers when engaging in practices such as reading or imaginative play (Potter et al 2013). While research regarding father-only services has provided new understandings of the benefits of father engagement, there is further scope for a critical investigation of the underlying discursive influences which frame the structure of these services, alongside observations of their relationship with the embodied practices of fathers, particularly to explore how specific meanings of fatherhood are promoted and enacted (see Chapter 6 for further exploration).

In summary, the cultural representations outlined here have ultimately been employed in political discourse to support enduring ideals of fathers as moral role models, teaching their children the values of society, and preventing engagement in anti-social behaviour (Crossley 2018; Jenson 2018). This rhetoric, as evidenced in a range of government think-tank reports (see CSJ 2006a, 2006b, 2013), relies upon a dual narrative of the risks of 'fatherlessness' alongside the benefits and solutions of father involvement, appealing to moralised explanations, such as the individual behaviours, temperaments, and characters of fathers, in shaping child and family outcomes (Vincent 2017; Jenson 2018; Dermott & Pomati 2016). What is lost, ignored, or downplayed within this discourse, however, is the extent to which fathering identities are impacted by material contexts, such as limited employment opportunities, insecure housing, or mental health issues, navigated as part of everyday life (Vincent 2017). In this sense, political discourse draws upon masculinised ideals, such as self-sacrifice or mental fortitude, in constructing a 'heroic' image of fatherhood, one who defies their background to support their families both economically and emotionally (Jordan 2020. Within the 'fixer father' narrative, then, is a reified value and status of fatherhood, underpinned by hegemonic masculine ideals, functioning as a means to an end for a range of social problems (Ives 2018). As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, this emphasis upon the benefits of fatherhood serves to also downplay the everyday care work of mothers who continue to shoulder the burden of primary responsibility for organising or co-ordinating domestic and childcare roles (Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012).

Exploring this cultural 'status' of fatherhood is a key aim of this study, as I seek to understand how fathers navigate and perceive their roles and responsibilities across a range of contexts. In the following section, I outline and discuss research in relation to fathers'

practical experiences and performances of care. Underpinned by the sentiment of Lewis and O'Brien (1987), I explore the ways in which 'new' fatherhood ideals have been traced in the conduct of fathers, evaluating the 'existence' of this figure in practice.

Fathering in Practice: The changing dynamics of family life?

With the emergence of the new intimate and involved father as a culturally acceptable figure across parental landscapes, attention in the social sciences has turned to tracing the practices of fathers, exploring whether cultural expectations and ideals have been reflected in tangible changes to the dynamics of family life (Dermott & Miller 2015; Lyonette & Crompton 2015; Warren 2011; Miller 2011; Norman & Elliot 2015; Ralph 2016; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). The organisation of family life has been a particular focus here, exploring how cultural, discursive, and personal expectations are entwinned with material and structural factors, shaping everyday lives and the divisions of domestic labour (Docuet 2017; Miller 2011). While the involved father is a prominent cultural figure in this regard, it is possible to trace this emergence to the material shift in women's working patterns and practices. As Hochschild (2012) outlines, the number of women in paid employment with dependent children has gradually increased since the 1960s as cultural expectations regarding *who* earns the family wage have been reflected in practice. Recent ONS (2019) figures, for example, suggest that 75% of mothers are employed on a part-time or full-time basis, while 'breadwinner mothers' – i.e. women as top family earners – are increasing among families in the UK (Miller 2017).

However, this shift in earning responsibilities and expectations has not coincided with an increased uptake in men's domestic labour, despite the cultural prominence of 'new' fatherhood (Oakley 2005; Hochschild 2012; Warren et al 2010; Doucet 2017). Statistical data points to what Hochschild (2012) describes as the 'stalled revolution' in work-family practices, with ONS (2016) data suggesting that mothers continue to take responsibility for domestic labour, dedicating 19 hours per week (compared to the 8.5 hours completed by fathers), while Working Families (2020) research intimates that only 31% of dual-earner couples describe themselves as sharing childcare equally. Further nuance to these working dynamics can be found in the type of employment patterns worked by mothers and fathers. For dual-earner families with children aged 3-4, 46% both worked full-time hours, 50% adopted a father full-time/mother part-time structure, and 2% adopted a mother full-time/father part time structure (ONS 2019). Such findings suggest that what has 'stalled' is a re-evaluation of care responsibilities for fathers to coincide with the changing structure of

family breadwinning – in other words, the limited fulfilment of involved fathering ideals in practice has delayed tangible shifts in domestic gender relations (Hochschild 2012).

Increasing fathers' practical engagement in caregiving has, as such, been highlighted as a crucial social development in the 21st century, with the potential to 'undo' feminised conceptions of care (Miller 2017; Deutsch 2007; Elliott 2016; Dermott & Miller 2015; Doucet 2017). As will be explored in this section, explanations for the obstruction of shifts in the perception and practice of care are multi-faceted, influenced by structural, political, cultural, and moralised factors (Gregory & Milner 2011; Elliott 2016; Walzer 1996). Moreover, given the power associated with hegemonic masculine ideals, it is important to consider the ease with which such social status would be surrendered (Connell & Messerschimdt 2005; Hunter et al 2017). Fatherhood research has, in turn, sought to pay particular attention to the various contexts within which parental care practices have been reconfigured or gendered expectations reaffirmed (Dermott & Miller 2015). This has involved nuanced accounts of everyday family practice across the various stages of parenthood and child development (pregnancy, infancy, school-age) and the ways in which expectations and demands are negotiated. Before these stages can be discussed in detail, it is important to define what is meant by the terms 'childcare' and 'domestic labour', particularly in the 'intensified' context of parenting culture, to establish exactly *what* constitutes parental roles (Doucet 2017).

As noted above, cultural definitions of father 'involvement' often draw upon somewhat vague conceptions of parenting practice, with terms such as 'childcare', 'child-rearing', or 'being there' utilised as shorthand for a host of tasks and demands (Norman 2017; Barclay & Lupton 1999; Miller 2011). Parenting as an everyday activity is of course an amalgamation of a multitude of roles and responsibilities which in some ways defy strict categorisation; as such, some degree of broadness in definition should be expected (Dermott 2008). In this regard, Lamb's (1986, 2000) work offers perhaps the most useful starting point for defining and categorising father involvement, but also parental practice in general (Norman 2017; Norman & Elliott 2015; Dermott 2008). The 'work' of parenting is divided into three categories which, while often overlapping, highlight the different forms of parental activity. The first category reflects the general sense of parental proximity or the extent to which mothers and fathers are 'present' and 'accessible' in the home (Lamb 1986; Norman 2017; Dermott 2008). It is taken as a secondary activity in the sense that it does not involve direct

activity with children but are around in the home if and when they are needed, often engaged in other tasks such as cooking, cleaning or laundry (Lamb 1986).

The second category – *engagement* – broadly encapsulates the practical tasks of childcare, and how parents assume responsibility for care needs in the process of 'caring for' their children (Lamb 1986; Norman & Elliott 2015; Elliott 2016; Dermott 2008). Thought of in terms of everyday or routine tasks (Dermott 2008), what constitutes such caregiving practice is fluid and context dependent. For example, the care of newborn or infant children often involves physical tasks, including feeding (both during the day and at night), changing nappies, getting dressed, or comforting and soothing their child, which are performed less as the child becomes more dependent (Norman & Elliott 2015; Miller 2011). As such, care needs shift with age and can involve bath and bedtime routines, transportation to school, food preparation, or help with homework (Miller 2017; Dermott 2008; Williams 2009; Wall & Arnold 2007; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). Engagement in this sense has also been extended by theorists to incorporate new 'intensive' demands and expectations placed upon parents, including one-to-one activities to enhance child development (such as reading or playing with children), taking part in extra-curricular activities (such as sports participation), or fostering 'family time' through days out together (Dermott 2008; Kay 2009b; Garner 2015; Miller 2017; Faircloth 2014b).

The third category refers to *responsibility*, the practice of planning, anticipating, and choreographing care needs, and involves ensuring that these needs are fulfilled (Oakley 2005; Lamb 1986; Norman 2017). For Miller (2017), parental responsibility is an internalised state and reflects the 'mental work' of caring *about* their children. This practice is exemplified by an adoption of '24/7 thinking responsibility' in which everyday family routines and tasks must be acknowledged and organised. The process of caring about a child's needs is, as such, significantly different from the practical task of caring for them; for example, caring for a child may involve feeding them dinner, while caring about a child can involve planning and organising what they will eat the *next day*, alongside attending to expectations of balanced and healthy diets (Miller 2018). Similarly, this mental work extends into everyday activities, *knowing where and when* their child needs to be and *arranging provision* for this to be fulfilled (Norman 2017). For Walzer (1996), this thinking time also involves a significant degree of worry, concern, and critical self-reflection, as parenting practices and child well-being are constantly open to evaluation from perceived 'others' (i.e. parenting experts, see Lee 2014). The pressure to perform to 'good' parenting standards, alongside the management

and anticipation of risk (e.g. illness or injury) ultimately takes a mental toll on parents or, predominantly, mothers (Miller 2017; Lee 2014; Shirani et al 2012).

As reflected in the time-use data above, the fulfilment of childcare responsibility and practice is still largely performed by mothers, despite rises in female employment and greater acceptance of 'new' fathering ideals. The practice and performance of parenting tasks implies that the capacity to care for one's children need not be gendered, yet the allocation and division of parental labour points to deeply entrenched gendered trajectories for mothers and fathers (Miller 2011; Williams 2009; Henwood et al 2014). As explored below, several key factors have been acknowledged in explanations for these enduring trends, including inadequate paternity leave or flexible working policies, long hours working cultures, and individual or family characteristics, attitudes, and motivations (Norman 2017; Gregory & Milner 2011; Miller 2018). Each of these factors intertwine to structure everyday family dynamics, contributing to understandings, perceptions, and dispositions towards motherly and fatherly roles and responsibilities across stages and contexts of parenting (Doucet 2017). Three specific stages of parental trajectories are explored here, (1) the ante-natal stage, (2) the early years following birth (0-3), and (3) the years following compulsory schooling (4-11).

Expectant Fathering: Preparations, Anticipations, and Mediations

The ante-natal stage represents perhaps the most deep-rooted of gendered trajectories for expectant parents. For expectant mothers, pregnancy is marked by significant biological and physiological changes and where the transition to parenthood is predominantly an embodied experience (Doucet 2009; Draper 2003; Ives 2014). However, as Miller and Nash (2017:546) suggest, the term 'expectant father' "does not invoke recognisable visual images such as those associated with pregnant bodies". The transition to parenthood/fatherhood is thus perceived as a "perplexing" period as men seek to make sense of their 'disembodied experiences' and develop a sense of a fathering identity (Draper 2003; Miller & Nash 2017). Draper (2003) argues that expectant fathers experience the ante-natal stage through 'body-mediated moments' with their partners, such as through pregnancy tests or attendance at ultrasound scans and health check-ups. The scans in particular have been cited as key sites for fathers in terms of confirming the 'reality' of the pregnancy; while their partners are able to 'feel' or 'sense' their baby on a daily basis, ultrasound scans acted as a sensory experience for fathers providing the opportunity to see and hear their child on the monitors (Ives 2014; Miller & Nash 2017). This in turn can provide an initial emotional connection and attachment

to their child and build the foundations of intimate and involved fathering identities (Miller & Nash 2017). Yet, this experience has also been found to evoke feelings of detachment among fathers, acting as a reminder of the distance between themselves and their child and the lack of physical or embodied connection (Ives 2014). In this sense, fathers can perceive their parenting transitions as being a 'step behind' their partners (Ives 2014), reinforcing the gendered trajectories which position mothers as the more knowledgeable or instinctive parent, at least from some fathers' perspectives.

A further form of mediation available for expectant fathers is the accessing of information about parenthood, pregnancy, and childcare through books, social media, social networks, and ante-natal preparation classes (such as the National Childbirth Trust). Father attendance at preparation classes has garnered significant interest in recent years, particularly in relation to the gendered dynamics which are perceived to underpin the structure of the sessions. Recent research, for example, has highlighted men's sense of uncertainty and feelings of being 'out-of-place' when attending classes, with the focus of the session perceived to be focused upon mothers' experiences or the birthing process which many fathers can feel detached from (Miller & Nash 2017; Nash 2018; Henwood et al 2014). When reflecting upon their experiences, many fathers have suggested that their presence at classes is a means of 'being there' for their partners, positioning themselves in a supportive role and demonstrating empathy and understanding (Miller 2011). However, the supportive function of fathers has also been found to emphasise their detachment and disembodiment from the pregnancy as they cannot fully understand the physiological changes their partners are experiencing (Miller 2011; Draper 2003).

This detachment and uncertainty can ultimately provide fathers with the agency to 'step back' from information processing, only engaging as and when *instructed*. A common theme among studies of expectant fatherhood is that men's engagement in information – through books or classes – is arranged or orchestrated by their partners (Sunderland 2000; Miller 2011; Miller & Nash 2017). Henwood and colleagues (2014), for example, found that fathers can often feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available from the various sources, and so require their partners to 'filter' this information. Broadly, there is general sense among fathers that information gathering does not fit with their perception of (masculine) selfhood; subsequently, cultural perceptions of fathering, such as the 'hapless father', can be utilised to temper expectations of men's engagement in learning material in way inaccessible to expectant mothers (Miller 2011). The 'trajectories' of expectant mothers and fathers are

arguably underpinned by the sense of embodiment and attachment to the growing baby; as a bodily experience mothers are not presented with the same *choices* as fathers in terms of their engagement with knowledge about pregnancy and childcare. For fathers, the ante-natal stage is experienced through their partners, with this mediation reinforcing the assumption that fathers are the 'secondary parent' – understandings which can powerfully underscore caring practices following the birth.

Infant Fathering: Navigating the barriers to care

The birth of a child can be regarded as a crucial turning point in the parental trajectories of fathers, as the once hypothetical and imagined responsibilities suddenly become a reality. The early days and weeks following the birth have been found to be a period of uncertain transition, underpinned by feelings of joy, trepidation, confusion, and worry as fathers practise caring tasks for the first time (Miller 2011; Norman & Elliot 2015; Wissö & Plantin 2015). Unlike experiences of expectant fatherhood, these early transitions provide opportunities for fathers to engage in embodied parental practices, performing hands-on care and developing a sense of an 'involved' fathering identity as reflected in the ideals and principles of the 'Dad 2.0' movement. This embodiment of caring practices has been emphasised as a means of challenging the gendered expectations of parents, arguably instilling in fathers an 'ethic of care' and nurturing 'caring dispositions' both practically and mentally (Elliott 2016; Doucet 2017). However, such engagement is typically navigated alongside a series of structural, discursive, and practical barriers such as working commitments and the availability of parental leave.

UK parental leave policies arguably represent one of the most influential barriers to father involvement in the year following the birth of a child. Leave entitlements have notoriously promoted traditional family models of the breadwinner father/primary carer mothers through the limited availability and poor financial compensation for fathers seeking to take time off from work (O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Kaufman 2018). For example, in the early 2000s, maternity leave entitlements were increased on several occasions, shifting from 18-26 weeks then 26-52 weeks, while statutory paternity leave (consisting of 2 weeks) was only introduced for fathers in 2003 (Kaufman 2018). In the intervening years, institutional support for increased paternity leave has been, at best, weak and minimal (O'Brien & Twamley 2017). Since 2015, four leave options have been available to fathers: (1) *Paternity Leave* consisting of 2 weeks following the birth, paid at a flat-rate of £138.18 per week; (2) unpaid *Parental Leave* of up to 18 weeks, available until their child's fifth birthday; (3) *Additional*

Paternity Leave which allows mothers to transfer a portion of their 52 week leave entitlement to fathers, but only from 20 weeks after the birth; and (4) the more flexible *Shared Parental Leave* which allows the transfer of mothers' leave from 2 weeks following the birth but paid at a lower rate to APL (Kaufman 2018; O'Brien & Twamley 2017). Such leave policies arguably contribute to the entrenched nature of gendered parental trajectories by privileging traditional ideals of mothering and fathering roles and limiting the structural tools for such ideals to be challenged, as explored below.

While there are no official statistics measuring the take-up of paternity leave in the UK, fatherhood research suggests that the majority of fathers take some form of leave following the birth of their child (Miller 2011; Henwood et al 2014; Brandth & Kvande 2018). This often includes a combination of parental leave entitlements with annual leave from employers, typically as a means of negating the low financial compensation. Indeed, research regarding fathers' use of leave suggests that financial costs are a major barrier which prevents the take up of longer periods of leave and contributes to traditional earning dynamics among UK families (Kaufman 2018). As Miller (2011) outlines, patterns of balancing caring and paid work are established fairly swiftly for fathers, with short-term periods of leave lasting between 2-4 weeks. Despite this short timeframe, periods of paternity leave are typically appreciated by fathers, facilitating their involvement in caring practices and allowing them to begin to understand their child's needs (Doucet 2009; Henwood et al 2014; Miller 2011). However, the return to work for fathers is argued to be marked by significant shifts in father involvement, with gendered parental trajectories beginning to emerge. Miller (2011) suggests that such gendered patterns seemingly 'fall into place' as part of everyday demands; work means that fathers are limited by time availability and so their involvement occurs at distinct periods such as evenings or weekends. This often then involves engagement in task-based activities such as feeding, bathing, or bedtime routines, as they 'support' or 'help out' their partners, reflecting cultural expectations as outlined above (Miller 2011; Sunderland 2000).

The first year following the birth is also key in establishing perceptions of maternal primacy in terms of care and intimacy. As Doucet (2009) notes, the consistent presence of mothers in the home, alongside the experience of pregnancy and birth, can be interpreted by fathers as representing a physical connection and maternal bond between mother and baby. Such impressions are perhaps best reflected in fathers' responses to breastfeeding and their associated feelings of jealousy and frustration at their inability to form such intimate and tactile connections (Henwood et al 2014; Doucet 2009). The caring role of mothers can also

lead fathers to question their own adeptness and competency of care, as mothers become more practised in understanding their child's needs. Fathers can often be left frustrated at the lack of responsiveness of a newborn child and can struggle to interpret their needs without support from their partners (Henwood et al 2014). Fathers' limited experience of hands-on care in the first year ultimately contributes to 'secondary' understandings of their parental role, again reinforced by physical and embodied perceptions of maternal practice (Doucet 2009), alongside cultural images which emphasise, and indeed *normalise,* father incompetency (Podnieks 2016). Yet, there is evidence to suggest that while men's embodied care can be restricted by working patterns, such family dynamics are influenced by fathers' own perceptions of gendered parenting discourses. For example, when investigating couples' decision making on parental leave, Kaufman (2018) found that gendered expectations were a stronger determinant than economic factors; even when female partners earned more, it was the male partner who returned to work. Similarly, Miller (2011) found that many fathers were 'relieved' upon returning to work and established routines following periods of leave and demonstrated little intention of changing their working hours. As such, while their limited experience and knowledge can be source of frustration for fathers, there are still questions regarding the extent to which they actively seek a hands-on care role in ways that are more than supplementary to mothers.

There is perhaps some evidence of shifting ideals and intentions of fathers, however, specifically among the limited number new fathers in the UK taking advantage of longer periods of leave, such as *Additional Paternity Leave*, alongside the more established number of fathers taking paternity leave in Nordic countries (O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Duvander et al 2017; Brandth & Kvande 2018; Johansson 2011). What is significant in such cases is that, unlike shorter periods of leave post-birth, these fathers took on parental responsibilities *alone* without direct support from their partners. In line with the work of Doucet (2017) and Elliott (2016), this experience of hands-on caregiving has been found to support the development of 'caring dispositions' among fathers, providing familiarity and understanding of the intensive labour associated with parenting infants. A common theme among studies, for example, was the framing of childcare and domestic labour as 'hard work', with the leave time providing 'new insights' for fathers regarding the challenging and tiresome nature of their responsibilities (O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Kvande & Brandth 2017). In particular, the repetitive nature of childcare has been emphasised across studies, with fathers negotiating patterns of feeding and sleeping alongside domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, and

shopping for groceries (Duvander et al 2017; Brandth & Kvande 2018; O'Brien & Twamley 2017). Despite these perceptions of difficulties in adjusting to their role, periods of fathering alone have been understood as developing a competence and confidence among fathers (O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Brandth & Kvande 2018), negating the sense of disconnection experienced by fathers during the ante-natal stage or following their return to work (Miller 2011). Fathers have expressed a greater understanding of their children's needs, in this sense, reading and interpreting the behavioural cues of their children, such as when they were hungry, needed their nappy changed, or were experiencing discomfort from trapped wind (Brandth & Kvande 2018; O'Brien & Twamley 2017).

Such findings are significant in that they demonstrate the impact of hands-on practice in forming what can be defined as 'caring fatherhoods', which challenge gendered discourses of parenting and care through engagement in traditionally 'feminised' practices (Boyer et al 2017; Dermott & Miller 2015; Elliott 2016; Doucet 2017; Johansson & Klinth 2008). By practising nurturing and intimate parenting, fathers are demonstrating that an ethic of care is not determined by inherent features of sex and gender and can thus be re-evaluated or 'undone' (Butler 1990; Deutsch 2007; Tronto 1998). Yet, the degree to which fathers and men more broadly can be seen to disassociate their practices from embodied ideals of masculinity is questionable. For example, research on fathers as primary carers has demonstrated persistent links between fathering identity and 'masculinised' forms of care, such as breadwinner activities or engagement in 'interactive care' – e.g. reading with children or engaging in physical activities (Wall & Arnold 2007; Henz 2019; Brandth & Kvande 2018; see also Chapter 5). What is evident among some fathers is a reconstitution of caring practices to fit masculine ideals or perceptions, akin to the representations of fatherhood portrayed in the 'Dad 2.0' movement (Lomas 2013; Gorman-Murray 2017; Scheibling 2020a). O'Brien and Twamley (2017), for example, note how one father in their study utilised masculinised approaches to caring tasks, such as carrying their baby in a sling when encouraging them to sleep. Such an approach involved long periods of walking and carrying their child, and arguably reflects traditional masculine ideals of physical strength and endurance. While gendered practices have been a central focus of fathering research, the gendered nuances in the performance caring practices are an emerging theme and thus require further investigation and analysis to understand how fathers navigate and interpret their practices of care (see Mean & Jackson 2013; Doucet 2009; Miller 2017; Brandth & Kvande 2018; Joshi 2021).

Established Fatherhood

What is clear from previous research on family lives is that meanings of involvement change and develop over time, as parental tasks and responsibilities shift as children grow and become increasingly more independent. Unlike infant or 'babycare', the everyday lives of parents of school-age children are more structured and settled – if not less chaotic (Dermott 2008; Miller 2017). Formal schooling is a key factor here as children are taken out of the home for extended periods of the weekday, with parental, domestic, and working commitments structuring this time for *both* mothers and fathers (Dermott 2008; Hochschild 2012). Moreover, it is this period of time which comes to reflect 'normative' images of contemporary parenting and associated responsibilities. Tasks such as the 'school run', presence at parent's evening, ferrying of children to extra-curricular activities, 'family time', and domestic labour, are all conjured in everyday imaginings of parenting practice (Miller 2017). Traditionally, the descriptions of such *parenting* tasks were often framed as a shorthand for *mothering* responsibilities, with the extent of father involvement open to discussion and debate.

Recent research suggests many fathers strongly favour more egalitarian conceptions of divisions of domestic labour and childcare than previous generations, with both care and earning responsibilities framed as 'interchangeable' by fathers (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Miller 2017; Wissö & Plantin 2015; Mooney et al 2013). As Hodkinson and Brooks (2018) outline, the fathers in their study narrated accounts of shared caregiving, with both parents presented as equally adept in the completion of tasks. Everyday care and domestic arrangements, in this sense, were not presented along idealised gendered trajectories, but rather as a result of circumstantial factors such as "earnings, costs, working hours, commutes, childcare practicalities and career prospects" of *both* parents in couple relationships (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018:6). In other words, divisions of labour were increasing dictated by pragmatic reasonings as opposed to gendered expectations or ideals. When navigated in practice, such shared responsibilities have been demonstrated to occur in specific 'pockets of time' across mornings and evenings, periods in which all family members are home. Fathering narratives collected by Dermott (2008), for example, provide accounts of 'hectic' morning routines with both parents seeming responsible for a number of tasks, including getting children washed, dressed, and fed, before embarking on trips to school or work. Evenings were more relaxed, but still included the fulfilment of basic care arrangements – cooking dinner, helping with homework, bedtime routines – which appear to be universal

among (middle-class) families (Dermott 2008; Miller 2017). As Dermott (2008:52) reflects, the fathers' accounts presented an awareness and involvement in the "minutiae" of jobs, "whether it is handing a child his toothbrush or finding her shoes", demonstrating an active engagement in routine caring.

For middle-class fathers in particular, family lives are also structured by a range of 'intensive' parenting demands which occupy evening and weekend schedules. Such activities can take two forms of involvement. First, there is what can be regarded as intensive 'father-child time' spent engaging in different activities together such as reading, playing sports, or days out (Dermott 2008; Such 2006; Coakley 2009; Garner 2015; Buswell et al 2012; see also Chapter 5) to foster intimate relationships and pass down virtuous values regarding education and learning, reflecting idealised political discourses of 'good' fathering discussed above (Faircloth 2014b; Finn & Henwood 2009). Framed as a form of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2011), such activities are a means of 'resourcing' children with skills viable in future endeavours, such as when completing further or higher education (Vincent & Ball 2007; Vincent & Maxwell 2016). Both Doucet (2006) and Wall and Arnold (2007) argue that such forms of interactive involvement with their children is important for fathers in establishing their distinctly masculine paternal identity, with traits such as strength, athletic prowess, and risk-taking a key feature in the performance of this role. For Doucet (2006, 2009), it is this form of masculine embodiment and the associated sense of 'ease' when performing such tasks which come to define and distinguish this specific aspect of masculinised fathering which, when combined with their more interchangeable identities of parenthood (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018), contribute to the formation of 'hybrid' or 'bricolage' masculine identities (Leer 2016; Bridges & Pascoe 2014; Connell and Messerschimdt 2005).

Second, there is engagement in the more indirect activities associated with their children; these can include 'being there' while children engage in leisure pursuits, or attendance at 'formal events' such as school parent's evenings or sports days (Dermott 2008; Miller 2017; Gillies 2009). Middle-class fathering, then, is typically framed by engagement in 'visible' practices (Gillies 2009) and being an active presence in their children's lives (Finn & Henwood 2009; Miller 2011). Such practices, however, are arguably underpinned by specific cultural values, such as high educational attainment, which drive particular forms of involvement. As Gillies (2009) found when comparing accounts of middle- and working-class fathers, engagement with educational institutions was dictated by class-based dispositions and experiences. While middle-class fathers typically understood the cultural

values of such institutions, working-class fathers often felt out-of-place engaging with teachers and felt condescended to in conversations (Gillies 2009). Working-class fathers in Gillies (2009) work also tended to frame their role within ideals of what Lareau (2011) describes as the fulfilment of 'natural growth', emphasising practices of 'essential care' such as ensuring their children are warm, clean, and fed – priorities which are nonetheless difficult to achieve with limited material resources. Working-class fathering, then, can be characterised by greater engagement in the day-to-day practices of childcare, often 'interchanging' responsibilities with partners as variable employment patterns (such as shift work) are negotiated (Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Gillies 2009).

Broadly, men's employment patterns and long working hours culture in the UK remain significant influences in dictating the form and extent to fathers' involvement practices (Miller 2017; Dermott & Miller 2015; Gregory & Milner 2011). Fathering narratives often point to feelings of constraint resulting from these commitments, in turn, shaping father perspectives in terms of the value of the time spent with their children (Dermott 2008). Consequently, fatherhood research has demonstrated an enduring trend among fathers to prioritise 'father-child time' above other domestic responsibilities, including housework, spending their time in a range of 'outdoor' settings (Hochschild 2012; Dermott 2008; Miller 2017). As such, contributions by fathers to the 'second shift' of domestic labour appears to remain minimal and held to different standards and values to female partners (Hochschild 2012). While fathers typically express egalitarian values regarding the sharing of household tasks, this often masks *what* and *how* such labour is performed. Hochschild (2012), for example, highlights how fathers have greater control over their household contributions, engaging in 'DIY' tasks as and when they have time. Mothers, on the other hand, are tied into a "rigid routine", completing "daily jobs", such as cooking and cleaning, alongside childcare responsibilities (Hochschild 2012:8-9). Even when fathers do contribute to domestic labour, this is also often completed to minimal standards; as Lyonette and Crompton (2015) found, fathers are described as 'surface cleaners' who perform domestic tasks with minimal effort and must be *allocated* tasks and *instructed* on when and how to complete them (Miller 2018).

Subsequently, research suggests that the *responsibility* for managing and choreographing everyday family lives continues to fall primarily upon mothers. The key difference in this sense is that while fathers may engage in caring routines it is still mothers who are deemed as responsible for ensuring such tasks are completed (Oakley 2005; Lyonette & Crompton; Miller 2018). Ralph (2016) notes that in accounts of everyday parenting it is mothers who

take responsibility for the 'mental labour' of the home, such as checking if the children had brushed their teeth before school. Similarly, Hochschild (2012) observed how mothers took on the role of "time and motion expert", encouraging and instructing their children to 'finish their breakfast' or to 'hurry up' so that the days routines could be completed on time. In other words, it is mothers who, more often than not, take on the role of domestic co-ordinator or 'gatekeeper', taking responsibility for *knowing* what care needs must to be met and *ensuring* that such tasks are completed (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Hochschild 2012; Ralph 2016; Eerola et al 2021). Consequently, it is mothers who typically work longer hours, sleep less, engage in less leisure time, and experience greater feelings of guilt or worry than fathers (Hochschild 2012; Miller 2017; Walzer 1996; Hays 1996). While feminist research has sought to investigate such family arrangements and dynamics, it is only in recent years that fathers' own 'paternal gatekeeping' practices have been theorised; the ability of fathers to retain unequal divisions of labour through notions of assumed incompetence and distinctly masculine practices is under explored and thus requires further investigation (Miller 2018; Lyonette & Crompton 2015).

Summary and Discussion

A central focus of this chapter has ultimately been to address the theorisations and explanations for the emergence of 'new' forms of fathering ideals and practices. In the 30 or so years since Lewis and O'Brien's (1987) critique regarding the existence of the 'new father', social scientific research has demonstrated some alignments in the shifts between the cultural representations and social interactions of fathers. Changes in this sense have been dictated by a two-way process in which ideals can shape practice, and practice can shape ideals. This is evident, for example, in the increased engagement by fathers in practices of 'intensive parenting' as a result of political discourses emphasising the parental impact upon child development and future outcomes, or the declining influence of 'hapless father' discourses owing to fathers' demonstrations of caring competence in parental settings. It is also possible to trace an increasing identification by fathers with the ideals of challenging deep-rooted gendered trajectories, such as those promoted by the 'Dad 2.0' movement, championing egalitarian values and 'interchangeable' parental roles. What is key in this sense is that understandings, meanings, and practices of fatherhood in society are reflective of occurrences in both culture *and* conduct. But what is also clear here is that changes in ideals and practices take place against a backdrop of complex parental landscapes set within traditional contexts and newly emerging 'spaces'. Domestic contexts remain a key site within

which parental roles and responsibilities are navigated and understood, with fathers encountering a variety of challenges reflecting their cultural identifications in their fathering conduct, including structural (availability of paternity leave), discursive (gendered expectations), and biological (pregnancy/breastfeeding) barriers in pursuit of a caring role. Equally, fathers have sought to find new ways of navigating parental identities through spaces deemed as 'father-only', making sense of their role in distinctly paternal contexts.

Tracing these changes remains a key project for sociology and social sciences, as new questions emerge from tangible shifts in behaviour and ideals. As outlined in Chapter 1, this thesis specifically seeks to address and further our understandings of fatherhood *in context*, exploring the nuances of fathering interactions and the meanings interpreted within the different spaces and settings of the parental landscape. Questions regarding the values and practices of care are explored in these contexts, including the home, public settings, and 'father-only' spaces (i.e. 'dad groups'), observing how fathers navigate, perform, and give meaning to their caregiving. A central focus of this research, as such, are the various discursive, material, and spatial factors that fathers encounter in their everyday lives, accounting for the influence of gendered ideals and social class resources as part of this sense-making process, and are addressed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In the following chapter, however, questions regarding methodology and knowledge production are discussed in further detail. In particular, this chapter will seek to address how the application of innovative methodologies, utilising a combination of narrative and 'in-situ' approaches, can support in capturing contextualised understandings of fatherhood, accounting for both culture and conduct.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological approach adopted in the thesis is outlined, addressing issues and debates related to the theoretical framework and research design which underpin it. Firstly, issues and debates regarding social science philosophy are discussed, exploring contemporary approaches to knowledge and representation to establish the reflexive theoretical orientations of this project. Secondly, these debates are contextualised in relation to the use of ethnography as a research approach, outlining ethnographic practice and its application in the field of fatherhood research. Attention then turns to an outline of the research design, outlining the research aims and research questions, before discussing the methods of data collection and analysis utilised. Finally, ethical issues are addressed and discussed.

Theoretical Orientations: Knowledge, Representation, and Reflexivity

Over the past century, conceptualisations and understandings of social scientific research have shifted as a result of fervent debates regarding the nature and production of knowledge (Flick 2009; Blaikie 2007; Silverman 2014; Benton and Craib 2011). Underpinned by 'realist' traditions, social scientific research in the early 20th century was assumed to capture the nature of the social world unproblematically, drawing upon methods of experimentation or observation to understand social phenomena (Blaikie 2007; Benton and Craib 2011). Such ideals were evident in early 'naturalist' approaches to ethnography, in which ethnographers immersed themselves in social worlds to observe phenomena in their 'natural' settings (Hammersley 1992). A researcher's role here was to describe everyday interactions and talk to members of communities to understand underlying social processes, conventions, and norms (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Ethnographic methods, such as observations or conversations with inhabitants, were understood as tools for empirically revealing the character of those worlds. Ethnographic texts, the product of this interrogation, told a 'realist tale': a 'straightforward' account of the lives as lived, and the phenomena encountered (Plummer 2001).

However, the emergence of social constructionist and post-modernist philosophies from the 1960s onwards have provided the foundation for a necessary critical scrutiny of realist perceptions of 'truth', both ontologically and epistemologically (Smith & Elger 2012). With regards to the nature of 'being' in this sense, social constructionist approaches demand that taken-for-granted knowledge be challenged, such as feminist accounts of gender which

challenge biological and essentialist 'truths' that underpin unequal power relations (Burr 2015; Ellis-Sloan 2014). In this sense, social constructionism is claimed to be a powerful emancipatory tool for exposing regimes of power, identifying discursive and cultural ideals which shape conceptions and understandings of 'normality' and destabilising their ontological grounding (Burr 1998). As such, social constructionism, defined in its broadest sense, pertains to a relativist perception of reality, in that the social world is comprised of multiple perspectives, interpretations, and formations of knowledge – including accounts constructed through political discourses, media and cultural representations, and, perhaps most crucially, *social scientific research* (Burr 2015; Gubrium & Holstein 2003; Holstein & Gubrium 2008).

The work of social scientists, then, has not been shielded from social constructionist critiques regarding the nature of knowledge; the supposed scientific 'authority' and 'voice' of the researcher is granted no special power and value within post-modernist and social constructionist philosophy (O'Reilly 2009; Gubrium & Holstein 2003; Plummer 2001). Yet, as Burr (1998) explains, the very emancipatory power of social constructionism also represents a crucial limitation for social scientists. While the notion of multiple conceptualisations of phenomena can allow for harmful and restrictive categories to be challenged and resisted – such as constructions of gender, race, and sexuality – by removing a foundational base to this 'being', social constructionism denies inequality a legitimate reality. As Burr (2015:27) summarises, "[i]f all accounts of the world are equally valid, then we appear deprived of defensible grounds for our moral choices and political allegiances." So, in other words, just as harmful conceptualisations can be challenged through accounts of suffering and marginalisation, so too can this experience be denied by accounts pertaining to regimes of power (Burr 1998; Ellis-Sloan 2014). What we find then, as a result of social constructionist critiques of knowledge, is that the ontological and epistemological 'security' and 'certainty' of realist methodologies, has been replaced by a post-modern "unreliability and unpredictability" or a 'crisis' of representation (England 2009:243; Gubrium & Holstein 2003). Subsequently, to allow for tangible political action and social change, social scientific accounts are deemed to require a means of reaffirming an empirical authority to knowledge; a means of legitimising and validating social scientific accounts, while also acknowledging the socially constructed nature of this knowledge (Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Doucet & Mauthner 2008). As such, contemporary social scientific research relating to qualitative

methods has, as such, sought to adopt and incorporate principles of reflexivity into research practice.

Reflexivity can be defined, in its most narrow or simplistic sense, as "analytic attention to the researcher's role in qualitative research" (Dowling 2006:8). It is the process of acknowledging that the researcher is not a value-free, objective 'lens' through which phenomena can be observed, but rather performing an interpretive role in the analysis and construction of social scientific knowledge and is thus 'present' within social scientific 'texts' (Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Braun & Clarke 2020). The purpose of reflexive practice, therefore, is to make transparent the 'craftpersonship' of research methodologies and account for the working practices as part of the production of knowledge (Letherby 2002). However, such accounts involve reflexive attention across different levels of research methodologies (Dowling 2006; Pillow 2003). Reflexive practice, as such, can range from choices and justification of data collection methods, practical issues and challenges within research design, and moral and ethical considerations. Entwined in the process, however, is an acknowledgement of the researcher's ontological and epistemological standpoints and assumptions – the theoretical tools used to interpret and provide meaning to data (Dunne et al 2005). This involves a careful consideration of the social scientific philosophies, discourses, or 'paradigms' through which knowledge is produced. For Bourdieu, reflexivity is regarded as a process of 'turning' the analytic tools of social science onto itself: a means of "objectivising one's own universe" to critically observe relations of power and the function of social scientific knowledge (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:68).

These philosophical debates regarding the nature of knowledge ultimately impart significant consequences on the practice of research and data collection. The foundation of knowledge can no longer simply be taken for granted, and thus requires reflexive engagement on the part of the researcher, involving practices of reflection, introspection, and examination of the processes through which knowledge is produced. The central aim of this chapter, as such, is to make explicit the methodological tools utilised in the design and conduct of this study, consider the philosophical meanings and assumptions in the production of knowledge of fatherhood, and acknowledge my own subjectivity and experiences of the world in the formation of interpretations. In the following section, key principles regarding ethnographic practice are addressed in relation to this study, discussing the means by which knowledge of fatherhood can be represented by ethnographic methods.

Ethnography: Principles, Practices, and Fatherhood

A key aim underpinning this research is to develop social scientific understandings of fatherhood in 'context', exploring how the spaces, settings, and geographical localities of fathering, such as the home, parenting services, or outdoor spaces, subsequently shape both the meanings of fatherhood and the conduct of fathers themselves. The context of fatherhood, then, refers to several social, cultural, and material influences which combine to structure and define plausible fathering interactions. These include cultural and discursive assumptions of parental and gendered 'norms' (Dermott & Miller 2015; Lee 2014; Faircloth 2014) alongside material and embodied factors, such as social class, ethnicity, and sexuality, which can shape everyday circumstances and responsibilities (Vespa 2009; Williams 2008; Gillies 2009; Doucet 2006; Miller 2011). As explored later in this chapter, the study of fatherhood must account for the dual processes of culture and conduct, or discourse and practice, in defining the normative roles and responsibilities of fathers, and thus requires an innovative methodological approach which can capture both the cultural expectations and motivations alongside the material and geographical factors which define everyday fatherhood. As will be outlined below, this research employs the principles and methods of ethnography to explore the contextual nuances of fatherhood and to understand the position of fatherhood within the complex milieu of everyday life.

The selection of an ethnographic methodology, then, is founded upon the relation between the principles and practices of ethnography and the key aims of this research. In broad terms, ethnography is defined by the researcher's close locality to the social worlds under investigation, participating, experiencing, and observing social conventions and interactions firsthand or 'in-situ' (O'Reilly 2012; Flick 2009). Knowledge and understanding, in this sense, is developed through the empirical value of 'being there' and encountering events and practices in context (Skeggs 1997; 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). As such, ethnography shares the broad ideals of qualitative research inquiry, as researchers interpret and understand human experience within the "fabric of everyday life" (Silverman 2014:230). For Back (2015:822), the practice of ethnography subsequently requires an "attentiveness to what is easily discarded as unimportant"; a focus upon the mundane or inconsequential facets of interaction which define one's being. Accordingly, ethnographic methodologies, as Wissö (2018) explains, offers fatherhood researchers an attention to *contextual detail* that other methods cannot capture as effectively. In Wissö's (2018) research, ethnographic methods – such as participant observations or guided 'city walks' – provided access to fathers'

experiences of poverty and deprivation. Not only did these methods account for the fathers' meanings in these contexts, but also their interactions within them. Wissö (2018:102) summarises that ethnography holds particular value in relation to social space and geographical locality of fathering, arguing that it "can be productive in fatherhood research as a means of understanding fatherhood in a social and cultural context". It is this eye for contextual detail which I feel most applies to the aims of this study (outlined further below).

Wissö's (2018) work also alerts us to the broad array of ethnographic methods that can be employed in the study of fatherhood. Participant observations, for example, allow for an exploration of the environments in which fathering is practised, allowing for rich, detailed accounts to be produced. Equally, ethnography allows for the perspectives and perceptions of participants to be captured through informal conversations or more standardized interview methods, providing informed commentaries and explanations of events, encounters, and interactions (O'Reilly 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). While this may imply that fathering contexts can be accessed from an objective and value-free methodological standpoint, contemporary ethnographic approaches seek to provide the reflexive tools to account for the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher and their role in the construction of knowledge (Flick 2009; Skeggs 2001; O'Reilly 2009; Pillow 2003).

Drawing upon feminist and Bourdieusian scholarship, contemporary ethnography seeks to produce a more robust and reflexive form of social theorizing which accounts for both the socially constructed foundation to knowledge alongside the material conditions of existence (Willis & Trondman 2000; Bourdieu & Waquant 1992; Skeggs 1997). A strong reflexive foundation to the research process is a necessary and essential quality in the context of social constructionist perceptions of 'truth', providing a sense of methodological 'authority' in light of the post-modernist crisis of representation, as outlined above (Burr 1998). Broadly, a reflexive ethnography – an approach which is transparent in its processes and assumptions – arguably adopts critical realist perspectives which allows for material conditions to be represented in ways which withstand post-modernist scrutiny. Here, social action is acknowledged as existing within external social structures and relations which can be accessed through *interpretive processes* providing representations of this action rather than 'mirror reflections' (Smith & Elger 2012; Miller & Glassner 2011). Such forms of critical realist knowledge are reflexive in that subjective and intersectional foundations to interpretations are acknowledged, i.e. the biographies and dispositions of both researchers and participants (Skeggs 1997). In relation to fatherhood research then, a reflexive

ethnographic approach can account for the role of both discourse and practice in the social construction of fatherhood, identifying the influence of cultural norms and expectations alongside the practical, embodied, and intersectional experiences of the roles and responsibilities encountered in daily life (Wissö 2018; Skeggs 1997; Vespa 2009).

When compared to previous fatherhood research projects, this focus upon material and cultural contexts 'in-situ' represents an innovative and unique approach to understanding the perceptions and practices of fatherhood (Gorman-Murray & Hopkins 2014). While fatherhood scholarship has historically employed qualitative methods, these have privileged interview-based approaches which utilise narrative accounts of fathering (Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Miller 2018b). While narrative accounts can be analysed 'biographically' and founded upon lived experience (Smith & Elger 2012; Chamberlayne et al 2000; Brannen & Nilsen 2006; Merrill & West 2009), they also more readily reflect *idealised* accounts of fathering practice, presenting fatherhood in relation to the narrator's desired impressions (Reissman 2008). Such insights are useful as part of discursive analysis to identify valued traits and practices; however, particular issues and challenges or even the seemingly mundane everyday practices of fatherhood are easily overlooked in such accounts. This is problematic in the context of government and policy representations of parenting in which material resources and circumstances are downplayed as contributing factors in parenting practice (Allen 2011; Field 2010; Gillies et al 2017; Dermott & Pomati 2016). As such, accounting for the role of the material is an important and necessary aspect in theorising and understanding fatherhood, interpreting through participation in parenting contexts how social structures and material conditions can mediate the conduct of everyday practices. This nuance in understandings of fatherhood demonstrates why contextual detail is of value alongside the meanings and perceptions produced within narrative accounts.

Methods

As an approach to social research, ethnography is acknowledged among social scientists as comprising a series of data collection methods including, but not limited to, observations of phenomena or settings, conversations and interviews with members of communities, audio and visual elicitation, and the collection of archival documents (Bryman 2004; O'Reilly 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Within this study, three forms of research method were utilised in the data collection process: (a) participant observations at three father-only playgroups or 'dad groups'; (b) qualitative interviews with fathers and dad group stakeholders; (c) go-along interviews with fathers and their children. Within this section,

these research methods are outlined and defined, considering the key features of each method, alongside a discussion of the methodological limitations and challenges encountered during the research process.

Participant Observations

As the primary method of data collection in ethnographic approaches, participant observations are often regarded as synonymous with ethnography (O'Reilly 2009). As Bryman explains, this is due to similarities in definition, whereby "the participant observer/ethnographer immerses him- or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions" (2004:292). What is emphasised in this case, however, is the process and purpose of participant observation in the context of this study. Participant observations were utilised as a means of accessing, at first-hand, the experiences of fathers within the distinct setting of a 'dad group'. While this involved informal conversations with attendees at these groups, the primary aim was to observe, record, and ultimately make sense of the interactions and practices of the fathers within these settings. This required, as Madden (2010) outlines, utilising and developing the qualities of the observational "gaze". In a broad sense, such qualities refer to the ability to watch and make note of one's surroundings, however, this is not quite so simple in practice. Angrosino (2007) notes that effective observations require an attentiveness to the nuanced details of a field setting that are often overlooked in everyday practice, such as body language or tone of voice.

This means accounting for two key domains within the setting. The first domain is what Madden (2010) refers to as the 'structural' elements or the 'where' of the events, encounters, or phenomena. Here the participant observer will make sense of the physical or material surroundings as part of a process of 'place-making'; this involves forming descriptions of the location and wider surroundings, alongside the content of the space (Madden 2010). As part of my participant observations, I sought to produce detailed notes of the dad group settings, describing the layout of the spaces alongside an account of the available activities. The second domain refers to the behavioural aspects within the settings, describing the interactions of the inhabitants. Broadly this meant observing what the attending fathers did during each session, how they engaged in the activities and how they interacted with their children and other fathers. The aim in this sense is to use observation as a tool for capturing the norms, values, and conventions of the setting, highlighting acceptable, plausible, and possible practice (Madden 2010). Ultimately, the aim of participant observation is to develop

a ‘thick description’ of the ethnographic field which captures the routine and culture of the space (O’Reilly 2012; Bryman 2004).

The perspectives and interpretations generated through observations are, however, intrinsically tied to the level of participation within, or membership of, the community under study (Angrosino 2007; O’Reilly 2009). Traditionally, the degree of participation in a field-setting has been determined using Gold’s conceptualisation of research positions – the complete participant, the participant-as-observer, the observer-as-participant, and the complete observer (cited in Bryman 2004) – however, in recent years, participation has been conceptualised in terms of *membership*. As Angrosino (2007) outlines, membership of a community can be defined in three ways: peripheral, active, or complete. Peripheral membership means that researchers will engage and interact with the inhabitants of the settings, building rapport and developing insider status, but will not participate in the core values and practices of the community. Researchers with active membership *will* engage in core practices but seek to maintain an objective distance from core values, while those with complete membership are engaged members of the community, often advocating the principles of the community.

Given my status as a non-father, my membership and participation in the dad groups was always limited or peripheral. In terms of the insider-outsider research dynamic (Griffith 1998; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009), I occupied an outsider status due to my lack of intimate knowledge or experience of performing fatherhood. By not having a child accompany me, I felt an absence in my connection to the fathers, the common similarity that linked the other members. While I could perhaps relate to the members of the community from the vantage point of our shared biographical similarities (such as age and gender), it was often the case that my observations, interpretations and perspectives stemmed from a position of the unknown – the intricacies and practices of fathering were alien in this sense and contributed to my own feelings of awkwardness when interacting with the fathers. However, this status, in many ways, allowed for a more explicit awareness of tacit agreements, and the routinely unremarked upon, mundane or overlooked aspects of fathering in these settings, drawing attention to practices that might have otherwise been ignored (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009).

However, this outsider or peripheral status also developed a degree of tension during periods of observations. As my ability to participate in the activities of the groups were limited, I often felt like I was occupying a position of a detached observer, simultaneously blending

into the background while also defying the social conventions of the settings. Observing the interactions during the sessions felt intrusive or 'voyeuristic', imposing myself upon intimate encounters between fathers and their children. Although the fathers were courteous when sharing brief conversations, their body language implied a sense of discomfort or unwillingness to engage beyond small talk (see Chapter 6 for further analysis). As Scott and colleagues (2012) discuss, this led to feelings of shyness, self-consciousness, and ultimately a reluctance to engage with the fathers. My perceptions and perspectives, then, were often developed on the fringes of the action, observing the interactions at a distance. While allowing for the production of descriptive and detailed fieldnote accounts, these perhaps lacked the intimate or subjective knowledge drawn out of immersive or participatory experience.

Qualitative Interviews

The 'qualitative interview' is a broad term used to refer to a range of face-to-face, conversational methods including semi- or unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic interviews (Bryman 2004; Oakley 2005; Madden 2010). These approaches to interviewing share many key characteristics. Firstly, they seek to present opportunities for the participants to express, discuss, or outline their thoughts or perspectives on the research topic (Bryman 2004). This is based on the principle that individuals hold the ability and authority to express their understandings of the world around them and the experiences they encounter (Arendell 1997). While this knowledge is by no means infallible, it provides insights, interpretations, and perspectives on the subject matter. Qualitative approaches, then, are typically more flexible with regards to interview structure, allowing participants to veer off into tangents, providing the opportunity to discuss the topic matter in ways that are meaningful to them (Bryman 2004). These types of interviews also tend to encourage narrative or biographical accounts of phenomena, as participants share and recount storied perspectives of their experiences (Reissman 2008; Brannen & Nilsen 2006). Ultimately, the aim of qualitative interviews is to access accounts on the participant's terms, in which their perspectives are treated with respect and are appreciated (Oakley 2005).

The aim of the qualitative interviews utilised in this study was to provide access to the perceptions and interpretations of fatherhood, both from the perspectives of fathers themselves, as well as from stakeholders from the three dad groups accessed as part of participant observations. The interviews conducted with fathers sought to access the participants experiences of everyday family life, with a specific focus upon domestic

relations and organisations of childcare responsibilities. An interview schedule was formulated outlining four key areas of discussion: everyday domestic routines; time spent with their children; parental social networks; and the future of fatherhood (this fourth topic was an optional discussion point and only discussed in one interview). These topics took the form of key words or phrases, acting as prompts rather than direct questions, to allow for a degree of flexibility within the interview encounter (Bryman 2004). Following an initial invitation to describe their everyday experiences of fathering and family life, the interviews took on an informal or conversational tone, as the fathers discussed and narrated a range of topics such as childcare tasks, day trips (both alone and with partners), ante-natal experiences, domestic duties, and work commitments. As such, while each interview shared similar starting points, the content of the discussion was dictated by the participants' meanings and understandings of different parental encounters.

By way of comparison, the interviews conducted with dad group stakeholders were purposefully more structured. The interview schedule in these cases was used more rigidly, containing direct questions rather than broad topics for discussion. The aim of these interviews was two-fold. Firstly, the interviews were designed to develop an understanding of the format of the groups and the service they aimed to provide to fathers, so involved questions regarding the organisation and planning of the sessions, as well as questions relating to the stakeholder's experiences of working with fathers. Secondly, the interviews sought to access the stakeholder perspectives of fatherhood as a cultural phenomenon, exploring the ways that fatherhood was socially constructed within these specific settings. In this sense, fatherhood was discussed as a social and cultural ideal, as opposed to an everyday practice.

Go-along Interviews

In recent years, a growing number of social scientists have adopted mobile methods as a means of capturing the relationship between self and place, situating understandings and perspectives within specific contexts (Jones et al 2008). The application of such methods have broadly utilised a 'walk and talk' approach in which interviews are conducted 'on the move'; such approaches include 'walking interviews', guided 'city walks', ethnographic 'hang outs', and – as utilised in this study – 'go-along interviews' (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009; Evans & Jones 2011). While these approaches broadly share similar characteristics and aims, what is distinctive about the 'go-along' method is the sense of everydayness which is weaved into the approach. Described as a "hybrid between participant

observation and interviewing", go-along interviews involve a researcher accompanying participants on trips they would normally take, exploring familiar environments to capture 'authentic' experiences and perceptions of the participants (Kusenbach 2003:463).

In practice, then, researchers are taken on a guided 'tour' of specific places or spaces which are significant to the participant as part of their everyday routines (Carpiano 2009). During 'go-alongs', participants are invited to discuss or narrate their experiences and perceptions of the space, with key features of the environment serving as potential prompts for discussion (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009). The researcher is also able to capture specific interactions of participants within these spaces, observing how these are navigated and manoeuvred. What is unique about the go-along method then, as Kusenbach (2003:463 original emphasis) explains, is that it enables researchers to "observe their informants' spatial practices *in situ* while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time". In other words, a researcher can access not only the specific meanings of place, as recounted by participants, but also how participants act or behave within these spaces (Wissö 2018).

Unlike traditional qualitative interviewing, the go-along interview provides access to specific encounters in space and place, capturing 'moments' of practice that might otherwise be overlooked during traditional interview encounters. The in-situ nature of the method, in this sense, allows access to 'impromptu' encounters located outside of the interview context (Kusenbach 2003). Such encounters in this study, for example, included interactions with other actors in the space, such as participant's children or other parents, with these encounters, in turn, stimulating related discussions. Fundamentally, the content and structure of go-along interviews is dictated by the everyday social interactions and dynamics of the space as navigated there and then, meaning that interviews are largely unstructured and undirected, retaining only a rather broad connection to the subject matter at hand (Carpiano 2009).

However, for this project, the go-along method was still employed as a research tool, first and foremost, designed to fulfil underlying research aims. As such, go-along interviews in this study were conducted in conjunction with a topic guide, similar to that outlined for the qualitative interviews above. The go-along interviews were employed to explore three broad topics: (a) the significance of the location, (b) the organisation and planning required when making the trip, and (c) the experience of being 'in-place'. Each topic served as a form of prompt to direct discussion with the fathers as and when necessary, such as during lulls in

conversation. In most cases, however, our discussions tended to revolve around these topics more organically, with the fathers relating to these topics without being prompted to do so.

Methods Rationale

As outlined in Chapter 1, this research is guided by three research questions. Firstly, this research aims to explore the impact of discursive constructions of fatherhood in shaping idealised fathering identities alongside mediations of fathers' practical and hands-on conduct. Secondly, the variety of different spaces, places, and contexts of fathering will be explored to develop understandings of how parental landscapes are navigated by fathers, tracing both perceived norms and values as well as fathers' embodied 'movements' within these settings. Finally, this research seeks to investigate the role of embodied resources, such as masculine values, in shaping fathering ideals and facilitating practice across parental contexts. As noted above, an ethnographic methodology was identified as an appropriate approach to fulfil the aims of this project, utilising a variety of methods to capture and analyse both the perspectives, perceptions, and meanings of fathers alongside observations of fathering practice within 'in-situ' contexts. Further detail on the justification and integration of the methods used is discussed briefly below, outlining how these contribute to the fulfilment of the research questions and aims.

When taken broadly, the aims of this research seek to engage with the nuance and complexity with which the meanings and practices of fatherhood are defined. In Chapter 2, such definitions were outlined, exploring how fatherhood is shaped and mediated by cultural discourses and ideologies in conjunction with the circumstantial realities formed by the social structures and material conditions present within parental contexts. The complexity within this definition, as such, necessitated the application of research methods which could account for both the macro (culture, discourse, structure) and micro (conduct, embodiment, agency) determining processes mediating fatherhood understandings. The combination of methods utilised in this research, in turn, offers unique perspectives or 'vantage points' from which to assess and analyse these processes. Participant observations, in this sense, can be seen to engage primarily with micro processes, focusing upon specific contextualised encounters and the performance of fathering in practice. In contrast, qualitative interviews take as a starting point the broader macro processes, engaging with the reflections and interpretations of fathers across a variety of contexts. What is unique about the go-along method, however, is that it can provide a link between micro and macro processes, allowing for perspectives to be generated in-situ as social action occurs. Ultimately, this mixed method approach is

beneficial in that a rich and nuanced data set can be produced, accounting for the dual processes of culture and conduct in shaping fatherhood definitions.

Fieldwork: Conduct, Participants, and Procedure

As an ethnographic study utilising a mixed methods approach, several practical issues were encountered while planning fieldwork and data collection. In this section, details of the fieldwork process are outlined, discussing firstly the arrangements and organisation of participant observations at three 'dad groups', followed by details of the recruitment process and sample for go-along and semi-structured interviews. Secondly, the types of data collected in this study are outlined, discussing the process of constructing both observational and interview data.

Participant Observations: Access and Field

Identifying and negotiating access to field sites represents an initial practical challenge for researchers conducting participant observations (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). As noted above, a key aim of this study was to explore the various contexts, settings, or spaces in which fathering practice and development of fathering identity takes place. Reviews of fatherhood literature identified several 'contexts' in which such negotiations take place, including domestic spaces (Miller 2011; Gorman-Murray 2017), leisure activities (Kay 2009; Such 2006; Buswell et al 2012), and more recently within 'father-only' groups and services (Potter & Carpenter 2010; Dolan 2014). This latter context was of particular sociological interest given the limited research conducted within such 'father-only' or paternal spaces located in early years settings, and were, as such, identified as a key focus for ethnographic investigation.

Preliminary online searches of early years services highlighted a multitude of parenting groups run within local council settings and community centres, offering a variety of child-oriented activities, such as music groups, stay-and-play groups, and reading groups. While primarily aimed at 'parents' or 'mothers', two groups advertised via the local council website were aimed solely at fathers, known informally as 'dad groups'. These groups, termed Dads Play and Dads Sing for purposes of confidentiality, were identified as potential field sites for participant observations; a third site – Dads Together – was recommended by a PhD colleague. Details of these groups are outlined in the table below.

Table 1.1	Setting	Stakeholders	No. Sessions Attended	No. Attendees (Fathers only)
Dads Sing	Library	Jessica (Lead stakeholder) Hugh (Session facilitator)	5	25-30
Dads Play	Children's Centre	Sue (Lead stakeholder) Mary (Session facilitator) Simon (Session facilitator)	12	20-25
Dads Together	Community Centre	Martin (Lead stakeholder)	5	15-20

Once the dad groups were identified, contact details for lead stakeholders were garnered through the local council website and advertisement posters for the events. Permission to access the groups was initially sought through telephone and email correspondence with lead stakeholders, in which the research aims and objectives were outlined and information sheets provided. The granting of access to Dads Sing and Dads Together sessions was a relatively simple process, with the lead stakeholders, Jessica and Martin, contacted via telephone through which an informal meeting was arranged. Both were keen and enthusiastic about supporting the project, and dates were arranged for observations to take place. Access to Dads Play, however, was somewhat trickier to organise as both telephone and email correspondence were mediated via the Children's Centre office, meaning I did not initially have direct contact with the lead stakeholder. After several unanswered calls and emails, I was able to arrange a meeting in which permission to conduct observations was granted.

Participant observations were conducted at the three dad groups between the period of October 2018 to December 2019. Sessions for each of the dad groups were run once a month on alternating Saturdays; Dads Play was scheduled for the first Saturday on the month, with Dads Sing and Dads Together running on the second and fourth Saturday respectively. In total, 24 sessions were attended – 12 at Dads Play and 5 each at Dads Sing and Dads Together. While all broadly child-orientated in nature, the format of each group differed in

terms of content and structure, providing different activities and using the available space in varied ways. Key features of the field sites for each group are outlined in more detail below.

Dads Sing

Dads Sing sessions took place in the children's area of a large public library, located in the town centre of a city in South-East England. Situated at the back of the library, the children's area was a warm and welcoming environment, with shelves of children's books bordering communal spaces used to host a number of library events, including Dads Sing. During the sessions, sofas and chairs were arranged around a large circular rug, accommodating the 25-30 fathers in attendance. Each session lasted around 30 minutes, and involved the children and fathers being led in a rendition of several traditional nursery rhymes by Hugh, the group facilitator, who played several different instruments and performed different actions for the children to copy. The sessions followed a similar structure each month, with Hugh performing a set list of songs. The facilitator-led format of the group meant that I was more observer than participant which limited my ability to interact with the attending fathers during the sessions, however, I was able to engage with some of the fathers at the end of the sessions. In total, I attended 5 sessions, owing in part to limited opportunities for participation.

Dads Play

Located just outside the city centre in the vicinity of a nearby housing estate, Dads Play sessions took place on the second floor of a Children's Centre. As the pseudonym implies, the sessions took on a 'stay-and-play' format. Running for 2 hours in the morning, a variety of activities were provided across 3 designated areas which I have termed the soft-play room, the craft room, and the garden. Both the soft-play room and the garden allowed for physical and active play; the soft-play room in particular contained a host of physical activities including a ball pit and an enclosed padded area. The craft room, in contrast, catered to more imaginative and creative play, with crafting activities such as painting or model building, and a role-play kitchen area. Each session was attended by 20-25 fathers, creating a bustling and chaotic atmosphere. The session activities were planned and organised by two facilitators, Mary and Simon, while the lead stakeholder Sue oversaw their 'toy library' service and provided snacks and drinks. This 'free play' structure meant I was able to take on a more participatory role, supporting the group facilitators in setting up and supporting the activities during the sessions. My supporting role allowed for some engagement and interaction with

the attending fathers, however, this was often fleeting as their children demanded their full attention. Of the three groups I attended, my fieldwork was the most prolonged at Dads Play, attending 12 sessions over a period of 14 months.

Dads Together

The format of the group at Dads Together was similar to that at Dads Play: a drop-in, stay-and-play session, running for two hours in the morning in the hall of a local community centre. One significant difference, however, was that Dads Together placed a greater emphasis on providing activities which appealed to both children *and* their fathers. While the activities at Dads Play were more child-orientated, Dads Together sought to provide novel activities and workshops designed to entertain fathers and children alike; some of the sessions I attended, for example, included workshops for lantern-making, Halloween-inspired make-up effects, and bottle rocket making. The area at the back of the hall was typically reserved for these workshops, where tables and chairs were laid out. The front of the hall was kept open, allowing space for the children to play with the toys and games provided. These were laid out on two large, multi-coloured 'parachutes' and contained a selection of cars, action figures, and plastic animals, while other boxes contained building blocks and a train set. A table in the corner was also set up for crafting activities, with pens, pencils, paper and other stationery provided. As with Dads Play, I performed a facilitative role during the sessions, helping to set up the workshops by carrying props, rearranging tables, and running errands[1]. I attended 5 sessions in total, including 4 sessions between September and December 2019. Prior to this time, the sessions were held as 'one-off' events, often clashing with my observations at Dads Sing or Dads Play.

Qualitative and Go-along Interviews: Sample and Procedure

Across both qualitative and go-along interviews, a total of eleven fathers voluntarily participated in this study. The sample was predominantly white, heterosexual, and from lower- to upper-middle class backgrounds (reflections of this sample are outlined in further detail below). Ten of the fathers were either married to or co-habiting with the mother of their child(ren) – one father was granted custody of his child following a separation from his child's mother. A variety of work and care arrangements were evident in the sample, with

[1] This included one occasion in which I was required to run to the local supermarket to purchase several tubs of sweets and chocolates as prizes for parlour games!

nine fathers in employment, one father completing a postgraduate degree, and one stay-at-home-father. Of the nine fathers in employment, four worked traditional full-time hours, while one father worked a variable shift pattern, and another father worked away from home 3 days a week. Two fathers worked 4-day weeks, both dedicating their non-working day to care responsibilities. Finally, one father worked part-time, 2 days a week. Participant details are outlined in table 1.2 below (pseudonyms have been used in all cases).

Table 1.2	Age	Children	Occupational Status	Working Structure	Interview Participation
Colin	45+	One son and one daughter (Oliver and Annabel)	Stay-at-home father	n/a	Semi-structured interview
Dylan	18-29	One daughter (Caitlin)	Video editor	Full time	Go-along and semi-structured interview
George	30-34	One daughter (Emma)	Call centre supervisor	4-day week	Go-along and semi-structured interview
Graham	35-49	One daughter (Lauren)	Retail supervisor	Shift work	Semi-structured interview
Harry	40-44	One daughter and one son (Margot and Jack)	Student	Away at university 3 days a week	Semi-structured interview
Jonathan	18-29	One daughter (Ava)	Management	Full time	Semi-structured interview
Neil	45+	One son and one daughter (Connor and Lucy)	Retail management	Full time	Semi-structured interview

Patrick	40-44	Two daughters (Luna and Lily)	Self-employed	4-day week	Semi-structured interview
Stewart	30-35	One son (Freddie)	Management	3-days away from home; 2-days home working	Go-along interview
Tom	35-39	One step-daughter, one adoptive son, and one son (Penny, Adam, and Ben)	Retail operative	Full time	Semi-structured interview
Zack	18-29	One son (Buddy)	Hairdresser	Part time (2 days a week)	Go-along interview

While this sample of fathers presents some diversity in terms of the forms of employment and working structures, the perspectives and perceptions of these fathers are arguably reflective of a particular set of cultural values, material conditions, and social backgrounds which do not represent the experiences of all fathers. The formation of this sample was not an active choice in the research process but was rather an unintended consequence of access issues encountered during participant recruitment. As part of my original recruitment strategy, I had intended on using convenience sampling methods at the three dad groups to recruit fathers from a range of social class and ethnic backgrounds. Given the material and economic diversity of the surrounding areas within which the dad groups were located[2], issues regarding access to different demographics and social backgrounds of fathers had not been fully anticipated. Yet, when I began observing in these groups, I found that they were all predominantly attended by white, middle-class fathers, somewhat limiting my scope for recruitment. Reflecting upon this circumstance, the predominance of this particular demographic of dad group attendees was possibly influenced by the scheduling of the sessions. As noted in Chapter 2, middle-class family dynamics and responsibilities means that father-child time is typically reserved for 'pockets' of time such as weekends (Miller

[2] The Children's Centre which ran Dads Play, for instance, was located in what was considered to be one of the most deprived and disadvantaged areas in the city, providing support for a number of vulnerable families, including "refugees, asylum seekers, and lone parents" (Sue – Dads Play Stakeholder).

2017; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Gillies 2009); as such, it is perhaps the case that the Saturday morning scheduling of these groups was more suitable to the availability and caring responsibilities of middle-class fathers with more conventional weekday working patterns, with the groups offering an appealing activity to attend with their children.

In addition, my use of dad groups as part of my recruitment strategy was perhaps also impacted by my own positionality, with my biographical characteristics (age, gender, social background) potentially influencing how I was perceived within these spaces. For example, my convenience sampling within the dad groups yielded two participants for go-along and semi-structured interviews (Jonathan and Dylan), with whom I shared many similar characteristics, such as a shared interest in sports and leisure endeavours, as well as sharing similar social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, including age, education, and place of birth or residence. In this sense, we shared very similar life experiences and dispositions, which provided a sense of comfort and familiarity during conversations, ultimately supporting the development of rapport. Yet, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, I typically encountered a perceived sense of reticence among many of the other (slightly older) fathers in attendance, with conversations rarely developing beyond casual small talk.

These challenges regarding the development of rapport meant adapting my original recruitment strategy, utilising convenience and snowball sampling methods across wider social networks. Four fathers (George, Patrick, Harry, and Zack) were introduced to me via shared social contacts and were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. A further five fathers (Graham, Neil, Stewart, Colin, and Tom) were then contacted using snowballing methods through the original four participants. As such, this sample of fathers was derived from a network of contacts from within a specific set of contextual circumstances with shared familial and parental experiences which do not reflect the experiences of *all fathers* (for example, gay or trans fathers). This is not to suggest that the experiences and perspectives of this sample of fathers are no less meaningful, rather that they are not universal or homogeneous representations of fatherhood.

In total, seven fathers participated in semi-structured interviews, two participated in go-along interviews, and two participated in both semi-structured and go-along interviews. The fathers were initially contacted via email or *WhatsApp* through which arrangements for interviews were organised. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a location of the father's choosing, allowing them to select a place in which they felt comfortable and convenient for their schedule. Three interviews were conducted in the participant's homes, one at the

participant's workplace, and the remaining five were conducted in coffee shops or cafes. All interviews were recorded, with permission, using an audio-recorder and later transcribed. The duration of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours.

For the go-along interviews, permission was requested to accompany the fathers on a trip or outing that they would normally take with their child. In all four cases, the fathers chose to take a trip to their local park; arrangements were made to meet at a suitable location, from which I accompanied the participating father and their child to the park. Interviews were conducted both during this journey and while at the parks; while the route there was defined, our route around the parks were much more meandering and improvised. All interviews were recorded, with permission, using an audio-recorder, which was held between myself and the participant to capture our responses. The interviews lasted between 1-2 hours, with audio-recordings later transcribed and fieldnotes produced.

Defining the Data

Over the duration of their research, social scientists will produce a variety of 'written accounts' which capture events, experiences and phenomena. The process of data collection, in other words, can be regarded as the transformation of social action into textual forms (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Dunne et al 2005). Following the reflexive 'turn' in the late twentieth century, social scientists have been encouraged to trace this process of action to text, accounting for the various methodological choices, assumptions, and interactions in the construction of data and the subsequent knowledge claims these represent (O'Reilly 2009; Mauthner & Doucet 2003; Letherby 2002). The use of observational and interview methods as part of this study means that two forms of knowledge production have been utilised, producing different forms of data which are situated within specific research contexts and practices. As outlined below, two forms of data have been produced: (a) in-situ data produced through observations and fieldnotes, and (b) elicited data produced through interview encounters and transcriptions.

Observational Data

Drawing upon the work of Ricœur (1991), Dunne and colleagues (2005) suggest that the process of transforming in-situ observations and experiences into textualized fieldnotes is itself akin to forms of imitation or 'mimesis'. Taken from the Ancient Greek notion of how "art imitates life", the process of mimesis has been extended to explain how social scientists seek to "make sense out of action" through their research (Dunne et al 2005:57). This sense-

making process of mimesis takes three forms (Ricœur 1991; Dunne et al 2005). This first form – 'mimesis 1' – refers to the experiences navigating and negotiating phenomena within the field, or what can broadly be described as the sense of 'being there' (Dunne et al 2005; Flick 2009). What is key, in this sense, is that as a researcher, one actively applies a 'scholarly gaze' in the field, transforming what are typically ephemeral interactions and ascribing social scientific meaning through recognition of the event (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Social action, in other words, comes to be represented in the social scientific interpretations of the researcher.

In relation to my fieldwork within dad groups, I entered the field with a series of aims and motivations which narrowed the focus of my observations. Following the approach outlined by Emerson and colleagues (2001 & 2011), I sought to acknowledge the physical setting – the size of the rooms, the colours, the layout, the activities on offer – alongside the interactions within this space. Here I focused upon the way the fathers and children navigated the space – who led who – and how they interacted together and with other group members. After several sessions, I began to look closer at the micro interactions of the group members (Emerson at al 2011), in particular the fathers' intimate and tactile practices with their children, such as cuddling and soothing, and their body language around other fathers, such as how they shaped their body to initiate or avoid conversation.

The second form of imitation – 'mimesis 2' – relates to the strategies for recording these observations, such as through fieldnotes. The production of my fieldnotes followed a three-stage process. While in the field, I firstly sought to produce 'scratch-notes', jotting down key words or phrases into my smartphone device to act as mnemonics when producing more detailed accounts after leaving the field (Madden 2010; Emerson et al 2011). These notes were often recorded in private spaces – kitchens, quiet hallways, or bathrooms – as to avoid feelings of intrusion or discomfort among the attendees (Emerson et al 2001). Secondly, at the end of a session in the field, these scratch-notes were used to support audio-recorded accounts and reflections of my experiences and the events observed. Finally, my scratch-notes and audio-notes were used to support the production of full written fieldnotes. My aim here was to produce a descriptive account of my experiences, detailing and interpreting the events and interactions as they occurred in a chronological order. In other words, these were written, as Emerson et al (2001) suggest, as *narratives*. This process of sequencing and emplotment which underpin a narrative writing style involved a significant level of mental recall, as events and interactions were replayed and repictured in my mind. (Emerson et al

2011). The reliance on memory, in this sense, means that despite a rich level of detail, my full fieldnotes must be regarded as a subjective reconstruction, rather than a mirror reflection of events (Dunne et al 2005; Emerson et al 2011). As explained below, these fieldnotes were used during the third form of mimesis, where textual accounts are analysed and interpreted to produce core themes and findings.

Interview Data

While observational data represents transient ‘moments’ in time, data elicited through interviews derives from a process of reflection, introspection, and interpretation of a wider array of fragmented experiences, pieced together to form a coherent narrative (Reissman 2008; Fontana 2003; Plummer 2001a, 2001b). While interview accounts were once seen to reflect a life as lived (Plummer 2001a), postmodern approaches have shifted this ideal, demonstrating the fallibility of narrated accounts (Gubrium & Holstein 2003; Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Fontana 2003). In terms of the production of interview data within this study, two key factors must be considered. Firstly, is the notion that the fathers accounts were produced within present-time perspectives, so reflections upon past experiences were imbued with hindsight and current emotional states (Phoenix & Brannen 2014). As a sense-making process, narrative responses are reflexive, an opportunity for self-examination and evaluation, or as described by one participant (Colin), the chance to share anxieties and “bleed openly”. Interview accounts, then, are not simply a transparent lens through which ‘pure’ experiences can be accessed, rather this lens is tinted with a myriad of emotions and reflections (Smith & Elger 2012; Miller & Glasner 2011).

The second factor to consider here is the sense that interview encounters are interactional events between a speaker and audience, with what is ‘said’ by the speaker adapted or presented in particular ways to meet the perceived expectations of the audience (Reissman 2002). Interview accounts can be performative, in this sense, presenting desired identities and emphasising specific traits, while ignoring or discounting experiences or perceptions which do not meet performative expectations (Reissman 2008). As Hanlon (2012) reflects, such performative features to interview interactions can be particularly prominent during encounters between men. Interviews can place men in a position of vulnerability, posing a challenge to hegemonic masculine ideals. Interview accounts, as such, offer a means to emphasise the fulfilment of such ideals – for example, discussing involvement in masculine activities, such as physical play, rather than more nurturing or caring practices (Wall &

Arnold 2007). As interactions between men, the influence of masculine ideals must be considered as a key feature in the production of interview data within this study.

The interview data produced within this study are, as such, considered to be 'polyvocal', reflecting personal reflections and interpretations, alongside discursive and cultural expectations, producing a coherent narrative account of fatherhood. While post-modern and constructionist approaches might suggest that such accounts merely reflect cultural or discursive perceptions of fatherhood, the approach taken in this study derives from epistemological perspectives more akin to biographical (see Brannen & Nilsen 2006) or critical realist approaches (see Smith & Elger 2012; Miller & Glasner 2013). Underpinning this approach is the understanding that interview data is constructed through interaction in the research context – and thus influenced by normative expectations and discourses – however the content derives from the lived experiences of the speaker (Smith & Elger 2012). These experiences are mediated by social structures and material conditions which are external to the speaker; as such interview accounts are produced in relation to the speaker's internalised dispositions or understandings of the world *as they experience it* (Bourdieu 1977; Verweij 2007). As Reissman (2002:697) summarises then, interview data "illuminates the intersection between biography, history and society", reflecting the influence of culture and conduct. Making sense of this 'intersection', as explored below, is achieved through various approaches to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Bryman (2004) notes that one of the perceived difficulties of qualitative research is finding an effective or systemic procedure for making sense of what are often large, rich, and detailed data sets. This depth to the data is, for the most part, due to methods of data collection that are relatively unstructured, working on the basis of interest and intrigue rather than rigidity or repetitiveness. The ethnographic methods utilised in this study, unsurprisingly, produced a complex and nuanced data set, with the underlying 'messiness' of this data obscuring the starting point for analysis. While an analytic procedure is generally regarded as undesirable for qualitative researchers, Braun and Clarke's (2006) guiding framework for conducting thematic analysis offers some solace for a novice researcher, providing a 'map' to follow. However, as outlined below, qualitative analysis is not a linear process, instead involving constant shifts back and forth as the data is evaluated, interpreted, and dwelt upon (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield 2019). In this section, key stages of the analytic process are outlined and discussed, providing a reflexive account of how data was analysed in this study. Firstly,

however, key concepts underlying thematic analysis as a method are briefly discussed, to situate this form of analysis within the broader methodological assumptions of this project.

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2015) method of reflexive thematic analysis provided the foundation for the analytic approach utilised within this study. At its most broadly defined, thematic analysis is a means of "identifying or interpreting patterns of meaning" within a data set (Braun & Clarke 2015:84). The analytic process, in this sense, is informed by a researcher's reading of shared meanings across the data set which, in turn, are conceptualised as 'themes'. How such themes are generated, however, is regarded as the product of a series of choices made by a researcher both prior to and during data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2015 & 2020). When developing themes, as Braun and Clarke (2006) outline, the following points must be considered: (a) the prevalence of the theme within the data set, (b) the relation to research questions, (c) inductive or deductive approaches to data, and (d) the level or depth of analysis (e.g. semantic or latent analysis).

The prevalence of a theme was a key consideration when conducting my analysis of interview transcripts and observational fieldnotes, as I sought to identify patterns across the data. A pattern by definition implies some form of repetition or similarity so identifying a tangible trace across the data was deemed as important as a means of demonstrating continuity or representation within the data. However, because of the nature of qualitative data collection, certain themes were only identifiable in a small number of instances. Yet, as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, this does not necessarily discount the importance of such themes. As such, theme generation within this study was also based upon the perceived contribution of a theme towards answering research questions. While not always prevalent among the data, patterns regarding spatial contexts, discursive influences, or material circumstances carried extra significance during analysis.

This relation between research questions and themes, in turn, influenced the process through which the data was interpreted. The development of themes was deductive in the sense that "existing theories and concepts provide a lens through which to read and interpret the data" (Braun & Clarke 2015:89). When analysing interview and observation data, a series of concepts were utilised as a means of making sense of the practices or perceptions within accounts. These were related to, for example, theories of gender and parenting, such as discourses of 'good fathering', 'intensive parenting' or 'hegemonic masculinity', or concepts regarding social class such as Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital (2010). In other words, my analysis was primarily theory-driven, utilising pre-existing concepts and frameworks.

Subsequently, the depth of my analysis primarily sought to interpret latent meanings within the data. Although an element of descriptive or semantic analysis was utilised to outline the practicalities of men's fathering, more nuanced analysis was conducted to identify and understand the ways in which the fathers sought to present their fathering on gendered or social classed terms. As part of this latent exploration of the data, then, practices of performative analysis, as such a focus upon speech acts or use of language, was used to formulate understandings of how gender and social class can be performed in narrated accounts (Gilbert et al 2014; Reissman 2002). Attention will now turn to an outline and discussion of the different stages of the analytic process, highlighting the ways in which Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedural process was navigated in practice.

Familiarisation, notes, and codes

The extent of a researcher's initial familiarity with a data corpus is dependent upon their involvement in the data collection process (Terry 2015). Having conducted primary data collection, it can be tempting for the novice researcher to begin formulating codes or themes based upon this experience alone (Braun & Clarke 2015; Terry 2015). Indeed, having ceased fieldwork, I found myself carrying a series of ideas and theories about the data in my head, not least due to the practice of transcription and fieldnote production which involved active reflection upon the data (Emerson et al 2011; Braun & Clarke 2006). However, heeding the advice of Terry (2015) and Braun and Clarke (2015), I sought to immerse myself into the data set, broadly exploring the details without systematically identifying patterns. This process of familiarisation involved reading back through my textual data. Interview transcripts were read in hard copy format, highlighting key words or phrases and noting reflections in the margins of the page. These notes formed my initial interpretations and understandings, a means of documenting my thought process. Observational fieldnotes, on the other hand, were explored using word processing software to hone and define my descriptions and reflections in greater detail, producing an articulated narrative of my encounters in the field (Emerson et al 2011).

Before engaging in a systematic coding of the data, I initially categorized the data in relation to the different contexts in which fathering was both recounted and observed. This categorizing was employed to provide a greater sense of narrative order to the data by identifying the spatial contexts from which this data derived. Three broad contexts were developed here: home or domestic contexts; outdoors or public settings; and 'dad group' contexts. The coding procedure, as such, could now be grounded within the aims and

motivations of my second research question relating to social, cultural, and geographical spaces (see above). Extracts relating to these three contexts were subsequently copied into corresponding tables in Microsoft Word, whereby coding procedures were conducted. These codes, consisting of key words and phrases, sought to capture interpreted meanings within the data, summarizing mainly surface or semantic meanings alongside some deeper or latent ideas. This systematic coding stage of analysis, with the use of computer software, and in some cases rigid and repeated codes, arguably represents my most overt diversion from Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis. While not utilising coding frames or codebooks, my approach at this stage shared some of the foundations of systematic thematic analysis, such as qualitative content analysis or thematic coding (Bryman 2004; Flick 2009). However, this surface level analysis in many ways owed to my inexperience conducting the analytic process; as I explain below, it was during the writing process that a nuanced form of analysis was conducted, and concrete themes developed.

Generating themes, writing, and re-writing

Through the initial familiarisation and coding phases of analysis, it was possible to discern general patterns or topics within the data that told a broad narrative regarding the fathers' experiences and perceptions in relation to the three different contexts I had identified. In the domestic context, for example, fatherhood was discussed in terms of being a transition or a learning process in which new responsibilities needed to be practised and understood, with the fathers using narrative features to outline and describe this period. Early drafts of my findings chapters, as such, re-told or recounted these narratives and resembled a 'text' more akin to what Plummer (2001b) describes as a 'realist tale', with the generated themes evoking somewhat overly descriptive arguments and analysis.

Despite lacking in terms of analytic depth, this initial drafting of my ideas was useful in that it provided a foundation for further, more nuanced analysis in which the data could be interrogated in finer detail. It was at this stage that my analysis took on a more recursive form where the data was reflected or 'dwelt' upon (Braun & Clarke 2015). Unlike my initial coding phase, this period felt less "mechanical", as Braun and Clarke (2020:5) suggest, involving greater 'thinking time' as the data was read and re-read, questioned, and pondered as part of the process of interpretation. The support of my supervisors was also utilised here, as my interpretations were triangulated via their comments and perspectives. In turn, this allowed for the themes to be honed and refined as the data was explored for latent meanings, utilising aspects of narrative and performative analysis to interrogate interview and

observational accounts in greater detail (Reissman 2002; Cortazzi 2001; Lainson, Braun & Clarke 2019). It was here that theoretical concepts were also applied to the data as part of the analytic sense-making process, exploring the role of discursive expectations and spatial influences in determining fathering practices and perceptions. It was through this writing process, underpinned by a greater analytic depth, that the majority of my analysis work was conducted, and the 'story' of the data produced (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2019; Braun & Clarke 2020).

Ethical Considerations and Procedure

In this section, I outline the considerations and implementation of ethical codes of practice within this research. Three key areas of ethical practice are discussed here: confidentiality, potential for harm, and informed consent. While these represent broad considerations for all social scientific research projects, the ethnographic, mixed-method approach used in this study means that different procedures were implemented to ensure that ethical codes were upheld within multiple research contexts. As outlined below, different ethical procedures were implemented in three contexts - 'dads groups', public settings, and interview contexts – with the aim of maintaining the welfare, dignity, and rights of the participants in this study (O'Reilly 2009; Flick 2009; Bryman 2004).

Confidentiality

The practice of social research often involves accessing areas of people's everyday lives which are emotive and meaningful (Bryman 2004). This project in particular sought to access men's experiences, practices and reflections of family life, typically regarded as sacred or private (Gabb 2010; Hall 2011). For male participants, questions or observations of this area of everyday life are often perceived as invasive, requiring an openness that challenges traditionally held ideals of masculinity and serving as a potential source of emotional conflict or anxiety (Ives 2018; Hanlon 2012; Gough 2018). Ensuring participant confidentiality, by providing anonymity, is regarded as a key ethical measure for alleviating such participant concerns as it grants the opportunity to behave regularly or speak openly under the knowledge that they cannot be identified (Bryman 2004; Flick 2009). As such it was decided that as part of the ethical procedure of this study, participant confidentiality would be upheld across the various research contexts. Subsequently, all participants, place names, and 'dad groups' (including staff and attendees) have been assigned pseudonyms, with any identifying

information changed or adapted within interview transcripts, fieldnote accounts, and findings and discussion chapters below.

The maintenance of confidentiality was also a requirement of the university data management policy and GDPR regulations. Fieldwork data, consisting of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and audio files were stored electronically, using an online 'cloud-based' storage account provided by the university. All files were stored in password protected folders and saved using pseudonym titles; any hard copies of the data were stored in lockable drawers or cabinets. Participants were informed of this confidentiality practice through information sheets provided prior to their agreement to participate (see further discussion on informed consent below).

Potential for Harm

As part of ethical research planning, key considerations must be made to ensure participant and researcher welfare is maintained. This involves anticipation of potential risks when planning research and remaining vigilant of further unforeseen risks both during and after fieldwork has commenced. Two key areas of welfare were encountered as part of this research. Firstly, measures were implemented to ensure the emotional and mental well-being of the participants when conducting participant observations, go-along interviews, and semi-structured interviews. During the planning stage of the project, key issues were identified here, including potential anxiety induced by observations; the discussion of sensitive or traumatic topics; and the safeguarding of vulnerable participants (e.g. children). To alleviate potential harm here, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process and without reason; participants were also encouraged to inform the researcher if they felt uncomfortable at any point and that data collection would be paused or ceased if that was the case. While participants were informed of these measures, in practice these measures also required a level of researcher intuition, such as reading body language or facial cues to identify potential discomfort or anxiety. During the fieldwork, there were no severe cases of emotional distress, however, sensitive topics were often broached during semi-structured interviews. In such incidents, participants were offered breaks from the interview (all of which were declined) and a debriefing or 'cooling' period was implemented at the end of the interview in which participant well-being was assessed.

The second area of potential harm related to participant and researcher health and safety in the field and surrounding environment. With regard to participant observations, the 'dad

group' settings were evaluated for the risk of injury in an emergency situation (e.g. fire); to ensure safety, I was informed of evacuation procedures and made aware of emergency exits. Conducting go-along interviews presented unique challenges for ensuring health and safety. Firstly, locations and suggested by participants needed to be evaluated in terms of their suitability and potential risk of injury. Such considerations included the distance of the routes and the safety of the location. In practice, the routes and locations were deemed safe but required caution and awareness, such as when crossing roads. There were also particular challenges ensuring the welfare and safety of the participants' children, who accompanied us during the 'go-alongs'. These included ensuring children were accompanied by an adult at all times and remaining vigilant of their physical and emotional well-being. A final area of consideration here related to the conducting of interviews in participant's homes; to ensure researcher safety in such cases, third parties were informed of the interview location, and contacted prior to arriving and again upon leaving the location.

Informed Consent

The process of adequately informing participants of the nature of the research is arguably the most important standard of ethical practice (Flick 2009). The aim, in principle at least, is to ensure that participants are informed of the aims of the research project, what their participation means, and what participation will involve, so that they can provide consent without deception or coercion – participation, in this sense, should be an informed choice (Bryman 2004). However, as noted above, the potential for harm can arise in unforeseen or unanticipated ways, as such, informed consent should also be considered as on-going process, as the practicalities of participation unravel during fieldwork and data collection (Punch 2014; Silverman 2014). Consequently, several strategies were employed in order for participants to provide their informed consent within the different research contexts navigated as part of this research.

To ensure the informed consent of participants involved in all aspects of this project, a broad strategy was employed. Following initial contact, through telephone call, text message, email, or face-to-face, participants were provided with information sheets outlining the research aims, details of what their participation will involve, and informing them of their rights within the research context (e.g. right to withdraw). Participants were then provided with a consent form to sign, acknowledging their written consent to participate. This strategy was employed for those participating in both observations and interviews, with specific information sheets produced for each data collection method. However, the nature of these

research methods presented some practical challenges for ensuring a participant's informed consent. For those participating in go-along or semi-structured interviews, for example, providing informed consent was a relatively straightforward process as we were able to meet prior to the start of the data collection, whereby information sheets were explained, and consent forms signed. Where necessary, oral consent to continue participation could be obtained, such as when discussing sensitive topics.

The practicalities of obtaining participant informed consent in dad group contexts was far more challenging, however. As 'drop-in' sessions, the attendance at the groups varied from month to month, with new attendees potentially unaware of my presence. Given this dynamic, several different strategies were employed to inform the attendees of my presence and broad research aims. Firstly, gatekeepers at each of the three groups agreed to reference my participation at the session through advertisements on social media; where possible, I was also introduced at the start of each session, so the attendees knew who I was and my role during the sessions. Secondly, I adopted a 'meet-and-greet' role with the attendees upon arrival at the sessions. This provided the opportunity to introduce myself to new attendees, provide them with information sheets, and present an opportunity to 'opt-out' of participating. Written consent was then obtained at the following session, with those attending on a one-time basis not included in fieldnotes.

Chapter 4: Navigating Domestic Identities

The domestic lives of men and women are an enduring topic of research and debate within the social sciences. Since the early 1970s, research among feminist and critical masculinities scholars has sought to acknowledge and understand the work of domesticity, tracing the underlying gendered assumptions which continue to shape and define cultural understandings. It is now widely accepted that the traditional family form of sole-breadwinner father and homemaker mother existed more as an ideal rather than reality (Miller 2017; Henwood et al 2014; Williams 2008). Changing cultural, political, and economic landscapes in Western society have resulted in the emergence of dual-earner households as the most common family dynamic, with women contributing significantly to household income. However, predicted reversals in terms of fathers making significant contributions to domestic and childcare tasks have, at best, been minimal (see Chapter 2). Yet, recent years have seen dramatic cultural shifts in representations of fatherhood, with the 'new' or 'involved' father a recognisable cultural figure. In discursive and linguistic terms at least, a newly emerged language of gender-neutral 'parenthoods' are clearly identifiable (Sunderland 2006; Dermott & Miller 2015), eroding traditional ideals of gendered divisions of household labour.

Taking these shifting ideals within domestic contexts as a starting point, this chapter traces the narrated experiences of a small group of predominantly white, heterosexual, middle-class fathers, exploring the various ways that domestic and family lives are presented and navigated within the context of their everyday experiences. These narratives were produced through semi-structured interviews with ten fathers. Of these fathers, nine were either married or cohabiting with the mothers of their children, while one father was granted custody of his child following a separation with the child's mother. Nine of the fathers were employed of which six worked full time (including variable shift patterns), two worked 4-day weeks, one was in full-time education, and one was a stay-at-home-father. All of the fathers lived in what could be broadly described as 'comfortable' backgrounds, however, the level of privilege accessible through material and cultural resources was varied. It is important to acknowledge, in turn, that the narratives produced by this sample can be seen to reflect heteronormative experiences of fatherhood (Vespa 2009). Any interpretation of fathering practice or discourse is, as such, framed within this specific context and is representative of this particular experience.

In their narrations of their experiences, the fathers discussed their involvement in a range of domestic and childcare practices which will be explored in depth across these findings chapters. Analysis in this chapter relates to research aims which seek to explore the impact of cultural and discursive influences in the formation of fathering identities. Of specific interest here are the ways in which discourses of gender weave into the fathers' perception of their experiences and practices, observing the extent to which such discursive expectations challenge or reinforce unequal relations of gender across the domestic landscape. This chapter begins with the fathers accounts of their early experiences of fatherhood, focusing specifically upon the discursive resources utilised to make sense of this transition period. Attention then turns to an evaluation of the parental demands narrated by the fathers, exploring how these are broadly conceptualised. A more overt focus upon the performances of class and gender within fathering narratives is then explored, accounting for the ways in which caring and domestic practices are framed. Finally, practices related to the organisation and co-ordination of care are explored within the fathers' accounts. The ways in which motherhood is presented in this context is of particular interest with regards to the reinforcement of gendered ideals.

Navigating 'Involvement': Early experiences of fathering

Since the late 1980s, cultural representations of fatherhood have shifted to reflect the emerging ideals of greater father presence in domestic family lives. No longer defined as cold, authoritative, household patriarchs, a broader language of fatherhood has emerged allowing fathers greater scope to construct identities founded upon 'caring' ideals of intimacy, nurture, and involvement (Dermott & Miller 2015; Elliott 2016; Dermott 2008). As such, the image of the 'involved father' arguably represents the most revered fathering ideal, shaping expectations for fathers to be "more nurturing, develop closer emotional relationships with their children, and share the joys and work of caregiving with mothers" (Wall and Arnold 2007:509). This shift in expectations has subsequently granted fathers access to a wide range of plausible and acceptable parenting practices across the social landscape, with research evidence suggesting greater father involvement in the ante-natal stage of pregnancy (Ives 2014; Doucet 2009), in one-to-one childcare and primary caregiving (Chesley 2011; Brannen & Nilsen 2006), and in stimulating practices to support child development (Amodia-Bidakowska 2020; Chung 2021). However, research also suggests that father involvement in practices of care is mediated by material necessities and structural restrictions. As Miller's (2011) research highlights, fathers' early parental experiences are

often constrained by the need for sufficient family income or the short-term – and poorly paid – period of paternity leave available. Ultimately, the research evidence suggests that in the years following the birth of a child, parental responsibilities tend to follow traditional gendered trajectories (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Miller 2011).

As such, it is important to provide a nuanced analysis of the underlying meanings which underpin the management of parental demands, alongside the formation of a range of fathering identities. In the context of enduring inequality among gender relations, it is thus necessary to scrutinize the role of fathers in both challenging and maintaining such relations through their parenting accounts. This section presents a range of fathering identities in relation to the participants' ante-natal experiences alongside early experiences of infant care post-natally. Of particular focus here, is the extent to which fathering practices are presented in ways which challenge traditional gendered trajectories, observing the meanings and discourses utilised as part of this narrative construction.

Planning and Preparation in the Ante-Natal Stage

Expectant fathers' experiences of pregnancy and the ante-natal stage are increasingly understood as an "unstructured and ambiguous process" when compared to the practices and trajectories of expectant mothers (Ives 2014:1005; see also Chapter 2). One clear reason for this is the embodiment of pregnancy, with a mother's physical changes representing symbolic markers of the perinatal stage, shaping transitionary experiences of expectant mothers (Miller 2011). This lack of a direct physical relationship with their child coupled with, at best, a supportive role for their partners, often leaves fathers feeling detached from the pregnancy and behind their partners in terms of their development of a parental identity (Ives 2014). As means of compensating for this lack of physical embodiment, a series of practices have come to define and frame discursive meanings of 'expectant fatherhood'. As outlined below, several of these practices appear to be drawn on in constituting these narratives, with the perinatal stage providing the foundations for the development and understanding of 'childcare'.

Engagement in practices of planning and preparation were key features in Jonathan and Dylan's narratives of the pregnancy. As first-time fathers, the ante-natal stage represented a journey into in the unknown for the two men. Reflecting on this period, Jonathan noted that it was "a very strange time", anticipating and planning for the impending birth:

> You have this baby, and you're trying to get your life in order. Buying baby stuff and trying to prepare yourself for everything that's about to happen. We were actually quite organised […] you know, the basket, high chair, working out what clothes we needed, because obviously it's the first baby, we had no idea what we'd need. (Jonathan)

Jonathan's emphasis upon both his and his partner's preparation for the birth of their child, arguably holds symbolic meaning in this account. By organising "way in advance", Jonathan is demonstrating both his and his partner's investment in their child and their understanding of their roles and responsibilities as new parents. The purchase of 'essential' items, in this sense, reflects Jonathan's status as an 'expectant father', allowing him to demonstrate his proactive anticipation, alongside a readiness for his care responsibilities.

Jonathan's role in the ante-natal stage was also defined along traditionally masculine trajectories, as he outlined the financial planning necessary for the use of shared parental leave.

> I had to plan it quite well though, because obviously […] the statutory pay is 'peanuts' […] I had to prepare each month, save a bit of cash […] That was kind of my idea, and when I said about taking the 3 months my wife asked about the money and if we could afford it, and I said if I save some money each month then it's doable, start saving it now then after 8 months we'll be ok. But yeah it did take a bit of planning.

The notion of shared parental leave within this narrative is interesting in that it both represents Jonathan's motivation for a hands-on care role while also affirming a traditional breadwinner status. Here, Jonathan occupies a dual-status of breadwinner-carer, with his financial planning and accrued savings fulfilling masculinised expectations for father involvement during pregnancy. This account implies that an 'expectant' father identity is underpinned by a prioritisation of specific financial practices, which demonstrate thoughtful and caring 'involvement' – in other words, Jonathan's access to a caring identity is determined, first and foremost, through the fulfilment of traditional masculine ideals.

Dylan's experiences also reflect this notion of dual caring and masculine identities. Like Jonathan, Dylan's caring persona was, in some cases, mediated through the fulfilment of 'masculinised' practices. In describing their preparation for 'hypnobirthing'[3], for example,

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[3] 'Hypnobirthing' is a birthing practice which uses self-hypnosis or meditation techniques such as deep breathing, visualisation, and mindfulness during pregnancy and labour.

Dylan occupied a self-defined position of "birthing partner", taking charge of the practical arrangements, such as inflating the birthing pool, and communicating with their midwife during the labour. Through a description of these practices, Dylan sought to convey his supportive, caring role in the labour. Reflecting on this, Dylan subsequently felt that he was a more active participant in the labour compared to what he imagined for other fathers during a hospital birth:

> So it was a lot of pressure, it was really intense. It was a lot to take on because as a dad in a hospital birth you probably feel quite powerless that you're sort of just sat there watching everything that's going on and sort of being like "it's ok" but you know you've got a whole team of professional people there. Whereas Sophie was entirely reliant on me to constantly look like this beacon of positivity and really I was just looking at her in the most excruciating pain and just putting on an 'Oscar' winning performance of just like "everything's going great" "you're doing so good" but in the back of my mind it's like "I've got no idea if this is going well or not".

Dylan presents two contrasting images here, that of the imagined 'other' who is side-lined and devalued among the medical "professionals", and his own participatory experience in which he is relied upon by his wife and holds greater responsibility and influence. Dylan articulates his caring persona during the labour through the performance of masculinised support, presenting a strong and stoic sense of calm to reassure his wife, while simultaneously fighting and supressing his own anxieties. This sacrifice of his own turmoil alludes to heroic imagery which celebrates masculine strength and fortitude (Gilbert at al 2014).

Ultimately, the accounts presented here demonstrate how father 'involvement' in the ante-natal stage is navigated via masculine ideals. Performances of the 'expectant father' are mediated through masculinised practices such as financial preparation, practical arrangements, or birthing support. Yet, for both Jonathan and Dylan, these masculine practices were a means to an end in the sense that they were utilised to fulfil their motivations for an involved caring role. As Dylan reflected,

> it was really nice to start off that journey of fatherhood taking on a really major, important role actually in the birth. I think it almost set the tone of our parenting style from that point. It was just like "we're in this together" and I'm like, I want to do as much as humanly possible to make this as good as possible for both of us.

Involvement in the ante-natal stage, then, can arguably set a precedent for future caring identities for fathers. While the involvement of 'expectant fathers' are mediated along masculine terms, these nevertheless represent means of accessing ante-natal engagement, and potentially informing a parental sense of self alongside embodied parenting practices, and caring relationships with their children. In the following section, emergent fathering identities are explored further, tracing accounts of post-natal care, again observing the negotiation of caring and masculine ideals.

Adapting to New Parenting Identities

Of the fathers who discussed their early experiences of parenting in their narratives, each captured an underlying sense of the life-altering transition imparted by the birth of their child. Their accounts traced the transition in ways of doing family life, as the stress, sleep deprivation, and 24/7 parenting demands shifted from expectation to reality. As is evident in previous research, the accounts of fathering present post-natal experiences as a joint endeavour, with fathers working alongside mothers in the practical care of their children (e.g. feeding, changing nappies, soothing) with their roles almost 'interchangeable', as Hodkinson and Brooks (2018) suggest. Fathering at this early stage, then, both in this study and in fatherhood literature, most prominently reflects practices traditionally associated with mothering (Miller 2011). Jonathan, for example, discussed his involvement in hands-on, embodied practices of care, articulated most ardently in his assertion that he handled night-time feeds of his daughter, practising different ways of holding her to ensure she was at her most comfortable. Colin, too, discussed his involvement in bottle-feeding, however, his task appeared much more onerous as he cared for twins:

> When they were first born we tried 100 different ways of getting through, she would breastfeed one and I would bottle feed […] they would want feeding about every two hours. It took about 40 minutes to feed them. And then they wouldn't go straight back to sleep, this is in the night, they'd take about another 20 minutes to go back to sleep or sometimes a bit longer. (Colin)

The fathers' accounts also provided an insight into their experiences of adapting to their everyday responsibilities, reflecting upon the emotive challenges associated with their new parenting identities. These included reflections on the monotony of "household chores" but also an emerging sense of boredom and isolation.

> You're literally just with the baby, and that's fine, but after the first week, I was like, I'm really quite bored now, and that was tough because all my time is spent doing that. (George)

> [E]specially in those first two or three weeks, I found it really, really difficult, and quite emotionally difficult as well […] If my mates were going out for Christmas drinks or something, I had to say no I've got the baby. And it feels like you're never going to go out again, and you're just in this mad baby bubble. (Jonathan)

George and Jonathan's accounts here seek to portray the sense of lost freedom or autonomy associated with the responsibilities of childcare. Jonathan, in particular, alluded to this through a comparison between his own autonomy and that of his friends, asserting that his parenting identity must be prioritised over going out for a drink ("I *had* to say no"). On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a narrative performance of 'good' fathering, with Jonathan sacrificing his social identity and friendships. However, it is also possible to discern a sense of longing for his previous freedoms – the fun of "going out" had been displaced by the responsibilities of the "baby bubble". Colin, too, alluded to similar feelings, describing non-parent 'others' who don't understand "the complete theft of your life" when having a child.

Many of the fathers' narratives, then, were underpinned by a sense of conflict with their emerging parental identities and care responsibilities, framing this period as mentally challenging as they described grappling with lingering doubts over their ability to care and growing anxieties over the well-being of their children.

> I was really unprepared […] for the kinds of like early struggles […] that might come up emotionally but also the day-to-day things of what do you need to do. (Dylan)

> There was a period where they had a cold for about nine months, but I spent a lot of that time thinking that they were, not to sound overdramatic, but I was just scared they were going to die the whole time. (Colin)

> One thing I always found really difficult in the first few weeks, was Steph was up till 3am feeding her and trying to get her to sleep, just in tears, exhausted, and it almost makes you resent your new baby for upsetting [her]. I love this person so much and you're upsetting her! And then you feel bad for thinking that! (Jonathan)

The narratives here present a series of emotions – guilt, worry, resentment – which underpin this identity conflict. This growing sense of anxiety and uncertainty is utilised as a narrative tool by the fathers to build towards a climatic resolution of their inner turmoil. For Colin and Jonathan, this resolution was seemingly triggered by a sudden outburst of emotion:

> I ended up one day, just well I saw, I wouldn’t call it a breakdown. But I came back one night and just collapsed in a heap on the floor in tears. Just thinking I can't do this anymore. (Colin)

> There was one night I was out walking her and I just cried. It all hit me, this screeching baby and everything just gets on top of you. It wasn’t depression or anything, just the whole thing of, the whole experience of the birth, building up to it, and you’ve got this new baby and everything has changed so much […] And obviously lack of sleep. It suddenly just hits you sometimes. (Jonathan)

Here, Colin and Jonathan both present themselves as reaching an emotional crisis regarding their new roles, describing their lowest points emotionally. Arguably, however, the point in recounting these experiences is not just to highlight their struggles, but to demonstrate the ways in which they were overcome, acting as a turning point in their parental trajectories. Jonathan’s account acts as a source of rational reflection, in this sense, acknowledging that his emotive state was a product of a series of extraneous factors. This rationalising, itself a very masculine trait, allowed Jonathan to downplay the severity of the incident, and instead frame the experience as a resolution of his internal identity conflict.

Similarly, Colin’s experience is pinpointed as a turning point in which he acknowledges his need for support, later describing a visit to the doctor in which he is reassured that his experience is ‘normal’ for first-time parents. Colin presents this as a ‘sense-making’ experience; a moment of clarity in which his identity crisis was resolved: “It was like a real big struggle and I wasn't sure I could keep doing it. But that got better. And now I feel like it is my job. And I think I'm all right at it.” Here, Colin most prominently draws upon individualised masculine discourses, demonstrating an underlying sense of resilience and fortitude to battle and endure his anxieties, eventually leading to an established sense of fathering identity.

Discursive masculine framings were also prominent in Dylan’s narrative of his identity crisis, presenting an almost ‘heroic’ performance of masculine stoicism to resolve both his wife’s and his own mental health challenges:

> […] my wife was really like up and down in the first 4 or 5 months and […] even if I was also going through a bad time, I was like well I’ve just got to be strong for everyone, which sounds like a cliché [but] my wife's going through such a bad time, my baby just needs care, so there just wasn't room for someone to also be emotional, someone else to be struggling […] I just needed to be an absolute rock for my wife and just get her through it. (Dylan)

Similar to his account of his wife's labour, Dylan hints at a 'protector' status here, sacrificing his own worries and concerns to support his wife and child. While Dylan implies a hands-on care role through the assertion that his child "just needs care", this is framed as a masculine performance due to the implied strength of will and mental resilience required to overcome his own anxieties. Dylan's framing of this early period of adaptation, alongside the accounts of Jonathan and Colin, arguably support the assertion of Das and Hodkinson (2020) that the peripheral positioning of fathers with regards to post-natal mental health and parental transition means that fathers are unable to legitimate their anxieties or seek adequate support and intervention. The narratives outlined here support the suggestion that the mobilisation of traditional masculine ideals of stoicism, strength and resilience remain the most prevalent form of intervention discursively available to fathers when encountering anxieties, stress, or a crisis of identity. In other words, the 'caring trajectories' of the fathers discussed here were navigated within a distinctly masculine framework, suggesting that fathering identities continue to be informed by hegemonic ideals of masculinity, at least during men's early experiences of parenting, to perhaps compensate for the absence of a 'caring space' for them within their new family arrangements. In the following section, the navigation of father involvement in domestic duties is explored in more detail, observing how caring practices are emphasised by the fathers in everyday accounts of parenting demands.

Managing Parenting Demands: Emphasised fathering

Shifting ideals and expectations, in recent years, have resulted in significant changes across the cultural landscape of parenthood and ways of 'doing' family life (Miller 2017; Dermott & Miller 2015; Lyonette & Crompton 2015). Economic and political changes – such as the growing number of dual-earner households or the 'intensive' focus on parenting practices – have seen the development of more diverse family roles among heterosexual couples, with the '24/7 responsibility' of care increasingly shared between mothers and fathers (Norman & Elliot 2015; Dermott & Miller 2015; Miller 2017). The narrative accounts of the fathers in this study suggest that the divide between parental responsibility is now, at least from their perspective, more equal. Everyday family life, as told by the fathers, was presented as a hectic and frantic management of several demands including childcare, domestic tasks, and working responsibilities, with varying strategies for navigating this daily hustle-and-bustle. While aspects of shared responsibility were evident within the accounts, the fathers own practices were often emphasised as part of descriptions.

> At the moment my wife is still on maternity leave, so she does the baby childcare every day during the week. Ava wakes up about 5, she's quite an early riser! So I usually get up with her in the morning to let Kirsty stay in bed for a few hours; I get her up, give her her breakfast, play with her for a couple of hours till I go out about half 8, when I pass her over [Chuckles awkwardly] (Jonathan)

> So I work full time. I do a variable shift pattern[…] My wife does a 3-day working week, also variable shift patterns. Lauren goes into childcare for 3-4 days a week, so we can both have a career […] Depending on our shift patterns, one of us will do drop off and one us will do pick up, or one might do both depending on the shift patterns or the amount of hours we're working. So that's awkward, or it can be. (Graham)

> Well there is a routine; we have 2 children, one is 3 and the other is 7. So one is at school and she has to be at school at quarter to 9, and the other is at nursery and she can be there any time from 8 o'clock. Generally the house wakes up about 7 o'clock in the morning; have to get them dressed, fed, teeth brushed. My wife and I both work, so we try to share the childcare 50/50. (Patrick)

As articulated in the accounts of the fathers, the strategies for managing domestic routines were to a certain extent dictated by their structural and circumstantial arrangements, in particular the working arrangements of both themselves and their partners. Underpinning these accounts is a motivation to frame these strategies as divided equally and considerately as possible. Jonathan, for example, seeks to emphasise that despite his wife's seemingly more prominent role in the everyday care of their daughter, he will still make sacrifices to support her, such as when he describes waking up early to handle the morning routine. However, Jonathan's awkward chuckle perhaps implies some acknowledgement of the potentially unequal division of this responsibility. As such, later in his account, Jonathan sought to clarify their home arrangements, presenting a 'split-shift' strategy – "when I get home about 5, half 5, I take over and I give Ava her dinner, and I do the bedtime routine as well to give Sara a bit of time on her own after a day of child madness!" Again, Jonathan alludes to a notion of sacrifice or courtesy, 'stepping in' to support his wife, allowing her the opportunity to seemingly unwind and relax. Jonathan's emphasis upon his caring practices and supportive role arguably represents an interesting shift in the valuation of parental care, with the labour of childcare acknowledged as potentially more arduous than the work of paid employment. In other words, a father's breadwinner status no longer allows for a legitimate avoidance of domestic care. By emphasising his responsibility for supporting his wife, Jonathan can be

seen as granting his involvement with an esteemed status, challenging traditional inequalities and casting himself as socially and morally aware.

For both Graham and Patrick, on the other hand, the motivation for presenting an equal distribution of parental responsibility stems from an acknowledgement of their respective partners' own working commitments. Here, the two fathers draw upon discourses of egalitarianism to acknowledge their awareness of the greater expectation for sharing domestic and working responsibilities (Vespa 2009; Roberts 2018). Patrick, in particular, also sought to acknowledge the 'intensive' demands of everyday parenting, describing how he and his wife will send each other "random diary invites" to organise school drop-off and pick-up, as well as outlining how they manage school demands such as making "super-hero costumes" or providing food for school events. Here, it is the level and intensity of demands that are most distinctly articulated by Patrick and serve as justification within his accounts to support in managing these tasks. As Patrick reflected, "there are days when you think you're gonna get buried in this, but it's rich, it's rewarding and it's nice"; in this sense alluding to an underlying sense of pride associated with this form of 'intensive' parenting.

While the fathering narratives emphasise circumstantial factors in the division of parenting responsibilities, many of the fathers also utilised moralised discourses regarding notions of shifting hegemonic masculine ideals when framing their involvement (Doucet 2009). Graham, for example, recounted his experience of taking voluntary redundancy in his retail management role, as his proposed working hours would limit the time available to spend with his daughter:

> …they offered me a commute of 18 miles to my new place of work, which would be more expense, less money and then shift pattern which started at five, six o'clock in the morning and potentially staying till 11. So, when do I see my little girl? It would have been pointless, absolutely pointless. I'd have been working, doing that new role about year, if I'd taken it, and wouldn't have seen her grow up.

Within this narrative, Graham seeks to emphasise his prioritisation of his daughter's needs over his working responsibilities. Drawing upon an image of vulnerability – "*my little girl"* – Graham implies that seeing his daughter "grow up" means more to him than his work, and thus sought out more suitable working arrangements in order to fulfil his desired role. Through this narrative, Graham presents a challenge to traditional breadwinner norms of fathering and masculinity through the moralised discourse of 'being there', privileging vague notions of 'involvement' or presence in the lives of children (Miller 2011; Ives 2018).

Similarly, Patrick's account identifies the role of fathers in contributing to gender equality through involvement in domestic practices, which he perceives as challenging 'out-dated' concepts of gender roles:

> So we're essentially role models, so for my children to see me doing the school run, doing the laundry. I still have a few friends who are almost still in '1970s comedy land' of thinking it's a woman's job, you know, 'her indoors' […] there are lots of issues, social, that I feel differently about now. Not just because I've got daughters but because I've got children. It makes you reappraise everything through a new lens, you're not just living in the world, you're bequeathing the world in a way.

Fathering conduct is imbued with an almost mythical or heroic quality here, capable of shifting deep-rooted gendered stereotypes, akin to the 'Dad 2.0 movement' discussed in Chapter 2. Fatherhood – and Patrick's perceived conduct more specifically – is underpinned by a moral responsibility to instil particular values of equality, changing the social world for future generations. Like Jonathan, Patrick seeks to present fatherhood with an esteemed status, highlighting *his role* – and those of 'involved fathers' more broadly – in actively changing the world.

Ultimately, a common thread underpinning the accounts of the fathers in this study was the presentation of parenting identities founded upon moral ideals of equality. The fathers sought to distinguish themselves from traditional divisions of labour by emphasising and reifying their involvement not only in domestic chores and childcare, but also their support of their wife or partner's working commitments. However, previous research findings suggest a degree of caution is required when evaluating these accounts, as fathers typically tend to exaggerate their involvement in domestic duties, as discussed further below (Wall & Arnold 2007). Roberts (2018), for example, argues that men from middle-class backgrounds typically engage in 'spoken egalitarianism' in which intentions of shared domestic responsibility are not reflected in conduct. This is supported by time-use surveys (see NatCen 2019) which suggest that women (26 hours) dedicate more time on average to domestic tasks than men (16 hours). The revered and esteemed status of this involvement by fathers, however, means that a critical analysis of the forms of domestic practices narratively performed by fathers is often overlooked. A key question, then, relates to the extent to which fathers' accounts of involvement presents the illusion of equality which is not reflected when the domestic work of mothers and fathers are compared (Miller 2018). With this in mind, the sections below seek to explore the nuances of men's fathering practices, as articulated in

interviews, by observing the means by which the fathers narratively construct forms of traditional, caring, and masculine parental identities.

Performances of Care and Gender

When discussing divisions of parental labour, the fathers in this study predominantly sought to emphasise their considerations of equality and fairness, demonstrating ways in which everyday tasks were shared with their partners. The narratives presented above in this case highlight the various practical tasks of domestic labour engaged in by fathers, including household tasks such as cooking or cleaning, and a range of childcare tasks, such as feeding, managing the 'school run', or handling bedtime routines. Broadly, everyday family lives as expressed by these fathers implied an 'interchangeability' to these practices, with both parents equally adept at fulfilling tasks; yet what is interesting within these accounts are the fathers' descriptions and framings of *how* these tasks are performed, drawing upon gendered ideals to draw distinctions between practices of fathering and mothering.

For some of the fathers, domestic and family life was drawn across traditionally gendered lines, involving separate roles and responsibilities for mothers and fathers. Harry's account, for example, draws upon explicit divisions between the practices of mothers and fathers, associating mothering with traditional assumptions of essential care and support, while ascribing fathering with a secondary care status.

> There's an anecdote, you know […] boys or girls need their mum for the first seven years and their dad for the second [seven years] […] I guess 'mum' is comfort and stuff like that. (Harry)

Throughout his account, Harry alludes to his secondary care role – "I'm kind of like the substitute" – and draws upon traditional gendered trajectories in describing his return to work following the birth of his children. Reflecting on these circumstances, Harry suggested that his situation emerged naturally, implying an inevitability to his role within the family dynamic.

Similarly, gendered divisions were also drawn by Tom, who framed his fathering practice in response to the more empathetic and supportive approach of his partner. While he acknowledged some responsibility to "nurture" or protect his children, Tom prioritised a description of his role in imparting values of independence or resilience:

> I see my role as a father, you know, from a nurturing, from a safe point of view to support them but push them a little bit into doing it for themselves. I keep saying, like, you don't need me to

> do your thinking for you […] not everything in life is going to be good, so much better to equip children with the ability to be strong and robust. You always want to be there for them, but equally you want to know that they can do it on their own. (Tom)

Here, Tom draws upon masculine values of autonomy and stoicism in framing his fathering approach. He presents himself as a voice of reason and aspiration, responsible for preparing his children for the wider world. He portrays an overtly 'hands-off' role, in which he parents from a distance, and only 'stepping in' when absolutely necessary. This sense of moral guardianship, alluded to by Tom, is interesting in that fathering practices are disembedded from the everyday, practical tasks of care. Such framings, as discussed later in this chapter, are important in terms of shielding fathers from the responsibility and scrutiny of 'everyday care', and arguably represent an active reinforcement of unequal gendered relations among heterosexual couples (Miller 2018).

While perhaps not idealised in the same manner, both Harry and Tom did allude to *some* involvement in everyday care tasks, emphasising their involvement in the school run in particular. As discussed above, similar themes of involvement ran across the accounts of the fathers, as they described the day-to-day management of parenting tasks. However, the storied nature of these accounts presented the fathers with nuanced ways of framing or portraying this involvement. These narratives were not simply accounts of care, then, but active performances weaving through perceived gendered ideals. Such performances of gender were particularly prominent in the accounts of Graham and George, both of whom took on primary care for their daughters, albeit on a part-time basis when their partners were working. This caring responsibility ultimately placed both fathers in what have traditionally been defined as 'feminine' contexts (for example domestic kitchens); however, their narrated accounts presented a distinctly masculinised navigation of such contexts (Meah 2014; Meah & Jackson 2013). When describing their food preparation, for example, both fathers utilised masculinised framings of this practice.

> If it's really nice, potentially we'll have a barbeque in the garden so Lauren can run around, help me cook on the barbeque… Then she wants to be held, because she wants to see what's going on at the same height. So she'll hang on my arm and I'll turn burgers and sausages and she'll be looking over it, just taking everything in. (Graham)

> That's the main thing really, we try to do sort of like proper food so what I might just do now is just chop up some tomato and cucumber and let her get through that, mash up some sweetcorn, maybe do a little bit of a cheese sandwich. So just little bits really, so she's got a mix. (George)

Graham's performance of masculinity is evident in his ownership of outdoor "event" cooking, evoking a sense of primal masculinity in his cooking practices compared to the more 'homely' and feminized practice of everyday meal preparation (Meah & Jackson 2013). Here, a masculinized portrait is evident in Graham's description of cooking a selection of meats – again evoking primal images – all the while his daughter, Lauren, will "hang" from his arm, demonstrating his physical strength in this scenario.

While George's account presents a more 'domesticated' narrative, his description of *how* he conducts his practices nevertheless draws upon masculinised framings. What is interesting about this account is that George was preparing lunch for his daughter, Emma, during our interview, so provided a 'real-time' narrative account of what he was preparing and how he was preparing it. George's narration seemingly sought to convey the simplicity of his approach, roughly chopping or mashing the food and framing his practices within a 'macho' lens. His assertion that he prepares "proper food" also alludes to moralised connotations, demonstrating 'good' parenting by providing fresh, healthy food for his daughter rather than 'convenience foods' (Meah & Jackson 2013). Graham sought to emphasise similar considerations declaring that "everything is pretty much scratch made". In this sense, then, cooking practices were presented as an elaborate affair, requiring specialist skills or knowledge to prepare family meals.

A further example of the performance of masculinity is evident in George's discursive framing of his feeding practices. While the preparation of food alludes to images of nurturing or nourishing care, George's account presents a wholly contrasting impression, drawing upon discourses of independence, rationality, and even authority in constructing his approach. As he explained, George adopted a 'baby-led weaning' approach when feeding his daughter, providing a selection of foods for her to pick and choose from and allowing her to "just get on with it" and "eat what she wants to eat". His partner (Anna), however, is presented as taking an alternative approach:

> Anna would try to get her to eat in a much more, not forceful, but she would be more, she wouldn't want to give up on that, she'd be like "No you are eating, this is time to eat" sort of thing. [...] My view on it was I'm not gonna sit here and get stressed out over someone who was crying because I wouldn't let them head-butt a wall earlier, so I'm not gonna invest emotionally on whether you're going to eat all your dinner. So, that's the key difference.

Here, George presents his approach as more laid-back and rationalised, seemingly implementing an authoritative 'all or nothing' approach to feeding. While this can be seen as

developing his daughter's autonomy and decision-making ability, George's willingness to let her potentially leave an entire meal can place increased pressure on his partner to ensure she eats sufficiently at other mealtimes. In other words, George can be seen to be thinking in 'present time' contexts while his partner is perhaps pressured by longer-term or future implications such as ensuring their daughter is well nourished to support her growth and development. As is explored further below, this division of responsibility between mothers and fathers is potentially problematic as it serves to reaffirm unequal relations of gender for heterosexual couples in domestic settings.

However, while normative gendered ideals were clearly traceable in some of the fathers' narratives, the allocation of domestic and care tasks were also narrated in ways which alluded to interchangeability, conveying performances in more gender-neutral terms (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). The accounts of Dylan and Jonathan, for example, described splitting their care responsibilities between mornings and evenings due to their working commitments, alluding to notions of 'switching' or 'taking over' childcare duties.

> We'll just drearily play in bed for a bit until I'll probably pop downstairs, I'll make porridge for everyone including getting her in her highchair. She'll have a sort of bowl of porridge with fruit and stuff whilst I'm also having porridge. Change nappy, get clothes on, by time we do all that, I'm about ready to go to work. (Dylan)

> I take over and I give her her dinner, and I do the bedtime routine as well […] So give her dinner, have a bath, then read her a book or something, give her some milk, then put her to bed. (Jonathan)

In these accounts, both fathers present their care roles in more 'matter-of-fact' ways, plainly describing what they do, and with little emphasis upon *how* they do it. When compared to Graham or George, there is a distinct gender-neutral tone underpinning the accounts, creating a broader sense of their roles as *parents* rather than as *men*. Considering the earlier accounts of Jonathan and Dylan, in which their parental roles were seemingly accessed through hegemonic masculine trajectories, their accounts of everyday care present an interesting contrast. Their care roles in this sense are navigated across more flexible gender terms – albeit as flexible as their working commitments could allow. Nevertheless, when presenting their engagement in practical tasks of care, the fathers demonstrated greater scope for caring or intimate identities by emphasising their softer and more gentle interactions with their children, such as Dylan's description of how he will "drearily play in bed" with his daughter,

or Jonathan's account of the bedtime routine. While framing these performances as active challenges to gendered ideals may be an overstatement, it is fair to describe these as evidence of the fluidity of masculine and fathering identities, demonstrating how caring practices can be incorporated on gender-neutral terms. However, the accounts of Jonathan and Dylan also alert us to the ways to which care responsibilities are negotiated between mothers and fathers in relation to material or structural factors. As such, the final section in this chapter will focus on the ways in which primary responsibility for the co-ordination of care roles is managed, paying particular attention to the extent to which this is informed by gendered assumptions, and perhaps most importantly, whether these assumptions are actively reinforced by fathering practice.

Co-ordinating and Gatekeeping: Understanding the dynamics of choreographing care

This chapter has, thus far, focused primarily on the various ways that fathers narrate their practices of 'caring for' their children, outlining how hands-on practices of care are navigated and performed within everyday, domestic contexts (Elliott 2016; Dermott & Miller 2015; Norman & Elliot 2015). However, drawing upon the work of Lamb (1986), Norman and Elliot (2015:2) point to a key distinction between embodied practices of 'caring for' children and the mentally based practices of 'caring about' children, which refers to the "planning, worry, and thought" that occupies parents when organising childcare tasks. 'Care' in this sense extends beyond the practice of 'doing' and involves, as Norman and Elliot explain, "knowing in detail what is needed and ensuring the particular aspects of childcare that are required are provided by *anticipating*, *planning* and *arranging* provision" (2015:3 emphasis added). Traditionally, such organising practices have included the arrangement of childcare provision, organising medical appointments, and the planning and provision of meals – tasks which, historically, have been assigned to mothers (Oakley 2005; Hochschild 2012; Miller 2018; Christopher 2012). In recent years, practices of 'choreographing care' have intensified, as parents, predominantly mothers, have been deemed responsible for ensuring the positive development of their children (Faircloth 2014a; Shirani et al 2012; Hays 1996); awareness of development milestones, alongside the planning and provision of enriching activities, are now regarded as key requirements of 'good' parenting.

To a certain extent, fathers have been shielded from such demands due to normative gendered conceptualisations of caring responsibilities (Faircloth 2014b; Shirani et al 2012). While the findings presented below broadly support this assertion, the accounts of the fathers imply that the negotiation of these demands is determined by a complex interplay of gendered ideals and

expectations which are utilised by both fathers *and* mothers (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). Finding the 'space' to engage and take responsibility for these practices, in other words, has arguably been restricted for fathers due to their discursive positioning as 'secondary' or 'supportive' parents, and the enduring ideals of primary motherhood (Miller 2018; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Christopher 2012). Harry, for example, reflected on the 'difficulties' he faced engaging in practices of care.

> Claire will take the kids to school. And actually, even when I try and take the kids to school in the morning, Claire will come anyway […] And actually, it's interesting, if I kind of want to insert myself into the structure, I have to be very forceful, otherwise Claire will do it. I say 'No, I'm picking up the kids', you know, 'would it help if I picked up the kids' is not a good enough. It's not a forceful enough thing for me. (Harry)

In many ways, Harry's account of 'inserting himself' into the daily routine reflects Allen and Hawkins (1999) notions of 'maternal gatekeeping' in which men's opportunities for engagement in practices of care are limited or 'blocked' by the seemingly controlling behaviours of mothers. Here, Harry alludes to such practices in his portrayal of his wife, Claire, who he suggests cannot "let go" of this primary responsibility and must accompany Harry even when he offers support. Harry's perception, then, is that he must be "forceful" in order to have the opportunity to engage. Ultimately, Harry positions himself as a 'willing' participant in this care routine but is apparently limited by his wife's continued presence.

However, the dynamics of organising and choreographing care are far more complex than is suggested by the work of Allen and Hawkins. Recent research, for example, has highlighted that the gatekeeping role performed by mothers can instead facilitate father involvement (Miller 2018; Christopher 2012), with mothers taking on the added responsibility of providing opportunities for fathers to take on caring practices, such as organising days out, or 'checking in' when fathers are alone with children. As Miller (2018) outlines, such practices reflect enduring assumptions that it is a mother's responsibility to ensure that particular 'standards' of care are met. However, this in turn relates to particular judgements over a father's competency of care. This was evident in Jonathan's account as he described his preparations for a day out with his daughter, Ava:

> I don't take her out on long trips on my own very often, Sara does it every day, so it was quite lucky when I was getting Ava ready in the morning, Sara went 'Have you got her lunch? Have you got her milk? Have you got her sun cream?' I was like, 'No'. She sort of packed the bag for me, 'there you go, everything's on the table, just put it in the bag'. (Jonathan)

In this account, Jonathan describes his wife, Sara, as performing a supervisory role, checking that he had packed his daughter's bag with the right items, before ultimately packing the bag for him. In this sense, his wife is presented as performing a dual role co-ordinating care for both Jonathan and their daughter. She considers which items their daughter will need, but also must check that Jonathan is aware of these items. In other words, as part of her role as mother and wife, it is Sara who carries the majority of the burden of the 'mental load', anticipating needs and potential issues, and providing support for Jonathan when needed (Miller 2017).

To a certain extent, the performance of such behaviours can be ascribed to dominant cultural narratives and discourses surrounding parenting roles, with mothers carrying the burden of expectation for organising and planning care (Hays 1996; Hochschild 2012). Yet, fathers are not entirely passive in this process of positioning mothers as primary carers and co-ordinators (Miller 2018). While the 'space' to engage in practices of choreographing care is often restricted by structural and cultural factors, equally fathers can be seen as doing very little to challenge this framework. The practice of planning and anticipating care needs is arduous, so avoiding such responsibility, in many ways, can be seen as beneficial for fathers, meaning they may seek to find ways of maintaining this particular division of responsibility. Miller (2018) terms this practice 'paternal gatekeeping' whereby fathers feign incompetence or lack of knowledge, and position mothers as 'experts' of care.

> I'm kind of the opinion that kids will grow up as they will and they all develop at different stages, so to an extent the development stages and goals are useful to look at but they can also apply a lot of pressure and worry and so therefore I don't worry about it a huge amount. I think my wife does a bit more, and my mum was an early years consultant for the government about 5 years ago, so she's really up on those sorts of things so between the two of them they look at that stuff more than I do whereas I try and just let him have, try not to worry about it. He walks, he talks, he's got all of his teeth. He seems to have fun and that's the main thing! (Stewart)

In this extract, Stewart is able to draw upon gendered parental assumptions as means of avoiding responsibility for tracking his son's development. The limited 'space' available to him is alluded to, as he argues that his involvement is unnecessary due to the roles performed by both his wife and his mum. This, in turn, allows him to take a laid-back approach, knowing that his practice won't be scrutinized in the same manner (Faircloth 2014b; Shirani et al 2012). This also allows Stewart the ability to select the type of issues he should be concerned about, focusing upon his son's general well-being and happiness – "He seems to

have fun and that's the main thing" – rather than specific development goals. Ultimately, the division of responsibility between himself and his partner is more suitable to Stewart as he can avoid the pressure and anxiety associated with child development, a privilege which is arguably inaccessible to many mothers (Shirani et al 2012; Miller 2018).

This avoidance practice was also a key feature of George's account. Unlike Stewart, however, George's avoidance strategy was underpinned by an active relegation of responsibility, in which his practices and decision-making were positioned as secondary to his partner's. Despite hands-on involvement in feeding practices (discussed above), George reflected that his wife dedicated a greater amount of time and consideration to her approach, taking ideas from parenting texts and manuals.

> So, Anna put a lot of work into that and she's actually bought one of these books [laughs] shouldn't laugh, don't know why I'm laughing, but she bought Holly Willoughby's book about what she does with her baby [...] So she's picked a lot of stuff up from that and she's had a lot of: "I'd like to try this and do this" [...] I said to her "I'm happy to do things but I'd like to just be more fluid with it and just let her decide" and she was happy with that because she was like "I like this idea of baby led food". (George)

George's account here presents two contrasting approaches to feeding: the invested and regimented approach of his wife, and his own "more fluid" or liberal approach. As noted above, George presents a critical response to his wife's more 'intensive' practices, while here his laughter strikes a potentially undermining tone, perhaps reflecting his perceived superiority and ability to challenge cultural expectations deriving from parenting texts. However, his adoption of this approach was seemingly only permissible *because* his partner deemed it acceptable – "she was happy with that" – in this sense, positioning her judgement above his own. As such, while George may be critical of such an invested approach, he also acknowledges that this places his wife as the more 'knowledgeable' parent giving her greater authority to make key parental decisions.

> So I guess you could say that Anna led the decision making on food, but she definitely engaged me with it and I said "look, I'm happy to kind of concede to you" because she'd read the book, she'd learned it, she'd been around children and said "look, I'll follow your lead" [...] so her knowledge of children far outweighs anything I could probably learn.

Arguably, by presenting his wife as more knowledgeable in relation to childcare, George constructs a discursive space in which he can step back from such decision-making

processes, in turn, freeing himself of the time, effort, and overall responsibility for this co-ordination of care. Moreover, his wife's investment in this form of care is framed as a *choice* by George. In this sense, George presents his wife's reading of parenting manuals as a leisure activity, with this type of care and attention forming part of her identity and selfhood. As George later explained, arranging childcare practices was not something he was "actively that interested in", whereas his wife was "much more warm to that idea".

Graham drew upon a similar explanation when describing divisions of parental responsibility. He presented his wife as dedicating time and effort to tracking their daughter's development, showing an awareness and anticipation of the different developmental milestones, often in conjunction with staff at their daughter's nursery. Similar to Stewart, Graham alluded to limited opportunities to engage in such practices himself, partly due to his work commitments but also because he assumed that his wife had *chosen* to manage this developmental responsibility.

> So I don't necessarily look at it myself, because sometimes I'll come home and literally my wife will be like: 'She's doing this, which is great because it's where she should be'[…] So with the job she's got, she's got a bit more free time. She can look at that sort of thing. Verses, I'm at work, I pick her up, I do other bits and pieces. I think it's a case that, if she wasn't so interested in looking at where Lauren should be and where she is, then yeah, I probably would look at it.

Graham's perception here creates the impression that tracking their daughter's development is a 'hobby' for his wife framing this practice as a pleasurable leisure pursuit. Their division of responsibility then is framed as a simple difference of opinion or interests. Ultimately, however, Graham suggests that the different approaches employed by him and his wife are informed by underlying essentialist or biological factors.

> [A]s a mum, you're going to worry more than maybe the dad would […] But is that the case that you carry something for 9 months and it's actually part of you, verses, I've not had that experience, I've not felt something grow inside of me. It's a different bond between her and Lauren, than me and Lauren.

The biological fact of pregnancy and giving birth is ultimately framed by Graham as barrier to his involvement in care. His "bond', in this sense, will *always* be secondary to his wife's when framed within essentialist discourse, meaning that he feels less necessity to be actively involved in practices of planning and co-ordinating care.

The accounts of the fathers outlined in this section ultimately reveal the discursive strategies utilised to determine the distribution of parental responsibilities in heterosexual couples. Specifically, the narrative presentations of wives or partners demonstrate the ways in which the fathers delegate responsibility for the 'thinking time' of care to mothers. Several different discourses are alluded to in this process, such as the 'controlling' behaviours of mothers, their more esteemed knowledge of care, and their inherent caring instincts. Such discursive constructions arguably represent a form of 'paternal gatekeeping' as the responsibility for caring 'about' their children is framed as a task for mothers. In turn, this creates a discursive space for fathers to agentically step-back from this responsibility and construct their fathering in more idealised ways. In other words, this allows fathers to reinforce a model of parenting which, to paraphrase Wall and Arnold (2007), shares the 'joys' of caregiving, but without the added time, effort, and scrutiny experienced by mothers.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore the ways in which the fathers in this study navigated their domestic identities within accounts of everyday parenting. The narratives highlighted the various ways in which day-to-day parenting demands, such as childcare, school runs, or work commitments, were managed, with fathers presenting a specific emphasis upon their involvement in this process. Alongside these descriptive accounts, analysis in this chapter has focused upon the nuanced ways in which the fathers in this study discursively framed their care and involvement practices. Specifically, attention was paid to the participants transition to fatherhood during both ante-natal and post-natal stages, with the accounts suggesting that fathers' caring identities are formed in relation to hegemonic masculine ideals such as financial provision or management of practical tasks associated with pregnancy. Masculinised resources were also evident in the fathers' accounts of their early parenting experiences, in particular the utilisation of hegemonic traits such as stoicism and resilience when navigating mental health conflicts and inner turmoil. Early experiences of fathering, then, were seemingly underpinned by traditional masculine trajectories; however, these were ultimately presented as a means of constructing caring personas, blurring the boundaries of masculine practice.

The accounts, however, also provided important insights into the fathers' perceptions of gendered parenting. The narratives, in this sense, presented the fathers with a means of performing idealised conceptions of gender, describing their caring practices in ways which emphasised masculinised traits. While hegemonic masculine traits were idealised in some

accounts, other fathers presented alternative perspectives derived from more gender-neutral ideals. In these cases, the fathers presented a softer, more intimate perception of their caring practices, demonstrating the nuanced ways in which gender and fathering can be perceived. When viewed broadly, the accounts of fathering presented here demonstrate a gendered continuum of care, as the fathers interpreted their practices across a spectrum of gender ideals. However, while the fathers perception of their own gender identities varied across the parenting landscape, their presentations of motherhood – as expressed through accounts of their partners – seemingly reinforced specific gendered inequalities. Through their accounts, mothers were ultimately portrayed as taking primary responsibility for the arduous and all-consuming practices of organising and co-ordinating care. Utilising gendered discourses, the fathers presented the '24/7' responsibility of care as a mothering practice, implying a sense of choice or inherent connection to this parental role. The consequence for the fathers is that it allowed them to avoid any association with such practices, freeing them from the work and scrutiny of this labour, and ultimately reinforced an ideal in which fathers are judged by their presence or involvement alone rather than what they 'do' specifically.

In relation to the research aims of this project, then, it is possible to interpret understandings of the interrelations between discursive expectations and embodied identifications of masculinity, with underlying meanings of masculine and fathering performances adapted as part of sense-making processes. In line with Lupton and Barclay (1997), the fathers in this study utilised different discursive subject positions, alongside accounts of embodied practices, to present an array of fathering performances, such as egalitarian parenting, caring and nurturing fathering, and masculinised fathering. Masculinity, in this context, can be perceived as both a discursive and embodied resource which allows fathers to determine their responsibilities, 'stepping in' to support when required but equally 'stepping back' when the responsibilities do not meet personal motivations and expectations. Such themes are explored further in Chapter 5, as the fathers' leisure practices with their children across public settings are explored.

Chapter 5: Fathering Identities and Practices in Public Settings

In this chapter, the enduring association between fatherhood and outdoor contexts is explored through analysis of narrative accounts produced through semi-structured interviews, alongside 'in-situ' interview and observational data collected as part of 'go-along' interviews. Three themes have been identified within this data, revealing the nuanced ways in which fathering practices outside of the home are navigated and interpreted in the formation of fathering identities. Drawing primarily on narrative accounts, this chapter will firstly explore the theme of leisurely or activity-based fathering practice in conceptualisations of 'good' fatherhood. Ideals surrounding masculine and middle-class identities are scrutinized here, exploring how fathering roles and responsibilities are shaped within already established dispositions and personal motivations. The second theme explores four fathers' perceptions and framings of 'father-child' time. Here narrative accounts are compared with in-situ observations and perspectives to demonstrate the contrasts between idealised conceptions and present-time performances of father-child interactions. Finally, this chapter will analyse the various ways in which gendered spaces are interpreted and navigated by fathers. Of particular interest here, is exploring the ways fathers interpret these spaces as 'maternal worlds' and account for their practices as part of a sense making process to understand norms and expectations.

Leisurely Fathering: 'Hands-off' approaches to cultivation

Since the late 20th century, research in the social sciences has demonstrated the variety of meanings which come to define expectations of 'good' father involvement. As noted in the previous chapter, these definitions are typically derived from gendered trajectories in which full time employment for fathers is maintained, and caring roles are performed across 'pockets' of time during mornings, evenings, or weekends (Hodkinson & Brooks 2018; Miller 2011; Dermott & Miller 2015). Despite shifting family dynamics, it is often the case that fathers continue to spend the majority of their time *away* from their children; as such, fathering identities tend to be formulated around discourses of meaningful time together (Miller 2011). Father involvement, then, tends to be defined by the 'doing' of various activities, such as playing sports, family days out, or even simply reading or watching television together (Such 2006, Kay 2009; Henz 2019). These activities, unlike the more essential practices of childcare, appeal centrally to fathers own personal identities or sense of

self, relating more directly to masculine ideals of play, fun, or physical activity (Wall & Arnold 2007; Doucet 2009; Harrington 2009).

For the fathers in this study, such masculinised 'doing' represented the most revered and idealised form of involvement; a state of parental being in which they felt most comfortable and most competently able to navigate fathering expectations. Coakley (2009) suggests that this sense of ease can stem from a father's familiarity with their environment, including spaces such as leisure centres, cinemas, or parks, that fathers may frequent as part of their non-parent lives. When narrating and describing their involvement in activities, several of the fathers alluded to this sense of familiarity, engaging in activities that appealed to them as well as their children.

> We do lots of things like playing games. There's *Risk* on the table, they cook things, and we're just beginning to [get into] cycling […] I discovered [board games shop] […] one day we just had some time to kill, so me and the kids we went in there and [it's like a] mystical paradise. 'Wow! Everyone's playing war games in here.' So they like it, a little place of where the adults do stuff. (Harry)

> [W]hen I started doing the boxing, I got the heavy bag up in the garden and got them all a set of gloves […] and when they got into wanting to go in the sea a lot more and really got into swimming, they're already good at swimming and so got them a little wetsuit each [...] the things that I feel I would love to have given a go when I was kid. (Tom)

Doucet (2009) argues that this form of embodied 'doing' by fathers is idealised in the sense that it appeals to more masculinised dispositions. With Harry, for example, this is evident in his framing of the event as a journey of discovery – an adventure into a new "mystical paradise". While the games shop is granted a 'mythical' allure in his account, Harry also establishes that it is an environment that both he and is his children are familiar with as they already play board games regularly at home. As such, a sense of togetherness is formed by this 'shared doing', framing father involvement in terms of companionship and fun. Similarly, Tom's account emphasises the physicality of his involvement with his children, taking part in an activity – boxing – which Tom already had a prior interest in. This prior knowledge or disposition towards the activities can, in turn, be seen to imbue the fathers with an 'expert' status, allowing them to guide or support their children during their endeavours. This sense of familiarity or expertise, then, is what allows the fathers to feel more comfortable and competent, building their fathering practice around activities they already 'know'.

While such activities were framed by the fathers as appealing to and fulfilling personal motivations, in recent years, the physical and playful activities of fathers have increasingly been seen to reflect cultural and political expectations of 'good' fathering (Faircloth 2014b). The promotion of children's physical and sporting endeavours, educational activities, and extra-curricular clubs in general, all represent cultural practices of concerted cultivation by parents (Vincent & Maxwell 2016; Lareau 2011). This involvement has typically been presented as a universal endeavour, particularly among political discourses (Edwards & Gillies 2011; Gillies et al 2017), however, academic research continues to trace an enduring association between cultivation practices and middle-class parents, with child engagement in these activities seen as a means of resourcing a middle-class self (Skeggs 2004; Vincent & Ball 2007). Although research suggests that fathers have been somewhat shielded by the 'intensive demands' of these concerted expectations (Shirani et al 2012), a wealth of literature in recent years has highlighted the beneficial impact for children when fathers take an active involvement in these practices (Ives 2018; Chung 2021). As such, there are increasing expectations for fathers to be visible figures in several aspects of their child's development, such as involvement in schooling, attendance at extra-curricular clubs, or supporting creative or arts endeavours (Gillies 2009; Vincent & Maxwell 2016; Vincent et al 2012). For the fathers with primary school aged children (4-11), the presentation of this visible and active involvement in cultivating practices was a prominent feature within their narratives. Of particular emphasis was this sense of 'resourcing' and the acquisition of skills associated with these activities.

> Both of my daughters now go to martial arts, which as well as teaching them how to defend themselves, it's got a mindfulness aspect to it, which is important. (Patrick)

> [T]hey do lots of clubs. 'Make-a-club', for example, which is a really good thing where they design and build their own things. And they do ninjas which I go and sit there with [them] (Harry)

Within the accounts above, child engagement is not simply framed as a 'fun' or 'shared' endeavour, but as fulfilling an educational function. Attendance at "martial arts", for example, is framed by Patrick as instilling not only physical skills for his daughters (the ability to "defend themselves") but also mental skills such as "mindfulness". Patrick's added assertion that such skills are "important", arguably represents a means for Patrick to demonstrate his understanding of these added benefits. Similarly, Harry's clarification that the "make-a-club" is a "really good thing" acts as a means of demonstrating the importance

of this group, not only for his children, but also as a demonstration of his ‘good’ fathering practice.

Patrick’s account in particular also fulfilled a performative function, articulating a distinctly middle-class portrait of family life. Throughout his narrative, Patrick referenced several different family activities, such as walks in the countryside, days out to museums, or engagement in arts and crafts, each imbued with a middle-class cultural capital.

> I find that although they’d rather have the TV turned on from dawn till dusk, when I actually spend time with them, making things, painting, arts and crafts, it’s really powerful. Their imaginations are growing; the eldest, her imagination, she’s reading Harry Potter and C.S. Lewis, it’s astounding.
>
> We recently took a drive to the south of France and back and just wanted to show them as much as possible. It’s possibly because I had that experience, like showing them caves and mountains, and all the ways that France changes as you drive through it. I think you want to give them a rich sort of scrapbook of memories as early as possible. (Patrick)

While Patrick initially refers to the potential difficulties in encouraging his daughters to engage in middle-class endeavours, this ultimately serves as a means of emphasising the importance and benefits of these activities. Patrick implies that when left to make their own choices, his daughters would prefer to sit and watch television all day; as such, his intervention is presented as “really powerful” as it engages them in educational activities which in turn support their development. Additionally, Patrick’s reference to his daughter reading “Harry Potter and C.S. Lewis” can be interpreted as a deliberate articulation of her growing cultural capital. This is further evidenced in his account of a family holiday to France. Here, Patrick’s articulation of his endeavours to provide a “rich scrapbook of memories” can be read as a demonstration of his involvement in the development of his daughters’ cultural knowledge and understanding, and in turn, a presentation of his ‘good’ parenting practice.

However, while the fathers were certainly aware of the potential benefits of their child’s participation in enriching activities, the degree to which the fathers took responsibility for organising and researching such suitable activities was questionable. Previous research focused on mothers’ practices of concerted cultivation highlight the “heavy investment” of time, energy and material resources, as mothers actively research, plan, and organise this engagement (Vincent & Ball 2007:1069; Vincent & Maxwell 2016). In line with previous

findings (e.g. Gillies 2009), the fathers primarily discussed extra-curricular activities more in terms of 'doing' – providing lifts, attending and watching, or participating alongside children – with the work of planning or organising not mentioned or discussed. What the fathers I interviewed appear to value, and where in their own accounts they excelled, however, was in terms of enthusiastically articulating their own role in concerted cultivation as a 'self-making' project; one in which children were granted the freedom and autonomy to make their own choices (Vincent & Ball 2007; Lupton & Barclay 1997). Tom, for example, spoke of his involvement in terms of providing opportunities to take part in a multitude of activities (Such 2006).

> I think it's important to try and give kids as much opportunity to do as many different things as possible and see what sticks you know. So they've had the chance to go bouldering, diving and swimming and biking and, you know, because you never know if someone's gonna be the next Tony Hawk but never gets bought a skateboard or whatever. You know, I've been a surfer for years, and I'm sure there are some incredible surfers who have never made it out of an urban or landlocked environment to get to the ocean, to get a relatively expensive wetsuit and surfboard and get in the sea and you know they might be just naturally just have an incredible affinity, same with skiing and stuff. […] So yeah, again, I think it comes back to my philosophy of trying to give them as much of a grounding or as many opportunities, as much of an understanding of lots of different things to see what direction they want to go rather than trying to say, 'You must go here! You must go here!'

In this account of the various activities his children take part in, Tom draws upon specific discourses of individualism and autonomy which promote the ideal of children being allowed to realise their potential through opportunity and choice (Vincent & Ball 2007). The focus is not upon enforcing an activity but stepping back and allowing his children to make their own decisions. Tom presents himself as feeling far more comfortable taking this approach as it appealed to his own 'free-spirited' sense of self – "it comes back to my philosophy". But it also had the added 'benefit' of avoiding the intensive investment outlined by mothers in other studies (Such 2006; Perrier 2012). Tom frames his role as facilitative rather enforcing, meaning he avoided any form of conflict or resistance from his children if they decided they do not like a particular activity. The burden of enforcement, in this sense, is seemingly pinned upon mothers, who are positioned as the parental 'other' within this context. As such, Tom did not feel the same sense of responsibility to try and maintain the interests of his children, regardless of the perceived benefits for development. As previous research demonstrates, this is, in part, due to the limited scrutiny of fathering practices, lower

expectations for their involvement, and less sense of responsibility for guiding development (Shirani et al 2012; Faircloth 2014b).

Harry makes similar reference to this ability to take a 'hands-off' approach regarding the enforcement of children's participation in activities.

> I like doing music and getting the kids to practice. It's quite interesting as someone who knows how much practise you've got to do [and] just being cool with them and letting them do it in their own way […] what you need to do is just leave them with it […] You gotta remember that when you're dealing with them as a parent, I think, [is] not to kind of crush them with your [imitates an exasperated noise].

Here, Harry presents the adoption of a laid-back approach as a viable and "healthier" alternative to a strict, regimented involvement in his daughter's music practice. While Harry asserts that ideally his daughter should be practising quite intensively, such an approach conflicts with what he perceives as the appropriate 'parental' response: to be "cool with them" and not "crush them" with expectations. The ability to adopt such an approach arguably reflects the apparent lack of scrutiny placed upon fathers, when compared to mothers, in terms of managing their child's accruement of skills; here, Harry is able to prioritise ideals of fun and enjoyment for children above the apparent necessity to anticipate longer-term benefits. Freedom and autonomy, in other words, were viable strategies for Harry when responding to expectations of concerted cultivation.

Ultimately, such accounts suggest a greater ability for fathers to step back from the expectation that they must concertedly invest their time and energy into the cultivation of their children, making their role seem much simpler, and with fewer repercussions, than the roles and responsibilities of mothers. A salient question then is whether such an approach would so readily reflect the cultural expectations of 'good' mothering. Arguably, the 'intensive focus' which underpins mothering ideals means that simply 'stepping back' and allowing their children freedom of choice, as with Tom and Harry, cannot be so easily justified by mothers or accepted by others (Hays 1996; Vincent & Ball 2007). There is a greater necessity for mothers to maintain control over their child's outcomes – and thus invest heavily in planning and guiding development – as failure arguably reflects more harshly upon them than their male partners (Hays 1996). This is not to suggest that the fathers in this study did not care about their child's development, more that they felt less pressure regarding specific developmental outcomes, instead focusing upon broader, and less intensive ideals, such as their child's overall happiness and well-being, or ensuring that their time

together is meaningful. In the following section, notions of meaningful father-child time are explored in greater detail, with a specific focus upon the divisive conceptualisation of "daddy days" and the connotations associated with this framing.

'Because it should feel special': Comparing narrative and in-situ accounts of father-child time

Expectations for fathers to fulfil breadwinning duties alongside a dedicated involvement in the lives of their children presents fathers with a delicate balancing act in their management of time. The long hours working culture in the United Kingdom, coupled with inadequate policy for the implementation of flexible working, means that many fathers are left with very little time to simply 'be' with their children (Gregory & Milner 2011). Enduring gendered parental trajectories, then, means that the sight of an 'involved' father is still regarded as a novelty, attracting the attention of 'others' in the social environment either to praise (see Miller 2011) or to scrutinize (see Doucet 2006) this presence. As previously noted, the fathers in this study adopted a variety of strategies for managing their 'father-child' time, such as through shift-work, homeworking, or 4-day working weeks. However, the ways in which this time together was framed and interpreted by the fathers was somewhat divisive. In particular, the notion of a "daddy day" – a distinct dedication to father-child time – was perceived in both positive and negative terms.

> I bumped into a guy I know yesterday in a hardware shop, and he's got a child pretty much the same age. I was buying some screws. He was with his daughter and I said, 'Ah a daddy day', and he said 'Yeah, yeah, it's my best day!' But he was still trying to, sort of, buy a set of hinges for a new cupboard door or something. (Patrick)

Patrick's perception of 'daddy day' is interesting in the way it conveys both the ordinariness of the event alongside the novelty of this time together. Here, Patrick utilises an encounter with an acquaintance to demonstrate how an everyday (masculine) task can be imbued with cultural meanings of 'involved' fatherhood. In this account, the idea of a 'daddy day' is greeted warmly and fondly, with the assertion by this fathering 'other' that it is his "best day" acting as a way of emphasising the enjoyment of this time together. Yet, the very 'everydayness' of Patrick's narrative, in turn, seeks to normalise the underlying novelty of the encounter; it highlights not only what fathers seemingly do with their children (e.g. go to hardware shops), but also emphasises that this occurs on a regular basis. The account, then, is performative across different levels of interpretation, portraying both masculinised *and*

involved identities. The notion of a 'daddy day' is ultimately utilised by Patrick as a discursive tool of empowerment, presenting an idealised image of fathering practice.

For Stewart, however, the notion of 'daddy day' was interpreted in far more condescending terms, with the 'novelty' of this time seemingly emphasising the secondary status of fatherhood. Here, Stewart recounts an incident at a local soft-play centre:

> [T]he thing that happened quite early on, they were like "ah daddy's day with the kid then", like, kind of on the assumption that every dad who was alone with their kid on a Saturday must've been part of a broken relationship [...] it's still not kind of assumed that given the choice the dad will take the kid out on his own. (Stewart)

From Stewart's perspective, the idea of "daddy's day" – as he describes it – carries specific connotations of fathers who are seemingly unwilling or are enforced to spend time with their children. In many ways, this draws upon traditional masculine assumptions of independence and the avoidance of care, which Stewart describes as being expressed by the non-specific 'other' in his narrative. This 'other', from Stewart's perspective, seemingly represents broader societal views on fathers, who seemingly do not acknowledge that some men (i.e. Stewart himself) *will* make the choice to spend time with their child. 'Daddy day', as Stewart perceives it, emphasises that a seeming majority of fathers are more likely to be absent in the lives of their children, and fails to acknowledge the 'everyday' care performed by fathers. In general, the fathers in this study presented their time with their children as regular occurrences to perhaps emphasise their presence alongside their children in response to perceived judgements such as those expressed by Stewart. Indeed, there was a sense that this time together formed important aspects of everyday family life. With this in mind, a nuanced analysis of father-child time is addressed below, exploring the patterns of meaning in fathers' narrated accounts, alongside the more 'fleeting' moments of this time as observed during 'go-along' interviews.

With regards to the narrated experiences of 'father-child' time, an underlying sense of uniqueness and importance was again expressed by the fathers in different ways. Extending upon the points addressed previously in this chapter, 'father-child' time was typically framed by participation in novel or fun activities and underpinned by the togetherness of the experience.

> They really like when we do sort of like 'boys' club days' […] So sometimes to give Kelly a bit of a break, I'll take the boys out for the day and we'll go over and do, you know, they've all

really got into a bit 'boogy-boarding' this summer, so, you know, down in the sea when there's been some waves, in their little wetsuits and stuff and just splashing about in the waves really and something I did a lot of when I was a kid. So, yeah, it's nice like that, but yeah, they really, we always go and do something. (Tom)

I say to Lily on a Sunday night, 'Do you know what day it is tomorrow?" and she'll say 'Daddy day!' And the kind of, the way that she answers pretty much says to me that I've got to make it extra special. So I take her swimming; they've both had swimming lessons, I take her for a half hour swimming lesson, and then generally find we just go out and do something […] I still think back to [daddy day] with Luna, there's some real golden moments. Going up to [countryside], singing along to a song on the radio together, you know, you just can't get that back. (Patrick)

The framings evident in these accounts of 'daddy day' or 'boys club day' are interesting in the sense that they reveal broad assumptions regarding the perceived roles of fathers. As evidenced in their shared phrasing, fatherhood, from Tom and Patrick's perspectives, is about taking children away from the domestic environment and 'doing something', turning this time together into an exciting and meaningful event. Primarily this is presented as being beneficial for their children, such as in the way Patrick seeks to convey a sense of excitement and anticipation in the response of his youngest daughter, Lily – this acts as a justification to make the day "extra special". In this sense, fathering is again imbued with an exciting mystique, distinguishing father activities from the more mundane tasks associated with motherhood. Such framings, in turn, imply that the engagement by mothers in 'fun' activities are overlooked or taken for granted, and hold less value when compared to fathers. This distinction between roles is hinted at further in Tom's statement where he describes spending time with his children to give his wife a "break"; this alludes to a secondary role for Tom, one in which he 'steps in' when necessary, to support a presumably exhausted partner. Interestingly, this secondary role is arguably framed as a sacrifice for Tom, implying he is doing his wife a 'favour' by taking part in a host of exciting activities with his children.

Support in this sense is not framed in terms of taking responsibility for household duties but is instead presented in terms of occupying the children. Patrick's narrative articulated such ideals here:

Because it should feel special, if I go home and handle the washing machine and just sit her in front of the TV, for me, I feel like I've failed a bit if I deploy the TV. There are moments where I've said to my wife, and we do squabble a bit, and I've used the expression 'childcare', and it

is *child* care, it's a day that you've decided not to earn any money and to dedicate to your child. (Patrick)

This notion of sacrifice is articulated by Patrick in the sense that he is 'dedicating' his time specifically to his daughter, time that could otherwise be spent earning money. Patrick suggests then that his *child*care must be prioritised to make this sacrifice of earnings worthwhile. While this is presented as a source of conflict between him and his wife, Patrick ultimately feels justified in his relegation and avoidance of household tasks – these are simply regarded as unimportant compared to time with his daughter. What this demonstrates, then, is that by framing father-child time as special and unique, fathers grant themselves the agency to construct and perform their fathering in a manner which appeals to personal motivations and dispositions. As such, fatherhood is broadly conceptualised – within narrative constructions at least – in terms of engaging and participating in a host of novel and exciting activities to make their involvement appear 'meaningful'. This also reiterates the fathers' perceptions and presentations of mothers, who are framed as the parental 'other' in these accounts and responsible for the 'hidden' labour in the home.

Patrick's account also implies underlying moral distinctions within this framing, with the use of the television presented as 'lazy' and deemed as a form of parenting 'failure' (Lareau 2002). His perception of fatherhood utilises (middle-class) cultural expectations of attentive, committed, and pro-active parenting strategies (Lareau 2011; Faircloth 2014b), which again serve as justification for his approach. Both Tom and Graham drew upon similar moralised ideas when discussing the distinction between the pro-active and passive activities of their children:

> You know, they like watching other people playing video games; what's that about? I was getting to the stage where honestly they're watching these two Californian guys playing this game, Roblox, and they're watching hours and hours and hours of it and that's all they wanted to watch […] both of them are really into natural history, and the natural world, all of that goes out the window to watch these guys playing this computer game. I was going mental, literally, I getting to the point of cancelling Amazon Prime just so they couldn't watch it anymore. (Tom)

> [T]he swimming is a good release for energy, keep her healthy, help develop her core. You know, you read and you see these children that are massively obese and just want to sit in front of the console […] we want her to be healthy; why shouldn't we set her up for the best she can have, verses someone who sits her in front of the TV, plugs in Peppa Pig… You hear about some of the negative publicity that you get around Peppa Pig, she's just a shitty little child, that

doesn't actually do what her parents ask. And it's like, is that really what you want your child to sit down and watch? (Graham)

Again, it is possible to interpret clear hierarchies in terms of 'acceptable' activities. In Tom's case, he presents the watching of video games as an all-consuming, monotonous activity with seemingly no discernible value, especially when contrasted with his children's enjoyment of natural history. His rhetorical questioning of these videos ("what's that about?") can be seen as a means of de-valuing the activity, while his frustration over the amount of time spent on the activity ("I was going mental") implies that it is a source of conflict, not only for everyday practice, but also Tom's presentation of 'good' fathering values. Arguably, Tom would prefer that his children engage pro-actively in educational activities, as these reflect Tom's idealised perception of his children's character, and by extension, frame his fathering practices within 'good' fathering ideals, such as those promoted by political discourses (Shirani et al 2012; Vincent & Maxwell 2016, Main & Bradshaw 2016; see also Chapter 2).

While Graham also presents a hierarchy of activities, he explicitly presents a contrast between his perceived values of attentiveness and responsibility and an imagined perception of uninvolved, passive parenting styles. Echoing Patrick's earlier account, Graham seeks to establish what he perceives to be the negative connotations of passive parenting, evoking images of what he perceives as parental 'failure' – such as child obesity or poor child behaviour – to emphasise his own 'good', pro-active fathering. The use of rhetorical questioning here presents this as a moral debate, with Graham calling into question the assumed values of parents who do not structure or guide their child's activities. Graham's own perceived status as an attentive and engaged father, in turn, is utilised to elevate the value of his fathering practices, performatively demonstrating his pro-active ideals under the guise of moralised distinctions.

Yet, it is important in this sense not to lose sight of the 'idealised' nature of these accounts. Patrick, for example, reflects upon what he describes as "*golden moments*", memories that are held in high esteem and represent the very best aspects of being a father. The narratives, then, can be seen as only partial accounts of fatherhood, implying other overlooked practices, perceptions, or events which are unaccounted for. The use of 'go-along' interviews in this study, however, allowed for greater accessibility to these perhaps more mundane or 'fleeting' moments of fathering practice, providing an added layer of detail and context to accounts (Wissö 2018). These included moments of care and attentiveness, physical embodiment and exertion, negotiations and compromise, and times where fathering practice goes 'wrong',

where idealised narratives are challenged. The major difference in the ‘go-along’ interview context, when compared to semi-structured interviews, was that fathering was performed ‘in-situ’ (i.e. in present time contexts), presenting an element of unpredictability to the encounters not typically experienced in verbal narrations of practice. As outlined below, the fathers were not simply managing their own performances, but responding to situations outside of their direct control, such as the behaviours of their children. In other words, while verbal accounts can allow some narrative licence to construct encounters in idealised ways, the ’real-time’ encounters captured in ‘go-along’ interviews present what can be regarded as a more ‘grounded’ account of in-situ contexts.

Fathering ‘in-situ’

I draw upon my observations with Stewart and Zack here to demonstrate the strategies and behaviours utilised in these interactions with their children. Both were fathers to boys of similar ages (between 2-3 years old), so encountered similar situations of conflict management and negotiation such as their child feeling tired or irritable, feeling over-excited, or not following instructions. What was interesting here were the particular personas employed within these situations – and the varying degrees of success in these performances. In both instances, I had arranged to meet the fathers and accompany them and their children on a trip to their respective local parks, however, upon our meeting the two children represented rather contrasting moods. When meeting Stewart, for example, his son Freddie had fallen asleep in his pushchair on the journey from their home, meaning we sat in a nearby public garden while Freddie napped. When Freddie began to stir and wake up, Stewart found himself negotiating a specific set of circumstances and employing particular practices and personas as a means of energising Freddie. Waking from his nap, Freddie seemed somewhat tired and disorientated, rubbing his eyes and whining incoherently. To help rouse him, Stewart employed a bright and excited tone, suggesting that Freddie run around the grass. Now standing, Freddie still appeared fairly unsure of his surroundings, his eyes half-closed as he adjusted to the bright sunshine. Employing a slightly softer tone, Stewart suggested walking to the park, to which Freddie nodded in agreement, before burying his head his dad’s arm for a cuddle, clearly still tired and irritable. However, Stewart was still resistant to Freddie’s demands for closeness and affection, instead asking if he would like a “shoulder carry” – his tone of voice now inferring a degree of compassion and compromise, as well as air of frustration.

Freddie was far more agreeable to this idea, though, smiling and lifting his arms into the air. Crouching down, Stewart launched Freddie up and over his head, audibly straining in the process. He paused for a moment, gripping his feet into the floor, then lifted himself back to standing. Clutching Freddie's legs with his left hand, Stewart turned to the pushchair, using his free hand to push it along. While not a seemingly practical compromise, this strategy for dealing with Freddie's tiredness was fairly successful. Sat bobbing atop of Stewart's shoulders, Freddie began to appear and sound much happier, making several random observations about the cars, buses and lorries that passed us, and telling me about the different animals on his shorts.

By way of contrast, my initial meeting with Zack and his son Buddy was somewhat livelier. They lived only a short walk from our meeting spot, and where the local park was also only a short distance away, Zack allowed Buddy to ride off ahead on his balance bike, avoiding any opportunity for him to slip into a nap. As a relatively young father in his mid-twenties, Zack seemed to embrace a youthful, more nonchalant approach to parenting, granting Buddy the freedom to explore and take risks. This is not to suggest Zack was not careful, however. While Zack was generally quite calm and laid-back about Buddy riding off in front of us, he still had to remain vigilant, especially when crossing roads, shouting firm instructions for Buddy to 'stop' and 'wait'. In those moments, Zack seamlessly slipped into contrasting personas, taking on a serious and authoritative demeanour when approaching the road, before enthusiastically encouraging Buddy to ride faster when back on the pavement. Buddy was mostly compliant to his father's demands, but sought to resist these where he could, stretching the distance between us on the pavement or asking to cross the road on his own, grasping a sense of his autonomy.

As both of the trips with the fathers progressed, we encountered similar scenarios in which the fathers were required to handle some form of conflict with their children, employing behaviour management strategies that had been otherwise overlooked across narrated accounts of fathering practice. Stewart had earlier pre-empted this as a potential issue; he explained that the local park had a small paddling pool but, in his haste, had forgotten Freddie's swimming shorts, so needed to employ a series of distraction techniques to avoid Freddie wanting to go for a swim. While at the park, Stewart directed Freddie to the range of different equipment – supporting him on the slide, cheering as he climbed across the climbing frame, and pushing him on a car-shaped spring rocker. Freddie still appeared quite dreary as

he played, however, and was mostly unenthused by his dad’s encouragement. He eventually wandered over to the sandpit and mumbled despondently about changing his clothes:

> Stewart: You want to change your clothes? Do you want this shirt instead? Oh you want your swimming clothes. [To JP] I did say! [laughs] [To Freddie] Maybe we go home and get your swimming clothes, I didn't bring them. Sorry I didn't bring your swimming clothes, but we can go home and play in water?
>
> [Freddie Cries]
>
> Stewart: I'm sorry, I didn’t think we'd be coming out for a swim. Shall we go home and get them then come back?
>
> Freddie: Yeah [Whilst crying]

Knowing that Freddie’s rather subdued sulking was primarily influenced by feeling tired – alongside his own error in forgetting the swimming shorts – Stewart again adopted a softer, apologetic tone as he sought to console and comfort his son. While seemingly not overly happy, Freddie was still mostly compliant and did not seek to challenge Stewart, so this apparently mild conflict called for an empathetic resolution from Stewart.

However, with Zack and Buddy, the conflict stemmed more from Buddy’s disobedience and challenging behaviour, requiring a more forceful and sterner response from Zack. The conflict occurred when we had stopped for a coffee in a nearby café. With me and Zack engaged in a conversation, Buddy engaged in a series of attention-seeking behaviours, vying for his dad’s sole focus, resisting the parameters of the interview context. My presence, in this sense, was seemingly the source of the conflict, an audience for Buddy to perform to:

> Zack ignored Buddy as he crawled around the floor and under the table next to us, before popping out at the other side with an old piece of crust from a sandwich in his hand. He starred towards his dad, smiled wryly, and ate the crust.
>
> “Why would you eat that? That’s disgusting. Showing off today are you? Showing off to a new person?” Zack moaned, aghast at the behaviour. (Zack Fieldnote Extract)

Zack was visibly irritated by Buddy’s behaviour, but tried to remain calm and firm, instructing Buddy to sit down and eat the chocolate brownie bought for him. Buddy was seemingly uninterested by his treat now, instead persisting with his attention seeking behaviour:

> Buddy got down from his seat, circled the table and picked up a large plastic train he had brought over earlier. He started to gently roll the train back and forth on the table before quickly launching it towards the other side, sending it crashing to the floor. Zack pointed his finger and calmly told Buddy not to crash the toys as they weren't his. Buddy smiled mischievously. Zack had taken the bait.
>
> "Why can't I crash it?" Buddy asked.
>
> "Because they're the cafes toys"
>
> "Why are they here?" Buddy continued.
>
> "So you can play with them. Why don't you roll it across the floor instead of the table? It can go for further."
>
> Buddy stood for a moment. He pulled the train back towards him.
>
> "I don't think that's the floor, is it?" Zack said with growing impatience, "if you want the train, you'll have to roll it on the floor."
>
> Zack glared at Buddy, who still held the train ready to be released.
>
> "I'm not going to roll it on the table!" Buddy insisted, before launching the train across the table again.
>
> Zack stood up sharply. "Right, lets go!" he scowled.
>
> "No, no, no!" Buddy pleaded, his eyes welling up, "I don't want to go!"
>
> "Are you going to sit down and behave? Are you going to eat your cake?"
>
> Buddy slumped in his chair. "I want it in a box" he grizzled. (Zack Fieldnote Extract)

This encounter in the café was interesting as an example of the everyday behavioural issues Zack must navigate with Buddy. While his description of such situations implied they were relatively simple to deal with, in practice this behaviour management seemed much harder to tackle, with Zack required to adopt a range of personas which conflicted with his idealised relaxed approach. Buddy's persistent misbehaviour meant Zack had to adopt a far stricter tone, appearing more animated in his behaviour, standing up sharply and raising his voice to shock Buddy. Although Zack was required to embody an approach that did not represent his ideal character, importantly, he did not maintain this persona. Upon leaving the café, Zack did not harbour any lingering frustrations and instead suggested taking Buddy into the

playground. While this may seem like a reward for Buddy's disobedience in the café, Zack was patient and understanding enough to realise that Buddy's behaviour was not intentional but rather a product of feeling tired or feeling confused about my presence. In other words, a key element of Zack's fathering practice was an emotional intelligence, an empathetic understanding of his son's feelings.

In summary, this analysis has interpreted key points of contrast in the conceptualisation of father-child time or so-called 'daddy days'. The narrated accounts of Tom and Patrick present a greater emphasis upon the uniqueness of their involvement and the novelty of activities engaged in, especially in contrast to mothers' practices, evoking a sense of the sentimental value to this time between father and child. The experience and embodiment of this time together is, as such, presented as crucial not only in the construction of fathering identities, but also in the perceived happiness and enjoyment of their children. 'Daddy days', in other words, are regarded as meaningful or "*extra special*", underpinned by classed ideals of pro-active parenting. Yet, the in-situ experiences of fatherhood offer an alternative reading of father-child time, in which the performance of idealised practices does not run quite so smoothly. The present time context, in this sense, provided a sharper focus on the nuances of father-child time and the multiple, and often contrasting, practices and personas employed in everyday situations. Both Stewart and Zack were not granted the luxury of emphasising "golden moments" and instead performed their fathering in more 'grounded' contexts, encountering moments of conflict, negotiation, and compromise in interactions with their children. Ultimately, my point here is to establish the different perspectives upon father-child time and the meanings of 'being there' across different contexts. While narrated accounts can idealise and reify the value of involvement, emphasising the 'novel' role of fathers, in-situ experiences suggest that fathering practices are more nuanced, and underpinned by a negotiation of the 'ideal' and situational conflicts beyond their control.

'You're on baby-sitting duties today, then?': Navigating 'gendered' spaces, scrutiny, and assumptions

Despite changing cultural ideals regarding fathers' involvement in caring practices, observations of the fathers movements through different spaces has revealed enduring perceptions of father incompetency or questions over their commitment and intentions when performing a caring role. Much of this scrutiny – in the form of assumptions, judgement, and gatekeeping practices by women – derives from the enduring 'gendered' nature of parenting spaces, or what Doucet (2006:704) describes as "estrogen-filled worlds". Within such spaces,

fathers are required to navigate a series of cultural and discursive assumptions regarding their everyday practices, whereby their defining feature is their male embodiment (Doucet 2006). As theorised by Allen and Hawkins (1999), a masculine presence in traditionally female-dominated settings can be perceived as a threat to the maternal primacy of care. Alternatively, fathers in feminine contexts may also be perceived as requiring support or guidance from more experienced parenting 'experts' (Puhlman & Pasley 2013). In both cases, however, fathers are regarded as 'out-of-place' and disrupting the normality of social interaction (Doucet 2006). As such, fathers must find ways to understand these settings, and learn how to navigate them while seeking to maintain the social 'norms'. While they were not treated with hostility, the interactions recounted as part of this study demonstrate the perceived novelty of the fathers' presence in particular spaces. In this section, four specific 'moments' of practice are analysed to demonstrate the variety of ways parenting spaces are narrated by fathers, highlighting not only their performances in these settings, but also the ways in which their presence was interpreted, observing the fathers' accounts of the perceived praise, scrutiny, or condescension they encountered.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of condescension towards the fathers was evident in Zack's account of attending pre-school playgroups. Here, he describes not only the attention he garnered as the "only male", but the types of judgement and assessment he received from the other mothers:

> [W]hen he was younger we used to go to a lot of playgroups because it was before he went to nursery, and the only way I'd meet people was by going to playgroups and I found that very strange because I was often the only male there. I remember one woman saying to me 'oh you're on babysitting duties today then?' and I was like, 'no, I'm a parent' […] so I used to get quite annoyed about it because it used to bug me, but now it doesn't bother me. But the majority of the time I am the only male parent.

Within this example, Zack describes how he is required to navigate two juxtaposed subject positions. On the one hand, he seeks to fulfil his primary caregiver duties by taking his son to a place where he can play and socialise with other children, while also seeking to develop his own parenting networks. There is a clear sense here of Zack narrating his performance of 'good' parenting expectations, perhaps as a means of highlighting the perceived 'normality' of this practice. However, his presence as the "only male parent" creates an alternative position in which his parenting practice is open to scrutiny; in this sense, Zack presents

himself as a parenting 'other', emphasising the potential 'hardships' he may encounter in these spaces.

In contrast, Dylan's account implied a more positive experience navigating parenting spaces. For our 'go-along' interview, I accompanied Dylan and his infant daughter, Caitlin, to their local park. The area had been renovated a few years earlier, with the old pond dug out and paved over, and replaced by a new family-friendly water feature – multiple water fountains were dug into the ground and shot jets of water into the air in unison. Caitlin really enjoyed the water, Dylan explained, so it was one of the regular places they visited. The layout of this section of the park was seemingly designed for use by families. Opposite the water foundations sat a café serving sandwiches and pizza, with benches in the outdoor patio adorned by a wooden veranda. On this particular August Sunday, the benches were populated by parents while their children ran between the jets of water jumping and splashing around. What was clear, however, was that the majority of the parents were mothers, sat with a coffee, and on hand to provide a warming towel and drinks and snacks for their children. While Dylan was certainly part of a minority of fathers present, he claimed he never felt out-of-place among the multitude of mothers, and was seemingly afforded respect and credibility for spending time with his daughter.

> I think, normally, I sort of, to be honest, when I'm with her, if I like come down here, it's normally like, I get a lot of like sort of kudos looks from mothers, sort of like ah good on you. I don't really know to be honest, I've never been made to feel, I've personally never been made to feel unwelcome or anything like that. (Dylan)

The interactions and perceptions outlined by Dylan here reveal the apparent intricacies of this complex gendered landscape. While Dylan implies he has not been made to feel uncomfortable as a father in this space, the "kudos looks" he receives from the mothers again emphasises the novelty associated with his involvement. Dylan's 'being there' attracts attention; however, in contrast to Zack's perceptions, the sense of praise that Dylan interprets from this attention allows him to feel comfortable and confident navigating the space. Yet, this award of credibility can arguably be seen as a form of maternal gatekeeping practice; an acknowledgement that Dylan meets the criteria to access the space without scrutiny or judgement.

While he was not the only father to regularly attend the park with his child, Dylan implied a subtle difference between his own practices and the attitudes of the 'other' fathers:

> On a weekend, yeah, normally, I don't see many dads with like on their own with babies sort of Caitlin's age, like me, that's a little bit rare, but I normally do see dads with slightly older kids, who've obviously been told like "right, go to the park and play with your kids for a couple of hours" […] Sometimes, I dunno, sometimes I get the impression with dads, it's almost just like it feels like a bit of job to them sometimes, I guess, kind of some dads feel like "urgh" (Dylan)

The sense that Dylan is 'different' from other fathers is further enhanced by a comparison between their practices. While Dylan presents himself as enthusiastic and willing to take on care of an infant, the 'other' fathers are presented as being unenthused by their role, and thus a subject of scrutiny. Dylan's account, in this sense, seeks to distinguish his pro-active performance, with the supposedly 'passive' involvement of the 'other' present fathers. This difference in approach means that Dylan is unable to relate to these fathers and instead seeks to reflect a model of parenting performed by the mothers in the park. While this seemingly suggests he is rejecting a traditionally masculine form of fatherhood, this nevertheless can be seen to reaffirm not only maternal primacy for care but also masculine values of competitiveness through his assertions of 'good' and 'bad' fathering. Dylan's validation as a father or a caregiver derives from the mothers around him, implying that they are the standard bearers for parenting practice; in other words, he is reliant upon the practices and judgements of mothers to inform his own fathering and caregiving.

Dylan's account of his attentive and enthusiastic parental attitudes implies an underlying sense of narrative performativity – a *demonstration* of 'good' fathering practice. This performative aspect was also evident within Graham's account of his experiences within parental spaces.

> I do 'baby gymnastics' with Lauren on a Thursday morning, where she gets to, I suppose, explore and do different things. So there's other children there as well, and she gets to use gymnastics equipment. I look at it as, it's just an opportunity for her to do something that I'm with. At the moment, she hasn't got the co-ordination to do it by herself, but when she gets older, I can just sit down and watch her do it. But it's just nice to do something with her […] there's probably one or two fathers who come along with their wife; so I don't know if it's a case of they feel that they shouldn't be doing it by themselves? (Graham)

Like Dylan previously, Graham presents an image of his pro-active involvement with his daughter, describing how he supports her as she develops her "co-ordination", but also how this time together seemingly strengthens their relationship, and alludes to the importance of 'father-child' time discussed above. Again, Graham uses this narrative presentation to

contrast his navigation of the space with 'other' seemingly less confident fathers. Graham's role here is seemingly constructed as his own; he implies that he is not reliant on his partner to 'choreograph' or 'co-ordinate' his time with his daughter. In many ways, this appeals to his sense of masculinised fathering identity, discussed in the previous chapter, emphasising his own autonomy in contrast to the other 'directed' fathers. Graham sought to emphasise this later in his account:

> I am the chief carer, I am looking after her. There's that sense of pride that actually, my wife suggested I take her along every Thursday and do that and hopefully she enjoys it. I've got videos of her giggling and laughing, progress from where she's learning, specific things, like she learned to do a forward roll, which is, you know, show them what you can do. It's that sense of pride that I'm teaching her something.

Here, Graham seeks to demonstrate the variety of ways in which he embodies the ideal of the "chief carer", emphasising his performative role. This is evident, for example, in his description of how he captures videos of his daughter "giggling and laughing" which represent tangible evidence of his daughter's enjoyment and his role within this. The image of him capturing this event is also symbolic – it is a demonstration to those around him that he is present and engaged. Even his daughter's successful skill acquisition – learning to do a forward roll – is reformulated as a demonstration of Graham's involvement, acting as a "sense of pride" that this is something *he* has taught her. The central focus, then, is upon Graham's performance in this setting, with his role reified in the narrative. Yet, despite this perceived central role, Graham also reveals that the event itself was arranged by his wife; this 'father-child' time, in other words, was a product of his wife's choreography, as part of the enduring maternal responsibility for co-ordinating father involvement.

The sense that these fathers were ultimately navigating 'maternal worlds' was an underlying theme within their accounts. Yet while the accounts above relate primarily to symbolic performances within these settings, for Stewart, his experiences of these 'worlds' were framed in relation to seemingly deep-rooted structural influences.

> I mean the weirdest one is when we go out as a family and we go to somewhere which hasn't got changing rooms for a dad so it's like, you go and change him, I can't that's hassle you go and change him. There's no facilities for me to change him, you know, that weird, it puts that weird kind of, it forces you into more stereotypical roles. (Stewart)

The limited availability of changing facilities is presented as important for Stewart as it "forces" him and his partner into "stereotypical roles" and creates "hassle" if he wants to take responsibility for changing his son's nappy. This "hassle", Stewart explained, often took the form of requesting permission of staff members to use the changing facilities in the women's toilets resulting in "strange looks" when entering or emerging having changed his son's nappy. What is evident here are the ways in which social convention can be structured by physical, gendered landscapes, preventing or limiting access to particular spaces. For Stewart, then, this structure of space restricts his realm of possibility and the availability of caring practice. Yet, Stewart suggested there were relatively simple solutions to such issues:

> So it's interesting, [games shop] where I play games, I bought them a changing, not a full table, but a mat just to go into their disabled toilets and they got so much kudos from other dads [that] they even had it there. It was amazing and it fully encouraged dads to take their kids and go and have a coffee there and maybe a cake for the kid or whatever because there was at least a decent, clean changing mat, admittedly it was on the floor but it was still a decent mat just there.

While Stewart perhaps draws upon narrative licence to emphasise the impact of this changing mat, it nevertheless suggests that social and cultural change can be enacted through greater accessibility to caring practices enabled by material changes to social spaces. In this case, by creating access to the changing facilities, more fathers were encouraged to use the space with their children and, in turn, recognising fathers as embodying care responsibilities.

These four moments of fathering experience ultimately reveal key features of gendered spaces. Firstly, is the degree to which father presence and visibility still attracts different forms of attention (Miller 2011; Doucet 2006). For the fathers, this attention was interpreted in different ways, with Dylan perceiving the "looks" from other mothers as supportive, enhancing his sense of credibility and access to the 'space'. While Zack, on the other hand, perceived such attention from mothers on negative terms, with the assumption he was "baby-sitting" rather than "parenting" regarded as a slight on his attitudes towards involvement. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is that this perceived attitudinal perception by mothers is also reflected in Dylan and Graham's scrutiny of fathering 'others'. Both fathers imply that acceptance within parental landscapes requires meeting a set of performative standards. In this sense, presence alone is not sufficient; instead, fathers must demonstrate their pro-active involvement to be accepted. There is an element of identity work which arguably underpins this assumption. For Dylan, this means framing his fathering identity in

line with what he perceives as mothering expectations; while Graham relies more heavily upon middle-class assumptions of involvement, demonstrating an active interest in supporting development. Nevertheless, it is perceived expectations which seemingly structure the conditions for acceptance in both cases. Yet, despite this performative work, it was still the case that fathering expectations were defined by structural constraints and limitations. As Stewart's account suggests, fathers often find themselves navigating structural barriers, such as accessibility to changing facilities, which present traditional gendered assumptions of care. Performativity, or an emphasis upon fathering care, is imperative within parenting landscapes owing to the apparent gendered contradictions encountered by the fathers in this study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, fatherhood ideals, expectations, and practices have been explored in relation to outdoor and leisure contexts, revealing key discursive and material landscapes within which fathering is performed and constructed. Of particular importance here are the nuanced ways fatherhood is represented in both narrative and in-situ performances, offering, at times, wholly different perspectives of fathering practice. Within the narrative accounts, for example, it is possible to identify enduring discourses of masculinity and social class in the construction of idealised fathering identities. Ideals of 'involvement' in this sense were constructed with regards to masculinised leisure practices, engaging in activities which appealed to the fathers' own established interests, providing a sense of comfort and competence within such environments. The types of activities recounted in narratives, in turn, appealed to middle-class framings of 'good' parental practice and involvement. Through these accounts the fathers sought to demonstrate their awareness of the benefits for their children in such engagement, and their role in facilitating this cultural expectation. There was also an underlying sense that this involvement needed to be emphasised, such as in the framing of father-child time as 'daddy days'. Father involvement is again presented in terms of its uniqueness, novelty, and importance, constructing this time with their children as meaningful and valuable. Father-child time, in other words, is reified and distinguished from everyday parenting practices, creating an agentic space in which other, more mundane, domestic chores can legitimately be avoided – from the perspectives of the fathers, at least. What this implies, then, is a distinction between the fun and togetherness of fathering interactions, and the practical and mundane responsibilities of mothering, owing to the time dedicated to this involvement and the parental practices emphasised.

Accounts garnered in-situ, however, offer an alternative perspective, grounded in mundane performances rather than idealised or "golden" moments presented in narratives. A key distinction here lies in the fathers' limited control over the environments and social actors involved in the encounters, as their performances of parental practices were enacted in response to the behaviour of their children. These were not 'perfect' accounts, in this sense, demonstrating the multiple personas employed in different situations. They were not framed by idealised discourses of masculinity or class, but rather out of the necessity of the moment, responding to the dynamics of the encounter. Yet the fathers' interpretation of these in-situ moments also reveals the underlying 'gendered' formation of parental spaces. The novelty of their presence as fathers was felt and interpreted in the ways these spaces were navigated, and the perceived expectations for practice that needed to be adhered to. There was a sense that their practice was being monitored to ensure performative standards were met; what is important here was that this monitoring was perceived as a practice of both mothers *and* fathers, performed through praise or scrutiny. Unlike the narrative accounts, then, the perceptions of the fathers emphasised their practices and performances of 'fitting in', demonstrating the ways in which social conventions were adhered to. What is discernible, then, are the different ways in which the normative dimensions of parenting 'spaces' can be interpreted by fathers, shaping the boundaries of expected and acceptable practice. Moreover, it is possible to interpret the ways in which fathers can legitimate their presence in these spaces, such as adhering to middle-class conceptions of 'good' fathering.

In the following chapter, the gendering of parenting landscapes is explored in further detail, focusing upon the ideals underpinning 'paternal spaces' – groups or services designed for the use by fathers alone. The aim here is to explore the perceptions and practices of fatherhood in contexts that are, to a certain extent, disembedded from maternal influences and founded upon distinct paternal cultures. In other words, insights regarding the social construction of fatherhood in specific paternal settings are investigated, observing the ways that such spaces are navigated and embodied, alongside negotiations of discursive expectations.

Chapter 6: ‘Dad Groups’: Constructing Fatherhood in Paternal Spaces

Shifts in the ideals and practices of men’s fathering, in recent years, have primarily been negotiated and navigated across gendered contexts (Miller 2011; Doucet 2006; Dermott & Miller 2015). For men seeking to fulfil the culturally revered status of the ‘involved father’, they must not only make sense of enduring masculine expectations, such as the necessity to fulfil breadwinner duties, alongside limited structural or policy support, such as limited access to flexible working or poorly paid paternity leave (Gregory & Milner 2011), but must also find ways to effectively navigate ‘women-centred’ spaces such as child welfare services, ante and post-natal education classes, or parent-and-child ‘play groups’ (Ives 2014; Dolan 2014; Hanna 2018). The past two decades have seen an increased focus among early years service providers to support fathers’ access to parenting groups and educational classes, in part due to shifts in government discourse towards parental determinism and positive child outcomes (Lee 2014; Edwards & Gillies 2011; Department for Education 2018; Early Education 2012). Yet fathers’ access to these settings has been met by a series of challenges and/or barriers, including limited awareness of services, competing work commitments, and gender-based assumptions such as a mother-orientated focus or conflicts with hegemonic ideals of fathering (Bayley et al 2009; Dolan 2014). These factors contribute to the formation of what Doucet (2006:704) describes as “complex maternal worlds” in which fathers are perceived as outsiders and cast as suspicious (see also Chapter 5). Fathers who are able to access such services must, in turn, find ways to navigate these spaces in ways that are deemed acceptable and in line with perceived gendered expectations (Doucet 2006). However, the increased availability of ‘father-only’ services in recent years presents the opportunity for the formation of *paternal* spaces in which fathering ideals and practices can be produced without overt maternal scrutiny. A critical understanding and scrutiny of such contexts is an important focus of this chapter, then, as paternal spaces can offer crucial perspectives upon socially constructed meanings of fatherhood, alongside in-situ perceptions of fathering practice.

The findings presented in this chapter derive from participant observations conducted at three ‘dad groups’ in South-East England. This observational data is supplemented by findings from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders at these groups, alongside informal conversations with attendees at the different sessions. Pseudonyms have been used as a means of differentiating between the three groups, while also seeking to capture the overall focus of the sessions. While the groups shared many characteristics – each ran once a month

on Saturdays and offered child-orientated activities – there were key nuances in the format of each group. Dads Sing, for example, was a sing-along session lasting 30 minutes in a library, in which fathers and their children were led by a facilitator in a rendition of traditional nursery rhymes. The structured format of this group differed significantly from the 'free-play' activities provided at Dads Play and Dads Together, each offering a series of crafting, imaginative, and physical activities for the child and their fathers to engage with. While these activities were similar, there were also key differences in the emphasis of these 'stay-and-play' sessions, with Dads Play seeking to facilitate one-to-one play between fathers and their children, and Dads Together encouraging more distant play, allowing the fathers to gather, talk, and develop friendships.

The focus of this chapter is to explore the various ways in which meanings of fatherhood are produced within these different settings, alongside an understanding of how fathers navigate these expectations through their in-situ practices. Three key themes are explored in relation to these aims. Firstly, the norms and values of these groups, as presented by key stakeholders, are traced to develop a sense of the underlying culture of each of the three settings, comparing and contrasting these ideals. Underlying social and political motivations are traced specifically within this section. Secondly, fathering practices within the dad groups are outlined, identifying the different ways the attending fathers made sense of the settings and their role within it. A key focus of this section are the various social conventions in relation to involvement and embodiment through which fathering practices were performed. Finally, observations of father-to-father interactions are discussed, tracing how social interactions are navigated. Of particular focus here is the extent to which these parenting networks are embraced or avoided, exploring the impact of hegemonic masculine ideals regarding the rejection of social support and friendships.

Constructing 'Culture': Exploring norms and ideals within 'dad groups'

Exploring a 'dad group' as a social and cultural space offers a unique perspective on the discursive and spatial influences in the construction of fatherhood meanings. As discussed in the previous chapter, the in-situ experiences of the fathers in this study typically involved navigating 'maternal worlds' in which social conventions and expectations were defined by gendered ideals. The 'dad group' is interesting as a sociological concept, then, as it represents a *paternal* environment – a space specifically for fathers with minimal maternal influence in shaping norms and expectations. While the absence of mothers from the physical space implies that fathers have an opportunity to forge a paternal identity of their own making, the

groups themselves were not free from internal or external social forces. As will be explored below, dad group cultures were influenced by a series of assumptions, discourses, and material factors which shaped and dictated fatherhood ideals. In this section, interview data with dad group stakeholders is analysed alongside observational data to explore how the parameters of plausible fathering practices were defined by dad group cultures.

What was initially interesting about navigating the three groups was just how different the spaces felt as physical and cultural landscapes. Each group was underpinned by its own unique sense of character, pertaining to particular values and social conventions. This sense of character within the spaces was imbued by an overarching 'purpose' of the groups as defined by the key stakeholders. In general terms, the purpose of the groups was relatively simple: providing a space for father involvement with their children; however, meanings of this 'involvement' were approached and justified through specific discursive framings. The stakeholders at Dads Sing, for example, explicitly highlighted the influence of political discourses regarding the positive influence of fathers on child outcomes in defining the purpose of the sessions.

> [A]t council level within early years there are things which trickle down from government saying 'this is what you need to focus on' as all early years settings. At that time, there was a big piece of work around dads, this was around 10 years ago and [previous co-ordinator] decided to put on an extra session. (Jessica – Dads Sing Stakeholder)

> There's a lot of evidence around singing being an important part of a child's development, for co-ordination, for language development, cognitive development, and also that communal sense of being part of a group. (Hugh – Dads Sing Facilitator)

In their accounts, both Jessica and Hugh utilise political discourses of early intervention (Gillies et al 2017) and 'fixer father' narratives (Ives 2018) when framing the underlying motivations and justifications for running the sessions. Notions of early intervention, for example, can be observed in Hugh's reference to "evidence around singing" as a supportive intervention for child development. Specifically, Hugh's focus on the supposed benefits for "language", "cognitive", and social development reflects the deterministic rhetoric of early intervention discourse in which effective early years development is attributed with preventing poor child outcomes in the future (Early Intervention Foundation 2018; Field 2008; Allen 2011). However, Jessica explicitly relates to father involvement in reference to 'evidence' in the form of "work around dads"; here, the motivation to provide fathering

services is justified by an evidence base regarding the benefits of father involvement (Chung 2021; Allen & Daly 2007; Amodia-Bidakowska et al 2020). Arguably, the meanings and purpose of the group are underpinned by two concurrent narratives: the necessity for intensive early years education and the importance or benefits of father involvement during this process. What seemingly provides the group with greater value, I would suggest, is the esteemed status that accompanies the notion of father involvement. By targeting fathers the group appeals to the 'problem-solving' narrative underpinning political discourses of involvement, enhancing the value or 'uniqueness' of the group (Ives 2018; Chung 2021; CSJ 2016).

This status of fatherhood is also evident within the accounts of stakeholders at both Dads Play and Dads Together. In the extracts below, the importance of father involvement for positive social change in relation to gender is emphasised in defining the meaning and purpose the sessions:

> I think the empowerment of fathers and male carers, encouraging boys to be carers, even baby boys, […] is so important. I think the world is finally getting somewhere with anti-racist life, anti-homophobic life, but they just don't see how gender-bias, gender stereotyping can damage children, damage their futures, damage their chances, and I think it's dreadful. (Sue – Dads Play Stakeholder)

> [Men are] struggling with this 'toxic masculinity' where you just get on with things and don't talk about it and don't be ridiculous, don't be a pussy, it's just really wrong […] There's a space there for dads to put their hands up and say 'I'm struggling, I missed sports day, my boss is a prick', 'I can't get home in time, I haven't seen my kids in 6 weeks'. There is no other space like that where men feel comfortable to put their hand up and say they're struggling. We have fun but there's also an important message behind it. (Martin – Dads Together Stakeholder)

Again, 'fixer father' narratives are evident within these accounts. Sue, for example, refers to father "empowerment" as carers as an important challenge to gendered inequalities, to ultimately improve the life chances of children. Similar to the 'early intervention' discourse, father involvement is framed here in relation to improving or supporting child welfare and well-being, evoking ideals of individual responsibility underpinning both hegemonic masculine ideals and neoliberalism (Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012; Davies & Bansel 2007). Martin, on the other hand, seemingly rejects key notions of hegemonic masculinity, such as stoicism or self-reliance, suggesting that the meaning of the group is underpinned by notions of masculine support or care. Again, the unique value of the sessions derives from the

involvement of fathers, creating a paternal space to talk that they are seemingly otherwise lacking.

What these accounts all shared, then, was the sense that the groups were created to serve some form of social function or intervention (Ives 2018), supporting both children and fathers to challenge different perceived social inequalities. These motivations, in turn, were evident in discussions of the practical aspects of the groups, such as the planning and implementation of the available activities. Again, specific discourses were utilised in the discussion of the practical elements of the group. At Dads Sing, for example, the activities were discussed in relation to discourses of child development. As Hugh explained,

> there's evidence to show how children acquire language through repetition, so I tend to do the same stuff every single time. But children like the repetition, it gives them that confidence to know what's coming next so they can participate. By linking in actions as well, it supports that development and retention of patterns of language.

The sessions, as such, were planned with the children's learning outcomes in mind, using a repetitive structure to reinforce the language development acquired through singing. As such, the sessions were seemingly planned and run with the children's developmental needs as a central focus. This meant that while seemingly enjoyable for the children, the sessions offered little variety for the fathers, with limited opportunities for engagement:

> [It's] very set and organised, because you come along, you sit with your child, you sing the songs, it's being led by somebody and then it's over. (Jessica – Dads Sing Stakeholder)

As Jessica's account implies, the sessions were underpinned by a regimented routine in which the fathers and children were guided through the allotted time. During my observations, I noted a similar pattern of behaviour employed by the fathers while observing the sessions. Each week, the fathers all tended to arrive around the same time, roughly 5 minutes prior to the scheduled start time, pushing buggies or prams which were left in the corner of the room and lined up on-by-one, before making their way to the 'performance area' – a series of chairs and sofas placed around a large, circular rug. The arrival of Hugh would signal the start of the session and the children and their fathers would then be led in a rendition of traditional nursery rhymes. Hugh appeared to be the central focus, playing instruments and performing accompanying actions for the children to imitate. While fathers were encouraged to join in, their interactions were seemingly rather muted or passive, following along in nothing more than a low mumble. The end of each session was then

typically followed by a swift mass exodus, with the fathers piling over to their buggies, putting on coats, and manoeuvring through the mass of bodies and objects to the exit.

The seemingly passive practices and interactions of the fathers arguably reflects a disjuncture between the framings of the group as outlined by the stakeholders and the conduct of the fathers observed in practice. While Jessica's account in particular emphasises the importance of father involvement in definitions of the meanings of the group, my observations suggest a far more mundane set of practices are made possible in the practical running of the group, presenting questions regarding the extent of the 'uniqueness' provided by father involvement. In other words, while the presence of fathers is central in defining the meaning and purpose of the group, in practice the fathers are arguably more peripheral in their positioning. In the following sections, the interactions of the fathers during the sessions are explored in greater detail, focusing upon their more nuanced interactions in relation to fathering performances, the potential impact of perceived masculine values, and the desire to 'blend' into their surroundings.

By way of contrast, both Dads Play and Dads Together sessions were defined by a 'free play' structure, offering a greater variety of activities, such as toys, games, arts and crafts, for the children and their fathers to engage with. While similar in terms of the available activities, the ways in which these were framed by the organisers was underpinned by a variety of discursive influences linked to underlying meanings of the group and ideals of fatherhood more broadly. For example, while several activities were provided during Dads Play sessions, these were meticulously planned to support both the children's on-going development and father involvement in this process:

> The session plans are so particular, so that one child's needs are met and their play can develop because they played with this one month so they can do this the next month, and you're including dad in that play. (Sue – Dads Play)

In the account above, Sue also draws upon discourses of 'early intervention' when outlining the purpose of the sessions. The activities, for example, are framed as meeting a "child's needs" so that "their play can develop"; yet, as with Jessica's account, Sue also links this form of developmental activity with father involvement. As the account below suggests, the 'open' structure of the group is seen to allow for the greater inclusion of fathers, providing an opportunity to engage in practices of early years development that are presented as otherwise inaccessible:

> What we've found is, quite often, dads are disenfranchised from information about their child. Not because of lack of intent, but because they never get to clinics, they never see a health visitor, they don't attend the groups that perhaps their partner is going to […] I think the importance of the dads group, albeit once a month, as a flag waving, this is for dads, they are important. It's where they can meet, make friends if they wish to, they can ask pertinent questions about their child's development, that perhaps their partners … don't talk to them about, and they can play with their children, and actually have fun with them and understand where on the development scale their kids are at … so that they're learning about their children and those growing needs and expectations … in a really safe, welcoming setting.

Here, Sue initially takes a sympathetic view towards the absence of fathers, framing this more in terms of 'distance' due to limited opportunities for involvement. In many ways, Sue's statement reflects the notions of gendered trajectories discussed in chapter 4, with structural factors imposing barriers on father involvement (Miller 2011; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). Dads Play, in turn, is imbued with a sense of 'allyship', promoting the importance of father involvement, and providing a space for men to perform a fathering role.

However, Sue's descriptions of the fathers' potential interactions in the group draws upon specific discourses relating to ideals of 'good' fatherhood. While Sue's references to fathers' "play" and "fun" with their children evokes images of strong father-child relationships which emerge from "involved" and "intimate" fatherhood discourse, these are ultimately tied to the ideals of 'early intervention' and 'intensive parenting' discourse. Here, the fathers are presented by Sue as curious and intuitive, asking "pertinent questions" about child development to build and expand their knowledge to become more competent fathers. The group then is framed as providing an educational function for fathers, with the open or free play structure allowing for fathers to observe and interact with their children to learn about their development and ask questions if they need to. This, in turn, grants the staff members with an 'expert' status, supporting and guiding the fathers in an educator or gatekeeper role. As the accounts below suggest, this 'expert' status relates to both child development and issues of gender and masculinity:

> We are aware that we have a role in educating in the wider sense […] They're not always asking things so we can just say 'That's good, have they done this as well?' and they'll say 'Oh no, what's that about?' and then you can explain.

> Some of them may have this certain way of being, this certain upbringing, and they just think, 'What do I do? I can't play with a baby, that's what other people do'. It's knocking down this

> ‘macho’ barrier so it’s acceptable […] So very gently, all the activities at Dads Play is all non-biased, and you hope that by good example people will pick up on that. And if they say something like, she can’t do that she’s not big enough, we would have the conversation, you know, why are you saying that? She’s bigger than that boy who’s doing it. Slowly you unpick it, and we work slowly and gently.

Arguably, then, the structure and culture of Dads Play is, at least in part, informed by an ‘intensive’ parenting discourse, in which assumptions of ‘good’ fathering are defined by engagement in child development and promoting the values of gender equality (Lee 2014; Miller 2017). Yet, in practice, I would suggest that such ‘intensive’ discourses were not imposed by the staff members in a forceful sense. During my observations, I found the two staff members to be somewhat unobtrusive in their interactions. They were friendly and jovial towards the attending fathers and children, and always on-hand to facilitate an activity if needed, but for the most part did not try to impose themselves upon the fathers, instead instigating casual small-talk when they felt it was appropriate or engaging the children in an activity. The fathers were also seemingly content with this approach, generally keeping to themselves while playing with their children. Their interactions, as explored further below, also implied a greater degree of experience with hands-on care than is suggested within Sue’s account. Arguably, the majority of fathers who attended regularly were *already* highly involved in practices of care, based upon the perceived competency and understanding within their interactions, and so seemingly required limited support from the staff. Equally, however, this limited engagement with the supportive functions of the group could also reflect fathers greater agency in the performance of parenting, utilising masculine discourses of self-reliance or independence as a means of rejecting or avoiding support from ‘experts’ (Shirani et al 2012; further discussion below).

This sentiment of masculine autonomy was arguably a prevalent feature underpinning the structure and culture of Dads Together. While utilising similar strategies of communal activities as a means of engaging the attendees at the group, this approach differed in terms of its more adult-centric and masculinised focus, providing activities which appealed directly to the assumed interests of the fathers, with the aim of encouraging conversations and interactions. As Martin outlined, specific interests or hobbies, such as music, were utilised as a focal point of the sessions:

> Little thing, but I went out and bought a portable record player, so bring your records along. Rather than listen to wheels on the bus, we’ll have a bit of Prodigy on in the background or

> something like that. It's so little kind of minor touches that will start a conversation, so rather than standing in the corner feeling awkward, you can recognise things and make the social interaction a lot more natural. (Martin – Dads Together)

Underpinning the structure and content of the Dads Together sessions, then, was Martin's assumptions regarding the interests and motivations of fathers. He alludes to the sense that fathers are not overly interested by the activities and content of traditional parent and child groups (such as Dads Sing or Dads Play) and would rather attend a group with more adult related themes. The somewhat passive interactions of the fathers at Dads Sing perhaps offers some support to this assumption, however, Martin's account clearly demonstrates his own personal feelings on the matter:

> There are other fatherhood groups, but without being disrespectful to them, they're run in a crappy church hall and their idea of getting dads in is we'll give them a free bacon sandwich. No, I don't want to go there, and I don't know anyone that would! […] There's a bit more personality. I get bored of those sing and sign groups; they're great for a purpose, but this is good for individuality.

When observing the sessions at Dads Together, there was certainly a livelier and more raucous atmosphere, not present at either of the other two groups. For example, Martin would often take on a role as 'DJ', playing an eclectic playlist of songs through his laptop which he had connected to the speakers at the venue. In the above text, Martin presents this as a means of imbuing "more personality" or "individuality" to the sessions, focusing on the fathers themselves, rather than, for example, the developmental needs of their children. This father-centric discourse is deemed as a way of bringing the fathers *together,* forming bonds and friendships that they might otherwise not be able to access.

> [The activities] start different conversations, rather than meeting someone on the school run, you tend to just talk about your children and what your children are up to and you don't get to know the person behind that. This gives them the element of, you know, 20 years ago I produced this drum and bass album or something, and you get to see this different side of the person.

The broad ideals regarding the function of the group are clearly evident in Martin's account, emphasising the sense of fun and sociability of the group. However, to a certain extent, Martin utilises his narrative license within the interview context to exaggerate the impact of the group. Here, Martin presents two contrasting, but *imagined*, scenarios, comparing what he perceives as the more mundane interactions on the school run with his presentation of the

‘livelier’ exchanges at Dads Together. The group is seen to access a ‘hidden’ side to men’s personalities, such as ‘producing a drum and bass album’, allowing their personal interests to dictate their interactions. In many ways, Martin regards the group as a means of presenting the attendees as *more than just fathers* – the sessions are structured, Martin asserts, by the interests, skills, and knowledge of the fathers:

> The idea is dads bring their kids along, we have the soft-play and the crafting and then we have a different theme, so that will be everything from DJ workshops, film workshops, crafting, circus skills, stand-up comedy skills, and these are all facilitated by the dads themselves. So the idea is if you’re a dad that’s a surveyor, come in and teach us how to do Lego. You might be an accountant but 20 years ago you were a notorious graffiti artist, come in and show us.

This narrated structure to the sessions contrasts with Dads Sing or Dads Play in the sense that the attending fathers are granted greater autonomy to shape the content, in turn, constructing the group in ways that reflect their own (masculine) interests. Martin’s account in many ways reflects the discourse of the ‘Dad 2.0’ movement (Scheibling 2020a, 2020b), in which fathers are argued to be misrepresented in society. This is reflected below in Martin’s description of ‘outdated’ cultural images:

> [T]he media’s perception of dads is that we own the remote control, we’re scared of changing a nappy, we don't know what a washing machine is. You know, it’s almost like a 70s sitcom, so we’re rallying the charge against that, because we do know where the nappies are.

What is interesting here is how Martin alludes to an ideal of involvement in which fathers are already skilled and knowledgeable in practices of care, contrasting with Sue’s perceptions of fathers requiring support. These notions of father incompetency are presented as a source of conflict for Martin, providing justification and motivation to construct Dads Together within his idealised perception of fatherhood and masculinity, challenging the notion that fathers need support with parenting practice. As such, discourses of masculine autonomy and idealised notions of fathering agency ultimately form the central tenets of Martin’s conceptualisation of Dads Together.

To briefly summarise the key points from this section, the stakeholder accounts utilised a range of discourses and cultural representations to conceptualise the underlying meanings and purposes of the three ‘dad groups’. The reified status of father involvement, for example, broadly underpinned each account, with the transformative potential of fathering practices emphasised as a means of justifying the existence of the groups and imbuing social value. As

such, the ‘paternal’ focus of the sessions can be regarded as a discursive marker highlighting their perceived importance. However, there were nuances in terms of the social forces influencing the meanings and culture of the groups. Both Dads Play and Dads Sing were framed within the ideals of ‘intensive parenting’ and child development interventions in terms of the planning and structure of the sessions. The activities were constructed in the stakeholder accounts as serving an educational function which, when tied to the engagement of fathers, was perceived as holding reified value. Dads Together, in contrast, was framed in relation to distinct masculine values of autonomy and emphasised the benefits for fathers in this regard. The value of the group was derived from a sense of fathering agency which foregrounds fun and novelty over responsibilities implied through discourses of ‘intensive’ parenting. However, as alluded to in this section, the degree to which these ‘cultures’ influenced fathering practices is questionable, with divisions between perceptions and practices. In the following section, these practices are explored in greater detail, observing the ways in which fathers navigated these spaces, utilising agentic meanings in their performances of fathering.

Involvement, Embodiment, and Play: Tracing fathering practices in dad group settings

Meanings and understandings of father involvement, as identified in social scientific research, have traditionally derived from practices of embodied play, with fathers typically engaging with their children through the use of toys, games, sporting endeavours or physical ‘roughhousing’ (Doucet 2006; Wall & Arnold 2007; see also Chapter 5). Involvement in dad group contexts was framed in similar ways, with father engagement presented in terms of sharing activities and providing opportunities for the fathers to engage in playful activities with their children. How the fathers navigated these settings, and their underlying expectations of involvement, was of particular interest during my observations, as I sought to understand how fatherhood was presented and performed within these contexts. The focus on playful activities I found to be particularly interesting in terms of the specific meanings facilitated through this form of involvement. The groups were, in this sense, spaces of embodied play, with fathers supporting and guiding their children in a range of fun, educational, and frivolous activities. Yet, the ways in the which the fathers engaged in the activities differed across the three settings, with differing levels of investment and embodiment observable throughout the sessions.

The involvement practices of the fathers attending Dads Sing presents an interesting starting point for this analysis due to, as noted above, the fathers apparent lack of investment in terms

of the activity itself – in this case, singing along to a series of children's nursery rhymes. My perception of this seeming lack of participation perhaps stems at least in part from my outsider status. As a non-father, the environment of Dads Sing was an unfamiliar and unconventional setting to navigate as this was primarily a 'parental' space, designed to be used by parents and children. As such, my initial impressions of the group were dominated by feelings of incomprehension and awkwardness owing to my inexperience of the interactions and social dynamics within the setting. In more straightforward terms, I found the experience of observing adult men singing along to a set of children's nursery rhymes to be somewhat bizarre and surreal. Hegemonic ideals of masculinity were certainly an influencing factor in shaping my own initial impressions of the interactions in this sense, with the 'early years' setting contrasting with traditionally masculinised spaces with which I was more familiar, such as sporting environments (Hanlon 2012).

To a certain extent, this sense of oddity regarding the social conventions of the group were shared, or at least acknowledged, during my conversations with Hugh, who led the Dads Sing sessions, where he alluded to the unusual nature of the scenario.

> Being with kids gives you a bit more confidence to be in a silly situation, if it was just dads there would be a whole other level of embarrassment there. But when you're with your kid you sort of leave that at the door, because it's a part of parenting. Everyone is in the same boat. (Hugh – Dads Sing)

While acknowledging that the experience of attending Dads Sing could be interpreted as a "silly situation" and a potential source of embarrassment for the fathers in particular, Hugh suggests that the presence of children in this scenario normalises the encounter, presenting this as a typical part of the performance of everyday parenting practice. However, what is interesting here is Hugh's framing of this practice, suggesting that the potential sense of masculine-inspired "embarrassment" can be supressed by parental identifications and responsibilities, providing fathers with a sense of "confidence" to enter and navigate what was ultimately a child-orientated setting. Masculinity, or at least hegemonic conceptions, are presented as a potential source of conflict for the fathers, then, perhaps due to feminised connotations associated with 'early years' settings. This poses questions in terms of the normalising processes at play when navigating these spaces, with underlying maternal assumptions influencing the environment.

My observations offered some support to Hugh's assertion that a parental identity and sense of responsibility can support a sense of belonging or comfort within the environment. During the sessions, for example, I noted several instances of the fathers enacting a 'parental persona', engaging in what I interpreted to be the performance of parental-type behaviours as they arguably sought to make sense of their role within the space. This was evident in expressions of encouragement towards their children, smiling at them, praising them, or demonstrating the actions of the songs. Performances of tactile and intimate practices were also common (Dermott 2008), particularly for fathers of younger children, with the fathers regularly cuddling their children, lifting them up and down and bouncing them on their knee during the songs, or cradling them as they sat in their laps (Amodia-Bidakowska 2020). As such, the fathers arguably utilised attentive forms of parental practice as a means of finding a place within this setting, a demonstration of their role to the perceived audience. This demonstration of parenting practices – or a sense of *being parental* – was a key feature of the fathering performances that I interpreted during my observations. When navigating this arguably unconventional setting, in other words, the fathers utilised what could be perceived as pro-active parental practices to make sense of their role. Therefore, given their lack of investment in the activity, demonstrating their closeness and attentiveness provided a focus in what was an uncertain and potentially uncomfortable setting.

Yet, the extent to which the oddity and discomfort of the situation was fully avoided by the fathers was questionable. When describing the involvement of the fathers, Hugh explained that

> most dads will join in with the singing, but not particularly loudly. Some do and get really enthusiastic. I've had some get up and start dancing, which is fine! It's whatever they're comfortable with.

Hugh's description here again reflects my own observations and interpretations, where I perceived the involvement of the fathers to be mostly withdrawn or reserved, with only a minority of fathers participating fully and enthusiastically. For the most part, I noted the fathers following along or mouthing the words but this produced, at best, nothing more than a low mumble. As such, it seemed as though the fathers were content to blend into the surroundings and seek a sense of anonymity to avoid 'exposing' themselves or risk feeling embarrassed. The performative dimension of turning their attention to their child and behaving parentally, as noted above, arguably serves a further purpose here, as a means of avoiding any risk of embarrassment or exposure. Ultimately, I would suggest that the child-

orientated nature of the setting – alongside conventional masculine expectations, such as hardiness or the avoidance of care – contributed to a degree of self-awareness for the fathers which could impart uncomfortable feelings of being ‘out-of-place’. The performance of a ‘parental persona’, in the context of Dads Sing, as such, can be regarded as a normalising process for the fathers, a response to a potentially uncomfortable scenario.

This performance or demonstration of the fathers’ parental identities was also evident at Dads Play and Dads Together, however, this was seemingly less in response to the oddity of the social encounter and more as a demonstration of their investment in the activities. In both of these settings, the fathers appeared to be more comfortable when navigating the environment, with greater opportunities to ‘blend’ into the surroundings. These opportunities arguably owed much to the ‘stay-and-play’ format of these groups, with the ‘free-play’ structure allowing for several activities to be engaged in, with less risk of exposure compared to the singular, collective activity at Dads Sing. Dads Play in particular offered several different activities across a range of indoor and outdoor spaces, allowing for shared participation in crafting activities, such as painting or modelling, role-playing games, or physical play on outdoor climbing equipment alongside a designated indoor soft-play area. As Sue, the lead stakeholder, explained, these activities were designed as part of a framing of the space as an “enabling environment”, allowing both children and their fathers to play, explore, and be creative. During my observations, I noted several examples of such engagement, with the fathers demonstrating an active investment in the activities, appearing more comfortable and confident in the environment:

> In the centre of the crafting room sat a role-play kitchen area, complete with a small plastic hob, oven, and shelves which housed tiny plastic cups and plates. An array of plastic fruit and vegetables sat on the table beside in a shopping basket. Oliver stared intently at the basket, before carefully selecting a ‘lemon’ which he placed on a frying pan.
>
> “Time for dinner, Daddy!” he exclaimed, opening the oven door and placing the pan on the shelf. Oliver looked through the plastic window on the oven door and removed the pan, handing it to John.
>
> “Yum, fried lemon. My favourite!” John jokingly remarked. (Dads Play Fieldnote)

What I found interesting about this encounter between John and his son Oliver, was John’s apparent sense of ease when entering into this child-orientated world. John was quite content to play along with his son’s imagined scenario, pretending to eat the array of plastic

vegetables served to him. In this sense, not only was John performing a role as part of his son's game, but he was also performing a specific parental role by engaging in this play, supporting and encouraging Oliver to develop his imagination and creativity (Amodia-Bidakowska et al 2020). Arguably, then, the space at Dads Play allowed for the fathers to engage in practices associated with 'intensive parenting' in ways informed by their own agency, in contrast to the more directed structure of Dads Sing. The ability to choose an activity, in other words, potentially reflects a greater sense of masculine autonomy for the fathers and a greater sense of control in how they perform their parental identities (Shirani et al 2012).

John's involvement here also reflects the greater physical or embodied investment by the fathers at Dads Play. As an early years space, all of the equipment and furniture at Dads Play was child-sized, meaning that father involvement often meant physically orientating to child level. During Oliver's game, for example, John was perched upon a small plastic chair – this image of a six-foot adult man, contorting his body as so to distribute his weight evenly and not shatter the tiny chair was again somewhat surreal (if not also quite humorous!). Yet, there were several examples of such embodied, physical involvement demonstrated by the fathers during the sessions. These included fathers contorting themselves into confined spaces such as 'Wendy Houses' or pop-up tents, 'wrestling' and roughhousing with their children in the soft-play area, or simply crouching beside their children to support them with their crafting activities. What was clear, then, was the fathers' investment in this setting, actively engaging in the encounters in both body and mind, presenting a 'fun-orientated' fathering persona, that was not as easily achieved at Dads Sing.

Yet, perhaps the most prominent examples of such trivial or frivolous involvement by the fathers occurred during sessions at Dads Together. While adopting a similar 'stay-and-play' format to Dads Play, the sessions were structured and designed in ways which sought to appeal more overtly to a 'carefree' perception of masculinity and fatherhood, in which the fathers and their children could bond by participating in what stakeholder Martin described as "daft" and "fun" activities together. These included more conventional activities such as crafting, building blocks, or train sets, but also 'one-off' novel events. During my observations, Martin had organised several different events, including lantern making, a 'movie make-up' workshop, and a 'bottle rocket' competition. However, the Christmas party was perhaps the most extravagant event I observed, which included a 'disco' – for which one of the regular attendees volunteered as DJ, supplying speakers and disco lights – alongside a

series of novelty ‘parlour games’. These games were inherently trivial, reflecting the laid-back culture of the group in general.

> With the microphone in hand, Martin instructed the fathers and children to gather by the kitchen and divide themselves into two teams. Martin bent down under the table and revealed two buckets and a sack of potatoes. He placed the buckets side by side over on the opposite side of the room and detailed the aims of the game.
>
> “This is ‘Poo the Potato’” Martin bellowed, baking potato in hand. “With the potato wedged between your legs, your job is to get to the bucket as quick as you can, squat down and ‘poo’ your potato into the bucket. The team with the most potatoes wins!”
>
> Lining up side by side, the first fathers took their marks and placed the potatoes between their legs. On Martin’s cue, they quickly shuffled across the room while their teams enthusiastically cheered them on. The children were bouncing up and down and laughing whenever a potato dropped and rolled across the floor. The dads were happy to play along with the goofy spectacle, exaggerating their despair when they lost a potato. Some dads were more reserved, and instead helped their child carry a potato, but they seemed to have fun, smiling and laughing along. (Fieldnote – Dads Together)

In many ways, the idea of ‘Poo the Potato’, and the embodied novelty of the movement during the game, subverts the discourse of the ‘bumbling’ ‘clueless’ father (Sunderland 2000, 2006; Podnieks 2016). While they were made to look ‘daft’ – as Martin described it – this was a knowing and collective daftness, a form of ‘comic’ masculinity which seemingly does not take itself too seriously. This relaxed and easy-going approach was for the most part embraced by the fathers, who were content to perform and abide by these light-hearted expectations. For their children, this was a source of great entertainment, taking unbridled joy from the seeming embarrassment of their fathers. This was also evident in the second parlour game, in which three of the fathers were wrapped in toilet paper as part of a ‘snowman building’ competition – here, the abiding image of the fathers, stood in line, covered in toilet paper and with carrots sticking out of their mouths, reflected this sense of daftness and frivolity which underpinned this comical presentation of fatherhood.

What is interesting from my outsider perspective, is the idea that father-child relationships in this context were founded upon ideals of companionship or friendship – the fathers and their children were seemingly more like ‘playmates’ in this sense (Amodia-Bidakowska 2020; La Rossa 2009). Interactions at Dads Together appeared less ‘parental’, with the fathers presenting a more laid-back or relaxed persona. This was evident in the ways in which they

granted autonomy to their children, such as allowing them free reign to eat as many sweets and chocolates as they liked, or the seeming disregard for mess. The ‘snowman’ competition was an interesting example in this case, with the toilet paper strewn across the hall until the very end of the session, whereby even the tidying process was turned into a game, with the fathers holding large bin liners for the child to throw the rolled-up paper into. This led to a mass, impromptu “snowball fight” with the fathers and children throwing the paper at one another and bounding around the hall narrowly avoiding collisions.

Arguably, the parenting strategies employed in this setting reflect the greater sense of agency available for fathers, particularly in relation to discourses of ‘intensive parenting’. As Shirani and colleagues (2012:32) argue, fathers are able to draw upon “resources of masculinity” – such as independence or self-reliance – in their performances of fatherhood, shielding them from intensive demands. Akin to Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart (2012:32), Dads Together as a paternal space, espoused a “non-conformist” culture, underpinned by masculine ideals, within which the fathers could formulate a ‘carefree’ parental persona in contrast to ‘intensive parenting’ strategies. As discussed in Chapter 5, fatherhood as cultural construction is thus imbued with a reified ‘mystique’, with father associated with fun and entertaining activities, often in line with their own interests or hobbies (Such 2006).

In summary, the fathering practices within the three dad groups settings ultimately represent a continuum relating to the level of investment in the available activities and the spaces as a whole. The extent of this investment – i.e. the ease with which activities were engaged in – in turn, impacted upon the type of practices performed by the fathers. What was interpreted as practices of ‘fathering’ at Dads Together or Dads Play, for example, derived from engagement in the activities, with the fathers investing in multiple forms of embodied (masculine) play. Supporting their child on a slide, helping construct a cardboard robot, or taking part in a novelty game all reflected meanings of being ‘parental’ or ‘fatherly’ within these settings. However, where the fathers were less invested in the singing activities at Dads Sing, parental or fatherly practices derived from different meanings, such as attentive or intimate engagement with their children (Dermott 2008). These different meanings and expectations for father involvement are interesting in the sense that they are in many ways influenced by the social conventions of each of the spaces. Dads Together, with its ‘parental non-conformist’ atmosphere presented less risk of social exposure, allowing the fathers to perform a ‘daft’ or ‘comic’ fathering persona, while the child-orientated, whole group focus

of Dads Sing, in contrast, presented far greater risk of being exposed or embarrassed and, as such, was countered through a performance of more caring or attentive parental practices.

(Un)social Interactions: The social dynamics of male homosocial relationships

The dynamics of male friendship or homosocial bonding represents an interesting lens through which to explore the construction of and maintenance of idealised masculine traits. How men socially interact as part of peer groups is influential in determining possible and acceptable practice, whether this be the promotion of rowdy or 'laddish' behaviours (Nayak 2006; Thurnell-Read 2012) or more caring and emotive traits (Elliott 2016). When coupled with the transition to parenthood and the emergence of new roles and responsibilities, male friendships – alongside family kinship ties – can develop new meanings, acting as a network of advice and support or as a means of sharing leisure activities together with their children (Cronin 2015). However, it is often the case that male parenting trajectories are not shared among peer groups, with fathers struggling to share parenting concerns with their non-parent friends (Dolan 2014). As such, father-only services have been identified in recent literature as a potential source of peer support, providing a space for fathers to create new peer networks or as described by one father in this study, to make 'dad friends' (Potter & Carpenter 2010). As previously discussed in this chapter, a key motivation in the formation of Dads Together was to provide a space for fathers to share their experiences, discuss issues, and talk openly about their vulnerabilities. Yet, my observations suggest that such spaces are not easily formed. While there is now a greater cultural acceptance of masculine emotion (Hanlon 2012; Elliott 2016; Gough 2018), my experiences in dad group settings imply that the social dynamics and conventions of male homosocial interactions continue to be defined by traditional masculine traits such as independence or stoicism (see Chapter 4). How male interactions were navigated at dad groups is the central focus of this section, exploring the social and embodied 'cues' utilised to avoid or resist interactions, alongside a discussion of the possible explanations for this behaviour (Scott 2004, 2005; Scott et al 2012).

The level of interaction between the fathers varied across the groups and between sessions at each of the settings. In general the fathers were all courteous and polite, greeting each other through smiles, waves, or nods of the head. Some fathers would congregate in corners or outside spaces and briefly chat while their children played together, while others seemingly formed close bonds, not parting from one another's company for the entirety of the sessions. Yet, I found that for the most part many of these conversations seemed more fleeting than enduring – they appeared more as passing acquaintances rather than close peers. What

attracted my attention, then, was what seemed to be missing from these relationships, with no visible or audible enthusiasm to the conversations, no shared laughter or physical tactility. The interpersonal dynamics, in other words, were seemingly quite reserved. These observations and reflections were, to a certain degree, shared by some of the attending fathers; in the accounts below, Jonathan and Dylan outlined their initial impressions upon entering Dads Play:

> What I found taking Ava to Dads Play, when I first got there, there are these rooms of people and I just sat down with Ava and started playing […] it was nice, but it was a bit of a strange, kind of, I don't know? (Jonathan – Dads Play attendee)

> I guess it was like a little bit of awkwardness for a while when you first sort of get there and you're like "umm don't really know where I'm going", seems like lots of dads just basically playing individually with their kids and you're sort of like, that's probably a 'dad-type' trait (Dylan – Dads Play attendee)

As first-time fathers with young babies, both Jonathan and Dylan's experiences were discussed in terms of parental transitions, as they sought to make sense of their new roles and identities (see Chapter 4). Their experiences attending Dads Play were no different in this sense, as they described entering and navigating what was a new, unknown setting. It's interesting that in these accounts, both Jonathan and Dylan refer to feelings of trepidation and the sense of unusualness within the setting. Jonathan's initial impressions were that the group felt 'strange', while Dylan described feeling 'awkward' when navigating the space as he sought to make sense of the fathering behaviours he encountered.

As noted above, what is particularly interesting about these accounts is what is *not* described. These narrations do not suggest a 'welcoming' environment, in which they are greeted with smiles and warmth from the other attendees; rather there is an underlying sense of avoidance, with the fathers "playing individually", and ignoring the others around them. Reflecting upon his experiences, Dylan suggested that such reserved or reticent behaviour was perhaps due to an inherent shyness of the other attendees:

> You sort of recognise that actually a lot of it comes down to natural awkwardness and shyness. And I feel like it's easier for dads to just lock themselves in with their child and just play with them. (Dylan – Dads Play attendee)

Dylan's reflections upon his perceived 'shyness' of the other attendees is interesting in that he presents these practices as a social process – a normalised response to an awkward setting.

As Scott (2004, 2005) argues, shyness as a 'dramaturgical' concept can be regarded as a purposeful social performance, in which the boundaries between self and others are regulated by embodied actions. Dylan alludes to such actions in his descriptions of how the attending fathers "lock themselves in with their child" and focus on playing with them – strategies of avoidance that I also felt were common, particularly at Dads Play and Dads Sing. During my observations, I noted a tendency for the fathers to 'shadow' their children, maintaining a close proximity to support them while they engaged in the activities and ensuring they were behaving appropriately with other children or were not putting themselves at risk (such as when playing on climbing equipment or the soft-play).

While it was unclear whether this 'shadowing' behaviour was a purposeful strategy to avoid interaction with other fathers, the performance itself was significant in that it produced what Scott (2005:101) describes as clearly discernible "symptoms of shyness". The most pertinent "symptom" in this case was the general silence between the fathers, a point I reflected upon in my fieldnotes:

> I was suddenly met by the silence in the room. Here were four other dads sat on the floor: silent. Their heads were down, their bodies enclosed: nothing was said. Another beat. Still silent. I smiled awkwardly. No response. (Fieldnote – Dads Play)

In this instance, I had been sat talking to one of the fathers when he was called away by his son on the other side of the room. It was only once our conversation was abruptly ended that the lack of interaction between the other fathers was noticeable. Given their close proximity and sharing of the same space, I interpreted a sense of tension resulting from this silence. In light of this perceived awkwardness, I observed other physical "symptoms" of shyness, such as the ways in which the fathers used their bodies to enclose themselves, keeping their heads down and avoiding eye contact. I interpreted this use of the body as a performative act, a demonstration of their desire not to be approached, disconnecting themselves from the others in the room. Across the groups, I noted several other iterations of this avoidance strategy, such as using smartphones as a focus of attention, directing their gaze down and away the others in the room.

In many ways, this discussion of shyness relates to themes of self-exposure discussed previously in this chapter, with the fathers preferring to 'blend' into their surroundings as to avoid feelings of awkwardness deriving a 'masculine-inspired' sense of embarrassment. As such, there is a potential link here between the practices of 'shyness', such as social

avoidance or fear of social exposure, and the hegemonic masculine traits of stoicism, suppression of emotions, and presentation of an aloof persona. Arguably, the regulation of self and identity inherent in the social performance of 'shyness' reflects the ideals of such hegemonic masculine traits. What is perceived as social awkwardness could, in other words, be interpreted as an ideal means of performing masculinity within collective and child-orientated settings.

Yet, as discussed during interviews with dad group stakeholders, developing strategies to challenge these portrayals of masculinity as remote or detached was a key aim within the sessions. In general these strategies were subtle and relied upon the fathers actually wanting to engage and talk to one another but were, in some cases, relatively successful in bringing the fathers together. At Dads Play, for example, the keyworkers would try to introduce new attendees to other members of the group, often on the basis of their children being similar ages. As Dylan explained, this was useful as means of helping him feel more at ease within the setting:

> I noticed that [keyworker] was very good at trying to spark conversation between the people and so if she sort of was talking to someone and could see someone coming passed and could see a connection, she would try and make that happen. And I think that's, kind of, what people need in a way to break the ice.

Dylan presents the role of the keyworker as facilitative, here, acknowledging that he may be feeling shy or nervous and seeking to ease these feelings by supporting the introductions with another potentially shy and nervous attendee. The act of being introduced, in this sense, nullifies the risk of embarrassment for the fathers as the burden of social exposure is shouldered by the keyworker, allowing the fathers to feel more at ease (Scott 2005).

As discussed above, the sessions at Dads Together also employed strategies to encourage conversations between the attending fathers, such as using the music or activities as 'talking points'. Yet, when observing at the sessions, I found that conversations were sparked through more subtle aspects relating to the layout of the room. Unlike the other groups, Dads Together offered more open spaces for the fathers to congregate. The kitchen area, a small enclave tucked away in the corner of the room, acted as a social 'hub', for example, where the fathers would gather to make cups of tea or coffee. I often observed the fathers milling around the kitchen area, casually chatting with their mugs in hand. Many of these conversations may have only lasted the duration of their drinks but acted as an initial 'ice-

breaker', overcoming the potentially awkward first encounter between strangers. In most cases, it was the offer of a hot drink which sparked a conversation; a courteous and friendly gesture, and an invitation to talk. As one of the fathers – John – explained, making a cup of tea or coffee for someone is a simple task and, importantly, is an easy favour to return – "it can become a social thing. I say it brings you together, but if you don't have access to it there might not be the same incentive to talk". John's discussion of "incentive" here, raises pertinent points regarding the layouts of both Dads Play and Dads Sing. Neither had informal gathering points, areas where the fathers might mingle or congregate, effectively 'closing-off' opportunities to talk. Arguably, then, social interactions between fathers require organisations of space which encourage communicative encounters; spaces where casual or fleeting interactions can develop into conversations.

While the layout of the spaces was a key factor for supporting conversations, it is important to also consider the motivations of the fathers in terms of engaging with others and building relationships or friendships. When discussing the topic of parenting friendships, both during interviews and at dad group sessions, many of the fathers observed their general lack of effort in forming and maintaining domestic networks, also highlighting that peer networking was generally handled by their partners. The development of parental friendships was not seen as a pressing issue for the fathers within this study. What is interesting here is the extent to which such concerns over parenting networks reflect broader connotations relating to the distribution of parental roles and responsibilities within families. Everyday parental practices, including the tasks and locations accessed, can arguably be seen to dictate the motivations of mothers and fathers for forming parenting friendships.

> If you are the sole carer, I think you would go to these groups as much for your own sake as you child's sake. Because it can be quite lonely looking after a small child. […] Dads can enjoy these groups but they wouldn't feel worried, or necessarily feel that sense of isolation [because] they would get [social contacts] from work. The person who is the primary carer doesn't have that outside network, so they have to form a network with other parents, and I think that's where these groups come in. (Jessica – Dads Sing Stakeholder)

In this account, Jessica presents the contrasting images of the "primary carer" whose access to social contacts is limited by domestic responsibilities, and the working father who has greater access to "outside networks". Where fathers are more likely to form social contacts through work, Jessica suggests, they are less likely to experience the sense of parental

isolation – or perhaps feel concerned by it – when compared with mothers, and so have different motivations and expectations when attending parenting services.

Moreover, as Jessica later explained, the domestic responsibilities of mothers means that parenting groups can also act as sources of support or advice regarding specific issues relating to childcare (see also Cronin 2015) – issues that fathers are less likely to encounter (Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012).

> Jessica: You go there and it is more centred around going and talking to other parents, socialising, peer to peer, sharing information […] but men don't do that, women do that, and I say that very broadly, women will say 'oh my god, that Sudocrem blah blah blah what have you tried?' Dads won't do that; they won't talk about different brands of nappies.
>
> JP: Do you think that's because dads won't find that interesting, or that dads are just not involved in that?
>
> Jessica: Or take ownership of…
>
> JP: …yeah, because that's not necessarily saying they don't use these creams, but they don't think about…
>
> Jessica: … using them or ask someone's advice about it. Yes, it's an interesting one. I would say no. If I'm talking about my husband, fairly typical average family, is that I did the bulk of the childcare and childrearing when they were young. He earned more money, I stayed at home, so obviously if I spoke to him about Sudocrem it would mean nothing to him.

In Jessica's account, the use of parenting groups, and the behaviours and interactions within them, is presented in relation to everyday parental responsibilities. From Jessica's perspective, mothers are presented as taking "ownership" of the practical and mental tasks of childcare and domestic labour, and due to the 'intensive' demands and scrutiny placed on this practice, utilise groups as a means of performing 'good' mothering in terms of seeking advice, discussing issues, and forming parental bonds.

The lower expectations for fathers to engage in such practices, in turn, can be seen to grant fathers greater agency in how their time with children and use of groups or services are framed. There is less necessity for fathers to seek parenting networks, meaning that fathers are not required to actively 'risk' their perceived masculinised, self-reliant parental personas by seeking advice or support and thus appearing vulnerable in paternal spaces. Arguably, then, the fewer 'intensive' expectations experienced by fathers means that 'dad groups' can

be utilised to serve idealised motivations of fathering, such as dedicating 'quality time' to their children. Demonstrating their fatherly 'involvement', in other words, is prioritised over the formation of parental networks and friendships, presenting fatherhood as an independent endeavour.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore the 'dad group' as a social phenomenon, using participant observations and interview data to highlight the underlying meanings, norms, and values utilised in the social construction of these contexts. As specifically 'paternal' spaces – i.e. used exclusively by fathers alone – these dad groups offer unique perspectives with regards to cultural or discursive ideals of fathering, alongside understandings of how such contexts are framed and navigated by fathers in practice. Broadly, the cultural values of these paternal worlds derived from similar motivations with regards to meanings of father involvement. The sense of purpose behind justifications for running each session were presented by stakeholders in relation to enduring discourses of supporting or facilitating increased father involvement in activities with their children. What is presented, then, is a deficit in terms of father-child time and the implication that enabling fathers to 'be there' for their children should be a cultural priority. This was further emphasised within stakeholder accounts when framing the specific justifications for prioritising father involvement; in each case, the dad group stakeholders utilised iterations of a 'fixer father' discourse, reifying fathering practice in terms of its transformative potential. The involvement of fathers, as such, was framed in terms of its perceived societal benefits, contributing to positive child development, challenging unequal gender roles, or tackling hegemonic ideals of men's emotive practices. What is especially significant regarding this framing is the use of moralised narratives, presenting the space and the practices within it as fulfilling essential social and political motivations. Fathering practice, as discussed in previous chapters, is again imbued with a mythical or heroic quality, providing the solution to enduring social concerns.

What is important to consider, however, is that while father involvement in paternal spaces is culturally and discursively reified, how these spaces are negotiated and navigated by fathers in practice implies a more modest impact. In terms of fathering conduct, the structure of the groups offered engagement in specific forms of parental practice, broadly encompassing ideals of masculine embodied play. While the level of investment and engagement in the activities varied across the groups, this focus on 'play' ultimately presented the attending fathers with fun-orientated identificatory framings and offering specific ways of performing

their fathering. In this sense, fathering practice was conducted in relation to the activities available as the fathers supported their children in a range of endeavours, such as physical, imaginative, or creative play. Arguably, then, these spaces are defined by masculinised ideals of involvement, in which fathering practice is presented in terms of engagement in activities. What can be problematised here is that such conduct does not reflect the reified ideals of cultural perceptions. In other words, the esteemed status of father involvement and the perceived benefits are not entirely reflected in practice. This disjuncture is further evidenced in relation to the father-to-father interactions which imply that not only are hegemonic masculine ideals such as independence or self-reliance still seemingly utilised in the presentation of masculine identity, but also that this prevalence reflects fathers' secondary care role. The function of paternal spaces, in this sense, derives not from a need for support or friendship from other fathers, but as a means of fulfilling an idealised involved role, alongside the presentation of hegemonic masculine values. The fathers' own meanings of involvement, in other words, appear to remain tied to traditional ideals of masculinity.

In the following chapter, key points of discussion raised within the analysis chapters are outlined and explored, linking these findings to theories related to fatherhood and gender more broadly.

Chapter 7: Discussion

In this chapter, key themes presented in the preceding analysis chapters are discussed in further detail, considering the potential impact of these findings. Three main discussion points are addressed, which together broadly assess the sociological conceptualisation of fatherhood, reflecting upon the meanings and practices outlined in this study, and considering implications for policy and future research. Firstly, this chapter will consider the extent to which a discernible and significant shift in the embodied practices of the fathers is evident, accounting for the influence of context and setting in the performance of fatherhood. Specifically, the fathers' interpretations and navigations of the increasing parental demands in everyday life are considered, including the practical tasks of care, such as feeding or soothing, intimate or bonding interactions, and the key stages in the transition to fatherhood. Secondly, the presentation of distinct paternal identities are assessed, particularly with regard to the sense of value attributed to masculinised forms of involvement. Two key interpretations are explored here, (1) the association between fatherhood and fun or novel practices, and (2) the formation of virtuous fathering identities underpinned by middle-class cultural values. Finally, the presentations and interpretations of motherhood are explored, in particular, the ways in which caring responsibilities and expectations are choreographed as part of fathering narratives. Gatekeeping practices, both maternal and paternal, are discussed with the underlying assumptions of parental roles highlighted within these accounts.

Caring Fatherhoods: An embodied change in the value and practice of care?

Feminist research since the mid-twentieth century has continually demonstrated the enduring devalued status of 'care' in society (Tronto 1998; Boyer et al 2018; Elliott 2016). As Glenn (2000) explains, the work of care is often overlooked, underpaid, and relegated to the peripheral of the social world where the most disadvantaged (predominantly women) are delegated responsibility for its activity. This feminised assumption of care has powerfully underpinned historical conceptions of parenting roles and gendered discourses more broadly, with the hegemonic status of masculinity informed by an avoidance of caring practices and the subsequent alienation and marginalisation of those who perform such tasks (Oakley 2005; Connell 2005; Connell & Messerschimdt 2005). Men's engagement in the practices of care, as such, has been highlighted as a potential challenge to such hegemonic conceptions, a means by which unequal gender relations and the devalued status of care ethics can be 'undone' (Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007) or 're-framed' (Boyer et al 2018; Elliott 2016).

As outlined in Chapter 2, tracing the emergence of 'care-orientated' fatherhoods and masculinities has been a key focus of social science research in recent years, with shifts in cultural representations of fatherhood (Wall & Arnold 2007; Podnieks 2015) alongside changes to fathering practices (Miller 2011; Doucet 2009; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018) critically evaluated to establish the degree of revisions to gendered relations. As Dermott and Miller (2015:188) summarise, however, "it would be naive to think that shifting deeply embedded gendered practices in any all-encompassing way is possible" given the endurance of gender inequalities over time. Nevertheless, Dermott and Miller advocate for a positive outlook upon the potential for change arguing that it is possible to "glimpse" spaces and contexts in which parental practices have been reconfigured. The aim of this section, as such, is to demonstrate the ways in which the findings presented in this thesis contribute to social scientific understandings of fatherhood and care, discussing the 'glimpses' of change observed throughout this study.

A significant finding, particularly in relation to domestic contexts, was the degree to which everyday childcare responsibilities were presented as a shared endeavour by the fathers in this study. Echoing the findings from previous studies of parenting (Ralph 2016; Eerola et al 2021; Wissö & Plantin 2016), domestic labour and childcare was described as hectic, with several demands to be completed ranging from practical tasks such as getting children dressed, preparing meals, bathing, changing nappies, dropping off or picking up children from nursery or school to household tasks such as laundry, cleaning, or food shopping (see Chapter 4). Underpinning the fathers' narratives was an emphasis upon their involvement and engagement in such tasks; akin to the findings of Hodkinson and Brooks (2018) the parental roles of the fathers and their partners were presented as 'interchangeable', with both parents seemingly adept and competent when performing tasks. Jonathan, Colin, and George, for example, all emphasised their skills and abilities regarding meal preparation and feeding, demonstrating their knowledge of appropriate foods for their children and, particularly when bottle feeding, techniques for holding both the baby and bottle to ensure comfort. What was emphasised among the fathering narratives, therefore, was a competency, skill, and confidence when performing hands-on embodied forms of care, presenting these practices, in a sense, within gender-neutral terms.

This notion of egalitarian parenting responsibility also partially extended into presentations and discussions of earning responsibilities. The majority of the fathers in this study resided in dual-earner households, with a variety of working patterns employed as part of everyday

work-care negotiations. Importantly, many of the fathers seemingly rejected their status as ‘primary’ breadwinner, instead emphasising the dual contribution by both parents to household earnings and care responsibilities. For Graham and Patrick in particular, maintaining a perceived egalitarian divide in work-care responsibilities was a source of pride in that they were presenting a positive example of gender equality for their respective daughters. Similarly, Jonathan sought to emphasise the equal value of his and his wife’s work and care responsibilities, describing how he would “take over” care for his daughter upon his arrival home from work. As Glenn (2000) argues, men’s working responsibilities have traditionally been utilised as a symbolic means of avoiding care work, a role ‘exchange’ which reinforces a mother-care dyad. The acknowledgement by the men in this study of their equal responsibilities as carers, however, can arguably be seen to disrupt this association, re-framing or *regendering* responsibilities of work and care (Boyer et al 2018).

Observations of the fathers practices in-situ – both in outdoor settings (Chapter 5) and at ‘father-only’ groups (Chapter 6) – also revealed the nuanced physical, embodied, and emotive interactions between the fathers and their children. When navigating these spaces, I observed several instances of how a physicality of care can be performed by fathers. While accompanying Dylan around his local park, for example, I noted the attentiveness of his practices with his daughter, providing physical caregiving by carrying her in a sling, talking to her, wiping her nose, or feeding her tiny pieces of rice cake. This also allowed for an intimate connection to be nurtured, mostly through light kisses on his daughter’s head or through tender cuddles as we walked. For Dylan, this time together was important as it allowed him to feel physically close to his daughter; as he explained, “I love carrying her because she’s not a particularly cuddly baby. I really like it when she falls asleep on me in the carrier and I’m just walking around aimlessly for an hour”. As Joshi (2021) suggests, this physical closeness and attentive care is important for fathers to develop strong loving bonds with their children, however, it is also significant in demonstrating how the affective, relational, and emotional qualities of care are incorporated in practice (Elliott 2016). Such practices, as Brandth and Kvande (2016) suggest, can reveal the ways men’s bodies can be presented as ‘caring bodies’.

With regards to a re-evaluation or regendering of the meaning and value of care, then, this practical and embodied engagement in caregiving alongside the reframing of parenting as egalitarian and interchangeable by the fathers in this study is significant. Drawing upon Doucet’s (2009, 2013) application of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus, it is possible

to discern the ways in which caring dispositions are developed and enacted as part of fathering identities and practices. The understanding, awareness, and adeptness of care – what Doucet (2009: 83) describes as the "everyday habituated activities of thinking, talking, gesturing, and moving" – demonstrated by the fathers in this study, arguably represents what Bourdieu describes as the 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Within the many 'moments' of everyday fathering observed in this study, there was a seeming sense of ease and understanding which underpinned the movements and gestures of care, such as the face-to-face contact, the wiping of dirty hands, or the reassuring and comforting cuddle. These actions, as Bourdieu describes, appeared to be a "state of the body" (cited by Doucet 2009:83), a practical and cultivated performance of care which belied gendered ideals and traditions. In this sense, while these practices were embodied in their 'doing', they were disembodied in terms of their gendered meaning.

Yet, my findings also suggest various contexts in which more traditional gendered meanings were still prominent, particularly as part of the fathers' narrative sense-making process relating to the transition to fatherhood. Performances of hegemonic masculinity, for example, were evident in both Graham and George's accounts of their cooking and feeding practices. Traditionally, food preparation has carried feminised connotations of nurturing care which conflict with the independent ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Meah & Jackson 2013; Klasson & Ulver 2015). Previous research, as such, has demonstrated the various ways in which men can reframe these nurturing or caring values to reflect more acceptable masculine ideals. Meah (2014) and Gorman-Murray (2008), for example, both point to such 'masculinisations' of care through the use of props or kitchen 'gadgets' (such as large knives or food processors) or emphasising specific skills (chopping or knife skills) in the process of meal preparation. Such masculinised framings were evident in Graham and George's accounts, with both fathers emphasising their culinary skills through their knowledge of appropriate foods and use of 'fresh' rather than processed ingredients, implying a sense of craftmanship within their meal preparation (Meah & Jackson 2013). There was also a tendency for these fathers present their cooking practices as 'special events', such as Graham's discussion of barbeque cooking or George's baby-led weaning approach, distancing them from feminised connotations of nurturing or nourishing care (Lomas 2013; Gorman-Murray 2008; Klasson & Ulver 2015).

While these examples imply some form of choice and agency in the masculinisation of caring practices and enhancement of hegemonic values, there was also evidence of the limited

choices available for fathers when navigating and negotiating parenting transitions, particularly in relation to the use of emotional support networks or parental friendships. Prominent among some of the fathers' narratives were accounts of the range of emotions and inner turmoil experienced as part the transition to fatherhood. These emotions were typically related to concerns over one's own competency, alongside worries and anxieties regarding the well-being of their child or partner. While the conjuring of such emotions among fathers signals engagement in the 'thinking responsibility' of parenting typically reserved for mothers (Walzer 1996; Miller 2017; see also Chapter 2), the fathers in this study employed hegemonic masculine strategies as a means of tackling their subsequent emotive crisis. Colin and Jonathan, for example, both sought to rationalise what could be interpreted as severe mental health challenges as a means of downplaying the severity of their experiences, discussing their inner strength and resilience to overcome their challenges. Dylan utilised similar discourses, alluding to notions of self-reliance and self-sacrifice when dealing with his wife's mental health struggles alongside his own anxieties. What was common among these fathers, then, was a strategy of suppression in which emotive difficulties were ignored. Das and Hodkinson (2020) argue that this employment of potentially harmful masculinised strategies reflects both the limited discursive resources available for fathers to acknowledge mental health struggles, alongside the enduring expectations of hegemonic masculinity which position men as mentally resilient and stoic.

To a certain extent, these needs are potentially recognised and met through the emergence of 'dad groups' which offer a distinctly paternal space for men to meet and discuss their issues or struggles. This was discussed most explicitly by Martin, the lead stakeholder at Dads Together, who described how the group presented opportunities for fathers to "put their hands up" and acknowledge their everyday issues and concerns. While the potential of the group as a supportive social 'hub' for fathers was emphasised by the stakeholders, in practice the interactions of the fathers seemingly reflected hegemonic masculine ideals in relation to homosociality and the development of friendships. Rather than 'putting their hands up', as Martin suggests, I found the fathers across the three settings to be far more reticent about the prospect of interactions and conversations with the fellow attendees, preferring to present what appeared to be an aloof persona, maintaining a physical distance between themselves and others. What is interesting is the extent to which this avoidance behaviour can be regarded as a purposeful or dramaturgical act, with the employment of traits and characteristics associated with 'shyness' serving a performative function (Scott 2004, 2005).

While it is possible to discern this 'shy' behaviour as an individual response to a socially awkward environment, the collective adoption of such practices by the majority of fathers across the settings implies that this is perhaps a normalised means of behaving in such masculine settings. Male interactions, in other words, are arguably underpinned by hegemonic masculine norms such as the avoidance of emotion, an aloofness towards relationships, and a self-reliance or independence. It would seem, then, that the caring ideals and dispositions expressed towards their children do not extend to fathers' relationships with one another. Traditional ideals of masculinity continue to endure in this regard.

Summary and Reflections

In line with the assertions of Dermott and Miller (2015), I think it is possible to observe shifts in the value of care and, particularly within domestic contexts, the emergence of embodied, care-orientated fatherhoods and masculinities. Taking on an active, intimate, and hands-on role in the performance of care responsibilities was clearly a motivation for the majority of the fathers in this study and, importantly, contributed to the development of caring dispositions, knowledge, and skills which formed the basis of their fathering practice and identity. In this sense, my findings here support Elliott's (2016) criteria for the emergence of caring masculinities among, in this case, heterosexual men, and that the values of relationality, interdependence, and support can be incorporated into such men's identities through hands-on practices of care. The development of strategies and policies to enable this form of involvement, such as improved paternity leave options, are essential if the values of care are to continue to develop as part of masculine identities. What is also clear in this regard, however, are the contexts and environments where caring identities are stifled, particularly in relation to fathers' homosocial relationships and acknowledgement of their own issues or challenges. It seems that traditional masculine trajectories with regard to emotional turmoil, anxieties, and struggles continue to be employed and form key parts of fathering identities for the men in this study. The development of strategies for fathers, and men more broadly, to recognise their mental health challenges should, as such, be a key priority for policy in the coming years (Das & Hodkinson 2020). There are also particular contexts in which hegemonic masculinities are actively enhanced and emphasised, renegotiating care values in line with masculine ideals (Lomas 2013). As such, while there are some 'glimpses' of care-orientated personas and dispositions among fathers (Dermott & Miller 2015), these are often countered or compensated by explicit portrayals of traditionally masculine interactions, in which one's sense of being a man is foregrounded. The following

sections are dedicated to an exploration of this foregrounding in further detail, firstly discussing the enduring association between fatherhood, leisure, and embodied play, and secondly discussing the implications in terms of the framings of parental roles and the choreographing of parental responsibilities.

Paternal Identities: Enhancing the value and status of fathering practice?

In recent years, representations of fatherhood across social, cultural, and political landscapes have sought to demonstrate the unique value of paternal involvement, with a particular emphasis upon the impact of a father's masculine status. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are now a series of clearly discernible cultural narratives relating to the growing influence of fathers as parental figures resulting from discursive ideals surrounding 'intensive parenting' and neoliberal ideologies (Davies & Bansel 2007; Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012). As Faircloth (2014b) suggests, these narratives are underpinned by a paradox in which both father absence *and* presence are socially constructed as social problems in need of specific intervention. Ives (2018) extends upon this idea in his conceptions of the 'failing' and 'fixer' father discourses prominent in cultural and political rhetoric (see Chapter 2). Here, the absence and/or presence of fathers in the lives of their children is presented as both cause and solution to a range of social issues, including child poverty, maternal mental health, and anti-social behaviour among teenagers and young adults (Jenson 2018; Crossley 2018; Faircloth 2014b). This language of 'failing' or 'fixer' fathers has, in turn, contributed to an idealisation of specific fathering practices such as engagement in caring responsibilities or supporting child development, with fathers who engage in these forms of involvement lauded among cultural contexts and singled out for praise and adulation (Amodia-Bidakowska 2020; Ives 2018; Faircloth 2014b). This is evident within responses to the 'activist' practices of dad bloggers who seek recognition for their promotion of seemingly egalitarian and feminist values (Scheibling 2020a; Podnieks 2016), or the emphasis within early years policy of the positive impact of child engagement with fathers, particularly relating to masculine activities such as rough-and-tumble play (Amodia-Bidakowska 2020; Chung 2021).

The key point here is that this distinction between the 'troubled' failing father and the 'engaged' fixer father can reify and glorify father involvement, instilling an esteemed value to the idea of a father's 'being there'. As Scheibling (2020a) outlines in relation to the 'Dad 2.0 movement', father engagement in issues of gender equality or child welfare is constructed as 'heroic', shifting and reconstituting hegemonic masculine ideals so that they are acceptable in the current cultural climate of perceived gender equality (Lomas 2013; Gorman-Murray

2017). In the discussion which follows, examples of distinct 'paternal identities', as interpreted through the findings above, are explored, demonstrating the ways in which fathers can ascertain value and esteem for their 'involved' practices (Barclay & Lupton 1999; Miller 2011). For the fathers in this study, this value was evoked in several ways, utilising both masculine capital and cultural perceptions of 'good' fatherhood. Specifically, the fathers utilised contemporary ideals of fun, humour, and novelty, alongside more traditional conceptions of virtue, wisdom, and autonomy, to constitute not only their role as fathers but to emphasise what they perceived as their unique contribution to their children's upbringing.

The Masculinisation of 'Fun'

Historically, the value of the paternal role has derived from the fulfilment of traditional masculine ideals with fathers seen to maintain a patriarchal status through authority, emotional detachment, and control over family finances (Williams 2008; Delphy & Leonard 1992; Faircloth 2014b). While breadwinner status continues to hold a powerful influence in cultural conceptions of 'good' fathering, particularly with regards to fathers positioned as materially disadvantaged (see Neale 2015 and Chapter 2), the role of financial provision, as discussed above, seemingly carries less significance in fathers own perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as parents and, significantly, as 'men' more broadly (Machin 2015; Finn & Henwood 2009). The perceptions and practices of men's parenting observed in this study supports previous findings of newly emerging adaptations and interpretations of masculinity, with men drawing upon what are perceived as contemporary or modern imaginings in shaping their 'hybrid' or 'bricolage' masculine identities (Leer 2016; Bridges & Pascoe 2014; Connell and Messerschimdt 2005). Following the findings of Doucet (2006) and Wall & Arnold (2007; see also Ralph 2016), the fathering narratives presented here suggest that masculine status can be derived through identification and ownership of interactive, recreational, or leisurely practices across several different settings and contexts.

Perhaps the most prominent of these settings was that of the 'dad group', where father-child play and interaction was encouraged and performed most overtly. As outlined in Chapter 6, father involvement in these contexts was primarily defined by engagement in practices of embodied play, with fathers focusing their attention upon their child and participating in activities together. A key feature of this embodied play, I would suggest, is the immersion of fathers in 'child worlds', playfully engaging and responding to their child's imagination in these settings. At Dads Play in particular, I observed several examples of father engagement in children's imaginative role-playing games, with fathers pretending to drink cups of tea or

‘play-acting’ as part of rough-and-tumble play. Similarly, at Dads Together the fathers engaged in a series of novelty games with their children, purposefully allowing themselves to look ‘daft’ or ‘silly’ while their children watched on in delight at their exaggerated body movements and facial expressions. In this regard, fathering practices were underpinned by an emphasis upon companionship, with fathers acting as ‘playmates’ to their children. As Garner (2015) observes, the employment of such practices means that fathering behaviours are almost indistinguishable from those of their children. As such, fatherhood, as a state of internalised being and practical ‘doing’, is arguably imbued with a ‘child-like’ sense of fun and novelty, with fathers perceived by their child as more like peers rather than authoritarian figures (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Kay 2009b). However, such ‘comic’ personas were also incorporated alongside an educating or instructive role, with the fathers engaging in play-to-learn practices, such as supporting their children with craft activities, singing nursery rhymes, or playing together with building blocks or train sets. In general, the fathers I observed sought to incorporate a sense of humour and playfulness into this educational role, conversing and engaging on a ‘child-like’ level to cultivate their companion status. Yet by adopting such a role, the fathers were also able to (re)impose hierarchical father-child relationships, positioning themselves as ‘experts’ in the eyes of their children, and deriving masculine status through their perceived knowledge of often obscure or interesting topics.

Particularly within ‘dad group’ contexts, then, fathering roles and interactions were performed in ways that were distinctive to those of mothers. As Garner (2015) suggests, mothers and fathers tend to perceive leisure-based contexts differently, with mothers framing such occasions as part of everyday care – owing, in part, to their primary carer status. In these contexts, mothers typically take responsibility for managing their child’s behaviour, through the issuing of demands, disciplining when required, and generally trying to maintain an overall sense of calm to avoid any incidents of misbehaviour (Garner 2015; Such 2006). Fathers, in contrast, have been found to ‘romanticize’ such events, describing family days out as important, special, or memorable, and using this framing to justify ‘indulgent’ practices such as allowing their children to eat ‘junk food’ or purchasing expensive souvenirs - often despite contestations from their partners (Garner 2015).

My findings broadly support such readings of mothering and fathering practices with ‘romanticized’ framings expressed most overtly by Tom, Harry, and Patrick’s conceptualisations of ‘daddy days’ – special occasions in which the fathers dedicated time and attention to their children and engaged in exciting and rewarding activities. Harry, for

example, imbued this time together with an adventurous and 'mythical' quality, while Patrick's discussion of "golden moments" emphasised the uniqueness of this time together, forming important and valuable memories for himself and his daughters (see Chapter 5). In this sense, there is a seeming desire for fathers, evident both within this study and in previous research, to be perceived positively by their children, receiving love, respect, and adulation through their engagement in novel events or providing 'one-off' treats (Garner 2015; Kay 2009b; Such 2006). It is in such interactions where shifts in masculinised fatherhoods are most prominent, with patriarchal ideals of authoritarian fathering rejected in favour of interactive, engaged, and 'fun' conceptualisations of paternal involvement (Garner 2015; Finn & Henwood 2009).

Importantly, this framing of father involvement arguably reifies and glorifies the meaning of father presence, associating a father's 'being there' with fun, excitement, and adventure which disembeds their specific 'fathering' practices from the more mundane landscape of everyday 'parenting' (Such 2006). This is significant in relation to men's sense of paternal identity, with engagement and association with exciting or novel activities utilised as a means of establishing unique meanings to father involvement which, in turn, contributes to ideals of embodied masculinised fatherhoods (Doucet 2006; Coakley 2009). What is emphasised, in other words, are the unique parental styles of fathers when specific masculine traits are performed (e.g. physical play, athleticism, companionship), enhancing the perceived cultural value and meaning of father presence within these leisure-based contexts. Broadly, then, fathers are able to utilise an embodied masculine status to position themselves as the 'fun and laid-back parent', with father-child time framed as a special or memorable event in which everyday 'rules' for behaviour can be ignored or dismissed owing to fathers' companion status with their children. As will be explored later in this chapter, such perceptions of fathering responsibilities crucially impact upon understandings and interpretations of the roles of mothers as part of everyday care. Yet, while there are clear shifts in masculinised ideals of fathering meanings, some traditional perceptions have endured in the construction of fathering identities.

Virtuous Fathering and Middle-Class Guises

The motivation for fathers to be perceived by their children as fun, easy-going, or light-hearted, can arguably be seen to reflect broader desires for the development of strong father-child relationships devoid of the conflictual connotations associated with patriarchal, authoritarian fatherhoods. Underpinning this ideal is the sense that fathers wish to

demonstrate that they care about their children, that they enjoy spending time with them, rather than keeping this emotion hidden behind a cold, emotionally distant persona. What can be interpreted as "new" about fatherhood in this case is the presentation of a playfulness and companionship which contributes to intimate and loving relationships (Dermott 2008; La Rossa 2009; Wall & Arnold 2007). Yet, as has been demonstrated in previous research, there is also a seeming desire for some continuities with traditional perceptions of fatherhood, specifically related to images of fathers as figures of respect, wisdom, and moral guardianship, typically reserved for 'middle-class' interpretations of 'good' fathering (Machin 2015; Williams 2008; Henz 2019). As Finn and Henwood (2009:557) argue, the image of the 'virtuous father' – "the capable and dependable family man and the architect of confidence, independence and fulfilled personhood" – continues to influence both men's conceptions and wider cultural constructions of the (middle-class) fathering role. As they explain:

> The talked up figure of virtue … is consistent with mainstream psychoanalytic and stereotypical conceptualisations of the father as symbolically representative of the outside world, order and morality and as uniquely responsible for instilling in children autonomy, emotional maturity and a coherent, differentiated selfhood by separating them from a fused relationship with the mother (Finn & Henwood 2009:557).

As noted above, fathering responsibilities continue to be perceived as existing outside the (maternal) context of the private or domestic sphere and instead seemingly lie in more visible or public contexts. A father's role in this regard is to teach their children the 'ways of the world', passing down knowledge, traits, and moral lessons as part of their journey to personhood. While these certainly reflect what can be perceived as vague or nebulous responsibilities, it is possible to frame such ideals in relation to contemporary discourses of 'intensive parenting', specifically notions of concerted cultivation, generative parenting, or middle-class cultural 'resourcing' (Vincent & Ball 2007; Vincent & Maxwell 2016; Faircloth 2014b; Kay 2009b).

This notion of fathering responsibility for preparing their children for adulthood was discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to the theme of 'leisurely fathering', in which shared engagement in educational activities was seen as contributing to their child's acquisition of skills perceived to be beneficial later in life. Within their accounts, the fathers narrated their children's engagement in a range of activities including sports, music, and arts and crafts which were not only regarded as increasing their proficiency in such specific activities, but

also supporting broader characteristics relating to their children's sense of personhood. Within many of the fathers' narratives it is possible to discern a sense that they perceived themselves to be the architects of their children's social and cultural cultivation, with their 'unique' input and involvement contributing to specific learning and growth. This is broadly evidenced in Patrick's assertion that "when I actually spend time with them … *it's really powerful*". In this sense Patrick can be seen to associate a distinctive value to fathering involvement, arguably reflecting the 'heroic' imagery of the 'Dad 2.0' movement or 'fixer father' discourse (Scheibling 2020a; Ives 2018).

As noted in Chapter 4, Patrick also suggests that the role of fatherhood has shifted in recent years, reflected in his perceived responsibility to "bequeath the world" to his daughters, shaping their expectations of morality and equality, and seemingly changing the world for the better. Such narratives reflect a sense of the grandiose: a 'divine purpose' solely associated with masculine power, strength, and responsibility. Arguably, this sense of grandeur is also reflected in the paternal cultures of dad groups. Political discourses of the 'fixer father' are utilised most explicitly in this regard, with the esteemed status of fatherhood presenting a unique value to the groups. Across the three groups, fatherhood is presented as beneficial for children by supporting development or challenging gendered stereotypes, while the prevalence of hegemonic or 'toxic' masculinity is also seemingly challenged by the presence of fathers uniting in support of one another (see Chapter 6). This notion of 'involvement' or 'togetherness' is presented as sufficient for evoking forms of social change, with very little scrutiny or attention paid towards the actual practices of fathers and what these represent in turn.

While ideals of embodied masculine traits and characteristics have been thoroughly documented in this regard, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which culturally informed social class assumptions contribute to the heightened status of fathering practices, often in subtle or unassuming guises (Faircloth 2014b; Klett-Davis 2010). Patrick's discussion of his engagement with his daughters in Chapter 4 demonstrates an interesting example of the role of 'middle-class' cultural ideals in shaping fathering practices. Here he presents a clear distinction between what he perceives to be 'poor' parental practice (having the television "turned on from dusk till dawn") and 'good' parenting practice ("making things, painting, arts and crafts"). Key to this distinction is the sense of pro-active involvement, both in terms of his daughters' hands-on engagement and his own attentiveness and supervision of the activity, reflecting ideals of 'middle-class resourcing' and concerted

cultivation prevalent within constructions of 'intensive parenting' (Vincent and Ball 2007; Vincent & Maxwell 2016; Vincent 2017; Lareau 2011). Yet, what is perhaps distinctly 'fatherly' about Patrick's assertions here are the ways in which these activities are seen to contribute to broad ideas regarding his children's temperament, character, and personhood as opposed to the development of specific skills or talents. The reading of books, for example, is seen by Patrick to enhance his daughters' "imaginations" rather than develop specific literacy skills. In this sense, Patrick frames his role in terms of nebulous ideals of virtuosity, responsible for instilling attitudes and values associated with idealised middle-class cultural characteristics and selfhoods (Finn & Henwood 2009; Skeggs 2004).

In this sense, 'virtuous fathering' is presented as a means of guiding children towards what are perceived to be the 'right' middle-class choices regarding cultural endeavours. For Patrick this can be interpreted simply as a matter of hierarchies, such as instilling a preference for reading books rather than watching television. As Lareau (2002) notes, television is regarded as a seemingly divisive activity among middle-class parents, posing risks in terms of its 'non-educational' content and its underlying passive nature. As noted in Chapter 5, Patrick alludes to such ideals when framing television use as a "failure", symbolising a lack of attentiveness and engagement. Yet my findings also suggest 'new' challenges for fathers in this regard, with children's use of electronic devices such as games consoles or tablets reflecting images of 'passive' parenting owing to their seeming lack of educational value. Encouraging their children to engage in physical or educational activities was a shared aim among the fathers in this study, with the choice to forego 'screen time' in favour of leisure activities reflecting the 'virtuous' character of their children and, by extension, the middle-class morals and values inherent within their own fathering.

Summary and Reflections

Ultimately, the accounts of fatherhood discussed in this section demonstrate how forms of masculine and social class capital can be utilised by fathers to agentically construct perceptions of glorified or romanticised value to their involvement in fathering practices. Underpinning what can be described as distinct 'paternal identities' are traits and characteristics typically associated with idealised constructions of masculinity (such as physicality, athleticism, or adventure) and middle-class cultural values of virtuosity, wisdom, or morality which contribute to expectations and discourses of fathering responsibilities. As discursive resources, then, such capital can afford fathers with the potential ability to construct their roles in ways which reflect not only cultural representations – such as 'fixer

father' ideals – but also appeals to personal motivations for fathering conduct. This is not to suggest that domestic responsibilities can be ignored entirely, but rather that fathers arguably hold greater flexibility in their performance of parental tasks when compared with mothers. As Lupton and Barclay (1997) argue, fathers are able to access a variety of subject positions across different parental contexts, shifting between 'parental personas' and more distinctly 'fatherly' or 'paternal personas' in public settings.

The formation of paternal spaces (such as 'dad groups') alongside fathers' perceptions of father-child time (such as 'daddy days') have been highlighted as examples of contexts in which 'paternal identities' are most prominent allowing for the performance of idealised fathering practices. For the fathers in this study, such contexts were both narrated and navigated in ways which sought to emphasise the fun and excitement of a father's 'being there', outlining engagement in various leisure pursuits, sporting endeavours, and activities. Specifically, the fathers emphasised the sense of novelty within these interactions, with the fathers presented more like playmates or companions to their children, perhaps as a means of challenging traditional 'authoritarian' portrayals of fatherhood. Equally, however, the fathers also sought to maintain some traditional ideals, expressing a desire to portray a virtuous role, guiding and teaching their children about 'the ways of the world' and imparting moral values such as equality or fairness to support their formation of selfhood.

When considered broadly, such masculine paternal identities signal positive shifts in the social construction of masculinity, with fathers seeking more fulfilled relationships and seemingly rejecting portrayals of the emotionless, stoic, authoritarian father who dominated cultural and historical representations of fatherhood. All the fathers who participated in this study identified and aligned with contemporary ideals, expressing a desire to be a positive influence in their children's lives and prioritised their involvement and time together. As such, it is important not to lose sight of this positive shift in the culture and conduct of fatherhood. This apparent greater desire for involvement should be celebrated and encouraged, both in terms of positive cultural representations of father-child time and the creation of spaces in which a father's 'being there' is *normalised*. The emergence of paternal spaces in the form of 'dad groups' represents progressive steps in this regard, offering a social space in which fathering practices and identities– as both carers and companions – can be negotiated and understood (Potter & Carpenter 2008; 2010; Potter et al 2013). Subsequently, the implications for policy can be framed in rather simple terms, with the continued growth of paternal spaces facilitated by increased funding for parental and early

years service providers to allow for more dad groups to be implemented. This can coincide with policy to allow for increased flexibility in fathers' working practices alongside cultural shifts in the normative expectations and value of father involvement in childcare. Ultimately, for father involvement to be normalised in both culture and conduct, fathers must be presented with the opportunities to engage through tangible services and accessible policy (Elliott 2016; Dermott & Miller 2015; Gregory & Milner 2011).

While it is important to implement policy to facilitate father involvement in parenting practices, it is equally important, however, to retain a degree of critical focus on the meanings and discourses utilised to justify this engagement. This degree of caution with regards to gendered shifts is articulated by Miller (2017), who warns that despite changing expectations of fathering, it is important not to 'gloss over' the meanings and practices of fatherhood relative to those of motherhood, with critical attention paid to the ways in which parental responsibilities are perceived, performed, or *avoided*. As will be discussed further below, the paternal identities of fathers hold a powerful influence in determining not only what they do, but perhaps most importantly, *what they do not do*. Valuing fatherhood for its specific masculine and middle-class capital or adulating and romanticising father involvement in novel leisure pursuits ultimately presents a narrow perception of the meaning and responsibility of fathering, which in turn reinforces traditional gendered conceptions of dichotomous parenting responsibilities. The final section, then, will turn to a discussion of the division of care responsibilities among the fathers in this study, specifically exploring the ways in which motherhood is portrayed.

"I'm kind of like the substitute in the football analogy, you know?": Assessing the Divisions of Responsibility and the Mental Labour of Parenting

When reflecting upon the accounts of fatherhood presented within this study, perhaps the most predominant finding is the degree of involvement, engagement, and commitment by the fathers to the various practices of hands-on care. As addressed in this chapter, this engagement is understood and navigated in ways that both align with and challenge gender norms, with masculinity performed in embodied, physical leisure and play pursuits alongside softer and more intimate nurturing practices. So too did the fathers outline their experiences and encounters with contemporary expectations of 'intensive' parenting practices, reflexively adapting their fathering to fulfil these apparent responsibilities. Contemporary family life, as outlined in Chapter 4, was presented as a shared endeavour with their partners, constructing an image of egalitarian lifestyles, with parental responsibilities for the fulfilment of tasks

divided equally. This idea of household equality is an important notion with regards to gender relations and gendered trajectories as it signals potential shifts towards an undoing of harmful and restrictive divisions of labour and, as such, requires critical discussion.

While the fathers certainly *spoke* of equality in relation to parental tasks (Roberts 2018), these were often supplemented by caveats within their narratives (such as Harry's self-defined role as "substitute" parent) which positioned their partners as primarily responsible for the fulfilment, and perhaps most significantly, the delegation or choreography of these tasks. As outlined in Chapter 2, the responsibility for the management of parental tasks requires arduous and draining mental labour (Miller 2017; Walzer 1996; see also Chapter 4), involving not just the completion of tasks but pre-planning and organisation. Using the example of a doctor's appointment, Lamb (1986) outlines this labour, demonstrating that it is not just a simple task of taking the child but *knowing* when they need an appointment, and *making* the appointment at a time which fits into the day-to-day schedule. As such, this '24/7 thinking time', as Miller (2017) defines it, is unpinned by a responsibility for being a 'knowledgeable' parent – a burden typically shouldered by mothers (Hochschild 2012; Miller 2018; Christopher 2012). What is important, moreover, is that primary responsibility in turn leads to greater scrutiny of parental practice, reaffirming unequal gender relations and expectations. As Oakley (2005:99) observes: "As long as blame is still laid on the woman's head for an empty larder or a dirty house, it is not meaningful to talk about marriage as a 'joint' or 'equal' partnership. The same holds for parenthood. So long as mothers, not fathers, are judged by their children's appearances and behaviour…symmetry remains a myth." Assessing this 'myth' of parental equality is the focus of this final section, exploring the ways in which the mental labour of parenting is negotiated across the narratives of fatherhood and how mothering and fathering responsibilities are subsequently divided. Guiding this discussion are key practices of mental labour identified by Walzer (1996) – (1) the management of parental tasks, (2) the processing of information/knowledge, and (3) mental care and the 'economy of gratitude'. In particular, this discussion accounts for the role of 'gatekeeping' practices between mothers and fathers, discussing the ways that primary and secondary care roles are navigated and maintained.

Presentations of Maternal Gatekeeping

The concept of maternal gatekeeping is a complex and highly charged theory of family dynamics and role division, fraught with assumptions regarding mothers' desire for power and control within domestic contexts (Allen & Hawkins 1999; Puhlman & Pasley 2013;

Miller 2018; see also Chapter 2). Originally developed as a means of conceptualising the seemingly restrictive behaviours of mothers which prevent father involvement (see Allen & Hawkins 1999), debates regarding maternal gatekeeping have expanded since the turn of the millennium, exploring the controlling, facilitative, and restrictive function of gatekeeping practices by *both* mothers and fathers (Miller 2018; Radcliffe & Cassell 2015; Gaunt 2008; Chapter 4). Crucially, the notion of maternal gatekeeping is no longer simply perceived as an agentic means by which mothers limit the involvement of fathers, but rather reflects an emerging understanding of the 'intensive' expectations upon mothers to support and facilitate not only their child's needs but also the needs of their partners so they can successfully fulfil their role as 'involved' fathers (Miller 2018).

The findings in this study offered some interesting insights into the understandings of gatekeeping as a maternal responsibility, reflecting in turn assumptions regarding the primary carer roles of mothers. A prevalent theme among the fathering narratives in this sense was the understanding that care or domestic contexts were inherently feminised worlds, within which maternal influences dictated plausible and acceptable behaviours (Doucet 2006). The fathers accounts of these worlds, as such, portrayed mothers as both directly and indirectly supporting and facilitating fathering practice. In Chapter 4, for example, presentations of mothers' overt gatekeeping practices were outlined in relation to the experiences of Harry and Jonathan who both alluded to their partners' role in shaping their practices. In Harry's case, the restrictive aspects of his partner's influence were outlined; here Harry described how his wife would accompany him during the school run despite his apparent insistence that he could handle the task alone. Jonathan, on the other hand, recounted the facilitative and practical support offered by his wife when preparing for a day out alone with his daughter, describing how she laid out all the essential items required for the trip such as food, water, and sun cream. In both cases, maternal primacy is affirmed through direct questioning of father competency, with the mothers in these narratives positioned as seemingly holding greater knowledge. While Harry suggests some frustration in this regard, he later affirms the primary status of his partner by defining himself as the "substitute" in the everyday care routine (as referenced above).

These narratives, as such, draw upon entrenched gendered expectations as part of the fathers' sense making process, reflecting what Sunderland (2000) describes as the 'part-time father/mother as main parent' discourse, with this primary status evoking images of mothers as household and care 'manager'. Key to these accounts was the sense that mothers were

positioned by the fathers as ‘directing’ their behaviour, establishing what is plausible and acceptable in maternal spaces. For Doucet (2006), this form of ‘gatekeeping’ practice is a dual process. On the one hand, there is *practical* guidance, with mothers demonstrating physical interactions and practices – such as Jonathan’s partner packing his bag – to allow fathers to “move through spaces in ways that are acceptable, normal, and in concert with public expectations” (Doucet 2006:699). This ability to meet public expectations, in turn, establishes a *moral* directive, with judgements over one’s actions and the extent to which these maintain or disrupt social norms (Doucet 2006).

As men navigating maternal worlds, there was certainly a sense that the fathers felt that they were disrupting everyday practice by ‘intruding’ upon maternal ‘territory’. Many of the fathers identified themselves as the ‘only father’ when navigating a number of different settings, and thus seemingly presented themselves as open to scrutiny. As outlined in Chapter 5, such scrutiny was managed in several ways; Zack, for example, was able to draw upon his status as his son’s primary caregiver to demonstrate his understanding of domestic responsibilities. For others, however, acceptance in parental settings meant seeking validation from the mothers who occupied these settings on what was assumed to be a regular basis. Such assumptions were key to Dylan’s narrative, in which his own practices were cast within a lens of maternal authority as a means of maintaining what he perceived to be normative parental behaviour. Drawing upon his perceptions of ‘other’ seemingly less involved fathers, Dylan established his own enthusiasm and attentiveness as a means of validation in maternal settings; his impression of other fathers that spending time with their children “feels like a bit of job to them” represented a disruption to social norms in these spaces, so he actively sought to avoid such judgements. His own actively attentive behaviour was in turn validated by what he interpreted as the “kudos looks” he received from the mothers present, signalling his acceptance in the space. Such framings ultimately present mothers not only as gatekeepers in a practical sense, but also as defining a father’s moral worth and acceptance in ‘maternal spaces’ (Doucet 2006).

What is crucial, in this sense, are the ways in which mothers are cast as the more experienced and knowledgeable parent as part of fathers’ own sense making practices. As a performative or symbolic interaction, fathering practices are conducted against the seemingly exemplary behaviours of mothers. A potential implication of this reifying of maternal status and father reliance upon mothers’ gatekeeping practices is that gendered parental trajectories are arguably reinforced – fathers will *always* be perceived as secondary parents when mothers’

parental practices are idealised in such ways. Yet perhaps an indicative issue here is the distinct lack of paternal role models within wider cultural representations of fatherhood (Podnieks 2016; Humphreys 2016). As discussed in Chapter 2, fathers' engagement in practices of care within pop culture or media texts has historically been portrayed as a source of humour or amusement, with father ineptness exaggerated for comic effect. While the fathers in this study did not see their own practices represented in such representations, there was nonetheless the sense that their own fathering reflected new or emerging ideals as part of generational shifts; as such, many of the fathers expressed a desire to imitate the caring practices of their mothers as opposed to their fathers – a trend supported by previous research (Finn & Henwood 2009; Williams 2008; Brannen & Nilsen 2006).

Ultimately, the limited images of engaged and competent fathers in cultural texts, alongside a discursive narrative of fathers as secondary or "substitutes" for mothers evokes an assumption that fathers require some form of guidance or direction in their practice – with the responsibility for orchestrating this instruction invariably falling upon their partners (Miller 2018; Radcliffe & Cassell 2015; Gaunt 2008; Sunderland 2000). Challenges to such assumptions of father competency were addressed in Chapter 6 in relation to the underlying motivations of dad group cultures, with the creation of these spaces presenting opportunities for fathers gain experience as hands-on, primary carers and to develop an understanding of both the physical and mental responsibilities of parenting. As Elliott (2016) argues, it is this experience of caring 'for' their children which has the *potential* to instil an 'ethic of care' within fathers, producing an embodied understanding of childcare needs, the domestic 'mental load' (Walzer 1996), and the '24/7 thinking responsibility' of parenthood (Miller 2017). However, the emergence of such 'caring masculinities' is dependent upon a number of factors, not least fathers own agency in navigating and negotiating care responsibilities. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, men's care is performed in a myriad of ways, utilising a combination of feminised and masculinised approaches (Lomas 2013; Miller 2018; Brandth & Kvande 2018; Meah 2015). As discussed below, conceptualisations of parental practices have been recast in recent years to account for such paternal agency, with accounts of 'paternal gatekeeping' emerging as key features of fathering practice as a means of framing the mental responsibilities of care as a matter of individual choice.

Parental 'Choices': Agency as a paternal gatekeeping practice

When seeking to understand the divisions of childcare responsibilities it is important to consider how perceptions of parental roles are shaped by the motivations, desires, and

choices of mothers and fathers. Theorisations of father 'involvement', in this sense, have sought to understand how fathers seek *greater* involvement, set against a backdrop of cultural and historical narratives of detached fathering among previous generations, alongside a long working hours culture which limits the availability of father-child time (Finn & Henwood 2009; Gregory & Milner 2011). 'New' or 'involved' fatherhood then has been broadly underpinned by the notion that fathers are seeking to *do more* in the realms of care and nurture but are often restricted by the aforementioned cultural and structural factors. Viewing fatherhood in this manner arguably casts it in a sympathetic tone, underpinned by a language of constraint which emphasises the ways fathers may struggle to adapt to (maternal) parenting worlds. It is certainly the case that the fathers in this study have faced structural and cultural restrictions in their desire to perform perceived ideals of 'good' fathering, with their contributions often underestimated or unacknowledged across different contexts (see Chapter 5). However, it is important to consider the ways in which these apparent 'limitations' to fathering involvement are perhaps beneficial or rewarding – such as shielding fathers from heightened expectations and scrutiny (Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012).

Within this study, the fathers' engagement and navigation of 'intensive parenting' expectations is a useful example. In line with previous research (Faircloth 2014b; Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012; Ralph 2016), the narratives of fatherhood demonstrated a knowledge and awareness of the heightened expectations placed upon parents to reflexively monitor and improve their care giving practices, both in terms of their physical or nurturing care and their interactive or educational engagement. Many of the fathers, for example, acknowledged the growing need to process information and knowledge relating to child development stages in order to support and enhance their child's physical, cognitive, and social growth. However, as argued in Chapter 4, these were often narrated from self-defined subject positions on the periphery of involvement and responsibility, with their partners actively presented as occupying a primary and controlling role, owing to their seemingly greater knowledge and expertise. In this sense, many of the fathers legitimated and justified their limited involvement by arguing that their partners accepted this responsibility *by choice*. Both Graham and George were key examples in this regard, presenting their partners' processing of child development information as a leisure pursuit performed during their "free time" and from which they took pleasure and enjoyment. This, in turn, allowed these fathers to frame their avoidance of such intensive engagement as a matter of their partner's own *personal choice and motivations.* As George explained:

> I don't want childcare to be the only thing that I'm doing in the day, that's not something I was actively that interested in… Whereas Anna is much more warm to that idea, so that's kind of, it just kind of fitted. So it's hard to say that it really, it was one person was pushing it the other way, it just kind of suited everybody.

Here, George presents an account in which the division of responsibility is an arrangement based upon his and his partner's parental desires or preferences. George's limited engagement is not, as Allen and Hawkins (1999) might suggest, a product of maternal 'blocking', but an active choice legitimated by the framing of his wife's motivations and ideals of her own mothering role. What is seemingly ignored or overlooked in George's account is the degree to which, in general, mothers are free to 'choose' how and what practices they engage in. As Miller (2017:139) and Shirani and colleagues (2012) argue, mothers are "more alert to the possibilities of how they will be perceived" and face higher risks of scrutiny than fathers, so are themselves more constrained in their parental choices. Cultural expectations of motherhood, as such, present a rather convenient set of circumstances for fathers in which they can actively avoid intensive demands owing to the apparent desire of mothers to fulfil these responsibilities themselves (Shirani et al 2012).

Such framings of personal choice can be regarded as a form of paternal gatekeeping in the sense that it maintains the ability of fathers to 'pick-and-choose' their involved practices and the extent of the 'intensity' with which these are performed (Miller 2017; Yarwood 2011; Wall & Arnold 2007). As outlined in Chapter 5, many of the fathers were able to adopt a 'hands-off' approach in relation to their children's extra-curricular educational or leisure pursuits, emphasising their shared engagement in the activity, but also avoiding the mental labour of planning, organising, or enforcing this participation by their children. Again, personal choice and autonomy were key ideals presented by the fathers as evidenced in Harry's assertion that it is important to just be "cool with [his children] and [let] them do it in their own way". Here, Harry was referring to his daughter's involvement in an orchestra and her often limited time spent practising; while aware that she should perhaps dedicate more time to this, Harry utilises notions of choice and autonomy to absolve himself of the responsibility to enforce this. Consequently, Harry actively avoided any form of conflict with his daughter, a position adopted by many of the fathers in their narratives, preferring to maintain a hands-off form of cultivation akin to Lareau's (2009) conception of the fulfilment of 'natural growth'. Ensuring their child's happiness and allowing them to make their own decisions were prioritised in this regard.

What was clear among the narratives of fatherhood was that expectations of 'intensive' parental demands were experienced and navigated by the fathers; managing daily routines, keeping track of development stages, and setting good moral examples of personhood were all expressed in some form. The point I seek to emphasise, however, is that while this parental labour is presented in ways which imply a shared responsibility, it is possible to discern distinct differences in how this labour was *performed*. Key to this difference was the 'intensity' with which parental practices were narrated. The accounts of fatherhood presented here, while not without its struggles, imply a greater sense of freedom and agency than may be possible for mothers. As noted above, there is a greater sense of choice underpinning father involvement; they can just as easily 'step in' and take responsibility for a task as they can 'step away' and devolve themselves of accountability. This is not to question the fathers' commitment and affection for their children, but rather to suggest that 'soft touch' approaches to parenting are made possible for fathers in ways that are not accessible to mothers due to cultural representations. Yet what is perhaps the most crucial point, is the suggestion that fathers do not understand this lack of flexibility or autonomy within cultural expectations of mothering and are often left confused as to why their partners appear so stressed about their parental responsibilities. Such interpersonal understandings by fathers are explored further below.

"They don't realise, do they?": Interpretations of Mental Labour

The notion of the 'mental labour' of mothers' everyday care responsibilities is well documented and has been identified as a potential source of conflict among couples (Walzer 1996; Hays 1996; Hochschild 2012). Walzer (1996), for example, notes how fathers in her study would often criticise their partners for their worries and anxieties about their child and how they were perceived; for the fathers this was seen as an unnecessary source of stress or concern. Such interpretations were encountered in Chapter 4, as George discussed the differences between his and his wife's feeding practices (*"she'd be like 'no you are eating, this is time to eat' sort of thing")*. Feeding times were presented by George as a source of stress for his wife, particularly when his daughter would refuse to eat. From his perspective, he could not understand why this refusal to eat should be a source of concern, presenting his wife's stress as a seemingly irrational emotional response (*"I'm not gonna sit here and get stressed out over someone who was crying because I wouldn't let them head-butt a wall earlier, so I'm not gonna invest emotionally on whether you're going to eat all your dinner"*). What is evident here are the perceptions of plausible practice – for George, stepping away

from this issue was acceptable, justified by his seemingly rational perspective. For his wife, however, potential anxieties regarding how the inability to feed her child may reflect on her status *as a mother* perhaps drives her persistent approach (Hays 1996; Miller 2017; Perrier 2013).

Differences in interpretations of care work and plausibility of practices were prominent throughout this study. As noted above, many of the fathers seemingly took alternative approaches to the cultivation of child development, adopting a masculinised perspective underpinned by moral guardianship and child autonomy. Domestic responsibilities, such as housework, were equally a divisive subject within fathering narratives, with household chores often avoided in favour of 'fun' activities (see Chapter 5). In general, then, fatherhood was presented on significantly different terms to motherhood, defined by broad, moral ideals in which their engagement was associated with vague notions of being present either physically or in 'spirit'. Arguably, it is this nebulous sense of 'being there' for fathers which maintains the low expectations of what is meant by 'involvement', allowing them to avoid the burdens of expectations placed upon mothering practices (Wall & Arnold 2007; Shirani et al 2012; Faircloth 2014b).

What is potentially problematic, however, is that despite an overall avoidance of many parenting tasks, many fathers still derive a sense of value and importance from vague notions of their 'being there'. As the only stay-at-home-father, Colin found definitions of 'good' fathering among his peers to be a source of frustration, and felt that the self-defined reified status of fathering involvement was ultimately unjustified:

> I think there's a lot of respect amongst people. And actually, I tell you what, there is a definite line between them, I think anyway, and that's people that stay at home, look after the kids, and people that go to work and think that they're amazing parents but don't do much of the actual parenting. There's almost a shorthand between, if you're talking to someone else that stays at home with the kids, you don't have to have that initial conversation, which is that: they don't realise do they? That they're not [amazing parents], you just know that (Colin)

Colin's opinions on the apparent divide in parental practices offer an interesting perspective on the notion of fathering value and expectation. Colin's own experience, both as a stay-at-home-father and his encounters with other mothers, contributes to his perception that (some) fathers attribute credibility for what is regarded as a low quantity of involvement time and effort. This idea of "actual parenting", as Colin defines it, alludes to the notion that fathers are unaware of the arduous physical and mental labour of childcare, with this work

subsequently overlooked or ignored entirely (Oakley 2005; Walzer 1996; Hochschild 2012). This lack of acknowledgement, as Hochschild (2012) suggests, means that it is not possible to attribute value to this domestic work; however, when fathers actively choose to 'step in' and engage in domestic tasks, there is an assumption of value as they are seemingly defying expectation. What is crucial to emphasise, as such, is an enduring set of domestic dynamics in which father presence *is still regarded as a novelty* – fathering presence alone is sufficient to claim discursive value and praise. The cultural landscape of parenting, in this sense, is framed in favour of fathers, emphasising and acknowledging their 'involvement', and creating subject positions through which fathers can claim praise and adulation (e.g. discourses of the 'fixer father' discussed above). What seems to endure, in other words, is that the value of father involvement derives from their status *as men*.

Summary and Reflections

Returning to Oakley's (2005) discussion of parental responsibility, outlined above, the question of egalitarian lifestyles and shared care endeavours derives from an alignment or 'symmetry' between the practices of mothers and fathers. Equality, in this sense, can only exist when fathers face the same expectations, the same judgements, and the same scrutiny as mothers. As the findings discussed here suggest, there appears to be very little change in this regard, with mothers occupying primary status in terms of parental competency, knowledge, and ability. The notion of maternal gatekeeping has been highlighted as a key factor in maintaining this inherent asymmetry in terms of heteronormative parental roles and responsibilities, with mothers deemed responsible for facilitating fathering practice as part of 'intensive' parenting expectations. Fathers, in turn, are positioned as secondary in the responsibility for care, requiring guidance, support, and direction owing to an assumed incompetency regarding their ability to care. Such assumptions are highly problematic, further engraining traditional gendered trajectories in divisions of parental labour for heterosexual couples. Potential solutions, in this case, can be found in the emergence of new cultural role models for fathers across different forms of media (such as advertisements, television programmes, or parental textbooks), presenting fathers not simply engaged in care but fulfilling aspects of the 24/7 thinking responsibilities, positioning them as primary (and competent) carers.

Equally, however, it is necessary to account for the strategies utilised by fathers as a means of resisting or avoiding the perceived burden of the 'thinking responsibilities' of parenting. The findings discussed here have demonstrated how notions of individual choice are utilised by

fathers, framing parental engagement in mental practices – such as planning, organising, and co-ordinating care needs – as a matter of personal motivation and desire. As a form of 'paternal gatekeeping', such practices can be seen as maintaining the 'status quo' of normative gendered and parental labour, with mothers continuing to carry the burden of expectation and scrutiny. Yet, perhaps the most pertinent aspect of this idea of choice, is the suggestion that fathers do not understand the all-consuming demands of parenting simply due to a lack of practical engagement in primary caring. While this study has demonstrated fathers increased engagement in care, the lack of discernible shifts in the cultural expectations of parental roles in wider society pose questions of the extent of this hands-on engagement. Colin's experiences as stay-at-home-father pose interesting questions in this regard, specifically the extent to which the (maternal) role of primary care is fully embodied and experienced by fathers. Empathetic understanding of care needs derives from hands-on experience, so subsequently there is an argument to suggest that the shifts in the conduct of fathering are not as 'revolutionary' in practice as they are in culture.

Conclusions

What is clear from the findings discussed in this chapter is the complex array of gender trajectories made available for fathers across the broad landscape of parental contexts – trajectories which are underpinned by competing and often contradictory discourses, subject positions, and interpretations. These accounts of fatherhood suggest both significant re-evaluations of masculinity and care alongside a reaffirming of traditional hegemonic concepts and relations of gendered parental practices. While there is evidence or 'glimpses' of egalitarian practices, these are performed within a cultural landscape which reifies or romanticises this engagement, presenting false impressions regarding the extent of change. As previous research has suggested, what is 'new' about fatherhood is the cultural acceptance of involved or intimate identities (Lewis & O'Brien 1987; Dermott 2008; Dermott & Miller 2015). The discussion presented here has extended this debate, considering the nuanced ways in which 'involvement' can be defined and performed in practice by fathers across multiple settings. Within domestic contexts, the fathers demonstrated their hands-on, embodied involvement in practices of care in ways which can be seen to re-gender assumptions of father engagement and challenge traditional ideals of masculinity. Yet, these same ideals were utilised in the development of distinct paternal identities and the performance of masculinised fathering practices. As such, while engagement in practices of care was presented as an important *parental* responsibility, what was presented as distinctly *fatherly*

was fun engagement in leisure activities and performing a virtuous, moral identity to "bequeath" the adult world to their children.

In line with previous fatherhood research, then, ideals of 'being there' with their children held great value for the fathers, and so sought to present their time together as special or distinctive – particularly in relation to their perceived ideals and practices of their partners. Father-child time carried an emotive value, presenting a reified status to father involvement and paternal identities. This status – in turn, underpinned by cultural representations of 'good' fathering – ultimately produces a powerful discursive space for fathers in which parental responsibilities can be taken on or avoided without critical scrutiny. This ability to choreograph their care responsibilities is significant in the sense that it determines both what fathers do and *do not do*. Not only can this reaffirm dichotomies in the division of parental labour, but also reflects idealised perceptions of parental value. In this case, it is the 'hidden' mental labour of parenting which is seemingly avoided by fathers, with value attributed to more visible and novel practices. While this form of involvement can be seen to reflect important shifts in the conceptualisation of masculinity, this change does not extend into broader perceptions of gender and femininity. Father involvement remains peripheral or secondary to the work of mothers – fathers will support or 'step in' when required but will not take on the primary responsibility for care and domestic labour. What we see, then, are 'hybrid' or 'bricolage' conceptions of fatherhood, underpinned by an agency to adopt some, but not all, parental responsibilities.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this thesis, changes and continuities regarding contemporary perceptions and practices of fatherhood have been explored. Specifically, the range of contexts navigated by fathers across the parental landscape have been investigated, tracing the influence of parenting discourses, social localities, and material and cultural resources in shaping and defining what fathers 'do'. This thesis is set against a backdrop of cultural shifts in understandings of fatherhood, with the seemingly 'new' engagement by fathers in practices of care potentially contributing to social changes not only in terms of parental labour but also in challenging and dismantling enduring gendered inequalities and dichotomies. In this regard, this research has contributed to social scientific understandings of the extent to this change, in particular exploring the ways in which fathers navigate and negotiate parental landscapes as part of sense-making processes. In this chapter, key findings and conclusions from this thesis are summarised. Firstly, the empirical findings discussed in the analysis chapters (4-6) are reiterated, with key themes in relation to the three fathering contexts summarised and contributions to theory identified. This is followed by reflections on the methodology utilised in this study, focusing specifically upon the forms of data and representation produced, as well as discussing issues relating to outsider status in the field. Finally, the wider implications and future directions of the research are explored, outlining key insights and recommendations.

Main Findings

The findings presented in this thesis (Chapters 4-6) have contributed to critical understandings of the identities, practices, and meanings of contemporary fatherhood in the UK. Specifically, this thesis has been guided by three key aims: (1) understanding the role of discourse in shaping meanings and perceptions of fatherhood, (2) exploring how different contexts and spaces impact upon the practices and perceptions of fatherhood, and (3) tracing the impact of embodiment, including material and cultural resources, in shaping how fathering practice is perceived and conducted. In this section, key findings from analysis chapters are summarised, outlining key themes in relation to the different 'contexts' explored as part of this research. Key contributions and implications of these findings will then be traced, outlining the ways in which understandings of fatherhood have been extended and challenged in relation to the aims of this thesis.

Findings Summaries

The focus upon the different contexts or spaces in which fathering is understood and practiced informed the structure and presentation of my findings in this thesis, with three key social contexts identified. In Chapter 4, narratives of fathering practices in the home were traced, exploring how the sample of fathers presented their domestic identities and how the demands of contemporary parenting were navigated and negotiated. A key focus of this chapter was the ways in which the practical demands of fathering were narrated and discussed by the fathers, as everyday domestic labour was traced across a chronological timeline, including experiences of their partner's pregnancy, care demands of new-born babies, and the everyday experiences of parenting school-age children. In general, many of the fathering narratives drew upon ideals of egalitarianism, presenting domestic labour as a shared endeavour with parental roles performed in interchangeable ways (Miller 2017; Hodkinson & Brooks 2018). This was evident among the fathers' narrations of their transition to fatherhood, in particular the ways in which they responded to the practical demands of infant care (such as nappy changes, feeding, or soothing), engaging in practices alongside their partners. Similarly, family life was presented as hectic, involving the completion of an array of tasks (including the school run, housework, and work commitments) to be shared between both parents. What was particularly significant in this case was that engagement in the 'work' of domestic labour appeared to be acknowledged and valued by the fathers, forming a key facet of their parental identity. This implied an important shift in the gendered ideals of fathers, with breadwinner responsibilities presented with a lower status than found among previous generations of fathers. Yet, the findings presented in Chapter 4 also revealed several continuities in the gendered trajectories of mothers and fathers. In particular was the enduring narrative of 'mother as main parent/father as secondary', with many of the fathers presenting their partners as responsible for co-ordinating care practices owing to their perceived maternal 'instincts' or knowledge. In this sense, mothers were seen to facilitate or 'gatekeep' father involvement, providing support or advice when needed. Broadly, then, the fathers tended to present their parental practices in distinctly 'masculinised' ways, with an emphasis upon autonomy, rationalisation, and even stoicism in negotiations of their role.

While the accounts of domestic family certainly evoked a sense of 'spoken' egalitarianism (Roberts 2018), the structure of the fathers' everyday lives implied that care practices were often engaged in during 'pockets' of time across mornings, evenings, and weekends. As

explored in Chapter 5, father engagement during weekends or 'non-working days' often involved the practice of 'interactive care' – time dedicated to family activities or leisure practices outside of the home, in settings which were more familiar to fathers but nonetheless underpinned by ideals of contemporary parental (or maternal) cultures. These spaces (including, parks, leisure centres, or playgrounds) were presented as key sites in the performance of 'concerted cultivation' by fathers, presenting opportunities for instilling 'life lessons' or fostering distinct cultural and moral values. Although the fathers often referred to or implied the influence of 'intensive parenting' discourse in their presentation of father involvement, there was also a sense of agency utilised by the fathers as they narrated their ability to perform a 'hands-off' form of cultivation, in turn resisting the demands of 'intensive' ideals. Here, masculine ideals of autonomy were discussed as a means of framing their practices, suggesting that part of their role included presenting opportunities for their children to make their own decisions regarding leisure engagement. In general, father-child time was presented not as an educational endeavour but rather as a novel or special time in which fun activities were prioritised. Here, the value of a father's 'being there' was emphasised, foregrounding the importance of father presence, and imbuing an exciting mystique to father-child interactions. However, such idealised perceptions present in fathering narratives were somewhat challenged by the findings produced through 'in-situ' methods, which revealed examples of the conflicts and negotiations encountered by fathers as part of their interactions with their children. In this sense, the reified meanings of narrated fathering were contrasted with the more mundane interactions of everyday parenting in practice. A key aspect of this 'grounded' approach was the ways in which maternal primacy structured parental landscapes, with the fathers adapting their practices in line with maternally defined social norms and values. Father presence across these settings continued to be interpreted as a novelty, leading to questions over fathers' parental competency and experience. Mothers, then, were positioned as gatekeepers for the fathers, with mothering practices regarded as setting the boundaries of plausible and acceptable practice.

In Chapter 6, however, newly emerging paternal sites within the parental landscape were observed. These spaces – referred to as 'dad groups' – were social contexts in which fathers took responsibility for the sole-care of their children and where maternal norms held a seemingly minimal influence. The focus of this chapter, as such, was to explore the social construction of fatherhood in spaces distinctly framed as 'paternal' or 'fatherly', observing the parental practices made possible and the ways in which fathers navigated such settings.

The cultural influences which underpinned these spaces was a key theme in this regard, with fathering ideals framed within distinct discourses. Across the three groups, different iterations and interpretations of ‘fixer father’ discourses were prominent, with father involvement encouraged by the seeming positive influence upon child development outcomes, shifting gendered ideals of parenting, and challenging ‘toxic’ traits of hegemonic masculinity. Again, the reified value of a father’s ‘being there’ was emphasised, with the groups seemingly performing a social function by providing opportunities for fathers to learn about their child’s development and engage in playful activities (such as singing, arts and crafts, and role-play games). A related theme in this regard was the sense with which the group activities facilitating an embodied form of involvement, with the fathers joining in as part of their child’s play, immersing themselves within the ‘child worlds’ fostered by the spaces. What was interesting as part of this embodiment was the degree of ‘exposure’ interpreted by the fathers – group singing activities, for example, risked high exposure and potential embarrassment so were typically engaged in reserved ways, while ‘parlour games’ imbued a sense of ‘knowing daftness’ and so were performed with greater enthusiasm and enjoyment. Broadly, father involvement across the groups was underpinned by a sense of companionship, with close father-child bonds developed through engagement in play and ‘novel’ activities. Interestingly, however, there were few instances of the development of bonds between the fathers attending the groups. While there was a polite and courteous atmosphere within the groups, the fathers appeared more as passing acquaintances, rarely engaging in conversation beyond that of small talk. What was particularly revealing were the strategies utilised by the fathers to avoid or close off potential engagement or conversation, such as avoiding eye-contact, looking at mobile phones, or ‘shadowing’ their children around the spaces. As such, men’s homosocial relationships continue to be primarily structured by traditional masculine values (such as independence or autonomy) preventing the formation of close bonds and friendships founded upon the values of care.

Contributions to Theory

In Chapter 2, the developing field of fatherhood theory and research was traced, outlining the contemporary understandings produced in recent decades. The broad consensus of this scholarship is that the meanings of fatherhood – both in terms of norms and values, alongside hands-on practice – are shifting as part of broader social changes to family lives and dynamics, workplace structures, and gendered perceptions of care (Dermott & Miller 2015; Lupton & Barclay 1997; Williams 2008; Doucet 2009; Miller 2017; Dermott 2008; Wall &

Arnold 2007). Unlike previous generations, there is now a greater visibility of fathers across the parenting landscape, with fathers seemingly fulfilling ‘new’ expectations of involvement and intimacy as reflected in cultural and discursive representations and pursuing a hands-on care role (Dermott & Miller 2015; Wall & Arnold 2007; Lupton & Barclay 1997). Yet, there are a number of factors which can be seen to impede such caring practice, including structural and workplace barriers, alongside enduring gender inequalities which produce deep-rooted trajectories for mothering and fathering practice among heterosexual couples. The notion of the ‘new’ father has, as such, been argued to be merely a figment of the cultural imagination, with men’s increased involvement in care, alongside the potential for shifting gender norms as a result, framed as an idealised narrative (Lewis & O’Brien 1987; Wall & Arnold 2007; Scheibling 2020a). These inconsistencies and complexities between the culture and conduct of fatherhood ultimately provide the foundation to this thesis, with this research guided by the aim of delving into this complexity to develop and extend social scientific understandings of fathering identity and practice. This was achieved by a focus upon the *contexts* of fatherhood, exploring and interpreting fathering experiences within the various sites and spaces across the material and cultural landscapes of parenthood.

The findings summarised above ultimately demonstrate and extend social scientific understandings of the complexity of fathering identities, with the fathers engaging in a variety of practices and negotiating a range of cultural expectations when presenting their perceptions of fatherhood. As outlined in Chapter 7, the contextualised focus of this investigation has revealed several key contributions to fatherhood theory particularly in relation to understandings of care ethics, gender and masculinity, and perceptions of parental responsibility. Firstly, then, the findings presented ‘glimpses’ of the contexts where changes in the value of care for fathers could be observed, offering evidence of how such reconfigurement could occur. A key factor in relation to fathering narratives was the ability of fathers to draw upon caring subject positions, utilising discourses of intimacy and involvement to construct caring and egalitarian identities. Engagement in practices of care, as part of a shared endeavour alongside their partners, formed the basis of ‘parental personas’, in which domestic labour was granted equal, if not greater, value than breadwinning responsibilities. Such hands-on and embodied practices of care – as observed across domestic, public, and ‘dad group’ settings – in turn, allowed for the development of caring dispositions among the fathers. The embodied experience of this interaction was seen to cultivate the fathers’ knowledge of care needs, increasing their competency, and perhaps

most importantly, their confidence when performing childcare. These findings were highlighted as a key contribution to the emerging field of 'caring masculinities', supporting Elliott's (2016) thesis that men's increased engagement in practices of 'caring for' their children can develop an 'ethic of care' as part of fathering identities. The engagement in care by the fathers in this study demonstrates how the values of empathy, compassion, and relationality can be incorporated into masculine identities, potentially destabilising traditional gendered ideals and expectations (Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Gough 2018). Yet, the findings also complicate masculine identities, with conflicting ideals holding hegemonic value and prominence within particular contexts. This was evident among the fathers' narratives of mental health issues, with traditional masculine traits of independence, stoicism, and self-sacrifice held as viable strategies for navigating the stresses and anxieties of the transition to fatherhood. Care identities, as such, were negotiated in fluid and complex ways, with care motivations and practices often re-cast and performed within masculinised framings (see Chapter 4). While there is evidence to suggest, then, that care values have been reconfigured for fathers, this is arguably part of a 'bricolage' fathering identity in which an ethic of care is incorporated alongside other hegemonic masculine values and utilised within different contexts (Leer 2016; Bridges & Pascoe 2014; Connell and Messerschimdt 2005).

In relation to this gendered complexity, these findings have also contributed to understandings of the cultural meanings of fatherhood, in particular the definitions which constitute 'involvement' for fathers (Wall & Arnold 2007; Doucet 2006; Henz 2019; Machin 2015). What is consistent here is the sense with which fathering ideals are influenced by changes and continuities to masculine identities. Across the accounts of fatherhood, and including observational findings of father-child interactions, idealised involvement practices were framed within notions of 'interactive care', underpinned by engagement in leisure pursuits with their children and taking responsibility for overseeing 'fun' family activities. Such findings suggest that despite narratives of increased father involvement, deep-rooted gender divisions of parental labour persist within family dynamics (Eerola et al 2021; Ralph 2016; Such 2006; Henz 2019). Yet, it is important not to overlook that father involvement in interactive care still signals shifts in the source of masculine status; these practices are a means of distancing fathers from traditional patriarchal ideals of cold and emotionless masculinity, and presenting them as fun, laid-back, and engaged in the interests of their children. Particularly within 'dad group' contexts, father-child relationships were founded

upon ideals of companionship and togetherness, a demonstration of love and care through play and interaction.

However, where continuities with traditional ideals were observed, these typically reflected traits regarded as key to men's hegemonic status (Connell 2005; Connell & Messerschimdt 2005; Finn & Henwood 2009). Here, fathers were presented as figures of virtue and wisdom, with the responsibility to teach moral lessons and impart particular values onto their children. While the fathers sought to present themselves as fun and engaged, then, they also sought to retain a sense of power and respect within their role through their 'virtuous' status. This status was argued to imbue a father's 'being there' with a reified, romanticised, or glorified status, in which value is derived from their status as men. This sense of power associated with fathering practice is, in turn, reflected and reinforced by wider discursive constructions of father involvement, with cultural narratives, such as the 'fixer father' or the 'Dad 2.0' movement, presenting fatherhood in a 'heroic' light. Such framings ultimately present powerful subject positions for fathers to draw upon when constructing their identity (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Yarwood 2011), in which simply demonstrating their involvement and presence is sufficient to derive value and importance.

Demonstrations of 'visible' father involvement were indeed a prominent feature of the fathering narratives and 'in-situ' performances, with the 'doing' of fatherhood foregrounded across accounts. While practices of 'caring for' their children were emphasised, what was seemingly missing, however, were accounts of the 'invisible' tasks of parental labour – the planning, co-ordinating, and thinking responsibilities of care (Miller 2017; Shirani et al 2012; Hochschild 2012). The findings, in this sense, implied enduring gendered divisions of labour in which fathers not only held, but actively adopted, a secondary care status to their seemingly more knowledgeable and competent partners (Sunderland 2000; Miller 2018). The fathers perspectives on the organisation of care labour, then, presented interesting insights into the practices of what has been defined as maternal and paternal gatekeeping (Allan & Hawkins 1999; Puhlman & Pasley 2013; Miller 2018). On the one hand, mothers were presented as the exemplars of parental practice, offering both practical and moral directives for fathers to follow when navigating what were perceived as predominantly 'maternal worlds' (Allan & Hawkins 1999; Doucet 2006). Mothers were regarded as responsible for guiding fathers through their parenting endeavours, on hand to offer support when needed. While such perspectives reinforce the primary status of motherhood in care contexts, it also implies an enduring 'novelty' status of involved fatherhood, reigniting debates regarding the

existence of this figure beyond cultural imaginings (Lewis & O'Brien 1987; Dermott & Miller 2015). While this may suggest a devalued status to fatherhood, such low expectations regarding knowledge and competency were also seen to offer fathers a degree of agency to choreograph their parental practices. Engagement in the 'thinking practices' of care – such as processing knowledge and information regarding child development – was perceived by fathers as a personal choice by their partners which, in turn, was seen to devolve them of responsibility to engage themselves. In this sense, fathers can be seen to benefit from their secondary status by positioning their partners as more knowledgeable and more competent carers, and actively avoiding the pressures associated with co-ordinating care and ensuring care needs are met. Such questions regarding the level and extent of father involvement casts significant uncertainty on the ability of 'caring fatherhoods' to re-gender or undo traditional parenting divisions. Despite talk of interchangeability and egalitarian lifestyles, fatherhood in practice still appears to remain on the peripheral of parental landscapes. Owing to this secondary status – whether imposed upon fathers or actively elected – it would seem that, as Oakley (2005) suggests, *"symmetry remains a myth"*.

Methodological Reflections

Representing Culture and Conduct: Reflections on method

A key aim of this research has been to acknowledge the differences between cultural representations of fatherhood and the conduct of fathering as performed in everyday settings. Fatherhood as a social phenomenon is defined by this dual process of culture and conduct, ontological foundations which are often misaligned or asynchronous, with shifts in culture not necessarily followed by changes in conduct and vice versa (La Rossa 1998; Dermott 2008; Wall & Arnold 2007). As such, reflexive awareness of the contributions of the data – either to understandings of the *discursive construction* of fatherhood in culture, or representations of the *embodied interactions* of fathers in practice – is of significant importance for establishing exactly *what* is being understood and interpreted (Dermott 2008; Pillow 2003; Dowling 2006). In Chapter 3, the interpretive boundaries of the data collections methods were addressed as part of this reflexive process, providing an outline of the different forms of observational and interview data produced. This was necessary as means of determining the possibilities for interpretation and representation within the data and how contributions to practical and/or cultural understandings of fatherhood were determined. The use of observational and interview methods in this regard presented a nuanced data set, capturing diverse representations of fathering interactions and behaviours alongside the

various meanings, motivations, and expectations of this practice. The different research contexts produced in relation to the data collection method, in other words, offered unique perspectives on the culture and conduct of fatherhood across the parental landscape.

Arguably, a key strength regarding the use of participant observations was that it offered tangible access to specific fathering contexts – in this case, dad group settings – providing the ability to observe 'transient moments' in the conduct of fathering. In this sense, being 'in place' as a researcher allowed for the intricacies or "texture" of everyday interactions to be observed and interpreted (Back 2015; Gabb & Fink 2015:971), fulfilling the research aims of understanding the impact of social space, location, and context in mediating fathering practice (Doucet 2006, 2013). My motivation and justification for adopting participants observations, in other words, was derived from a desire to observe the embodied practices of fathering – the "postures", "gestures", and "expressions" which serve to reflect fathering as a "state of the body" (Bourdieu 1977:87, 1990; Doucet 2013; Atkinson 2010, 2018). In many ways, access to these embodied practices was easily achieved. When navigating the three dad groups, for instance, I observed first-hand the interactions of the fathers as they negotiated the physical environment. I witnessed several different fleeting moments in this regard, such as the tender or intimate interactions between fathers and their children alongside the moments of fun and laughter that were shared. What was accessible, then, were examples of *practical, embodied, and hands-on fathering*.

What was problematic, however, were the epistemological limitations in effectively capturing and representing the interactions within in-situ contexts. My presence in these spaces was not sufficient to allow unfettered access to these material realities of care. Observational data is always subject to interpretive processes and saturation, in this sense, as observed events are transformed into 'text' – e.g. through the production of fieldnotes (Dunne et al 2005; Skeggs 1997). The nature of this transformation ultimately means that the observational data produced in this research must be regarded as a *subjective reconstruction*, as filtered through the unique scholarly and biographical lens of the observer (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Ricoueur 1991). My experiences within these settings, as such, were interpreted within an academic framework and mediated by the discourses made available through fatherhood scholarship, including notions of 'intensive' parenting or hegemonic masculinities (Skeggs 1997). My interpretations, in other words, were derived from different meanings to the fathers who attended the event, an issue discussed further below.

Access to understandings and insights into fathering conduct as part of analysis and interpretation were also obscured by the extent to which the observed events could be perceived as 'naturally occurring'. In this regard, it was necessary to consider the ways in which the fathering conduct was mediated by the "normative dimensions" imposed upon these spaces (Doucet 2013:291). As a social space, practices within the dad groups were informed by cultural ideals and discourses, defining the boundaries of possible and plausible conduct (Doucet 2013; Wall & Arnold 2007; Chapter 6). This was evidenced, for example, by the available activities within the spaces, many of which encouraged playful interactions between fathers and their children. My analysis in this sense explored the ways in which the fathering conduct could be perceived as a performative act, demonstrating compliance to the cultural expectations of fatherhood within these contexts. As such, the presence of pre-existing structural and discursive forces was a key theoretical assumption as part of my analysis. Subsequently, an important element of my reflexive practice was to retain an awareness of such assumptions as part of the interpretive process.

The use of interview accounts presents an interesting contrast to the observation data in that narrations of fathering practice predominantly reflected perceptions of cultural understandings of fatherhood. The strength of this approach was that it offered complimentary perspectives on the *meanings* of fatherhood and the different subject positions available to fathers in the process of "identity negotiation" (Yarwood 2011:152; Locket & Yarwood 2017; Lupton & Barclay 1997). Following Yarwood (2011), the ways in which fathers narrated their practices, in this sense, served more than a descriptive purpose in that it was a curated, sense-making, and performative process informing constructions and representations of fatherhood as a cultural or discursive identity. As part of the analytic process, then, fathering accounts were explored to highlight emphasised features of fathering identities, and the cultural and discursive ideals most valued in this regard. This was particularly evident in the various ways in which fathering presence was emphasised, reified, and glorified within accounts, positively impacting upon family lives in various ways (see Chapters 4, 5, & 7 for discussion). While such narrations cannot reflect these lives *as lived*, they provided intriguing insights into fathers interpretations of their roles. These were fathers who were seemingly embracing the shifts in cultural expectations, seeking to take pride and value from their involvement. While my role as a social scientist has been to cast a critical perspective over these accounts, a key aspect of my reflexive engagement with these narratives has been to temper my expectations in relation to the claims made by the fathers

and remember that the expressed shifts in fathering culture are positive overall, even if they were not to the extent that I might have hoped when embarking on this research.

Arguably, part of the analytical challenge with this interpretation of the fathers' accounts was negotiating what could be perceived as *performative* (i.e. framing the narrative in line with expectations) or *biographical* (i.e. a recounting of experiences and conduct). Adopting critical realist perspectives was important as part of analysis here, allowing for reflexibility in how the narratives were interpreted. This was particularly useful when analysing narrated experiences that did not match the fathers' idealised expectations. A key example in this case were the accounts of mental health struggles as narrated by Colin, Jonathan, and Dylan (see Chapter 4). These were intense, compelling, and emotive narrations of particularly challenging periods in the lives of these fathers, and I found it to be an incredibly humbling experience to listen to these stories. As such, I felt a responsibility to represent these narratives as examples of actual conduct, providing a 'realist' grounding to reflect the emotions, struggles, and responses experienced by the fathers, developing understandings of father wellbeing and mental health to potentially be used as part of future interventions. Interestingly, however, I was also able to apply performative analysis to these accounts to demonstrate the endurance of hegemonic masculine discourses as part of the fathers' framing of their experiences. The interpretation of such normative dimensions implied a potential challenge for mental health interventions to consider, as traditional traits such as resilience and independence are still perceived by fathers as viable strategies for navigating mental health struggles. What a critical realist perspective allowed for, in this sense, was not only grounded accounts of the struggles experienced, but the meanings and ideals utilised by fathers to frame this experience.

Further possibilities to negotiate the boundaries of culture and conduct in this project were afforded by the use of go-along interviews with fathers and their children. As a 'hybrid method' (Kusenbach 2003), the go-alongs represented a medium between participant observations and qualitative interviews, producing what can be described as an 'in-situ narration' involving responses by fathers to contextual factors *as they occurred*. The key difference in this sense was that our discussions were more 'impromptu' and dictated by contextual triggers (such as the behaviour of their child, or the physical landscape around us) meaning that the narrations were somewhat more mundane or grounded than the accounts produced in traditional interviews. What added nuance and complexity to this unique form of data was the sense that the fathers were not entirely 'in control' of the settings and behaviours

around them, meaning that practices or encounters which could be ignored as part of narrations out of context, were required to be engaged with directly. For example, father narrations of ‘daddy days’ presented father-child time as a special event, underpinned by fun and enjoyment – an idyllic account of this time together. The go-along context, however, presented examples of the types of issues or frustrations fathers may encounter, such as their infant child resisting a nap or their pre-school child misbehaving and not listening to instructions. Again, while these were not mirror reflections of fathering conduct, these encounters at least offered an ‘everydayness’ to the data which the father could reflect on. There was a nuance to the meanings produced by the fathers, in other words, acknowledging the mundane alongside the idealised.

Reflections on Representation and Intersectionality

A central aim of this thesis has been to access the various contexts and landscapes navigated by fathers, observing the practices and sense making processes which underpin everyday lives. Reflecting upon the benefits of researching everyday life, Les Back argues that it allows for social scientists to acknowledge that society is not just “a set of structural arrangements” but a “moving dynamic entity that has a rhythm and a temporality” (2015:820). When researching the contexts and circumstances of everyday lives it is necessary to acknowledge, therefore, that these ‘rhythms’ are inherently nuanced and subjective, and are experienced and interpreted in a multitude of ways by different members of society. As observed in Chapter 1, while social action takes place within a set of pre-existing social structures, such as gender, social class, race, or sexuality, it is the relationships between these structures, as experienced by individuals, which contributes to the production of the fabric of everyday life, developing one’s dispositions and understandings of plausible and possible action (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Smith & Elger 2012; Vespa 2009). In this sense, the acknowledgement of intersectionality – the structures, discourses, and embodiments, which inform our understanding of the world – is essential for social scientists for establishing *whose* experience is being represented and the knowledge claims which can be extrapolated.

The experiences of fatherhood explored in this study are, as such, reflective of a particular set of intersectional perspectives and characteristics. The majority of the fathers who took part in this study, including interviews and participant observations at dad groups, were heterosexual men, meaning that their perspectives and experiences of fatherhood can be seen to be interpreted from within heteronormative frameworks (Bower-Brown & Zadeh 2021; Vespa

2009). The transitions, navigations, and negotiations of fatherhood, in this sense, arguably took place within 'normative' parental landscapes, underpinned by a particular history of gender relations, ideologies, and inequalities. For example, the emergence of 'caring masculinities' and changes to men's gender identities discussed throughout this thesis ultimately derive in response to social and cultural 'norms' regarding the dichotomy of gender and parental roles. How the heterosexual fathers in this study responded to such historical social conditions, arguably do not reflect the responses and experiences of gay or trans fathers who themselves must navigate different social contexts and circumstances (Bower-Brown & Zadeh 2021).

The geographies through which the participating fathers navigated as part of their everyday lives also implied a high degree of privilege and ease when accessing cultural resources. The South East of England is largely an affluent region of the UK, with a predominantly white population. This was reflected across my sample as I mainly encountered white, middle-class fathers when observing parental spaces. Indeed, when conducting interviews with my sample of fathers it was possible to note several indicators of affluence and wealth. The homes I visited, for example, were warm, comfortable, and well-furnished and often located in suburban wards on the cusp of livelily city centres and green spaces. Navigating these areas also seemed unproblematic for these fathers. While difference was certainly established regarding their gender in these 'maternal worlds', the fathers did not express any other forms of stigma, such as racial discrimination (see Gill 2018 for discussion of 'Asian Masculinity' and associated discrimination). Ultimately, what I am seeking to emphasise here is that the findings presented in this thesis do not speak for the experiences of *all fathers*; the understandings of fatherhood in this sense are derived from a specific set of contextual circumstances and do not seek to claim universality. This implies, in turn, multiple intersectional fathering landscapes which can be explored as part of future research, contributing to the rich complexity of contemporary fatherhood in the UK.

The Imposter Phenomenon: Being an 'outsider' in the field

Managing the dynamics of outsider and insider relations within ethnographic research can be a difficult task given the variety of issues these relations produce. When approaching as an outsider a researcher is tasked with managing several factors in order to immerse themselves in the field and establish themselves as an 'insider' (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). These include dealing with unfamiliarity in the field, both in terms of navigating the space itself and dealing with the potential suspicions of the members with in it; building rapport with

members of the field, locating commonalities, and establishing friendly relationships; or tackling areas of distinction which might act as barriers to rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Scott et al 2012; McNess et al 2015). Managing these social dynamics, as Scott and colleagues (2012) reflect, ideally requires a researcher who is comfortable and confident in their role, assertively managing the social encounters that arise in the process of ethnographic, or indeed all qualitative research. Yet, even for the most experienced of researchers, it can often be difficult to avoid the 'dramaturgical stress' associated with the performance of a research role – feelings of nervousness, shyness, or fraudulence which ultimately contribute to internal questions and anxieties over one's status and legitimacy, termed 'the imposter phenomenon' (Scott et al 2012). These were worries and anxieties which I grappled with on many occasions during my time in the field, stemming from several different sources and encounters which will be outlined briefly below as part of a reflexive 'confession' of the factors which influenced my data collection.

As noted in Chapter 6, the parenting landscapes I navigated were unfamiliar owing to my status as a 'non-father' and so I always felt that I needed to dedicate time to settle into my surroundings and make sense of *my role* within the space. My dual role as researcher-volunteer when observing in dad groups, however, complicated matters somewhat, as I attempted to navigate the performative expectations of both of these roles. As volunteer, I felt that my access to the 'space' was legitimated as my role was formalised, with members of the group able to observe me carrying out supportive duties – such as supervising activities or making drinks and snacks – and so positioning me as an 'insider' within the group. Supervising and taking part in the activities was a fun and novel means of building rapport with the attending fathers and their children, offering opportunities to talk and establish common ground. What was problematic, however, was the sense of imagined intrusion I felt owing to my researcher role. While the attending fathers were aware of my research[4], I feared that, from their perspective, I represented a figure of suspicion within the group – an 'imposter' casting judgement over their interactions. This meant that on some occasions I felt limited in my ability to engage with the group activities, contributing to feelings of

[4] Where possible, I ensured that I was introduced to the group by members staff prior to the start of the sessions. I also greeted the fathers on arrival to hand out information sheets about my project, offering the fathers the opportunity to 'opt out' of observations.

detachment and the sense that the group dynamic could be effectively represented within my analysis.

Such anxieties were not helped by the sometimes strained interactions between me and the fathers. Shyness and reticence have been highlighted as key themes as part of dad group interactions, meaning that building rapport was often problematic. I found it rare for the fathers to appear open to conversation; even if they were not playing with their child, I often found their body shape to be 'closed-off', making it difficult to catch their attention. As such, I was required to engage in strategies of 'performative identity work': smiling, nodding, or waving to greet the fathers and appear polite and approachable (Goffman 1959; Scott et al 2012). While on some occasions this led to successful greetings and extended conversations, the situations which have stuck with me are the 'cringe-worthy' interactions; those which evoked feelings of "awkwardness, self-consciousness, and discomfort" as Scott et al (2012:721) describe. Such reactions were most prominent during my attendance at Dads Sing sessions, where my lack of a volunteer role meant I was required to approach the fathers to initiate conversation. One incident involved a prolonged silence between me and two fathers as our exchange of pleasantries failed to develop into further conversation. This exchange was underpinned by their sense of reluctance to engage in small talk, leading me to feel an intense sense of embarrassment as I was forced to walk away and seek out another conversation.

Dolan (2014) offers a potential explanation here which may account for such strained interactions. He notes how his interviews with fathers on their experiences of parenting programmes were not simply encounters between a researcher and participant, but "encounters between *men*" (Dolan 2014:816 emphasis added). As such, a significant part of these interactions was underpinned by 'masculine identity work' and the performance of normative masculine traits such as aloofness, apathy, or reticence (Dolan 2014; see also Chapter 6). As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) explain, men can often find such interaction to be threatening to their perceived sense of 'masculine self', and consequently adopt strategies of non-disclosure, particularly when discussing sensitive topics. Interestingly, however, I did not encounter such incidents of non-disclosure when conducting semi-structured or 'go-along' interviews with fathers. In many ways, my lack of parenting experience and 'outsider' status was beneficial in these contexts as I was perceived by the fathers as a 'non-expert'. This granted a sense of power to the participants, allowing them to explain the nuances of their perspectives under the assumption of my limited fathering

knowledge. In many ways, then, this sense of being an outsider in the field meant that much of my data, including my perceptions and interpretations, were produced 'on the fringes' of the interaction; never quite fully immersed within the research context. While this is not necessarily a problematic 'vantage point' from which my data has been collected and analysed, it is nevertheless a unique perspective, offering a specific account of fathering experience.

Wider Implications and Future Directions

Policy Opportunities for Hands-on Care

Predominantly, the findings of this research provide supporting evidence for discernible shifts in the attitudes, aspirations, and practices of fathers towards greater involvement in the performance of childcare and associated domestic responsibilities. In particular, this research has found clear motivations among the wide-ranging sample of fathers for contributing to 'egalitarian' lifestyles, in which parental role of care, housework, and financial provision are shared or 'interchangeable', supporting ideals of gender equality and challenging gendered parental trajectories. What is significant in this regard are shifts between the values of care and financial provision, with traditional patriarchal models of breadwinner fatherhoods holding less status and recognition in the formation of fathering identities. Meanings of contemporary fatherhood, as expressed in this study, derive from the ability to provide forms of nurturing and interactive care in partnership with mothers. How these partnerships are negotiated and co-ordinated in practice, however, remain limited by structural factors. While shifts in fathering conduct are visible, these findings offer mere 'glimpses' of the arenas and contexts in which father involvement in primary childcare is prominent, restricted in the most part to 'pockets' of time across mornings, evenings, or weekends and non-working days. Where this engagement is possible, fathers demonstrate a greater competency, confidence, and knowledge of care needs, contributing to an emergence of care dispositions among fathers.

When considering strategies for facilitating father involvement in hands-on care, the opportunities afforded by policy are a key starting point (Koslowski & O'Brien 2021; O'Brien & Twamley 2017; Kaufman 2018). While the availability of parental leave for fathers has increased in the UK since the early 2000s, these have lagged significantly behind initiatives implemented in Nordic countries such as Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (Koslowski & O'Brien 2021; Kvande & Brandth 2017; Brandth & Kvande 2018). Several shortcomings of UK policy have subsequently been highlighted, including the emphasis upon

maternal transfer of leave (Koslowski & O'Brien 2021), the limited financial compensation for fathers taking leave (O'Brien & Twamley 2017), and perceived workplace resistance towards fathers requesting leave (Kaufman 2018). My findings in relation to fathering attitudes and motivations, albeit from their specific middle-class perspectives, ultimately provide further evidence that UK policy strategy for working fathers continues to be based upon outdated conceptions of fathering expectations, emphasising men's financial responsibilities. While financial provision remains an important aspect of fathering, this is now perceived as a shared endeavour, so policy must shift its focus in order to facilitate the family dynamics of dual-earner households. It is clear from my findings that fathers will take advantage of opportunities to engage in care and spend time with their children; subsequently, it is essential that policy is developed which recognises these motivations, allowing for more flexible work-care dynamics for fathers.

Development of Paternal Spaces

As argued in Chapter 6, paternal or 'father-only' spaces are an under-explored concept within the social sciences. The emergence of such spaces is significant in the sense that, as this research has demonstrated, parental landscapes continue to be defined by discourses of maternal primacy, with the presence of fathers still often regarded as a novelty. This research has demonstrated, as such, that when navigating early years or parental settings, fathers will typically negotiate normative dimensions and boundaries dictated by mothering ideals. This, in turn, contributes to (re)affirming expectations of maternal gatekeeping, with mothers positioned as 'experts' of care, responsible for directing, monitoring, and regulating fathering practice. While such findings demonstrate enduring perceptions of primary motherhood, it also implies disjunctions for fathers in establishing parental role models, with a distinct lack of *competent* paternal figures visible within cultural representations of parenting in popular media. In other words, fathers continue to rely upon exemplars of mothering practice in the formation of parenting identities and performance of caring practices.

Paternal spaces, such as the dad groups explored in this study, present fathers with social arenas in which fatherhood is not only recognised but allows for the formation of collective fathering identities and in which the primary care of fathers in emphasised and encouraged. A key contribution of this research, then, has been to extend understandings of the function of these groups, observing the underlying cultural and discursive influences within these spaces and the forms of fathering involvement promoted and performed. In terms of fathering practice, my findings have highlighted the emphasis upon the interactive care of fathers

within dad groups, with the activities designed to facilitate playful interactions. While father-child time is normalised in these settings, it is nevertheless important to remain critical of this interactive framing of fathering care, as men's nurturing practices can be overlooked or ignored. The positioning of fathers as the experts of 'fun' or 'play' ultimately reinforces masculinised ideals of physicality, rather than encouraging greater engagement in nurturing practices traditionally associated with femininity. It is important to strike a balance, then, between the development of companionship and the promotion of men's nurturing capabilities. Arguably a key issue here relates to the timing of these events, with dad groups run during weekends – a time predominantly associated with fun leisure events. Expanding the scope of father-only sessions or greater facilitation of shared *parental* settings across early years and community settings can arguably go some way to normalising care-orientated fatherhoods across parental landscapes. There is certainly scope here for the use of participatory approaches in the future, to trace the development of paternal spaces in collaboration with fathers gaining further insights into fathers' motivations and approaches to facilitating particular forms of care practice.

The Power of 'Hybrid' Fatherhoods

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to retain a critical lens to the ideals of progressive change presented through the narratives of the fathers participating in this study and my own observations and interpretations of hands-on care. As part of my reflexive practice, I have been mindful of times when I have been dismissive of claims of egalitarianism or the extent to which housework is shared '50/50'. As Miller (2017) argues, parenting research has demonstrated that fathers' caring practices, the embodied 'movements' of nurture, can take different forms to mothering practices. As such, I have adopted open interpretations as part of my analysis to ideas of "parenting like a man", as Gillian Ranson describes it (cited in Miller 2017:153). This was perhaps most evident in Chapter 4, in which ways of negotiating care and masculinity were explored, in particular the practices of masculinised care such as money saving for parental leave or the performance of masculine cooking practices. What was emphasised in these cases were caring intentions and motivations, signalling potential shifts in the value of care as part of masculine and fathering identities. A key question which remains, however, is the extent to which the performance of such care can be perceived as a 'dismantling' of traditional masculine values or, perhaps more troublingly, an *appropriation* of feminised ideals to supplement broader hegemonic masculine traits (Randles 2018; Bridges & Pascoe 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This latter practice – a key aspect

of 'hybrid' or 'bricolage' masculinities – is problematic in that it can be utilised to evoke values of change or progression while reaffirming gendered dichotomies and divisions. As such, I feel it is important to retain a critical awareness of the underlying meanings and framings of men's parental 'involvement' as part of future fatherhood studies, especially when the focus is upon divisions of labour and gendered inequalities.

What I have found to be particularly troublesome in this regard is the sense of reified or glorified value imbued by and upon fathers for their 'being there' – a vaguely defined form of involvement which gives little indication of what fathers actually do or how they do it. Discourses of father involvement in recent years, for example, have evoked 'heroic' or 'romanticised' notions of fatherhood, highlighting the positive impact of *specific practices* – such as engagement in interactive, playful, or leisure activities – upon the developmental outcomes of their children. What is emphasised here, in other words, are the specific masculine traits utilised by fathers in the care of their children – *traits which cannot be compensated by mothers* (Randles 2018; Miller 2017; Wall & Arnold 2007; Doucet 2009). The status of the 'involved' father, then, is in part derived from discourses of traditional, hegemonic masculinity, signalling what is unique about male parenting, and contributing to this sense of 'hybridity' which underpins fathering identities. As argued in Chapter 7, fathering value is derived from traits associated with being a man, in turn, reaffirming gendered assumptions of traditional roles and responsibilities. Future research, consequently, must seek to trace the 'hybrid' processing of fathering practices, exploring how hegemonic masculinity continues to influence taken for granted ideals of divisions of parental practice shaping socially constructed definitions of fatherhood *and* motherhood.

Concluding Thoughts

This study has contributed important insights into the nuances and complexities of contemporary fatherhood, exploring the influence of discursive representations, social spaces and localities, and cultural resources in men's navigation of the parental terrain. Specifically, three contexts were identified and investigated through a mixed method ethnographic approach, tracing fathers' navigation of domestic and home life, encounters across public settings, and negotiation of newly developed 'paternal spaces' in early years settings. Contemporary fathering practice, as reflected in this thesis, is underpinned by a series of seemingly contradictory values relating to changes and continuities in the culture and conduct of fatherhood. What was clear among the vast narratives of fatherhood produced in this study was a commitment and desire to fulfil the discursive expectations of 'involved' fatherhood by

engaging in a range of caring practices including those associated with nurturing care (feeding, soothing, developing intimate relationships) alongside more interactive practices of play and leisure. The fathers both described and were observed engaging in primary care of their children across the different parental contexts, demonstrating a confidence and competency in their embodied practice as they took on the various roles of companion, playmate, nurturer, and carer. While these fathers were certainly driven by a motivation to incorporate the values of care, this coincided with a desire to maintain traditional fatherly values, acting as moral guardians and figures of virtue in the lives of their children. So too were the fathers seemingly averse to ideals of 'intensive' parenting, utilising their partners' status as mothers to reaffirm maternal primacy for co-ordinating and choregraphing such care needs. Subsequently, questions remain in relation to the perceptions and practices of fatherhood and the extent of changes to family lives. There is certainly scope for sustained challenges to hegemonic masculine ideals and gendered parental trajectories through men's embodied practices of care – the hands-on, embodied work which formulates dispositions for care. However, this is reliant both upon the motivations of fathers and the opportunity to engage in care, as set within a discursive environment to enable and promote significant changes. This is clearly a slow process, but this thesis would suggest there is hope for change in the future.

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Appendices

Participant Information Sheet: Participant Observations

Participant Information Sheet

Fatherhood in Context: exploring fathers' experiences within multiple settings

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. I will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have. This should take about 10-20 minutes. Talk to others about the study if you wish, and ask me or my supervisors if there is anything that is not clear (contact details are available below). You will be given time to think about whether you wish to take part before making a decision, and may take this sheet away with you.

What is this study about?

This study is about developing a better understanding of what it means to be a father in everyday life, exploring how the variety of settings in which fathers interact with their children and other fathers may influence a father's experiences and perspectives of their role.

Who is the researcher?

This research is being conducted by Jason Preston as part of his PhD project at the University of Brighton.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to take part in this research as the researcher is interested in understanding the experiences of fathers in different settings and contexts, and considering how these experiences shape our ideas of what it means to be a father in society.

Who will participate in this study?

Fathers of school aged children will be invited to participate in this study. Given the nature of the study, children may also be present but are not the direct focus of the study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is **voluntary**; the decision to take part is entirely your choice, and you will not be forced to participate against your will. Consent forms will be provided if you choose to take part. You can also choose to withdraw from the study at any time, without

giving a reason. If you do decide to withdraw, then you can choose whether any information shared up to the point of withdrawal can be used as part of the findings or deleted.

Does my child have to take part?

While they are not the direct focus of the study, your child or children will be present during the study which means they will be participating in some form. **This participation is voluntary**, however, as they are dependents you will be required to provide consent for their participation in the consent forms. If your child or children express discomfort during the study, or you feel they are unhappy, then they can withdraw from the study at any time.

What will the study involve?

Participants are invited to be involved in observations conducted by the researcher at dad-group sessions. The researcher is seeking to understand your experiences as part of the group, and how these shape our ideas of what it means to a father in society. Observations will focus on three aspects of the group:

1. The activities which take place during the session, focusing on how these are structured and organised.
2. How the setting influences your interactions with your children, and what fathering practices take place. **This does not mean the researcher will be passing judgement over your skills as a parent, but rather understanding the types of practices involved in the care of your children.**
3. The relationships between the fathers at the group, focusing on your collective experiences as members of a group.

The researcher will also seek to engage in informal conversations to provide you with the opportunity to discuss your experience at the group and as a father more generally. While these conversations will be spontaneous, they will address topics such as:

1. Your motivations for attending the group
2. What you feel are the benefits of attending the group
3. Any issues you feel you have faced as a father

These topics are examples and the researcher will only discuss topics which you feel comfortable talking about; engaging in conversations is entirely at your discretion so please inform the researcher if you do not wish to discuss your experiences. Conversations will not be audio-recorded but will form part of the researcher's fieldnotes which will be written following a session.

Each session will run as normal, so you will not be required to do anything you would not normally do. You are welcome to ask the researcher questions and discuss topics you feel are

relevant; these will be treated as informal and spontaneous and will not be audio-recorded. The researcher will take on a voluntary role, helping with the running of the group, to understand what these sessions involve. The researcher will attend meetings for a period of 6-8 months, and it is not necessary for members of the group to attend every session.

Are there any risks in taking part?

It is difficult to predict how you will respond to taking part, but it is important to be aware that you may find some aspects of the research to be sensitive or upsetting.

For example, the researcher's attendance at 'dads group' meetings may be something which causes you to feel uncomfortable or distressed; or you may be asked to describe or reflect upon an experience or topic you find challenging or upsetting.

You are not required to discuss any topics which you feel are private or upsetting. The researcher will ask for your consent to talk about subjects which you may sensitive or distressing to allow you to inform the researcher that you do not wish to discuss that particular topic.

What should I do if I feel uncomfortable or distressed?

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the research, then you must inform the researcher as soon as you feel is possible. If you do not feel able to, or would prefer not to contact the researcher, then please inform Dr Matthew Adams (lead PhD supervisor – contact details below). Contact details of family related helplines are provided at the end of this sheet if you wish to discuss any issues with an independent service provider.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

The purpose of this study is to deepen our knowledge of fatherhood, and use this information to help shape policy in the future.

It is also an opportunity for you to talk about a topic you find important and meaningful, sharing insights into the everyday experiences of fathers.

What if I do not wish to take part?

There is no obligation to participate in this study, and you do not have to decide straight away. If you decide you do not want to be involved in observations, then the researcher will not collect any information related to yourself or your child.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The results will form the basis of the researcher's PhD, and will be available to view online. The researcher aims to also use to findings to publish academic articles to share the results with a wider audience.

All data within this project will be collected, stored and protected in line with GDPR regulations. More information on the University of Brighton's data collection and data protection policy is available at the University's Research Privacy Notice – please follow the following link for access:
https://staff.brighton.ac.uk/reg/legal/other/Research_Privacy_Notice.pdf

Will anyone know who has taken part?

All personal details about participants will be treated as confidential. When writing the final report, the researcher will not use any information which may identify you; for example, you will be given a fictitious name, and any other features such as cities or landmarks will be described in general terms.

The only exception is if the researcher witnesses behaviour that they feel risks the safety of participants – such behaviour will be reported to the group co-ordinator or relevant staff at the University of Brighton.

Who can I speak to if I have any problems or concerns?

I have provided below the contact details of the researcher and lead supervisor for the project Dr Matthew Adams.

Jason Preston – email: J.Preston4@brighton.ac.uk

Dr Matthew Adams – email: Matthew.Adams@brighton.ac.uk telephone: 01273 644518

What happens next?

You will be given time to decide whether you wish to take part. If you have any questions, then do not hesitate to ask the researcher; it is important that you understand all the details of what's involved. If you decide to take part, then the researcher will ask you to sign a consent form. On the consent form you will indicate which parts of the study you want to participate in. The researcher will ask you to provide contact details (home and mobile telephone numbers, and email address) to make arrangements for the date and time of your participation.

This study has received a favourable ethical opinion from the Social Sciences Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Brighton

Family Services Contact Details

Family Support Work

A Sussex based charity providing support for families.

- www.familysupportwork.org
- 01273 832963
- admin@familysupportwork.org.uk

Family Service Directory

Directory provided by Brighton and Hove City Council offering helplines and information for families.

- http://www.familyinfobrighton.org.uk/kb5/brighton/fsd/home.page
- 01273 293545
- familyinfo@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Mind: family support service

Directory of services for families across Sussex.

- https://www.mindcharity.co.uk/a-z/
- 01273 666950
- info@mindcharity.co.uk

Participant Information Sheet: Interviews

Participant Information Sheet

Fatherhood in Context: exploring fathers' experiences within multiple settings

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. I will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have. This should take about 10-20 minutes. Talk to others about the study if you wish, and ask me or my supervisors if there is anything that is not clear (contact details are available below). You will be given time to think about whether you wish to take part before making a decision, and may take this sheet away with you.

What is this study about?

This study is about developing a better understanding of what it means to be a father in everyday life, exploring how the variety of settings in which fathers interact may influence a father's experiences and perspectives of their role.

Who is the researcher?

This research is being conducted by Jason Preston as part of his PhD project at the University of Brighton.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to take part in this research as the researcher is interested in understanding the experiences of fathers in different settings and contexts, and considering how these experiences shape our ideas of what it means to be a father in society.

Who will participate in this study?

Fathers of school aged children will be invited to participate in this study. Given the nature of the study, children may also be present but are not the direct focus of the study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is **voluntary**; the decision to take part is entirely your choice, and you will not be forced to participate against your will. You can also choose to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. If you do decide to withdraw, then you can choose whether any information shared up to the point of withdrawal can be used as part of the findings or deleted.

What will the study involve?

Participants are invited to take part in two types of interviews with the researcher. The first is a 'go-along' interview in which the researcher will accompany fathers and their children on one or more trips you would normally take (e.g. to playgrounds, shopping centres, or supermarkets) and ask questions related to the setting and your experiences of the trip. The second is a face-to-face interview taking place in an environment you are comfortable with, in which we can discuss the topics raised on the 'go-along' interview in more detail, and also discuss your experiences as a father more generally. These could take place in a café or coffee shop, or more private location such as your home. Interviews will last for around 1-2

hours, depending on time restraints and how much you wish to share. Interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission, with audio files stored in password protected folders.

There is no obligation to take part in all parts of the study – you may choose to participate in the parts you feel most comfortable with.

Does my child have to take part?

While they are not the direct focus of the study and will not be required to provide answers to questions, it is possible for your child or children to accompany us during 'go-along' interviews. This participation is **voluntary**, however, as they are dependents you will be required to provide consent if you wish for them to accompany us during the interviews through written consent forms.

If your child or children express discomfort during the study, or you feel they are unhappy, then they can withdraw from the study at any time.

Are there any risks in taking part?

It is difficult to predict how you will respond to taking part, but it is important to be aware that you may find some aspects of the research to be sensitive or upsetting.

For example, the researcher's attendance during the 'go-along' interview may be something which causes you to feel uncomfortable or distressed; or during the semi structured interview you may be asked to describe or reflect upon an experience or topic you find challenging or upsetting.

You are not required to answer any questions on topics which you find distressing or upsetting. Prior to the start of interviews, the researcher will provide a copy of the interview schedule, so you can highlight any topics you do not wish to discuss. During the interviews, the researcher will also ask for your consent to talk about potentially sensitive topics to ensure that you are completely comfortable.

What should I do if I feel uncomfortable or distressed?

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the research, then you must inform the researcher as soon as you feel is possible. If you do not feel able to, or would prefer not to contact the researcher, then please inform Dr Matthew Adams (lead PhD supervisor – contact details below). Contact details of family related helplines are provided at the end of this sheet if you wish to discuss any issues with an independent service provider.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

The purpose of this study is to deepen our knowledge of fatherhood, and use this information to help shape policy in the future.

It is also an opportunity for you to talk about a topic you find important and meaningful, sharing insights into the everyday experiences of fathers.

What if I do not wish to take part?

There is no obligation to participate in this study, and you do not have to decide straight away. If you decide you do not want to be involved in observations, then the researcher will not collect any information related to yourself or your child.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The results will form the basis of the researcher's PhD, and will be available to view online. The researcher aims to also use to findings to publish academic articles to share the results with a wider audience.

All data within this project will be collected, stored and protected in line with GDPR regulations. More information on the University of Brighton's data collection and data protection policy is available at the University's Research Privacy Notice – please follow the following link for access:
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Will anyone know who has taken part?

All personal details about participants will be treated as confidential. When writing the final report, the researcher will not use any information which may identify you; for example, you will be given a fictitious name, and any other features such as cities or landmarks will be described in general terms.

The only exception is if the researcher witnesses behaviour that they feel risks the safety of participants – such behaviour will be reported to the group co-ordinator or relevant staff at the University of Brighton.

Who can I speak to if I have any problems or concerns?

I have provided below the contact details of the researcher and lead supervisor for the project Dr Matthew Adams.

Jason Preston – email: J.Preston4@brighton.ac.uk

Dr Matthew Adams – email: Matthew.Adams@brighton.ac.uk telephone: 01273 644518

What happens next?

You will be given time to decide whether you wish to take part. If you have any questions, then do not hesitate to ask the researcher; it is important that you understand all the details of what's involved. If you decide to take part, then the researcher will ask you to sign a consent form. On the consent form you will indicate which parts of the study you want to participate in. The researcher will ask you to provide contact details (home and mobile telephone numbers, and email address) to make arrangements for the date and time of your participation.

This study has received a favourable ethical opinion from the Social Sciences Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Brighton

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- familyinfo@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Mind: family support service

Directory of services for families across Sussex.

- https://www.mindcharity.co.uk/a-z/
- 01273 666950
- info@mindcharity.co.uk

Participant Consent Form

Fatherhood in Context: exploring fathers' experiences within multiple settings

Please initial or tick box

I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions ☐

The researcher has explained the purpose of the study, and what is involved in taking part. ☐

I agree to take part in this research about my experiences of fatherhood ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason ☐

Should I withdraw from the study, I understand that I can decide whether the researcher can use the information provided by me for the study or, to have it deleted. ☐

I agree for myself and my child(ren) to be involved in participant observations ☐

Name (please print) ....

Signed ………………………………………………

Date ………………………..

Participant Consent Form: Interviews

Participant Consent Form

Fatherhood in Context: exploring fathers' experiences within multiple settings

Please initial or tick box

I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions	☐
The researcher has explained the purpose of the study, and what is involved in taking part.	☐
I agree to take part in this research about my experiences of fatherhood	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason	☐
Should I withdraw from the study, I understand that I can decide whether the researcher can use the information provided by me for the study or, to have it deleted.	☐
I agree for myself and my child(ren) to be involved in 'go-along' interviews	☐

Name (please print) …………………………………………………………………………

Signed …………………………………………………

Date ………………………..