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**Paternal involvement in childcare: how can it be classified and what are the key influences?**

**1. Introduction**

Fathering is comprised of interrelated activities but there are two ‘core’ components that provide benchmarks against which ‘good’ fathers are commonly assessed: financial provisioning (breadwinning) and contributions to childcare (involvement). Breadwinning has long been the defining characteristic of a father’s role since the rise of industrialisation in the mid-nineteenth century. However, from the mid-1970s demographic shifts in family structure, changes in the employment patterns of women and changes in social attitudes and norms concerning gender and family roles shifted expectations about fathers and their responsibilities. Now economic provisioning is no longer sufficient for affirming a ‘good father’ status; involvement in a child’s care considered to be as, or in some cases, even more important (Dermott 2008; 2005; Lamb 2008).

There has been an increase in the number of explicit father-targeted policies across Europe, which include incentive or penalty-based measures to encourage men to take time off from breadwinning to get ‘involved’ in the care of their children (O’Brien 2009; Fagan and Norman 2013a). The promotion of men’s family commitments and the need for a balance between men and women’s roles has been particularly advanced by the state policies in the Scandinavian countries, notably in Sweden (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Johansson and Klinth 2008; Wells and Sarkadi 2011). The promotion of men as caring fathers has been less advanced in policy frameworks in other countries such as in the Czech Republic and Italy where there are only very limited provisions to support fathers (Fagan and Norman 2013b). In other countries, such as the UK and Portugal, innovations to support men’s work-family reconciliation have only been developed more recently. A series of reforms to extend fathers’ rights to parental leave were introduced in Portugal from 2009, which have centred on introducing a ‘daddy quota’ and improving the financial support during parental leave. In the UK, additional paternity leave was introduced in 2011, and then replaced by shared parental leave in April 2015, which is intended to support and encourage fathers to take a more involved role in his child’s upbringing. This has been accompanied by a proliferation of media reports and policy debates about the importance of fathers and their involvement at home (e.g. Antrobus 2012; Cleave, 2009; HM Government 2011).

Thus, the concept of involvement is a familiar one, gaining attention in the media and in political debates across Europe, but there is still little consensus about what paternal ‘involvement’ in a child’s care means and how it might be measured (for example, see Henwood, Shirani and Coltart 2011; Dermott 2008; 2005; 2003; Lewis and Lamb, 2007; Morman and Floyd 2006; Folbre and Yoon 2006; Hatten et al 2002; Sanderson and Sanders-Thompson 2002; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Marsiglio 1995; Miller 2011; Palkovitz 1997; Pleck 2010).

To address these contentions, this paper reviews the main debates on how to conceptualise ‘paternal involvement’ in childcare. The definition offered by Lamb et al (1987) continues to be one of the most used typologies in social and psychological research and, I argue, is still one of the most comprehensive formulations that is neither bound by time nor locality. However, it is not without fault given classifying fathers’ roles into three dimensions (i.e. accessibility, engagement and responsibility) ignores the multifaceted and subjective nature of fathering practices. In light of this, I consider other typologies of involvement developed by Palkovitz (1997), Dermott (2008) and Pleck (2010) who build on Lamb et al’s three dimensions to provide a more comprehensive definition of the different components that make up a father’s role. Given the typology deployed must be linked to the overall aim and focus of the particular study, I select Lamb et al.’s three dimensional typology to discuss the key state policy, workplace and individual-level factors that shape paternal involvement on a more general scale. This is important in light of current policy and media debates about how best to support and encourage fathers’ roles at home (e.g. Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2014; European Union 2013). Using Sen’s (1992) capabilities framework, I discuss how structural factors shape fathers’ capabilities to be involved but I also reflect on how individual practices of agency interact to shape their involvement in different and complex ways.

**2. Conceptualising paternal involvement**

Paternal involvement, or ‘involved fathering’, centres on ideas of nurturing, providing and engaging in care. A generic definition is provided by O’Brien (2005: 3) who argues that an involved father is an ‘active “hands-on” sharer of child caring responsibilities’. A more in-depth definition of paternal involvement is provided by Lamb et al (1987) with later definitions building on this or providing some variation (discussed later). Lamb et al argue that the three components of involvement common to all fathers are accessibility, engagement and responsibility.

*Accessibility*is defined as being physically available and present as a parent and encompasses supervisory care or activities that require a non-intensive degree of interaction, such as cooking in the kitchen whilst the child plays nearby. It can be thought of as a secondary activity, or as passive. *Engagement* represents the more intensive, one-to-one interaction time with the child such as feeding the child, playing or helping with homework. *Responsibility* is about *knowing* in detail what is needed for the child’s welfare and care and *ensuring* that the particular aspects of childcare that are needed are provided by anticipating, planning and arranging provision. For example, knowing when the child needs to go to the doctor, making the appointment and ensuring the child gets to it; making arrangements for childcare and ensuring the child has clothes to wear and food to eat. Although not explicitly recognised by Lamb et al., I argue that responsibility can be expressed in two ways: ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ (also see Norman and Elliot 2015). Direct responsibility involves the planning of the child’s day to day life while indirect responsibility encompasses the support activities that provide a positive nurturing environment for the child. Housework is one form of indirect responsibility, given it concerns the maintenance of the quality of the child’s environment and therefore wellbeing. Doing housework also relieves the other parent of these tasks so she or he can concentrate on caregiving. Lewis and O’Brien (1987) suggest fathers who contribute to household labour by doing housework might be considered ‘involved’ while Dermott (2008: 53) argues that after the birth of a child, housework becomes an ‘acknowledged task’ because chores suddenly attain a child-specific dimension to them. Thus, housework is one form of (indirect) responsibility, which is important to measure in light of the unequal gendered division of domestic labour that continues to create a ‘second shift’ of housework and childcare for employed women (Hochschild 1989; Bianchi et al 2012; Lyonette and Crompton 2015).

Lamb et al’s (1987) theory of involvement was developed over twenty years ago; and in the intervening period some aspects of roles and behaviour have changed, particularly in light of developments in policy and changes in social attitudes towards parenting roles. This raises the question of whether a distinction between the three dimensions remains pertinent.

A later conceptualisation of involvement by Palkovitz (1997) extends Lamb et al’s dimensions from three to fifteen to include roles such as communication, monitoring, teaching and emotional support. Similarly, Dermott’s (2008) interviews with fathers of primary school age children revealed that ways of being involved did not map neatly onto the three dimensions developed by Lamb et al. and so extended them to five dimensions to include family time and day to day chores (see Table 1).

Pleck (2010) also developed a revised conceptualisation of Lamb et al’s work, which he argues takes account of the numerous definitions of involvement that stretch beyond the three dimensional classification. Pleck’s main criticism of Lamb et al’s theory is that the dimension of responsibility does not differentiate between two important activities that constitute it, namely overseeing the provision of care and arranging goods and services for the child. Pleck’s revised conceptualisation of paternal involvement includes three primary components - positive engagement activities that promote the child’s development; warmth and responsiveness; and control, particularly in terms of monitoring and decision-making - and two auxiliary domains, which serve to clarify the two aspects of the original responsibility component. These are: i) indirect care, that is activities done for the child that do not entail interaction, in the form of material indirect care (e.g. purchasing and arranging goods and services for the child or doing housework tasks such as cooking and cleaning) and social indirect care (e.g. fostering community connections with peers and institutions), but excluding breadwinning, and ii) process responsibility, which refers to monitoring to ensure that the child’s needs for the first four components of involvement are being met.

Although the revised definitions offered by Palkovitz, Dermott and Pleck provide an in-depth and more precise interpretation of the ways in which fathers can be involved, Lamb et al’s three dimensional typology still provides a useful summary measure because it is applicable to all fathers and all ages of child. This allows for the derivation of a quantitative measure of paternal involvement to explore fathering on a much larger scale, as was carried out in previous work (Norman 2010; Norman and Elliot 2015). A quantitative tool such as this provides a benchmark operationalisation of paternal involvement, and a reliable means for assessing the factors associated with being a ‘good father’ (Morman and Floyd 2006). This is particularly relevant in light of the growing attention to fathers within policy debates about work family issues across Europe (European Union 2013), including UK policy, where the introduction of shared parental leave is the most recent reform designed to provide better support for fathers and their involvement in childcare (see Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2014). Rehel (2014) also argues that unlike other approaches, which capture specific, and often very gendered tasks, Lamb et al’s typology establishes broader groupings of ways in which a father may be involved. By using this typology, we can capture various forms of involvement - from playing and reading (engagement) to cleaning whilst a child does homework (accessibility) to planning around the child (responsibility). Ensuring fathers are supported in these broader areas provides the basis for involvement in the more specific activities that Palkovitz, Dermott and Pleck describe. This is illustrated by Table 1 where the activities or additional components described by Palkovitz, Dermott and Pleck can be neatly grouped under Lamb et al’s three core dimensions.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Fathering activities identified by other research can also be grouped under Lamb et al’s three dimensions, even when this is not explicitly recognised by the researchers. For example, this applies to Lupton and Barclay’s (1997) summary of the common themes that fathers identified as important constituents of paternal involvement and Folbre and Yoon’s (2006) definitions of primary childcare activities (see Norman 2010). Haurai and Hollingsworth’s (2009) research with families also identifies several ways in which fathers can be involved such as physical care, play, teaching and being a family protector, but they refer back to Lamb et al’s three dimensions in order to categorise these activities. This suggests that Lamb et al’s broad definition is relevant to all representative groups, such as those from different minority ethnic groups who may have different expectations about fathers and their roles (e.g. see Warin et al 1999; Haurai and Hollingworth 2009). The more precise description of activities offered by other scholars mentioned above may preclude some fathers who do not see or recognise ‘monitoring homework’ or showing ‘affection’ as falling within their remit or culture. Here the advantage of Lamb et al’s definition is that his three dimensions are broad and thus capture a diverse set of practices that reach out to all types of fathers and so can be useful for summarising the diversity of ways in which different fathers can be involved.

I am not implying that the revised conceptualisations offered by Palkovitz, Pleck and Dermott are redundant, but rather the definition of involvement that is deployed or developed should be linked to the overall aim and focus of the particular study. I refer to Lamb et al’s typology in this paper given my rationale is concerned with discussing the key influences on paternal involvement on a general, more quantifiable scale. The definitions provided by Palkovitz, Dermott and Pleck are more useful for research that has a different purpose. For example, Palkowitz's aim was to provide more detailed components of involvement, which largely fitted within Lamb et al's typology. Using fifteen dimensions to measure paternal involvement is therefore better suited to an in-depth study that focuses on the specific components of a father’s role. Dermott's identification of five dimensions of involvement was derived empirically rather than theoretically and her conceptual interest was to incorporate an emotional dimension (i.e. ‘intimacy’) which, she argues, is an element not fully captured by Lamb et al.’s typology. Pleck's formulation is directed towards the relationship between involvement and children's wellbeing, with fathering activities categorised in terms of their potential impact. Thus, the rationale behind thinking about paternal involvement influences which of these elements come to the fore, and therefore which typology is most suited to meeting the aims of the particular study.

**What shapes paternal involvement?**

There are a plethora of structural and individual factors which can support or hinder paternal accessibility, engagement and responsibility. A valuable way of theorising the interplay of these structural and individual factors is through Sen’s (1992) capability framework, which suggests state and organisational policies, social norms, and household economic and demographic circumstances shape men and women’s decision making about how childcare and domestic labour is organised (Hobson 2011; 2014). This approach focuses on what people are able to do and be, as opposed to what they have, or how they feel (Hobson 2014). In other words, fathers may strive to be involved parents but policies, workplace and/or household factors can either hinder or enable their capabilities to be involved. Practices of individual agency (which I reflect on in more detail later) also interact with these factors in complex and unique ways to further shape how paternal involvement is understood and practiced.

Previous studies have mainly focussed on measuring paternal engagement in childcare or housework. There has been comparatively little research on paternal accessibility and responsibility for childcare, partly because these dimensions can be more difficult to measure (see for example: Norman 2010). Some research has explored fathers’ contributions to housework (e.g. Kitterod et al, 2006; Bianchi et al, 2000; Bianchi et al, 2012) but there has been a lack of research on paternal accessibility. To date, most studies focus on paternal engagement in childcare as reflective of a father’s ‘involvement’, which could be misleading given it is possible some fathers may compensate a lower level of engagement for a higher level of accessibility or responsibility. Due to the lack of research on paternal accessibility and (direct) responsibility, the following section focuses primarily on the key policy, workplace and individual factors that shape paternal engagement and indirect responsibility (i.e. contributions to housework) but where possible, I consider how these factors may also affect paternal accessibility and direct responsibility.

***National policies and welfare regimes***

Time use data shows that men in Sweden spend more minutes per day on childcare and housework than men in other EU countries (Francavilla et al 2013; Kan et al 2011; Sullivan et al 2009; Sayer 2010). For example, comparing Sweden with the UK, Sullivan et al’s (2009) analysis of the 2000 Harmonised European Time Use Survey showed that in Sweden, full-time-employed married fathers with co-resident children under five spent more time per day caring for their children aged under five (74 minutes) compared to their British counterparts (64 minutes). A similar pattern emerged when children were older (up to age seven) and when partners were employed either full or part-time.

State policies and welfare regimes are important for encouraging paternal engagement in childcare and, albeit to a lesser extent, responsibility for housework. The cross-national variations in paternal engagement and responsibility (for housework) are partly due to different welfare systems that have different reconciliation measures and work-time provisions which support (or do not support) fathers in different ways. Men’s participation in domestic work and engagement in childcare has increased in Sweden partly because of the generous reconciliation measures that are in place to support father’s engagement in childcare. There is a period of well-remunerated parental leave reserved specifically for the father on a ‘use it or lose it’ basis, which has resulted in some of the highest take up rates of parental leave amongst men in Europe (Bettio and Verschagina, 2012; Bergman and Hobson, 2002; Wells and Sarkadi 2011). This targeted period of leave for fathers underlines the importance of men’s involvement in childcare whilst promoting parental leave as an acceptable and important option for both parents to take. This is in contrast to the very low take up of parental leave amongst men in the UK, Italy, France and Spain, for example, where leave schemes are gender neutral, low paid and have family based allocations that can be taken by either parent (Fagan and Norman 2013a; 2013b).

Taking parental leave appears to have some association with paternal engagement and responsibility for housework. In Sweden, Haas and Hwang’s (1999) study found that fathers using a higher proportion of parental leave than average (i.e. 20 per cent or more of all potential leave days[[1]](#endnote-1)) sustained ‘more engaged family commitment’, worked fewer hours and were generally more engaged in childcare and responsible for housework - at least in the short term. With regard to the longer-term effects of taking paternity leave, a 2009 survey of 2,261 fathers in the UK found that over half (55 per cent) who had a child under six took this up when their last child was born, and the majority (56 per cent) claimed it allowed them to take a greater role in the care of their children; 69 per cent said it also led to improvements in family life overall (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2009). Norman’s (2010) analysis of sweep one (2001-2) of the UK’s Millennium Cohort Study revealed that fathers who took some form of leave after the child’s birth were more engaged in both childcare and housework nine months later. The extent to which parental leave, and other reconciliation measures, impact on paternal accessibility has not been examined in previous research but we could assume that leave provisions, which allow fathers to adapt their work schedules in order to spend more time with their children, would have a positive association with their accessibility.

While reconciliation policies may support paternal engagement, accessibility and responsibility, there are other factors that interact with this relationship. Despite of the development and increase of policy measures to support men’s work-family reconciliation, mothers continue to do more childcare and housework than fathers in Sweden, and men are still generally expected to be primary breadwinner (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Wells and Sarkadi 2011). Parental leave provisions interact with other aspects of national policy frameworks, such as the availability and affordability of childcare facilities, access to flexible working, and other work-time policies. This, alongside persistent gender pay gaps, the constraints of the household (e.g. financial pressures) and organisations (e.g. demands to work long hours), may hinder the overall transformative potential of reconciliation policies that are in place to support fathers. Furthermore, women’s choices are constrained by dominant ideologies of femininity and motherhood that emphasise caring and domestic work, which in the case of the UK, has been intensified by a lack of affordable and accessible childcare services.

***Workplace factors***

Workplace conditions and organisational culture has some influence on paternal accessibility, engagement and responsibility. Research shows employment to be one of the most important factors in determining paternal engagement in childcare and responsibility for housework. Various studies show long employment hours have a strong, negative association with men’s contribution to childcare and housework (e.g. Singleton and Maher, 2004; Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson, 2004; Hatten et al, 2002; Dex and Ward, 2007; Norman 2010; Norman et al. 2014; Fagan and Norman forthcoming 2016). Long work hours are also likely to have a negative association with accessibility although (for older children) this will depend on whether the father is accessible via other means when he is at work (e.g. by phone or email). Mothers’ work hours are also important in shaping father’s roles at home with some evidence suggesting this has an even larger influence on fathers’ engagement in childcare and responsibility for housework than fathers’ own work hours (e.g. Norman et al. 2014).

The scheduling of work hours may also have an impact on the extent to which a father is accessible, engaged and responsible for his children. Work schedules that are ‘non-standard’ or provide individual autonomy as to when and where work is undertaken can enable fathers to be more engaged in childcare, responsible for housework and accessible at certain times of the day or night. For example, shift or weekend work can be conducive to fathers having a higher level of engagement and responsibility for their children compared to fathers with a work schedule of fixed hours during the day. This is also shaped by the mother’s work schedule as fathers may be mobilised to drop or collect children from childcare or school, or to ‘shift parent’ and look after the children in the evening or at weekends while the mother is out at work (Reynolds et al. 2003; La Valle et al 2002).

Broader pressures to work long hours and to be constantly available are features of the workplace culture for many full-time workers, particularly men, in countries such as the UK and Greece (Hearn 2001; Stewart 2011). Many workplaces have opportunities in place for employees to work flexibly, which can help balance the demands of home with employment. However in some countries, such as the UK, flexible working continues to be associated with the ‘mommy track’ given it was an initiative first introduced in 2003 to support mothers’ labour market participation. Often this discourages men from requesting and taking it up (Lewis et al 2007; Smithson et al 2004) and some evidence shows that men are more likely to have their requests rejected by their employer (Fagan et al 2006). Thus, the organisational culture of a workplace continues to steer men into working standard, full-time hours, which reduces the amount of time that can be spent on childcare.

***Individual and family characteristics***

Individual attributes shape paternal accessibility, engagement and responsibility in different and intersecting ways by enabling or constraining decisions and capabilities around fathering. Some studies have explored the association of individual characteristics on responsibility for housework but there is little research which focuses on whether these attributes interact with accessibility. Child characteristics (e.g. age, gender, temperament), parent characteristics (e.g. beliefs, attitudes, preferences, motivation, confidence), stressors on and supports to parental relationships (e.g. marital relationships, co-parenting processes) interact to shape fathers’ roles in different and individual ways (e.g. see Gaertner et al 2007; Henwood, Shirani and Coltart 2011; Crompton et al 2003; Paihe and Solaz 2008; Dermott 2008: Hauari and Hollingworth 2009).

Some studies suggest fathers get most involved during the early years of a child’s life (e.g. Pleck 1997; Lamb 1986) while others show involvement is greater when children are older (e.g. Dermott 2008; Hatten et al 2002; Lammi-Taskula 2006). These conflicting findings suggest that other factors interact with the relationship between paternal involvement and a child’s age. These studies do not distinguish between the three dimensions of paternal involvement but it is likely a child’s age has a differential association with engagement, accessibility and responsibility at any one point in time. For example, fathers will probably engage more often with a toddler given this is important for their development and young children like to play compared to an older teenager with whom engagement is probably less intensive and more sporadic. Teenagers may rely more on a father’s accessibility (i.e. him ‘being there’ when needed) as opposed to daily, intensive engagement.

Some research shows paternal engagement varies according to the child’s gender; with fathers contributing more to the care of their sons than their daughters (e.g. Marsiglio 1991; Flouri and Buchanen 2003; Lamb 1986; Raley and Bianchi 2006). In my earlier study using sweep one (2001-2) of the Millennium Cohort Study, a baby’s gender (at age nine months) was found to have no association with paternal responsibility for housework (Norman, 2010). The influence a child’s gender has on paternal accessibility is unclear given this has not yet been explored.

Parents’ characteristics and personal developmental trajectories, such as their age, education and class also influence the three dimensions of paternal involvement. Previous research shows that a higher level of education leads to greater paternal engagement in childcare and/or responsibility for household labour (Coltrane and Parke 1998; Arrighi and Maume 2000; Pailhe and Solaz 2008; Sullivan 2010; Sayer, Gauthier and Furstenberg 2004) while class and race/ethnicity can also enable and constrain decisions around fathering and so will have some impact on a father’s accessibility, engagement and responsibility (Coltrane and Parke, 1998; Haurai and Hollingsworth 2009; Gillies 2009; Shows and Gerstel 2009; Norman 2010).

Motivation and confidence to be an involved parent, and the desire to be an involved parent, also shapes the three dimensions of paternal involvement and this is linked to a father’s individual agency, which I reflect on further in the next section. Jacobs and Kelley (2006) found parenting self-efficacy (i.e. the extent to which a parent believes that they have the ability to care for the child emotionally and physically) has a significant effect on paternal engagement, although motivation and confidence is also likely to shape direct and indirect responsibility and, to some extent, his accessibility. Motivation will also be shaped by attitudes and preferences towards parenting roles. Hence the relationship between practices of agency and paternal involvement in childcare is far from clear cut.

Combined with this are parental relationships and co-parenting processes, which also impact on paternal involvement. Backett (1982) argues that paternal engagement in childcare (although probably also relevant to accessibility and responsibility) is negotiated and subjectively assessed according to the parental behaviour considered appropriate by the spouses, within their familial context, at any one point in time. Children may not always be cared for by two, biologically-related parents as relationships break down and family networks, circumstances and locality can change, which may impact on how often a father cares for his children (Lewis and Lamb 2007; Morgan 1996).

The father’s relationship with the mother will also shape his engagement and how much responsibility he takes for childcare. ‘Maternal gatekeeping’, linked to women’s acceptance of men as caregivers, has been defined as mothers’ reluctance to allow fathers’ active participation in childrearing (Hatten et al 2002). This could be due to mothers’ perceptions of fathers’ abilities in childrearing whereby some mothers may feel fathers do not live up to the standards of parenting that they have set and so restrict or discourage paternal accessibility, engagement and/or responsibility through particular “gatekeeping behaviours” (Gaertner et al. 2007: 964; also Nangle et al 2003; Allen and Hawkins 1999). This set of conscious or unconscious behaviours that the mother engages in can either support or discourage paternal involvement in particular childcare activities. Thus, fathers’ capabilities to take part in the day-to-day responsibilities that mothers traditionally assume may be (unknowingly) limited.

Other contextual influences such as ease of access to supportive networks of relatives and friends will also shape the three dimensions of involvement. The quality of fathers’ relationships with their own fathers has also been shown to influence how engaged and responsible fathers are with their own children (Dermott 2003; 2008; Haurai and Hollingsworth 2009; Masciadrelli, Pleck and Stueve 2006).

**Summary and discussion**

There are many ways of being a father, or doing ‘fatherhood/s’ (Coltrane and Parke 1998:16). An ‘involved father’ is one form that is receiving growing attention in academic and policy debates. However, the term ‘involvement’ is rarely defined despite its variable and complex nature. This paper has reviewed some of the debates about how to conceptualise paternal ‘involvement’ in childcare. I conclude that Lamb et al’s (1987) three dimensional classification, which defines involvement in terms of accessibility, engagement and responsibility, provides a reliable and comprehensive way of summarising a plethora of parental activities, applicable to all fathers and any cohort or age of dependent child. This provides a benchmark operationalisation of involvement, which is important in light of wider policy debates about how best to support fathering roles.

However, there are limitations in classifying fathering roles into three dimensions. The increasing diversity of fatherhood means that fathering practices may not always fit neatly within Lamb et al.’s typology and so restricting our focus to practices that ‘fit’ within these dimensions ignores other ways in which fathers may be involved; such as in an emotional capacity identified in Dermott’s (2008) work, or through financial provisioning as argued by Christiansen and Palkovitz (2001).

Furthermore, changes to our understandings of gender and gendered practices that have come about through shifts in social attitudes and changes to work-family roles, will affect how we define and index fathering (as well as mothering). Lamb (2008) notes the defining motif of fathering has shifted over time from moral guidance to breadwinning to sex-role modelling, martial support and to nurturance. This suggests Lamb et al.’s typology may become less relevant in the future when the defining motif of fathering may shift again. However, while attitudinal and economic shifts may affect the extent to which a father is accessible, engaged and responsible, it is unlikely to affect the actual measure of these dimensions themselves. For example, the increase to the labour market participation of mothers over the last thirty years may have some association with the increase of paternal engagement in childcare given the time a mother has to interact with her child on a one-to-one basis has been reduced by her being in work (e.g. see Lyonette and Crompton 2015); however, this is unlikely to alter what we consider the general definition of engagement with children to be (i.e. one-to-one interaction). Of course, the specific activities that constitute engagement are likely to have changed and this is where a more comprehensive measure of paternal involvement, such as that offered by Palkovitz (1997), would be more useful for exploring the detail of this. Overall, Lamb et al’s typology is a fairly stable measure for exploring changes to fathers’ roles over time. This is also evidenced by the fact that Lamb et al.’s typology continues to be the most utilised and cited definition in social and psychological research, spanning three decades[[2]](#endnote-2) (e.g. LaRossa 1988; Volling and Belsky, 1991; McBride and Mills 1993; Sanderson and Sanders-Thompson 2002; Nangle et al 2003; O’Brien 2005; Morman and Floyd 2006; Mikelson 2008; Haurai and Hollingsworth 2009; Wilson and Prior 2011) confirming it provides a timely and comprehensive way of giving a simple definition to a complex and multifaceted term. Using a quantitative measure also helps to identify areas of contention or interest that can be examined in more detail by future (qualitative) research. For example, earlier quantitative research that used one or more of Lamb et al’s dimensions found a significant relationship between paternal involvement and employment hours (Norman et al. 2014), and a significant relationship between paternal involvement and ethnicity (Norman and Elliot 2015), which suggests future research should focus on these areas in more depth to understand the reasons behind these variations.

Following the conceptual discussion of paternal involvement, I drew on Sen’s (1992) ‘capabilities framework’ to review how state policies, workplace and individual circumstances impact on paternal engagement and, albeit to a lesser extent, (indirect) responsibility and accessibility. A capabilities framework is useful for understanding some of the tensions between what fathers may feel or strive to be (i.e. involved) and what they are actually capable of doing in practice. This paper focussed mainly on the influence of structural factors such as institutional constraints (e.g. inflexible working hours and limited paid leave) demands and expectations at the workplace (e.g. long work hours) and individual attributes (e.g. child’s age and/or gender), however, individual practices of agency (e.g. the father’s motivation, desire, beliefs) were also identified as having an influence on fathers’ capabilities to be involved. For instance, father involvement is influenced by whether or not he feels that ‘being involved’ in childcare is something of value and therefore worth pursuing. Practices of agency such as this mediate the influence of policy, workplace and individual factors on paternal involvement, which means these relationships are never clear cut. For example, paternity leave policies may support paternal involvement but if a father does not perceive an involved role to be valuable or worthy, he is unlikely to pursue this role. A further complication is that a father’s agency will also be shaped by his partner and children’s understanding of what involvement means, how it is shared and how it should be practiced. Thus, from a qualitative perspective, the variability and messiness of individual agency and behaviour makes paternal involvement difficult to measure in a unified and consistent way.

Finally, there are areas that warrant further research, which have been picked up by this brief review. There is a lack of attention given to the dimension of accessibility and this would be an interesting component of involvement to focus on, particularly given some scholars claim it is the most important aspect of paternal involvement (e.g. Dermott 2008). There is also minimal research that explores the extent to which the three dimensions intersect or are related with the exception of my earlier work, which uses factor analysis to derive latent measures of paternal engagement and indirect responsibility (for housework) to find only a very weak correlation between the two dimensions (Norman 2010). There is also a lack of research on fathers with older children with most studies focusing on paternal involvement with very young children and the period surrounding the birth of a child. Demands on time will be different for older children and the significance of the three dimensions of involvement may vary. It would also be interesting to explore paternal involvement across all groups of fathers, particularly minority ethnic groups, and other minority groups of fathers such as gay fathers, step, foster or adoptive fathers given there has been limited empirical research on this. Finally, a more in-depth focus on the impact of individual agency would be interesting in light of the complex and important influence this has on fathers’ capabilities to be involved parents.

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1. In Sweden, fathers are entitled to 60 days of parental leave – known as ‘Daddy days’ – in addition to two weeks of paternity leave. 360 days of joint parental leave are also provided with half reserved for each parent. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I note Pleck and Dermott’s revisions have only been developed in the last three and five years respectively, however, Lamb et al’s definition continues to be frequently cited in more recent research as shown in the following citations. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)