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# The complex landscape of contemporary fathering in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

Distinguishing between fatherhood as a social construction and fathering as a social practice, this paper presents empirical evidence from the UK concerning the complex landscape of contemporary fathering. The paper focuses on the spatial and temporal dynamics of fathering, particularly following moments of rupture and transition such as family break-up or bereavement. Based on narrative interviews and ethnographic observation, including the co-production and analysis of video data, the paper identifies three key issues: the diversity of contemporary fathering practices, the complex emotional geographies of lone fathering and the relationality of fathering both in terms of the research participants and their female partners (as fathers and mothers) and inter-generationally (between the research participants and their own fathers). The study supports previous research on the 'awkward spaces' of fathering with a particular emphasis on moments of transition and their complex social and emotional geographies.

## Le paysage complexe de la paternité contemporaine au Royaume-Uni

### RÉSUMÉ

Faisant la distinction entre la paternité en tant que construction sociale et la paternité en tant que pratique sociale, cet article présente l'évidence empirique du Royaume-Uni concernant le paysage complexe de la paternité contemporaine. L'article se concentre sur les dynamiques spatiales et temporelles de la paternité, suivant en particulier les moments de rupture et de transition tels que la séparation ou le deuil. Basé sur des entretiens narratifs et une observation ethnographique, incluant la co-production et l'analyse de données de vidéos, l'article identifie trois problèmes clés : la diversité des pratiques de paternité contemporaines, les géographies complexes émotionnelles de la paternité solitaire et la relation de paternité concernant à la fois les participants à la recherche et leur partenaire féminine (en tant que pères et mères) et l'aspect intergénérationnel (entre les participants à la recherche et leurs propres pères). Cette recherche soutient une étude précédente sur les « espaces inconfortables » de la paternité avec un accent particulier mis sur les moments de transition et les géographies complexes sociales et émotionnelles.

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## El complejo panorama de la paternidad contemporánea en el Reino Unido

### RESUMEN

Haciendo una distinción entre la paternidad como una construcción social y la paternidad como una práctica social, este trabajo presenta evidencia empírica del Reino Unido en relación al complejo panorama de la paternidad contemporánea. El documento se centra en la dinámica espacial y temporal de la paternidad, en particular luego de momentos de ruptura y transición como la ruptura de la familia o el duelo. Basado en entrevistas narrativas y observación etnográfica, incluyendo la coproducción y el análisis de datos de vídeo, el documento identifica tres cuestiones fundamentales: la diversidad de prácticas de paternidad contemporáneas, las complejas geografías emocionales de la paternidad ejercida por padres solteros, y la relacionalidad de la paternidad tanto en relación a los participantes de la investigación y sus parejas femeninas (como padres y madres) e inter-generacionalmente (entre los participantes de la investigación y sus propios padres). El estudio apoya la investigación previa sobre los 'espacios incómodos' de la paternidad con un énfasis particular en momentos de transición y sus complejas geografías sociales y emocionales.

### Introduction

While critical analyses of men and masculinities have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years including work by social and cultural geographers such as van Hoven and Hörschelmann (2005) and Gorman-Murray and Hopkins (2014), surprisingly little attention has been paid to contemporary fatherhood, a parenting role which has been consistently defined as secondary to motherhood in terms of its social significance (see Aitken, 2000). Commenting on the lack of a history of fatherhood, Thomas Laqueur draws attention to a silence which he regards as a 'systemic pathology in our understanding of what being a man and being a father entail' (1992, p. 155). Similar arguments could be made about the absence of geographical work on fatherhood (as a social construction) and fathering (as a social practice) – a distinction which is central to the current paper. In making the case for more geographical work on fatherhood and fathering, Stuart Aitken (2005) suggests that there is little theory or empirical data to help researchers understand the daily emotional practices through which contemporary fathering is negotiated and contested. Noting how fathers' voices are absent from much existing research on parenting, Aitken draws attention to a critical contradiction between the rational and egalitarian basis of shared parental responsibilities (as a normative ideal) and the irrationality and emotional labour involved in day-to-day childcare practices (ibid., p. 229). Aitken's work probes the social and cultural geographies of parental responsibility through an exploration of what he calls the 'awkward spaces' of fathering (Aitken, 2005, 2009). This exploration of the complex landscape of contemporary fathering in the UK provides further evidence about these contested spaces as well as 'giving voice' to fathers through our own empirical work.

The 'invisibility' of fathers in current social science research is also apparent in US research on early child development and well-being (Saracho and Spodek 2008), where mothers have been used to provide proxy accounts of men's fathering practices (Bzostek, 2008; Guzzo,

2011; Saracho & Spodek 2008). Despite this empirical vacuum, there has been much commentary on both sides of the Atlantic concerning the alleged 'crisis in fatherhood' as reflected in the declining number of men entering fatherhood and an increase in those leaving it (Jensen, as cited in Gillis, 2000, p. 225). A similar 'crisis' has also been noted in popular culture and media representations (Baskerville, 2004; Freeman, 2003), although the picture appears more complex when the statistical evidence is examined in more detail. For example, of the 12 million dependent children living in England and Wales in 2011, 8.8 million lived in either married, civil partnership or cohabiting families, while 3.3 million lived with lone parents. While the overwhelming majority of children whose parents are separated remain with their mothers (91%), there had been a significant increase of 31% in the number of lone parent families headed by men since the previous census (ONS, 2014a). Meanwhile, 3.2% of those children recorded in the 2011 census had a second address with another parent or guardian (ONS, 2014b), providing evidence of some degree of shared residency in the post-separation parenting landscape. Similar trends have been observed in Australia and the US, where shared-time parenting has been steadily rising over the past decade, albeit from a low base (Smyth, Baxter, Fletcher, & Moloney, 2013, p. 370). There was a concomitant 14% decline in the number of "couple stepfamilies" in England and Wales between 2001 and 2011, suggesting that 'lone parents may be increasingly likely to have a partner who lives elsewhere [who] may be a stepparent to the lone parent's children while not living with them permanently' (ONS, 2014a, p. 2).

These data highlight an increasingly complex landscape of contemporary parenting in the UK, where family relationships may take place across a number of households, with men adopting the role of social parents, in addition to – or instead of – fathering biological children of their own. A further complication is how these data fail to account for 'nuclear' family households where fathers are absent from home for long periods, either through incarceration, or through work<sup>1</sup>. This paper seeks to extend current understandings of the contemporary landscape of fathering in the UK via an intensive exploration of the fathering narratives and practices of a small number of men (and their families) who took part in a recently completed pilot study of domestic masculinities.<sup>2</sup> These data reveal the multiple narratives and practices of contemporary fathering and the geographies through which they take place, including their relational character and emotional complexity. Before turning to our empirical material, the paper explores some of the tensions which exist around the social construction of fatherhood which can no longer be characterised by the 'distant breadwinner' model that prevailed in nineteenth-century accounts, but as a more equal 'co-parenting' model (Aitken, 2000; Gillis, 2000), whether or not both parents are co-resident. Likewise, we contend, 'fatherhood' (as a social construction) needs to be distinguished from 'fathering' (as a series of social practices performed by individuals who may or may not be biologically related to a child, and may indeed not always be male, as in the case of lesbian parents (Aitken, 2009).

## Social constructions of fatherhood

Commenting on the 'marginalisation' of fatherhood in Western countries, John Gillis (2000) provides a historical perspective on fatherhood and how it has changed over time, acknowledging the role of industrial capitalism in marginalising fathers from domestic life, while at

the same time reinforcing their role as provider, criminalising non-support and desertion of families by so-called 'home-slackers' (ibid., p. 230). While such punitive measures impacted most severely on poorer fathers, Gillis notes that many fathers have found it difficult to fulfil the traditional breadwinner role, further complicated by the increased participation of women in paid work outside the home, paving the way for a restructuring of the organisation of domestic life and men's contribution to childcare, particularly among households where both parents work full-time (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006).

Despite a social and cultural shift towards more involved fatherhood (Palm & Fagan, 2008) including legislation which, in some countries, has given fathers a right to paid paternity leave, Gillis (2000, p. 233) notes that even in the Nordic states, where paternal leave policies are most generous, there is an apparent unwillingness among fathers to take advantage of these entitlements. So too, in the UK, Tina Miller (2010) reports that the imagined ideal of making hands-on and emotional contributions to their children's lives among expectant fathers often fails to be realised once their children are born and they return to work and succumb to work-place demands. While fathers' involvement in the care and emotional well-being of their children may be regarded as having socially redefined fatherhood (Palkovitz & Palm, 2009), the breadwinner role continues to be pervasive across the global north, particularly when children are younger (Smyth et al., 2013). It also persists in the event of separation or divorce when fathers are generally expected to pay child support for their children regardless of their level of domestic involvement (Featherstone, 2009; Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010). In the UK, for example, the policies of successive governments have tended to 'support fathers as providers of cash rather than of care' (Featherstone, 2009, p. 2). Yarwood (2011) suggests that the state contributes to the persistence of the breadwinner model of fatherhood as the culturally exalted way of being a man in the UK since current political and policy discourses define a responsible parent as one who is economically active in the labour market (see also Collier, 2009). It is little wonder that such discourses have been reflected in the ways that men in different contexts have articulated their identities as fathers (see Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Olmstead et al., 2009; Smyth et al., 2013; Yarwood, 2011). For example, Smyth and colleagues (2013) note that Australian men feel obliged to place considerable emphasis on providing financially for their families since there is a perceived association between good fathering and breadwinning. Additionally, reporting qualitative research with stay-at-home fathers in Canada, Andrea Doucet (2004) highlights that along with structural pressures to conform to a particular, economically constituted, model of 'good fatherhood', men who do not conform to this ideal 'fall under the weight of community scrutiny for being primary caregivers and not primary breadwinners, thus confirming research that has argued that mothers' and fathers' 'moral' responsibilities as carers and earners remain differently framed and experienced' (ibid., p. 278) (see also Finch & Mason, 1993).

While the publication of a number of policy documents endorsing *parenting* have been published in the UK (e.g. DfES 2007; DCSF, 2010), leading to a proliferation of parenting programmes directed exclusively at fathers, Alan Dolan (2014) reports a dearth of research focusing on these initiatives, largely attributed to the challenges of recruiting 'volunteer' fathers to such programmes. This is perhaps attributable to the normativity of mothering as a model for parenting among health and social care professionals. Fathers in the UK, for example, have reported feelings of alienation by the way that information is given to them by professionals (Featherstone, 2009), with Lewis (2013) noting that services are perceived by

fathers as being run by women for women, and – where they do concern men – have a tendency to focus on men's 'problems'. This has been echoed by Dolan (2014), whose participants perceived child support services to be targeted at mothers and 'problematic' or 'suboptimal' fathers, from whom they were keen to distinguish themselves (see also Featherstone, 2009). In Australia, fathers are similarly reported as feeling alienated in the provision of support with services for fathers held to be fragmented, idiosyncratic and underdeveloped (Smyth et al., 2013, p. 372). In contrast, some US states require divorcing parents to attend compulsory parent education classes to ameliorate the adverse effects of divorce on children (see Palkovitz & Palm, 2009; Troilo & Coleman, 2013).

Although it is now de rigueur to speak of 'parenting' with its implication of shared or genderless practice, Aitken (2000, p. 581) suggests that this mythic conception of family life belies the complex and highly gendered realities of contemporary parenting. Indeed, the frequent conflation of 'parenting' with 'mothering' in policy and practice, wherein 'parental responsibilities are negotiated using 'explanatory' demonstrations by the mother which are copied by the father' (Lewis, 2013, p. 344), constructs fatherhood against a female (maternal) norm (Lewis, 2013; Plantin et al., 2003; Warin et al., 1999). Acknowledging that motherhood is socially and culturally accepted as the benchmark against which fathers' relationships with their children are assessed, Aitken expresses concern that 'the idea of the father is constituted in parallel or in opposition to the idea of the mother and, as such, does not account for the imprecise and hesitant day-to-day work of fathering' (2000, p. 585). Recent work has also focused on the diversity of 'fathering narratives' (Featherstone, 2009) including gay fathers and fathers who have joint residency of their children, along with the ethnic and cultural diversity now prevalent in British society.

### **Fathering practices in space and time**

Consistent with the recent 'practice turn' in contemporary theory (Schatzki et al., 2001), there has been a growing emphasis on the relational practices of contemporary fathering. In practice theory, social practices (such as childcare or cooking) become the unit of analysis rather than individual fathers or social constructions of fatherhood. Research focuses on the 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89) through which fatherhood is practiced and on the relations between fathers and children, fathers and mothers, fathers and other men. When men speak of their fathering practices in conversation with researchers, their narratives invoke comparison with the judgments and expectations of others (Doucet, 2004; Robb, 2004), including their own experiences of being fathered and how their own practices are refined and renegotiated (Olmstead et al., 2009). Moreover, fathering practices are both responsive to changing circumstances and moments of rupture – for example in relation to employment, ill-health, separation/divorce or bereavement. They are also context and time dependent, for example, in relation to their children's changing needs as they get older and become parents themselves. Indeed, as Brannen and Nilsen (2006, p. 339) observe, 'a father is always a father whatever his age ... [and] fathering changes over the life course'.

Importantly, fathering practices are also performed in different spaces – both public and private – across multiple households, and across sometimes considerable geographic distances. To date, few researchers have examined the situated practices of care – the spatially and temporally organised 'carescapes' to which men contribute (Barker, 2011). Among those who have conducted research in this area, it has been suggested that men's contributions are

organised in particularly masculine spaces of care – namely outside the domestic environment – either as fathers (Barker, 2008, 2011; Brandth & Kvande, 1998) or grandfathers (Tarrant, 2013). Stuart Aitken's (2009) work with men reflecting upon their fathering careers is a rare example of research which probes the spatial and temporal responsiveness of fathering over the life-course, also foregrounding the emotional geographies of fathering (cf. Conradson, 2003). Indeed, speaking of the limitations of much existing research regarding the work that mothers and fathers do, Aitken (2005, p. 223) argues that 'much of the institution of fatherhood hinges on an 'idea' that does not embrace the 'fact' of fathering as a daily emotional practice that is negotiated, contested and resisted differently in different spaces'. It is to the practices of fathering that we now turn through an analysis that combines ethnographic observation with a reflexive account of their narrative construction.

Contemporary fathering practices might be taken to include 'spending time with children, developing relationships with them, and providing parental guidance, discipline and love' (Baxter, 2012, p. 189). Expanding on this definition, Rob Palkovitz argues that:

other values should be included in a broader model that allows a complete description of the father's emotional and cognitive involvement in the children and domestic affairs. This involvement does not ... have to be expressed through direct and practical duties, but may instead include activities such as planning for the children's future, worrying about them, protecting them, always thinking about them, or ... being directly involved in their leisure activities. (as discussed by Plantin et al., 2003, p. 21)

Previous research has highlighted the importance of the transition to parenthood among first-time fathers (e.g. Guzzo, 2011; Henwood et al., 2011; Miller, 2010; Shirani, 2013; Yarwood, 2011). Transitions *within* fathering represent relatively uncharted territory, with the transition from residential to non-residential parent an important but seemingly neglected area of empirical investigation (cf. Palkovitz & Palm, 2009). These spatial dislocations are at the core of the current paper including the ways in which non-resident fathers are potentially alienated within the temporal patterns of routine care, leading to grief on the part of parents and children alike (Smyth et al., 2012). For example, Spencer Olmstead and colleagues (2009, p. 251) argue that activities which reinforced a father's role identity prior to divorce – such as putting the child to bed at night or helping with homework – frequently become limited or eliminated altogether, particularly since it is not unusual for an estranged father's time with children to be confined to weekends. Conversely, however, Troilo and Coleman (2013) highlight that some non-resident fathers in their US study illustrated how their fathering practices could be reframed to provide more routine aspects of care, including – for example – sharing household tasks and shopping, from which they might otherwise have been exempted.

But fathering is not simply a practical endeavour, restricted to the provision of food, shelter, clothing, moral guidance, protection, support and the teaching of social and personal skills. Fathers are also involved in what Aitken (2005) calls labour of the heart. Drawing upon 15 years of ethnographic work with a socially and culturally diverse group of fathers in California, Aitken (2009) highlights how fathering constitutes an ill-defined and ongoing daily emotional practice which is constantly being negotiated, contested and resisted across different spaces, different moments in time and in relation to different individuals. The case studies which he presents emphasise that rather than representing a state of 'being', fathering is – in fact – a constantly evolving process of becoming. These issues form the focus of the remainder of this paper, based on our ethnographic observation of three UK families.

## Methods

This paper draws on findings from a pilot study undertaken in the South Yorkshire and East Midlands areas of the UK between January and July 2014. The project originally focused on men's domestic practices and gradually evolved into a more specific exploration of contemporary fathering practices. The research used a mixed method, qualitative and ethnographic approach which aimed to go beyond what is accessible via purely discursive accounts to address the performative character of social life including what Schatzki (1996, p. 89) describes as the 'doings and sayings' of everyday life. This meant that besides exploring men's narrative constructions of fathering and fatherhood through in-depth interviews, the first author also spent time 'hanging out' with the research participants and their children (cf. Evans, 2011), observing some of their everyday practices and filming them using an iPhone and mini-tripod.<sup>3</sup> The participants, all of whom are anonymised, are described in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

Each household was also given a small digital recorder and tripod during the first visit, and participants were asked to record anything that they felt was relevant to their sense of 'being a man'. Video recorders remained with each participant for a six- to eight-week period, when the recordings were collected and analysed using Gibson's (2005) 'movie-maker method' for analysing participant-generated films. This approach examines factors such as who the intended audience appears to be, what story the creator of the film is trying to convey, how it is directed, who is featured in it and the roles they play and – importantly – what, or who, is absent. The first author then paid a final visit to each household, reflexively interviewing all household members about their films and the stories behind them, along with how they experienced this dimension of the study, what they would do differently, and practical recommendations for the researchers in taking the study forwards. The participants were involved

**Table 1.** The participants.

	Roger (51)	Darren (45)	Dave (47)
Occupational background	Ex-military officer Operations executive	Sales; self-employed landscape gardener	Fire Officer
Ethnicity, social class and education	White Upper middle class Postgrad education	White Working class Higher education	White Working class Higher education
Relationship status	Widowed Separated from youngest children's mother. Non-cohabiting partner, Jane [39; White; has a son, Sam (4), from a previous relationship; father lives overseas].	Married to Carol [39; British born Afro-Caribbean; full time employed]	Divorced Non-cohabiting partner, Kate [39; White; has a daughter, Lucy (11), from a previous relationship; father has sporadic contact].
Children	Simon (10); Libby (7) – live locally with mother, but stay 2/3 overnights each week, in addition to taking to after-school activities on other nights. From first marriage: Emma (26) and Helena (24) [neither living locally]; granddaughter, Molly (6)	Charlie (7); Billie (5); Benjamin <sup>a</sup> [born very prematurely and subsequently died during the study]  From previous relationship: Carmen [21; at local university]	Harvey (13); Jack (11). Equal shared residency [in dispute via the Family Court at time of fieldwork]

<sup>a</sup>We have included Benjamin since his death, and the couple's feelings about this were the focus of much of the final visit with the household. During this discussion, Carol, in particular, maintained a strong sense of his personhood, which we have maintained here.



not just as co-producers of data but also, via a joint analysis of the findings, as co-producers of knowledge including all of the epistemological issues that this raises regarding who said what, about whom and how such knowledge is legitimised (Maynard, 1994).<sup>5</sup>

Verbatim transcriptions of the interview and video footage were embedded – along with photographs and still images from the videos – in extensive contemporaneous reflexive field notes which were recorded following each stage of the fieldwork, allowing the second author to comment on the first author's initial analysis and interpretation of the data. These intersubjective relationships involving our own family histories and experiences as well as our interpretation of our participants' lives merit further attention particularly in relation to the enactment of 'masculinity', gender and fathering (cf. Robb, 2004). The co-production of our research 'data' was particularly important in transcending the gap between 'our' world and 'theirs', comparing our own interpretations of participants' video footage with the meanings attached to certain practices and activities by those performing them. In some instances, our participants provided clarification – for example, regarding why a wife was 'excluded' from a participant's footage, seemingly telling the story of a single dad, or a man who does not need a woman to help care for his children. However, the reflexive dialogue which took place between the first author and the couple subsequently revealed the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality to this man's identity, hence his omission of this (and his wife) from his representation of his sense of being a man, which – instead – emphasised his identity as a father. Indeed, all of the men did this, resulting in our analysis shifting away from an emphasis on 'being a man' towards 'being a father'.

The three men who form the core of our pilot research were all of similar age. They were all heterosexual, all had experience of a stepfamily household and all had experience of being single fathers, either in the past or at present<sup>6</sup>. While the narrative interviews elicited discussions of a more diverse range of masculinities – particularly in relation to school, young manhood, work, friendship and heterosexual relationships – it was through the observational work and the participants' own footage that the significance of these men's fathering practices became most apparent. Indeed, when asked – at the conclusion of the narrative interview – what the best and worst things about being a man were, all responded that being a dad was the best:

I guess, y'know, being a dad. Being a dad's fun (.) you get to sometimes relive your childhood through your kids (.) [laughs] which is good, y'know, and I've done things where you think 'oh that's great. I've not done that for about 30 years'. It's a good excuse, having kids is a good excuse to be a child yourself [Dave].

The best thing, I suppose, for me personally, is being a father [Darren].

...I think the good thing about being a dad is you can be a child, you see [big smile and a glint in his eye] ... You can do all the things that you really loved doing when you were small. AGAIN! And no-one thinks you're an idiot because of course you're doing it for the child! [laughs] [Roger].

The remainder of this paper explores the diversity of contemporary fathering practices, the complex emotional geographies of lone fathering, and the relationality of fathering both in terms of fathers and mothers (the research participants and their female partners) and intergenerationally (between the research participants and their own fathers).

## The diversity of contemporary fathering practices

Although this paper reports on only three cases, there was considerable diversity in these men's narrative accounts of their experience as fathers and in our observation of their fathering practices. None of their stories reflected a straightforward nuclear family script, all being punctuated by rupture of some kind and involving more diverse family forms, including step- and social parenting as well as reflecting the changing nature of fathering across the life-course. In all cases, fathering of dependent children had taken place across multiple households. For example, Roger married and first became a father at 24. Although relatively young and representing a radical departure from the footloose life of adventure that he had experienced in the armed services, Roger reports that he embraced his fathering responsibilities, explaining that: 'I'd always wanted to be married with children'. Following the death of his first wife when his eldest child was only nine, he later re-married and had two more children – Simon and Libby – in his 40s, with his granddaughter born only a year after his youngest child. One of his adult daughters lives overseas and he sees her a couple of times a year, the other living in a neighbouring county with her own daughter. While neither daughter lives close by, they continue to be subject to fatherly concern, albeit in a less hands-on way than was required when they were younger. Now estranged from his younger children's mother, Roger reported that his elder children had admitted, separately, that 'they always felt tolerated rather than loved' by their stepmother, 'which isn't great, is it?'

Twelve months after the separation, Roger had started a relationship with a long-term friend, Jane, who had a four-year-old son, Sam. The child's father lives overseas and they have irregular contact using FaceTime, which Jane said caused some disruption to Sam's equilibrium. Roger continues to care for Simon and Libby, who remain in the family home with their mother, seeing them three or four times a week. Some of his time with the children is also spent with Jane and Sam, who looks upon Simon as an older brother. Roger reported helping Jane with childcare by collecting Sam from his childminder when she was at work. This had prompted her to comment: 'You have now spent more time with Sam than his own father has'.

Like Roger, Darren also became a father at a relatively young age, fulfilling an ambition he had held since being a teenager: 'I kind of remember, going back to sort of 15 or so, really, really wanting to have kids'. His relationship with the mother of his eldest daughter, Carmen, was reported as often being awkward – sometimes resulting in violence on her part – ultimately breaking down when Carmen was three and a half. However, Darren remained a constant and active presence in Carmen's life, his daughter staying with him four nights a week until she started high school. He remembers, with some fondness, the holidays that the two of them shared with another single dad and his daughter. When Carmen was 11, Darren married Carol. Carol referred to Carmen as 'my stepdaughter' and was in the process of baking her a 21st birthday cake when the fieldwork started. The couple now have two children, Charlie and Billie, of their own, losing a third child, Benjamin – who was born very prematurely – during the course of the fieldwork. The children all get along well, and Carmen picks her younger siblings up from school one night a week and prepares their evening meal.

While Carol welcomed Carmen into their life, the fact of a child from a previous relationship, a reminder that Darren was already a father, became more problematic when the couple decided to start a family of their own. Darren spoke animatedly of Carmen's birth story, recounting the 'massive rise of euphoric feeling ... that I can still, I can still taste that

emotion I felt at that time'. He suggests that, during the pregnancy, he had needed to reassure Carol that although the birth of his first child was perhaps inevitably more 'vividly painted on my memory,' *their* first child's birth would nonetheless be 'special' by virtue of it being shared with her.

Dave was 10 years older than the other participants when he made his debut as a father. This came after a succession of miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies with his ex-wife, Sue. While having a family had perhaps been – to some degree – taken for granted by Roger and Darren, the difficulties that Dave's ex-wife had in sustaining a pregnancy had prompted him to question how important this was to both the relationship itself, and to him as an individual. The couple went on to have IVF treatment, their two attempts – two years apart – both being successful. However, the relationship broke down following Sue's affair with a colleague when their youngest son, Jack, was two. Sue went on to marry this man, who had a non-cohabiting daughter of his own. They then had a daughter together – Harvey and Jack's half-sister, Daisy. Dave subsequently re-partnered and bought a house with a woman who had two similarly aged sons of her own. Highlighting some of the logistical and emotional messiness of 'blending' families, and corresponding issues of 'fairness' (cf. Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2003), Dave comments:

that rankled [because she treated it like it was more her house] and my boys were there under her grace and favour and never, she wanted me to be step-father to her boys but (.) she didn't wanna, she didn't wanna reciprocate.<sup>7</sup>

Having extricated himself from this relationship, Dave now lives a short walk away from his ex-wife and her husband, their sons spending an equal amount of time between the two households. He also has a partner, Kate, who lives 30 miles away; the couple see each other once or twice a week, depending on their work commitments. Kate has a daughter, Lucy, who is the same age as Jack. Dave suggested that it was easier being a step-parent to Lucy than it was with his previous partner's sons because – as she is female – 'there's no competition ... my boys were quite clearly jealous [of ex-partner's sons], and quite right too'.

### **The complex emotional geographies of lone fathering**

As these diverse narratives suggest, fathering involves complex geographies of care, particularly when relationships break down, or when new families are formed across multiple households which may, or may not, involve children from the new relationship. Not surprisingly, these may also require specific forms of emotional labour, both in relation to children and new partners, as suggested in Darren and Dave's narratives. But parenting can be logistically complex even within stable nuclear families. For example, until relatively recently, Darren's wife worked away from home during the week, requiring him to take responsibility for the everyday care of his two young children. Although Carol was absent from Darren's video footage of him doing the laundry, ironing uniforms, getting the children up and ready for school, preparing their evening meal and listening to them read, in addition to a range of other tasks, in their reflexive joint interview, Darren and Carol revealed that while he might have given the appearance of efficiency, none of this would be possible without Carol having done 'all the organising [for example, child-minders], I just know where I'm meant to be at what time' (cf. Featherstone, 2009; O'Brien, 2005). Meanwhile, Roger acknowledges that when he and his first wife became parents, his fathering was impeded by the demands of his military career, which sometimes took him away on exercise for up to six months at a time.

This was 'quite stressful ... it was difficult for both of us'. Indeed, he reports going away for several months when his eldest daughter was only seven months old and how she did not recognise him, initially, on his return. He reflects: 'it wasn't easy on any of us in some senses'.

While fathers' role as providers of cash dominates the social construction of post-separation fathering, non-resident fathers who remain involved with their children may nonetheless attempt to maintain at least some of the roles they had played prior to separation (see Aitken, 2009; Olmstead et al., 2009; Smyth et al., 2013; Troilo & Coleman, 2013), the separation itself eliciting particular emotional responses in children (and parents) which can create new parenting challenges. For example, Roger reported that Simon had gone through a period of being very angry, and sometimes violent, towards his mother, whom he blamed for Roger leaving the family home. He explains how he responded to this, emphasising to his son that while it is okay to be angry, it is not acceptable to be aggressive or violent:

'I'm really quite angry at you for that, I'm disappointed and I'm angry. So what I want you to do is you have to apologise to mummy, but what I didn't want him to do was not feel that he could be angry, so by me using those words while giving the appearance of calm, shows anger is okay. It's perfectly alright, just don't turn it into something horrid.'

Rather than adopting a punitive approach towards his son, Roger's response was both positive and generative, illustrating the centrality of the teacher and disciplinarian dimensions of fathering (Olmstead et al., 2009) within his fathering practices. Additionally, since this discussion became necessary as a result of behavioural challenges wrought by the breakdown of Roger's relationship with the children's mother – who had insisted that he talk to 'your' son – this example also shows how co-parenting – as another dimension of fathering – is performed when children move between parents residing in different households. Further evidence of this was seen in Roger's report of having to comfort and reassure a distressed Simon who, having discovered his mother's internet search history and found a 'baby-making machine' (sex toy) in the bathroom, had got it into his head that she was trying to have another baby and no longer wanted him and his sister.

In another example, Dave illustrated some of the challenges associated with attempting to co-parent across two households, where there may be different rules and approaches to discipline. He reported that Jack was both a highly empathic child and was particularly sensitive to matters of in/justice. However, because he had not yet developed the capacity to express himself appropriately, this had started to manifest itself in problematic behaviour that his teachers were finding difficult to manage. There had been one serious incident, involving both boys, which had prompted Jack's head teacher to threaten police action. Their mother had responded to the boys' behaviour by telling them that she was 'very disappointed' in them. Dave indicated that his approach would have been more direct: he would have told the school to go ahead and call the police so that the boys could understand the potential consequences of their actions. However, he acknowledged both that he could not be seen to undermine their mother, and that they must provide a consistent message, consequently reinforcing her position by voicing his own disappointment (cf. Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003).

While each of our participants emphasised the fun dimensions of being a father, it was equally clear that being a father could be emotionally challenging, not least in the event of rupture to the nuclear family. Indeed, Roger had experienced single fatherhood in two very different but equally painful situations: the first, following the sudden death of Emma and Helena's mother in 1996; the second, as a result of the recent breakdown of his marriage.

There was a tangible sense of rawness regarding his relationship with the younger children throughout the fieldwork, often precipitated by ongoing difficulties with their mother. While Roger gets on with things in a seemingly cheerful fashion in the presence of his children, one piece of footage – recorded as he is driving to work having dropped the children off at their mother's – captures how emotionally challenging being separated from his children is for him:

Not particularly keen on this part of my life, in the sense of dropping the children off ... every time I drop them off, it is actually quite painful, er, (,) it really is (...) I wish I weren't separated from them, but I am (..) ... But it doesn't make for an easy life, emotionally.

However, he accepts this as the price of extricating himself from what he experienced, in some ways, as a cruel marriage, acknowledging that 'you just have to try to make as good a fist of these things as you possibly can'. Echoing the findings of Troilo and Coleman (2013), Roger appears to have reframed potential barriers to being a part of his children's lives, enabling him to manage them in such ways as to facilitate a level of involvement with his children with which he can live. These included moving house to be closer to them, and organising his domestic life around their overnight visits and after-school activities. His video footage gave the impression of a man in the process of a 'reboot all round', whose life was organised around going to work and preparing for his children's arrival. For example, in addition to the two or three overnight stays they had with him, Roger also drove them to various after-school activities, such as swimming and music classes, as well as days out; many of these journeys are filmed by Roger and the children themselves. Often, Roger could be seen, still in his work attire, preparing meals, eating with the children, and clearing up afterwards (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Roger washing up the supper dishes before taking the children swimming.

## The relationality of fathering

### *Fathers and mothers*

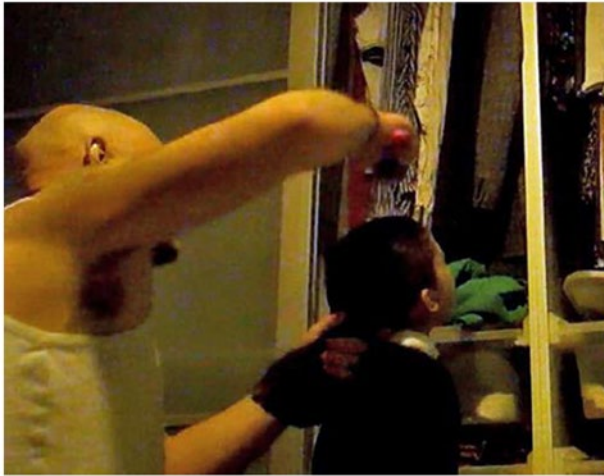
While mothers' relationships with their children is commonly acknowledged – socially and culturally – as the benchmark against which fathers' are assessed, data from these households highlight the seemingly unique contributions that these men make to their children's lives. The nature of fathers' contribution will obviously shift in response to children's ages, developmental and emotional needs, as well as in response to changes in circumstances, as discussed above. While Darren indicated that 'when they're really young, [there is] not massive amounts of difference' between sons' and daughters' needs, it was Dave's sons who pointed out that once they reached a particular phase in their lives, there are certain conversations which they, as boys, would be more likely to have with their father:

- A: What would you do if you had a problem, like with your body changing and stuff?  
 H: I'd tell dad because dad's been through it ... what's the point in talking to mum? She's not had to go through it.  
 A: What about girlfriends?  
 H: I wouldn't talk to mum. That would be so embarrassing.

On the other hand, fathers may experience particular challenges with daughters, not all of which can be practicably referred back to their mothers, especially not if the mother is not immediately available. Here, Darren is a case in point. Darren had been a single father to his eldest daughter for several years and also undertakes routine caring responsibilities for his younger children due to the fact that his wife used to work away from home, or – as now – has left for work before they get up, and arrives home late. While it was not something he reported particularly enjoying or being good at, doing his daughter, Billie's, hair was something he often had to do in the morning. This task is all the more challenging because both Carol and Carmen's mother are of Afro-Caribbean descent and his children have hair-management requirements which he is less likely to be familiar with as a bald, White man. He reflects about learning to do Carmen's hair as a single dad and the criticism – or 'accusations' – he was subjected to by her mother, whom he also says 'accused me of dressing her like a tomboy. I don't think I did, I'd put her in a dress but I'd put her a pair of boots on'. Here, he defends his 'ignorance', pointing out that he did his best:

I got accused [by Carmen's mother] of not knowing how to do her hair, which I don't, I didn't grow up in a Caribbean, Afro household. Having said that, joking apart, 'cause of the neighbourhood I grew up in, I just knew that Black people put more stuff on their hair [laughs]. But then I just used to do it the best I could, which were basically, put a load of oil on it, comb it all back and tie it into a ponytail at the back.

Darren's own recorded footage of him helping the children get ready for school included doing Billie's hair. Figure 2 shows him sitting on the edge of a bed with Billie standing in front of him. He squirts some oil into his hands, rubs them together and confidently smooths it into her still tied-back hair. He then peels the bobble off and brushes her hair through with a paddle brush. He does this quickly and firmly – like a man who has done this before. With her hair drawn back into a ponytail, Darren then uses a second – smaller – brush to gently smooth it back and finish it off. Having been subjected to many hours of painful brushing and detangling of her own long hair by her mother as a child, the first author was struck both by the absence of any resistance or complaint from Billie, and by the apparent tenderness



**Figure 2.** Darren doing Billie's Afro hair.

with which the task is performed by Darren. While not being any kind of expert in either girls' hairstyles or Afro hair, Darren demonstrates that this does not mean that he cannot make something that might be experienced by both father and daughter as a chore into a moment of closeness at the start of the day.

### **Fathers and fathers**

Among psychologists and social work professionals, particular importance has been attached to attending to the biographical experience of being fathered which can be lost in structural approaches to parenting (Hollway, 2006). Although with very different experiences of their respective fathers (now both deceased), Roger and Dave reflected on the roles their own fathers played, indirectly, in the processes of their 'becoming' fathers, both effectively distancing themselves from the model practiced by their fathers. For Roger, who reported that his father was:

a brutal, sarcastic, violent, quick-to-temper person [who] would fly into a rage over anything. It was like he'd had the reverse of a lobotomy. He would have extremes of emotion almost from nothing. He was just an absolute bully,

having a family of his own meant that he could 'create my own dynasty' which broke with the dominant cultural script of violent fathering which had been passed down by his grandfather before him within his paternal family. Adopting what Karen Guzzo (2011) has described as a 'compensatory' approach, Roger explained that his own approach to becoming a father was:

R: Almost exactly the opposite, I suppose, that's why I just don't go along with ... It's a misunderstanding to say that if you were abused you become an abuser. It's the wrong way round: often those who abuse were abused.

A: Did you make a conscious decision then?

R: I would *never* hit my children, and I never have. I struggle even to raise my voice at them because actually there really isn't a need, even if they're not that intellectually (. .) developed. If things are explained in a reasonably, they'll get it. And if they're

throwing a bit of a strop, the best thing to do is just ignore 'em, erm, it really is. Just stay calm and ignore 'em.

This approach is reflected, for example, in his concern – reported above – with teaching his son about the *appropriate* expression of anger.

In contrast, Dave's father was characterised as being a more benign and passive figure in his upbringing, and it appeared that Dave's views regarding his father's approach to fathering him and his older brother were reflexively constructed via the lens of his own fathering practices. For example, Dave's youngest son, Jack, plays for a local rugby team and Dave makes a point of attending as many of his matches as he can, as well as accompanying him on an annual 'dads and lads' rugby tour. Dave views this as a 'normal' activity for a father. He contrasts this with his own father, of whom one of his enduring memories was when – on the only occasion he came to watch Dave play football – he ended up 'remonstrating with the manager' who had not given Dave a game that day. Dave says: 'it was just so embarrassing that, y'know; I just didn't wanna speak to him'. Father and son consequently left the match separately, Dave cycling off furiously 'because I was so ashamed of what had happened, him bawling out my manager'.

Dave seemed to be both ambivalent and inconsistent in how he represented his father. He spoke of older colleagues who had been influential after he had begun his professional life as a firefighter, seemingly constructing them as foils to his own father 'who wanted to be part of the gang' as opposed to 'teaching me or anything like that'. Consequently, with his own sons he reports that he tries to be as 'highbrow as possible and try and push them'. As an example of this, Dave and his older son, Harvey, were observed (see Figure 3) chatting about current British politics over lunch one Saturday afternoon, Harvey appearing to be remarkably knowledgeable. However, while Dave later remarked that his father had never spoken to him or his older brother in the way he speaks to Harvey and Jack, in *this* moment he turns to Harvey and says: 'we'll end up doing what me and my dad did ... Sitting in the pub, drinking and talking politics'. It would seem that it was during his boyhood years that Dave feels that his father was perceived to be wanting as a teacher. While Dave appears



**Figure 3.** Dave and Harvey having a 'highbrow' conversation over lunch.



somewhat critical of his father's desire to be 'part of the gang' once he was old enough to drink in pubs, it seems that this emerged precisely as a result of his perceived responsibilities *as a father*. Indeed, Dave speculates that it was probably his mother who had sent him to 'keep an eye on me to a certain extent'. Highlighting the complexity of fathering even 30 years ago, Dave acknowledges that although his father's practices fell short of how he wants to father his own sons, he was, nonetheless, regarded 'by outsiders' as an 'avuncular figure' who was both 'a mate' to his sons' friends and became a 'surrogate father' to Dave's best friend, whose own father had died when he was eight.

Men's relationships with, and need for, their fathers do not cease when they become fathers themselves. As with their own children, their relationships with their fathers are constantly evolving and in a process of becoming, shifting with transitions to new identities and responsibilities. Darren illustrated how having a son of his own, and his awareness of the bond that exists between himself and Charlie, has contributed to the feelings of loss he has towards his own father, from whom he has been estranged since shortly after Charlie's birth. While he has tried to reconcile with his father, it is the projective memory – both anticipating his father's death without having achieved a reconciliation, as well imagining a relationship with an adult Charlie – that moves Darren, causing his voice to audibly break, when asked:

A: Do you miss your dad?

D: Yeh, very (...) so, I've not especially, I've never had a particularly demonstrative relationship and not really very close, but just that sort of stuff that you sit back and (.) so I can remember doing stuff with him, I would hate to think that I'd reach that point with Charlie. It's probably gonna reach a point when he passes and we won't have buried the hatchet and that's gonna be horrible.

While some might experience the kind of relationship that Darren reported having previously had with his father as being somehow unsatisfactory – and it certainly does not appear to be mirrored in his relationship with Carmen, Charlie and Billie – he is nonetheless *his* dad, and Darren misses him in spite of his father's on-going rejection of him.

## Conclusion

Using ethnographic observation and narrative interviews with three case-study fathers and their multiple relationships, this paper has demonstrated how the landscape of contemporary fathering practices in Britain is far more complex than is allowed for within conventional definitions of fatherhood as a social construction which focuses narrowly on men's role as breadwinner within monolithic constructions of the nuclear family. While the conventional 'breadwinner' role may be experienced by many men as a constraint to engaging with more 'involved' and egalitarian parenting practices, the participants in this small-scale, in-depth pilot study demonstrate the extent to which some men confound those stereotypes which construct fathers as secondary parents vis-à-vis mothers, particularly in the context of direct caregiving. Analysis of their narrative accounts of fatherhood and direct observation of their fathering practices by Darren, Dave and Roger illustrate the complex geographies of responsibility and care which characterise contemporary fathering. In each case, and not uncommonly, these practices take place across a range of geographic spaces and domestic circumstances. Roger has twice experienced single fatherhood: once as a widower, and currently as a result of family breakdown, each situation presenting specific

emotional challenges. For Dave, the transition to fatherhood, ultimately aided by IVF, was emotionally fraught. Now a single father, he shares residency of his children with their mother and step-father while simultaneously fulfilling the role of social father to his non-cohabiting partner's child. While Darren is the only father to currently find himself in a nuclear family arrangement, he has previously been a single father, co-parenting his now adult daughter across two different households. Darren faces the additional challenge of being a White man fathering mixed race children.

Our findings support Aitken's (2005) observation that the 'idea' of fatherhood as a socially constructed institution does not accord well with the complex 'facts' of fathering as a daily emotional practice, a practice which comes under closer scrutiny and increased pressure in moments of rupture and transition, for example following separation or bereavement, or following changes in employment circumstances, where each of the case studies shows that emotional labour is not the exclusive preserve of mothers.

The data reported here also make visible the relationality of fathering practices, which are on the one hand positioned against participants' reports of their (former) partners' parenting practices, but also in relation to the in-the-moment requirements warranted by their children's actions and emotional states, sometimes requiring discipline, at others patience, support, love and care. Contemporary fathering narratives and practices are also shaped by the men's intergenerational experience of having been fathered themselves, whether they model their practices on their own fathers or seek to distance themselves from those experiences. With diverse fathering 'careers' encompassing adult children, grandchildren and step-children, these men's accounts attest to the observation that a father is always a father regardless of his age (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006); it is the character of that fathering that shifts with children's progression through the life-course. In this sense, fathering constitutes a process of endless becoming (Aitken, 2009). Importantly, Dave and Roger's fathering practices are also positioned in relation to – and against – those of their late fathers, revealing the significance of biographical and generational experiences of being fathered. Roger attributes his own fathering practices to those of his father, and his father before him. However, rather than revisiting the paternal family script of brutality and humiliation upon his own children, Roger makes a conscious decision to be 'almost exactly the opposite', thus confounding rhetoric which points towards the causal relationship between bad or abusive fathering and the previous experience of such abuse on the part of the abuser. While their fathers were perhaps more benign figures in their own histories, Darren and Dave also appear to want to enact the father–son relationship differently with their own sons, be this in the present, or in an imagined future. In each case, a strong contrast can be seen between the socially constructed model of father as 'provider' in a material sense, and the dynamic practices of fathering as emotional labour. These issues are also highlighted at moments of transition following the rupture of contemporary family life by the breakdown of relationships or the experience of bereavement. The evidence reported here from pilot research in the UK supports Aitken's (2009) evidence of the awkward spaces of fathering in the US, underlining the diversity of fathering practices, the complex emotional geographies of lone fathering, and the relationality of fathering both in terms of men's relationships with their female partners (as fathers and mothers) and intergenerationally (between the research participants and their own fathers).

## Notes

1. For example, the Office of National Statistics does not release data on armed service personnel and data are sketchy on those in the off-shore oil industry and others who simply work away from home during the week.
2. This project was funded through the University of Sheffield Faculty of Social Science.
3. For further discussion of the methodological, epistemological and ethical issues raised in this kind of research, see Martens (2012) and Muir and Mason (2012).
4. All of the men's dependent children took part in the study. Two of their partners took part peripherally. Participants were recruited through the first author's existing social networks.
5. This aspect of the study has been reported via Meah (2014) and Meah and Jackson (2014).
6. The original intention was to recruit men at different points in the life-course and with a greater diversity of age and experience. However, although a pilot study, the fieldwork with these three men accumulated 79 GB of raw data, almost 20% of which was collected by the participants themselves. This amounted to 25 hours of recorded audio and video material and 300+ photographs and still images taken from video footage. Given the volume of data generated, it was decided not to pursue fieldwork with other men who had shown an interest in taking part in this pilot research.
7. The lack of parity in how the two sets of children were treated was something that Harvey spontaneously brought up himself.

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