

**“I’m not Just a Babysitter”: Masculinity and Men’s Experiences of First-Time Fatherhood**

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# **"I'm not just a babysitter": Masculinity and men's experiences of first-time fatherhood**

## **Abstract**

A man's transition into the role of a father is a rewarding yet challenging experience for many men. This study explores how men navigate contradictory roles of fatherhood and the impact this has on their identity. Fifteen first-time fathers were interviewed, and their responses were analysed using thematic and discourse analysis tools. Findings revealed that fathers were found to both adhere to and challenge masculine ideals of fatherhood. Men described both traditional and non-traditional roles in their becoming a father, being a father, and navigating fatherhood and manhood. The continuation and contestation of masculine discourses in the experiences of fatherhood was found to influence their involvement with raising children and employment, as well as their relationships. Overall, these findings highlight the uncertainty that shapes modern fathers' roles and demonstrates how fathers move between both traditional and new fatherhood roles.

## **Keywords**

Fatherhood; Hegemonic masculinity; Interpretive phenomenology; Gender discourses

## **Introduction**

The transition to fatherhood is identified as a significant and challenging period for men (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2015; Goodman 2005). For many men, it is one filled with experiences of happiness, love, and excitement (Iwata 2014). Yet, it is also a period of great angst, frustration, and helplessness, as fathers struggle to adapt to the expectations and practices of fatherhood (Barclay and Lupton 1999; Chin, Daiches, and Hall 2011; Genesoni and Tallandini 2009). Becoming a father is a multifaceted process involving both emotional and lifestyle adjustments (Crespi and Ruspini 2015). Within heterosexual couples, continued focus on mother and child during the pre- and postpartum period, fathers risk feeling marginalised with limited support and understanding of their needs and concerns

as they navigate their new role (Bartlett 2004; Draper 2003; Eerola and Mykkänen 2015; McVeigh, Baafi, and Williamson 2002). Recently, there has been a notable increase in scholarship exploring the transition to fatherhood. This work shows that the transition affects how men think and feel about themselves and their experiences of anxiety and uncertainty (Kowlessar, Fox, and Wittkowski 2015). It highlights the difficulties experienced by fathers during the transition to parenthood, such as challenges relating to work-life balance and feeling a loss of control, are the result of personal and societal pressures (Machin 2015). The current study builds on the growing body of scholarship by addressing how discourses of fatherhood and masculinity shapes men's experiences of first-time fatherhood in Australia. In particular, it focuses on how men navigate contradictory roles of fatherhood and the impact this has on their identity, as fathers and men.

## **Literature Review**

### **Hegemonic masculinity constructing fatherhood**

Expectations surrounding fatherhood in Australia encompass powerful discourses affecting how men transition into new father roles. Discourse—defined as the “language which constructs our social life” (Crowe 2005; Dew 2007; Holloway and Wheeler 2010; Liamputtong 2013)—informs our practices and structures social life (Eakin 2005).

Discourses influence how first-time fathers transition into their new role, with men having to conform to differing ideas and expectations (Barclay and Lupton 1999).

The contemporary role of a father consists of contradictory discourses requiring men to simultaneously be the provider and protector for the family, supporter for mother and child, playmate, and nurturer, all the while maintaining their own sense of self. Conflicts exist between being “masculine” and being a “nurturing father” (Crespi and Ruspini 2015).

Contemporary requirements bring to the surface the contradictory expectations of hegemonic

masculinity that men negotiate to feel like a “good father” and a “real man” (Crespi and Ruspini 2015, p. 355).

Hegemonic masculinity is the socially dominant or ideal form of masculinity which legitimates the dominance of men and the subordination of women and other forms of masculinity (Coles 2009; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Courtenay 2000). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) identify hegemonic masculinity as the “patterns of practice” (p. 832) which legitimate the notion that men are more powerful than women. Connell (1987) reveals that hegemonic masculinity is the public display of what it is to be a man. While not defined by specific characteristics, many scholars suggest that configurations of masculinity defined by aggressive and dominant behaviour, invulnerability, strength, and independence are hegemonic; these characteristics also involve the rejection of femininity (Coles 2009; Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Courtenay 2000). This rejection of “feminine” characteristics highlights the difficulties for men embracing fatherhood, an identity requiring nurturance and care (Eerola and Mykkänen 2015; Henwood and Procter 2003).

### **Conflicting roles of fatherhood**

When men become fathers, scholarship shows that hegemonic masculinity creates conditions whereby traditional gendered parenting roles are encouraged. For example, Premberg et al. (2008) argues that hegemonic masculinity “obstructs and postpones” (p. 61) the move toward equal parenting roles. Similarly, Magaraggia (2012) states that hegemonic masculinity provides legitimate excuses for men to avoid the new fatherhood role. Höfner, et al. (2011) argue, however, that hegemonic masculinity also creates uncertainty of identity for fathers as they are left to navigate between society’s contradictory encouragement of both *traditional* fatherhood and *new* fatherhood.

Contemporary (or new) fatherhood has been found to undermine hegemonic masculinity, with changing attitudes towards a father's involvement in raising children (Donaldson 1993). For instance, Barclay and Lupton (1999) found that fathers accepted the "new fatherhood" role, but still practiced the more traditional "provider" role (see also Gregory and Milner 2011). That is, despite an *expectational* shift toward gender egalitarianism among contemporary fathers, there seems to be limited shift in the *practices* of the new, egalitarian identity for fathers (Baxter, Buchler, Perales, and Western 2015; Genesoni and Tallandini 2009; Gregory and Milner 2011).

The social and cultural constraints identified regarding fatherhood, indicate there are gender roles at play shaping fathers' involvement (Cook et al. 2005). While the new father role allows fathers to be more "mother-like," social and cultural pressures discourage fathers from being involved in child-raising activities and encourage men to enact their identity as masculine subjects through financial providership (e.g., Duvander 2016; Eerola and Mykkänen 2015; Goodman 2005; Nyström and Öhrling 2004; Russell 1983).

The contemporary move away from the breadwinner role creates conflict as there is still opposition from fathers who are not readily accepting of co-parenting or primary caregiver roles (Barclay and Lupton 1999; Cabrera et al. 2000). This disruption of the provider role is viewed as detrimental to a man's identity (Doucet and Lee 2014). And recent studies have found fathers are still expected to be financial providers (Craig and Mullan 2014; Doucet and Lee 2014; Gray 2013). Indeed, an Australian study revealed that traditional fatherhood practices were often promoted by mothers, despite some fathers shifting to more egalitarian views (Buchler, Perales, and Baxter 2017; Doucet and Lee 2014). This push towards gendered parenting roles may result from institutional ideologies supporting "traditional" divisions of labour (Doucet and Lee 2014; Suwada 2015). Participants in Machin's (2015) study expressed that society paid lip service to involved fatherhood with no

genuine investment into implementing support systems or policies that allow fathers to be equally involved in raising children. While society claims to support involved fathering, men's everyday experiences reflect the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculine ideals at odds with this support.

### **Balancing work and life**

Scholarship from Western countries has found that fathers struggle balancing roles, such as caregiver, helper, protector, and provider (e.g., McVeigh, Baafi, and Williamson 2002; Chin, Daiches, and Hall 2011; Goodman 2005; Sansiriphun et al. 2015). They also report struggle in navigating their commitment to spending time with their child, along with attending to their personal and work-related needs (Genesoni and Tallandini 2009; Shirani et al. 2012). Above all, men express difficulty negotiating their role as a father and their commitment to paid employment, with many fathers admitting to altering their leisure, partner, and domestic roles so that their worker role remains unchanged (Hamilton and De Jonge, 2010).

Men also report that paid employment interfered or prevented them from being active fathers (Børve and Bungum 2015; Goodman 2005; Iwata 2014). Some fathers report difficulty returning to work and achieving work-life balance (Chin, Hall, and Diaches 2011; Deave and Johnson 2008; Genesoni and Tallandini 2009). However, unlike new mothers, research shows that new fathers navigate this difficulty in balancing roles by taking the secondary parenting role, despite many desires to be more involved (Machin 2015). This results in fathers feeling physically and emotionally removed, as they forfeit involvement in the care of their child (Chin, Daiches, and Hall 2011; Fägerskiöld 2008; Shirani et al. 2012). Workplace culture is also instrumental in a father's ability to balance their roles, with employers perceiving fathers as "uncommitted" if they take paternity leave or assume a caregiver role (Hamilton and De Jonge 2010), and feeling marginalised when returning to

work (Chin, Daiches, and Hall 2011; Fägerskiöld 2008; Machin 2015; Shirani et al. 2012). The balancing of roles challenges fathers who wish to be more involved, because this is often in violation of work conditions and requirements (Børve and Bungum 2015).

Many fathers viewed their engagement in paid employment as positive, giving them a sense of belonging in the workplace and self-worth in supporting the family (Chin, Diaches, and Hall 2011; Hamilton and De Jonge 2010). Being a provider is viewed as integral to being a “good father” (Carlson et al. 2015; Eerola 2014; Hamilton and De Jonge 2010; Shirani et al. 2012). Contrary to this, Duvander’s (2016) study in Sweden revealed that fathers expressed both a continuity and change with traditional norms for employment. Men returned to full-time work but some sacrificed career progression, moved to more family friendly jobs or negotiated their work day to prioritise family over work. Similar to Duvander’s findings, Hodkinson and Brooks (2018) found that fathers in the UK either reduced or adjusted paid work to be involved in caregiving. This suggests a possible shift in attitudes and behaviours in some contexts towards men being involved fathers.

This research suggests that it is the contradictory discourses that define what it means to be a man and what it means to be a father that is at the core of this issue. Yet, while there is emerging research exploring the transition into fatherhood, there is still the need to understand how men navigate discourses surrounding masculinity *and* fatherhood.

### **Methodology**

To explore how men’s experiences of first-time fatherhood are shaped by discourses surrounding fatherhood and masculinity, we used an interpretive phenomenological approach. Through interpretive phenomenology, we can explore lived experiences and develop an understanding of socially constructed meanings (Carpenter 2013; Creswell et al. 2007; van Manen 2017). Engaging an interpretive phenomenology approach was considered appropriate as the framework aligned with the research aims and allowed for the participants

to reveal their own perspectives of fatherhood and how masculinity influences their experiences.

This study sought first-time fathers residing in Australia to explore how masculinity shapes men’s experiences of first-time fatherhood. To be eligible for this study, participants met the following criteria: man, over the age of 18 years (for ethical clearance); first-time fathers within the first 12 months of the birth of their first child; and English-speaking. The requirements for this study intended to gain perspective from first-time fathers and their experiences during the first year postpartum. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant as well as their respective infants and the mothers, if mentioned. The 15 participants in this study were from the South-East Queensland metropolitan area. All participants identified as heterosexual. **Table 1** includes demographic information for each of the participants.

Participants were contacted via purposive and snowball sampling methods, recruited by sending information through online fathers groups/dad clubs, handing out research pamphlets at local community child health clinics and hospital classes for new parents, and advertising through the university. Saturation was reached at the twelfth interview. Responses were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using thematic and discourse analysis.

**Table 1. Demographics of first-time father participants**

<b>Participant (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Employment Industry</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
Jonathan	24	Student	Unemployed	De facto
Zane	29	Trade services	Full time	Married
Willis	35	Stay-at-home father	Unemployed	Married
Dean	29	Information Technology	Full time	Married
Isaac	43	Construction	Full time	Married
Anthony	33	Tertiary Education	Full time	Married



Alex	41	Tertiary Education	Full time	Married
Keith	37	Emergency services	Full time	Married
Nathanael	31	Trade services	Full time	Married
Alan	34	Human Resources	Full time	De facto
Michael	24	Retail	Full time	De facto
Lewis	28	Tertiary Education	Full time	Married
Simon	35	Education	Full time	Married
Charles	27	Science	Full time	Married
Sander	38	Education	Full time	Married

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I conducted a thematic analysis to establish key themes, using a combination of Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays (2008) and Pitney and Parker’s (2009) frameworks. After themes were identified, we used Fairclough’s (2001, 2013) discourse analysis tool to analyse discourses surrounding masculinity and fatherhood by addressing three levels involved in understanding discursive events. The three-level analysis consisted of spoken or written language (text), the production and interpretation of text (discursive practice), and the context in which the interaction of text and the discursive practice take place (social practice) (Fairclough 2001, 2013; Liu and Guo 2016). This analytical approach was accompanied by three corresponding steps, which allowed for the researchers to provide a description of the text (identifying excerpts from the interview transcripts), followed by an interpretation of the relationship between the text and discursive practice (linking the text to ideals of masculinity, adhering to and not), and an explanation of the relationship between the discursive practice and the social practice (the researchers were able to use literature to explain the social practices of the first-time fathers) (Fairclough 2001, 2013; Liu and Guo 2016).

## Findings

Each of the fathers interviewed, while differing individually, revealed shared experiences of navigating the complexities surrounding what it means to be a man and what it means to be a father. They were asked questions about the transition to fatherhood, role models, work-life balance, what it means to be a “good father,” and what it means to “be a man.” The fathers, although sometimes unaware, found themselves adhering to or challenging masculine ideals of fatherhood. The following themes were identified which shape the experiences of first-time fathers when navigating fatherhood and manhood: expectations of self, partners and society; work-life balance; and being a provider versus a nurturer.

### *Expectations of self, partners, and society*

Becoming a new father was filled with strong feelings and concerns for the role of a father. Men viewed fatherhood as the most important role in a man’s life, a similar finding to Buchler et al. (2017). However, this important role for men was experienced with the tension of traditional versus contemporary expectations associated with fatherhood in Australia. Participants were conscious of the type of father they wanted to be, which was influenced by experiences with their own fathers, partner’s expectations, and societal expectations. When asked to identify “a good father,” the men shared both new and traditional qualities of fatherhood, such as being a provider, protector, career-driven, present, loving, caring but also strict, as well as being supportive. This demonstrates the tension between traditional or non-traditional fatherhood roles (Carlson, Kendall, and Edleson 2015; Crespi and Ruspini 2015). Alex illustrates this tension:

*I guess traditionally, you look at a father as being the one who goes and works, earns the money and provides... But I don't necessarily see that as my role because my wife earns more money than me anyway. But I see it as helping out and supporting my*

*wife... To be a good father is being someone who does all that. And helps out [with] the not so traditional things... Changing the nappies, and emptying the rubbish, and cleaning, and washing, and all that stuff.* (Alex, 41, married, full-time employed)

Despite a desire to be more involved, Alex shares that this was limited to the more traditional expectations of a father “helping out,” adhering to the hegemonic masculine discourse of fathers in supportive, but not primary, caregiving roles (Crespi and Ruspini 2015).

When participants were asked about father role models and their influence on their fathering style, most of the participants related back to their own experiences as a child and how their own fathers influenced their expectations of what it means to be a good father. Many were acutely aware of their own childhood experiences and wanted to parent differently than their own fathers or role models. This is similar to the findings of Goodman (2005) who found that fathers wanted to be more involved due to their own father adhering to the breadwinner model and being absent. Zane, described that his father was absent due to work commitments and felt strongly about not wanting to do the same:

*I had a really bad father. All of the things I think are [good] qualities are things that I didn't get - which is probably why I think they are important qualities... My dad worked shifts... so I never saw him... there's no way I'm going to do that.*

(Zane, 29, married, full-time self-employed)

Despite a professed desire to be more involved than his own father, however, Zane was still committed to working full-time. When asked if he would consider being more involved in parenting, he first said, “It would be amazing.” However, this was followed by claiming, “My immediate judgemental attitude is I would feel like if I took that role I would be defending a demasculating (*sic*) position.” Zane’s descriptions indicate an internal contestation between being an involved father and not disrupting the masculine identity of provider.

In addition to the contradictions of fathers' expectations of themselves, many expressed that partners' and societal expectations have either promoted or challenged traditional ideals of fatherhood and how this has influenced their own fathering style. Many expressed that their partners expected them to adhere to the role of the provider despite their desire to be involved fathers. One participant, Dean, described his desire to be the primary caregiver alongside discovering that his wife felt very strongly about her role as the primary caregiver. She still expected Dean to be "helping a lot," but also to be the "financial provider":

*[My wife] feels really strongly that this is her job... She expects that she is the primary caregiver and I will help out as I can... She definitely wasn't expecting me to do nothing - she always expected I'd be helping a lot... [She sees me as] the financial provider... [and I have] been doing the housework, cooking, shopping, and transport.*

(Dean, 29, married, full-time employed)

This left Dean feeling obligated to provide, as well as adopting more non-traditional roles.

Similar findings in Australian studies found that women's attitudes towards parenting prioritised mothers in the traditional sense as the primary caregiver, despite some fathers having more egalitarian views to fatherhood (Baxter et al. 2015; Buchler et al. 2017).

Simultaneously, it also became evident when Dean continued that he had also always expected to work full time, expressing, "I've always sort of assumed that I'll do the full-time work," ensuring he "always [has] a job." This is in line with the findings of Carlson et al. (2015), who found fathers were concerned about maintaining their role as a provider through ensuring that they always had a job to care for their new family.

Additionally, participants were also aware that they had differing expectations compared to societal expectation of fathers to be providers. For instance, Charles, described that he had differing views in regard to societal expectations:

*Society expects men to be breadwinners and to be the person who goes to work and brings home the money... I don't think that society has really played a role on the way that I view what being a man is, since I obviously don't think the same way.*

(Charles, 27, married, full-time employed)

Though when asked if he has considered being the primary carer, Charles responded:

*I would definitely relish the opportunity to spend a week or two at home with [my baby]. But, I think full-time it wouldn't work for me because, (laughs) I think being stuck at home would be something that would drive me crazy. For that reason, I think I'd prefer to be working still.*

Despite a shift in the attitudes and expectations of fathers, these findings support the notion that we are still witnessing challenges with the ways hegemonic masculine ideals impact men's expectations, decisions and subsequent behaviours around their involvement in fatherhood. This is evident in the men's descriptions, as they confessed to both contesting traditional fatherhood roles while simultaneously being constrained by them. Many felt that partners expected them to provide financially and claimed this was also encouraged by society. This may suggest that societal expectations and continued support of traditional roles is one reason we still see fathers engaging in "traditional" fatherhood practices (Buchler et al. 2017). These challenges fathers described in their experiences were also evident when participants were asked about their work-life balance. The following theme builds upon the above expectations and presents the fathers' experiences of first-time fatherhood and the complexities they faced navigating through work-life balance in their new role.

### ***Work-life balance issues***

Participants described being a new father as a positive and joyful experience, but also reported challenges. Some revealed they felt strain on their ability to balance work and life, such as spending time with partners and friends, as well as participating in sport and hobbies.

Many revealed that their work-life balance changed after the birth of their new baby. And all reported taking some form of parental leave, ranging from a couple of days to a few months. Fathers expressed that they enjoyed their time at home with their new baby and their partner, and would prefer more paid parental leave. Some fathers also reported wanting to reduce or adjust paid work arrangements to commit to caregiving. Though, similar to the findings of Hodkinson and Brooks (2018), though they were invested in caregiving, they also felt restricted by gendered institutional and societal pressures.

Many of the fathers expressed that social and political institutions were not consistent with access to *paternity* leave or arrangements for them to be more involved in raising children, which left them feeling obligated to adhere to the traditional provider role (Baxter et al. 2015; Hamilton and De Jonge 2010). One participant, Anthony, the only father of twins, was critical of his workplace parental leave policy:

*[In my workplace] women get twelve weeks' maternity leave and then fourteen weeks' primary carers leave. Whereas, men only get fourteen weeks' primary carers leave. So, really, you could think that that's a sexist policy, because who says that a man can't look after children. They can do everything that a woman can, apart from breastfeed. We've got bottles. My wife pumps, with a breast pump... If it was the other way around, there would be such a stink. It would be such a big deal.*

(Anthony, 33, married, full-time employment)

Anthony's experience of feeling disregarded as a father is similar to the findings of Barclay and Lupton (1999) and Baxter et al. (2015), where men felt that involved fatherhood is not institutionally supported in Australia (Barclay and Lupton 1999; Baxter et al. 2015). This

results in fathers feeling excluded from policies, which limits their involvement at home and downgrades fathers to the role of “helper” (Machin 2015; St John et al. 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, despite Anthony’s concern at the lack of policy supporting fathers to be more involved, he expressed that his priorities regarding work and raising a child had changed, as he claimed that he prioritises his children over work. As with others, however, Anthony followed this with the comment “That doesn’t mean I won’t still stay in my [work] role.” Anthony also criticised his work-life balance and expressed that his ability to balance personal time was hindered by his new role as a father:

*I feel like I’ve gotta ask my wife’s permission to do everything. If I wanna go to the gym, it’s like “can I go to the gym?”, and she is like “there’s two babies to look after, no!”. So, I would go to the gym, before this, four or five days a week. I think I’ve been seven times since they’ve been home. In four weeks. Also, not having as much interaction with my friends as I used to. Because I think she gets everything from the babies that she needs as far as that... I just think that females are biologically ingrained to say that “I need to be with those babies because I’ve gotta feed them”... Whereas, I wanna go to the gym with one of my mates, or go to the movies. But I can’t at the moment because there is so much need with the babies.*

From Anthony’s statements, it is apparent that hegemonic masculine ideals influence his decisions surrounding parenting. Despite a strong desire to be involved in caring for his children, he also does not want to compromise his personal life. Anthony claims that his wife has everything she needs with the babies, because she is a mother, what more could she need? Anthony’s belief that women are programmed “biologically” to find fulfilment from

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<sup>1</sup> The Australian Government provides two forms of parental leave to Australian men: Paid Parental Leave, in which fathers must be the primary caregiver and meet eligibility criteria to receive up to 18 weeks parental leave pay at the national minimum wage; Dad and Partner Pay, in which fathers can receive two weeks of paid leave at the national minimum wage, however they must meet certain work and income tests (Paid Parental Leave Act 2010, 2020, Cth).

motherhood reinforces hegemonic gendered parental roles, as discussed by Hodkinson and Brooks (2018). Anthony adds further to this by stating that he is not considering cutting his work hours so he can still go to the gym and meet his friends; it is time with the family that he feels he can compromise so that he can still have a personal life.

One participant, Alan, criticised his work-life balance for different reasons, explaining that he felt like a bad father because his work-life balance has not changed significantly despite wanting to be more involved:

*The baby doesn't really affect me so much, because I'm not here. It hasn't affected my life by having the baby because my partner and mother-in-law take up the slack for when I'm not here. But when I say it out loud it just makes me feel like a bit of a shit dad... I leave for work at 7am, I've only got an hour or so to get myself ready, and then I don't get home till 6pm. And then if I'm out the door to go to the gym, then I don't really see him much during the week. So, I don't really have to juggle the work-life, I don't have to juggle it that much. (Alan, 34, de facto, full-time employed)*

In spite of Alan feeling guilty about not being more involved with his child, he went on to justify his decision by stating, “work is quite easy compared to being a full-time parent”.

Despite feeling that work detracts from family life, Alan was not willing to compromise work or personal time to be more available at home. This is similar to Magaraggia's (2012) findings that hegemonic masculine expectations allow men to shy away from involved parenting roles.

Despite men in this study expressing the desire for more time at home with their family, contesting the distinctions between fathers and mothers in the availability and access to parental leave, men also expressed difficulty in negotiating their role as a father alongside their commitment to paid employment. Many admitted changes in leisure activities, partner time, and domestic roles, while their worker role remained unchanged (Hamilton and De



Jonge 2010). These experiences reveal the decisions fathers must navigate around involvement in raising children and employment, highlighting the complexities they encounter in the fatherhood role. The following theme presents how first-time fathers navigate the contradictory expectations of fatherhood and manhood.

### ***Provider versus nurturer***

Many of the fathers confessed a tension between “being a man” and “being a father.” Participants identified both contemporary qualities and traditional ideals of what it means to be a man and a father. Throughout the interviews, many expressed that they would like to take on the stay-at-home father role. However, this decision was dependent on the financial benefits of the father being the primary caregiver and whether their career progression would allow it.

It became evident that men’s decisions surrounding being the primary caregiver were still influenced by the model of fathers as provider. The only stay-at-home father in the study, Willis, expressed that he did not associate with societal expectations of what it means to be a man, stating “*there is this idea that a man is supposed to be the breadwinner, but I couldn’t care less.*” When asked about his role as a stay-at-home dad, however, he also confessed that this role was “not 100% what I would like to do” and that he does not see his role “as work.” When asked if he identified as a stay-at-home father he replied “yes”, but also claimed that when asked about his employment status by others he felt inclined to identify as “unemployed.”

Isaac, had a similar view to Willis in regards to stay-at-home fathers despite “embracing” his work hours being reduced to be “more family involved.”

*One of the immediate thoughts I had was that I would feel emasculated [being a stay-at-home father]. And that’s not something I wanted to do (laughs). And it’s probably*

*because society would look at it, in my opinion, they would've been like, "oh, he's just a stay-at-home dad".* (Isaac, 43, married, full-time self-employed)

Both Willis and Isaac's attitudes towards new fatherhood practices reveal a conflict between the provider and nurturer role, supported by scholarship documenting men navigating the contradictory demands of both "traditional" and "new" fatherhood (Höfner et al. 2011; Magaraggia 2012; Premberg et al. 2008).

For the fathers with more involved roles, their involvement in caretaking responsibilities was often overlooked despite contemporary ideals encouraging them to be more nurturing. Some fathers felt disregarded in their role as a father and that they were viewed by others as "you're a dad, you're just a babysitter", as described by Lewis. He continued:

*I would get praised for doing things, but if I was a woman I wouldn't get praised.*

*Like, "oh, he changes nappies? That's so good!" ... It's so frustrating because what do I say to that? "No worries, what? should I just leave her sitting in poop?" ...*

*I'm not just a babysitter and I do know stuff about my [baby] ... All that stuff normally the mum takes care of.* (Lewis, 28, married, full-time employed)

Like Lewis, many fathers did not want to identify with only being a helper or supporter, they wanted to be recognised as an equal parent (i.e., Fägerskiöld 2008). Despite attempts to contest the traditional norms, however, many felt constrained by traditional definitions of fatherhood that situated them as "just a babysitter." This was highlighted by Lewis with his experience attending a mothers' group, which he described as being seen as a token gesture because his role as a father was not viewed past the role of babysitter. This left Lewis feeling the same as fathers reported in Iwata's (2014) study: not fully recognised as co-parents questioning whether they were adequate.

This feeling of wanting to be viewed as more than a helper or babysitter was also emphasised by Jonathan's experience when he went to the bank with his partner and baby. It was assumed by the bank teller that Jonathan (24, de facto, unemployed/student) was not involved in the care of his child and his partner was the primary caregiver with the bank teller only asking the mother if she was tired. Other work has also found that in Australia, motherhood is often prioritised in similar ways (Baxter et al. 2015).

In addition to Jonathan's desire to be considered more than just a secondary parent, when asked if he identified as being a stay-at-home dad, he described a conflicting attitude:

*If someone asked me what do, I do, I'd say I'm a full-time student, umm... I don't know, maybe there is a bit of feeling that I can't say I'm a stay-at-home dad because it is viewed as a negative. Like, "oh, I guess you aren't doing anything". So, I guess I would say something about studying just to reinforce that I am doing something.*

Jonathan also described being compelled to act differently with their child in the presence of other men, stating:

*With my son, I'm pretty soft... I'll give him cuddles and kisses all the time. I guess, maybe there would be a conflict socially if I was like that in front of different people... I'd definitely feel (makes gesture of hesitation) ... that I'll want to give him a cuddle and a kiss because he is doing something cute, but I don't.*

Although some were fulfilling roles of "stay-at-home dad" or "nurturing father," they were not comfortable with expressing this publicly. It was evident that while some men's roles and perceptions of fatherhood were indeed changing, they still felt constrained by hegemonic masculine ideals. This meant that the men were having to move back and forth between the expectations of masculinity and involved fatherhood. This conflict described by Jonathan, and many of the other participants, is similar to the findings of Barclay and Lupton's (1999) seminal study on fatherhood where the fathers found themselves navigating between the

caring, nurturing role of new fatherhood, and the traditional norms of fatherhood which support the masculine identity (see also Henwood and Procter 2003). A father's level of involvement was found to be dependent on the expectations of their partner, society, and notably, their experiences with their own father during childhood (Höfner et al. 2011).

This conflict between being a man and being a father was also highlighted by Zane, who expresses how difficult it is to be a man and a father:

*I can actually empathise with men that run away now, 'cause I can see how if you have that huge conflict of, I'm just being a strong man that doesn't have feelings, you have a baby that you really love but you don't know how to deal with that. You don't know how to deal with your own feelings, you don't know how to deal with what your role should be in a family because there is no clear role for a man as a father.*

The rich descriptions of the participants experiences revealed the conflicts fathers face arising from the differing expectations in their role as a man and as a father. This uncertainty surrounding the role of a father may be due to the conflicting models of “new” and “traditional” fatherhood that men navigate (Suwada 2015). This study found that often Australian fathers try to contest “traditional” fatherhood by being more involved. Despite this desire to enact contemporary *ideals* of fatherhood, however, the men found themselves in gendered limbo, contesting and acquiescing traditional fatherhood at the same time.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings from men in this cohort indicate that masculine discourses surrounding what it means to “be a man” and what it means to “be a father” were at the core of men's experiences of first-time fatherhood. The experiences of the fathers in this study revealed a notable shift in behaviours and attitudes towards involved fatherhood practices. This finding is consistent with previous research such as Scambor et al. (2014) who suggest that in the past few decades men have slowly shifted from clear breadwinner roles, demonstrating an

increasing desire to contribute to family life and childcare. Simultaneously, however, hegemonic discourses of masculinity were still present in men's decisions surrounding fatherhood producing conflict between contrasting expectations.

It was apparent that despite contemporary ideals encouraging fathers to be caring and nurturing, this has not paved a simple path to involved parenting for new fathers. While it is encouraging to note a contemporary shift in expectations of fathers in this cohort, hegemonic notions of "traditional masculinity" still shape these men's experiences of manhood and fatherhood, suggesting that there remains a lot of grey area between the extremes of traditional and involved fatherhood. Importantly, the current research has identified the limiting space occupied by fathers between traditional and involved fatherhood, highlighting the need to move beyond dichotomous understandings of men's fatherhood experiences. It is important to note that the small cohort of heterosexual, English-speaking men in this study has shaped the findings, and therefore should be interpreted in light of the context of this demographic.

### ***Moving beyond dichotomies***

The fatherhood literature tends to focus on the dichotomy of traditional fatherhood and involved fatherhood, however, it became evident through the experiences of the fathers in this study that it is not as simple as identifying with new or traditional fatherhood roles. The role strain experienced by men often resulted in stress and confusion surrounding the desire to be a good father (Nyström and Öhrling 2004; Sansiriphun et al. 2015). This encourages the idea that fatherhood should not be constrained to simple binaries, echoing Habib (2012) who argues that there is no singular status for a father to identify with as a man.

Unlike previous research identifying differing roles for fathers, such as Eerola and Mykkänen (2015) and Höfner, Schadler, and Richter (2011), this study found it is not as simple as reducing fatherhood to categories. The researchers and the men in this study found

it difficult to categorise which role the fathers fell into, traditional or involved. Fathers were found to move between the roles of traditional and non-traditional fatherhood, indicating that categorising fatherhood into roles is not as simple as previously discussed. This fluidity between the roles of traditional and non-traditional fatherhood resulted in men feeling that there is no clear role for men as fathers anymore. Therefore, this research suggests that to understand fatherhood we must move beyond the dichotomy of traditional and non-traditional fatherhood which constrains men leaving them questioning their identity as fathers. Hanlon's (2012) phrase, "the costs of masculinity," is appropriate here to describe the tension men experience when they cannot live up to hegemonic ideals which serves to limit them in their roles and contribute to adverse feelings of angst, frustration, and helplessness. Indeed, evidence suggests that enabling caring roles among men will reduce the harmful costs of masculinity and therefore lead to men's increased physical and psychological health (Elliott, 2016).

The term "caring masculinities" has been used by Elliott (2016) to describe attributes of caring and nurturing among men, including values such as "positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality [which] have been traditionally, though not accurately, associated solely with women" (p. 252). The caring masculinities framework incorporates these values into masculine identities. While it is recognised in this study and others (e.g. Gartner et al., 2007 cited in Elliott, 2016) that caring masculinities already exist in various forms, contexts need to be created for them to be fostered and accepted. It is therefore fitting that building on Elliott's (2016) work in caring masculinities that the term "caring fatherhood" be proposed for utility in masculinities research specifically related to fatherhood.

A research and policy agenda in caring fatherhood would seek to not only value the caring practices of fathers but extend to the broader political and social context to enable the

structural change required to make men's caring a viable option in their everyday lives. As the current study has demonstrated along with others, men's positive attitudes towards caring fatherhood are already evident. Future research and policy action advocating for caring fatherhood should focus on formal and legal regulations as they provide a clear sense of entitlement (Scambor et al., 2014) for fathers. Caring fatherhood proposes that new forms of masculinity need to be recognised (Doucet and Lee 2014; Johansson 2011) which allow men to prioritise partner and baby whilst negotiating work-life balance.

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