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*Sociology* published online 12 December 2013

DOI: 10.1177/0038038513511872

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# 'I've Learnt What a Dad Should Do': The Interaction of Masculine and Fathering Identities among Men Who Attended a 'Dads Only' Parenting Programme

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## Abstract

This article is based on qualitative research with men who voluntarily attended a 'dads only' parenting programme. The article explores men's motivations to attend and demonstrates some of the challenges relating to masculine identity that fathers face when seeking support regarding their children. It also highlights how aspects of masculinity may shape men's limited knowledge concerning the needs of their children and their capabilities as 'involved' fathers. The article then explores how men made sense of their changing thoughts and practices regarding fathering and fatherhood within the context of their conceptualisations of masculinity. Whilst men appeared to embrace parenting qualities more commonly associated with women they did not completely distance themselves from traditional fathering templates. Moreover, although they gained a sense of mastery over childcare, the ways in which men care for their children is inevitably context dependent and some demonstrations of involved fathering may clash with certain masculine ideals.

## Keywords

fathers and fatherhood, masculinities, parenting programmes

## Introduction

In the UK, fathers and fatherhood have attracted considerable interest among researchers, practitioners and policy makers (e.g. DCSF, 2010; Gilligan et al., 2012; Miller,

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2011). A significant amount of this work has focused on fathers' increased involvement in the care of their children and apparent changes in fathering practice that incorporate more attentive and nurturing characteristics (Lewis and Lamb, 2007). However, primary distinctions between father/provider and mother/carer remain a feature of this territory that often structure the gender-differentiated experiences of men and women as parents (Doucet, 2006). Thus, even though the contemporary milieu concerning fatherhood appears to encourage men to take on more caring responsibilities, men may be simultaneously impeded from participating in the care of their children by dominant forms of gender relations.

The ways in which fathers *as men* negotiate this terrain has become a feature of recent research (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Plantin et al., 2003; Williams, 2009). Much of this work has been influenced by the study of men and masculinities that has contested the notion of 'masculinity' as an essentially fixed or unitary concept (e.g. Whitehead, 2002). Instead, theorists have started to conceptualise 'masculinities' as more plural and variable, defined in terms of ideologies and associated practices that are also influenced by other aspects of identity and wider social structures (Coles, 2009). Central to this shift in understanding is Connell's (1995) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', which facilitates an understanding of masculine identities as both fluid and hierarchical; i.e. it is concerned with the intersection of gender and other social divisions, such as social class and ethnicity. In this way, hegemonic masculinity can account for men's dominance both over women and also over less powerful groups of men. Certain configurations of practice gain dominance at the expense of other less powerful forms that become subordinated to and/or marginalised from hegemonic forms. Although it is impossible for all men to meet hegemonic ideals, men grow up in a culture that encourages hegemonic characteristics such as stoicism, emotional independence and the denial of weakness. Men also seek to emulate hegemonic forms of masculinity that are equated with being successful, capable and in control. All of these underpin deeply ingrained assumptions about men's secondary role as caregivers (Williams, 2009).

Whilst Connell's theoretical framework has informed numerous empirical researchers across a wide range of academic disciplines, it has also been subject to much critical analysis. Demetriou (2001), for example, questioned the vagueness surrounding the day-to-day processes associated with the maintenance of 'internal' hegemony: how men maintain dominance over other men. In response, the concept was reformulated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and revisited more recently by Messerschmidt (2012). One outcome has been the greater emphasis given to the agency of subordinated or marginalised groups to challenge aspects of hegemonic masculinity. This can occur at three different levels: local (face-to-face interactions), regional (society wide) and global (transnational arenas). Furthermore, it is also now recognised that dominant masculine identities exist within subordinated or marginalised positions: that is, 'it is possible to be subordinated by hegemonic masculinity yet still draw on dominant masculinities and assume a dominant position in relation to other men' (Coles, 2009: 33). Among working-class men, for example, dominant masculinity may be exemplified by physical strength and emotional detachment (Dolan, 2011). Previous research by the author (Dolan and Coe, 2011), which examined fathers' experiences of childbirth, also demonstrated how men can be marginalised within certain settings, but draw on identifiable markers of

masculine practice, such as stoicism and self-reliance, as a means of maintaining masculine identities.

Current understanding of the interconnections between masculine and fathering identities has then expanded (see also Dermott, 2006; Henwood and Procter, 2003). However, little research has focused on those men who seek support in their role as fathers. The lack of research is somewhat surprising given the range of policy documents (e.g. DCSF, 2010; DfES, 2007) that have specifically targeted fathers as a means of enhancing children's lives (Page et al., 2008). The paucity of research is likely to reflect the difficulties faced by those who work with families when attempting to encourage fathers to participate in support programmes (Gilligan et al., 2012). Thus, to date, research that explores men's experiences of parenting programmes is rare and has tended to focus on men who are 'compelled' to attend (e.g. via court order) rather than men who choose to attend (Bayley, 2009).

This article is based on qualitative research undertaken with a group of predominantly working-class men who voluntarily attended a 'dads only' parenting programme. This programme aimed to provide men with greater understanding of their children's behaviour within the context of age and stage of development, and promoted the growth of reflective and sensitive parenting (Douglas and Rheeston, 2009). The article contributes to our understanding regarding fatherhood by exploring the interaction of masculine and fathering identities in relation to three aspects of these men's experiences: 1) the motivations and challenges to men's participation in the parenting programme; 2) men's perceived lack of knowledge as fathers; and 3) the ways in which men's thoughts and practices regarding fathering and fatherhood changed as a consequence of attending the programme. In categorising these men as working class, the study draws on Bourdieu's understanding of class as 'habitus', which refers to shared lifestyles, expectations and access to resources (Coles, 2009). The study also draws on Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity to signal a dominant notion of working-class masculinity; that is, situated masculine ideals within a specific class-related habitus. This can be viewed as the template by which these working-class men constructed masculine identities, which were interwoven with their identities as fathers.

## Study Design

The analysis presented in this article arose from a qualitative study conducted with men who voluntarily attended a 'dads only' parenting programme. The choice of in-depth semi-structured interviews reflects philosophical assumptions, both ontological and epistemological, regarding individuals and the contextual conditions that shape and embed their perspectives and experiences (Archer, 2003). This study therefore represents a commitment to the in-depth investigation of men's subjective and experiential constructions of masculine and fathering identities in light of their attendance at a parenting programme.

The 'dads only' parenting programmes were open to all fathers in a relatively deprived town on the outskirts of a large city in the West Midlands, UK, which may account for the high number of working-class men who accessed these programmes. Men self-referred to one of the programmes by making contact with those facilitating the

programmes (Health Visitors and Children Centre staff). The majority of men were made aware of the programmes via their wives or partners, who saw programme advertisements in their local Children's Centre. The relatively small number of programmes (five) together with difficulties in recruiting men to these programmes and the relatively high numbers of men who dropped out during the programmes reduced the numbers of potential participants eligible to take part in this study.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained via the standard university Faculty Research Committee. All men who attended one of five 'dads only' parenting programmes were eligible to participate in the study. Participants were recruited to the study in one of two ways. Posters highlighting the aims of the study and who was eligible to take part were displayed in the setting in which the parenting programmes took place. The posters contained the contact details of the researcher and potential participants were encouraged to contact the researcher directly in order to discuss their participation. The practitioners facilitating the programmes also made men aware of the study through specifically designed information sheets which explained the study. The details of men who expressed an interest in participating were recorded by the practitioners and passed to the researcher. The researcher then contacted the potential recruits by telephone in order to further explain the study and what participation involved. In addition to receiving an information sheet, each participant also signed a consent form prior to the interview taking place.

Eleven men from across the five 'dads only' parenting programmes were recruited to the study. These men ranged in age from 19 to 46 years. All men self-reported their ethnic category as 'White English' and all had children they had fathered. Their children ranged in age from 11 months to 10 years old. Three men did not live with their children but spent time with them during the week and/or at the weekend. The majority of the men were from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Three were currently out of paid employment while others were in typical working-class employment, such as sheet metal and building work. There was no evidence to suggest that the men's motivation to attend the programme had developed in response to their particular familial circumstances or employment status. All of the men were interviewed by the researcher with each interview lasting for approximately one-and-a-half hours. Interviews were carried out at a time and place of the men's choosing with the majority taking place in the men's own homes or in other venues, such as the workplace or Children's Centre. All of the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

Following transcription, a 'thematic' review of the data was carried out manually. This allowed the researcher to systematically and thoroughly compare and contrast men's accounts, build up categories, test emergent theory and attach 'meaning' to the data (Russell Bernard and Ryan, 2009). This review process began during data collection, which allowed the researcher to explore new avenues of inquiry in later interviews. After reviewing all the interviews, excerpts were labelled with key themes relating to the main ideas and repeated experiences of these men, which were then coded. Thus, the coding scheme was generated both by the broader categories that informed the topic areas covered in the interview schedule and by the emerging empirical data. This process of 'analytic induction' aimed to reflect the complexity of these men's accounts and provided a framework to help make sense of this complexity as well as the social context in

which these accounts are located (Bendassolli, 2013). This analysis of the data identified three broad areas of shared experience, which form the framework for the findings sections. Given the relatively small sample size, only those themes that were evident across the majority of accounts were considered for inclusion. Participant confidentiality is protected using pseudonyms (chosen by the researcher) and changing local place names that could lead to their identification.

Before the article moves on to present its findings it is pertinent to raise two points of interest. First, these interviews were not simply encounters between an interviewer and an interviewee – they were also encounters between men. As with other such encounters, masculine identities were constructed and conveyed through what was said (Olliffe, 2009). Dominant discourses about working-class masculinity may consequently not only have influenced these men's practices as fathers, but may also have influenced how they interpreted and talked about such ordinarily private matters with another man. Second, although this was a relatively small-scale investigation, the author adopted several measures to ensure rigour and establish confidence in the findings (Mays and Pope, 1995). The researcher sought to immerse himself in the research field using extensive notes to capture his thoughts and observations of interactions with study participants during and after interviews. The informal nature of the interview process helped establish rapport and trust. In short, the researcher sought every opportunity to enhance the validity of this fine-grained, in-depth enquiry and to build confidence in the quality of the data, which was also analysed in a thorough and exact fashion.

## Findings

The study findings are presented via three themes: 1) the motivations and challenges to men's participation in the parenting programme; 2) men's perceived lack of knowledge regarding children and childcare; and 3) the ways in which men's thoughts and practices regarding fathering and fatherhood changed as a consequence of attending the programme.

### Motivations and Challenges to Men's Participation in the Parenting Programme

The interviewer began the interview by asking men about their decisions to attend the parenting programme. Although they felt they were 'doing alright', their main motivations to attend were to gain new information and knowledge, which they perceived would enable them to develop their understanding and skills as fathers:

Whatever I can do to improve. Whatever can help me be a better parent. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

In many cases, their wish to become 'better' fathers was referenced against the predominantly detached and emotionally remote figures that men remembered from their own childhood (Dermott, 2008):

I want to be better ... a million times better [laughs] ... I don't think he wanted to be a dad. I don't ever feel there was a connection or love or anything like that. (Michael, 30, son aged 11 months)

In putting forward a different model of being a father, men sought to blend their decisions with apparent shifts in the current landscape of fatherhood and accepted facets of contemporary masculinity, which incorporated men's participation in childcare (Henwood and Procter, 2003):

It wasn't really a dad's thing to get involved. That's nothing like it now ... I want to feel like a family man. I want to get all hands on. (Gavin, 30, son aged 2, daughter aged 5 years)

However, there were also signs that changes in masculine beliefs and practices and notions of 'involved' fatherhood may not be totally embedded at a social and cultural level, particularly among working-class men (Plantin et al., 2003). For example, men's continued adherence to traditional working-class ideologies and associated fathering practices were put forward as potential barriers for recruiting fathers to such programmes:

Maybe there is still very much a stereotypical view what the bloke does ... Goes down the pub comes back for dinner and everything like that ... I'm sure there are still men, possibly the majority, that think the male role is not the care taker of the children. (Michael, 30, son aged 11 months)

Thus, although these men sought to integrate their notion of 'good' fathering within an appropriate masculine discourse (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006), their views were not necessarily shared among their peers. Clearly, therefore, their decision to seek help with their fathering could potentially endanger or challenge their identities as working-class men. This apperception was clearest among younger men who decided against public disclosure of their attendance, primarily for fear of ridicule:

No [laugh]. They'd laugh ... No seriously. They would go 'Are you mad or what?' (James, 19, son aged 2 years)

They're just a bunch of piss takers so I didn't say too much to them. (Ryan, 23, daughter aged 2 years)

Such responses begin to demonstrate the manner in which these men negotiated the sometimes contradictory terrain between conforming to certain social and cultural expectations associated with working-class masculinity and their desire to be more knowledgeable and involved as fathers. Their lack of disclosure also chimes with other research suggesting that men, particularly working-class men, tend to define asking for help as a sign of weakness, which is not a characteristic associated with hegemonic masculinity (Dolan, 2011). Moreover, the difficulties men have with expressing emotion, which they perceived led to 'poor' relationships with their children, was also put forward as a reason why many men simply withdraw from family life rather than seek help:



You don't really see many dads doing stuff like that ... Most dads walk away ... It's not the sort of thing blokes go to. (James, 19, son aged 2 years)

Men's absence from parenting programmes was also linked to certain assumptions regarding the 'legitimate' users of such services, namely mothers and 'problematic' fathers. In the first instance, men's endorsement of hegemonic ideals includes the rejection of feminine activities or ideals, which contribute to the construction of dominant masculinities and the oppression of women alongside less powerful groups of men (Connell, 1995). In the second instance, these men clearly believed there was the potential for interaction with suboptimal men or fathers. This presented them with two difficulties: 1) they did not want to be viewed as having the same attributes or faults; and 2) it engendered emotions of fear and vulnerability:

I was a bit nervous ... I thought there might be some rough people. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

In highlighting their anxieties, these men appeared to draw upon public discourses around fatherhood that have conjured up ideas of the 'feckless' father to articulate general concerns about men's lack of involvement with their children (Gillies, 2009). However, these men tended to re-evaluate their constructions of 'good' fathers based on their interactions with other men on the programme, including those who were perceived to come from poorer and tougher neighbourhoods:

It was a bit of an eye-opener ... We may have come from ... this side of the tracks or that side of tracks but everyone agreed. We all just wanted the best for [our children]. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

Their identification with other working-class men on the programme, who could not be defined as weak or effeminate, also provided a means by which these men could legitimate their engagement with a service seen as feminine in nature and maintain a masculine identity. Moreover, whereas previously they may have lacked sympathy for, or perceived little similarity with, such fathers, including those who lived apart from their children, they now identified with more nuanced notions of fatherhood that were shaped by the particular structural and cultural contexts within which men undertake their fathering role:

I feel very sorry for some of the other dads ... But what's great is it didn't stop them trying to be the best dads that they could be ... I came away feeling more of a bond ... a kinship with guys who just want to be fathers. (Michael, 30, son aged 11 months)

This extract reiterates men's desire to improve as fathers, which they presented as the main motivation for accessing support. As previously mentioned, men often used how they were fathered as a benchmark against which to judge their progression as fathers, albeit with the proviso that their childhood experiences had undoubtedly been influenced by histo-socio-cultural norms regarding expected and accepted fathering behaviour

(Dermott, 2008). It was also apparent that the time these men spent with their children was often occupationally and socially determined, which echoed their experiences as children:

I always feel guilty ... You come home from work at night and you have very little time. (Gavin, 30, son aged 2, daughter aged 5 years)

I don't want to be exactly the same as my dad, just seeing him on a Saturday. But the way things are I'm not sure if I've got much of a choice. (James, 19, son aged 2 years)

However, in contrast to their fathers, who were often perceived to have been indifferent to their children, these men wanted their children to feel important, understood and secure. As such, men often drew on the doctrine of wanting 'the best' and to make the 'right choices' for their children (Gillies, 2009). Also evident was the notion of 'being there' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Miller, 2011) that encompassed a wider appreciation of the protective, actively involved and emotionally engaged father:

I want them to be safe and well looked after ... and that they're protected ... Shown that they're loved. Really loved ... To be there for them ... So they respect me. Instead of the frustration I had with my own dad. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

Their lack of understanding was, however, perceived to be a significant hindrance to them achieving the best outcomes or making the right choices regarding their children:

I just wanted to better myself as a dad. I want to actually have knowledge of kids ... to do my best for my children. Bring them up as good as I can. And not have complications in doing so ... Not making them feel bad ... Doing it the right way instead of going in charging like a bull. (Gavin, 30, son aged 2, daughter aged 5 years)

## Men's Lack of Knowledge Regarding Children and Childcare

Across their accounts, men's desire for better father-child interactions and stronger emotional relationships was perceived to be undermined by their lack of knowledge regarding children and childcare:

I didn't understand how to work with children. I can train a dog not a problem [laugh] ... Children I found a little bit ... stressful. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

When discussing their lack of understanding, men tended to reproduce polarised masculine and feminine identities that often drew on biological and/or cultural assumptions to account for differences in the inherent parenting abilities of men and women (Dermott, 2008):

They know more generally don't they? All about babies and so on. It's because they're carrying them. (Ryan, 23, daughter aged 2 years)

For generations past [men] didn't play much of a role. More of an authority thing and went off to work. So dads need a bit more help ... just to know what they're doing, if they're right or wrong. (James, 19, son aged 2 years)

Biological or cultural assumptions that construct men and women as different commonly advantage men at the expense of women (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). However, in the case of perceptive and sympathetic parenting, these men commonly relegated themselves to a 'secondary' position behind their wives or partners (Miller, 2011):

Your wife will know naturally what to do. They've got that more sensitive side ... Men are a bit more egotistical and a bit hard and all that; 'Do as I say!' ... I was never sure how to help out ... I was always saying to my wife: 'What do I do?' 'What do you want me to do?' (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

Their accounts were clearly premised on 'ontological ways of being, thinking and doing' in relation to children (Miller, 2011: 19). These differences also reflected the fewer available opportunities for men to gain such knowledge. This resulted from gendered expectations around paid employment, men's self-imposed absence from family support services and assumptions among practitioners that men are not interested in learning about child development or improving emotional interactions with their children (Featherstone, 2009):

We don't have their knowledge ... [Partner's] been to [clinic] today ... and she's getting ... every time she goes, full of knowledge ... We don't get that. I don't know anywhere where I'm given any knowledge like my wife's given. Even if I was a single parent ... you don't see single parent dads at the same thing my wife's been at today. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

These deficiencies in instinct and knowledge were the main reasons why, in hindsight, men were thankful that their wives or partners or other mothers were not present at the programme:

Men would take the back seat and the women take the lead role ... Because they're emotionally attached: 'We've carried the child. What do you know?' ... It's like they're more superior. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

We may have felt overshadowed ... We may have got ... beaten down ... 'We have them all the time. How would you know this? How do you know that?' (Gavin, 30, son aged 2, daughter aged 5 years)

Without their wives or partners or other mothers present, it appeared that men felt more comfortable discussing their views and experiences as fathers:

I liked it because it was dad focused ... You can be frank in those sorts of environments and you ain't got to worry about saying things ... I wasn't sure of the subject matter at this time of course. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

As the three previous extracts demonstrate, this aspect of the men's narratives was a long way removed from traditional demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity, which are often displayed in terms of technical competence, hands-on ability and self-confidence (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). In short, given their perceived shortcomings as fathers, the presence of women or mothers could potentially have denied men the means to construct effective masculine identities and consigned them to marginalised or subordinated positions. In contrast, men's concerns regarding their lack of parenting knowledge and skills did not apply to other men, who were universally perceived to be in the same position:

Most men they're out there ... they're doing hands-on stuff. They're not usually all babies or children ... Here we all had the same situations ... we all had children and we wanted to learn. (Kevin, 33, daughters aged 1 and 4 years)

It was clear that the programme provided men with opportunities to gain knowledge and to be expressive regarding their identities as fathers. For example, one man described how another 'had tears in his eyes' when talking about his children. However, their narratives also indicated that expressions of interest and demonstrations of emotion regarding fathering and fatherhood may not be appropriate in different circumstances where similar behaviour could compromise men's masculine identities:

It's nice to be heard. You don't get that much ... You can't go down the pub and say: 'My child was saying to me the other day.' They'll think: 'Shut up, the football's on' [laugh]. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

## Men's Changing Thoughts and Practices Regarding Fathering and Fatherhood

It was evident that these men had not previously considered aspects of child development and age-related activities. Nor had they reflected on how they reacted to their children's behaviour or how their actions were experienced by their children. Following the programme, men described how they had changed their thoughts and actions concerning their children that had resulted in perceived improvements in father-child interactions:

It gives you empathy with what your children are feeling ... Once you've got that empathy ... it all falls into place. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

Instead of looking at it in my point of view and thinking what would I like to do? I've actually gone down and watched them do what they do ... and how they behave ... It's given me a chance to interact ... It's made me feel good ... seeing them happy. (Daniel, 31, daughter aged 2, son aged 4 years)

It was also clear that implementing changes in their fathering practice was not easy or straightforward. There was a suggestion that financial, employment and other pressures, which may have been shaped by their position as working-class men, could contribute to men 'losing it' and reverting to less effective ways of interacting with their children

(Gillies, 2009). Nonetheless, they generally articulated a mixture of perseverance and optimism regarding self-reflection and behaviour changes that they believed had lessened frustration and reduced the likelihood of potentially damaging fathering practices:

In the past I would react very quickly as in shout straight away or stop the situation straight away ... I'm realising now I was at times overreacting. I'm trying to react to that and to change that. Even still now I can still see myself going the opposite way. But I pull myself back [laugh] ... I try and get with their level ... As soon as you get the connection it's like they completely change. There's never a stress. And you think wow! ... It has made such a difference ... We've got more of a bond. We understand each other in a sense. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

All of the men reported improvements in their father–child relationships and the degree of emotional attachment to their children:

I wasn't as close to him previously. I was trying to bond ... But I needed to learn it. Learn what to do. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

A number of the men used the notion of cognitive 'level' to illustrate their newfound understanding of child behaviour that guided improvements in their care and emotional connections to their children. As previous extracts have illustrated, when discussing these changes it was not unusual for men to use language more associated with women or mothers, such as 'bonding', 'love' and 'sensitivity':

I feel much more at ease with our son since doing the course. I don't feel like I've ever kind of hit the panic button as I used to ... I just didn't know what was going on. Things escalating and he'd be in a real state. I don't feel I've ever got to that stage again ... I'm very much in tune with him now ... I'm more sensitive. I know now he likes to be close and touchy ... I can pick up on that now and do that rather than shake this, hit that or whatever ... I feel a very good bond with him now. (Adrian, 28, son aged 1 year)

This extract also illustrates how gaining knowledge about their children increased the men's sense of control and reduced their fears and concerns, resulting in them feeling more comfortable and assured in their fathering abilities. This often contrasted with their previous experiences where they appeared less certain about their children's needs and behaviours. In making these comparisons, the men's narratives point to a potential disjuncture between their often tentative individual practice and the more general societal visions of men as increasingly poised carers (Miller, 2011). However, it appeared that their ability to disclose their concerns and lack of confidence may be constrained by aspects of hegemonic masculinity, which promotes self-reliance and the avoidance of dependence (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009):

It does make it a lot more easier than you trying to battle it on your own ... Asking my wife the same things ... the same questions. That's annoying. (Gavin, 30, son aged 2, daughter aged 5 years)

Men's uncertainties regarding children's behaviour could also foster anxiety and undermine men's self-belief, which, alongside the potential for criticism, meant that they could

often feel reticent about taking greater responsibility for childcare tasks. In other words, men may occasionally choose to absolve themselves of childcare responsibilities rather than risk damaging their fathering and/or masculine identities:

It's helped me relax more around my son. It's just made me feel more comfortable ... able to do more ... There was always something I was getting told off about [laughs] ... Because I've always been very unsure about what I'm doing. (James, 19, son aged 2 years)

It is also pertinent to note that there was no sense of these men using their newly acquired knowledge to elicit deference from their wives or partners. Instead, it appeared that they continued to concede superiority concerning childrearing to mothers, although there were occasions when some men questioned the outright ascendancy of women:

Her view of raising children is more important than mine [laughs] ... I understand the female perspective is more important ... My wife definitely spends obviously more time with the baby ... But it would be nice to have more of the male perspective to balance it. (Adrian, 28, son aged 1 year)

Without exception, these men reported a new mastery over contemporary aspects of fatherhood, which also marked them as different to many other fathers who continued to enact practices now considered to be outdated:

I love being a dad ... I think it's very important to all men. Whether they actually do what I think now a dad should do? I don't think they do that ... Because obviously I've learnt what a dad should do. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

Perhaps the starkest example of how these men now perceived themselves to be different from other fathers was in relation to discipline. This aspect of fatherhood and how it should be performed was universally perceived to be learnt in family settings – what one man referred to as ‘the continual chain of events’, in which consecutive generations of men reinforce dominant masculine values and fathers’ role as disciplinarians (Dermott, 2008). In the following extract, Michael powerfully reflects on previously taken for granted assumptions regarding corporal punishment:

Your grandfather beat the hell out of your father, your father beat the hell out of you, are you going to ... will you smack your child ... Before ... I probably thought it's not something that I'd enjoy, but probably it's a necessary part of helping establish what's acceptable or not. And I came away thinking no it's just a pathetic thing to do. How could you? ... Here's somebody that is struggling with their own development and communication and they don't know ... how the world operates and what's right or wrong. And you come along and whack them ... I kind of felt quite small at that point. It really made me challenge everything. (Michael, 30, son aged 11 months)

Men also reflected more on the actions of other fathers, although none felt able to challenge other men about the way they disciplined their children:

I'm looking at it and thinking that's quite rough ... But you can't obviously approach and tell them. You'd get a slap [laugh]. (Adam, 29, son aged 1, daughter aged 8 years)

Clearly, therefore, these men now associated certain aspects of 'traditional' fatherhood with frustration and potential brutality. However, they did not distance themselves entirely from established fathering templates. For example, they continued to reaffirm the need for paternal control and authority, albeit with a more affectionate and responsive disposition:

People probably would say ... the man's there to be the discipline and the mum's there to love them. But it's about being responsible. To help them grow up the right way with the right discipline in the right areas ... But coming from a more sensitive side. (Adrian, 28, son aged 1 year)

Alongside this, men reported how they were consciously attempting to become more tactile and wanted to demonstrate affection towards their children:

I think men are scared to show their feelings ... A dad to a kid is a quick cuddle, peck on the head ... I've learnt to give them proper cuddles, proper kisses ... Actually showing love for my children. (Daniel, 31, daughter aged 2, son aged 4 years)

This extract also indicates the difficulties men may face when they attempt to occupy two potentially competing subjective positions: the traditional working-class male role and the affectionate or involved father. The incompatibility of affectionate behaviour and hegemonic masculinity, which is premised on the stigmatisation of femininity, was evident when men discussed potential barriers to public demonstrations of affection:

There is the aspect of how others may judge how you act ... It's just the way blokes are ... They ain't going to do it with other people there. (Robert, 42, son aged 1 year)

As with their concealment of their attendance at the parenting programme, it appeared that men made conscious decisions as to when and where they were willing to demonstrate certain practices associated with caring, such as cuddling and kissing. To reiterate, although men described how they were more expressive with their children and were able to talk with 'passion' about their fathering role within the context of the parenting programme, few could envisage similar scenarios in other male-orientated arenas:

You don't really tend to talk that much about children. Or all the problems you have with children do you? It's not something you do down the pub is it? ... Nobody was going to laugh at you or tell you to shut up because they don't want to hear about that sort of stuff. (Christopher, 45, son aged 2, two step-daughters aged 6 and 8 years)

Thus, men's decisions regarding fathering practices appeared to be shaped by contradictory pressures, based on whether they were motivated by a desire to prove their masculine status as working-class men or portray themselves as caring and engaged fathers. What constituted acceptable male practice in one setting did not necessarily apply to other settings. In short, men's expressions of masculine and fathering identities can be viewed as context dependent and continually negotiated in men's daily practice.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In recent years, government policies have encouraged family support services to engage with fathers. Yet men remain largely absent from such provision. Barriers to fathers' engagement tend to be located in the failure of such services to appeal to men (Gilligan et al., 2012). This study has demonstrated how the potential tensions between masculine and fathering identities also appear relevant to understanding the obstacles men face when considering whether to access support services. The men in this study, albeit from predominantly working-class backgrounds, clearly illustrate the challenging and often paradoxical relationship between seeking support and the fulfilment of certain masculine ideals (Plantin et al., 2003). Men construct, negotiate and reconstruct masculine identities through 'local' interactions within their social and cultural contexts (Messerschmidt, 2012). Clearly, however, education or self-reflection in relation to fatherhood is not a conventional route by which working-class men signify a strong masculine identity (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Attending the programme heightened their risk of being defined as effeminate, eccentric or failures, which could assign them to lower-status masculine positions relative to other men within their social networks (Connell, 1995) – hence the decision of many men to keep their attendance secret and their inclination to promote contemporary male identities in which effective fathering was increasingly regarded as a positive aspect of working-class masculinity. Men's support for these shifts in fathering was also shaped by the desire not to replicate their childhood experiences, which they often portrayed as 'a negative model' of fatherhood (Brandth and Kvande, 1998: 300). Moreover, the men's motivation to learn more about their children and to improve their father-child interactions was premised by the notion that genuinely involved and skilled fathers were created rather than born.

Whilst these men had accessed support, they actively sought to present themselves as both suitable and relatively competent as fathers inasmuch as they distanced themselves from accusations of not coping or underperforming as fathers. Instead, they viewed themselves to be similar to other men in that they wanted better father-child relationships and to make the right decisions regarding their children, but lacked the necessary skills or attributes to achieve this. In making sense of these deficiencies, men were distinguished from women in relation to certain male or masculine characteristics. These were exemplified by men's inherent lack of nurturance, gentleness and emotional expressivity, which together with their traditional roles in the public realm distanced men from caring roles (Seidler, 2006). This accounted for men's lack of understanding, their relative exclusion from potential sources of knowledge, and their inability to self-monitor or assess the impact of their actions on those around them. As a result, men were often rendered acquiescent, in need of direction from their wives or partners, and more likely to resort to authoritarian 'over the top' responses as they struggled to make sense of their children's behaviour. In short, aspects of their masculine identities appeared incompatible with their hopes and aspirations to become more involved and effective as fathers.

Clearly, accessing a parenting programme presented certain difficulties for these men, not least because male identity is often sustained through men's capacity not to ask for help (Dolan, 2011). Men were therefore required to legitimate their actions in order to maintain masculine identities (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). One means by which men



achieved legitimation was to identify with other men on the programme who were portrayed as potentially dangerous 'archetypal' masculine men. However, these men were not viewed to be a threat in terms of their likely skills and competencies as fathers: that is, they could not claim privileged fathering identities. Rather, all of the men were there to learn, which also signalled their willingness to change. Thus, 'being a man' in this context encouraged men to distance themselves from certain aspects of traditional masculinity, such as impulse and aggression, and to value characteristics such as intimacy and affection that also allowed them to talk openly about their love for their children. In other words, the programme represented a specific context in which men constructed masculine identities considered appropriate to the situation (Coles, 2009). However, men also acknowledged that their interactions during the programme did not necessarily resemble their interactions with men in other social settings. Outside of the programme, men's interactions appeared more congruent with working-class men's tendency to concentrate on subjects and activities external to themselves, such as sport and politics, rather than communicating aspects of their inner selves such as the nature of father-child relationships (Dolan, 2011).

Post-programme, these men reported increased levels of knowledge and competence regarding their children's needs and more emotionally close relationships with their children. Bearing in mind Plantin's (2003: 19) assertion that men can 'talk' coherently about parenting regardless of their actual behaviour, it is not possible to confirm whether men found themselves entering into new territory regarding childcare or reacting in more self-reflective ways. However, men commonly used the term 'massive' to indicate the extent of the perceived changes in their fathering practice and father-child interactions. One significant aspect of this was the ways in which men embraced parenting qualities more commonly associated with women, such as tenderness, empathy and emotional reciprocity (Miller, 2011). This shift in fathering practice was apparent across all of the men's accounts regardless of their employment status or whether or not they lived with their children.

Another feature of men's changes in fathering practice was their increasing sense of 'mastery' in relation to children and childcare. This was often premised on improvements in their feelings of control, expertise and persuasion technique, which are also important masculine attributes (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). In contrast, certain fathering practices, particularly in relation to corporal punishment, were now considered outdated and driven by men's sense of exasperation, incompetence and the need for coercion. Nonetheless, these men did not seek to distance themselves entirely from traditional templates for respectable working-class men or fathers (Williams, 2009). They continued to promote the centrality of paid employment and reaffirmed male responsibility for standards of child behaviour and moral aptitude. Thus, whilst these men redefined notions of good fathering, their definitions continued to fit within acceptable conceptions of maleness, which were adapted to fit with a more caring and nurturing fatherhood.

Whilst these men undoubtedly valued their superiority as fathers, they were not necessarily able to 'champion' their newfound expertise and status, at least not publically (Plantin et al., 2003). Even though discernible changes in fatherhood and fathering practice were viewed to have taken place, this did not constitute the 'undoing' of well understood and accepted expressions of masculinity at a 'local' level (Messerschmidt, 2012).

Much previous work on masculinity has highlighted how men use subterfuge within the process of identity formation (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Thus, in the company of other men, they reported how they would be cautious concerning actions and/or words that could signal femininity or weakness, i.e. that they were somehow lacking as men (Seidler, 2006). In short, it appeared that within certain social settings, socially normative ways of demonstrating manhood continued to circumscribe men's thoughts and behaviours regarding fatherhood and fathering practice. Therefore, whatever their private practice as fathers, their public persona as men continued to largely conform to working-class masculine ideals, particularly in all-male environments where they often felt compelled to appear more detached from their children.

In summary, this study has sought to capture the interaction of masculine and fathering identities among a group of men who attended a 'dads only' parenting programme. It has shown how their class position intersected with their gender to inform men's masculine and fathering identities. It contributes to our understanding of the ways in which fathering and masculine identities are interwoven within the social and cultural context in which they take place. Even though there was an understanding that a more involved fatherhood was becoming a feature of working-class masculinity, these men were not at the stage where they felt they could use their knowledge and skills to subordinate other men. In the longer term, changes in fathering practice are likely to further challenge hegemonic forms of working-class masculinity. However, these changes will inevitably be caught in the tension between masculine and fathering identities as men seek to consolidate their role as fathers with their self-image as men.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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**Date submitted** December 2012

**Date accepted** October 2013