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Men and Masculinities, 2017; OnlinePubl:1-20

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Published version available via DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17730593>

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21 November 2018

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/116188>

Constructions of primary caregiving fathers in popular parenting texts

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Abstract

Expectations and norms of fatherhood are evolving, with fathers now expected to be more involved in childcare. These changes have made it possible for a growing number of fathers to assume a primary caregiving role. Catering to these fathers, a growing number of books have been published focusing on primary caregiving fathers. The present paper reports on a discourse analysis of nine such books. Four interpretative repertoires were identified, suggesting very specific ways in which it is deemed appropriate for men to take on primary caregiving. The findings emphasise the need to pay ongoing attention to popular parenting texts since, despite claims they encourage and support involved models of fathering, the books present and reproduce potentially limited accounts of fathers who are primary caregivers. As such, the findings highlight the importance of being critical of claims that fatherhood is evolving, given such evolution may be mitigated by ongoing normativity with regard to fathering.

Keywords: fathering, stay-at-home dads, hegemonic masculinity, masculinities

Introduction

The 21st century has seen considerable change in fathering identities and practices (Dempsey & Hewitt, 2012). Changing social and economic conditions have contributed to evolving expectations and norms within families, where men are now expected to be more involved in childcare and house responsibilities (Wall & Arnold, 2007). This increasing expectation of involved fathering has seen the emergence of an emotionally expressive and nurturing image of ideal fathers within the media (Miller, 2011), and an increase in the number of fathers who assume a primary caregiving role (Chesley, 2011). However, caregiving is still predominantly considered “women’s work”, and thus not a responsibility of fathers (Maurer & Pleck, 2006). Therefore, both cultural and academic attention has shifted toward a focus on fathers who assume the primary caregiving role, as they challenge this societal view and normative understandings of masculinity.

A focus on masculinity in the context of primary caregiving fathers is particularly important as constructions and understandings of fathering are intertwined with constructions and understandings of masculinity (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity – defined as the most honoured or desired form of masculinity - has long informed normative understandings of fathers as financial providers (Connell, 2003). However, due to primary caregiving fathers typically stepping away from the financial provider role, the concept of hegemonic masculinity does not entirely capture the experiences of these fathers. A recent paper described how the academic literature has shown a growing interest in a new form of “caring masculinity” to describe the primary caregiving fathers (Hunter, Riggs & Augoustinos, 2017). However, it went on to identify that ideas surrounding this form of caring masculinity are better understood as a broadening of hegemonic masculinity (Hunter, Riggs & Augoustinos, 2017). As

such, primary caregiving fathers face complex and contradictory expectations, and have been identified as simultaneously transgressive and complicit with hegemonic definitions of masculinity (Medved, 2016). It becomes important then, to direct research toward a focus on masculinity, in order to unpack these complex constructions and negotiations.

To date, research on primary caregiving fathers has primarily focused on examining the reasons why men take on the primary caregiving role, the difficulties they encounter and their associated coping strategies, and how fathers negotiate their fathering and masculine identity (e.g., Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Dunn, Rochlen & O'Brien, 2013; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2011; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo & Scaringi, 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008). However, in order to understand contemporary fathering, it is important for research to also focus on popular culture, and the significant role it plays in the production of discourses which in turn can create pressures and expectations that men must navigate (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Research needs to examine the sites in which discourses on fathering are constructed and reproduced, and to consider the implications of such discourses. One contemporary site in which constructions and representations of primary caregiving fathers are located is in parenting texts, and the study reported in this paper focuses on examining these texts for their constructive and action-oriented nature (Potter, 1996).

Previous research on men in parenting texts

Parenting texts, in the context of this paper, are understood as books that are published and marketed as a manual, instruction guide, or source of knowledge for parent readers. Such books are increasingly written for primary caregiving fathers in order to assist them to effectively raise children, focusing on instructing fathers on how “to be” a primary caregiving father. Therefore,

these books present themselves as a crucial source of information on fatherhood, and thus potentially exert influence on understandings of fathering. It is important to critically examine these books as they market themselves as a source of authority in addressing questions relating to effective parenting, frequently drawing upon experts in the fields of science, medicine, and the social sciences to substantiate their claims (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). As such, it is productive to be critical of what messages this literature is presenting. It is important to identify what intelligible identities they make available for fathers, and how they instruct them to parent.

There has been limited research on parenting texts directed at fathers. Fathers are rarely the focus of parenting texts, as mothers have historically and in the present been positioned as having primary responsibility for caregiving (Fleming & Tobin, 2005; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Sunderland, 2000; 2006). Analyses of parenting texts in general demonstrate that fathers are more often than not positioned as part-time parents or helpers with less competence than mothers, who have few caregiving responsibilities and are predominantly positioned as financial providers (Fleming & Tobin, 2005; Sunderland 2000; 2006; Vuori, 2009; Wall & Arnold, 2007). As such, it is not surprising that research on primary caregiving fathers suggests that such fathers struggle to negotiate their role due to perceptions of them as the secondary parent, along with expectations that they should be financial providers (Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Dunn, Rochlen & O'Brien, 2013; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw 2011; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo & Scaringi, 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008).

In a study on popular parenting books, Fleming and Tobin (2005) sought to determine if the identity of the “new” father is made intelligible to fathers. They identified that fathers were not depicted as primary caregivers, and their involvement in caregiving was considered

voluntary and of little significance (whereas mothers' caregiving was depicted as necessary). They concluded that parenting books do not adequately describe the importance of the fathering role, and do not make available the new and involved fathering identity. In a similar way, Vuori's (2009) study examined texts specifically focused on fathers who provide care. Vuori found that men were welcomed to fatherhood, they were encouraged to enjoy it, learn new things, and to liberate themselves from traditional expectations. In particular, fathers were encouraged to get involved through a construction of fatherhood as fun – they were constructed as more lively and playful compared to mothers. It is significant that mothers in these texts were still constructed as the decision makers, and were encouraged to make room for fathers, to let them get involved (Vuori, 2009). Sunderland (2000) identified a similar construction through a discourse analysis of popular parenting texts. Sunderland (2000) outlined how fathers were encouraged to get involved as it is not only important, but playing with children was framed as “fun”. Sunderland (2006) also conducted an analysis of parenting magazines and identified very similar results. Even though these magazines were directed to parents and not just mothers, they continued to typically address mothers, reinforcing the idea that fathers are secondary parents and not primary caregivers.

Whilst the studies reported above have much to tell us about how fathers are depicted in general parenting texts, they have less to tell us about how fathers are depicted in texts written solely for fathers, and even less to tell us about how primary caregiving fathers are depicted aimed at this cohort. The research reported below thus sought to add to the literature summarised above by focusing specifically on parenting texts aimed at primary caregiving fathers.

Method

Analytic approach

This paper examines how primary caregiving fathers and masculinity are constructed in popular parenting texts. This was achieved by utilising a discourse analysis informed by a critical psychological perspective (Gough & McFadden, 2001). Critical psychology is influenced by social constructionism which explains how the social world is constructed through language and discourse (Burr, 1995). This perspective is significant as it recognises how certain accounts of reality are more powerful than others (Gough & McFadden, 2001). Therefore critical psychology is analytically useful for the insights it affords us about how particular social practices, such as fathering, are constructed (Gough & McFadden, 2001). Further, this approach seeks to examine how truth claims are made, in whose service they operate, and firmly believes that research should challenge oppression and promote social change (Gough & McFadden, 2001).

Sample

The data analysed in this study come from nine books written by and for primary caregiving fathers. Books were selected if they were published between the years 2000-2014. The analysis was particularly concerned with contemporary constructions of primary caregiving fathers, given the changing norms and expectations of fathers. Therefore, books published prior to 2000 were not included for analysis as research indicates that the 21st century has seen considerable change in fathering identities and practices (Dempsey & Hewitt, 2012). The nine texts selected reflect the most recent and popular texts published, as identified via rankings and searches of Amazon.com. “Amazon” was used due to its large selection of books and its features to sort results via “bestselling”, “publication date”, “featured” and “average customer review”, making it easier to identify the most popular books. The following search terms were used: “stay at home

dads”, “stay at home fathers” and “fathering”. Books were excluded if they were fiction, and were simply a narrative or recount of a personal story (i.e., they needed to be instructive in some way).

The sample analysed include two types of books. The first type included four books that were parenting manuals, written as instruction guides for fathers. These can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: *Parenting Manual Books*

Title	Author	Year
The Stay at Home Dad Handbook	Baylies & Toonkel	2004
Stay-at-Home Dads: The Essential Guide to Creating the New Family	Gill	2001
The Stay @ Home Dad: 200+ Tips and Hints to Running Your Household	Cookson	2013
Full Time Father: How to Succeed as a Stay at Home Dad	Hallows	2004

The second type included five books that were instructive although written through an autobiographical narrative. These can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: *Autobiographical Books*

Title	Author	Year
Daddy, Where’s Your Vagina? What I Learned as a Stay-at-Home Dad	Schatz	2009
Captain Dad: The Manly Art of Stay-at-Home Parenting	Byrnes	2013
Dad or Alive: Confessions of an Unexpected Stay-at-Home Dad	Kulp	2013

Hear me Roar: The Story of a Stay-at-Home Dad	Robertson	2012
Cinderfella: My Life as a Stay-at-Home Dad	Mastin	2010

Coding procedure

As this paper utilised a discourse analysis informed by critical psychology, analysis of the data consisted of several stages. Initially, each book was read from cover to cover, in order to gain familiarity with the text as well as allowing for all sections of the books to be analysed. After this, a second in-depth reading was accompanied by selecting quotes from the books that related to masculinity, heteronormativity, and sexuality, and for each quote, theoretical notes were made to describe its significance. Once all books were re-read, quotes taken, and noted, the quotes were examined for any patterns, and were coded accordingly. These patterns were, to a large degree, obvious and dictated by the foci of the books. It is important to note that these patterns did not pre-exist the analysis, and were identified throughout the analytic process. Once the patterns were identified, each quote was analysed both individually and collectively in regards to their constructive and rhetorical work. The analysis that follows then, is organised around the identified patterns, and the extracts are examples of how these patterns were constructed in the books.

Analysis

The extracts and quotes analysed include a small but representative sample of the discursive constructions of masculinities and the primary caregiving father identity within the books. The focus of the analysis is not merely on how masculinities and fathers are represented within the books. Rather, the analysis takes as a starting point the constructive and action-oriented nature of language, and focuses on what the text is doing, accomplishing and constructing (Edwards &

Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The books analysed are required to engage in a negotiation process. To write a book that represents the lives of primary caregiving fathers, the authors must negotiate with what norms and ideas are available to them and construct their own ideas of what constitutes a primary caregiving father. The books then do not present a neutral, factual description of primary caregiving fathers. Instead, they present a constructed *version*, the author's own version, of primary caregiving fathers.

The focus of the following analysis is to explore the ways in which versions and accounts worked to construct a normative account of primary caregiving fathers. Taken at face value, these books are concerned with promoting and normalising primary caregiving fathers, as they are marketed as encouraging and helping these fathers. However, the analysis that follows makes evident that the process of constructing primary caregiving fathers as normative and legitimate is a dilemmatic process, one that requires considerable discursive and rhetorical work.

In the sections that follow, four identified interpretative repertoires are analysed. Potter and Wetherell (1987) described interpretative repertoires as the various ways in which individuals describe the world. They are relatively established and coherent ways of talking about things; they can be understood as the building blocks people draw on within everyday interaction (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). By considering these four interpretative repertoires, we can see the ways in which the parenting texts navigate a complex negotiation process.

Fathers as financial providers

The books analysed were written and marketed as books that want to educate and help fathers who have taken on the primary caregiving role. The assumption, then, is that these books seek to

support and encourage such fathers. Readers, like the authors, are likely aware that primary caregiving is a departure from a currently accepted social norm (of men as financial providers, not primarily caregivers). Therefore, accounts that do not acknowledge and negotiate with this norm and its influence on primary caregiving fathers are at risk of being discounted, or as potentially presenting an uninformed, biased, or unrealistic portrayal of primary caregiving fathers.

To avoid this, and to ensure that their accounts are seen as legitimate and factual, the books offer up the opposing side of the argument. This not only makes for a more convincing argument in favour of primary caregiving, but the books appear more knowledgeable as well as more empathic toward readers. The opposing side they offer up nonetheless rests upon a discussion of masculinity and financial providing. Therefore, throughout all of the books the authors draw upon a repertoire of men as financial providers. This repertoire is framed as an “honest” account of what it means to be a primary caregiving father, and includes acknowledging the difficulties associated with relinquishing paid employment, as can be seen in the following quotes.

It is surprising how overnight you can change from being a worthwhile and productive member of society, to being an unpaid servant whose only function is to respond to the whims of a small child (Hallows, 2004, p. 21)

The most difficult adjustment of full-time parenting was the loss of ‘status’ (Baylies and Toonkel, 2004, p. 39)

Both of these extracts suggest that the authors understand the difficulties associated with the loss of paid employment. For example, Hallows (2004) draws upon a normative expectation that fathers should view taking on the caregiving role as a demotion, positioning men as “worthwhile” and “productive” when they are financial providers, but then as “servants” when they are caregivers. This highlights how in contemporary society, paid work continues to be socially valued over unpaid work. Similarly, the extract from Baylies and Toonkel (2004) suggests that it is not simply the adjustment of giving up one’s paid employment, but the associated loss of status and privilege that comes with having socially valued paid employment. Due to giving up a socially valued role in society the authors then proceed to detail at length the subsequent struggles that comes with this loss of status.

I have heard (at some length) about how a stay at home Dad couldn’t feel as if he was a man anymore because he was no longer the breadwinner, and that clearly he would be immediately unattractive to his partner (Hallows, 2004, p. 143)

Look, I’ve lost my job. The e-mails have stopped, my phone doesn’t ring anymore, and I’m slipping into irrelevancy. My pride is shattered and self-worth is barely existent. I’ve boxed up my manhood, destined for storage, and I’m going to be spending eleven hours a day with a two-month-old girl who can’t talk to me (Kulp, 2013, p. 97)

Here, we can see how Hallows (2004) constructs the notion that caregiving may strip men of their gendered identity, suggesting that when they step away from their provider role, they also step away from manhood. Further, Hallows suggests that stepping away from the financial

provider role makes a man “immediately” unappealing to their partner. And to avoid being held accountable for this position, Hallows uses a distanced footing (Goffman, 1981), implying that he is only passing on information that he has “heard” and not just once, but “at some length” from a primary caregiving father. Similarly, Kulp (2013) denies primary caregiving fathers a legitimate masculinity, suggesting they “box up” or put aside their masculinity when they cease paid employment. Not only does Kulp work up an account of a wounded masculinity, but suggests that this leads to a wounded identity more generally – constructing men as having no pride or self-worth and that they are irrelevant when they take on primary caregiving.

The extracts presented above suggest that giving up the provider role results in significant loss and hardship. The rhetorical work within such a construction is complex. The extracts reproduce the long held normative notion that fathers are financial providers. In doing so they work up an account that is positioned as both credible and knowledgeable on what it means to be a father. Of course such positioning is dilemmatic: in working up an account in which not earning an income is a loss, this does very little to depict primary caregiving as something that men should undertake. One way in which this dilemma is negotiated is through constructing fathers as not choosing the primary caregiving role, but instead, finding themselves in this role due to circumstance. This also lends a pathway to caregiving that does not result in a wounded masculinity, as it is outside of their control.

I had never planned on being a stay-at-home dad, although adjusting to life on my wage alone clearly did not make economic sense (Robertson, 2012, p. 55)

My boss informed me that I was ‘involuntarily terminated’ (Baylies & Toonkel, 2004, p. 2)

As demonstrated in these two extracts, primary caregiving is not something fathers necessarily undertake voluntarily. Rather, they are positioned in this role by accident or due to circumstances. One book rests its entire narrative on this notion, titling the book *Dad or Alive: Confessions of an Unexpected Stay-at-Home Dad* (Kulp, 2013). The action orientation of this title is clear – it allows the men to retain their masculinity as they had never intended on being a primary caregiver. However, by implication it suggests that it would be less masculine to intentionally plan to be a primary caregiver. Unsurprisingly, then, across all of the books, there is no discussion of men choosing or planning to take on this role.

A second way in which the dilemma (between encouraging primary caregiving for fathers whilst still acknowledging that not earning an income is a loss) is overcome is through constructing the primary caregiving role as temporary, and thus a “time out” from paid employment, rather than a permanent withdrawal from the paid workplace:

Many stay at home Dads do not expect to retain the primary carer role once the children go to school (Hallows, 2004, p. 159)

Get a part-time job once all your kids are in school. Your wife will appreciate the extra help (Cookson, 2013, p. 18)

After all, if my girl is away at school for four hours a day, don't I owe it to my family to at least edge my way back into 'productive' (i.e., 'paid') work? (Baylies & Toonkel, 2004, p. 160)

These extracts make clear that primary caregiving does not become a part of the father's identity, but simply a role they take on temporarily. Hallows uses a consensus warrant to emphasise that this is not something only some fathers feel, but "many" feel that this role is only temporary. Further, in Cookson's (2013) extract we can see how the author tells fathers that they should get a "part-time job". Here we can see, even in a book encouraging fathers to take on primary caregiving, fathers are being told and reminded that they should do all they can to remain tied to the financial provider role. Baylies and Toonkel's (2004) extract too reinforces this idea by suggesting that fathers "owe" it to their family to return to work in some capacity once their children have gone to school.

Significantly, this interpretative repertoire relies heavily upon heteronormativity to substantiate its legitimacy. The authors draw upon dominant beliefs that people fall into one of two genders that come with associated roles. In other words, even though the books discuss fathers who are caregivers, and mothers who work, ultimately the books position women as natural caregivers and men as natural financial providers. The implication then is that heterosexuality is the norm, as these two genders are complimentary and rely on one another. The books thus implicitly align themselves with heterosexual marriage and the traditional nuclear family structure (Hunter & Riggs, 2015).

Established masculinity

Once the books have drawn upon a repertoire of fathers as financial providers, their discursive work then turns to their goal of convincing fathers that taking on the primary caregiving role is normal and legitimate for men. Therefore, the books draw upon a

repertoire of an established masculinity in order to achieve this.

The presented identity of the author of these books, and the likelihood of readers identifying with it, plays a fundamental role in the success of the argument they put forward (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Readers will either accept or refute claims made, based on inferences they make about the author's identity. This is a significant aspect of talk and text – the authors' stake and interest (Potter, 1996). The authors of the books analysed can have something to gain or can put themselves at risk through their descriptions. Therefore this repertoire of an established masculinity works to manage their stake and interest and appeal to the predicted readership, especially given their account that fathers are financial providers.

As caregiving is traditionally associated with femininity, the effects of this repertoire ensures that primary caregiving fathers' masculinities are not brought into question when they take on the caregiving role. This is achieved through aligning descriptions of primary caregiving fathers with hegemonic masculinity. These accounts construct fathers as though they have already established or "proven" their masculinity, as can be seen in the following quotes.

In truth, the beer-and-rum soaked Mad Cow tavern with its black-and-white façade, udder bar and saloon-style décor was a great place to get into a fight on a Friday night or, it would seem, to fall in love. (Robertson, 2012, p.3)

I've been a die-hard baseball fan for as long as I can remember. My dad and I used to play catch every day during the summer when he got home from work...I can almost remember sitting in the living room watching the game with my dad and uncles, systematically cruising around the coffee table, stealing the backwash from the bottom of their Heinekens,

and clapping along with them. It was male bonding at its best. (Kulp, 2013, p.3-4)

These two extracts are the opening sentences of two of the books. Orienting toward the possibility that primary caregiving fathers may be viewed as transgressive of normative masculinities, these extracts demonstrate how masculinity is used as the entry point to engage readers on primary caregiving, by attempting to centre it within hegemonic masculinity. The authors are presented as people who the readers can relate to, and this is derived from the extreme markers of hegemonic masculinity. The first extract begins by detailing how the author met his wife. The heteronormativity of this, in itself, works to masculinise the author. The author presents himself as the type of person who spends his Friday night at a pub, which is arguably a masculine stereotype. And this “tavern” is constructed with rich details which evoke connotations aligned with traditional masculinity. For example, “beer” and “rum” are considered stereotypically masculine drinks, and so for a “tavern” to be described as “soaked” in these drinks suggests that this tavern is a place suited only for traditionally masculine men. In addition, the author describes this tavern as a place where one would get into a fight: again behaviour that is typically associated with traditional, even hyper, masculinity. This description ends with the author outlining that this tavern is not the type of place you would fall in love, by saying “it would seem”, which suggests that he was surprised that he met a woman there who he could (and did) fall in love with.

The second extract describes the author’s relationship with his own father, detailing stories to do with them and baseball. Drawing upon stories relating to baseball and beer are arguably very stereotypically masculine past times. As well, the author mentions his father and how he worked, therefore positioning himself as someone who grew up in a traditional family

where his father was the financial provider.

These two extracts exemplify the detailed discursive work that goes into normalising primary caregiving for men. From the outset, both authors attempt to establish their credentials as typical and traditional men. By presenting themselves as having established masculinities prior to taking on this role, their masculinity is protected from being challenged or potentially undermined. “Proving” one’s masculinity in order to be accepted within this role has been identified in previous literature, specifically where primary caregiving fathers emphasise that they took on this role as they felt they were “masculine enough” to take on a traditionally feminine role (e.g., Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008; Wall & Arnold, 2007).

In addition to working up a background context of established masculinity, the authors also draw upon an established masculinity repertoire throughout the books as well. The use of this repertoire throughout the books can be understood as stake inoculation - the discursive process through which an individual minimizes or denies their stake and interest in their descriptions (Potter, 1996). The authors’ descriptions continually orient to the possibility that primary caregiving fathers may be viewed as different and outside of the norm. Therefore, the authors align themselves and primary caregiving fathers with hegemonic masculinity, working to counter potential criticisms that they are different:

Before I became a ‘domestic goddess,’ I bought into the myth that any man who stayed home to care for the kids wasn’t truly a man. Not only is it a-typical, but men in this profession are seen as somewhat weak for not being able to cut it in the ‘working world’.

(Mastin, 2010, p. 65)

Not only do girls expect to be moms someday, but they also start their training very early on. Girls grow up playing house, playing with baby dolls, pushing toy strollers, and flipping plastic pancakes with plastic spatulas in their plastic kitchens. I had GI Joes and Transformers. If you dug through my toy chest, you might think I would have a career in freedom fighting or advanced robotics – not fatherhood. (Schatz, 2009, p. 17)

These two extracts build accounts that present both authors as not the type of men who desired to be primary caregivers, positioning them as “normative” men. Mastin (2010) describes that he previously believed that primary caregiving was unmasculine, describing such men as weak, atypical, and not real men. And in the second extract, Schatz (2009) not only aligns himself with the position that primary caregiving was not part of his plan, and it was not something that he wanted, but he distances himself completely from the entire notion of fatherhood. Schatz positions himself with the heteronormative assumption that mothers are the natural caregivers, not fathers, by stating that “girls expect to be moms”, detailing the various aspects of a girl’s upbringing that make her suited to caregiving.

It is also worth noting the term “domestic goddess” in Mastin’s (2010) extract. This term appears to feminize the primary caregiving role, which works in opposition to all the detailed work that has gone into building these fathers up as masculine. However, it could be argued that Mastin depicts primary caregiving fathers as so masculine that being called a domestic goddess does not threaten their masculinity. It is significant, though, that this extract also defines primary caregiving as a “profession”. This discursive work arguably masculinises caregiving, potentially undoing any damage caused by offering up a view of primary caregiving fathers as feminine.

The authors establish their location within traditional norms of masculinity in order for

their claims that primary caregiving is a legitimate and normative role for men to be taken as credible. However, proving one's membership to a category is not often simple, therefore membership often has to be worked up and achieved (Potter, 1996). The discursive work in this interpretative repertoire demonstrates the authors establishing and building up their category entitlements to traditional norms of masculinity – they are establishing their legitimate membership to this group despite what others might suggest due to their caregiving role.

Masculine caregiving

Even though men are departing from traditional norms of masculinity when they take on the primary caregiving role, a masculine caregiving repertoire is drawn on to argue that they do not simultaneously lose their masculinity. Fathers are constructed as providing care in a way that is uniquely masculine. The discursive work within this repertoire can be likened to Wetherell and Edley's (1999) argument that very few men reproduce or align themselves with hegemonic masculinity, but rather draw upon hegemonic values to demonstrate a departure from hegemony. Therefore, this next repertoire draws upon these masculine qualities in order to legitimise and normalise the caregiving role for fathers, as can be seen in the following quotes:

There's no doubt that playtime with Dad is a bit more physical than it is with my wife. I like to get down on my hands and knees and let the kids jump on my back like they're riding a horse. My wife is a bit too dainty to do that and prefers a less rough and tumble playtime when they're together (Mastin, 2010, p. 56-57)

Kids need to learn from playing, using their imagination, and even falling down. That's

what dads bring to the table (Schatz, 2009, p. 150)

Expect dads to do things differently from moms. Women ask for directions. Men use tools.

Face it, men and women *are* different, in their parenting styles as well as in other ways,

and their differences should be recognised and embraced (Gill, 2001, p. 50)

These three extracts exemplify how, despite primary caregiving fathers breaking away from traditional models of fathering, they embed masculine qualities within the caregiving role. For example, fathers are described using stereotypically masculine traits such as “hands on”, “physical”, “playful”, and that they “use tools”. Thus fathers are not being praised on their parenting skills, but on their ability to bring masculine qualities to the primary caregiving role. This repertoire was prominent throughout the books, so much so that even the title of one of the books *Captain Dad: The Manly Art of Stay-at-Home Parenting* (Byrnes, 2013) describes fathers providing primary care as an artistic demonstration of masculinity. It could be argued that the books suggest that a man is especially masculine if he is able to take on a traditionally feminine role, and make it masculine. Again, this is similar to Wetherell and Edley’s (1999) exploration of gender non-conformity. What is celebrated in these discourses is not that men are becoming less masculine, but that they are masculine enough to engage in these potentially belittling activities.

This idea of a masculine caregiving is further substantiated by a reliance on a gender essentialist argument. All three extracts draw on traditional essentialist notions that men and women have inherent and unique attributes due to their gender, and therefore, mothers and fathers have unique parenting styles. This idea can be seen, for example when Schatz (2009, p. 150) claims “that’s what dads bring to the table”, and when Gill (2001, p. 50) asserts that “men

and women *are* different”. However, attempts to dismantle currently accepted norms is a difficult task, and it is not surprising that these extracts draw on persuasive language such as “there’s no doubt” (Mastin 2010, pp. 56-57) and that we should “expect dads” (Gill, 2001, p. 50) to provide primary care differently to mothers. These extracts draw on empiricist repertoires of facticity (Potter, 1996) to persuade readers that this is not simply the account of the author, but that it is a well-known fact that fathers provide care in masculine ways. Interestingly, the books also drew upon this repertoire in order to manage direct threats to primary caregiving fathers’ masculinity:

I’m the guy in charge, and I’m doing this my way. The guy way. Don’t call me Mr. Mom
(Byrnes, 2013, p. v)

Among the various negative comments that at-home dads hear from people, the one they find the most annoying is being called Mr. Mom (Baylies & Toonkel 2004, p. 10)

These two extracts exemplify how primary caregiving fathers take issue with being labelled in ways that scrutinize their masculinity and suggest that they take on the role of a mother. Byrnes (2013) in the first extract emphasises this by arguing that these fathers are not male mothers, but are doing it the “guy way”. Here the author distinguishes that primary caregiving as a father is distinct from primary caregiving as a mother. Further, Baylies and Toonkel (2004) describe how being likened to a male mother is the worst insult for primary caregiving fathers. This significantly outlines how fathers seek to be categorised in a way that acknowledges their masculinity, rather than stripping them of it. Some authors sought to recategorise fathers using

“captain dad” (Byrnes, 2013), and “full time father” (Hallows, 2004). These categories include the fathers’ parental role, “dad” and “father”, combined with a hegemonic trait, “captain” and “full time” (the implication being full-time paid work outside of the home). The effect of using hegemonic qualities within the title highlights that primary caregiving can be masculine.

It is clear these books work hard to advocate that primary caregiving fathers are masculine, and seek to problematise threats to this masculinity. This repertoire of masculine caregiving establishes that it is possible for fathers to take on a traditionally feminine role and be considered masculine. However, through doing so, they may also potentially marginalise some fathers. The extracts analysed demonstrate that for fathers to be considered masculine within the primary caregiving role, they must not want to be considered similar to mothers. Therefore, fathers who do not feel their masculinity is threatened, and are happy to be, or want to be considered, similar to mothers, are at risk of being marginalised and considered unmasculine.

Inferiors to mothers

The analysis so far demonstrates the rhetorical work that functions to normalise and legitimise primary caregiving for men by positioning primary caregiving fathers as masculine. The books, nonetheless, orient toward men who are considering the primary caregiver role. That is, men who are, to varying degrees, breaking away from traditional, breadwinner, notions of fathering. Therefore the books cannot simply align primary caregiving fathers with hegemonic masculinity and traditional masculinities alone. The books must attend to the possibility that their readership may be engaging in a delicate negotiation between ideals of the new, involved father, and the traditional, breadwinner father. This is accomplished by drawing upon a repertoire of fathers as essentially inferior caregivers to mothers. The implication being that irrespective of what form of

masculinities or ideals a father aligns with, fathers who take on the primary caregiving role remain within normative boundaries of masculinity as they will always remain distinct and inferior to mothers. The following two quotes illustrate this point:

As strong as your bond may be with your son, always know that his mother's bond is equally great or stronger since she is the one who carried the child in her womb for nine months. That's a closeness that a father cannot duplicate, no matter what (Mastin, 2010, p. 102)

It is at this moment that I realise that role reversal perhaps doesn't work. Pretend as we might but it feels to me that there is something incredible unnatural about the situation playing out. Maybe children should be with their mothers (Robertson, 2012, p. 181)

In the first extract, fathers are positioned as incapable of having a bond with their child the way that a mother does, which is attributed to biology. This biological essentialist view of gender rests on the argument that there is a particular nature that belongs uniquely to "males" and "females", and which exhaustively explains differences in behaviour (Bem, 1993). This use of biological essentialism works to denaturalise male caregiving, and implies mothers as biologically superior caregivers. The rhetorical effect is that it masculinises male caregiving. Fathers, no matter how involved they are, can never approximate caregiving like a mother due to the "biological bond" mothers have. Whilst it may seem counterintuitive to present fathers as inferior when the aim of the books is to encourage fathers to take on this role, by suggesting fathers are inferior, the authors distinguish fathers as distinctly different from mothers. This

results in fathers being assured that regardless of how involved a caregiver they are, they will remain within normative masculine boundaries.

We can see how this is further accomplished in the second extract. By using language such as “unnatural”, fathers are positioned as not being the preferred caregiver. Fathers are also constructed in this extract as “pretend(ing)” when they take on this role. Mothers are positioned as the “natural” and “rightful” caregiver, and the implication then is that fathers can take this role on, but they will never approximate a mother. To ward off criticism, these claims are substantiated by drawing upon a discourse of heteronormativity. This is accomplished when the authors emphasise that children prefer mothers over fathers as their caregiver.

Children still turn to their mothers more often for comfort, no matter who the primary caregiver is (Baylies & Toonkel, 2004, p. 36)

This extract works to distinguish the categories of “primary caregiver” and “mother”. A father may take on the primary caregiver role, but he cannot replace the role of the mother. The books draw on the normative idea of mothers as the primary caregiver, and the extract presents this as something outside of control as it derives from the children themselves. This idea of children desiring a mother as the primary caregiver was drawn on throughout all of the books. One of the book titles *Daddy, Where’s Your Vagina? What I Learned as a Stay-at-Home Dad* (Schatz, 2009) illustrates how children are constructed as confused that fathers are providing the primary care, and also confused that their fathers are not mothers.

This discursive work exemplifies how the books present the notion that fathers can take on the primary caregiving role, but mothers remain the superior parent as a result of their

biological connection to their child(ren). As previously mentioned, this appears to be counterintuitive and potentially undermining of the main purpose of these books: that is to normalise and legitimise the role of fathers as primary caregivers. What is happening here is an inherent contradiction between ideologies of caregiving. The books simultaneously promote and discourage fathers as primary caregivers. This ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) demonstrates the complexity surrounding primary caregiving fathers. The contradiction and ambivalence toward fathers taking on this role exemplifies the shifting of normative understandings of fathering. The books are forced to negotiate with traditional, provider expectations of fathers as well as new, and involved expectations. Therefore positioning fathers as primary caregivers as both normative as well as transgressive demonstrates the challenge facing the authors. One way in which the books work to negotiate this ideological dilemma, as discussed in this final interpretative repertoire, is to suggest that it is acceptable and masculine for fathers to be primary caregivers, however, only if they are not too successful in the role. If a father were to be highly successful in the primary caregiving role, then he is approximating the role of a mother, positioning himself as feminine. As this is potentially demeaning, the books position fathers as inherently inferior as caregivers compared with mothers in order to ensure their masculine position.

Discussion

The analysis presented in this paper has explored the discursive and rhetorical strategies employed within books written for primary caregiving fathers. In particular, it has been argued that these books work to legitimise and normalise primary caregiving for men. The analysis presented demonstrates the complex and dilemmatic negotiations men face in relation to masculinities and their fathering identity. It can be argued that the books are written on the

premise of an ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988). They advocate for men as primary caregivers, therefore encouraging the introduction of a caring masculinity and a new and involved father. However, they are required to negotiate with expectations for fathers to be financial providers due to the enduring nature of hegemonic masculinity.

The first interpretative repertoire examined in this analysis demonstrated how the books present an honest account of what it means to be a primary caregiving father. This involved describing how fathers remain tied to the expectation that they should be financial providers, even when they take on the primary caregiving role. Through doing this, the books are able to demonstrate their credibility. However, this repertoire undermines their work to encourage and support fathers as primary caregivers. This finding is unique as no previous literature has explored constructions of fathers within texts written explicitly for primary caregiving fathers.

The remainder of the analysis explored three other interpretative repertoires that work to discursively undo the potential damage of reproducing and reinforcing the norm of fathers as financial providers. The established masculinity repertoire is drawn upon to convince readers that demonstrating an established masculinity prior to taking on the caregiver role ensures that one's masculinity is not brought into question, damaged, or revoked. This again, was a unique finding, although can be likened to empirical work that has identified primary caregiving fathers speaking of feeling "masculine enough" to take on what is considered a traditionally feminine role (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008; Wall & Arnold, 2007). What is celebrated in these discourses is not that men are taking on femininity, but that they are masculine enough to engage in these potentially belittling activities.

The books also drew on a repertoire that fathers have a uniquely masculine way of providing care, which worked to demonstrate that men are not feminine when in the primary

caregiver role, but can still exercise their masculinity. This is similar to Vuori (2009) and Sunderland's (2000) findings that fathers are welcomed to fatherhood; however masculinity is used as the entry point to engage fathers, constructing them as lively, physical and playful compared to mothers.

And finally, the books drew upon a repertoire of fathers as inferior caregivers to mothers, to ensure that irrespective of the form of masculinity that fathers approximate, they cannot be likened to mothers, and thus femininity. This is similar to previous analyses of parenting texts that have demonstrated that fathers are frequently positioned as helpers with less competence than mothers (Fleming & Tobin, 2005; Sunderland, 2000, 2006; Vuori, 2009; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Taken together, these four interpretative repertoires ensure that primary caregiving fathers can be positioned within the normative boundaries of hegemonic masculinity.

The aim of this analysis was to highlight the function of these books, and it found that these books work to normalise and legitimise primary caregiving for fathers. However, the books navigate and negotiate complex norms relating to fathering and masculinity in order to accomplish this aim. Another aim of this analysis, though, was to highlight the broader cultural implications of these constructions and positionings of primary caregiving fathers. At this broader level, the books analysed can be argued to reinforce and privilege hegemonic masculinity. It could be that the books achieve this simply because hegemonic masculinity is the widely accepted norm, therefore the authors are required to draw on it as a resource. However, what the books do is reinforce and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity as a norm, rather than challenge it. These books seek to normalise and legitimise primary caregiving, but they are, normalising and legitimising a form of masculinity that serves to subordinate such a role for men.

Importantly, it must be acknowledged that the sample was relatively small. Although identified as the most recent and popular books published made available for primary caregiving fathers, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of influence these books may have. Further, it is important to acknowledge that parenting texts are written specifically to sell, so we cannot know or speak to the authors' intentions. What is significant, however, is the similarities identified between the two types of books analysed. Drawing on both parenting manuals that are marketed as instruction guides, as well as books written as autobiographical narratives, it is surprising that there were no differences in the constructions of primary caregiving fathers. The only difference identified across these types of books was the way in which these constructions were worked up – through drawing on empirical research or anecdotal and personal experience, respectively. Both, however, rely on the claims and category entitlements made by experts on primary caregiving fathers.

To provide a fuller understanding of constructions of primary caregiving fathers, future research might utilise this critical psychological approach to analyse books written for fathers from different cultures, ethnicities, political contexts and social classes in order to determine if hegemonic masculinity is guiding understandings of what it means to be a primary caregiving father. Based on the complexity of the findings, it is important for future theorisations of fathering to pay close attention to how mothering is concurrently constructed and understood. Focusing on evolving and changing norms relating to fathering and masculinity need to be contextualised in what this means for the gendered divisions of carework, in order to determine if changes in masculinity actually contribute to shifting gender norms.

In conclusion, the books present an account that suggests very specific ways in which it is deemed appropriate for men to take on primary caregiving. Fathers must remain tied to their

financial provider role, they must demonstrate an established masculinity, they must provide care in a masculine way, and they must remain inferior caregivers to mothers. This has important implications for how we theorise and understand primary caregiving fathers. It is important that as researchers we focus on taking a critical approach to accounts that seek to encourage primary caregiving, as they can simultaneously produce accounts of primary caregiving that fits within norms of established hegemonic masculinity.

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