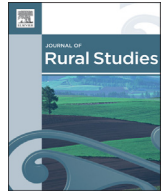


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# Masculinity and fathering in the lives of rural men with a disability<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the literature on masculinities and rurality, and masculinities and disability through interviews about fatherhood with 16 rural men with an acquired disability. In the context of shifting notions of fatherhood in broader society, and dominant discourses of rural and disabled masculinity, we explore interviewees' understandings and enactments of being a parent. We address the question of how rural fathers with a disability define fatherhood through reference to Gerschick and Miller's (1995) typology of reliance, rejection and reformulation. The majority of the men in the sample understood fatherhood via discourses of breadwinning, physicality, and the outdoors. We argue that these strategies of reliance on traditional discourses of masculinity have particularly negative implications for men with a disability living in rural areas, due to the nature of the rural economy, poor service provision and limited accessibility to facilities. In the final section of the paper, we turn to constructions of fatherhood articulated by four participants. These men adopt strategies of both reliance and reformulation. They incorporate dimensions of hegemonic masculinity into their definition of parenthood, while simultaneously encompassing more normatively feminised practices and spaces.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper, which explores rural fatherhood for men with an acquired disability, is embedded in two areas of literature that have rarely been in conversation. These are: scholarship on rural men and masculinity, and men with a disability and masculinity. In the former literature, a key theme has been the intersecting and reinforcing nature of hegemonic discourses of masculinity and rurality (Cloke, 2005). Practicality, strength, technological expertise, physicality, competence in the natural environment, resilience and toughness inform both conventional definitions of rurality and conventional definitions of masculinity (Brandth, 2000; Bye, 2009; Pini, 2008). In the latter area of research, it has been the antithetical and contradictory nature of hegemonic discourses of masculinity and disability, which have been a central focus for researchers (Shuttleworth et al., 2012). Against dominant socio-cultural

constructions of the masculine subject, is that of the disabled subject as weak, dependent and passive (Loeser, 2015; Gerschick and Miller, 1995; Shakespeare, 1999).

How men with a disability negotiate the discursive tension in constructions of disability and masculinity or traverse what Shuttleworth et al. (2012) label 'the dilemma of disabled masculinity,' has been of significant interest to scholars. Highly cited in this regard is Thomas Gerschick and Adam Miller's (1995) typology derived from interviews with ten physically disabled men. They contended that men with a disability adopt one of three strategies as a means of 'coming to terms' with masculinity and disability as normatively defined (Gerschick and Miller, 1995: 183). The first strategy, reliance, involves a continued adherence to conventional configurations of masculinity. The second strategy, rejection, is characterised by the renunciation of idealised notions of masculinity and potentially the denial of the importance of masculinity to one's identity. The final strategy, that of reformulation, entails adopting a mode of masculinity which involves a tactical recalibration of hegemonic masculinity that is consistent with a man's resources and capacities. Despite being widely used, Gerschick and Miller's (1995) categorisation is not without limitations. Shuttleworth et al. (2012) and Barrett (2014) point out that: the authors formulated interviews according to a pre-defined, trait-based notion of hegemonic masculinity; provided little context about the lives of their participants;

<sup>☆</sup> This paper reports on data from a larger study of disability in rural Australia. The larger project included a specific study of Indigenous rural people with a disability. This was conducted by other members of the research team (see Grech and Soldatic, 2015a, b).

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and did not always clearly distinguish between participant strategies of reformulation and rejection.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Gerschick and Miller's (1995) notions of men with a disability relying, rejecting or reformulating masculinity have proved to be useful ways of understanding the gendered lives of disabled men (e.g. Coles, 2008; Lipenga, 2014; Loeser, 2015). We thus use their categorisation as a rubric in investigating how fatherhood, as a key signifier of masculinity (Whitehead, 2002), is enacted by 16 rural men with an acquired disability. We begin the paper by situating the study in the literature on fathering and masculinities. Following this, we provide an overview of our methodology and introduce the study's participants. We then explore the two dominant discourses through which the majority of men in the sample constituted fatherhood, that is, via breadwinning and via sports, physicality and the outdoors. We argue that these strategies of reliance on traditional discourses of masculinity in defining fatherhood have particularly negative implications for men with a disability living in rural areas, as employment opportunities and access to sports and the outdoors are circumscribed. Thereafter, reformulated constructions of fatherhood articulated by four participants are detailed. In these alternative constructions, the men perform fatherhood in new spaces and via new activities which have been more traditionally associated with femininity.

## 2. "New" fatherhood, rurality and disability

This paper understands fatherhood as a 'gender practice' (Creighton et al., 2014: 2). Fatherhood is a resource for enacting masculinity, while masculinity informs the enactment of fatherhood (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 44). As such, gender theorists have been particularly interested in mapping changes in fathering, and in understanding what these changes mean for gendered power relations between men and women, and between groups of men. Such changes have been encapsulated in the commonly utilised nomenclature 'new father' (Brandth, 2012; Miller, 2010). As the term suggests, being a male parent is changing. According to Eerola and Huttunen (2011: 211), the 'meta-narrative' of the 'new father' is involvement, emotional intimacy, participation, nurturing and care. However, what this means in terms of masculinity is not straightforward. For example, Brannen and Nilsen (2006: 347) report that despite discursive change around other aspects of masculine parenting, the notion of the 'work-focused father' continues to permeate ideas about masculinity. Thus, fathers may incorporate breadwinning into a discourse of care and involvement so that, despite a more expansive definition of fatherhood, past ideologies of masculinity remain intact (Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001). Similarly, new ideas about fatherhood may be integrated into conventional norms about masculinity, as fathers stress child care but undertake this labour in outdoor physical pursuits which require strength and physical ability (Brandth and Kvande, 1998). A 'new' type of fatherhood and a 'new' type of masculinity are thus not necessarily supplanting the 'old', but co-existing or competing with the 'old'.

Seeking to understand the extent to which shifts in discourses of fatherhood represent continuities or disruptions in conventional masculinities becomes more complex when attention is afforded to variations between fathers (e.g. Farstad and Stefansen, 2015; Lesch and Scheffler, 2015). Of such variations, very little work has considered geographical context. Rural geographers have sometimes bumped into fatherhood in the course of their research, but seldom has it been a key focus for analysis. Illustrative is the detailed ethnographic work by Trell et al. (2012; 2014a; 2014b) with rural young men in Estonia. The youth perform rural masculinity in ways that have been well rehearsed in the literature, that is, through

engaging with and controlling the natural environment, and by demonstrating endurance in tough and rough outdoor conditions. However, the authors note that there are some fissures in conventional scripts of rural masculinity adopted by the young men. They express a commitment to sharing household labour and convey a desire to be an involved father. Similarly, Aure and Munkejord (2015) report that fatherhood emerges as a key theme in interviews with eighteen male newcomers in northern rural Norway. In delineating fatherhood, participants valorise breadwinning. However, demonstrating the intersecting nature of 'old' and 'new' fatherhood discourses, they also deploy notions of involvement, domestic work and care as they discuss what it means to be a male parent.

In contrast to the studies cited above, Creighton et al. (2014) and Brandth and Overrein (2013) and Brandth (2016) address questions of fathering and masculinity in rural spaces overtly. Creighton et al. (2014: 2) draw on interview data to compare and contrast the fathering of men in urban and rural Canada noting the paucity of literature on 'how places influence father identity work'. The authors report that all fathers emphasise active play but the type of play and the meanings given to the play differ significantly. In the urban, play is supervised and organised and viewed as important for developing confidence and promoting development. In the rural, play is associated with pursuits such as hunting, fishing and climbing, and is viewed by fathers as important to building capacities for a successful future rural life and rural identity (particularly for boys). Rural fathers also differed from their urban counterparts in that they had a gendered approach to domestic and familial labour, characterising their fatherhood care as 'help'.

Brandth and Overrein (2013) and Brandth (2016) add to this picture of rural fathering by drawing on interviews with two generations of Norwegian farming men. The oldest of the interviewees were born in the 1940s, while the youngest (their sons) were born in the 1960s and early 1970s. In both studies the authors identify differences in fathering between the two groups. For the older generation, time was spent with children alongside farm work, which was understood as necessary preparation for future agricultural careers. Younger farming men are less likely to engage their children in farm work and instead undertake father/child activities of interest to their offspring, such as music or sport. Three further insights can be gleaned from this work. First, as Brandth and Overrein (2013: 108) report, the 'norms of intensive parenting' as demanded by 'new' fatherhood, are evident in the narratives of the younger generation. Second, the spaces and activities that have traditionally defined rural masculinity continue to play a significant role in the fathering of younger men, but are attributed different meanings which allow these men to be reconciled with the discourses of the 'new' father. For example, modern fathers continue to hunt with their children as their own fathers did with them, but they imbue the practice with 'nurturance, compassion and emotionality' (Brandth, 2016: 447). Finally, adding nuance to their findings, Brandth and Overrein (2013) remind us that shifts in fathering discourses enunciated by participants need to be contextualised by other discursive and material changes. These include new understandings of the child and childhood, the restructuring of agriculture and the greater use of technology on farms.

The still-limited literature on rural fathering outlined above is nevertheless substantial in comparison with studies of disability, masculinity, and fathering. As Kilkey and Clarke (2010: 132) conclude in reviewing the literature, 'disability as a dimension of difference among fathers has received little or no attention'. In seeking to redress this lacuna in research, they report on data from two studies of British fathers with a range of physical, sensory, learning and psychiatric disabilities. They explain that men with a disability, like able-bodied men, view breadwinning as important to fathering, but the experience of disability as well as structural

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