



# Ideological dilemmas in accounts of primary caregiving fathers in Australian news media



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## ABSTRACT

Norms and expectations regarding fathers are changing, with fathers now expected to be more involved in caregiving. One consequence of this is an increase in fathers who assume the primary caregiving role. The study reported in this paper involved a discourse analysis of 176 Australian newspaper articles that focused on primary caregiving fathers. Three recurring interpretative repertoires pertaining to primary caregiving fathers were identified, suggesting contradictory and dilemmatic accounts of this role. These were: (1) advocating for primary caregiving fathers, (2) comparing the past and present, and (3) barriers to father involvement. Overall, when describing the “typical” father who provides primary care, the articles promoted the evolving cultural ideal of fathers as involved and nurturing caregivers, however they nonetheless justified continued gendered inequalities in parenting. Therefore, despite claims that new models of fathering are encouraged and promoted in western cultures, the analysis demonstrates that media accounts construct and reproduce hegemonic masculinity. The paper concludes by suggesting that a more critical lens should be applied to claims of support for greater father involvement, as despite structural and social support in favour of involved fathering, this support is comprised of contradictory elements that simultaneously undermine this emerging ideal.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, what are seen as seismic shifts with regard to father involvement have been of increased academic and cultural interest (Doucet and Merla, 2007; Duckworth and Buzzanell, 2009; Latshaw and Hale, 2015; Rochlen et al., 2008b). In particular, there has been a focus on the growing number of fathers who assume a primary caregiving role, referring specifically to men in heterosexual relationships who take the lead in providing day-to-day care for their children (Chesley, 2011). Such fathers, it has been suggested, break away from the traditionally held assumption that fathers are the “secondary” parent, where caregiving is predominantly considered “women’s work” (Fleming and Tobin, 2005; Maurer and Pleck, 2006).

To date, research on primary caregiving fathers has focused on exploring (1) what motivates men to take on the primary caregiving role, (2) negative reactions and attitudes toward men who undertake this role, (3) the various coping strategies such men use when faced with negativity, and (4) how they negotiate their

fathering and masculine identity (e.g., Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Chesley, 2011; Doucet and Merla, 2007; Dunn et al., 2013; Fischer and Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2011; Latshaw and Hale, 2015; Rochlen et al., 2008a; Rochlen et al., 2008b). Understandably, much of this research has focused on constructions of masculinity amongst primary caregiving fathers given paid work – and the assumption that men will be financial providers – has long been understood as fundamental to the fathering identity (Hanlon, 2012; Medved, 2016; Petroski and Edley, 2006; Whelan and Lally, 2002).

This subject position of father-as-provider legitimates a socially valued form of masculinity and therefore can be viewed as hegemonic. As such, and despite ambiguity and debate surrounding the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Edley and Wetherell, 1995; Speer, 2001; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), it is a theoretically useful tool for conceptualising the experiences of primary caregiving fathers. Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as an ideology that mandates certain forms of masculinity as most laudable, in comparison to all women and men who are depicted as effeminate (Connell, 1987). Few men achieve the hegemonic ideal, of course, however all are measured against it (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Plantin et al., 2003). This is perhaps espe-

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cially true for primary caregiving fathers who step away from the financial provider role, who are then by default located outside the hegemonic norm for fathering.

In order to account for how primary caregiving fathers negotiate a place within the hegemonic norm, the notion of a “caring masculinity” has emerged to account for how contemporary fathers are encouraged to explore a more nurturing and caregiving aspect of their fathering identity (Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2015; Elliott, 2015). The idea of a “new” father has been extensively discussed in the literature, and there is considerable emphasis on the benefits of a father who is attentive, caring, and involved (Henwood and Procter, 2003). For primary caregiving fathers, the idea of a “caring masculinity” both offers them a space within a new norm, whilst still positioning them as outside the more traditional hegemonic position of the father-as-provider (Medved, 2016).

One cultural site where tensions between a caring masculinity and more traditionally hegemonic masculinities are evident is in the media. Popular culture plays a significant role in the production of discourse, which in turn can create pressures and expectations that men must navigate (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Necessary, then, is research that considers how discourses of fathering are constructed and reproduced in the media, and the implications of such discourses. The present paper thus reports on a discourse analysis of Australian news media reports focused on primary caregiving fathers. Before presenting the analysis, an overview is first provided of previous research on primary caregiving fathers in the media.

## 2. Previous research on primary caregiving fathers in the media

Lupton and Barclay (1997) argue that news media constitutes a crucial source of information on fatherhood. How fathers construct ideas of what it means to be a father is largely based on what intelligible identities are made available to them. The media is one site in which regulatory notions of what is appropriate, expected, and normal with regard to fatherhood are presented (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). Despite the media’s claims to objectively report on world events, these accounts should more properly be understood as social constructions, drawing upon existing norms and available discourses (Eldridge, 1993). The discourses deployed in these accounts have repercussions and consequences, often not intended or understood by the writer (Wetherell and Potter, 1988). It is therefore important to examine the ideological consequences of how primary caregiving fathers are constructed.

Even though research has documented the positive effects of involved fatherhood (Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005), a relative lack of fatherhood presence within the media reinforces the long standing assumption that fathers are secondary, and sometimes, unnecessary, to the caregiving process (Schmitz, 2016). For example, a study by Winter and Pauwels (2006) analysed all newspaper articles focused on primary caregiving fathers published in 2004 in Canada. They identified how the articles focus on both current and previous paid employment when describing primary caregiving fathers, highlighting the need to demonstrate an “other”, more traditionally masculine, role. Similarly, Liong’s (2015) study of representations of primary caregiving fathers within Hong Kong newspapers found that such fathers were depicted as remaining tied to the public sphere, especially middle-to-upper class fathers. This connection to the public sphere, while undertaking the primary caregiving role, served to position these fathers as aspiring to return to paid employment, demonstrating that they were still invested in their provider role, thus demonstrating a legitimate and socially valued masculinity. This provider ideology was not challenged within the news articles examined by Liong, instead,

it was used to praise primary caregiving fathers for their sacrifice to giving up their economic power and careers.

In the limited research conducted on Australian media representations, Stevens (2015) found that primary caregiving is not framed as a personal choice for fathers, but instead results from circumstances. The news excerpts examined by Stevens suggested that if it were not for structural constraints or economic hardships, primary caregiving fathers would prefer to be financial providers. Overall, the news media examined by Stevens emphasised the traditionally masculine attributes of primary caregiving fathers, specifically by framing involved fathering as an addition to paid employment. Therefore, the ideal image of a contemporary father is one who is both a financial provider and an involved father (Stevens).

Whilst the present study is situated within the broader context of research that has been conducted in a variety of countries, this does not suggest an aim to identify a universal construction or experience of all primary caregiving fathers. There are limitations inherent in attempting to draw comparisons across different national and cultural contexts, as fathering is constructed through specific social, cultural and historical contexts. As such, the study reported here sought to further focus on news media representations of primary caregiving fathers within the Australian context, reflecting as they likely do the specificities of Australian discourses, policies and practices with regard to fathering, as will be discussed later in this paper.

## 3. Method

The data examined in this study are derived from news media accounts of primary caregiving fathers. Articles that focused specifically on the lives and experiences of these fathers were included for analysis: articles that only fleetingly mentioned them were excluded. Further, it was decided to exclude the search term “house husbands” due to the number of articles retrieved relating to the popular Australian television series *House Husbands*. Such articles focused largely or exclusively on the actors, ratings, season renewals, etc. of this series, and were therefore not deemed relevant for this analysis.

A search was conducted of all Australian newspapers within the Factiva database. The articles analysed were sourced from the two major Australian publically-listed newspaper proprietors (Fairfax and News Ltd), which represent the political left – right spectrum of newsprint journalism in Australia respectively. The following search terms were used: “stay-at-home dads”, “stay at home dads”, “stay-at-home fathers”, “stay at home fathers”, “caregiving dads”, “caregiving fathers”, “men who mother”, “Mr. Mom”, and “Mr. Mum”. These search terms are the most commonly used terms as identified by the academic literature reviewed in the introduction to the present paper. The search was restricted to articles published over a 5 year period, between 1st January 2012 and 20th October 2016.

In total, 351 articles were found using these criteria. After excluding 101 articles due to being duplicates, and excluding articles that were not relevant, 176 articles remained for analysis.

### 3.1. Analytic approach

There are many forms of discourse analysis, but all share a concern with the meanings that people negotiate in social interaction, and the ways in which everyday talk is shaped by cultural forces (Gough and McFadden, 2001). This paper draws on discourse analysis in a way that focuses on the socially constructed nature of fathering. Such an approach enables the analysis to capture the complex, inconsistent, and contradictory accounts of masculinity

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