

## *Introduction*

Recently, I was queuing in a large department store in a nearby city when I noticed that a sizeable crowd of people had gathered in a circle just beyond the checkout. When I craned my neck to see what had caused this amount of interest I was met with the sight of a father sitting on a chair bottle feeding his young baby. The crowd, mostly older women, were smiling admiringly and making enquiries as to the age of the infant, whilst I was struck by how *invisible* this activity would have been if it had been a mother sitting on the chair bottle feeding her infant: it would hardly have registered as people went about their shopping. But then fathers seem to be everywhere at the moment in the UK – in the press, in political party pledges, in policies and in public places and spaces – as visible displays of doing fathering become more common place and everyday. Ideas of more emotionally expressive men have become associated with ideals of involved, caring fatherhood as conjured up in media images of fathers such as David Beckham and Brad Pitt. Yet ideas and practices around fathering, just like mothering, have always been subject to change, and research has illuminated its diverse historical, cultural and social dimensions. But continuities, too, can be traced. For example, whilst we will see that the fathering expectations and practices of the men in this book are different to those of their own fathers, paid work remains a significant factor in all the men's lives and this is shared *across* the generations. The contemporary Western context in which fathering is experienced and fatherhood understood is, then, one of change *and* continuities *and* optimism. The optimism springs from the concurrence and overlapping of a number of shifts in societal structures and features, which appear to herald, and make possible, new opportunities for men's engagement in fathering practices in the UK.

This book is written as a companion text to an earlier work on motherhood, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (Miller, 2005), and in response to a question regularly asked in relation to

this earlier research – ‘what about the fathers?’. The two studies have followed the same longitudinal trajectory capturing, this time round, men’s narratives of transition to first-time fatherhood as these have unfolded. An overarching question has been to explore how men make sense of this period of transition and how this is similar to and/or different to the women becoming mothers in the earlier study. Fathering and societal ideas about fatherhood clearly exist in relation to societal ideas about mothering and motherhood. But these can be quite differently conceived and although contingent they do not exactly mirror one another: which is not to say that men lack a capacity to do the caring necessary to raise a child – as many men in a range of circumstances have demonstrated. But whilst more mothers now take up paid work outside the home this has not been matched by an equivalent number of men remaining at home taking on primary responsibility for childcare and/or domestic chores. The reasons for this are complex – and sometimes more straightforward – as will be seen across the chapters of this book. They encompass embedded gendered practices around caring responsibilities, policies related to work and family life, personal choices, and lack of choice and power. Exploring and illuminating the ways in which these areas come together and shape expectations, practices and experiences of first-time fatherhood provides a key focus in this book. The book also addresses questions which have arisen in other recent scholarship on fathering and so explores the ways in which ‘the processes of women and men “doing gender” within households’ become practised and how any ‘gender differences are articulated and justified’ by the men as new fathers (Doucet, 2006: 228; Dermott, 2008: 77). Gender, then, provides an important conceptual lens through which the men’s unfolding experiences of new fatherhood are explored.

Researching and writing about men and fatherhood can be a tricky endeavour for all sorts of reasons: and there are numerous caveats I would want to place around this work whilst also celebrating the unique insights into gendered processes and practices the research makes visible. Fatherhood and its associated responsibilities and practices are not so clearly defined or morally ‘policed’ as motherhood. Even so, dominant and recognisable discourses of the ‘good’, involved contemporary father as noted earlier are now more prevalent and discernible across many Western societies (see chapters 1 and 2). These normative visions of fatherhood tend to conjure up images of men

who are employed, partnered, present and intending to stay and where fatherhood fits temporally into an adult life-course so that (particularly economic) responsibilities for a child can be met. Clearly, many other ways of being a father are also possible and can be successful but these other ways are also likely to be more subject to scrutiny and/or problematised in policy (e.g., see Duncan *et al.*, 2010). The men whose experiences of becoming a father run through this book in many ways conform to the normative vision and discourse of the good, involved father outlined above. They are all employed in a wide range of skilled jobs that would mostly position them as middle-class, they are partnered (some are married) and they mostly regard becoming a father as a culturally recognisable stage in an adult life-course. They are also white (several are in ethnically mixed partnerships/marriages) and heterosexual and they are the biological fathers of their children. Their structural location and access to resources and corresponding choices are greater than those in less advantaged groups might enjoy (Miller, 2007). Yet it is because this group of men are so readily identified with normative ideals of the ‘good’ father and assumed practices of caring involvement that their particular experiences – and how these are understood, practised and voiced – are of interest. What do their unfolding and complex accounts of impending and actual fatherhood tell us about individual, masculinist practices of agency and caring, the contours of their involvement and how paternal identities are individually understood and managed? If the circumstances of these men’s lives appear to present them with more possibilities and position them as most able to take up new initiatives such as parental and paternity leave and share caring in more equal ways, what actually happens at the everyday, household level? How is agency manifested and who is left holding the baby?

By taking a qualitative, longitudinal approach and focusing intensively on a group of seventeen men as they anticipate and then become fathers for the first time the findings from this study reveal both individual and collective practices and, most importantly, illuminate the intricacies and complexities of doing gender.<sup>1</sup> In turn, these findings are analysed and (in chapter 6) set alongside some of the data from the

<sup>1</sup> This was a self-selected sample resulting from a requirement set by the Oxford Brookes University research ethics committee that potential participants must opt into the study (see chapters 1 and 7 for further details).

earlier transition to motherhood study, providing compelling insights into gendered practices and narrations. This book, then, contributes to wider contemporary debates on men, fathering and masculinities by making an innovative and ultimately revealing contribution to this complex area. The findings go beyond simplified categorisations and representations of men as fathers and the fine-grained focus reveals how gender plays out in early parenting amongst this group of men in complex ways. And whilst the findings will be recognisable to many fathers (and mothers) – and have been when the data have been presented in different forums – they could not be and should not be generalised to all fathers. Similarly this book focuses upon a very particular, intense period as fatherhood and fathering relationships are anticipated and then established for the first time and it is acknowledged that these relationships will surely undergo change as children grow, other children are born and personal biographies and lives shift. Relationships will not just change over time but may also feel shaped in significant ways by the sex of the child. Other individual, couple and life circumstances will also mediate paternal relationships and practices of involvement and their possibility within lives that are lived in a wide array of social circumstances that also shift. But a notable and resilient thread running across much of the literature, and which overrides class, ethnicity and age, is many fathers' stated desire and intention of 'being there' for their child: yet as other research shows, complicated – and sometimes chaotic – lives can get in the way of this being achieved and/or sustained.

This book, as the book on motherhood before it, is written with the intention and hope of reaching a wide audience beyond the discipline of sociology from which it primarily emanates. It is anticipated that as well as being relevant to an academic and policy audience the book's focus on 'gender' (chapter 2) and subsequently how gender shapes men's (and women's) lives, choices and parenting practices, will be of use to those working in NGOs where gender mainstreaming is a prominent policy initiative, as well as to other practitioners and service providers. Importantly it is also hoped that men who are fathers or are anticipating becoming a father – or are just curious about this thing called fatherhood – will also find the rich, sometimes profound and sometimes humorous narratives of transition that are woven through the chapters both illuminating and thought-provoking. For comparative purposes the format of this book follows closely (but not exactly) that of the earlier motherhood book. The theoretical and conceptual

framework is set out across the first two chapters and includes an overview of contemporary debates around fatherhood, caring, gender, paid work and masculinities. These areas are then illuminated further using the empirical data across the subsequent three chapters. As outlined above, the next chapter (chapter 6) brings together data from both transition studies. The theoretical considerations – particularly related to what the findings enable us to say about ‘doing’ and ‘undoing gender’ – are returned to in the final, concluding chapter alongside reflections on the methodological issues which have arisen during the course of the study.

Across the chapters key concepts and terms have been used and definitions of these now follow. This book, just as the motherhood book before it, is set against the backdrop of ‘late modernity’ (see chapter 1). This setting refers to contemporary society as a period which can be characterised by more rapid changes than in the previous period. A feature of these changes and transformations is that new possibilities are invoked – especially in relation to gender – as (some) individuals are seen to be less tethered to traditional, gendered ways of being. Contemporary fatherhoods and paternal identities are considered against this transformational backdrop (see chapters 1, 2 and 7) and specifically through the lens of ‘gender’ (see chapter 2). The term ‘caring’ features liberally throughout the chapters and is used in a generic way to refer to men’s descriptions of meeting the needs of a new and growing baby through hands-on practices, activities and emotional thinking, commitment and responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘nurturing’ is used much less because of its associations with physically breastfeeding a baby. ‘Involvement’ is used to refer to men’s practices of caring, which range across hands-on involvement and sole responsibility for periods of caring, to their own perceptions of involvement as providing economically for their children and/ or just being physically present. Against the backdrop of late modernity, modern fatherhoods are shaped by ‘discourses’ and articulated in relation to these. Discourses are the societal visions of how things should be: individual lives often do not fit with these normative ideals but nevertheless dominant, gendered discourses are hard to escape as life events (becoming a father) are anticipated and everyday lives articulated in ways that

<sup>2</sup> It is recognised that ‘caring’ can be conceptualised in more nuanced and complex ways – for example, as components of an ‘ethic of care’ as in the writings of Fisher and Tronto (1990).

are culturally recognisable and socially acceptable (see chapter 1). The term ‘fathering’ refers to the personal individual experiences that men have as they engage in fathering practices whilst ‘fatherhood’ refers to the wider societal context in which fathering takes place and which is usually conjured up and reinforced through discourses – for example, the contemporary discourse of the ‘good’, involved father. Fatherhood, then, like motherhood, is a socially constructed category which is shaped by and through an amalgam of political, social, cultural and historical antecedents and contemporary concerns. Interestingly, whilst the ‘myths of motherhood’ denote the ways in which individual mothering experiences so often do not resonate with the category ‘motherhood’, an equivalent gulf has not (so far) been articulated in relation to a misfit between individual fathering experiences and the category ‘fatherhood’. Some of the men’s narratives, woven across the empirical chapters of this book, provide insights into why this might be the case.

The contemporary context, then, in which men come to fatherhood could be described as more fluid than in previous times and so offering new possibilities. But it also remains deeply etched with the legacies of particular forms of masculinities alongside gendered notions of who does caring, especially for new babies and young children. Thus, seeing men engaged in some aspects of caring that has for so long been ‘naturally’ associated with women can still be regarded as novel and/or out of place as noted at the outset of this introduction. Yet for those men who want to take on a more hands-on caring – or even primary – responsibility for their child there can be obstacles too. As already seen, paternal identities and practices remain less distinct when set beside easily recognised – ‘natural’ – maternal spheres of assumed knowledge and practice: but this lack of recognition and ‘natural’ association can also make it easier for men to opt out. What follows, then, is a group of men’s narratives of transition as they first anticipate and then set about being a new father and doing fathering. Their journeys, which are similar and varied, emotionally charged, frustrating, rewarding, depressing and ultimately (mostly) life changing, illuminate just how deeply practices of caring for our children are shaped by and through gender. But ways of doing gender differently are also optimistically glimpsed through these rich, unfolding accounts of transition.

# 1 *Gendered lives and caring responsibilities*

## *An overview*

I think in terms of the kind of era thing, I think, yeah, it's almost more acceptable now to be, you know, a man, a male, showing your emotions.  
(Mike)

This book explores the journeys of a group of men into first-time fatherhood in the UK. It does so at a time when discussions about men and their involvement in family lives – or lack of involvement – continue to occupy political debate, newspaper column inches and of course individual and family lives too. Whilst so much around women's lives and motherhood is simplistically assumed, taken for granted and unquestioned, the relationship between men and fatherhood is seen as more problematic: requiring definition, 'claims' and other interventions in order to shape its visibility (or deny it), its dimensions and direction. The parameters of fatherhood are, then, less clearly drawn when set beside those which powerfully and morally encompass motherhood. But both are shaped by the 'choices' and constraints in which gendered lives are lived and which converge on the domains of the home and paid work. These domains provide the settings in which many of the responsibilities associated with motherhood and fatherhood – caring and providing – have been understood and practised. Yet these responsibilities and the ways in which they are understood and undertaken are not fixed but rather configured in relation to complex structural, cultural and gendered conditions in an historical moment. In discourses of modern fatherhood in the UK men's involvement in caring for their children has been positioned as (ideally) 'emotionally engaged', 'involved', 'active', 'sensitive', 'intimate' and 'positive' rather than as previously characterised more exclusively in relation to economic provision and the 'breadwinner role' or indeed absence. Such shifts correspond to more nuanced and critical understandings of masculinities and male identities together with other transformations in

late modernity: but this is a complex, congested and shifting landscape. The ways in which lives are lived and men and women as mothers and fathers care for their children emanates from deeply embedded, 'durable', practices in which biological assumptions, patriarchy and power remain explicitly or implicitly woven together (McNay, 2000). Whilst shifts in discourses and policies may imply change, research findings continue to highlight entrenched and gendered practices in the division of domestic labour and paid work between the 'logic of cash and care' (Hobson, 2002). It is little wonder, then, that ambivalence and contradictory messages can characterise men's and women's experiences of caring and providing for their children. But what can an examination of the contours of modern fatherhoods and, importantly, a group of men's understandings and experiences of these tell us about how agency and gender are woven through and practised in this arena? How do choices and constraints operate alongside ideas of fathering 'responsibilities' to facilitate, restrict or deny possibilities in men's lives as they become fathers? And how are these understood in relation to motherhood? These questions form the overarching themes addressed across the book which, importantly, has at its core men's voices as they draw upon different discourses and narrate their experiences of transition through first-time fatherhood.

### **Researching men's lives**

This book is written by a woman who is an academic, a mother and a feminist and who likes men. The research began with an optimistic belief that men can do the sort of caring for a child that we associate more usually with women as mothers in many Western societies: this is not a view shared by all feminists and/or those who wish to prioritise the mother-child relationship. The research was also undertaken at a time that seems to offer more possibilities and opportunities to men as fathers, as policies and traditional ideas are shifting, albeit in slow and uneven ways. The research involved many hours of listening to men talk about their hopes and fears as they anticipated fatherhood and subsequently engaged in early fathering for the first time. The data generated across the longitudinal research returned me to the academically theorised and familiar areas of patriarchy, equality, difference, power and contestation but in the unfamiliar position of writing about and representing men's voices. This led me to consciously prioritise the



focus on men and fatherhood, avoiding the oft-felt temptation to add ‘and mothers too’ or ‘what about women?’ At times I felt unease in this experientially foreign land, aware that some might feel that I have ‘sold out’ and others that I have no platform from which to speak (Doucet, 2006; Dermott, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). Notwithstanding this, the research involved me in a much closer reading of the growing literature on masculinities and the rich, longitudinal interview data provided more nuanced understandings of how different men in different ways make sense of, and negotiate, the terrain of modern fatherhoods. But I remain aware at all times that I am treading a difficult pathway through the highly contested areas of equality and difference in men’s and women’s lives around caring for our children. My overarching aim, then, was to listen closely to men’s accounts through their transition and to present these unfolding narratives across the chapters in this book, whilst recognising the struggles which have implicitly and explicitly circumscribed women’s ‘historical connection to care giving’ and men’s exclusion from it (Doucet, 2006: 29).

### Setting the context

In recent academic and popular literature fatherhood has been described as ‘in crisis’ and as a ‘work in progress’ as men as fathers have ‘become central figures on the policy agenda’ amidst debate about whether this ‘is a good thing’ and questions around ‘what fatherhood is’ and the ‘future of fatherhood’ (Hobson and Morgan, 2002; Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006; Featherstone, 2009; Hochschild, 1995; Lewis, 2000; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000; Gregory and Milner, 2005; Lloyd *et al.*, 2003; Williams, 2008). Noted, too, has been an increased emphasis on ‘caring’ and ‘involved fatherhood’ discourses, signalling an apparent ‘detraditionalisation of fatherhood’ – and gender more generally – and emphasising the ‘rising cultural importance of hands-on fathering’ (Sanchez and Thomson, 1997: 750). In turn this has drawn attention to the ‘competing narratives of fatherhood’ that are now more apparent and available (Morgan, 2002: 278; Wall and Arnold 2007; Knijn and Selten, 2002; O’Brien, 2005; Vuori, 2009). Yet Lewis and O’Brien noted in the 1980s that ‘discussion of the “new father” far outweighs evidence to demonstrate his existence’ and so a concern within this book is to see how far changes have occurred in practical terms (Lewis and O’Brien, 1987: 3; Williams, 2008). More recent

research findings have, for example, shown that men can experience difficulties in ‘being both provider and supportive partner and home builder’ (Henwood, 2001; Henwood and Proctor, 2003), and that categorising resident fathers ‘as either good providers or active carers fails to properly describe modern fatherhood’ which is much more complex and multidimensional (Smith, 2007; Hearn *et al.*, 2006). This growing body of literature underscores the complex and contradictory landscape of contemporary fatherhood within which an assortment of father ‘types’ are included and appealed to, from ‘biological’ to ‘non-resident’ through ‘absent’, ‘gay’, ‘adoptive’, ‘teenage’, ‘social’ and ‘stepfather’, married, unmarried, living in ‘intact families’ or apart or in other configurations. These descriptions and definitions emanate from and reflect policy and legal concerns and individual practices (Collier, 2001; Duncan *et al.*, 2010). What is beyond doubt is that many men have become much more *visibly* involved in child-related activities. In this changing context, theorisations of men’s lives and masculinities have also become more critically and sensitively focused upon (Connell, 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This has resulted in a move away from the idea of ‘a single model of unified masculinity’ and has precipitated consideration of aspects of men’s lives as fathers and associated constructions of fatherhood (Morgan, 2002: 280; Vuori, 2009). The connections between these – masculine identities, fatherhoods and fathering practices – have been explored in relation to structural conditions – for example, employment practices and models of welfare – together with cultural, familial and individual understandings of caring responsibilities and practices (Hobson, 2002; Hearn *et al.*, 2006; Dermott, 2008; Rossi, 2006; see chapter 2). Reflecting upon these shifts, which are discernible in uneven ways across Europe, it has recently been noted that whilst ‘traditional “solutions” in domestic arrangements’ continue there is also a ‘growing recognition of the micro-politics of fatherhood, domestic responsibilities and homework reconciliation *for at least some men*’ (Hearn *et al.*, 2006: 43, emphasis added). These observations suggest that adopting a finer focus could reveal change – and the processes at work – at an individual and everyday level of practice: illuminating the ‘micro-politics’ and ‘reconciliations’ which shape, and are shaped through, individual lives and which form the focus of men’s experiences of fatherhood in this book.