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Hegemonic masculinity vs. a caring masculinity: Implications for understanding primary caregiving fathers

Sarah Hunter

The University of Adelaide

Damien W. Riggs

Flinders University

Martha Augoustinos

The University of Adelaide

Abstract

Recently there has been growing interest in what is positioned as a new form of masculinity arising from the increase in fathers as primary caregivers. This new form is referred to as a ‘caring masculinity’, and is theorised as a radical shift away from traditional or hegemonic forms of masculinity. This paper critically examines the fathering literature, focusing specifically on how primary caregiving fathers navigate social norms with regard to masculinity. The paper concludes that there is a complex interplay between expectations of a traditional, provider father and a new and involved father. It is argued that ideas surrounding a caring masculinity are better understood as a broadening of hegemonic masculinity, rather than an entirely new form.

Keywords: fathering, fatherhood, primary caregiving, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinity, father involvement

Introduction

Recent decades have seen significant change in relation to expectations about both men and women's work and home responsibilities (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008). Specifically, it has been found that women are increasingly involved in the labour market, and men are doing more housework (Latshaw & Hale, 2015). Yet despite these apparent changes, it is nonetheless the case that women in heterosexual relationships continue to remain responsible for the largest proportion of housework, despite their increased involvement in the paid workforce (Latshaw & Hale, 2015). As such, there is potentially as much continuity as there is change with regard to the gendered division of labor in heterosexual households. Nonetheless, and with regard to parenting in heterosexual relationships, there have been changes to norms and expectations of men. Specifically, it has been suggested that understandings of masculinity and fathering in contemporary western society have been expanded. In response to this apparent expansion, there has been an outpour of literature exploring increased father involvement, with a focus on the implications of this in terms of masculinity. This literature suggests that there has been a shift away from hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987), and towards one that has been termed a 'caring masculinity' (Elliott, 2015).

This focus on change with regard to fatherhood and masculinity highlights the ways in which such institutions are complex cultural and ideological constructions that are continuously negotiated and reconstructed (Petroski & Edley, 2006). Understandings of fathering are shaped by cultural, political, and economic contexts (Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2009), and what is considered "good" or normative fathering can change over time and place, as well as across individual families, and in response to cultural and institutional change (Duckworth & Buzzanell; Latshaw, 2011; Matta & Knudson-Martin, 2006). As such, it is important that taken-for-granted understandings are critically evaluated. It is particularly important that we focus on

the ways in which constructions and understandings of fathering are intertwined with constructions and understandings of masculinity (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Fatherhood cannot be understood separate from masculinity: to study fathers is to study masculinity.

In order to assess recent claims of a shift in masculinity with regard to fathering, this paper examines the literature on primary caregiving fathers so as to consider whether the shift is as marked as has been suggested. For the purpose of this paper, the term primary caregiving fathers refers to fathers who assume the role of primary caregiver. This paper includes research that includes both fathers who have completely removed themselves from paid work, but also fathers who engage in paid work but still assume the primary caregiver role. Therefore, this paper understands primary caregiver fathers as those who self-identify as such, and does not discriminate this definition based on their involvement in paid work. The research that is drawn on in this study uses a variety of terms, (i.e. stay-at-home dads or at-home fathering), however for the purpose of consistency this paper refers to all samples of fathers as primary caregiving fathers. In particular instances, research has also been drawn on that refers to fathering more broadly (and not specifically primary caregiving fathers). In such cases, these papers contribute to providing context of fathering more generally and also demonstrate arguments that are applicable but have yet to be applied specifically to primary caregiving fathers.

Overall, this paper will demonstrate that it may well be too simplistic to suggest that hegemonic masculinity is no longer guiding understandings of fatherhood, and that the introduction of a caring masculinity and a new and involved father is perhaps not as dominant as has been suggested, specifically with regard to fathers who are primary caregivers. The paper will conclude by arguing that there is a complex interplay between ideologies of the traditional provider father and a new and involved father, and this complexity needs to be acknowledged and utilised within research on men and fathering.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Paid work – and the notion of men as ‘breadwinners’ – is traditionally understood as a fundamental foundation of a fathering identity, serving to legitimate a socially valued form of masculinity (Hanlon, 2012; Medved, 2016; Petroski & Edley, 2006; Whelan & Lally, 2002). Given the longstanding norm of father-as-provider, this subject position can be viewed as hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) suggests, is located at the apex of a hierarchy of masculinities. While there is ambiguity and debate surrounding what hegemonic masculinity actually is (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Speer, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), as a theoretical concept it brings attention to the fact that not all masculinities are considered equal.

In terms of defining the concept, hegemonic masculinity is understood as the most honoured or desired form of masculinity, and it drives understandings and expectations of what it means to be a man (Connell, 2003). Most simply, it is an interpretation and understanding of what masculinity should be, and thus dominates over and subordinates all other styles of not only masculine expression, but also expressions of womanhood (Connell, 1987). The hegemonic male ideal traditionally embodies qualities such as being strong, successful, capable, unemotional, and in control (Connell, 2003). Even if men do not live up to the cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity, it has been suggested that they still acknowledge its existence and are complicit in sustaining it, as they are able to enjoy the advantages from the general subordination of women and men positioned outside of the ideal (Connell, 2000). As such, while very few men achieve the hegemonic masculine ideal, all men are measured against it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As such, men exist in a continuous state of tension with hegemonic masculinity, demanding them to continuously negotiate with it (Plantin, Mansson & Kearney, 2003).

Hegemonic masculinity informs all aspects of men's lives, but is particularly relevant in regards to fathering as it informs understandings of what fathers are expected to be and what a good father should be. Hegemonic forms of masculinity have traditionally informed understandings of fathers as overly authoritarian, disinterested, absent, and emotionally distant (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Johansson, 2011). Significantly, hegemonic masculinity has also informed the expectation that fathers should be the primary financial provider; they are expected to construct their identities as fathers through paid work (Haas & Hwang, 2008). This can grant fathers a powerful position within a heterosexual, nuclear family, as it underpins traditional understandings of fathers as associated with power, authority, and status (Brandth & Kvande, 1998)..

It is important to note that whilst individual men approximate this "traditional" father in varying ways, not all men conform to these attributes. However, there is a general consensus that a "good" father provides for their family financially, and this 'good provider' model remains the strongest core definition of fatherhood (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Dowd, 2000; Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2015; Lamb, 2000; Medved, 2016; Miller, 2011; Whelan & Lally, 2002). Whilst mothers can and do assume decision making roles, especially in regards to child rearing, being the primary financial provider means that fathers are typically positioned as the 'head of the household', which potentially allocates them more power as the primary decision-maker (Catlett & McKenry, 2004).

It is important to recognise, however, that financial provision can be understood as a form of caregiving as it is commonly viewed as a fatherly or masculine way of showing and providing care (Hanlon, 2012). Therefore, it is not necessarily correct to suggest that this traditional model of fathering does not value caregiving or involvement in child rearing, but rather that it prioritizes paid work over other ways of providing for children (Gatrell et al., 2015).

Caring Masculinity and the New and Involved Father

Despite the utility of the concept of hegemonic masculinity to the study of fathering, primary caregiving fathers do not fit easily into this subject position. This is not to suggest that primary caregiving fathers are entirely outside hegemonic positions, but rather to suggest that given the norm of financial provider inherent to hegemonic masculinity and fathering, it is possible that the concept of hegemonic masculinity does not entirely capture the experiences of primary caregiving fathers, or that the concept requires some reworking in order to speak to the experiences of such fathers.

One term that has sought to address the subject positions of fathers who may not be viewed as complying with hegemonic ideals is that of ‘caring masculinity’. The concept of a caring masculinity proposes that men are able to adopt what is viewed as traditionally feminine characteristics (i.e. emotional expression, sensitivity, domestication, interdependence, caring, etc.) without departing from or rejecting masculinity (Elliott, 2015; Miller, 2011). Men who approximate this form of masculinity are viewed as a form of “new man” (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Smith, 2016; Singleton & Maher, 2004). Furthermore, fathers not only have the opportunity to explore a more nurturing side, but they are also now *expected* to be more involved in caregiving. There is a general consensus that there has been a shift in expectations in this regard (Habib, 2012; Lamb, 2000; Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Merla, 2008, Wall & Arnold, 2007).

To date there has been considerable enthusiasm surrounding the emergence of this new father in the masculinities literature, as the benefits of a father who is attentive, expressive and involved have been found to outweigh those of a caring father who is detached and distant (Elliott, 2015; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Stevens, 2015). This enthusiasm is tempered, however,

by critical accounts which have challenged the temptation to overly simplify these ideas into a “new” versus “traditional” father (Dermott, 2008). The recognition of a “good” father as one who is involved and nurturing does not mean that the “provider” father is no longer seen as “good”, or no longer occupies a hegemonic position. Further, there has been considerable debate surrounding whether fathers are actually living up to these new expectations (Craig, 2006; Cosson & Graham, 2012; Doucet, 2004, 2009; Henwood & Procter, 2003; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan & Jaret, 1980; Lupton & Barclay, 1997). As we shall now see with regard to primary caregiving fathers, caring and hegemonic masculinities often appear to sit alongside one another, rather than the former superseding the latter.

Primary Caregiving Fathers Negotiating Masculinities

It would seem from the research summarized above that both a caring and hegemonic masculinity are equally prominent within both academic and public discourse. Fathers are therefore required to negotiate with norms and expectations of a traditional, provider model of fathering as well as a new and involved model of fathering. For primary caregiving fathers, negotiating the two sets of expectations may be particularly challenging. What is needed, then, is consideration of how primary caregiving fathers negotiate and construct an intelligible masculine identity that takes into account both sets of expectations.

The increase in fathers taking on a primary caregiving role in itself suggests that some fathers are stepping away from the traditional provider role, instead adopting the “new and involved” model of fathering. Early Australian research has shown that in order for fathers to take on primary caregiving, they are required to reject and redefine understandings (both their own and those around them) of men as providers, and actively introduce the idea of men as caregivers (Grbich, 1992; 1995; 1997). More recent research in Belgium, Australia, Sweden, the

UK and the USA has supported this, suggesting that primary caregiving fathers abandon traditional norms and pressure in order to undertake the role (Merla, 2008; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012). Cumulatively, then, this research would appear to suggest that the uptake of primary caregiving contributes to evolving norms and expectations amongst fathers. Further, expressing interest in and identifying as a new and involved father allows primary caregiving fathers to distance themselves from the many characteristics of hegemonic masculinity that are viewed negatively (Finn & Henwood, 2009).

Yet despite research which has indicated both the explicit favouring of an involved father identity, combined with negative attitudes toward the more traditional father, research conducted in the UK has found that fathers nonetheless continue to speak of how it takes a “bigger” and “stronger” father to be involved in caregiving (Henwood & Procter, 2003). This reflects the findings of Wetherell and Edley (1999), where the most effective way of approximating a hegemonic position in regards to masculinity can be to demonstrate one’s distance from it. Further, while fathers in Henwood and Procter’s research did not treat breadwinning as a core component of being a good father, it was still always treated as salient concern by their participants.

Middle-to-upper class primary caregiving fathers in America have similarly acknowledged that traditional norms still exist. However in research by Rochlen and colleagues (2008), such men reported not feeling as though their masculinity was threatened by their caregiving role, by positioning their masculinity as flexible enough to incorporate caregiving. At the same time, these fathers spoke of having interests and hobbies that were linked to traditional notions of masculinity, such as sport and being “handy men”. It would appear, then, that these fathers reject the traditional norms of masculinity that do not serve their identity, and hold onto the ones that do. As such, they are engaged in simultaneous rejection and uptake of hegemonic

masculinity, rather than simply a wholesale uptake of a caring masculinity (framed as entirely different to hegemonic accounts of masculinity and fathering). Rochlen et al.'s (2008) research thus succinctly demonstrates how primary caregiving fathers negotiate a balance of both caring and traditional masculinities.

Research has also demonstrated that class plays an important role in how men view their primary caregiving role. For example, working-class fathers in Hong Kong have been reported as more likely to take on the role more permanently, and to view their identity as a caregiver, compared to middle-to-upper class fathers (Liong, 2015). This can be explained through recourse to the idea that middle-to-upper class fathers are awarded significant power and status due to their socially valued paid work. Therefore, taking on a primary caregiving role results in giving up this power and status. Thus, middle-to-upper class primary caregiving fathers may frame their primary caregiving role as temporary, and attempt to remain tied to their paid work.

However, research in Canada, Belgium, and Norway has also identified how middle-to-upper class fathers who feel they have reached professional success and have achieved their career goals expressed no concern with permanently leaving paid work (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Doucet, 2004; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Ranson, 2001). This is significant, as it would appear these fathers see it as only appropriate to take on a caregiving role when they have 'successfully' completed their prescribed role as a financial provider. These fathers, therefore, may feel they can afford to take risks with their masculinity due to their capital and status from being middle-to-upper class men.

Given the varied relationships that primary caregiving fathers are likely to have to hegemonic expectations about fathering and masculinity, it is not surprising that the research summarized above consistently shows that primary caregiving fathers remain connected to hegemonic masculine norms and sources of identity (Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Doucet, 2004;

2006; Merla, 2008; Nentwich, 2008; Pajumets & Hearn, 2012; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012; Smith, 1998). Such a connection may well be important, it has been suggested, so as to mitigate any sense of “failure” in the context of norms of hegemonic masculinity with regard to fathering (Doucet & Merla, 2007). Whilst, as noted above (and also in the work of Solomon, 2014), there is likely to be a particular classed aspect to whether or not primary caregiving is seen as “success” or “failure” by fathers, it would nonetheless appear to be the case that even though primary caregiving fathers actively step away from the role of financial provider, they find it difficult to remove themselves completely from it (Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Doucet, 2004; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Grbich, 1992; Latshaw, 2011; Merla, 2008; Nentwich, 2008; Pajumets & Hearn, 2012; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Indeed, while discourses of the new and involved father are emerging, this does not necessarily mean a move entirely away from expectations of being a financial provider, but rather, there are increasing expectations for fathers to be more than just a financial provider (Yarwood, 2011). Therefore, primary caregiving fathers, whilst meeting new expectations of fathering, still negotiate with traditional provider expectations of fathering

In this regard, research indicates that primary caregiving fathers commonly remain tied to paid work, replace paid work with unpaid work, or become involved in community work, so they can remain connected to their “provider” identity, thus asserting to others and reassuring themselves that they are still men (Burkstrand-Reid, 2012; Doucet, 2004; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Grbich, 1992; Latshaw, 2011; Medved, 2016). Research that has explored representations of primary caregiving fathers within Hong Kong newspapers, for example, has found that they are portrayed as remaining connected to the public sphere (Liong, 2015). If primary caregiving fathers are unable to maintain links to work (either paid or unpaid), research suggests that they

engage in training and education in order to ensure and prepare for their return to work (Brandth & Kvande 1998; Grbich, 1992; Latshaw, 2011).

The above points help to explain Doucet's (2004) claim that such fathers do not fulfill a position strictly equivalent to that of women who are primary caregivers. For example, amongst heterosexual couples living in America, mothers tend to "take over" from primary caregiving fathers during the evenings and on weekends (Latshaw & Hale, 2015; Smith, 1998). Therefore, these fathers are able to reassert their masculinity through taking time off from the caregiving role, demonstrating that it is not the sole aspect of their identity (Latshaw & Hale, 2015).

Research also suggests that traditionally, when fathers take on primary caregiving, they were not required to take on other aspects of the role, such as housework, as it was often not considered within the role of caregiving for fathers (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). It could be argued that this also works to distance fathers from femininity and is a way to reinforce mothers' secondary status and fathers' dominance (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). What these studies suggest, then, is that families that have a primary caregiving father may not be breaking away from traditional norms, and rather, may be enacting understandings of masculinity and femininity in a similar way to more traditional understandings

The increasing evidence that primary caregiving fathers actively negotiate with normative expectations demonstrates the complexity of the issue, and suggests that these fathers are both transgressive and complicit with hegemonic definitions of masculinity (Merla, 2008; Medved, 2016; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012). Moreover, it is significant that it is hegemonic masculinity that appears to guide definitions of contemporary fathering. Transgressing and abandoning hegemonic masculinity still requires acknowledgement and negotiation with it. Even though a caring masculinity has been theorised to have emerged, gendered expectations appear to remain the same - men must still be men, and it is important that they continue to prove their

masculinity (Burkstrand-Reid, 2012). Overall, the research reviewed above suggests that we cannot simply conclude that hegemonic masculinity no longer guides understandings of what it means to be a man, and a father.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief overview of international research on masculinities and primary caregiving fathers. It has suggested that hegemonic masculinity as a concept is theoretically complex, and that it is contentious within the literature. However, the research on primary caregiving fathers demonstrates that we cannot conclude that it is of diminishing importance in men's lives. Even though it is difficult to define and locate hegemonic masculinity, it is clear that primary caregiving fathers negotiate with and position themselves in relation to it as a taken for granted set of norms. In addition, the introduction of a caring masculinity and ideologies of a new and involved father also cannot be ignored. Primary caregiving fathers demonstrate that the norms and expectations of fathers are evolving, and that they are no longer required to adhere strictly to traditional, provider expectations of fathering, even if they are still expected to enact particular hegemonic forms of masculinity.

The literature, however, remains unclear with regard to how the increased focus on a caring masculinity fits in with understandings of hegemonic masculinity (Doucet, 2004). An issue first raised by LaRossa et al. (1980), is that discourses of fatherhood suggest that fathers are more involved and more nurturing than what they are in practice. This is a debate that continues in the literature, raising the question of whether or not a new and involved father actually exists, or whether this is just a variation on what has come before (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Dermott, 2008; Drakich, 1989; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Further, the enthusiasm for this new and involved father and its influence on the development of the concept

of a caring masculinity may have resulted in research that is uncritical (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). The focus to date has been on the introduction of this *new* masculinity, and this *new* father, yet we need to be cautious not to assume that father love and involvement is new. Rather, the focus should be on how the expression and behaviours of care and love may be evolving or changing, as much as on how it may remain the same albeit in different guises. The uncritical uptake of notions of the new father may result in unrealistic expectations for fathers (Everingham & Bowers, 2006). We cannot redefine fatherhood based on ideals; there are structural and economic factors that work against the new father image (Dowd, 2000).

Similarly, it is important that as researchers we acknowledge that this new and involved father is very much associated primarily with white, middle-to-upper class fathers (Finn & Henwood, 2009). Such fathers who take on a primary caregiving role already possess the economic, social and cultural resources to be able to take risks with their masculine identities (Farrell, 2015; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004). This would suggest that masculinity is not evolving or changing *per se*, but rather that those who meet current norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity are afforded the luxury to be involved in caregiving. As such, critical accounts of a caring masculinity and the new and involved father suggest that this new father is essentially hegemonic (Henwood & Procter, 2003). This new father is able to adhere to the new expectations and norms without surrendering the benefits of hegemonic privilege (Smith, 2016). This new father is able to enjoy the benefits of parenting while avoiding the competing demands of childcare and household work (Cosson & Graham, 2012). Fathers want to be more involved with their children, however not necessarily in a gender equal way (Johansson, 2011).

In conclusion, it is important to recognise that there is a complex interplay between expectations of a traditional, provider father and a new and involved father. It is too early to suggest that there is a wholesale departure from hegemonic masculinity. Rather, the ideas

surrounding a caring masculinity are better understood as a broadening of hegemonic masculinity to include roles more traditionally undertaken by women. This has important implications for how we theorize and understand primary caregiving fathers. Specifically, and has been noted already in this paper, it is vitally important that as researchers we focus closely on which fathers and when: who has the cultural capital to rework norms of masculinity and fatherhood, and what specific contexts render this intelligible. Further, it is important that any theorisations of fathering pay close attention to how mothering is concurrently understood. As the concept of hegemonic masculinity would suggest, masculine hegemonies are primarily founded on the disavowed feminine other. Thinking through purported shifts in masculinity and fathering thus requires us to focus concurrently on what such shifts mean in the context of gendered divisions in carework, so as not to lose sight of whether or not changes in masculinity are merely cosmetic, or whether they actually contribute to shifting gender norms.

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