Intimate Fatherhood

A sociological analysis

Esther Dermott

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Fatherhood is gaining ever more public and political attention, stimulated by the increasing prominence of fathers' rights groups and the introduction of social policies, such as paternity leave. *Intimate Fatherhood* explores discourses of contemporary fatherhood, men's parenting behaviour and debates about fathers' rights and responsibilities.

The book addresses the extent to which fatherhood has changed by examining key dichotomies - culture versus conduct, involved versus uninvolved and public versus private. The book also looks at longstanding conundrums such as the apparent discrepancy between fathers' acceptance of long hours spent in paid work combined with a preference for involved fathering. Dermott maintains that our current view of good fatherhood is related to new ideas of intimacy. She argues that in order to understand contemporary fatherhood, we must recognise the centrality of the emotional father-child relationship, that the importance of breadwinning has been overstated and that flexible involvement is viewed as more important than the amount of time spent in childcare.

Drawing on original qualitative interviews and large-scale quantitative research, *Intimate Fatherhood* presents a sociological analysis of contemporary fatherhood in Britain by exploring our ideas of good fatherhood in relation to time use, finance, emotion, motherhood and policy debates. This book will interest students, academics and researchers in sociology, gender studies and social policy.

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Introduction

The setting is a seminar given by two senior male academics. The first speaker begins his talk by taking out of his pocket a bright blue child's watch, saying that he will rely on his son's dolphin watch to make sure that he doesn't go over time. The second speaker starts his talk more conventionally, mentioning his forthcoming book. After a comment from his co-presenter about his high rate of publication, he responds that any royalties will keep his children clothed and fed, adding that his productivity has gone down 'since the kids arrived'. Now if this had been a workshop on fatherhood or family life, these comments would perhaps not have seemed exceptional – but these were experts on nationalism and international migration. The incident serves as an example of the extent to which fatherhood is now pervasive as a comfortable public identity.

This increased visibility of men as fathers is part of a heightened awareness of the role of fathers that provides a rationale for sociological attention and, since Marsiglio's claim over a decade ago that fatherhood 'remains a hot topic' (1993: 484), an already substantial body of work has continued to accumulate. Yet the expansion of fatherhood studies has also revealed a diversity in fathering contexts which suggests the field is far from saturated (Lewis and Lamb 2006). However, 'because it is there' cannot alone be an adequate rationale for academic attention. It is the different, sometimes polarised, opinions about modern fatherhood, within and outside the academy, that make it an intriguing topic of study. There is general agreement that the meaning of fatherhood has altered, but there is much less consensus over the extent of change and how modern fatherhood should be understood. Questions such as what involved fathering entails, whether the absence of fathers from families is problematic, whether breadwinning is an essential component of good fatherhood and if mothering and fathering are equal, all remain key areas of debate and have encouraged the recent tendency to situate fatherhood as a sui generis topic of study within the social sciences.

In order to address the extent of the transformation in fatherhood I make a case here for reconceptualising the way in which we think about contemporary fatherhood. The concept of intimacy allows for the examination of personal relationships both in terms of orientations and tasks; that is, what is being sought from and offered in a father–child relationship as an ideal and in terms of practical caring. Adopting this approach, I hope, allows for some creative thinking around

our expectations of fatherhood. A better framing of key concerns can dissolve some problematic dichotomies in discussions of fatherhood: culture versus conduct, involved versus uninvolved and public versus private. Specifically, it provides a way of resolving longstanding conundrums, such as the apparent discrepancy between fathers' acceptance of long hours spent in paid work combined with a preference for involved fathering. Nevertheless, this is a low-key argument: it does not attempt to raze previous thought to the ground, or reincarnate a theorist from another sub-discipline as providing *the* route towards better understanding, or invent a new terminology. The question being addressed is not whether fatherhood should be conceptualised as a form of intimacy but about how intimacy is done by contemporary fathers. Given the current popularity of 'intimacy' as a way to conceptualise personal relationships, this work fits within a wider body of research that is seeking to understand personal life.

The focus here is on fathers and on fathering as the object of study in itself and for providing new insights into understanding personal relationships, rather than as a causal factor in explorations of child development. One of the primary reasons for an interest in fatherhood has been the association between fatherhood and childhood outcomes. This has been dealt with predominantly, and extensively, in psychological and health literature (e.g. Flouri 2005) but has also received attention from other social scientists. The importance of fathers for child welfare is a theme to which both academics and those with political agendas and policy aims frequently return. Improving children's lives is such an uncontroversial objective that emphasising the role of fathers has provided a ready-made justification for concern with fathering. This publication, however, is not concerned with the effect of fathers' presence, their absence, or forms of involvement for outcomes for children. Therefore questions such as 'are fathers necessary?' or 'what can men contribute to family life?' are not prominent.

Fatherhood is now a controversial political issue. Any research findings are likely to be commandeered to back up particular viewpoints and justify interventions by one of the numerous interest groups, which seek to influence public opinion and policy on topics that are directly or indirectly related to men's parenting. This perhaps explains why, when presenting papers at academic conferences and even more so when engaging with the media, there is a desire from audiences to pigeon-hole research findings into one of two polarised categories: as condemning fathers or claiming that they are oppressed. When talking about the findings of the research presented here I have received accusations of doing both, so it seems important to state explicitly that my aim is to vindicate neither position. Although the nature of sociological research means that it can, and should, be interpreted for policy ends, the initial rationale for my programme of research is that developing a better understanding of contemporary fatherhood helps to explain why conflicting perspectives exist, not to pronounce on their validity.

Methodology

Arguments about the ways in which fatherhood is defined and experienced are examined in this study through looking at everyday practices. *Intimate Fatherhood* draws predominantly on two new pieces of independent but complementary pieces of empirical research and integrates these findings with other recent writing on fatherhood. The focus on 'practices' follows David Morgan's (1996) concept of 'family practices' which is defined broadly, to include not only the activities of individual fathers but also those of, for example, policy makers, which contribute to ideas of fatherhood: 'family practices are those practices described as being in some measure about 'family' by one or more of the following: individual actors; social and cultural institutions; the observer' (Morgan 1998: 19).

The two projects approached the subject of contemporary fatherhood with rather different research questions. The first study, *Men, Work and Family Life*, was concerned with exploring how men conceptualised their roles as 'worker' and 'father' and the extent to which reality matched the theory. The implied proposition from a body of existing literature was that men were now likely to face the same 'double shift' as women, as a result of current expectations that combined an obligation on fathers to be involved in childcare and to be committed workers. This possible tension provided the starting point for the project which had a specific interest in finding out how fathers managed to juggle their commitments to employment and family life. In contrast to most research, where the focus has tended to be on the transition to fatherhood and the earliest stages of parenting, these interviews captured arrangements and orientations at a later period as only fathers who had children at primary school (or, in two cases, nursery school) were included. The research adopted a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, in order to explore the meaning of and the rationale for particular behaviour and attitudes. Chapters 3, 4 and 5, and to a lesser extent Chapters 2 and 6 draw extensively on this material.

The 25 fathers who were interviewed were relatively homogeneous in terms of their social, as well as geographical location. They were mainly limited to white men, in their thirties and forties, who were in paid work in middle-class occupations, and lived with their female partner and primary school age biological child/ren in a single borough of South London. Further details of the sample and access are detailed in the appendix. There is probably no need therefore to emphasise that the comments made by this group of fathers should not be taken as representative of fathers as a whole. The aim towards social similarity was though intentional. The rationale for this homogeneity was in order to target a sample that might be best placed to take action towards the achievement of 'new' models of fathering: following the idea of purposive sampling, the idea was to focus research on what could be considered an 'extreme' group. At the outset it was thought that a relatively advantaged group of fathers would have more opportunities to act out their preferences. These were men who could actually make choices about how they combined work and family life (Marsiglio and Cohan 2000), but who also might mirror the particular 'career woman' dilemma of juggling commitment to

work and children. A discussion session at a recent seminar prompted a pertinent comment from the chair, Rachel Thomson[1] – why should we expect the middle-classes to lead the way in doing parenting differently? It is an astute question as sociologists often seem to look towards the advantaged for social inventiveness only to be disappointed. The assumption here was not that creative parenting practices are limited to a particular family form but, because the push of economic necessity is often the reason that is given for adopting 'traditional' gendered forms of parenting, higher incomes levels might afford more possibilities. If this was not the case, there was a better chance of questioning economic rationalisations in order to better understand men's parenting identity and behaviours.

The second piece of research, *The Effect of Fatherhood on Men's Patterns of Employment,* which is discussed extensively in Chapter 2, focused more specifically on fathers' relationship with the labour market. The relationship between parenting and employment is crucial in accounts of contemporary fatherhood. A crude summary is that commentators tend to see good fatherhood either as accomplished through engagement with the labour market (as breadwinning) or achieved despite the demands of employment, which restrict time that would otherwise be devoted to children. However, there is limited published material which presents quantitative analysis of fathers' employment situation to test these theories. The thinking behind the turn towards quantitative analysis was an interest in disentangling the impact of fatherhood on men's working time from other significant factors. Secondary analysis was conducted on two existing datasets: the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) (University of Essex, 2007) and the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) (University of London, 2007). The NCDS, as a cohort panel, has followed one particular generational group, born in one week in March 1958, at regular intervals in seven sweeps of data collection. The BHPS is a representative panel study with repeated data collections at yearly intervals beginning in 1991; it follows the members of 5,500 households. Further details on each are available from the Economic and Social Data Service (www.esds.ac.uk). As longitudinal, prospective surveys, these datasets also allowed a temporal dimension to be included in the analyses. This meant that in addition to multivariate analyses of data collected at one point in time it was possible to conduct analysis that looked at engagement in the labour market at different points in time, crucially before and after becoming a father.

It is worth noting the geographical focus of the two original empirical studies on which *Intimate Fatherhood* is based. The context is primarily British and aims to capture the state of fathers, fathering and fatherhood in the UK today, where literature on fathers is still 'rather sparse' (Brannen and Nilsen 2006: 336). At the same time, the discussion also draws on literature from North America, where research on fatherhood is more extensive, along with other parts of Europe and Australia. While other national contexts can shed light on the British situation by means of contrast, conversely the UK case can help regarding broader statements about how fatherhood is conceptualised that, optimistically, will be taken up by students and academics outside as well as inside the UK.

Chapter outline

This study addresses the lived experiences of fathers and their attitudes to parenting and integrates them into a broader ideology of contemporary fatherhood. This includes bringing into the frame the role of mothers, and considering the question of who is excluded from achieving contemporary ideals of good fatherhood. Finally, it deals with the public face of fatherhood and examines both legal and policy debates, in light of new forms of contestation around paternity. In terms of breadth of material and style, *Intimate Fatherhood* aims to be accessible to higher level undergraduates with some, but not extensive, background knowledge of sociological research on family and fatherhood – there is no intention though to provide a textbook style trot through all possibly relevant material. The aim is to present the research findings as an argument which should be of interest to an academic audience, but to do so with a sufficient number of references and explanations so that those with less knowledge can still follow the argument.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of contemporary ideas about fatherhood and flags the key issues in the ongoing debate as to whether a fundamental transformation of fatherhood has taken place. The chapter suggests that there are three dominant paradoxes within current thinking on fatherhood that need to be resolved: attention and absence; creation and construction; and culture and conduct. It also details current diversity in fatherhood, from familial and household arrangements to routes to becoming a father.

Chapter 2 analyses the relationship between men's family circumstances and employment; a central element for understanding the contemporary meaning of fatherhood as it involves assessing the extent to which breadwinning retains its significance. Drawing on original findings from large-scale surveys, it is shown that fatherhood status is largely irrelevant for men's level of engagement with the labour market. Together with interview data, these findings suggest that the importance of breadwinning has been overplayed in accounts of fatherhood.

Chapter 3 examines how fathers spend time with their children; not only what they actually do, but also how they feel about particular child-related activities. It is suggested that the acts which are seen as most significant rely on building familiarity but are not necessarily time hungry. Therefore, the argument is made that there is greater potential for involved fathers to have a complementary relationship between work and family than previously acknowledged.

Chapter 4 discusses emotions in relation to fatherhood. It is demonstrated that feeling an emotional connection is important for men in grounding the relationship with their child and that displaying emotions through expressions of closeness is viewed as necessary for successful fathering. It is the physical and verbal manifestations of the emotional bond which mark out a generational shift in ideals of good fatherhood, as the existence of an emotional connection alone is not the preserve of contemporary fathers. It is also argued that an intense emotional connection does not automatically translate into taking on childcare tasks and more equal parenting.

Chapter 5 brings mothers and ideas of motherhood into the frame arguing that, especially since transformations in fatherhood have raised the prospect of gender neutral parenting and the undermining of gender inequality, a coherent understanding of fatherhood is possible only by also understanding motherhood. The chapter challenges the thesis that parents are now interchangeable by showing how fathers themselves continue to construct motherhood as distinct from, and in some ways more important than, fatherhood.

Chapter 6 discusses how fatherhood is constructed in recent government policy and the response by fathers to these initiatives. A spate of recent measures indicates a new level of policy consciousness around fathers and their families in Britain. The chapter explores the fathering practices that have been anticipated and the kinds of parenting involvement that are accommodated by these policies. The chapter places the emphasis on flexibility rather than finance for fathers' ability to achieve a good work–family balance.

Chapter 7 explores some of the ways in which contemporary fatherhood can be experienced as problematic. Fatherhood is frequently described as being in 'crisis' with men increasingly excluded from fatherhood. The chapter focuses on the situation of non-resident and gay fathers in order to highlight the structural elements which underpin contemporary ideas of good fatherhood, and its fluidity and limitations. It also examines the way in which intimacy has been constructed by fathers' rights campaigners as a demand that can be fulfilled through legislative reform.

Chapter 8 assesses the concept of 'disclosing intimacy' in the light of previous findings. This entails an assessment of: the boundaries of intimacy in talking about father–child relations; the extent to which an analysis of fatherhood can improve our understanding of the concept of intimacy and tensions within it; and how analysing fatherhood within the context of intimate relationships can add to the way we think about contemporary fathering. In conclusion, it is suggested that the concept of intimacy is useful for progressing thinking about 'good fatherhood'.

1 Paradoxes of contemporary fatherhood

Thinking about fatherhood involves thinking about fatherhood, fathering and fathers. Morgan (2003, 2004) has clarified the distinction between the three terms as referring respectively to: the public meanings associated with being a father; the actual practices of 'doing' parenting; and the connection between a particular child and a particular man (whether biological or social). This means recognising the construction of fatherhood at the level of meanings, especially the move from an emphasis on fathers as financial providers to emotional nurturers. It also involves a consideration of fathers' involvement, including the importance of pre-existing social categories as an influence on what fathers do and the extent to which various fathering practices are accommodated, promoted or challenged. Finally, it requires an acknowledgement of the diverse routes by which individual men become fathers.

A useful way of conceptualising current thinking about fatherhood is as characterised by paradoxes.[1] Three paradoxes, which, I suggest, are either explicitly recognised in the literature or are evident from competing sociological positions, are outlined here: attention and absence; creation and construction; and culture and conduct. The first paradox (attention and absence) is that, at a time when levels of father absence from the family are unprecedented (Coltrane 2004) there is increasing attention paid to fathers and fatherhood by academics, policy makers and social commentators. This dilemma, I suggest, is of a different order from the others as it is more apparent than real. The second paradox (creation and construction) is that while the tie between biological father and child is given primary status, there is also recognition that social fatherhood (without a biological link) is increasingly prevalent and that 'good fathers' are made, not born. Third, (culture and conduct) is the issue first raised by Ralph La Rossa in the 1980s, namely that while cultural representations of fatherhood suggest a new model of ever increasing involvement and a move towards equal parenthood, the conduct of fathers suggests much less change in men's activities and an obvious continuing division of labour between mothers and fathers. A better understanding of contemporary fatherhood requires moving beyond the binary positions suggested by these dominant paradoxes and towards a more nuanced approach. There is one additional tension in commentaries on fatherhood, which can be thought of as a paradox to be resolved by considering our purpose in studying fatherhood

rather than empirical analysis. That is, given the acknowledgement that the social contexts in which fathering occurs and the routes to fatherhood are manifold, resulting in significant diversity in men's experiences of fatherhood, why there is still a concern to conceptualise contemporary fatherhood as one entity.

Attention and absence

Interest in fatherhood has probably never been greater, yet, as Gillis (2000) has described, the last few decades have witnessed a loosening of the connection between fatherhood and masculinity, what he refers to as a 'marginalization of fatherhood' in the West. The apparent paradox is that the two should be occurring simultaneously.

Interest in fathers and fatherhood

In 1984, Jackson titled the first chapter of his book on fatherhood 'the invisible man': in the last few decades the attention lavished on analysis of fatherhood means that this is no longer the case. Across the range of social science disciplines – sociology, psychology, history, policy, cultural studies, socio-legal, geography – fatherhood has become a mainstream concern and this has been accompanied by, or perhaps led by, attention in the popular press, in fictional writing, in books offering parenting advice, and in political debate.

As recently as the 1990s, academic writing on masculinity often excluded discussions of fatherhood altogether and texts on the sociology of the family did not automatically include references to fatherhood. For example, Morgan's important work *Family Connections* published in 1996 has a number of entries under 'mother' and 'parenting' but none under fathers or fatherhood in the index. Collections of writing on the sociology of the family would now be considered lacking if, at minimum, one chapter was not dedicated to some aspect of fatherhood. Major journals in the areas of masculinity/gender and family (such as *Gender and Society* and *Journal of Marriage and the Family*) have regular articles on fatherhood as a matter of course, while others, such as *Journal of Family History,* have had special issues focused on fatherhood, and there is also at least one journal dedicated specifically to research on fatherhood, *Fathering: A Journal of Research, Theory and Practice*. There are many research monographs and edited volumes on fatherhood that are too numerous to list, but recent publications cover a wide range in terms of discipline and methodology; from the ethnographic (Townsend 2002) to the socio-legal (Collier and Sheldon 2008), from policy focused (Hobson 2002) to edited collections (Peters and Day 2002). Research examining the situation of fathers has also been commissioned by government funded organisations such as the Equal Opportunities Commission (e.g. O'Brien 2005, O'Brien and Schemilt 2003, Smeaton 2006). Furthermore, the last decade has witnessed the publication of a number of commentaries offering overviews of the considerable research to date and setting out agendas for the future (e.g. Lewis and Lamb 2006, Marsiglio 1993, Marsiglio *et al*. 2000). It is though worth echoing Lamb's (1993) comment

that the previous lack of attention did not necessarily reflect the position of fathers in society. There was a tendency in some earlier studies of fatherhood to suggest that fathering as a personal and socially recognised identity was a new invention: historical work, such as Griswold's (1993) influential *Fatherhood in America*, was important in challenging this idea. Instead the 'newness' originates from developments in sociology (and other disciplines) that now recognise fathers as an interesting social fact.

Current interest in fathers is further emphasised by the frequent presence of the topic in lay writing. The number of 'how to' books on fathering has expanded exponentially, a product of the publishing phenomenon of self-help alongside a particular demand for parenting guides. These are accompanied by both serious advice and more light-hearted reflections in popular publications, such as lists of 'Things A Man Should Know About Fatherhood', in magazines and newspapers which portray family life as not only the preserve of women and children: as just one example a current column 'Dad Rules' appears weekly in *The Sunday Times* and details everyday events in the life of a father. The subject of fatherhood has also made an impact in popular fiction with, to name just two bestsellers in the UK; Tony Parsons' *Man and Boy* (1999), a fictionalised version of lone fatherhood drawing heavily on the author's personal biography, and Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* (1998), which has a surrogate father relationship at its centre. The prevalence of fatherhood is perhaps most obvious in the mass of autobiographical accounts from the perspective of parents and children, of which Blake Morrison's *And When Did You Last See Your Father*, which recounts the relationship with his own father and inspired a raft of confessional memoirs, is perhaps the best known (see also Martin Amis *Experience* 2000, Fraser Harrison *A Father's Diary* 1985 and Fergal Keane *Letter to Daniel* 1996). This wealth of material is supplemented further by the presence of anthologies on fatherhood (e.g. Guinness 1998, Lewis-Stempel 2001).

Fatherless families, familyless men

At the same time as fathers are being 'found' as the subject of academic and popular study, the current historical period often finds men absent from the realm of parenthood. Commentators refer to the current era as witnessing a societal wide epidemic of 'fatherlessness' (Blankenhorn 1995) or the 'shrinking' of fatherhood (Jensen 1998, 1999). The evidence for this state of affairs is twofold: first, that fewer men now become fathers; second, that greater numbers of men 'leave' fatherhood, in the sense of having less involvement in the lives of their children.

The factors behind this abstention from fatherhood are related to the organisation of personal relationships. In terms of 'entry' factors, more options in personal and sexual relationships means that a choice exists either to have children or remain childless/childfree; fatherhood can no longer be automatically assumed as a life event. Commentary in the United States suggests that this avoidance of fatherhood is the choice of a particular section of society, the educated upper-middle-class (Oláh *et al*. 2002), who make up Connell's (1998) influential minority of men

who exhibit 'trans-national business masculinity'. Men are having fewer children and are more likely to remain 'childfree' than their recent predecessors (Kiernan 2004), but this is often attributed to the decision-making of women and it is the issue of women remaining childless that is prominent in accounts of social change. Worries about father absence tend to focus more on men who have children, rather than on voluntary childlessness.

In terms of influences on 'exit', 'the question of the fragility of men's relationships with their children has become more pressing' (Collier and Sheldon 2006: 11). This is usually attributed to the end of the universality and permanence of marriage; significant numbers of fathers are not married to the mothers of their children and marital ties are less secure. The end of a marriage need not mean the end of parenting; in fact, as Smart (1997) has argued, the parent–child relationship has replaced marriage as the relationship of permanence (see also Chapter 7). However, the framing of the debate about father absence has co-residence as a central component: in arguing the case for the 'shrinkage' of fatherhood, Jensen (1998, 1999) notes that across Europe, women in their mid-thirties are more likely to live with children than with an adult partner, while men are more likely to live with a partner than with a child. The advent of childbearing as a dimension of serial monogamy means that children are increasingly likely to live apart from one biological parent at some point. In the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand around one-fifth of children live in one-parent households at any one time, a figure that rises to about one quarter in the US (Pryor and Trinder 2004). Given the tendency for children to remain resident with their mother after divorce or separation, at any one point in time there are considerable numbers of non-resident fathers, and even more biological fathers who will live apart from their offspring for some period.

The 'absence' of fathers has a number of dimensions: the physical absence of men from the households in which their children live; an emotional distance from children's lives; a relinquishing of the role of financial provider and thereby economic absence. In effect, what is usually being spoken about is the absence of fathers from the households in which children live on a permanent basis, in response to relationship breakdown. This, in turn, is viewed as impacting on the ability of men to be involved with their children in other ways. Fatherlessness, as it has been termed, has been identified as the cause of a whole range of social problems for children, from low educational achievement to childhood delinquency, gun crime to promiscuity. Just recently in the UK, incidents of youth violence have, again, been attributed to an absence of fathers. Particular concern about father absence in Afro-Caribbean families has led to efforts to promote alternative 'father figure' role models for those most 'at risk':

> And as we know – lads need dads. Of course they need their mums as well, but there is a particular point in teenagers' development, of young men, where fathers are very important and they are more likely to be absent in the case of the Afro-Caribbean.
>
> (Jack Straw, Justice Secretary, 21 August 2007, *BBC Radio 4*)

For writers such as Blankenhorn (1995) in the US and Dench (1996) in the UK, men's natural tendency towards selfishness (with the ominous prospect of 'deadbeat dads' or 'feckless fathers' becoming rampant) threatens the basis of social order, unless it is tamed by the influence of women and the responsibilities of fatherhood. 'Absent' fathers are therefore considered a social ill not only because individual children are believed to suffer without the influence of their (biological) father but because this lack of responsibility has a detrimental effect on men themselves.

Apparent paradox?

Dissecting the various aspects of the 'absence' dilemma highlights where a paradox over the absence of fathers in families and their presence in accounts really exists and where this only appears to be the case. It is paradoxical for attention on fatherhood to be increasing at a time when it is dropping in terms of importance as a social identity. However, although it is true that successful masculinity is not tied to the achievement of fatherhood, and that parenthood is less central to the construction of adulthood for men than women, it is not clear that fatherhood has entirely lost its significance. Only around 5 per cent of people across the European Union expect to remain childless and the majority of people, both men and women, think that having a child is important (Kiernan 2004). 'Fatherhood is a common life experience for nearly all men' (Dowd 2000: 22), while Townsend's (2002) study of a group of 'family' men in the US situates fatherhood as an important part of the 'package deal' of masculine adulthood (along with a steady job, being married and owning a home). Similarly, research with young men about their expectations for the future reveals trajectories which include fatherhood (Edley and Wetherell 1999); not as a considered choice but as the default option. This unquestioning attitude is, though, likely to be restricted to those who identify as heterosexual:

> Heterosexual 'situations' continue to lead a preponderance of straight men into paternity. Homosexual situations, on the other hand, currently lead most gay men to childlessness.
>
> (Stacey 2006: 48)

The second way in which absence has entered discussions provides less of an obstacle. It is completely consistent that the worry about a 'crisis of fatherhood', characterised as men failing to fulfil their duties as responsible fathers, should be accompanied by the study of ways in which fathering is conceptualised and practised. It would make sense for this concern to lead to a particular focus on; fathers who are labelled as 'bad dads' (Furstenberg 1988), the impact of absence in various forms, and research on social policies that could affect men's parenting behaviour: all of which are indeed themes in the literature. Research in this area is though preoccupied with resolving the 'problem' of modern fatherhood, and the