

# **Understanding fatherhood**



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# **Understanding fatherhood**

**A review of recent research**

**Charlie Lewis and Michael E. Lamb**

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# 1 Introduction

Demands on fathers to participate more actively in the rearing and socialization of their children have existed for some decades. These demands, nonetheless, have intensified in recent years across all social sectors. Now, according to their accounts, young fathers generally help mothers with child rearing, particularly during the first months and years. This assistance continues over time, with some men continuing to help their partner do household chores, even occasionally cooking, washing the clothes, and other 'household things' to ensure the woman gets a break, especially at weekends.  
(Olavarría, 2003, p. 343)

This account of fathering is typical of the claims made by social commentators for several years. It suggests that men's involvement in family life is changing, even intensifying, alongside other pressures that either push men away from their children or towards greater involvement in family life. In this report, we summarise current thinking about the nature of contemporary fatherhood. This is no easy task because more than 700 papers on men's family roles, which come from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds with less cross-referencing than is desirable, are published in academic journals each year. Our aim is to identify the dimensions of fathering that need to be considered when understanding the roles played by men in today's families, which, by implication, show fatherhood to be a diverse and complex concept. We also explore some of the methodological issues and challenges that researchers face when they attempt to explore these complexities. A number of methodological shifts have taken place during the past ten years and it is important to reflect on their potential and on their limitations. Finally, we summarise recent and current British research on 'diversity' that can profitably help to shape new directions for research. We also identify more general gaps in research for future reference.

## 2 Understanding fatherhood: conceptualising diversity

Although we have been asked to provide ‘a brief overview of key findings from recent research on fatherhood’, it is difficult to summarise such a sprawling literature succinctly. We have found that even localised aspects cannot be captured adequately, despite lengthy books on methodology (Day and Lamb, 2004), interdisciplinary perspectives (Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera, 2002), paternal influences (Lamb, 2004; Flouri, 2005), work–home relationships (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003) and social policy issues (Hobson, 2002).

Scholars have long noted that men’s commitment to childcare is marked by wide variability, even when we restrict the focus to ‘traditional’ families, loosely defined by households in which fathers and mothers are co-resident (e.g. Lewis, 1986). It has proved hard to evaluate the differences between men who do more childcare than their partners and the majority who specialise in economic provision. Two issues in particular have dogged researchers. The first concerns the assessment of ‘involvement’. Lamb *et al.* (1987) made an initial stab at distinguishing between three different dimensions – the amounts of time that fathers spend interacting with, being accessible to, or making arrangements for the care of their children. These three dimensions continue to dominate research, especially in the United States, and are still used to explain complexities and contradictions in the literature (see Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004). Unfortunately, although Lamb *et al.* (1987) were explicit that their focus on childcare activities should not lead researchers to ignore other important aspects of fatherhood, many have restricted their focus to the three dimensions, to the detriment of important activities like breadwinning. In a noteworthy departure from this trend, Morgan (1998) has provided insights by questioning dimensions of the familiar dichotomy between parenting and activities outside the home. For example, he suggests that participation in trade union activities may serve to protect opportunities in the labour force for the next generation. They could, therefore, be construed as ‘fathering’, affecting children’s long-term well-being.

In recent years, several authors (see examples in Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera, 2002; Day and Lamb, 2004; Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004) have sought to analyse what men do with their children and factors that facilitate or inhibit involvement. Palkovitz (1997) differentiated between 15 aspects of paternal involvement, including factors like play, instruction and guidance. The list of possible aspects could probably be much longer than this. However, any conceptualisation of ‘involvement’ will seem remarkably rudderless unless there are clear theoretical postulates steering the identification of relevant categories.

Progress has been impeded by the absence of clear theoretical perspectives to frame the conceptualisation of fathering as an activity and of fatherhood as a status. Because fathers have been studied by sociologists, lawyers, historians, anthropologists, psychologists, social policymakers and others, it is not surprising that summaries of the literature have noted (and criticised) its theoretical diversity. Day *et al.* (2005) identified many interpretative traditions, including:

- the individualism of life-course psychoanalytic theory, in which parenthood is represented as a normative life phase in individual development (e.g. Palkovitz, 1997)
- the dynamic approaches of both family systems theory (Day *et al.*, 2001) and symbolic interactionism, in which individuals are believed to draw on cultural patterns in their everyday activities (e.g. Minton and Pasley, 1996).

More wide-ranging perspectives are based on:

- feminism (Silverstein, 1996)
- social capital theory (Furstenburg and Hughes, 1995)
- anthropology (La Rossa, 1988).

How do such theoretical approaches fit together? Day *et al.* (2005) outlined the necessary components of any fruitful theoretical model by noting that:

... any analysis of fatherhood requires awareness of the specific cultural, economic, and social conditions which give rise to the norms and behaviour shaping the conduct of fathers.  
(Day *et al.*, 2005, p. 341)

While some allude to a 'grand unifying theory' (Roggman *et al.*, 2002), Day *et al.* (2005) point out that much contemporary research attempts to be theory free when trying to answer pressing social questions, such as the amount of contact children need with non-resident fathers. Yet it is often not difficult to spot theoretical assumptions just below the surface. Day *et al.* (2005) cite the examples of Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (1993) who emphasise the 'natural' path to paternity (i.e. *not* via adoption, step-parenting, or sperm donor strategies) while proposing that non-biological fathers have difficulty making the same connection, contribution and investment in children as biological fathers.

We need to base empirical studies of fathers on a sounder theoretical footing if we are to avoid making such assumptions, based on popular stereotypes or political orientations. There is no *a priori* reason for biological fathers to be the men who care for children – something that is simply assumed in many cultures. This was illustrated by the visceral reactions to Malinowski's (1927) famous case study of Trobriand Islanders, who, he claimed, recognised the mother's brother as the social 'father'. Increasingly, the term 'father' has come to identify a form of social, rather than biological, relationship (Palkovitz, 2002). But how should we consider the social and biological aspects of fatherhood? Day *et al.* (2005) have depicted their intersection in relation to one level of social involvement – a man's motivation to be involved with his children. But even this tessellation leads to four 'types' of fatherhood, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 The biological and social aspects of fatherhood**

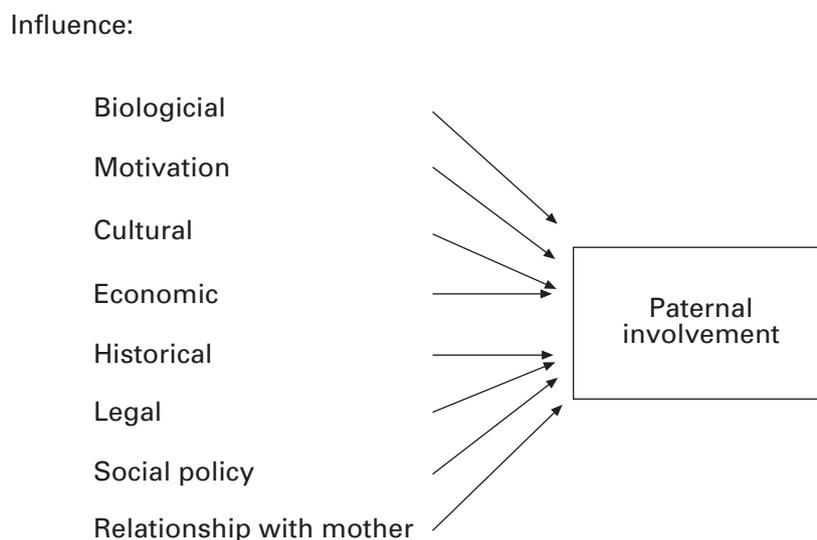
	Biological connection present	Biological connection absent
Motivation present	1 Motivated biofather	3 Motivated non-biofather (e.g. involved stepfather)
Motivation absent	2 Unmotivated biofather (e.g. disengaged father)	4 Unmotivated non-biofather (e.g. casual, uninvolved, transitory relationship)

Source: Day *et al.* (2005).

This identifies four types of fathers who have been the focus of recent studies. *Motivated biofathers* are those identified as biological fathers who are also committed to social relationships with their children. They are the most easily recognised and have been the main focus of attention in fathering research, even though they are becoming less prominent in demographic terms. In the UK, 83 per cent of children lived with two parents in 1991; whereas, in 2001, the proportion had declined to 77 per cent (ONS, 2003). The *unmotivated biofathers* in Table 1 (such as the 'deadbeat dads' discussed in polemical accounts of fatherhood by Blankenhorn [1995] and Popenoe [1993]) are widely decried. But, in many cases, their non-involvement is assumed rather than documented. Indeed, Maclean and Eekelaar (1995) have showed how non-resident fathers change the nature and extent of their contact with their children over time, with many drifting back into contact after initial separation from the mothers. There are several examples of *motivated non-biofathers*. Stepfathers have been studied systematically (e.g. Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992), but others, including adoptive fathers, have received less attention. Finally, there are *unmotivated non-biofathers*: men who have relationships with mothers, but engage in little childcare. Some men in this group have been identified as potential sources of risk to children and their numbers appear to be growing (Kiernan, 2006).

If Table 1 demonstrates the complexity of relationships when just two dimensions of fatherhood are considered, it is easy to see why a thorough analysis of fathering presents a far more complex challenge. For a start, the social dimension involves more than simple ‘motivation’ and extends to other types of commitment to children. For example, Figure 1 shows how paternal involvement in childcare is guided by a number of factors that can be distinguished from one another. Marsiglio (1995) has long pointed out that different men can serve as *biological* (production of sperm), *economic* (financial provision for children), *social* (giving care and maintaining relationships with children) and *legal* (defined by law as responsible) fathers. But other factors need to be considered if our analysis is to be exhaustive.

**Figure 1 The factors known to influence paternal involvement with their children**



‘Fathers’ biological links are often assumed, but research continues to show that approximately 4 per cent (but in one study up to 30 per cent) of ‘biological fathers’ were not the genetic fathers of their children (Bellis *et al.*, 2005). On another biological level, men appear to go through hormonal changes around the time of their child’s delivery (Storey *et al.*, 2000) and they also experience postnatal mood swings that may be of biological origin (Ramchandani *et al.*, 2005).

Meanwhile, shifts in paternal care patterns over the past half century show the importance of *cultural* and *historical* as well as economic and legal factors. We emphasise culture because different types of society can be associated with very different types of paternal roles. In many societies, men spend their time helping to keep their children alive and, among cultures like that of the Aka in the Central African Republic, this involves considerable amounts of daily care (Hewlett, 2004).

Hewlett (2004) points out that, as a rule, men seem to spend more time with children in societies that are less differentiated on the basis of age, gender, wealth or status.

Economic factors certainly affect fathers' involvement in the family. In many parts of the world, particularly southern Africa and Asia, men work several hundreds of miles away from their homes in order to provide sufficient income for their families. Many others have to work long hours, often in two jobs, in order to keep their families afloat. Under such circumstances, hands-on involvement with children is impossible. By the same token, much of the increase in men's domestic involvement has been the result of shifting labour force patterns that include a massive expansion of the female labour force and increasing opportunities that allow both mothers and fathers to be active as parents and employees (Presser, 1988).

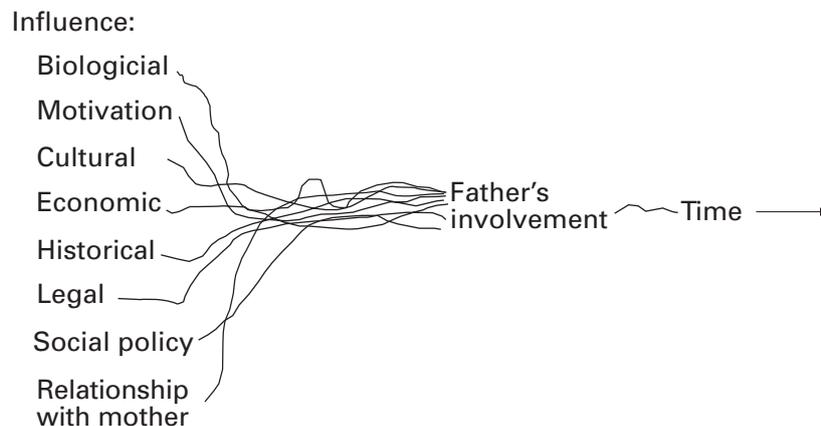
Historical changes, like those just described, mark paternal involvement. For example, La Rossa's (1988) work comparing popular images of fathers over the last 80 years shows the changing roles of men and women in a variety of spheres, including the home. Sociologists like Beck (1992) and Giddens (1998) have also identified historical shifts, like a growing emphasis on individualism and more reciprocal parent-child relationships as features of advanced democracies. Legal issues are also important. In general, the preservation of children's relationships with biological and social fathers is emerging as a key preoccupation of legal jurisdictions throughout the world (Bainham *et al.*, 2003, Trinder and Lamb, 2005). However, there are subtle variations within individual legal jurisdictions concerning the responsibilities and rights of social and biological fathers. In relation to *social policy* issues, it is worth noting that fathers in the UK became a focus of attention under 'New Labour' (Scourfield, 2001) long before the 'fathers' rights' campaign launched by the group Fathers 4 Justice attracted media attention. But, in many respects, fathers have been neglected in the past because scholars assumed that a mother's nurturing role was pre-eminent and that mothers' impact on children was overwhelming.

In much of the research that we summarise below, father *relationships with mothers* also have been identified as key influences on the nature of father-child involvement within dynamic and organic family systems (see, for example, Cummings *et al.*, 2004). Research on families shows, not only that parents influence the nature and degree of the other's involvement, but also that the quality of father-infant relationships is correlated with the attitudes of both partners to paternal involvement (e.g. Beitel and Parke, 1998).

So, if Figure 1 captures some of the diverse influences on paternal roles, it still fails to address the two most important aspects of paternal diversity: the *dynamic associations* among these influences and their *interplay over time*. Over the past

few years, such dynamics have become a central concern to a number of theorists and the sociologist David Morgan (1998) refers to such dynamics as ‘doing the family’. He views the family as a network of continually changing relationships. Other sociologists and psychologists have made similar claims (e.g. Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000a and 2000b; O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003). Not only do factors like biology and motivation interact to produce complex interactions between and among factors (see Table 1), but each of the factors in Figure 1 interact over time. This is apparent in the ways that men and their partners conceptualise, construct and reconstruct fathering activities, and even the status of fatherhood, in changing ways. In Figure 2, we modify Figure 1 to try to illustrate the added strands of complexity.

**Figure 2 The dynamics of paternal involvement over time**



How do such influences fit together? Our answer to this question illustrates the complexity of the issues involved – to the extent that our two conclusions may appear, at first glance, to be contradictory.

First, the relative effects and nature of the interactions shown in Figures 1 and 2 affect individuals and families differently at different points in time. For example, it is inappropriate to assume that children will always be cared for by two parents who are both biologically related to them and remain committed to each other over time and within one locality.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, we know that many families go through rapid, sometimes dramatic, transitions in their form and composition. All households – to contradict Tolstoy’s famous dictum in *Anna Karenina* about the difference between ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ families – are unique. Put another way: ‘Every family has a secret and the secret is that it is not like other families’ (Bennett, 2005, p. 41).

Second, some factors are so powerful that they are capable of influencing every father in a culture or even across cultures. For example, Olavarría (2003) referred to two processes leading men to take more active roles in their families: the increase in female participation in the labour force; and a general instability in modern economies that has made traditional 'men's jobs' more unstable. Olavarría's study involved highly impoverished families in Santiago, Chile, yet it could as easily have involved fathers in Tyne and Wear (Wheelock, 1990). Evidently, there are historical shifts towards global patterns of employment and social life that cut across differences derived from culture and local history.

### 3 Understanding fatherhood: methods and data from the past decade of British research

In this chapter, we consider how research over the past decade and a half has contributed new insights into fatherhood. Our brief has been to consider:

- parenting in 'ordinary families'
- the factors associated with the diversity of paternal involvement
- the extent to which there is consensus around key findings and implications.

As far as the last issue is concerned, we contend that, although there is no complete consensus, fathering is now widely viewed as a diverse set of activities where the influences on men are complex and dynamic. Two main methodological innovations have been in evidence in the contributing research. In their efforts to understand the course of family relationships more clearly, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have capitalised on national datasets to explore the diverse manifestations of fathering. In the USA, longitudinal patterns have been explored using databases like the National Survey of Family and Households and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. These were designed in the 1980s to permit examination of father involvement in a variety of sub-groups by oversampling minority ethnic groups and those living in poverty. In one American analysis, Crockett *et al.* (1993) were able to examine the correlations over time between the presence of father figures and the development of pre-schoolchildren. In the UK, the National Child Development Study (NCDS) of children born in 1958, and the more recent Millennium Cohort, have been examined to good effect. For example, Ferri and Smith's (1995) analysis of the relationship between the nature of parents' occupations and their family life showed that working-class fathers in the NCDS were more likely than white-collar workers to care for their children while their partners worked. Although such analyses are valuable, we also need to be aware that such databases involve very general questions and thus can give us only a limited understanding of complex issues.

The past decade has also witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of qualitative research methods. This has helped to address and illustrate the complexity of paternal roles by allowing scholars to explore issues as diverse as the transition to fatherhood (Henwood and Procter, 2003) and men's adjustment to post-separation parenting (Lewis *et al.*, 2002) by providing insights into the variations in individuals'

experiences and their changes over time. Some fathering studies have been inappropriately described as 'qualitative' when their content has amounted to little more than journalistic description. But, at its best in this field, qualitative research involves a wide variety of perspectives and is highly disciplined, establishing a clear relationship between the theoretical analysis underpinning the study and the data themselves.

Of all the issues concerning 'ordinary families' explored in the UK, the relationships between men's and women's employment, and their commitments to care and the home have been especially prominent. Research in this area has illustrated the added value of using a variety of research methods to explore the role of fathers and to illuminate the need for theory about the interactions among the influences depicted in Figures 1 and 2. Summarising research on the ways in which couples have divided domestic labour over the past two decades, Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) described a 'culture shift' towards greater male domesticity. This reading of the international data is consistent with Fisher *et al.*'s (1999) analyses of two national databases showing faster growth in British fathers' childcare commitments since the 1960s than among mothers. Of course, greater equity still does not mean that twenty-first-century fathers commit as much time on average to childcare as mothers. As O'Brien's (2005) recent analysis of data for the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2003) suggests, fathers in dual-earner households still do less with their children than mothers do (respectively, three and four-and-a-half hours per day). Further analysis of these databases suggests that the sharpest increase in parenting activities has occurred among fathers of pre-schoolers (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003). O'Brien (2005) concludes that:

British fathers are now expected to be accessible and nurturing as well as economically supportive to their children.  
(O'Brien, 2005, p. 1)

Because dual-earner families now represent two-thirds of British families with dependent children, the ongoing changes in working and family roles have important psychological effects. Higher levels of father involvement in childcare are related to the hours and status of maternal employment (Sidle Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Yet increased involvement by men does not appear to be correlated with increased harmony between the involved partners. In a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), Lewis (2000) reported that, at least in dual-earner families, increased paternal involvement in childcare was related to lower marital satisfaction (for example, see Crouter *et al.*, 1987). This finding has been replicated but we now know that the picture is more complex and requires analysis of the family system. Fathers with less sensitive partners appear to be less sensitive towards their children

(Grych and Clark, 1999), so it is possible that depressed marital satisfaction reported is more a reflection of general family stress than of poor-quality paternal involvement.

Not all findings are consistent in this area. Indeed, Brennan *et al.* (2001) reported that greater paternal participation in childcare appeared to relate to increased satisfaction among mothers with their partners. One important aspect of this evidence is its implications for children's well-being. For example, a longitudinal study in Bristol (the ALSPAC study) showed that children's developmental progress was delayed when mothers returned to work before the children were 18 months old, but that this pattern was not evident when the fathers were highly involved in childcare (Gregg and Washbrook, 2003). But more work is needed to understand these complex and seemingly divergent results.

Cohabitation is another area where rapid social change has prompted much research in the past 15 years – not least because cohabiting relationships, including those where the partners have dependent children, are more likely to dissolve than marriages. The proportion of cohabiting couples in the UK increased from 11 per cent in 1979 to around 29 per cent of all households in 2000 (ONS, 2003). Most cohabiting parents were unaware that, until recent changes in the law, cohabitation typically conferred few paternal responsibilities unless they were actively sought (Pickford, 1999). Research funded by the JRF also showed that parents' engagement in their cohabiting relationships ranged from mutual commitment, in which some formal arrangements are made, to a more contingent commitment, in which it was assumed that the relationship would not last (Smart and Stevens, 2000). Yet, even when the latter types of relationships dissolved, there was often a commitment to maintain father–child relationships, unless there had been a history of violence. Lewis *et al.* (2002), meanwhile, suggested that the mothers' gatekeeping role was paramount in such families. After separation, the 'ex-cohabiting' fathers had financial support responsibilities – enforced by the now-to-be abolished Child Support Agency – but no rights to contact with their children.

These reports coincided with, and may have influenced, changes in the law (in 2001 in Northern Ireland and 2003 in England and Wales) that gave parental responsibility to fathers named on their children's birth certificates, whether or not they were married to the mothers.

Studies like these not only have implications for governmental policy but also assist understanding of relationships between the influential factors identified in Figure 2. For example, they show how men's residence and subsequent contact with their children is negotiated with mothers, and how patterns of residence and contact are intertwined with financial issues, especially men's contribution to

their children's expenses. Speak *et al.*'s (1997) work on young unwed fathers in Newcastle highlighted tensions in the association between work and family life, and the influence of economic deprivation on family obligations. It concluded that such tensions often prevent fathers from meeting their parental responsibilities and maintaining relationships with their children.

Given the research emphasis on fathers who have difficulty maintaining relationships with their children, it is hardly surprising that much of the policy debate over the past decade has identified men, particularly those in impoverished circumstances, as 'dangerous fathers'. This has been true in legal texts (Collier, 1995), sociological analyses (Hearn, 1998) and also social work practice. For example:

There is a certain exasperation expressed about men's incompetence as carers and as clients. They are variously described as unable to cope, childlike, deluded, obsessive, and stubborn. They are seen as difficult to work with ... They are regarded as of little practical use in terms of family life.

(Scourfield, 2001, p. 81)

However, policy views have sounded a more positive note. For example, *Supporting Families* (1998), the document that initially drove New Labour's legislative programme, was clear that: 'Fathers have a crucial role to play in their children's upbringing'. The Government has not only sought to allocate parental responsibility to some cohabiting fathers (see above), but also introduced paternal leave entitlements (see O'Brien, 2004) that signify a positive view of fathers (see also Scourfield and Drakeford, 2002).

Most European governments are now committed to facilitating active paternal involvement with children by revising their directives on working hours and paid paternity leave. In Britain, however, many fathers continue to work long hours – much longer than their EU counterparts, especially in northern Europe. More than 33 per cent are regularly engaged in paid employment for more than 48 hours per week (the maximum limit specified by the EU's Working Time Directive) and 12 per cent work for over 60 hours. Although there are signs of a slight reduction in the number of men working long hours (CIPD, 2003), many contemporary couples face the dilemma that they can only enhance their family finances through work at the cost of reduced involvement in childcare (Day *et al.*, 2005).

Most studies of young children suggest that maternal and paternal styles and patterns of care become more similar as children grow older (see Lamb and Lewis, 2004), and are associated with variations in the quality of the relationship between

the parents (Grych and Clark, 1999). But, because so many fathers work long hours, it might be assumed that their influence on their children's upbringing and well-being is relatively small. However, the huge research literature that now exists on paternal 'effects' suggests otherwise (Lamb, 2004).

Research on younger children does appear to support the long-standing belief that mother-child relationships typically affect children's development more than father-child relationships do. For example, many studies, including those in England (Steele *et al.*, 1999) and Belgium (Verschueren and Marcoen, 1999), have found that primary school children's sociability is predicted by the quality of child-mother attachments more than four years earlier, whereas the closeness of child-father attachments is not consistently of similar importance. However, studies of subsequent educational attainment suggest that exposure to parental conversation in the home and parental limit-setting both affect achievement, with no clear differences between mothers and fathers (e.g. Scott, 2004). Capturing some of the complexity in the literature, Goldman (2005) concluded that:

Fathers are more likely to be involved if their child's mother is involved in the child's learning and education, they have good relations with their child's mother, they or their child's mother have relatively high educational qualifications, they got involved in their child's life early on, their child is in primary school rather than secondary school, their child is doing well in secondary school, and their child's school is welcoming to parents. The strongest association is with the level of mother's involvement.  
(Goldman, 2005, summary)

That being so, the evidence concerning longer-term influences on the child's adjustment may seem somewhat surprising. Maternal 'inputs' are not consistently correlated with indices of their children's development once they enter secondary school, whereas paternal 'inputs' *are* so correlated. Indeed, there is an indication that teenagers' sense of self-worth is predicted by the quality of their play with their fathers some 13 years earlier. There are also more consistent associations between father-teenager relationships and the latter's adjustment to adult life than exist between adjustment and mother-teenager relationships (Grossmann *et al.*, 2002).

The most detailed of the relevant findings have come from analyses of longitudinal data in the UK National Child Development Study. Eirini Flouri (2005; Flouri and Buchanan, 2002a, 2002b) has demonstrated links between parental reports of father's involvement at the age of seven and lower levels of later police contact as reported by the mothers and teachers (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002a). Similarly, father and adolescent reports of their closeness at age 16 have been correlated

with measures of the children's depression and marital satisfaction at age 33 (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002b). Teenagers' feelings of closeness to their mothers at age 16 predicted levels of marital satisfaction 17 years later, but not their overall satisfaction with life. Rather than suggesting that fathers make some magical contribution to the lives of children in adolescence and young adulthood that mothers cannot match, it may be that the quality of father-child relationships is simply a marker of the quality of all the relationships within families with older children, as depicted in some of the strands in Figure 2. We would, of course, make the same point if mother-child relationships were more predictive of child adjustment than father-child relationships – all family relationships are highly interrelated and it is difficult to single out individual relationships as unique determinants of child development.

## 4 Fatherhood and diversity: current issues

As already noted, many researchers and commentators have focused, with varying degrees of scepticism, on stereotypes concerning ‘superdads’ and ‘deadbeat dads’. Lewis (2000), in his research overview for JRF, found this generally unhelpful and identified three particular barriers to progress a better understanding of fathering and fatherhood: a narrow concentration on men’s roles as ‘providers’; inattention paid to other, less visible, aspects of parenting; and neglect of the non-economic barriers to fathers’ involvement. In this chapter, we chart the progress of current or very recent British research to see how it builds on the conclusions reached by Lewis.<sup>1</sup>

One point is clear from the outset – there is more British research on fathers today than five years ago. Although the Joseph Rowntree Foundation was the most consistent supporter of fatherhood research over the past decade, a wider variety of funders – including the Equal Opportunities Commission, the National Family and Parenting Institute, government departments, the Economic and Social Research Council and a range of charities and think tanks – are now active. However, because some funders have simply commissioned reviews or cursory surveys and analyses, some of the resulting ‘research’ merely reproduces the stereotypes. One recent study, for example, divided fathers into four types: ‘enforcers’, ‘entertainers’, ‘useful’ and ‘fully involved’. Such classifications do little to advance knowledge and are reminiscent of the cursory analyses being performed over 30 years ago. In the sections that follow we confine the discussion to more serious attempts to deepen understanding of the nature of fatherhood and its diversity.

### Diversity in method

Although many researchers use traditional surveys or interviews to collect data, methodological innovations have enabled fresh air to be blown into areas of debate that have stagnated for some time. We will consider three exemplary innovative approaches, each of which demonstrates the need for clear research questions and has been based on novel data collection or analysis plans.

The first involves an exploration of family processes by Kerry Lee (2005), a PhD student at City University, who is focusing on the nature of changing family forms using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). Lee reports that, of the 2,183 men in the sample, the number who become parents and then lived with their children throughout the family life course dropped from 83 per cent of those

born in 1900–39 to 63 per cent of those born in 1960–79. Thus more than a third of the current generation of male parents have followed a ‘non-standard paternal biography’. Lee’s analysis is innovative, however, because it goes further to identify the number and *nature* of the pathways that men follow in their parental careers. In Lee’s analysis, each father’s career is charted by the number and nature of their parenting transitions:

For example, the trajectory:

BIO — NR — STEP — DUAL

describes a man who resides with his child[ren], then leaves the household, becomes a stepfather and then becomes a biological father again with a new partner. In all, Lee has identified 73 different pathways in the sample, thereby demonstrating that diversity is indeed the order of the day. Even so, the picture is likely to become even more complex once the individual lives of fathers in both groups are investigated more closely. It is, for example, likely that many ‘traditional’ fathers live in more complex circumstances than their responses on the BHPS would suggest.

The second exemplary study involves analyses made by Kathleen Kiernan of data from the Office of National Statistics and the Millennium cohort. Kiernan, who was a source of inspiration for the JRF research on cohabitation in the 1990s (Kiernan and Estaug, 1993) has focused on the sizeable minority of fathers who are non-resident at the time their baby is born and about whom we know very little (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). Her initial analyses showed that, although 25 per cent of children are born to mothers in cohabiting relationships, 15 per cent are born to mothers who do not reside with the fathers (Kiernan and Smith, 2003). Her more recent studies (Kiernan, 2006) have showed that these fathers do not fit the stereotype of being young (66 per cent are over 25) even though, as expected, they have lower educational qualifications than married parents. As with studies of older children (Welsh *et al.*, 2004), Kiernan’s research shows that non-resident fathers go through diverse early paternal careers. At nine months post-partum, 24 per cent were living with the mothers. It would also be wrong to assume that the other 76 per cent had no contact with their babies because three-quarters saw their children at least once a week and one-third made some contribution to the children’s maintenance. The data analysed by Kiernan were gathered before recent changes in legislation on cohabitation. So we need to know whether the responsibilities given to men named on birth certificates have changed the behaviour of mothers at the time of registration or the subsequent commitment, both financial and personal, demonstrated by men who are identified on birth certificates compared with those who still are not (see Chapter 5).

The third exemplary research strategy belongs to an increasing number of studies concerned with children's perspectives. Over the past decade, there has been a trickle of studies examining the perspectives of teenagers (e.g. Gilles *et al.*, 2001; Langford *et al.*, 2001) and even younger children (Morrow, 1998). Such a strategy has also been a hallmark of Judy Dunn's research on family life and the effects of changes in household composition over time. For example, Dunn and her colleagues (2004) were interested in young children's opinions about family life. They recruited 258 children aged four to seven, of whom 192 came from separated, divorced, step- or blended families. Using a technique called the 'Four Field Map', each child was asked to place all her, or his family, members on a diagram comprising five concentric circles, with an X representing themselves in the inside of the innermost circle. The child was told that the two outer circles indicated relationships that are 'not close' while the inner circles denoted 'close' relationships.

The procedure seemed to be easy for the children to understand and provided interesting family profiles. For example, 67 per cent of those who lived with their biological fathers placed him in the two innermost circles. By contrast, only 30 per cent of the relevant children placed stepfathers in these circles, although 62 per cent placed their (non-resident) biological fathers there. The study showed how even very young children could become active participants in a research process and that their responses closely matched those of older children asked about relationships with non-resident fathers.

## **Theorising diversity**

Paradoxically, without a sound theoretical basis, fatherhood research can be polemical. Yet the topic is so complex that it is frequently quite difficult to develop theory. Efforts are being made, however, to draw together the strands identified in Figures 1 and 2. In the study described above, for example, Lee (2005) is exploring the extent to which contextual factors like family structure affect paternal involvement. Because the word 'context' derives from the Latin 'contextere' (to bind together, as in the strands of a rope), Lee is working towards a model of fatherhood similar to that in Figure 2, which includes men like non-resident fathers who are usually left out of the picture. John Ives, A PhD student at Birmingham University, is, meanwhile, conducting a study on the ways that paternal rights and responsibilities are generated. In part, the work explores the tension between 'social' and 'biological fatherhood' by examining different men's perspectives on these constructs. According to Ives (personal communication, 15 December 2005), he is seeking to break down traditional barriers between social sciences research and bioethics, starting from the theoretical perspective that empirical qualitative data have a salient role to play

in informing our understanding of bioethical issues. Tensions among participating men have been identified between their desire to conceive of fatherhood as a social relationship and the need of many to maintain a 'uniqueness' that can be expressed only through some physical 'genetic' relationship.' This relates to theoretical work in the 1990s (Marsiglio, 1995; Lupton and Barclay, 1997) and to studies that have examined the 'maternal gatekeeping' hypothesis (Allen and Hawkins, 1999) – the claim that mothers play an important role in either facilitating or preventing paternal involvement. This is a contentious issue that is hard to study. Ongoing research suggests that such processes are evident in parents' accounts of the ways in which parental responsibilities are negotiated (following Backett, 1982), but that both mothers and fathers create and maintain the 'gates' (Zacharostilianakis-Roussou, PhD in progress, Lancaster University). This is because mother–father relationships appear to be central predictors of the roles played by men in families. Nevertheless, Dunn (2006) suggests that maternal gatekeeping is central to our understanding of fathering and its effects.

### Fathering in 'ordinary families'

One brief for this review was to identify what we know and need to know about fathering in 'ordinary families' in the UK. Here, there are large-scale surveys of parents (e.g. Yaxley *et al.*, 2005) and young people (e.g. TOPMAN, no date) that complement the cohort studies described above. Numerous smaller-scale quantitative and qualitative studies have also been initiated. However, here, too, actual progress in understanding fatherhood has been slow. It has, again, to be emphasised that the data show fathering to be diverse in relation to changing patterns of activity over the life course and life circumstances, like divorce, that can affect individuals' commitment to parenting. It has, likewise, been sensitive to secular trends like the rapid increase in paternal involvement reported by O'Brien and Shemilt (2003). Other changes over time also need to be closely examined because they may reflect the temporary reactions of parents to outside forces, like a downturn in the economy, rather than a shift in the nature of parenting relationships. However, the fact that more men than before, and more men than their partners, want to spend more time looking after their children (Yaxley *et al.*, 2005) does seem to indicate that a major shift is occurring.

In the main, the same factors predict paternal relationships throughout the first 18 years of parenting. In an analysis of parenting in 'middle childhood', Pike *et al.* (2006) found that a range of factors predicted paternal involvement. For example, the warmth of men's relationships with their children was greater when they had good relationships with the mothers, when the home was 'well organised' and when the

family regularly engaged in activities together. This echoes the results of research on the early months of parenting by Ross Parke in the USA in the 1970s (Parke and Sawin, 1980) and on families with non-resident fathers where patterns of contact are correlated with the closeness of mother–father relationships (Flouri, 2005).

Such correlations only scratch the surface, however, and we still need to dig deeper by conducting more intensive qualitative interviews in the course of longitudinal research, charting the links between family events and examining the role of fathers from each family member’s perspective. For example, a study by Langford *et al.* (2001) attempted to assess each household member’s views on the nature of family relationships and to explore the different types of discourse they use. This found that, beneath the tendency for parents and children to describe their relationships as ‘best mates’, there were real tensions about control and the nature of family life. More could be done in future to explore the origins and effects of such patterns.

Research could also do more to understand children’s perspectives. Two British studies have examined the reaction of children to patterns of parental separation, repartnering and stepfamily creation (Smith *et al.*, 2001; Dunn *et al.*, 2004). But we still need to know more about the ways in which families react to changing circumstances and about the factors influencing the level and nature of father–child relationships. Dunn *et al.* (2004) described children’s accounts of depressed feelings and concern about being caught between their parents, when they live in two households. Yet she (Dunn, 2006) also found that positive relationships with both biological and/or stepfathers predicted a reduction in behaviour problems three years later. The direction of causality is unclear and more work needs to be done to unravel the complexity of these associations.

Finally, we need to expand the definition of ‘fathering’ as a diverse activity so that it embraces all representative groups in the UK. This is particularly important in relation to fathering in minority ethnic groups, about which there has been little research but considerable speculation. As O’Brien (2005) pointed out, some groups, like South Asians, deserve special attention because their fertility rates are increasing at a time when they are decreasing in most other social groups across the European Union. Second, there are some signs of different expectations concerning fathers and fatherhood in different groups. For example, Warin *et al.* (1999) found that the need to provide for the family was expressed especially strongly among British-Punjabi fathers. However, the fact that men from some South Asian communities are more likely to be unemployed or self-employed suggests that their patterns of paternal involvement may differ from those of other British fathers (Hatten, *et al.*, 2002). The new JRF project by Clarke *et al.* (in progress) is timely.

We must always be careful to view and interpret data about minority ethnic groups in context. It is not a good idea to assume cultural differences between ethnic groups without considering other possible influences. Examples of the latter are the effects relating to financial hardship, social connections and health that Williams (2004) found among African, Caribbean and white working-class fathers without any ethnic differences. Even when variations between ethnic groups are found, these tend to be determined by a range of factors, including gender and the fathers' residence (Guishard, 2002). Studies of ethnicity and fathering should take care to explore the complexities of fathering in all social and ethnic groups, and should beware simple, often ethnocentric, assumptions. In the USA, for example, many social commentators have made sweeping statements about African-American fathers, especially those who are non-resident. Yet careful ethnographic research (such as that by Waller, 2002) has identified much greater non-resident father-child contact than the stereotypes would suggest. Other studies show that many 'ethnic' differences are better viewed as socio-economic in nature (e.g. Roopnarine *et al.*, 2005).

### **No longer under the radar? Fathers in special circumstances**

The study of fathers and fatherhood has often been characterised by a broad brush of research methods – through surveys and cohort studies to intensive investigations of identifiable groups. Some of these paid particular attention to vulnerable groups for whom social policy interventions may be appropriate.

- *Birth fathers and adoption*: in the 1990s, close attention was paid to mothers who had been 'persuaded' to give up their children for adoption in the 1960s, and three recent studies have examined the experiences of birth fathers. One of these (Clapton, 2003, 2004) found little support for the stereotypical belief that the men were not committed to their children and were not involved in the adoption decisions. Studies like this challenge much of the folklore about 'deadbeat dads'.
- *Teenage fathers*: this group periodically comes into the public eye (Lamb and Elster, 1986). A recent study by Quinton and Pollock (2002) found that 60 per cent of young fathers in Bristol remained highly involved with their children, whereas 37 per cent had no contact. These contrasting responses were best predicted by the couple's relationship during pregnancy and not, as expected, by the reaction of each family to the men's involvement. There are good reasons to follow the men in this large sample, which is contained within a well-studied geographical area.

- *Disabled fathers/fathers of children with disabilities:* again, these groups of fathers have not been wholly neglected (see the review by Lamb and Billings, 1997). In the UK, a project undertaken by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities issued a report in 2006 (Towers and Swift, 2006). To our knowledge there is no current work on disabled men as fathers.
- *Drug-taking fathers:* drug and alcohol abuse are major factors preventing fathers' co-residence or continuing relationship with their children (Lewis *et al.*, 2002) and there is a need to understand more generally how family members cope with such activity. Anne Whittaker (PhD student, University of Dundee) points out that the research on drug-abusing mothers is more extensive than that on drug-abusing fathers, even though the latter outnumber the former by 2:1 (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2003). She is conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with service providers and with drug-dependent men around the transition to parenthood. As Whittaker (personal communication, December 2005) points out:

Many problem drug-using fathers come from disadvantaged backgrounds and will have multiple health and social problems in addition to their problem drug use. They may face enormous difficulties in providing the sort of positive parenting and supportive partnering that is associated with positive child outcomes.

- *Fathers in prison:* the first research on British prisoners as fathers yielded the heartfelt accounts obtained in a study by Katz (2002) of 341 prisoners and 70 of their family members. Recent research builds on many issues raised in that report as part of an international effort to explore prisoners' relationships with their children (Brooks-Gordon, cited in Bainham *et al.*, 2003; Nicholls, 2006). The most recent study by Clarke *et al.* (2005) emphasises the ways that mothers serve as 'gatekeepers' for the men's continuing roles as fathers.
- *Fathers and professional services for families:* this has been an active area of research as a result of government policy regarding social exclusion. Ghate *et al.* (2000) and Lloyd *et al.* (2003) both concluded that pre-school services for families seldom provide services for fathers or men taking advantage of generally available provision. Male workers at day nurseries and playgroups in Sure Start comprise, respectively, 2 per cent and 1 per cent of the total (Kahn, 2005). By contrast, about 40 per cent of fathers have contact with pre-schools, albeit for very short periods, presumably when dropping their children off in the morning. Lloyd *et al.* (2003) found that local Sure Start programmes had successfully engaged fathers where the directors were keen to do so, and especially when

they had dedicated 'fathers' workers', but fathers were still conspicuous by their absence from many programmes. In a small qualitative study of Sure Start users, Cavanaugh and Smith (2005) found that half of the children's fathers were non-resident and that half of these fathers felt socially isolated. They perceived Sure Start services as being run 'by women for women'. A linked survey of programmes for men found that these tended to aim at problems, like drug abuse, rather than focusing on more positive parenting topics.

## 5 Conclusion: research on fathers in future

In the UK and elsewhere, the research literature on fathers has been extensive. In the first half of this paper, we underlined the need for clear theoretical frameworks to guide further research on the nature of men's commitment to their children. The complex influences on family processes have inhibited efforts to develop a clear understanding of, or policy statements about, men's family roles, in part because professionals and academics often fail to acknowledge these complexities and resort instead to stereotypes:

Professional practice within child and family social work services also remains *gendered*, with a focus on mothering and an avoidance of father. (Scourfield, 2001, emphasis in the original)

In his JRF report, Lewis (2000) noted that professionals often accept without question a father's seeming lack of involvement in the family. There is little clear evidence of any widespread recent change in this regard. He also identified the need to study unemployed fathers, young fathers, cohabiting men, non-resident fathers, stepfathers, men as carers and men as providers. Research on many of these topics has since taken place, although there remains a special need for research on the non-resident and stepfathers who represent the more visible understudied types of fatherhood. In her analyses of fathers' involvement in their children's education, for example, Goldman (2005) noted that knowledge was limited by continuing neglect of fathers who are non-resident or non-white. We should study these and other understudied groups as part of a process of recognising continually changing family forms and structures (see Chapters 1 and 2 of this report). In the process, as suggested in the previous chapter, we need to employ varied methods so that the nature and processes of fathering can be explored from numerous angles.

There are still clear gaps in our appreciation of British fathering. For example, O'Brien (2005, p. 24) has emphasised the need to explore family processes more fully, particularly the negotiation of work and family life, and the status of parent-child relationships after parents separate. Such research will require that researchers address the varied mutually overlapping factors described in Figure 2. Indeed, the most fundamental need at present is for research that draws the tangled strands depicted in Figure 2 into a tidier and more systematic bundle.

Conversations with colleagues in other countries, particularly Australia and the USA, also underscore the need for more links between the worlds of research and

practice. In the USA, for example, a fathers' programme was made a central part of the Early Head Start programme in the mid-1990s and this (along with the Fragile Families Project) has become the central component of a nationwide attempt to foster close father-child relationships, especially in vulnerable families. In Australia, large corporations have played a central role in the development and evaluation of father-friendly programmes, policies and practices (Russell and Hwang, 2004). For example, the Engaging Fathers Project ([www.newcastle.edu.au](http://www.newcastle.edu.au)) produced a DVD entitled *Skills and Strengths of Indigenous Men* as a result of co-operation between employers and researchers.

Finally, there is a need to monitor social changes in ways exemplified by the work of Kiernan (see above). We need to study cohabitation and fathering closely in order to monitor the effects of legal changes that have resulted in fathers automatically being assigned parental responsibility when they are named on birth certificates. Similarly, the nature and effects of parental separation on fatherhood continue to demand attention. In the UK, the 'best interests' policy has led to an automatic assumption of maternal residence, so that the relevant research has focused on the frequency of contact between non-resident fathers and their children (e.g. Trinder and Lamb, 2005). In the USA, the agenda has been more focused on shared responsibility (Trinder and Lamb, 2005).

Although we have covered a lot of topics in this report, we realise that these only identify further issues to explore. This is in part because the notion of fathering depicted in Figure 2 is so complex. We have also to be aware of the blinkers that researchers and policymakers wear when deliberating about fatherhood. We hope that this report has widened our field of vision a bit. Like Gary Clapton at Edinburgh University (personal communication, March 2006), we would also note that most people continue to have relationships with their parents for much of their, as well as their parents', lives. Yet family studies have neglected those aspects of parenting that usually long outlast the years of dependency. We get the impression that further conceptual work should help us to widen our vision and perspective still further.

# Notes

## Chapter 2

- 1 For example, in the longest running soap opera in the UK (*The Archers*), baby George Grundy has moved from one household to another while two brothers, Edward and William, have been competing to be acknowledged as his father. When his mother, Emma, decided shortly after the birth to reside with Edward, a genetic test showed that her husband, William, was the 'father'. This has led both brothers to claim some paternal responsibility and relationship. The story continues and will doubtless show further shifts in commitment, care, responsibility and relationships. In many respects, however, the stuff of soap operas is a pale reflection of the complexity of family relationships as enacted in a majority of households, not only currently, but in the past as well (Rapoport *et al.*, 1976).

## Chapter 4

- 1 It is based on a brief scan of the literature and a request for information published in the electronic newsletter distributed by Fathers Direct.

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