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| Figuring out fatherhood |
| Rachel Hannah Pennington |

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Staffordshire University for the degree of Doctorate in Clinical Psychology

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| **Declaration and signature of candidate** |
| I confirm that the thesis submitted is the outcome of work that I have undertaken during my programme of study, and except where explicitly stated, it is all my own work.  I confirm that the decision to submit this thesis is my own.  I confirm that except where explicitly stated, the work has not been submitted for another academic award.  I confirm that the work has been conducted ethically and that I have maintained the anonymity of research participants at all times within the thesis.    Signed: Rachel Pennington                                                                 Date: 24/04/2023 |

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# **Thesis Abstract**

Paper 1 is a review which aimed to systemically identify and collate literature on the experiences of fathers accessing internet-based support. A total of 11 papers were reviewed. The review found four key themes which indicate that fathers experience support online in different ways: internet-based support experienced as a community; as a space to consider societal norms of gender; as a safe space to develop new narratives and challenge misconceptions; and as a place of learning. Reflectivity and ethical considerations were noted within the literature and should be held in mind when interpreting the findings. The results show a need for fathers to have access to safe communities to learn from each other’s experiences and continue developing discourses to share with their children.

Paper 2 is an empirical paper which uses interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore young fathers’ experience of their developing their identity whilst transitioning from young person to parent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants who viewed themselves as having been young fathers. At the time of the interview, the participants ranged in age from 22-52 having had their first child between the ages of 20-24. Three themes were developed: “What do we do now?”; “Step up”. “Man up”, and “Change happens”. The findings indicate that young fathers go through a range of emotions and experiences as they develop their fatherhood identities. External factors have a large influence, and their identity is interpreted through multiple lenses. The research indicates that young fathers require more support from services with an emphasis on peer support and consideration of psychoeducation.

Paper 3 is an executive summary paper, written to be accessible to young fathers. It contains a summary of the empirical paper mainly focusing on the results and what they mean for young fathers. It can be distributed to those who work with young parents in the charity sector, health clinicians and the general public.

# Paper 1

# Figuring out fatherhood; what is known about the experience of internet-based support for fathers: a review

**Author Note**

Both Papers One and Two have been written with the intent to submit for publication in the *Journal of Family Studies* (Appendix A). Amendments will be made prior to submission to the journal to ensure the papers adhere to all submission guidelines.

# **Abstract**

This review aimed to systematically search and appraise the literature exploring fathers’ experiences of using internet-based platforms for support, published since 2002. Electronic searches were conducted during March 2022 and papers were selected according to pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. In total 11 papers were included which varied in quality. This review examines how fathers engage with and experience online sources of support regarding fatherhood.

Four themes were identified: internet-based support experienced as a community; as a space to consider societal norms of gender; as a safe space to develop new narratives and challenge misconceptions; and as a place of learning. These themes were all linked with fatherhood ideologies of masculinity and identity.

Research on the impact of culture and investment into inclusive research is needed to further understand the role that the internet can have in supporting fathers/partners.

Key words: father, paternal, online, support

# **Introduction**

Parenting research often falls foul of perpetuating gender norms with a focus on the mother child relationship (Cabrera et al., 2018). Whereas the relationships between any infant and caregiver is important, the current literature often diminishes the role of father. Fatherhood is a transitional time for men, often met with feelings of helplessness and uncertainty (Reid et al., 2016) yet support for fathers is unavailable or rarely accessed. The emergence of the internet offers an option for informal support that parents have utilised for several years (Lupton et al., 2016), however, the experience of fathers accessing such support is relatively unknown.

Research has linked paternal involvement with better outcomes for children, (Scourfield et al., 2014) noting that fathers’ health in the perinatal period can impact their parenting abilities and the relationship with children in the future (Giallo et al., 2013). Although crucial to consider the child, research examining this area of fatherhood may further perpetuate the narrative that supporting fathers is there to serve a purpose beyond the individual themselves.

The concept of fatherhood has changed and developed over recent years, moving away from typical gender roles to normalising more hands-on approaches to being a dad. The term ‘involved fatherhood’ has become increasingly popular which aligns the role of father with that of mother, rather than a secondary parent (Campana et al., 2020). Yet with this comes contrasting narratives of wanting to be present and engaged in their children’s lives but also feeling the masculine pressure of needing to provide for and be ‘the rock’ of the family (Das & Hodkinson, 2019). This may leave fathers in a position of wanting to be different from their own fathers (Åsenhed et al., 2013) but unsure of how to enact change.

There is considerable literature documenting mental health difficulties associated with mothers, more recently an increasing body of evidence has identified that mental health difficulties in fathers are prevalent in the perinatal period (Mayers et al., 2020) with an awareness that there are limited resources available to support fathers. Online platforms may bridge the gap in services to support fathers in their own experiences of fatherhood, and allow them to explore and develop the new narrative of fatherhood with likeminded individuals.

For many people, the internet functions as a source of easily accessible information, generally residing in people’s pockets. For fathers, it seems to be a logical place to search for support in relation to fatherhood and has been noted to be a promising avenue for research (Teague & Shatte, 2018). Whereas fathers have typically been seen as a hard-to-reach group (Mackert et al., 2018) online interventions have become one way for them to access support.

In a society fuelled by seemingly endless technological developments internet-based platforms can often fall foul of criticism (McMullan et al., 2019), yet for some fathers these spaces have become an easy to access network of support. The internet also offers insight into the experiences of others whereby fathers can access in-depth experiential accounts of what others are going through that may offer a relatable perspective (Plantin & Daneback, 2009).

Fathers accessing services or formal support for parenting have reportedly felt like ‘part-time parents’ or as a ‘helper’ rather than a collaborative part of the parenting team (Cosson & Graham, 2012). Emerging documentation has been clear that support for fathers is beneficial for reducing paternal anxiety and depression (Tohotoa et al., 2012). With formal support falling short for fathers (Hodgson et al., 2021) and more informal support sought out via internet-based platforms, this literature review aims to examine what is known about fathers’ experiences of internet-based support with a focus on examining how fathers interact with the platforms they access and reasons for seeking support.

# **Rationale**

Research into fathers and fatherhood is still not as widely documented as that of mothers but it has gained traction over recent years. Existing studies have looked at the way fathers access support, barriers to support (Bateson et al., 2017) and how they manage with specific difficulties e.g., depression, anxiety, (O’Brien et al., 2016) or illness in their children (Van Oers et al., 2014). How fathers experience and interact with support online is less documented, and the research that is available has not been synthesised.

At the time of writing, no other paper has systematically reviewed the literature on fathers’ experience of online support.

# **Aim**

This review aimed to systematically identify and collate the experiences of fathers accessing internet-based support. Specifically, the review considers what is known about fathers’ use of online platforms, and perceived strengths and concerns of accessing internet-based support, with a view to exploring gaps in the current understanding of fathers’ experiences, and enhancing the knowledge of the phenomena.

# **Method**

**Search Strategy**

Initial scoping searches were conducted to establish if enough research existed to warrant systematically reviewing the data. Search terms were established through this scoping, with relevant terms collated and synonyms identified.

An electronic search of the following databases was conducted between 1st-31st March 2022: Medline, CINAHL, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, Scopus, and the Cochrane Database. Grey literature was also searched using the CORE and Ethos databases. Google Scholar was searched as the final database, with the first 10 pages reviewed, until no further relevant papers were found. Finally, hand searching of reference lists of relevant papers was conducted (Figure 1).

**Search Terms**

The terms used were ‘father\* OR dad\* OR paternal AND online OR digital OR "social media" OR "internet-based" AND support OR "peer support"’.

**Screening Procedure**

The inclusion/exclusion criteria were developed to ensure all appropriate papers were captured. As the review focuses on fathers and their use of the internet to access support inclusion required both fathers and the internet to be referenced in the title or abstract. Support that was moderated by official bodies such as health care providers was not included as research suggests that fathers are less likely to seek out professional support (Katz et al., 2007). Papers which focused on maternal support were also excluded.

Formal support and mothers were not the target and therefore papers that documented support moderated by official bodies or mothers were excluded. The age was set at 18-65 as younger and older fathers have different needs (Kiselika, 2008). Similarly, fathers seeking support for specific illnesses were excluded. Text or phone support options were excluded as these offer a different type of support to online platforms. A restriction of papers published between 01/01/2002 and 01/01/2022 was set as to capture the 20-year period since social media was first developed in the early 2000’s(Maryville University, 2020)**.**

Following initial searches, 871 papers were returned, of those 11 duplicates were removed. Abstracts and titles of the remaining 860 papers were screened and assessed for eligibility in line with a pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criterion (Table 1). Papers were primarily excluded for three reasons: they were not father focused, they focused on a diagnosed medical condition, or they did not look at online support. Those which were considered relevant were then read in full (n=69). Of these papers only nine met the inclusion/exclusion criteria. A further two were found via hand searching references and from google scholar. The screening process resulted in 11 papers for inclusion in the review (Figure 1).

**Table 1**

*Inclusion and Exclusion criteria*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Inclusion | Exclusion |
| Title/abstract referenced father support on an online platform | Papers focused on mothers |
| Focused on fathers using internet-based platforms for support | Online support which was moderated by an official body e.g., a healthcare service |
| Fathers aged between 18 and 65 years | Papers investigating specific health needs of children e.g., babies born with health conditions |
| Papers supporting fatherhood in general | Papers which looked at support for both parents |
| Written in English | Papers investigating formal support online e.g., interventions for fathers |
| Published between 01/01/2002 and 01/01/2022 | Text or phone support for fathers |

**Figure 1**  
*Literature search screening process flow diagram*

Articles published in English between 2002 and 1st January 2022 identified through database searches

Papers screened by title and abstract based on pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria

APA Psych articles (*n*=20)

APA Psych Info (*n*=199)

CINAHL Plus with full text (*n*=232)

MEDLINE (*n*=232)

Scopus (*n*=154)

Cochrane (*n*=11)

CORE (*n*=0)

Ethos Library (*n*=23)

*n*=871

**Total number of studies for screening *n*=860**

Studies excluded based on title/abstract not meeting inclusion criteria

*n*=791

Full text articles assessed for eligibility *n*=69

APA Psych articles (*n*=7)

APA Psych Info (*n*=13)

CINAHL Plus with full text (*n*=22)

MEDLINE (*n*=17)

Scopus (*n*=8)

Ethos Library (2)

Hand searching reference lists for further eligible publications and search of google scholar (*n*=11)

Studies excluded based on full text article review and inclusion/exclusion criteria *n*=69

Duplicates removed

*n*=11

APA Psych articles (*n*=1)

CINAHL Plus with full text (*n*=2)

Ethos (n=1)

MEDLINE (*n*=1)

Scopus (n=4)

Google Scholar and reference lists (hand searched) (*n*=2)

**Studies included in final review *n*=11**

**Publication Bias**

Though publication bias has been discussed within the research community for many years, there are still difficulties with research only being published if it is significant (Malički & Marušić, 2014). Qualitative research, although not reported in line with significance values, is not immune to publication bias. Papers that do not show striking findings are often not published (Petticrew et al., 2008). To avoid being complicit with publication bias grey literature was searched for the review, only one thesis was found which met criteria to be included in the review, it was published by the affiliated university (Mackay, 2018).

**Critical Appraisal**

To systematically examine research, determining its relevance and value, critical appraisal tools are widely used (Brice, 2022). The papers in this review were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) for qualitative papers. Although there are several tools available for assessing qualitative research the CASP was deemed most appropriate as it was specifically designed for use within health research and is endorsed by both Cochrane and the World Health Organisation (Long et al., 2020).

The CASP consists of ten questions to aid in evaluating three areas: are the results valid? What are the results? Will the results help locally? Due to the review focusing on internet-based support the complexity of this final question has been thought about more widely.

Although the CASP does not provide a quality score the papers reviewed have been given a nominal score to illuminate the value of the research. Scores were given based on the answers to the questions: two points assigned to questions answered ‘yes’; one point for ‘cannot tell’; and zero points for no. The final question assessing overall value has not been coded as the tool looks at local value, which when considering the internet, does not feel applicable, it will be commented upon. With this coding system, a maximum score of 18 is available (Appendix B).

# **Results**

**Study Characteristics**

Ten qualitative studies and one mixed-methods paper were included for review. Key characteristics were extracted from each paper (Table 2). Ten papers were peer reviewed plus one doctoral thesis. Three studies used semi-structured interviews (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Campana et al., 2020; Scheibling, 2018) although just one used interviews as their only data source (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015). Blogs were used with various analysis methodologies by three studies (Åsenhed et al., 2013; Scheibling, 2018; Scheibling, 2019). Fatherhood forums were the most used data source, accessed by six studies (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Fletcher & St George, 2011; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013; St George & Fletcher, 2011; Mackay, 2018; Teague & Shatte, 2021). One study also used Instadads, (a term used to describe a father who has a child/fatherhood focused Instagram account), conducting a Netnography of 21 profiles (Campana et al., 2020). One paper, Teague and Shatte (2021) employed a mixed methods design, using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count technology to identify key words within the texts as well as conducting a content analysis.

Geographically the papers were conducted in five areas, Sweden (n=3), Australia (n=3), UK (n=2), Canada (n=2) and USA (n=1). Netnographys were conducted by three studies with data varying from 21 Instadads (Campana et al., 2020) to 1049 pages of an online forum (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012, Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013). The same data sources were used twice on three occasions, (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012, Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013; Scheibling, 2018; Scheibling, 2019; Fletcher & St George, 2011; St George & Fletcher, 2011) to examine different elements of fatherhood online.

Demographic data is difficult to establish when participants are gained from online forums, but those papers that did report on demographics noted a prevalence of fathers being married or in long term relationships (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Campana et al., 2020) and, in the case of Scheibling’s research (2018, 2019), were white, heterosexual and employed. As noted, this style of research makes collecting demographic data difficult, but it may indicate a gap in knowledge about different cultural perspectives, such as single fathers or those who are in same sex relationships etc.

**Table 2** *Study Characteristics*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Author, Date, Country | Design & Methodology | Data Source | Key strengths (+) or limitations (-) | Main Findings | Quality Score |
| Ammari & Schoenbeck (2015) US | Qualitative - inductive process, semi structured interview | Semi-structured interviews with 37 fathers | -No clear aim  -Ethics not considered  -Researchers’ relationship not considered  + Adds to the growing body of literature surrounding fathers use of internet-based platforms  +Consideration of culture | Fathers used the internet to document and discuss three overarching themes: social media to learn how to be a father, how diverse experiences influence social media use, and perceived barriers to sharing online. | **10** |
| Åsenhed, Kilstam, Alehagen & Baggens (2013) Sweden | Explorative qualitative design, qualitative content analysis | Blogs from 11 first time fathers living in Sweden | -Lacks reflexivity  +Analysis done with multiple researchers, enhancing transferability  +Clinical relevance considered  +Ethical considerations of conducting research on a sensitive topic that is in a public forum | Fathers reported the transition to fatherhood as a roller coaster, noting fluctuating emotions, highlighting:   * Experiences of feeling excluded * Sense of community online – support from others in similar situations * Blogging to reflect on their experience - a method of coping | **16** |
| Campana & Van den Bossche & Miller (2020) London | Qualitative design,  netnography and interviews | Netnography of 21 Instadads and 10 interviews | -Lack of reflexivity, ethics, and limited data analysis  -Unclear statement of findings  +Multiple sources of data  +Different element of research, bringing something new as looking at dads’ who are paid to provide content. | Found that fathers use the internet as a space to put forward a profile of involved fatherhood to support a change in narrative with a focus on:   * Connecting – torchbearers for unapologetically involved form of fatherhood * Emoting – countering the silencing of men’s mental health * Reframing – critiquing status quo/ presenting an alternative discourse * Collaborating – fathers as co-parents | **12** |
| Author, Date, Country | **Design & Methodology** | **Data Source** | **Key strengths (+) or limitations (-)** | **Main Findings** | **Quality Score** |
| Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson (2012) Sweden | Archival and cross-sectional observational forum study, netnography | 1049 pages from an online forum | -Researchers own role is not critically examined  -Unclear data analysis process  +Considerations of clinical implications | Fathers experience online is broken down into three categories:   * Communicating encouragement – act of writing is a tool for easing concern, seeking out support from others in the same situation * Providing confirmation – resource for sharing their experiences, connecting offers a link outside of the home. Humour used to confirm experiences * Communicating advice – practical advice, mix of personal experience and signposting | **15** |
| Fletcher & St George (2011) Australia | Qualitative design, thematic analysis | Convenience sample of 18 months of posts from an Australian based, government-supported website. | -Unclear aims  -Reflexivity not considered  + The use of technology to analyse data, increased transparency, additional memos written, and research log documented major insights and significant coding action. | Online forums used to seek out advice and reassurance – no right way to be a father. Three key areas:   * Fathers’ concerns – lack of formal resources, expectations of fatherhood, concerns with being a ‘better’ fathers and the welfare of children and their mother. * Modes of expression – fathers seek and provide social support through empathetic responses, self-disclosure, vulnerability, and humour. * Encouraging fathers – questioning stereotypes, providing space to vent.   Of note is the varied attitude towards females using the space, some encourage it, others feel it removes some of the safety. | **14** |
| Author, Date, Country | **Design & Methodology** | **Data Source** | **Key strengths (+) or limitations (-)** | **Main Findings** | **Quality Score** |
| Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson (2013) Sweden | Qualitative design, netnography | 1049 pages from an online fatherhood forum | -Reflectivity not noted  +Researchers careful consideration of ethics for data in a public forum  +Analysis clearly documented | Considered fathers’ attitudes towards healthcare parental support, key finding was fathers used the online forums as a provision of mutual support. This was broken down into two themes:   * Intertwined attitudes – concerned with the healthcare system, sharing of positive and negative experiences, realisation of living in a gendered society * Assimilating advice – sharing/trading advice, health care staff viewed as a credible resource | **16** |
| Scheiblig (2018) Canada | Qualitative design, ethnographic content analysis | Blogs, field inquiry and interviews with dad bloggers | -Unclear aim making critical analysis difficult  -Research does not appear to consider ethics or reflexivity +Uses multiple data sources  +Adds to the literature on theorising caring masculinity  +Considers the group the data is taken from and the importance of this for future research | Dad bloggers are using their platforms to challenge the traditional notions associated with fatherhood. The research identified three areas that fathers identify as important:   * Challenge to traditional masculinity – reject notion of ‘real men’ and offer ‘better men’ as an alternative. Stereotypes of fathers can impede good parenting and are viewed as damaging * Constructing a caring masculinity – reshaping the meaning of masculinity, using their platform to document acts of care * Feminism – dad bloggers working towards the feminist ideals of gender equality, with views to shape future generations | **12** |
| Scheiblig (2019) Canada | Qualitative document analysis | Blogs taken from an ethnographic project on dad bloggers | -Research does not appear to consider ethics or reflexivity  +Considered the sample used and how this may influence the data, suggestion for future research to focus on other groups | The paper has a focus on identity and has four key themes:   * Self-as-father trajectory – fathers share stories pre fatherhood, positive and negative role models, consider turning points and the father identity, strong narrative of not being ‘moms’ * Role of experience – discussions consisting of practical tips, construct of fatherhood for future generations * Ideology – focus on normalising involved fatherhood, discussions of stereotypes and reshaping cultural norms. | **14** |
| Author, Date, Country | **Design & Methodology** | **Data Source** | **Key strengths (+) or limitations (-)** | **Main Findings** | **Quality Score** |
| St George & Fletcher (2011) Australia | Qualitative design, thematic analysis | 18 months of posts from an Australian based, government-supported website | -The data analysed is the same as the Fletcher & St George (2011) but analysed from a different angle.  -Although the researchers use the same data set, they do not comment on their relationship to the research  +Research adds to both the data on fathers’ support and towards the need for a different support option | Four key themes were captured in the analysis:   * Dads left out – feeling excluded from formal support and unable to access playgroups etc. due to negative reactions * Breadwinners or nurturers – concerns regarding balancing financial stability and parenting role * Making a space for fathers – concerns with women accessing the chat * Cultural space – discussions regarding a shift from stereotypical fatherhood to involved fatherhood | **13** |
| Teague & Shatte (2021) Australia | Mixed methods design, quantitative analysis using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2015, qualitative via content analysis | 369 posts with 3535 replied contributed by 2393 users on Reddit’s two most popular fatherhood forums | -The relationship between the researchers and the research was not documented, however possibly less important with mixed methods  +Clearly documented considerations of ethics  +Analysis clearly documented  +Suggestions for future research with consideration of the way medicine is changing | Three overarching themes identified:   * Individual stressors * Family stressors * Broader societal stressors   Differences were found in the way fathers communicated depending on the type of support they were offering | **15** |
| Author, Date, Country | **Design & Methodology** | **Data Source** | **Key strengths (+) or limitations (-)** | **Main Findings** | **Quality Score** |
| Mackay (2018) UK | Thematic analysis | 835 posts from an online peer support forum | -Thesis, not peer reviewed so although the quality appears good it is more questionable than the other papers.  - As unpublished the thesis is not in report form, therefore a lot of the factors addressed may be removed if published  +Considers the researchers role, reflexivity  +Ethics are considered  +Clearly documented analysis | The transition to fatherhood and early years of parenting is a difficult time for fathers. Internet discussions were used for:   * Seeking and receiving both information and social support for both self-disclosure and self-help * Masculinity as a status was maintained via a range of strategies to mitigate their help-seeking – online nature of discussions helped remove constraints of ‘expected’ masculine behaviour * As threads developed reciprocity and universality became strong characteristics of communication * Online peer support is deemed both an appropriate and acceptable form of support for fathers * Recommendations for professionals working with fathers were suggested and a potential model of engagement discussed * Also noted many people were viewing but not posting | **18** |

# **Critical Appraisal**

**Aims**

Seven of the papers set out clear aims for the research, allowing the reader to consider what is deemed important to the researcher and to have a clearer understanding of the value of the findings (Åsenhed et al., 2013; Campana et al., 2020; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013; Mackay, 2018; St George & Fletcher, 2011; Teague & Shatte, 2021). The remaining four papers were all marked as ‘cannot tell’ as although aims did not appear clearly set, throughout the body of the papers it was possible to draw out indications of what they intended to discuss.

**Methodology and Design**

The CASP appraises methodology in terms of the extent to which the chosen method is appropriate for a qualitative design. The papers with clear aims were easier to consider as the terminology used indicates whether or not the research intends to examine the subjective experiences of those involved. The question of the appropriateness of the chosen design is then considered.

All the papers, bar one, used qualitative methodologies. Teague & Shatte (2021) used a mixed methods approach utilising technology to quantitatively capture the words used in forum posts combined with a qualitative content analysis. Their explanation for selecting the methods and how the research was conducted was clear and added a level of rigour that other studies struggled to achieve.

Netnography, a relatively new methodology developed to conduct ethnography online, is designed to specifically study communities and cultures online (Bowler, 2014). Three studies used this method (Campana et al., 2020; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013), and all reference the same stages of analysis. Strengths of this include being able to conduct field observations in a timelier manner with reduced costs. One limitation noted in Campana’s (2020) work is the potential for data overload. They countered this by selecting posts from Instadads with the highest engagement. The other papers did not note this limitation but clearly outlined their data selection method, which included analysis simultaneously by two researchers and the writing of analysis memos to aid reflexivity and rigour.

The other methods of analysis include: content analysis (n=3); inductive process (n=1); thematic analysis (n=3); and document analysis (n=1).

**Recruitment**

Purposive sampling is frequently used within qualitative research designs due to the ability to match the sample to the aims of the research. This is widely seen to improve the rigour and transferability of studies (Campbell et al., 2020). It was the most common recruitment method used, with ten out of eleven papers using it. However, as blogs and online forums were the sources of data for the majority of papers, recruitment considerations relied less on individuals and more on the selection of appropriate sites.

Fletcher and St George, Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson, and Scheibling, are authors of more than one of the papers within the review, all having an author position on two papers each. It should be noted that although the papers focus on different areas of fatherhood online, they use the same samples for their two studies.

Scheibling (2018, 2019) focuses on a specific community of Dad bloggers in their work, taken from a wider ethnographic project on Dad bloggers in North America. Describing purposive sampling from a community linked to the ‘Dad 2.0 Summit’. Scheibling (2018, 2019) acknowledges that their sample is specific and identified that it is likely an over-representation of liberal-minded men with similar political interests. Furthermore, the lack of diversity within the group is identified and recommendations for future work to encompass many of the characteristics missing (cultural diversity, relationship status, economic position, and sexual orientation) from his sample is suggested. These two studies were in the minority for considering those who were not represented in the sample.

Recruitment for the studies that used interviews varied, Ammari & Schoenebeck (2015), advertised on social media using snowballing and word of mouth, 37 fathers were recruited. It is unclear why that number was chosen and if anyone showed interest in the study but did not complete an interview etc. Although this approach is an appropriate recruitment strategy (Geddes et al., 2017) information regarding the sampling selection is missing. Campana et al., 2020, used purposive sampling but similarly did not report on why 10 was deemed an appropriate number of interviews or if more people were approached but declined.

The recruitment strategy for Scheibling (2018) is unclear. As well as blogs and fieldwork, five ‘key informants’ were interviewed. The informants are noted to be long-standing members of the Dad 0.2 community, but it is unclear how they were approached, or if any other were approached and discounted.

A limitation for all the papers is the element of needing internet access as it automatically removes those who cannot or do not have access to the internet. As the focus of the papers and the review is support for fatherhood via online platforms it may be that this is not a consideration, yet it removes the voice of those who may want to access support but cannot. With this it is important to consider the demographics and the impact the findings may have for clinical implementation.

**Reflexivity**

Within qualitative research reflexivity, the process of the researcher(s) describing the contextual and intersecting relationships between themselves and the area of study, is important as it allows the reader a deeper understanding of the work (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity also adds credibility to the findings as by researchers stepping back and examining their own role and interpretations rigor is increased (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Indication of reflexivity is noted in three of the papers: Teague and Shatte (2021) highlight their role as experts in the field of fatherhood and both Eriksson and Salzmann-Erikson (2012) and Fletcher and St George (2011) note the use of memos during the analysis stage. This may indicate some level of reflexivity, but links to personal views or attitudes are not made.

Only one paper, produced by Mackay (2018), critically examined their own relationship to the research. As a doctoral thesis limitation on the word count is not the same as with papers published in journals, meaning there is more scope for clearly documenting reflexivity. However, it is of interest to consider that only one non-peer reviewed paper gave consideration to their role in relation to the research topic.

The lack of reflexivity within the papers reviewed does impact their quality. The researcher’s personal relationship to the topic, and any individual impact or epistemological position for the research is unknown.

**Ethics**

As with recruitment, the ethics of research performed online requires different considerations than seeking out individual participants. The papers that use online forums and blogs have accessed information that is in the public domain, yet it is still sensitive data that the posters have not consented to be involved in research. This creates an ethical dilemma which several of the studies raised (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Fletcher & St George, 2011; Mackay, 2018; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013; St George & Fletcher, 2011). In research by Åsenhed et al. (2013) they opted to not release the names of the forums that they accessed which protects the participants but can be problematic in terms of rigour as the studies cannot be replicated. However, this is true for many designs used in qualitative research.

A further consideration is to what extent the posters realise their data is in a public forum, as even though websites list terms and conditions research shows these are often not read (Berreby, 2017; Sandle, 2020; Pulvermacher, 2021). Although legally the data can be accessed, is it ethically appropriate? With those posting to online platforms not being aware of the research key ethical considerations seen as standard in traditional forms of research, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, are not met (Brownlow & O’Dell, 2002). Whereas research may not have intent to harm, further considerations of the ramifications of research are needed. If a forum user happened to read the research and identified themselves unintentional harm could result; their words albeit typed publicly, are now visible to unintended audiences.

Ethical concerns are not considered in three papers (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Scheibling, 2018; Teague & Shatte, 2021), and only anonymity is briefly discussed in one (Campana et al., 2020). Considering the additional layers of ethical consideration that comes with online research the lack of attention paid to ethics impacts the quality of the papers.

**Analysis**

Qualitative analysis can take many forms. Three papers (Åsenhed et al., 2013; Mackay, 2018; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013) document sufficient rigour in the analysis, clearly indicating the analysis design and process, and presenting data within the results to support the findings. The use of multiple analysists, as seen in Åsenhed et al., (2013) and Teague and Shatte, (2021), increases the quality of the analysis as it reduces possible bias and increases credibility (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Although all the studies use data to highlight the themes it is not always clear how themes have been established or the process steps of the analysis (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Campana et al., 2020; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012). Two papers indicate a level of reflexivity via the use of analytic memos (Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Fletcher & St George, 2011), however it is unclear how these memos were used to inform the analysis or the results.

The use of content analysis in Scheibling’s, (2019) work which increases validity and reduces bias but also raises the challenge around the level of depth and meaning that can be gained from the data. Similarly, in Teague & Shatte (2021), the one mixed method paper, software is used to analyse the data, but this is used to provide a quantitative understanding considering the words used rather than interpreting meaning.

The lack of reflexivity within the papers impacts on the quality of the analysis as regardless of the method used the researcher’s stance and bias from subjective experience is unknown.

**Findings and Value**

Clear statements of findings are available in all but two of the papers. Although Campana et al. (2020) and St George & Fletcher (2011) report their findings alongside supporting data, their discussions lack cohesion in collating what the research found. Consideration of ongoing work is noted in all papers and all the reviewed literature adding to the growing body of evidence for fathers accessing internet-based platforms. The CASP appraises value at a local level, however when considering the internet this becomes more challenging, therefore value is considered in terms of enhancement or consolidation of knowledge.

Eight of the papers (Åsenhed et al., 2013; Campana et al., 2020; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013; Mackay, 2018; Scheibling, 2019; St George & Fletcher, 2011; Teague & Shatte, 2011) identify the role that online platforms have in supporting fathers as an additional tool to traditional healthcare services. Consideration is given to the possibility of professionals involved in the care of fathers utilising online mediums to provide more readily accessible support.

Three studies (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Fletcher & St George, 2011; Scheibling, 2018) observe the impact of the researched group with reference to privilege and therefore highlight the need for further research in non-dominant groups. Scheibling (2018) also adds to the theory surrounding caring masculinity.

Value is also considered in terms of the quality of the paper; the reviewed papers varied in their given quality scores, from 10 to 18 (Appendix C), where the maximum possible score on the CASP is 18. All the papers surpass 50% for the quality scoring, with indicates that they are all of a relatively good standard. Awareness should also be given to the peer review process as the highest scoring paper is the doctoral thesis.

Whereas the peer review process can add value it by no means implies that unpublished research has no value. Those writing theses are studying at doctoral level and their work is upheld by numerous bodies such as ethical review panels, university faculty and in some cases wider public services. Whilst value is added to the literature through such work it is of note that elements such as tight word counts in journals are not prevalent therefore the aspects assessed in tools such as the CASP can be more readily included. Consequently, whilst some caution is needed for interpreting the results of the mid-range papers, so too is caution required for the highest scoring paper.

# **Synthesis of Themes across the literature**

Findings relating to fathers’ experiences were extracted from the reviewed papers, collated, coded, and organised into themes within a table (process depicted in Appendix D), considering the question of what is known regarding the experience of internet-based support for fathers. This process encompassed reading and re-reading the 11 papers to establish familiarity with the research, the key findings were then extracted and documented in a table. Findings were re-read and assigned codes, from which emerging themes were noted. Similar codes were then colour coded and if appropriate merged. Final themes were then established from the codes and grouped together in a table.

Four dominant themes were developed: internet-based support experienced as: (1) a community, (2), a space to consider societal norms of gender, (3) a safe space to develop new narratives and challenge misconceptions, and (4) a place of learning.

***A community***

The element of an online space being used for fathers to experience a community was present in several of the papers. The idea of connecting with other likeminded individuals was an important narrative, implying that fathers might experience internet-based platforms as an opportunity to seek connection and camaraderie (Fletcher & St George, 2011). It may also signify something that they have lost by becoming a father and holding new responsibilities that perhaps prevent a return to previous social circles.

Terminology within the community appears to be important with fathers adopting the term ‘involved father’ experiencing a shared identity (Campana et al., 2020) and being torchbearers for this concept. Some papers indicated that specific groups, such as single fathers (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015) or stay at home dads (Scheibling, 2019) may use online platforms seek out others in similar situations. Perhaps accessing support to gain reassurance or check themselves against the actions of others in the community.

The community element is enhanced by fathers of older children remaining in the group to offer support to newer parents (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015), providing fathers the experience of learning from others who have been through similar times, as well as a community of peers currently experiencing it. Fathers who continue to access the platforms to offer support may also experience a shift in their own identity, from advice seeker to advice giver.

***A space to consider societal norms of gender***

The feeling of being secondary, not noticed or not focused upon is documented in many of the papers reviewed. Health care professionals often bear the brunt of accusation for not being more conscious of the needs or perspectives of fathers (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013). A lack of resources for fathers was another objection raised (Fletcher & St George, 2011) with considerations of playgroups being mother focused and not parent focused.

Some counter this view with the notion that mothers receive the same pigeonholing as fathers (Campana et al., 2020) but in the other extreme, risk being seen as bad mothers for not being perfect and not receiving praise for parenting. Furthering this, literature highlights that male spaces are not lacking, but rather it is the responsibility of men to go into their existing spaces and make them feminist (Scheibling, 2018). Placing the power to change in the hands of fathers to actively challenge societal norms and make places dominated by men more open to feminist perspectives. A challenge in that by becoming aware of the patriarchy and seeking such a change for fathers may impact areas of life that have previously been beneficial for men. Adding a different experience for some fathers, with their grievances directed at a community they were perhaps once part of, such as ‘locker room banter’ (Baskerville, 2020) which perpetuates misogyny.

Within some of the papers the role of gender norms is addressed and discussed in terms of pregnancy being a seminal moment for increasing awareness about living in a gendered society (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013), with parenting being a predominantly female domain. The title and role of secondary parent was embodied by some and acknowledged in terms of the need to sit within societal norms and adapt their behaviour to match.

***A safe space to develop new narratives and challenge misconceptions***

Going beyond considering societal norms, fathers have identified online platforms as being arenas for challenging stereotypes of traditional fathers (Scheibling, 2018). Online platforms were used as a safe space to express less traditional masculine opinions and to start to deconstruct views they had perhaps been raised with. Challenging gender norms and traditional masculine behaviours is noted by some as a way of shaping future generations by being the fathers they want to be (Campana et al., 2020). For some, fatherhood online platforms may be their only experience of these discussions.

The notion of involved fathers being ‘superdads’ is also challenged with views promoted on the forums that the standards for fathers are set too low and that of mothers too high (Scheibling, 2019). Having an online platform provides fathers with an opportunity to reflect and discuss comments with likeminded individuals; offering them opportunity to be open and discuss with peers.

Experiences of violations to this sense of safety are made when people from outside the fatherhood community comment. Debates around who should be able to access and comment on posts raise queries about the purpose of the sites. Some fathers report wanting it to be purely for fathers, whereas others welcome advice from mothers (St George & Fletcher, 2011).

With internet-based support being used by those who are actively looking for support or reassurance, it may be that fathers experience a different response to the views they might get elsewhere (Scheibling, 2018). Narratives of men being weak or subservient if they take a pay cut to spend more time with their family is still present in society, but online, with likeminded individuals, this experience may enable fathers to act differently.

***A place of learning***

All the papers identified fathers using online platforms to learn how to father in some way. Experience of sharing anecdotes to support others, seeking out practical advice or signposting were repeatedly documented.

The ways fathers sought out information varied and indicated different experiences. For instance, some fathers downplayed difficulties or made light of them whilst asking for support, whereas others explained they had tried everything before seeking support online (Mackay 2018; Scheibling, 2018). Perhaps suggesting that there are different reasons for seeking help or mirroring experiences that they have had in their own reality.

Work commitments were often questioned and discussed, with a narrative of working being secondary to parenting. This discourse was supported with fathers positioning work as an obstacle to parenting. Work conversations also linked to the role of the mother and her career path. Linking to the awareness of a gendered society and the experience of learning together online.

# **Discussion**

Fathers experience online support in different ways, some seeking out information, others offering support or challenge to societal norms. Although clear themes emerged from the current literature, underlying ideas of masculinity and identity can be seen throughout.

The research has a focus on involved fathers and what this entails in terms of parenting; being more present and emotionally available, which is a contrast to the literature of fathers holding onto the belief about needing to be a rock for the family (Das & Hodkinson, 2019). The notion of being a rock often implies financial stability with fathers as the breadwinner and strength in terms of holding the family together, a patriarchal view, which although will vary with cultures dominated the discourse for many years. Fathers may continue to hold onto this but also aim to be more emotionally available for their families, leading to perhaps unattainable standards.

Online platforms can offer space to challenge more traditional views by facilitating conversations with those who are experiencing similar situations. Discussions around establishing a work life balance to be physically available or learning how to be emotionally available may be enacted from hearing anecdotes from their peers or advice from fathers of older children. Platforms that are father specific may enhance these discussions.

A further consideration in respect to this is that of privilege. When considering the emerging themes, only Scheibling (2018, 2019) reported on privilege, noting the idea of time being more important than money as an ideal that is possibly unattainable for many. Some papers did note that the socioeconomic status of the participants was not varied within their research but did not consider the implications of this. Privilege is apparent for those able to take pay cuts or alter working patterns to be at home more. In a society that is still dominated by a gender pay gap, for many, the title of breadwinner is not a status point but a matter of survival. Linking this to the notion above it might be that those accessing the forums were in a position whereby it was easier to distance themselves from gender norms.

The theme of safety, (a safe space to develop new narratives and challenge misconceptions) is consistent with other literature (Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). The anonymity offered with internet use although not always accepted, may provide fathers with opportunities to share and explore areas of themselves that they cannot do safely within their own realties for fear of judgment or perceive judgment.

One area only briefly considered is that of those who read comments but do not post or engage in conversations (Mackay, 2018). The experiences of these fathers are unknown. It is possible the themes highlighted are true for those who do not actively participate but it maybe that they are seeking or gaining something else from forums and blogs. Although a potentially difficult area to research it may benefit from further consideration.

This review focuses on fathers’, research on the experiences of those who do not identify with a gender-specific parental norm, or those in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+) parenting relationships, is sparse. Similarly, little is known about cultural differences in online support forums. The experience of the other partner is not examined in this review.

# **Limitations**

Although the 11 papers have been reviewed under the same criteria it may be that the different online platforms require more in-depth consideration separately. Different experiences may be had by those who access forums to only read posts, those who post requests, those who reply to others, those who share experiences versus share anecdotes, or those who engage in all activities but at different times. Similarly, those who actively blog or Instadads may have other agendas for doing so, such as financial gains or to challenge political agendas etc. Each fathers’ experience is unique to them and a review does not necessarily identify their reason for accessing support. It could be hypothesised that fathers not commenting were gaining what they needed from the sites, e.g., a place of learning or conversely that they were not finding the place of safety or sense of community they required to access support.

Furthermore, the research has been viewed through a western lens, and appraised in line with guidance set out by the UK. Although all the papers were from westernised countries, standards for journals and ethical guidelines do vary between regions. One paper conducted two interviews with fathers from other regions but, overall, the voice and experiences of fathers from non-western countries is absent. This limitation is potentially a product of the inclusion criteria meaning only papers written in English were reviewed.

As of note with the papers themselves, reflexivity within the review is important to consider. Although conducted systematically the review is the work of a single researcher assigning their perspective of quality to the papers. Whilst completed under supervision potential bias from the researchers’ subjective views of the topic and application of the appraisal tool may have influenced the work. To counter this the work was completed for accreditation in a doctoral programme, by a female researcher with an interest in fatherhood narratives.

# **Research Recommendations**

Further research is needed to investigate the experiences of non-gender conforming roles of parenting. Going beyond the title of father and mother to explore the experiences of parents whose families may be considered rainbow families (Reid, 2021), where a parent is part of the LGBTQIA+ community, resulting in more parents being considered (*Family Equality | Facts about LGBTQ Families*, 2020).

Research into the experiences of fathers from different social status may also be beneficial. Intersectionality is a missing aspect of the existing research. One thing noted with research from the Covid-19 pandemic was the effect of lockdown on parents where families who were already struggling were impacted more (Saunders & Hogg, 2020). Considering how different elements of fathers lives prior to fatherhood impact their experience of parenting may add value to the growing body of literature.

# **Conclusion**

The literature examining what is known about the experience of internet-based support for fathers’ ranges in quality from medium to high. Researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations do impact the research and should be held in mind when interpreting the results.

Key themes for how fathers experience online support are intertwined with dominant discourses of masculinity and identity. They show a need for fathers to have safe communities to learn from each other and continue developing discourses to pass onto their children.

Further research into the area of fatherhood, particularly considering intersectionality and parents from the LGBTQIA+ community, is needed to advance the understanding of what parents need in terms of support going forwards.

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# **Appendices**

**Appendix A**

**Journal submission guidelines**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=rjfs20>

**Key points:**

* The journal is an international, peer-reviewed journal publishing high-quality, original research.
* The Journal of Family Studies considers all manuscripts on the strict condition that:
  + The manuscript is your own original work and does not duplicate any previous published work.
  + The work is not under consideration or peer review or accepted for publication or in press or published elsewhere.
  + The manuscript contains nothing abusive, defamatory, libellous, obscene, fraudulent, or illegal.
* Structure – your paper should be complied in the following order: title page; abstract; keywords; main text introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion; acknowledgments; declaration of interest statement; references; appendices (as appropriate); table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list)
* Word limits – word counts must be included but there are no limits for this journal.
* Format-Free Submission – authors may submit their paper in any scholarly format or layout. There are no strict formatting requirements. References can be in any style or format.

The guidelines will be fully addressed prior to submission for publication.

**Appendix B**

**Table showing CASP scores**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Paper** | **Author** | Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? | Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? | Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research? | Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? | Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? | Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered? | Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? | Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? | Is there a clear statement of findings? | Total quality score |
| 1 | Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | **10** |
| 2 | Åsenhed et al., 2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | **16** |
| 3 | Campana et al., 2020 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | **12** |
| 4 | Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2012 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | **15** |
| 5 | Fletcher & St George, 2011 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | **14** |
| 6 | Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | **16** |
| 7 | Scheibling, 2018; | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | **12** |
| 8 | Scheibling, 2019 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | **14** |
| 9 | St George & Fletcher, 2011 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | **13** |
| 10 | Teague & Shatte, 2021 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | **15** |
| 11 | Mackay, 2018 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | **18** |

**Appendix C**

**Process of coding and theme generation**

**Appendix D**

**Graphical user interface, application, table, Excel

Description automatically generatedCASP extraction table example**

Graphical user interface, application, table, Excel

Description automatically generated

# Paper 2

# Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?

**Author Note**

Both Papers One and Two have been written with the intent to submit for publication in the *Journal of Family Studies,* please see Appendix A of Paper One. Amendments will be made prior to submission to the journal to ensure the papers adhere to all submission guidelines.

# **Abstract**

***Introduction***

Within the literature, young fathers, aged 25 or under, are an underrepresented group. Where they are considered, the discourse surrounding them tends to be negative. Research suggests that developmentally the transition from young person to adult is challenging (Tanti et al., 2011), whilst becoming a father at this time adds in another dimension. The present research explores this transition with an emphasis on gaining an understanding of identity.

***Method***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five fathers who had their first child between the ages of 20 - 24. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach was used to explore their experiences of making sense of their developing identity.

***Results***

Three group experiential themes and six subthemes were developed through analysis: “What do we do now?”; “Step up”. “Man up”, and “Change happens”. The experience of external factors on the fathers developing identity, and their reflections on internal processes indicated that the young fathers interpreted their identity through multiple lenses.

***Conclusion***

Young fathers experience a change in identity as they take on the role of father. Their identity is influenced by current external factors, perceived societal expectations, and their own experience of being parented. The fatherhood identity was experienced by both the taking on of new expected duties and responsibilities and a recognition of emotional changes. This paper concludes that research into the experience of changing identity during the perinatal period, and into the experience of fathers under the age of 20 has the potential to be beneficial for both father and child. Further understanding of identity is required for those working with young fathers to ensure appropriate support is offered.

Keywords: young fathers, identity, parenting, fatherhood

# **Introduction**

Young fathers are defined as those who had a child aged 25 or under (Public Health England 2019). Previous research has highlighted society’s perception of young fathers; terminology such as ‘deadbeat’, ‘incompetent’ and ‘disinterested’ are littered throughout papers (Lammy, 2015). The narrative surrounding this group has been, and remains for the most part, negative, with the expectation that ‘most dads aren’t around’ (Weber, 2018). Yet the understanding of the impact of this discourse on the young fathers themselves and how their identity has been shaped through their experiences continues to be limited.

Literature focused on fathers has found that within research settings they are not viewed equally in their role as parent. Within heterosexual couples, mothers are automatically identified as the primary parent. With terminology such as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ caregiver still used, fathers are assumed to be less involved in childcare (Cabrera et al., 2018) and therefore easier to isolate from research. This has been noted to reinforce the perceptions of young fathers that support is aimed at mothers (Diverse Dads Collaboration, 2021). Furthermore, when estranged from their child’s mother, fathers are unable to apply for legal aid to seek contact, therefore limiting their ability to fight for rights if finances are a concern (GOV.UK, 2012). Considering that identity is linked to how we experience situations the societal view is important, for young fathers the impact of this exclusion can only serve to negatively impact their own identity.

Whilst it is known that young fathers struggle, the help available to them remains limited. Within professional services, young fathers may be viewed with the stigma of being ‘troublesome’ or ‘absent’. The notion of them as being ‘hard-to-reach’ is postulated (Davies, 2016), yet engagement is not seen as a priority by services (Page et al., 2008). Young fathers may be reluctant to seek help for fear of further being discriminated against (Featherstone et al., 2007) or hampered by traditional notions of masculinity whereby young men are expected to be stoic and independent (Davies, 2016). If young fathers are unable to access help the negative discourse surrounding them continues to be perpetuated and may be internalised by the young fathers, or actively fought against. In both cases, identity development will be impacted.

Recent research has considered identity to be established within the individual through relationships and experiences (Branje, 2021), suggesting that transition periods or significant life events are crucial to changes in identity. Identity is questioned and considered through exploration, becoming more fixed and stable over time. The critical period for identity development starts within adolescence (Sokol, 2009), however it is reported to be an ongoing process which is a fundamental component of emerging adulthood. Young fathers face this natural identity process whilst also developing a given identity of father, which can be accompanied by possible rejection from families and social stigma (Guterman & Lee, 2005).

The fatherhood identity is reported to be informed by context, with the environment noted to be important for understanding fatherhood, principally what fathers do (Cabrera et al., 2018). Context is said to be sustained by dynamic systems and transactional beliefs that change with time and culture. Research notes that pregnancy, which is arguably when fatherhood starts (Bakermans‐Kranenburg et al., 2019), is considered a stressful life event (Geller, 2004). Identity challenges can occur during the transitions into new roles and during stressful life events (Marksberry, 2011; Waterman, 2020), both of which simultaneously occur for young fathers.

Research on the transition into fatherhood, focused on an adult population, highlights the changing role as a significant psychological transition with an increased risk of mental health difficulties (Teague & Shatte, 2018). Although adolescence and early adulthood is known to be a critical developmental period (Tanti et al., 2011) in general, the current body of research appears to exclude the experience of young fathers. The work of Frewin et al. (2007) gives voice to elements of young fatherhood, with a focus on identity development through social interaction with an emphasis on language. Their work indicates some of the struggles young fathers go through in terms of claiming an identity. Furthermore, research focusing on policy has shown that the ‘breadwinner’ element of fatherhood is seen by young fathers as a given part of their new adult identity (Neale & Davies, 2015) regardless of their physical capacity to provide.

This group are not only susceptible to the difficulties that come alongside being a father but also the added pressures of developing their own individual identities. Whilst elements of what it means to be a young father have been explored through policy and via a discourse lens (Frewin et al., 2007; Neale & Davies, 2015) the individual phenomenon of how young fathers experience the transition to the fatherhood identity is missing. Therefore, there is a need for research exploring how young fathers experience their identity development.

# **Aims**

The current study aims to explore how young fathers experience their change in identity from young person to parent.

# **Research question**

How do young fathers experience and make sense of their own developing identity in the context of becoming a young father?

# **Method**

# **Ethics**

Full ethical approval for the research was approved by the Staffordshire University Ethics Review Committee (Appendix A), two amendments were also sought and approved (Appendix B and C). Participants were provided with an information sheet and given the opportunity to ask questions before being sent a consent form to complete. Informed consent was given by all participants and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity. Although not anticipated, to provide support should any participants experience distress, a debrief was provided which signposted to agencies that could help if required.

# **Design**

A qualitative design utilising semi-structured interviews and analysed via Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. IPA places an emphasis on the phenomenological experience of the participant and endeavours, during the interpretation, to make sense of the participant’s reflection (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than assigning meaning to pre-existing theories (Smith & Osborn, 2015) IPA focuses on individual lived experiences. For this research, the emphasis is placed on how the young fathers experienced their own change in identity from young person to father, therefore IPA was considered to be the most appropriate method.

# **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited online using purposive sampling, with adverts (Appendix D) placed on online support groups and forums for young fathers. Social media was also used to recruit with adverts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Reddit. Organisations working with and supporting young fathers were approached via email, including education facilities, youth clubs and charities. Those who wished to participate or wanted more information contacted the researcher via an email address on the advert. Those who voiced interest in the study were sent an information sheet (Appendix E) and a consent form (Appendix F). Consent was reiterated at the start of the interviews, which were arranged at a time convenient to the participant.

An incentive in the form of a chance to win a £40 Amazon voucher was offered to those who participated. This was an optional incentive whereby participants opted in. The voucher was paid following the recruitment stage ending.

# **Inclusion Criteria**

**Table 1**

*Inclusion Criteria and Exclusion Criteria*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria |
| Fathers who had a child at or before the age of 25 | Fathers who had their first child after the age of 25 |
| Currently living in the UK | Those external to the UK as social norms and childcare support vary |
| Children do not need to be living with their father | Mothers of any age |
| Currently over the age of 16 | Fathers under the age of 16 due to ethical concerns around consent |
| Biological fathers | Stepfathers - their role in the child’s life is less defined (King et al., 2014) |

# **Participants**

There is no fixed recommendation for the number of participants when using IPA, however, it has been suggested that between three and six is considered a reasonable sample size (Smith et at., 2009). Small, purposive samples are preferred within IPA due to the emphasis on individual detailed understanding (Smith et al., 2022) of the participants lived experience. Reflection, dialogue, and time are vital for successful analysis and larger numbers can inhibit all three (Smith et al., 2009). Five participants were recruited over the course of six months, see Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Table of Participant Characteristics*

|  |
| --- |
| Demographic Data |
| Dave is 34, he had his first child aged 22. At that time, he had been with his girlfriend for approximately six months. His girlfriend already had a child aged four. At the time of his first child (biological), Dave was employed. He is white British. |
| Chris is 28, he had his child aged 24 when he was studying at university. Chris was in a committed relationship at the time and is black British. |
| Adam is 34, he had his first child at 21 and has two children. At the time of conceiving his first child, he was in a new relationship and was employed. Adam is white British. |
| Bradley is 22 and had his child aged 20, he had been in a committed relationship for five years. Bradley was unemployed and is white British. |
| Ethan is 51, he had his first son aged 22 and his second aged 24. He was married at the time of conception and employed. He is British[[1]](#footnote-1). |

The participants varied in age at the time of the study from 22-51 with all having had their first child before the age of 25. Ethnicity data was collected as research has indicated that minority ethnic groups are overrepresented among UK young parents (Diverse Dads Collaboration, 2021). Four out of the five participants were providing a retrospective account of their lived experience of having been a young father with just one currently navigating the experience. Within IPA limits are not placed on retrospective accounts as long as the participant can add a perspective on the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2022).

# **Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (Appendix G); the questions were developed in line with IPA guidelines and in consultation with an academic supervisor and charity worker who supports young fathers. All interviews were conducted online via MS Teams, a secure platform. Interviews were recorded, both visual and audio data were captured within the interviews and then transcribed.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 19 to 45 minutes, with an average time of 30 minutes. Participants were asked at the end of each interview if they wished to share any further information or if they felt that something had been missed. A verbal debrief was provided and a follow up email sent containing a debrief document (Appendix H), which signposted participants to services where they could access support and gave details of the academic supervisor. No participants reported any negative effects.

To ensure the research was relevant to the participants, consultation with charity workers who support young fathers and a young father known to the researcher but who did not participate in the research, was sought at multiple stages of the research process. The interview schedule, the advert and the results all had input from the consultants.

# **Analysis**

Following transcription, the interviews were analysed using IPA following the steps outlined in Smith et al. (2022). Each transcript was listened to and read multiple times to immerse the researcher in the data. Exploratory notes were written on each transcript with attention paid to having an open mind, the language used and the participant’s understanding of the information (Smith et al., 2022).

Each transcript was then revisited to start consolidating the notes and develop a deeper understanding of the data, enabling the development of experiential statements. The statements focused on the participant’s experience and their understanding of their experience, as well as the researcher’s interpretation of their words. The experiential statements were written on the transcripts (Appendix I).

To begin the process of searching for links between the experiential statements each one was typed up, printed out and cut up. This allowed the researcher to move them around and look for connections between them (Appendix J). Within IPA it is noted that the participants are unlikely to discuss their story in order, so by breaking the text up, different conceptual ordering can be established (Smith et al., 2022). This process also gave the researcher the opportunity to be flexible in noticing connections in order to map them from different positions before bringing them together in clusters that become Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (Appendix K).

The PETs for each transcript were then pulled together to develop themes across all data sets; Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Appendix L). The GETs highlight the shared features of the participants’ experiences but also the divergences. A visual representation of the analysis process can be seen in Appendix M.

# **Epistemological Position and Reflexivity**

The research takes the stance of an interpretivist epistemological position whereby the researcher holds the ontological view that there are multiple realities created by individuals. Therefore, the realities the participants offer need to be interpreted by uncovering the underlying meaning of their experiences (Patel, 2015). IPA as a method allows this by focusing on the phenomenology of each participant. Deeper interpretations are developed via the double hermeneutic approach, whereby the researcher takes the stance of sense-making of the participant’s own sense-making of their experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Within the interpretation of IPA, reflexivity is an important consideration. This refers to the researcher’s ability to consider their own experiences and preconceptions of the research area and the process by which they come to understand the participant’s experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher had no experience working with young fathers but was aware of the views often held of them in society. A further consideration the researcher held in mind was their own impending parenthood whilst conduction the final two interviews and during the analysis and write up stages of the work. To separate any pre-existing views the researcher kept a reflective diary (Appendix N) and triangulated initial themes and thoughts with IPA research peers. The reflective diary was essential during the analysis stage to allow the researcher to reflect and separate out their own views from the final themes and ensure that the themes were data driven.

# **Results**

The young fathers’ experiences of fatherhood led to the development of three Group Experiential Themes and six subthemes through IPA analysis of the transcripts. The three GETs are: “What do we do now?”; “Step up”. “Man up”, and “Change happens” (Table 3).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Table 3  *Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes* |  |
| Group Experiential Themes (GETs) | Subthemes |
| 1. “WHAT DO WE DO NOW?” | A sense of uncertainty and conflict |
| The power of “showing them” |
| 2. “STEP UP”. “MAN UP” | A sense of duty |
| Doing “the right thing” |
| 3. “CHANGE HAPPENS” | “Left behind” |
| “Changed me” |

## **Group Experiential Theme 1: “What do we do now?”**

***A sense of uncertainty and conflict***

The young fathers' early experience of developing the fatherhood identity appears to be filled with heavy emotions and consideration for how they themselves were parented. With a sense of learning from those before them and mirroring or rejecting their actions.

Initially, for some of the young fathers there were expressions of “disappointment” (Chris, p. 3) and feelings of being “shocked” (Bradley, p. 10) which brought questions of “what do we do now?” (Bradley, p. 10).  For these fathers, their children were not planned and there is a sense of negative emotions linked to impending fatherhood and the gravity of what is to come. There is also the element of uncertainty and the need to seek out the answers to their questions from others rather than work it out alone. For the one father whose first child was planned, there was still an initial experience of apprehension: “it was fear initially … once you get over that … it’s a little person that you made” (Ethan, p. 6). Indicating that fatherhood, regardless of how it came about is an initial period of self-doubt and ambiguity.

This initial stage appeared to come with a need to learn how to be a father and what that would look like. Several of the fathers looked to people close to them to determine what they needed to do. “My dad really helped me. He was like a shining light” (Chris, p. 3), implying feelings of perhaps being in the dark and needing that support to get through, which could also bring feelings of a lack of self-confidence, in that he had to have the help of another. Support was also reflected as being important by Ethan: “I learnt a lot” (p. 12), “his support was fantastic” (p. 7). Ethan’s experience creates a sense of hope out of uncertainty, he reflected that he learnt from another and that this was a valuable experience for him in developing his own fatherhood identity.

Bradley’s experience differed. His own father passed away when he was a teenager, and he expressed a feeling of pain in not having him there to support him during his own transition to being a parent; “It’s hard” (p. 18). However, he also noted that “I do talk to him [son] about my dad” (p. 18), implying a feeling of keeping his father close through the experience of sharing stories with his son. There is a sense of loss in Bradley’s experience, that from not having his own dad he has missed out, yet there is also the legacy of his father through stories. Adding an element of the continuation of fatherhood even in death allowed Bradley to draw upon his own experiences of being parented to support his transition to fatherhood.

Not all the young fathers experienced wanting to identify with their own fathers; “conflict” was experienced by Ethan as he expressed “I don’t want to be like. My dad” (p. 1). Ethan knew that he did not want to be like his own father but, as noted above, he had a positive role model to teach him how to be a father, he had support from his father-in-law. Ethan indicates an internal pressure of not wanting to be like his father, with “conflict” suggesting an active fight to be different. Adam, on the other hand, did take on his parenting identity from what his father modelled to him “do what’s done to me”, and then went on to question “was that really the right. Thing to do?” (p. 2-3). Voicing a sense of uncertainty and indicating feelings of guilt “really that wasn’t the best” (p. 2). Whereas Ethan knew that his fatherhood identity would not reflect his own upbringing, Adam took longer to establish his own parenting identity.

***The power of “showing them”***

Part of the development of the fatherhood identity was experienced through what the young fathers shared with their children. Dave noted it was important to “just try to pass your wisdom on” (p. 6) expressing that for him he now had a responsibility to teach his children and a desire to share his knowledge with them. The language of “just try” indicates perhaps a desperation or fear in that all he can do is try and there is a weight to that, a burden of that responsibility. Similarly, Adam commented that part of his role was “showing them the. Best ways as of how to do things” (p. 13), there is an accountability to pass on the right way to do things.

 There was also sense a of pride in how his son might become like him “I think he’ll. Be a lot … like me and my dad” (Dave, p. 6). Acknowledging that for him being like his own father was important and something he wanted, in turn, to pass on. The element of legacy comes through and again the importance of this role of father to teach and get it right. Making mistakes does not feel like an option which adds another layer to the experience, in that there is a pressure to succeed.

The passing on of knowledge was also reflected as a pressure to get it right with their children and seen as “being accountable” (Chris, p. 3). With consideration given to what their children may learn from them: “lazy around the house … they’re gonna repeat that” (Adam, p. 13). Indicating that perhaps their fatherhood identity is linked to what their children end up like. There is a perception that laziness is bad and therefore to prevent it Adam must model what should be done instead. The accountability is also indicated by Chris who places an emphasis again on the gravity of what being a father means.

## **Group Experiential Theme 2: “Step up”. “Man up”**

***A sense of duty***

A shared experience between the participants was the sense of duty fatherhood brought. The financial need to provide was discussed “I was more committed to going to work because I obviously needed the money” (Dave, p. 2). For Dave this was an ‘obvious’ implication of being a father, similarly, Bradley commented that he "just started looking for jobs here and everywhere” (p. 1). There is a feeling that work became more necessary because they would have to support their families. This expectation appeared to be a given and indicated a sense of powerlessness.

Adam reflected on how as a young father you are at the bottom of the ladder in terms of career progression; “when you’re young … you’ve got the jobs which you know everyone else … they’ve been at. It is the crap jobs” (p. 10), indicating that salary and job role may be undesirable. There is also the suggestion that job satisfaction is not a factor in gaining employment in such circumstances. Bradley also implied this, commenting that his search for work was not focused or specific but done out of necessity to have an income. Again, perhaps reflecting powerlessness, in that the young fathers are not working for themselves but for their families, “You will be responsible … to provide (Chris, p. 3), highlighting that their duty is to provide.

For young fathers, the need to provide coupled with limited income options may negatively impact their sense of self-worth and their own perceptions of their identity. Furthermore, the knock-on implications of being at the bottom from a societal perspective may bring about perceptions that others may view them as not being worthy.  Having “crap jobs” places a judgement on the type of work available and a reflection that they must work out of obligation to their family, their fatherhood identity is tied to the duty to provide.

The sense of duty was also portrayed by Ethan as an immediate change; “Suddenly you’ve got responsibility and that thought for someone else” (p. 5) and reflected that he experienced this as a shift; “you know I’m alright with that for me, but I’m not I’m not for Bobby” (p. 5). Indicating that his experience with the fatherhood identity is that you become secondary to the needs of your child.

The experience of raising a child in the current cost of living crisis in the UK was commented upon. “It’s freezing now. It’s like you’ve gotta make the choice whether you feed your kid or have the heating on and it’s one of those choices where you shouldn’t even have to think about what you’re gonna do” (Bradley, p. 8). Unavoidable societal factors magnify the weight of taking on the fatherhood identity at a young age. Bradley highlights the task of attempting to manage on limited resources and how he is forced to make decisions of huge gravity. His experience of being a father is one of making decisions he never anticipated making and a sense of powerlessness of being in that position is alluded to.

The shared feeling amongst the young fathers is that this role was a given. They each experienced this as a factor of fatherhood and a responsibility that they must now manage. In terms of shaping their sense of identity, the role of the father is intrinsic with that of the provider. The idea of what they are unable to provide, or the possibility of making mistakes is missing from their experiences, as if it is unimaginable to not get it right, further highlighting the duty of the role of dad.

***Doing “the right thing”***

The development of the fatherhood identity was experienced as a need to adapt and accept responsibility. “Even if you think you can’t you should man up and know the right thing … You did it. Don’t run” (Chris, p. 4). Chris spoke passionately about what he felt he ‘should’ do and commented that for him “it’s not that hard” (p. 4), although this appeared to be against his experience as he also voiced “it is what it is that I had to man. Up” (p. 1). Suggesting that although he felt he knew what needed to be done, it was a challenge. Dave echoed this, commenting that his view was “old fashioned” but that when “This situation arises, yeah, like. Step up … we’re the ones who go out and work every day … knew that we had to grow up” (Dave, p. 4).

The language used by both Chris and Dave illustrates the belief that fathers should “step up” or “man up”. Their language suggests that gender roles are continuing to be perpetuated by society. Dave indicates that this feeling is shared by others and acknowledges that it is a potentially outdated view but one that is still considered a father’s duty. There is a real sense of this being a given and there appears to be no choice in what must happen. By becoming a father and taking on that identity there is a weight that comes with it.

 Ethan presents an alternative perspective “My dad’s mum, once she used to come and see him [son] and I’ll change his nappy and she used to tell me off. You know it’s not your job, it’s a woman’s job” (p. 13). Ethan was aware of traditional gender roles and actively parented against them. This is not to say that his notion of the role of a father is different to the others, but that elements of what the contemporary role of male parenting entails are changing. It may be that younger fathers are identifying with more hands-on methods of parenting but continuing to hold the sense of duty to provide. For the young fathers, this adds additional layers of how they identify and possible internal conflict. Paradoxically, they need to provide, but also be present for the family yet by working they have less time to spend at home. The experience of this being something they ‘should do’ is a pressure that the young fathers take on.

## **Group Experiential Theme 3: “Change happens”**

***“Left behind”***

Several young fathers made a distinction separating their life before and after fatherhood, highlighting the experience as a transition. “Before then I was like that, you know. I loved having fun. I was just living. A good life I would say…I wouldn’t say right now I’m not. Living a good life because. Change happens” (Chris, p. 2). Chris reflects on who he was before and speaks of fun, there is an element of guilt coming through in his justification of voicing that his life is good now, but a resolution that ‘change happens’.

A feeling of tension with the need to change is reflected by Adam “when all your friends etc. They’re all maybe single…but then yourself. Uhm, so left behind really, uhm, that’s I guess the difficult part” (Adam, p. 5). Adam experienced feeling different from his peers and spoke of “trying to get that balance” (p. 5) noting that it was difficult and reflecting “should I have done things differently” (p. 6). For him, there are elements of questioning if he did things the right way and a feeling of guilt at straddling two lives. His experience of the transition to fatherhood is one of uncertainty.

Loss is also indicated by Dave but expressed as a positive, he spoke about the impact of fatherhood on his football career “cause I was supposed to be training but. I I was trying to better myself” (p. 9). There is an element of needing to be or wanting to be different, with a suggestion that who he was before needed to change to be ‘better’. Dave also spoke about a “move away from them (friends)” (p. 9) noting his family as his “priority” (p. 9). Indicating that the transition was driven by prioritising his family over all else. Adding to the experience of identifying as secondary in becoming a father.

When talking about their transitions to fatherhood the young fathers appeared to choose their words carefully. Chris expressed “I wouldn’t exactly say it’s a mistake … it was a mistake in part” (p. 1) indicating a sense of cautiousness in how he rationalised his experience. Chris was at university when he became a father, and there could have been an element of a fear of judgment if he outright voiced the feeling of making a mistake or guilt in talking that way about his son. The young fathers all spoke tentatively when discussing the difficult elements of fatherhood. Dave expressed a need to ‘better himself’ whilst Adam spoke of ‘trying’ to find a balance. Their experiences of fatherhood are tied to their children, and it may be that by indicating they found it hard there is an implication for how they view them. Noting what has been lost or left behind could invoke feelings of guilt, which could lead to self-judgments on what that says about them as fathers.

***“Changed me”***

Mixed emotions were demonstrated by the young fathers in that contrary to the feeling of being left behind there was also an experience of gaining a bigger purpose in becoming fathers. In developing their fatherhood identities, unexpected changes were noted. “Rather than like I thought, it changed my life for the better” (Bradley, p. 4). For Bradley there was an anticipation that his life would be negatively impacted, however, he found the opposite. Similarly, Dave noted, “it made me a better person … it’s certainly sorted me head out” (p. 7). Indicating that the experience has changed them in positive ways. For Dave, there was a sense of realisation that things needed to change “I was. Doing things I shouldn’t really be doing” (p. 2) and by becoming a father he had to make the changes in his life. There is an element that by becoming a dad Dave found a sense of relief in finding a concrete reason to change.

Emotional changes were noted by several of the young fathers. Ethan noted “it brings out all all the emotion that I, I wasn’t really an emotional person” (p. 3) and voiced “I’ve got like 100 more worries on my mind” (p. 3). Suggesting he experienced a shift in what is important, his son became his focus and that brought with it new feelings and concerns. Bradley also experienced emotions differently “I was a really angry person before … becoming a dad like changed me for the better like helped me calm down” (p. 2). Showing a change in what is important, for Bradley he adapted to control his emotions, feeling he needed to for his son. For both Ethan and Bradley, there is an element of moving past their own emotions to focus on their children, moving past their fear and stepping into the fatherhood identity.

For all the young fathers there was the experience of change and an acceptance that life would be different now. For some, this was experienced as a struggle or tension, and for others as a necessary adjustment. In developing their fatherhood identities elements of their previous selves were lost, but change was also reflected as a positive.

# **Discussion**

Considering the influence of others, the young fathers tended to either parent as they themselves had been parented or actively go against their upbringing. This suggests that at least initially when becoming a father, the influence of one’s own experiences shapes the emerging fatherhood identity. The Fraiberg et al. (1957) study introduced the concept of ‘Ghosts in the nursery’ which suggests that repetitions of how individuals were parented are present in their own parenting styles. This is an interesting concept to reflect on in considering the young fathers’ experiences, as their parents are more likely to still be present and influential in their lives. The young fathers sit between two roles, which raises the question: do they identify with the role of dad, or are they more inclined to sit in the role of son? This leads to the potential reflection that if they had become fathers at an older age and had more opportunity to think about the sort of parent they wanted to be, would their experience have been different. It also adds to the element of uncertainty and conflict as the young fathers are confronted with the parent role (Liberska et al., 2016) and how best to take on this new identity.

Research has indicated that fathers often use peers as role models (Masciadrelli et al., 2006) to learn about fatherhood. As becoming a young father is going against the social norm (Murphy et al., 2012) it is less likely that their peers will be able to offer such guidance. Furthermore, with their focus on their families rather than friends, there is also a potential loss of general support. Research has indicated that young fathers are often socially isolated (North East Young Lads and Dads Project, n.d.) and rarely have other young fathers as friends. The young fathers expressed a need to be accountable to their children, indicating that they themselves had a responsibility to raise them ‘correctly’. Yet with information aimed at young fathers lacking (Mniszak et al., 2020), there was a sense of uncertainty in how they took on that responsibility.

Differing from the narrative of fathers being ‘disinterested’ (Lammy, 2015), all five of the participants reflected on the experience of responsibility and duty that fatherhood brought. The view of needing to provide for their families is a stark difference from the discourse of young fathers not being around. The element of fatherhood meaning ‘manning up’ has been suggested as a defensive strategy to protect young fathers from the negative discourse of being a ‘deadbeat’ (Weber, 2018). By invoking a sense of adult masculinity and asserting that fatherhood means ‘manning up’ young fathers are linking what it means to be a good dad with a notion of inferred expectations. By becoming fathers at young ages, they step into the adult role but are still developing their adult identity.

Research suggests that masculinity has two phases (Eck, 2014) which are perpetuated by society, initially, young men fall into being ‘one of the guys’ where peers are their priority and commitment is not expected. The second phase is the move into settling down, committing and parenthood with an expectation of providing. This view of needing to provide appeared to be an innate expectation, one that the young fathers held regardless of their social situation, implying that there is a stronger narrative of what it means to be a dad.

For young fathers, the assumed necessity to take on the role of provider creates additional concerns, as they typically have lower-paid jobs or are unemployed. UK statistics show that young people aged 16 to 24 have the highest rates of unemployment (Clark, 2023). By experiencing pressure to provide there may be an impact on how young fathers identify, insomuch that they do not fit the expected role. Research has indicated that the self-esteem of young fathers may be impacted by an inability to take on this provider role (Lau Clayton, 2015). The element of what it means if they cannot provide was not discussed by the young fathers, it may be that this was simply not an option, therefore potentially adding an intense pressure to avoid experiencing a ‘failure’.

Contrary to the literature, financial difficulties did not cause the young fathers to reduce participation in their children’s lives but instead led to an increased work ethic and continuation in job roles that they would usually leave. Social perceptions of masculinity appear to change with fatherhood, whilst maintaining a portion of proven masculinity – the provider role – other elements shift. There is a move from friend focus to family first. Constructs of masculinity are noted to be societally driven with young boys experiencing what it means to be a man through their culture’s expectations (Harris, 1995) of how men should behave. The duty of fatherhood experienced by the young fathers may be important to establish their own masculinity as if they are unable to provide for their families a new narrative of being a ‘slacker’ or not a ‘real man’ (Scheibling, 2018) may creep in.

Identity is said to be negotiated through experience and shaped by the groups we are part of and the way we participate in society (Murphy et al., 2012). It can be seen as a work-in-progress, and it is the everyday moments that allow for undertaking new roles and relinquishing old identities. From conception, new fathers start to become aware of the lifestyle changes needed, however, due to them not being physically affected by pregnancy they are able to delay changes in identity (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). A sense of powerlessness has also been linked to this period, with new fathers experiencing a loss of control. This was reflected in the young fathers noting feeling left behind. By stepping into the role of father elements of their old lives had to change or be put on hold (Liberska et al., 2016) in order to meet the needs of their new family.

A feeling of change was reported in the transition from young person to parent with a focus on emotions. For some, this came as a shift in behaviour, from behaving in a way they did not deem acceptable for fathers, to learning to manage their emotions. Identity can be seen as being attached to roles or relationships, societal norms have an impact on how individuals see themselves and therefore social behaviour. Those roles which people identify more strongly with impact the commitment to the behaviours expected (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and the expectations of the roles are internalised and then acted out. For the role of father, there is now an emphasis on emotional availability (Lau Clayton, 2015) as well as the continuing discourse of being a provider. For young fathers developing their identity, they are contending with meeting both new and old standards (Marsiglio, 1995) of what it means to be a good father.

Identity itself is a difficult concept to reflect on, particularly considering one’s own sense of identity development. The internalised beliefs and values, interlinked with goals for the future (Erikson, 1968) have been noted by the participants as not being fixed. Whereas identity development takes time, the young fathers contended with a reduction in time as their new role needed addressing. By becoming a father at a young age, the chance to experiment with identity may be removed. Although noted not to be fixed, there is a sense that from taking on the role of father there are limitations in how much change can happen (Dhayanandhan & Bohr, 2016). Change may occur in styles of parenting, which has been reflected, but the prioritising of the family over oneself may restrict the opportunity for young fathers to identify differently.

# **Strengths and Limitations**

The current study adds to the understanding of the experiences of young fathers. Using an IPA approach rich data on how they experience their change in identity from young person to parent has been gained. From focusing on their experience’s recommendations can be made to provide additional support for young fathers in the future.

The participants involved in the research were all under the age of 25 but over 20 when they became fathers, data is missing for the experiences of younger fathers; those in their teens. Whilst generalisability is not an aim of qualitative data, links between fathers of similar ages can be seen in the results from the group themes. It is unknown however if those themes would be applicable for teenage fathers generally.

Difficulties arose with recruitment. Accessing young fathers proved challenging, often due to gatekeepers of services declining to support the research. The services that did offer support became valuable links to accessing young fathers, yet uptake remained a challenge. As previously discussed within professional services young fathers have often been stigmatised and judged therefore may be less willing to participate for fear of a negative experience.

Cohort effects need to be considered: there are unique challenges of being a young father today compared to those who were young fathers several years ago. One of the participants became a father during a global pandemic, and is raising a young son in a cost-of-living crisis. That is not to say that there were less challenges 20 years ago, but that perhaps such societal events impact the identity of fathers. Consequently, it raises the question of if reflections on identity are as accurate as currently experiencing it, or if with hindsight it is easier to consider the challenges of being a young father.

# **Clinical Implications**

The data indicates that there are several factors which can influence a young father’s identity as they take on the role of father. Being able to access a role model who can model positive parenting is important, especially when their own experience of being parented may have been less desirable. Young fathers are limited in having peer support but that may be a role services could provide in the future. Support for young fathers is offered through charities and in some areas NHS trusts have linked in with projects (Darwin et al., 2021), but this creates a postcode lottery for accessing support. Where budgets do not allow for in-house peer support the routine signposting to services in the area that could offer guidance would allow young fathers to become aware of support available.

Due to routine antenatal care young mums are automatically known to services. By becoming aware of the challenges that young fathers face health visitors could be uniquely positioned to offer psychoeducation and support. By routinely providing psychoeducation on identity development, young fathers may feel more informed of the changes they are experiencing and therefore more likely to reach out if further support is required.

Financial considerations were highlighted within the data, and it has been noted that providing is an important feature of young father’s identity. Support for young fathers to get back into education or access career guidance may be of benefit. This feels especially important when considering the negative impact on self-esteem when young fathers are unable to enact a role seen as pertinent to their fatherhood identity.

# **Future Research**

Due to the age range within this research the experience of older young fathers has been explored, data on the experience of identity for fathers under the age of 20 remains limited. This would be a valuable group to gain further understanding on, as during the teen years their identity development will be influenced by different factors than those over 20. As the fathers in this research had been dads for a minimum of two years it would be interesting to have similar conversations about identity during the perinatal period to further understand the formation of fatherhood and how it impacts individual identities.

# **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore young fathers’ experiences of their changing identity as they move from young person to parent. Young fathers reflected on their experience of becoming a dad and spoke about the impact fatherhood had on them. Several factors were discussed when considering their experiences of identity with an emphasis on external influences. The fatherhood identity was noted to be not fixed but developed with experience or parenting; consideration was given to their own experience of being parented and the roles they took on alongside that of dad. Societal gender roles continue to be present in parenting with an emphasis on the young fathers identifying strongly with the provider role. Yet, emotional awareness and availability is also present now, which is a change from the notional historical stoic father figure. The young fathers in this research were reflecting on their experiences, and it is their accounts of their experiences that have informed this research. However, further research is needed to consider identity as it is forming in the perinatal period and to consider the identity of those who become fathers under the age of 20. Further awareness of identity is required for those working with young fathers to ensure appropriate support is offered.

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# **Appendices**

**Graphical user interface, text, application, Word

Description automatically generatedAppendix A**

**Ethical Approval**

**Appendix B**

**Approval for amendments**

Graphical user interface, text, application, Word

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**Appendix C**

**Approval for second amendments**

Graphical user interface, text, application, Word

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**Appendix D**

**Research Advert**

Graphical user interface, application

Description automatically generated

**Appendix E**

**Participant Information Sheet**

**INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**

*Project Reference Number:* SU\_21\_056

**Title of study**

Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?

You are being invited to take part in the above research project, before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully, you can discuss it with others if you would like, but the decision to take part is yours to make. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me on [Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk).

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The study is being conducted to gain an understanding of the unique experience young fathers have navigating the transition into fatherhood whilst developing their own sense of identity.

Previous research has shown that there is a gap in knowledge when it comes to understanding the experience of becoming a young dad and how this change in role, from child to parent, impacts on their developing identity. Research looking at fathers in general has highlighted how challenging it can be taking on a new role in becoming a dad (Teague & Shatte, 2018). For young dads, there is also the added pressure of adolescence, working out who they are as an individual as well as taking on a new role. The aim is to gain young fathers perspectives on their identity journey into fatherhood during adolescence.

The research is being undertaken as part of a doctoral qualification in Clinical Psychology at Staffordshire University.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

As a young father you are being invited to take part to share your experience.

You are eligible to take part if:

* You are male
* View yourself to currently be or have been a young father
* Live in the UK

**What will happen if I take part?**

If you choose to take part in the research you will first be asked to read over a consent form and click a box to confirm your consent. Following this you will be invited to attend an interview which will be conducted at a convenient time for yourself via Microsoft Teams. To arrange the interview, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire, this will ask about contact details and availability. The questionnaire will also include a short demographic sheet which will ask items such as age, relationship status and employment status.

During the interview you will be asked to talk about your personal experience of becoming a young dad. This will follow the style of a conversation and the researcher may ask questions such as “could you tell me what that was like?” or “can you explain a bit more about that?”. As this is your own personal story there is no right or wrong things to say and it is important that you only share what you feel comfortable sharing.

Before the interview starts you will be asked to give a contact number and details of an emergency contact. If there are any difficulties with the technology, or you leave the call unexpectedly you will be contacted. If you leave the call and cannot be reached on your contact number your emergency contact will be called. Should you become distressed, and it is felt that support is needed your emergency contact will be called. Where possible the researcher will tell you if they feel they need to contact your emergency support.

The interview will take place online via Microsoft Teams, technical support can be offered if you are not familiar with the system. As the interview will be done online it is important that you are able to find a quiet, private place where you feel comfortable talking and will not be overheard or interrupted. The interview will be recorded and both visual and audio data will be collected and transcribed verbatim. It is important that you have your camera on during the interview so the researcher can see that you are okay and stop if they start to see that you are finding it difficult. The recording will only start with your consent and the researcher will make you aware before they begin recording.

To ensure confidentiality you will be asked to choose a pseudonym or alias for yourself so that the transcript doesn’t hold any identifiable information. If anything is said that the researcher feels will make you identifiable this will be left out of the report.

Immediately after the interview you will be given a debrief which will consist of a conversation, checking how they are feeling and offering links for support. The whole process will take no longer than an hour and a half.

Once the research has finished you will be sent a copy of the research findings, if they do not wish to receive this, you can opt out research updates by stating they don’t wish to be updated to the researcher.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, participation is completely voluntary. You should only take part if you want to, choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Once you have read the information sheet, please contact the researcher on the email address at the top of the sheet if you have any questions that will help you decide about taking part. Contacting the research does not affect the decision to participate, after seeking more information it is still okay to decline to be involved. If you decide to take part, we will ask you to consent via clicking the consent box on a consent form online.

It’s important that you know that you can stop and withdraw from the research at any time during the interview and you do not need to give an explanation why.

**What are the possible risks of taking part?**

Taking part in the interview may bring up some difficult emotions. This may be the first-time you have been asked about your personal identity in relation to becoming a young father, and you may have unexpected emotions in relation to this. The below links are options for support should any be required, these will also be available at the end of the interview.

• CALM - CALM, the campaign against living miserably is a suicide prevention charity that offers free, anonymous and confidential support via their helpline and webchat for anyone who is in crisis. Phone: 0800 58 58 58 (daily 5pm-midnight) Get Help - Campaign Against Living Miserably (thecalmzone.net)

• Shout - Shout is a 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone struggling to cope and in need of immediate help. Text SHOUT to 85258 Get help - free, 24/7, confidential mental health text support service | Shout 85258 (giveusashout.org)

• HOPELineUK - HOPELineUK offer support, practical advice and information to young people considering suicide and can also offer help and advice if you’re concerned about someone you know. Phone: 0800 068 41 41 Home | Papyrus UK | Suicide Prevention Charity (papyrus-uk.org)

• Hub of Hope – a website which enables the participant to find local support via inputting their postcode Hub of Hope - Mental Health Support Network provided by Chasing the Stigma

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Some people enjoy sharing their experiences, if you choose to participate you may benefit from having the time to discuss your experience and how you felt becoming a young dad.

**Data handling and confidentiality**

Participant data will be processed in accordance with the data protection law and will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).

Your name, pseudonym (alias) and demographic information will be held on a password protected database, this, along with the recordings and transcripts will be held on a password protected computer. Following transcription of your interview your name will be deleted. Upon completion of the research project the interviews will be deleted, and the transcribed data will be sent to the university where it will be stored for 10 years, after this it will be destroyed. Stored data may be audited.

Your data will be disused with the project supervisor and direct quotes from the interview will be used in the final research paper, however these will all be under your chosen pseudonym.

Although it is not anticipated, if you talk about anything that may put yourself or another at risk this information will have to be passed on for yours or another’s protection. Your confidentiality will not be broken without it being discussed first.

**Data Protection Statement**

The data controller for this project will be Staffordshire University. The University will process participants personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. The legal basis for processing personal data for research purposes under the data protection law is a ‘task in the public interest’ participants can provide their consent for the use of their personal data in this study by completing the consent form that will be provided.

**What if I change my mind about taking part?**

You are free to withdraw at any point during the interview, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from the research will not affect you in any way. You are able to withdraw your data from the research up until **28 days after the interview date**,after which withdrawal of data will no longer be possible due to analysis having started.

If you choose to withdraw from the study all information will be deleted.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be written up for a Doctorate thesis, the final paper may be submitted for publication in peer reviewed journals.

**Who should I contact for further information?**

For any questions or more information about this study, please contact the researcher using the following contact details:

Researcher: Rachel Pennington – [Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk)

Research Supervisor: Dr Jo Heyes - [joanna.heyes@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:joanna.heyes@staffs.ac.uk)

Please note these emails cannot be used in an emergency situation.

**What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?** 

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact the study supervisor on the email address above or the Director of Research at Staffordshire University for further advice and information:

Dr Tim Horne   
Research, Innovation and Impact Services  
Cadman Building,   
Staffordshire University,   
College Road  
Stoke-on-Trent  
ST4 2DE

[Tim.horne@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:Tim.horne@staffs.ac.uk)

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.**

**Appendix F**

**Consent Form**

**RESEARCH PROJECT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Project:** Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?

**Researcher:** Rachel Pennington

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| I have read and understood the information sheet. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw during the interview without having to give an explanation and without impacting my access to a debrief. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I understand that the interview will be both audio and video recorded. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I consent that data collected could be used for publication in scientific journals or could be presented in scientific forums (conferences, seminars, workshops) or could be used for teaching purposes and understand that all data will be presented anonymously. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I agree that data will only be used for this project ‘Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?’, and that the data may also be audited for quality control purposes. | Yes |  | No |  |
| All data will be sorted safely on a password protected computer (electronic data) or locked away securely (hard copies of data) for 10 years before being destroyed, in line with Staffordshire University’s policy. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I understand that I can withdraw my data from the project up to 28 days after the interview without having to give an explanation. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I understand that if the researcher is concerned for mine or another’s safety, they have a duty of care to act, and will inform me before they do so. | Yes |  | No |  |
| I hereby give consent to take part in this study | Yes |  | No |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Yes |  | No |  |

**Due to the online nature of the research, I consent that by ticking this box I am signing the consent form.**

**Appendix G**

**Interview Schedule**

Interview schedule

Introduction – re-visit information within the participant information sheet and discuss the aim of the interview. Just before I start recording:

Can I just check the contact number:

Emergency contact name and number:

Just to reassure you I’ll delete those as soon as the interview is complete.

What pseudonym would you like to be used in the report:

Okay so I’ll just start the recording.

I am interested in hearing and exploring your thoughts and feelings of your journey through fatherhood. I’ll ask some questions, but may appear quiet at times, as I am interested in your experiences and your reflections. There are no right, wrong, or stupid answers.

When the research is complete would you like to be sent a copy of the report to the email address you originally contacted me on?

Questions:

* Can you tell me about your experience of developing your identity whilst becoming a dad?
* What was your sense of identity prior to becoming a dad?
* Thinking back to that time, can you tell me if you noticed a change in your identity?
* What does becoming a dad mean to you?
* What is the main difference between who you were or how you identified before the baby and who you are now?
* Do you think those around you noticed any changes in your identity?
* Have your values changed since becoming a father?
* Is there anything I’ve not asked that you expected me to ask?
* Is there anything you’d like to add before we end?

Prompts:

* What was it like for you?
* How did that make you feel?
* Can you tell me a bit more about how that felt?
* You spoke about…what was that like for you?
* Why was that?
* How was that for you?
* What do you think impacted that?
* How was that experience for you?
* How did that change?
* What do you mean by…?
* Can you explain what you meant by…?
* Could you give me an example of…?

**Appendix H**

**Debrief sheet**

****

Thank you for taking part in the research, your participation is greatly appreciated. As you know the research is looking at the views of young fathers and their experience of becoming a father whilst still developing their own sense of identity.

It can be really difficult talking about your experience. If you have any concerns about the research please contact me [Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.pennington@student.staffs.ac.uk) or my supervisor [joanna.heyes@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:joanna.heyes@staffs.ac.uk).

Below are some contacts that could be helpful if you wanted to talk more about how you’re feeling:

* CALM - CALM, the campaign against living miserably is a suicide prevention charity that offers free, anonymous and confidential support via their helpline and webchat for anyone who is in crisis. Phone: 0800 58 58 58 (daily 5pm-midnight) Get Help - Campaign Against Living Miserably (thecalmzone.net)
* Shout - Shout is a 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone struggling to cope and in need of immediate help. Text SHOUT to 85258 Get help - free, 24/7, confidential mental health text support service | Shout 85258 (giveusashout.org)
* HOPELineUK - HOPELineUK offer support, practical advice and information to young people considering suicide and can also offer help and advice if you’re concerned about someone you know. Phone: 0800 068 41 41 Home | Papyrus UK | Suicide Prevention Charity (papyrus-uk.org)
* Hub of Hope – a website which enables the participant to find local support via inputting their postcode Hub of Hope - Mental Health Support Network provided by Chasing the Stigma
* Mind – a charity which provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. <https://www.mind.org.uk/> Infoline: 0300 123 3393 – open 9-6 Monday – Friday, email [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)
* Samaritans - get in touch about anything that’s troubling you, no matter how large or small the issue feels. Telephone - open 24 hours or [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) – responses within 24 hours

Thank you again for your participation.

**Appendix I**

**Transcript containing initial notes and experiential statements**

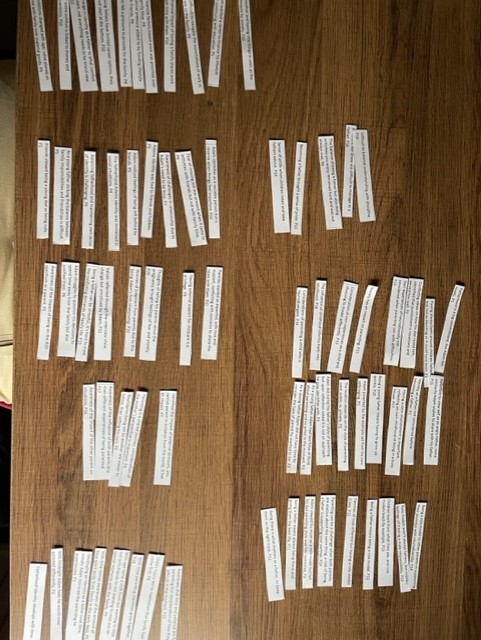
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**Appendix J**

**Experiential statements cut out to form potential PETs**

Interview 3’s Experiential Statements



Interview 3 possible PETs

**Appendix K**

**Table of Personal Experiential Themes for all participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant |  | |  | | PETS | |  | |  | |  |
| 1 | **Fatherhood alters perspectives and priorities** | | **You cannot parent in isolation** | | **Traditional gender roles** | | **Values of fatherhood** | | **Benefits vs. negatives** | |  |
| *Financial priorities* | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| *Friendships* | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| *Self-interests* | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| 2 | **Support is invaluable** | | **Considerations of the past on the future** | | **Fatherhood is a transition** | | **Impact of pregnancy and birth** | | **Societal responsibilities** | |  |
| 3 | **Cannot parent in isolation** | | **Social life** | | **Conflicting emotions of fatherhood** | | **Financial Factors** | | **Impact of own identity on parenting** | | **Role Models** |
| *Own past* | |  | |  | |  | | *Ongoing consideration* | |  |
| *Society* | |  | |  | |  | | *Changes with time* | |  |
| *Support* | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
| 4 | **Additional pressures of fatherhood** | | **Fatherhood brings change** | | **Connecting with the meaning of fatherhood** | | **Initial Response** | | **Social experiences** | | **External influences** |
| *Finances* | | *Practical* | |  | |  | |  | | *Societal issues* |
| *Property* | | *Emotional* | |  | |  | |  | | *Managing and maintaining supportive relationships* |
| 5 | **Role model Vs anti role model** | | **Impact of external influences** | | **Responsibilities of fatherhood** | | **Changes in perceptions due to fatherhood** | | **Learning how to be a father** | |  |
|  | *Impact of others* | | *Financial responsibilities* | |  | |  | |  | |
|  | *Culture* | | *Taking fatherhood seriously* | |  | |  | |  | |

PETs for all interviews printed to code as GETs using the above table to hold onto possible overarching themes.

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**Appendix L**

**Group Experiential Themes**

|  |
| --- |
| Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) |
| **1. ‘WHAT DO WE DO NOW?’** |
| **A sense of uncertainty and conflict** |
| Experiencing difficult emotions  *‘initially when it just happened. You know that this was. Not really expected … disappointment’* (Chris, p. 3) |
| Learning about pregnancy brought difficult questions and feelings *‘I was like oh God [laughs] here we go…I were I was shocked I was like, ok? Ok, what do we do now?’* (Bradley, p. 10) |
| Initial emotions of fear and stress  *‘It was fear initially and quite a bit of stress, but then. Once you get over that, it was just. They were fantastic. It was brilliant. You know it’s a little person that your made’* (Ethan, p. 6) |
| Loosing a role model and the importance of sharing memories through the generations  *‘It is hard like I do tell even tell my son like, even though he’s probably not understanding…I do talk to him about my dad’* (Bradley, p. 18) |
| Guidance from family can show the way forwards  *‘my dad really helped me. He was like a shining light to me pointing me in the right direction’* (Chris, p. 2) |
| Positive experience of having emotional responsiveness modelled *‘he was so good. You know he was so switched on he’d almost beat you to it. You know he’d he’d be able to sense things and say, you know, don’t worry about this…his support was fantastic’* (Ethan, p. 7) |
| Fatherhood identity developed through watching a positive role model  *‘Jess’s dad. Fantastic values, you know. A real family man…I learnt a lot’* (Ethan, p. 12) |
| Adam mirrored his father’s parenting practice, this mirroring changed with time *‘you did something wrong. You would get like a smack bum…to be honest when I was growing up. You know, like 20, I thought you know, actually do what’s done to me…but now I look back and think actually really was that. Was that really the right. Thing to do?’* (Adam, p. 2-3) |
| Rejecting cultural upbringing and parental role models  *‘conflict straight away with me…I don’t want to be like. My dad in terms of. How I was. Brought up I want to do it differently’* (Ethan, p. 1) |
| Parents are role models but reflection can alter the view of their parenting style *‘you do look at your parents as as your role models…but then I’ll probably look at some stuff. My dad, my dad, and thoughts perhaps, really, that wasn’t the best’* (Adam, p. 2) |
| Conflict with own experiences of being parented  *‘I didn’t know anything different growing up I thought my dad was like fantastic…it’s only as I got older that I thought this doesn’t…reflect what I’m seeing or what this doesn’t feel right’* (Ethan, p. 8) |
| Doing it a different way  *‘you know that’s the way you do, but this. Is the way I do it’* (Ethan, p. 13) |
| Initially impending fatherhood caused self-doubt  *‘the first few months were really difficult you know…questions running around. Flying around…just the negative parts and everything like how? How did I get here’* (Chris, p. 1) |
| Questioning and justifying decisions  *‘I always look back and think should I’ve gone, but she still had a. You know her mother was about. I do think back. Think. Should I have done things differently’* (Adam, p. 6) |
| Learning responsibility is challenging  *‘You’re responsible but I just found it. Yeah, it’s quite difficult really’* (Adam, p. 5) |
| Questioning if the pregnancy should be continued *‘obviously changed my life like I was like. Ok, so right, what I’m supposed to think now then. Obviously we had to talk about it and decided we wanted to go through with it’* (Bradley, p. 1) |
| **The power of “showing them”** |
| Noticing identity through the generations  *‘youngest lad I. I think he’ll. Be a lot more like me and my dad’* (Dave, p. 6) |
| It is a father’s role to model the values you want your children to embody *‘just try to pass your wisdom on’* (Dave, p. 6) |
| Fatherhood is becoming the best version of yourself as you are accountable to your child.  *‘Manning up to the responsibility…you will be responsible, being accountable*.’ (Chris, p. 3) |
| Being a father means being a role model  *‘just wanna given them the best life you know sort of. Erm show show the right ways to do stuff, etc.’* (Adam, p. 11) |
| Children learn from what they see, and role models teach by example  *‘that’s what we we are really is. Is role models really as to how we should probably live our lifes…we’re lazy around the house…they’re gonna repeat that…so it’s just about showing them the. Best ways of as to how to do to do things’* (Adam, p. 13) |
| Fatherhood should be taken seriously  *‘I took it, as you should, very seriously…all of a sudden it’s you know, I’m responsible now, this is my son and I make decisions for him’* (Ethan, p. 10) |
| Consideration of what is passed on  *‘if he knows I’m annoyed, he’d get upset because he could feel what I feel’* (Bradley, p. 19) |
| **2. ‘STEP UP’. ‘MAN UP’** |
| **A sense of duty** |
| Work ethic changed due to need to support family  *‘I was more committed to going to work because I obviously needed the money. Erm. Whereas before. It wouldn’t really bother me if you had a day off…I’ve got someone that relied on me and I’ve gotta look after’* (Dave, p. 2) |
| A role of fatherhood is providing for your family  *‘we decided we wanted to go through with it (the pregnancy) …and obviously just started looking for jobs here and everywhere’* (Bradley, p. 1) |
| Young fathers have limited career opportunities  *‘**when you’re young…you’ve got the jobs which you know everyone else when you’re in older life that you know they’ve been at. It is the crap jobs’* (Adam, p. 10) |
| Fatherhood is taking responsibility  *‘taking care of the woman and child. You will be responsible…to provide’* (Chris, p. 3) |
| Responsibility for another is different to responsibility for yourself  *‘suddenly you’ve got responsibility and that thought for someone else, it completely changes you…you know I’m alright with that for me, but I’m not I’m not for Bobby’* (Ethan, p. 5) |
| Impossible choices due to economic crisis  *‘it’s freezing now. It’s like you’ve gotta make the choice whether you feed your kid or have the heating on and it’s one of those choices where you shouldn’t even have to think about what you’re gonna do’* (Bradley, p. 8) |
| Recognition of the value of money was a result of becoming a father  *‘More careful now than I were cause money meant nothing to me like I could have £20 in my pocket one day and it could be gone within. Two hours before my son was here, and now obviously I’ve tried to keep the money behind…for him’* (Bradley, p. 16) |
| Working hard to support your family is important  *‘knowing that someone was 100% reliant on you and knowing that everything. That you did helped them…makes you feel better…when they’ve got what they want because you’ve worked hard’* (Dave, p. 3) |
| Providing comfort is a father’s responsibility  *‘just want to provide, you know and make sure that things are comfortable’* (Adam, p. 10) |
| Added responsibility of providing a home  *‘obviously it’s like one of the things being the main tenant of your own home. Like you’ve got to make sure everything’s up to scratch’* (Bradley, p. 8) |
| Financial responsibilities mean more time in work and less time with the family  *‘I had to work more because you know, we we couldn’t afford it at the time…I work ridiculous hours long, long hours and over the years…I really resented it’* (Ethan, p. 4) |
| Responsibility to maintain a job  *‘usually I don’t stick a job out for more than two months because I just get tired of it. But knowing that I need a job, it’s just like kept pushing me forwards’* (Bradley, p. 5) |
| **Doing “the right thing”** |
| Manning up is a responsibility you should be ready for  *‘even if you think you can’t you should man up and know the right thing and. Take care of the child and the mother. You did it. Don’t run. We should just be ready to take responsibility. I think it’s not that hard’* (Chris, p. 4) |
| Becoming a father means manning up and accepting responsibility for your actions  *‘it just happened and I just have to take responsibility. I have to stand up…it is what it is that I had to man. Up’* (Chris, p. 1) |
| Old fashioned roles – fathers step up  *‘Old fashioned to. Know what we had to do when. This situation arises, yeah, like. Step up…the money earners…we’re the ones who go out and work every day…were all old fashioned knew that we had to grow up’* (Dave, p. 4) |
| Fathers step up  *‘I started thinking even all the confusion. I just have to step up step up’* (Chris, p. 4) |
| Parenting against gender norms  *‘my dads mum, once she used to come and see him (son) and I’ll change his Nappy and she used to tell me off. You know it’s not your job, it’s a woman’s job’* (Ethan, p. 13) |
| Financial demands impacted by the cost-of-living crisis  *‘like I’m still on Universal Credit whilst working, and obviously like it’s hard to budget money these days’* (Bradley, p. 15) |
| **3. “CHANGE HAPPENS”** |
| **“Left behind”** |
| Before becoming a father, life was fun  *‘before then I was like that, you know. I loved having fun. I was just living. A good life I would say…I wouldn’t say right now I’m not. Living a good life because. Change happens’* (Chris, p. 2) |
| Feeling left behind by friends  *‘When all your friend etc. They’re all maybe single…but then yourself. Uhm, so left behind really, uhm, that’s I guess really the difficult part’* (Adam, p. 5) |
| Balancing family and friends is challenging  *‘trying to get that balance. Between friendship and erm wife etc. and it’s yeah I did find that difficult, difficult at time’* (Adam, p. 5) |
| Sacrifice – giving up hobby to better himself for the family  *‘The only thing it impacted was me football cause I was supposed to be training but. I I was trying to better myself…everything’s for the family’* (Dave, p. 9) |
| Fatherhood brings a change in priorities  *‘That’s your priority then isn’t it your family? So you do distance yourself…you move away from them (friends) to concentrate more on yourself and your family’* (Dave, p. 4) |
| Becoming a father caused internal conflict about if it was a mistake or not  *‘I wouldn’t exactly say it’s a mistake, but it was not something I planned, but it just happened…it was a mistake in part’* (Chris, p. 1) |
| Awareness that things would change *‘a month before her due date I’d I’d still be going out quite frequently…But I think that. Was just realising that I wasn’t going to be able to do it after’* (Dave, p. 2-3) |
| Pre fatherhood identity was tied to social situations  *‘just a sociable person…always like to go to go out and have fun. I’d always be like the last one to leave everything. I never want to miss out on anything’* (Adam, p. 4) |
| Ongoing feelings of being left behind  ‘*I still feel it today like it’s just that fear of missing out’* (Adam, p. 6) |
| **“Changed me”** |
| Feared becoming a father would have a negative impact but it didn’t  *‘It’s changed my life for the better. Rather than like I thought it changed my life for the worse like it just didn’t like just changed my life for the better’* (Bradley, p. 4) |
| Bradley changed for the better through fatherhood  *‘like just helped me calm down more…all of a sudden that I just realised it just. Weren’t this person that I were. Like even people said that having a kid changed you’* (Bradley, p. 4) |
| Fatherhood is a change for the better  ‘*it made me a better person. It, it’s certainly sorted me head out*…I can’t see a negative. From becoming a dad’ (Dave p. 7) |
| Revaluating life  *‘I was. Doing things I shouldn’t really be doing’* (Dave p. 2) |
| Becoming a father brought new feelings and worries  *‘it’s quite strange really, because I remember at the time feeling things that I’ve never felt before. You know, all of a sudden I’m extremely protective and I’ve got like 100 more worries on my mind’* (Ethan, p. 3) |
| New feelings  *‘it brings out all all the emotion that I, I wasn’t really an emotional person’* (Ethan p. 3) |
| Becoming a father caused Bradley to evaluate his temperament  *‘like I was a really angry person before, like knowing I was becoming a dad like anything would tigger me anger just to make me flip on anyone. Like and then obviously becoming a dad like changed me for the better like help me calm down’* (Bradley, p. 2) |
| Fatherhood is becoming the best version of yourself  *‘Just to find my possible best, you know. For him’* (Chris, p. 3) |
| Fatherhood caused a refocus on what is seen as important.  *‘its certainly sorted my life out. Made me concentrate…what’s important now to me’* (Dave p. 2) |
| Immediate change – everything put into being a dad  *‘my life changed straight away…you know I’m a dad now and I’ve got to learn how to be a dad, not how to be a friend going out and doing this, that and the other’* (Ethan, p. 3) |
| Fatherhood brought feelings of not wanting to be hypocritical and therefore a change in lifestyle  *‘I stopped swearing so you know I stopped. I tried to be the best person I could be. Because I certainly wasn’t going to be what I experienced and that was just hypocritical. Do as I say you know’.* (Ethan, p. 12) |
| Fatherhood brings realisations about the sort of person you want to be *‘me being able to control my temper a lot easier…I thought I need to start coming down’* (Bradley, p. 18) |
| Fatherhood identity develops with time  *‘as I’ve got older, I done things more. Sort of my my own way and being a bit. A bit more open to do different, different things’* (Adam, p. 4) |
| Modelling talking about emotions  *‘I didn’t want to be that I wanted to show it (emotions) and. You know if there were any concerns that I have I just used to discuss it…if you care you know you are a bit fearful about things’* (Ethan, p. 6) |

**Appendix M**

**Analysis flow diagram**

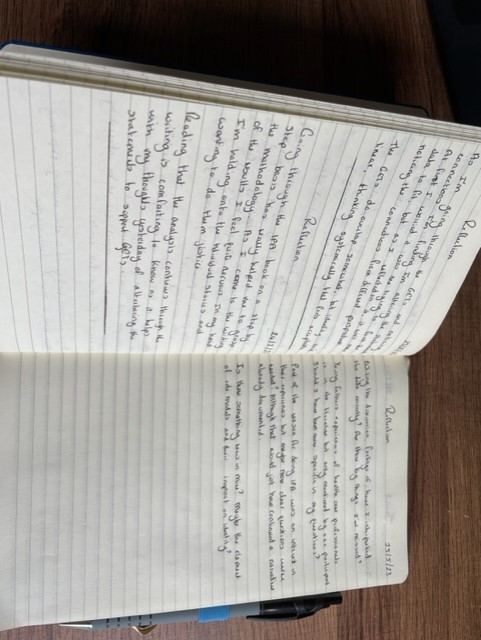
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**Reflective diary extract**



# Paper 3 – Executive Summary

# Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?



Fast track to fatherhood; how do young fathers make sense of their developing identity?

Executive Summary

With special thanks to the young fathers who took part and those who consulted on the research

CONTENTS

BACKGROUND – WHY LOOK AT YOUNG DADS?

AIMS – WHAT THE RESEARCH WANTED TO DO

THE METHOD – WHAT TOOK PLACE AND WHY

THE RESULTS – WHAT WAS FOUND

DISCUSSION – WHAT DOES THIS ACTUALLY MEAN?

STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

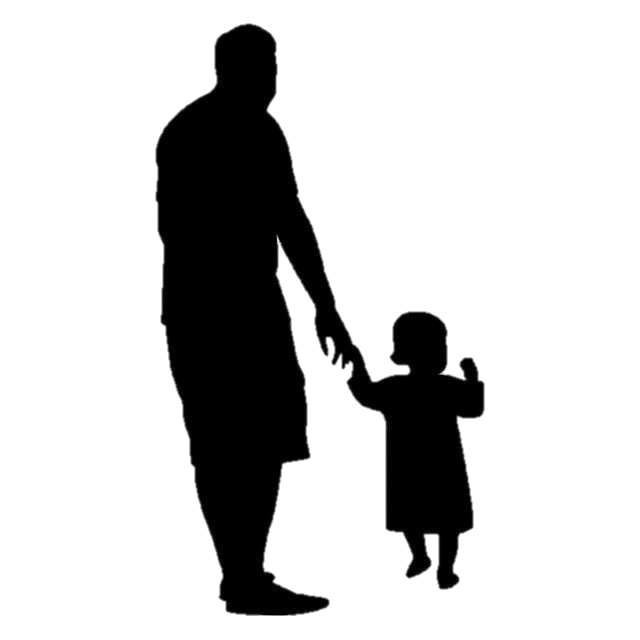
WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR THOSE WHO SUPPORT YOUNG DADS?

FUTURE RESEARCH – WHAT ELSE COULD BE DONE GOING FORWARDS

REFERENCES

This paper has been written for young fathers, those who work with them and the general public. It has been written with consultation from those who work in the charity sector with young fathers and with the input of someone who views themselves as having been a young father. Their involvement has been critical. Consultation took place prior to the research starting with input into interview questions and advert designs. Drafts of this paper have also been reviewed.

Thank you again for your support.



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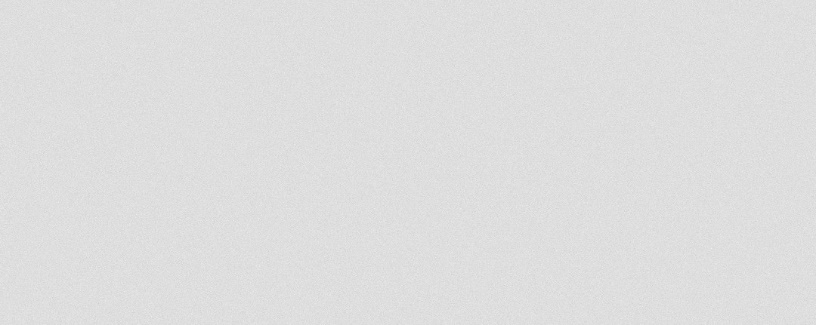
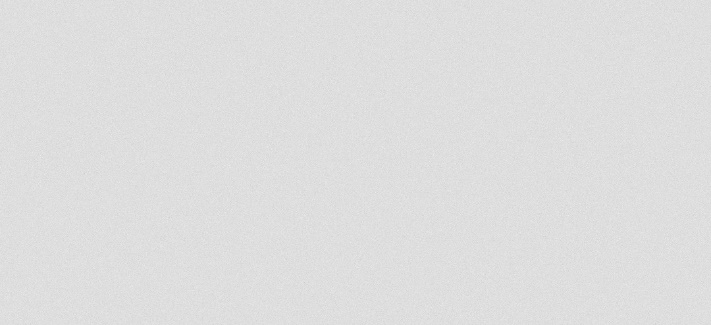
* To explore young dad’s experiences of their identity as they become fathers.

In research young dads (aged 25 or under) have usually been overlooked or viewed as being ‘disinterested’, ‘incompetent’ or just not around (Lammy, 2015; Weber, 2018). Few studies ask young dads for their experiences and none to date have asked young dads how it felt going from being a young person to becoming a dad, in terms of their identity.

Identity can be a difficult thing to think about. The focus is on how we become who we are, what shapes us and what changes as we get older (Carr, 2020). For young people becoming young adult’s things naturally change but for young dads, the often-unexpected addition of a baby gives them a new role to take on.

AIMS - WHAT THE RESEARCH WANTED TO DO

BACKGROUND - WHY LOOK AT YOUNG DADS?



THE METHOD - WHAT TOOK PLACE AND WHY?

You could take part if:

Who did take part?

* You were a male
* Had a child before turning 25
* Lived in the UK
* Over the age of 16
* 5 dads who viewed themselves as having been young fathers
* Aged between 22-51
* Had children between the ages of 20-24

The Ethics Committee at Staffordshire University approved the research. The young dads who took part gave consent and have been kept anonymous. The names in this paper have all been changed.

The study was advertised on social media and by charities working with young dads.

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Three themes were developed:

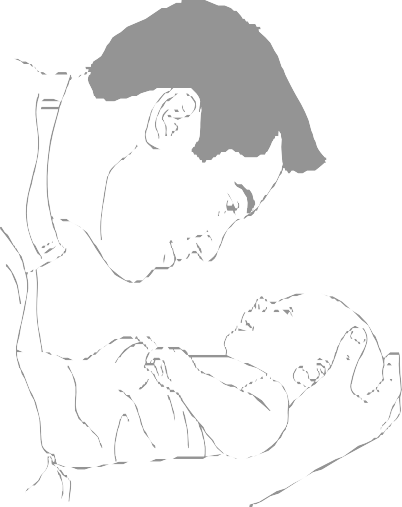
1. “What do we do now?”
2. “Step up”. “Man up”
3. “Change happens”

WHAT DID THEY DO?

The researcher led online interviews with the young dads over Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed word for word.

The transcripts were then analysed using a technique called Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or IPA.

IPA is used to help find meaning in conversations. It looks at what people said, how they said it and what they could have meant. The researcher spends time going through all the transcripts, focusing in detail on the descriptions of the participants stories. They look to see if any themes come up. It is useful for when researchers are interested in the personal experiences of people.



THE RESULTS - WHAT WAS FOUND

THEME 1: “WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”

This theme focused on the young fathers’ early experience of developing the fatherhood identity, thinking about the emotions that came with it and their own experiences of being parented. It has two sub-themes:

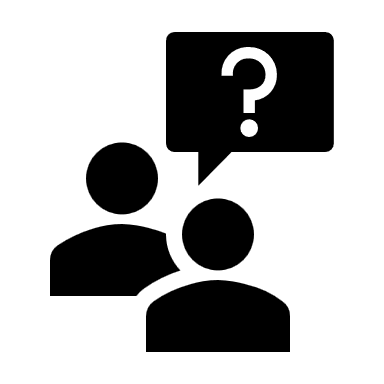
* A sense of uncertainty and conflict
* The power of “showing them”

When first learning about the pregnancies some initial feelings were of being “shocked” (Bradley, p. 10) and of “disappointment” (Chris, p. 3) which brought questions of “what do we do now?” (Bradley, p. 10). There was a sense of uncertainty about what comes next and the need to access support to help.

The young fathers spoke of learning how to be a dad from others and commented on how valuable that support was, “his support was fantastic” (Ethan, p. 7), “My dad really helped me. He was like a shining light” (Chris, p. 3).

One of the young fathers thought about how he was parented and felt conflicted straight away, “I don’t want to be like. My dad” (p. 1), whereas another copied his father’s parenting style but later questioned it “really that wasn’t the best” (Adam, p. 2). Suggesting that for them their fatherhood identities were impacted by their experiences of being parented.

Part of the fatherhood identity was experience through what the young fathers shared with their children, via passing “wisdom on” (Dave, p. 6), through “being accountable” (Chris, p. 3) or with a sense of pride that they are similar. “I think he’ll. Be a lot … like me and my dad” (Dave. p.6)



THEME 2: “STEP UP”. “MAN UP”

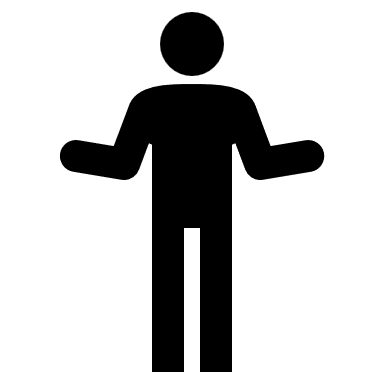
This theme focused on the outside influences that guide identity, it has two sub-themes:

* A sense of duty
* Doing “the right thing”

The sense of duty that comes with fatherhood was thought about by all the young fathers. This was shown through an increased work ethic and spoken about as a need to provide. The need to provide was mainly experienced through financial considerations and was seen as a given. “You will be responsible … to provide” (Chris, p. 3)

Difficulties in society were spoken about, such as the current cost-of-living crisis in the UK. “you’ve gotta make the choice whether you feed your kid or have the heating on” (Bradley, p. 8), this suggests a sense of powerlessness that the young fathers felt. Some situations are beyond their control and by being unable to provide difficult feelings could be internalised impacting negatively on identity.

Language such as “you should man up” (Chris, p. 4) and “Step up” (Dave, p. 4) was used by the young fathers, showing the continuation of stereotypical gender roles. The fathers all felt it was their duty to step into the role of provider and a real sense that there was no choice in that. This can be seen to link with masculinity in that by not doing so they may be viewed as less of a man, thereby affecting their identity.



THEME 3: “CHANGE HAPPENS”

This theme focused on the changes that occur during fatherhood, it has two sub-themes:

* “Left behind”
* “Changed me”

Becoming a father was a big change and several of the young fathers spoke their life before and after fatherhood. “Before then I was like that, you know. I loved having fun. I was just living. A good life I would say…I wouldn’t say right now I’m not. Living a good life because. Change happens” (Chris, p. 2).

For some there was a feeling of tension with the need to change and a sense of being left behind, “when all your friends etc. They’re all maybe single…but then yourself. Uhm, so left behind really, uhm, that’s I guess the difficult part” (Adam, p. 5).

Mixed emotions were shown by the young fathers, there was a sense of what they had lost from their old lives but also an experience of finding a bigger purpose in becoming dads. In developing their fatherhood identities, unexpected changes were noted. “Rather than like I thought, it changed my life for the better” (Bradley, p. 4) “it made me a better person … it’s certainly sorted me head out” (Dave, p. 7).

Emotional changes were also highlighted “it brings out all all the emotion that I, I wasn’t really an emotional person” (Ethan, p. 3), “I was a really angry person before … becoming a dad like changed me for the better like helped me calm down” (Bradley, p. 2). Suggesting that by becoming a dad, emotions changed.

In developing their fatherhood identities elements of themselves were lost, but change was also seen as a positive.



DISCUSSION – WHAT DOES THIS ACTUALLY MEAN?

The study aimed to look at how young fathers experienced their transition from young person to parent, focusing on their identity. The themes show that there are a lot of outside influences that impact the fatherhood identity. Those close to the fathers, such as parents, social factors such as work, and the views of what society says fathers should be, all have an effect. This suggests that the young father’s identity is not fixed but is constantly being seen from different perspectives (Pulla & Carter, 2018).

Fathers’ identity can be affected by how they were parented, but for young fathers, this is a strange position as their own parents still have a large impact on their lives. It puts young fathers’ in-between roles, whether they are fathers or sons (Fraiberg et al., 1975) both roles have very different identities.

Although previous research has suggested young fathers are ‘disinterested’ (Lammy, 2015) this paper found that all the fathers took on the duty of being a dad. It may be that by having a child young they took on a defensive position of not wanting to be seen as a ‘deadbeat’ (Weber, 2018). By seeing fatherhood as becoming a man, ‘manning up’, the young fathers stepped into an adult identity linked to ‘typical’ masculinity.

Identity is linked to social roles and therefore social behaviour. The young fathers all committed to the role of dad (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and changed their behaviour to match what they felt dads should do. That was seen by the fathers going out less, spending more time with family and managing their emotions. Identity is not set in stone and changes with time and experiences. The young fathers had to change quickly and may have had less chance to think about who they wanted to be.

* The research gives a voice to the experiences of young fathers and adds to the literature.
* All the dads interviewed became fathers after the age of 20, the experiences of younger fathers are missing.
* Some of the dads were looking back on what it was like to be a young dad over 15 years ago, there may be different challenges to being a young dad now compared with then.
* It was difficult to recruit to the research, young dads often face stigma from professionals and may have feared a negative response so opted not to participate.

STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

* Being able to access positive role models through services could be a valuable support.
* Professionals knowing about services that work with young fathers and helping them to access them as a standard procedure could be helpful.
* Staff training on the challenges young fathers face and how identity can be impacted could be helpful.

WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR THOSE WHO SUPPORT YOUNG DADS?

·   Staff training on the challenges young fathers face and how identity can be impacted could be helpful.

Professionals knowing about services that work with young fathers and directing them to them as a standard procedure could be helpful.

·   Staff training on the challenges young fathers face and how identity can be impacted could be helpful.

* Research could focus on younger fathers, under the age of 20, as their identity is likely to be impacted by different factors.
* Looking at identity during the perinatal period (from pregnancy to a year after the baby is born) as the changes are happening, rather than reflecting on them may also add new understanding.

FUTURE RESEARCH – WHAT ELSE COULD BE DONE GOING FORWARDS?

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1. Ethan did not provide more detail on his ethnicity, he only stated British when asked. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)