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**Title:** The Price of Love: The prioritisation of child care and income earning among UK fathers

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**Abstract**

Shifting perspectives on how fathers ‘should’ practice child care responsibilities, combined with changing household income patterns, indicate that balancing child care and breadwinning is complicated for contemporary fathers.

Drawing upon qualitative discussions with 100 employed fathers and using as an analytical framework notions of breadwinner (income earning) and involved (hands on) fathering, this study examines how employed, married/co-habiting and lone UK fathers, interpret paternity.

The study discerns patterns of continuity and change among UK fathers in their practices of child caring and income earning. It observes how breadwinning remains important for many fathers. However, a tendency among some men to prioritise child care over paid work suggests a shift in the practices of contemporary fathers.

The study concludes that further research is needed, especially concerning lone fathers with resident children, who may be more involved with child caring than is presently acknowledged.

**Introduction**

Within organizations, perceptions about how employed fathers ought to balance work and family commitments remain often embedded in assumptions about heterosexual coupledom and high male work-orientation (Özbilgin *et al.* 2011). Despite women’s increased labour market participation, organizational ideas about mothers as default carers, and fathers as main breadwinners, remain persistent (Gatrell *et al.*, 2014; Holter, 2007; Lewis and Cooper 2005; Miller, 2011, Ranson, 2012).

As a consequence, while contemporary work-life balance policies may seek theoretically to embrace fathers (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) long standing identification of paternity with employment means that fathers continue to be positioned, at work, as economic providers while the ‘hard labour’ of care giving is assumed to be primarily a maternal responsibility (Gatrell, 2005; Holter, 2007; Tracy and Rivera, 2010). Employed men can, as a consequence, feel discouraged from seeking access to work-life balance initiatives (Gatrell *et al.,* 2014, Özbilgin *et al.,* 2011).

Yet as Burnett *et al.,* 2012; Lewis and Cooper (2005) and Tracy and Rivera (2010) all argue, today’s employed fathers may wish (or need) to access family friendly initiatives. Additional research is recommended to understand working fathers’ experience of integrating childcare and employment, with a view to influencing policy. It has been suggested by Eräranta and Moisander (2011) that even in Nordic and supposedly enlightened settings (see Brandth and Kvande, 2002; Lammi-Taskula, 2006), where parental leave schemes are open to both men and women, assumptions about the everyday processes by which fathers ‘perceive and negotiate’ their work-family lives remain shadowy, and under-researched. Such omissions are especially notable in relation to post-divorce/separated fathers (Doucet, 2006; Philip, 2014) particularly regarding how lone fathers with resident children manage child care and employment. This is significant given evidence that lone fathering impacts on men’s ability to maintain employment (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003) and that single fathers are more likely to experience stress and ill-health than if they are co-habiting (Ringbäck Weitoft *et al*., 2004).

This study thus contributes to knowledge on how employed fathers negotiate and understand fathering practices, drawing on a qualitative study among 100 employed UK fathers from two organizations, both of which promote family friendly working. It explores how far fathers’ changing social circumstances such as divorce, and current narratives of involved fatherhood, ‘equate to a comprehensive transformation of contemporary fatherhood in ways previously unseen’ (Dermott and Miller, this volume).

Attitudes and experiences among employed fathers regarding paternal practices and child care are examined through developing Eräranta and Moisander’s (2011) dual classification of breadwinner (or ‘manly’) and involved fathers. In keeping with the interpretations of Eräranta and Moisander (2011) and also Ranson (2012), the paper defines breadwinner fathering as the prioritisation, among some men, of paid work over ‘hands on’ involvement in day-to-day caring for dependent children (Ranson, 2012:745). By contrast, notions of involved fathering are aligned, here, with paternal narratives giving precedence to engaged, ‘intimate’ fathering (Dermott, 2008) in which fathers place high value on close relationships with children, sometimes at the expense of career advancement: ‘explicitly organizing their working lives to accommodate family responsibilities’ (Ranson, 2012, 748). The paper thus contributes new insights into how employed fathers in a range of circumstances (married/co-habiting fathers, lone fathers and men who share care), interpret paternity.

The focus, here, on lone fathers is important because this group are, as mentioned above, largely missing from fatherhood research (excepting Philip, 2014) where the focus tends to be non-resident fatherhood (e.g. Natalier and Hewitt, 2010), even though we know that lone fatherhood may reduce paternal employment rates and (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003) and contribute to ill health (Ringbäck Weitoft *et al*., 2004).

Underpinning this research is David Morgan’s (1996) concept of ‘family practices’ which has prompted a shift away from assumptions that families with dependent children are stable entities (comprising, by implication, heterosexual parents in intact relationships, Smart and Neale, 1999). ‘Family practices’ facilitates instead an understanding of families as fluid, adaptable, and with changing needs, depending on the status of adult relationships and the ages and health of children.

**Paternity and work-life balance**

Paternity and work-life balance is a growing concern within research on fathers and work (Gregory and Milner 2009; 2011; Özbilgin *et al*., 2011). In particular, the relative invisibility within organizational narratives of men as fathers, has been examined across psychological, sociological and management literatures. See for example Burnett *et al.*’s (2012), conceptualization of fathers as metaphorical ‘*ghosts’* within ‘*organizational machines’*. Likewise, paternal presenteeism is investigated within policy studies, O’Brien and Shemilt (2003) arguing that fathers with dependent (especially infant) children work very long hours (see also Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006), while Dermott (2006) questions the significance of fatherhood status in predicting men’s working hours.

A common theme among and between studies on employed fatherhood is an examination of competing narratives about fathers as either main breadwinners prioritising economic provision, or involved fathers who assume everyday care of dependent children (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Miller, 2010). In what follows, the paper draws upon Eräranta and Moisander’s (2011) concepts of involved and breadwinner fathering (which they describe as ‘manly’), to contribute to understandings of how employed fathers perceive and experience their commitments to children. The choice of these dual definitions allows for flexibility of interpretation – for example, fathers who prioritise breadwinning might nevertheless value ‘hands on’ engagement with children. It is shown how fathers’ interpretation of paternal priorities may change over time and, further, how involved fathers might feel ambivalent about the prioritization of child care over career advancement.

An overview of literatures on fathers and employment in relation to breadwinner and involved fathering is provided below, and the study on which the paper draws is then described. Subsequently, the paper considers how men interpreted their fathering practices and preferences as focusing on either breadwinning or involved fathering, using examples from their narratives. It observes how relationship status and/or flexible working does not necessarily explain how fathers position themselves regarding their own perceptions of balancing breadwinning and involved fathering.

*Breadwinner fathering*

Relationships between economic provision and paternity tend to be foregrounded within narratives of breadwinner fathering, which are favoured within some organizations and sit comfortably with some men (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011). Understanding experiences and attitudes among breadwinner fathers became a focus within organizational psychology from the 1970’s onwards (Pleck 1977; Keith and Schafer 1980; Greenhaus and Beutell 1985, Lewis and Cooper 2005). These studies showed how dual earner couples with dependent children were likely to experience high work–family conflict and may therefore require ‘family-supportive benefits to … enhance their work-life balance’ (Thompson *et al.* 1999: 396). Greenhaus and Beutell’s (1985) research in this area was seminal, because their arguments significantly influenced organizational research on parenting and work-life balance over the next thirty years (Gareis *et al.*, 2009). Greenhaus and Beutell recognised the complexity of relationships between the allocation of childcare responsibilities and income earning among dual earner parents. Significantly (and unsurprisingly, given that their paper was written in 1985 when women’s labour market participation was less than at present), their paper interpreted fathers’ position as primarily related to breadwinning and income provision, a perspective still purveyed by Hakim (2010). Implicit assumptions underlying these arguments were that fathers were work-orientated while mothers were adaptive, fitting employment around child care arrangements. Such views have continued to predominate within organisational psychology literatures, which continue to associate maternity within care-giving, and paternity with economic provision (Özbilgin *et al.* 2011; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) even if breadwinner fathers ‘help’ with hands on child care (Delphy and Leonard, 1992). It has been argued that assumptions within organizational psychology about breadwinner fathering serve to consolidate line managers’ beliefs that fathers do not need family friendly working initiatives (Kossek *et al*., 2012, see also Gatrell, 2005, Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Tracy and Rivera 2010).

*Involved fathering*

The psychological focus on work-family conflict could be seen as obfuscating social shifts in paternal *desire* for direct engagement in children’s lives, as observed by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995). Sociological studies on fatherhood (including within policy and management studies) indicate that greater attention should be paid to fathers who seek close involvement in child-care (although perhaps not housework, Bianchi *et al.* 2000) not only through necessity, but because some men proactively desire engaged relationships with dependent children (see Gatrell, 2005; Holter, 2007; Miller, 2010; Özbilgin *et al*. 2011). Sociologies of fatherhood and work are, arguably, more cognisant of the complexities of family practices than are psychological studies, acknowledging for example differences in experience between separated/divorced fathers (Doucet, 2006, Philip, 2014; Smart and Neale, 1999) and those in intact relationships, as well as the impact of changing gendered work patterns on economic provision in households (Ford and Collinson, 2011). Many such studies observe the impact, on paternal desire for involved fatherhood, of organizational expectations about prioritisation of breadwinning over child care (Gatrell, 2007; Dienhart, 1998; Holter, 2007; Kimmel, 1993). As a result of such expectations, many employed fathers take the line of ‘least resistance’ to such constraints (Miller 2011:1), prioritising employment and ‘falling back’ into gendered patterns of breadwinner fathering, even if their pre-parenthood preference was to be closely involved with child care (Miller, 2011:1; Lewis 1986; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Dermott, 2008; Featherstone, 2009; Gregory and Milner 2009).

Yet the relationship between paternal involvement and paternal breadwinning is complex. As Christiansen and Palkowitz (2001) observe, current focus on paternal engagement with dependent children could lead to an under-estimation of the importance, to fathers, of the association between breadwinning and masculinity (see also Ranson, 2010, 2012). Positive links have been observed between men’s ability to provide for children and their desire for father-child involvement (especially among divorced men, Collier, 2001; Philip, 2013; 2014). Even among young, impoverished fathers, an ability to also see themselves as providing financial support for dependent children influences their self-esteem and a sense of being involved (Shirani, this volume). Perhaps for this reason, positive correlations have been shown between fathers’ capacity to provide for children, and paternal well-being. Conversely, should men view themselves as ‘underperforming’ financially, in the context of children’s material needs, this may cause paternal ill-health (Christiansen and Palkowitz 2001). As Christiansen and Palkowitz observe, links between paternity and economic provision remain under-explored within contemporary fatherhood literatures. They identify a need (which this study seeks to address) to analyse relationships between economic provision and involved fathering (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011).

**The Study**

The U.K. study of working fathers reported here took place between 2009 and 2012, beginning with a quantitative stress evaluation survey involving 1,100 working fathers and producing demographic, physiological and psychological data. The survey was followed up with the qualitative, audio only tele-conference interviews and discussion groups upon which we draw below, which explored how fathers experienced and perceived combining parenting and paid work.

Fathers were recruited from two major organizations employing a total of over 40,000 staff within the UK across a range of income levels. Importantly, these organizations support family-friendly and flexible working including part-time hours, full time flexible hours and some home working.

Fathers from both organizations were invited to register for the tele-conferences against a chosen time slot through a secure web-link, enabling them to join a conference at a time and location convenient to them. One hundred fathers took part in the teleconferences (usually two to eight participants) which were chaired by two members of the research team. The interview team comprised two men and one woman. It did not appear, to the interviewer team at least, that the gender balance among the researchers affected responses. However, fathers indicated that the use of only first names during the tele-conferences encouraged them to be more open about their views than might have been the case in a face-to-face focus group. In contrast to Halford’s (2006) study on homeworkers, we did not target one particular group, but sought participation from all employed fathers within the two organizations.

For purposes of anonymity we did not ask for personal details, thus while some men offered information about posts and salary (indicating a range of backgrounds) we did not ask men about age, ethnicity, seniority, or regional locations. We did however, have a schedule of discussion themes upon which we drew, asking about numbers of children in each household; whether men were living with a partner; how much child care men were undertaking; whether this was shared and if so, with whom. We also asked if fathers had tried to access and/or had taken up flexible working schemes on offer in their organizations. Promises of anonymity elicited a high response rate and appeared to facilitate open discussions among men whose anonymity was protected and who could disconnect at any time. Each tele-conference was transcribed and analysed thematically, using the computer package Nvivo.

It is acknowledged that the fathers we interviewed may not be typical of wider populations, since all were employed within organizations offering (in theory at least) flexible working. However, we believe our findings move forward the debate on how far paternal practices regarding breadwinning and child care may be shifting. Because of the variety of experience and differences in what fathers chose to disclose, we do not attempt to quantify or generalize from the data. Rather we offer examples from discussions to illustrate key themes.

**Findings**

In the following sections we describe how fathers reported a range of family situations. In keeping with Morgan’s (1996) description of ‘family practices’, men’s households and child care arrangements varied, with some fathers jointly raising dependent children in intact adult relationships, some lone fathers operating as sole carers for their children, and some divorced/separated fathers sharing care with others. In this latter ‘shared care’ category, some men appeared to combine family and work within the context of extended family relationships, sharing child care between themselves, new wives/partners, ex-wives/partners, and grandparents.

The language of involved and ‘breadwinner’ fathering was not introduced within the research interviews. As noted above, men were asked open questions about their family situations, followed by more specific questions about how child care tasks such as food preparation, bathing, and school or nursery transport were shared. However, the responses from most participants appeared to fall predominantly into either one category or the other across a variety of family and working arrangements. The ability to work flexibly (or not) did not appear to impact on men’s behaviour as either breadwinner or involved fathers. Additionally, and perhaps surprisingly, links between men’s relationship status and our classification of fathers as either breadwinning or involved were less obvious than might have been anticipated from previous research (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). Thus, men living full time with employed female partners/wives might be just as likely to report involved fathering as those who were raising children without female partners - although employed men with wives at home did tend towards breadwinner fathering.

**‘Breadwinner’ fathers Peter, Nick and Trevor**

We begin by describing the experiences of breadwinner father Peter, who was divorced with resident children. Peter described his second wife as lead carer not only of their new baby and three children from her previous relationship, but also for his two children from a previous marriage. This was despite Peter’s accessing a flexible working arrangement which allowed him to operate remotely from home. We interpreted Peter’s description of his fathering approach as ‘breadwinner’ not only in terms of his prioritisation of economic provision over engagement with child rearing, but also because he described himself as leading on decision making within the household. Peter explained how his current wife wanted to become a teacher (meaning he would have taken a greater share of child care) but this idea was rejected and his career took precedence:

‘We are a blended family, let’s put it that way. She has three, and I have my two with me, and then we have one between us. That makes up the six so you see, it’s basically two separate families but [the new baby] binds them all together. Initially she was going to become a teacher but that was impossible with a little one, because I can’t stop what I am doing to look after a little child. So I had a chat with her, and she decided to become a registered child minder working from our home (and) the flexibility which that allows us is fabulous.’

Peter had built a ‘home office’ within his garden where he ‘shields’ himself from ‘interruption’ from the six children. Although he did share with his wife the afternoon collection of the five school-age children, and sometimes supervised bath times, Peter regarded his wife as ‘spinning the plates for all our children’ so that he did not ‘have to worry’ that the five school age children were:

‘up to something they shouldn’t be, or the little one isn’t being looked after.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in situations where resident female partners were in a lower paid job (as in Peter’s case), or were not in paid work at all, it did appear that fathers tended to be breadwinners, with female partners positioned as lead child carers. Thus, full time worker Nick was ‘quite happy’ to leave to his wife (in paid work only one day per week) the main responsibility for child care and described himself as ‘helping out’ (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Maushart, 2008).

Similarly, although Trevor’s post was fully flexible with non-fixed hours, he nevertheless worked a full time equivalent and took the lead as main provider while his wife undertook ‘most’ of the childcare:

‘I work full time and my wife doesn’t so inevitably there’s a sort of, you can imagine the split, if I can help out I certainly will but it does depend on my timetable, so she does [most] and that’s just the way it is’

While the examples from Pete, Nick and Trevor are typical of those men in our sample who prioritised breadwinner fathering, a significant proportion of respondents tended towards a more involved approach and we consider their experiences below.

**Involved fathers**

The men whom we classified as involved fathers fell into two categories: those who had little choice other than to be involved because partners were absent, and those men who expressed an explicit desire to be directly engaged with children’s upbringing and shaped their working practices accordingly. Below, we look first at single fathers Jack and Ian (who were lone child carers) and then at Sol and Rick (who drew upon other familial resources).

*Single fathers: Jack, Ian, Sol and Rick.*

Jack is a single parent with school age children. He clearly valued his role as an involved father but had little alternative other than to be primary carer for his infant son and daughter, as their mother was ‘no longer on the scene’. For most of the week there was nobody with whom he could share child care although his parents did undertake the school run each Wednesday. Jack explained:

‘I am a single parent, so I have the kids 7 days a week, basically 24/7. I am contracted to work from 9am … so I drop the kids off at school…about 8.50. Then lunch times my daughter has to have medication which the school won’t administer, so I scoot down there at lunchtime (5 – 10 minutes drive) administer it, then back to work, then I pick them from school at 3.15 … (and work from home)’.

Similarly, lone father Ian reported that he used the child care provided by the children’s primary school at the beginning and end of each day, but was otherwise an involved father through necessity, which put him under some pressure, perhaps illustrating reasons why lone fathers may be more likely to experience stress than co-habitees (Ringbäck Weitoft *et al.,* 2004).

‘What I do is start [work] at 8.30 am and finish at 4.15. So … I tend to be rushing about at a hundred miles an hour all the time trying to get to work and back in the car. So I get home then and feed the kids. And it’s hard work.’

Despite these pressures, however, Ian indicated that the requirement to care for his children was combined with a desire to prioritise their needs over those of his employer (even though he was sole provider as well as sole carer):

‘it’s the kids that come first with me – they are more important than work’.

For some fathers, while adult relationships had broken down, care of children was nevertheless shared with ex-wives and partners. Sol explained:

‘we don’t, I mean we’re not together now but things are pretty amicable really, we live close and sort of, I mean, just sort it out between us. So I mean she is their mum but if she is working nights they stay with me and I’ll have them. It’s not official, I mean we never married or anything so it’s just shared.’

Alternatively, some involved single fathers with parents living close by were able to share child care with children’s grandparents. As Rick observed:

‘Well, my son lives with me, I mean that’s full time since he was four but I’m fortunate, my parents [are retired]…and they help me out. I have some lengthy journeys to get to work and they do help me out with regard to after school … he may sleep round with them, so it allows me, I can leave in the morning any time I want’.

The experiences of Jack, Ian, Sol and Rick illustrate the changes in households observed by Philip (2013) who noted within her sample a proportion of divorced fathers who were lead carers for children. Many important studies on fatherhood focus mainly on either men in intact relationships (Gatrell, 2007; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2010, 2011), or non-resident fathers post-divorce (Smart and Neale, 1999; Natalier and Hewitt, 2010). However, the situation of single fathers with resident children is less well documented and the experiences recounted above highlight the need for further investigation into changing family practices (Morgan, 1996; Ranson, 2012), whereby fathers might be both providing and caring for their children for at least part of the working week, if relationships with mothers have broken down (Doucet, 2006, Philip, 2013). This is particularly important given the suggestion (noted above) that child care obligations can have a marked effect on lone fathers’ employment behaviours (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

*Involved married/co-habiting fathers*

For married fathers John and Richard, below, the situation was different from that of the divorced/separated fathers because they sought to be involved with children’s upbringing within intact relationships. John lived with his wife and they had one son at infant school. While both John and his wife were in paid work, John had chosen to work part-time and flexibly, and was ‘primary carer’ while his wife worked full time:

‘I’m the primary person looking after him. My wife works full time…she goes into work early and comes home late. So I make sure he gets to school and collect him, then I have maybe two hours with him on my own after work ... generally speaking I do a majority of things with him … I’m not saying she doesn’t do … but it is generally me, to be honest’.

John had made a specific decision to reduce his hours in order to engage more fully with his son’s upbringing, while his wife appeared strongly career oriented:

‘I have worked for the department for many years and obviously I’ve not always had children therefore I [previously] worked long hours. So when my son is old enough to go to school on his own, I’ll do longer days again (but for now) I work condensed days, work through lunch, so that allows me to do what I want to do with my son’.

Richard, who reported sharing child care equally with his wife (both worked full-time) suggested:

‘the general sort of set up is, we share – she won’t be back till late tonight so I’ll do both of the boys tonight, but if I am off first thing to a meeting, then she’ll do it. There is a lot of flexibility in terms of who does what with no rigid kind of script, that suits us, we both want to share it’.

**Promotion prospects among breadwinner and involved fathers**

All men were asked about opportunities for promotion in their jobs. They were asked to consider whether they felt that being involved fathers, especially if this meant working reduced hours, might be detrimental to career prospects (as observed by Gatrell *et al.,* 2014). Among those men who adopted breadwinner fathering styles, some were clear that economic provision and doing well in their paid work was a priority. Nicholas, who was married with three daughters and described his household as ‘traditional’, recounted how (in accordance with observations by Ribbens, 1994; Miller, 2010 and Dermott, 2008) his wife had always managed child care on his behalf. He worked long hours in order to ‘support them’ and indicated pride in his ability to:

‘provide what they need and then some; holidays and so forth’.

Other breadwinner fathers were more ambivalent. Patrick had made a specific choice to increase his hours at the office. His wife focused on child care, and household decisions and patterns operated around Patrick’s job. Nevertheless, he indicated a reluctance to ‘go to the next stage’ [i.e become a manager] immediately: he was ‘resisting that at the moment’ because it would involve travel which ‘would seriously impact on my family’.

Among involved fathers in couples, the desire to prioritise children was plainly expressed, alongside concerns that involved parenting might compromise promotion prospects, while promotion might compromise involved fathering. Such ambivalence suggests a shift, among this group of involved men, from conventional gendered patterns observed by Ribbens (1994) and Miller (2011), where heterosexual fathers tended to prioritise breadwinning, even if this had not been their original intention. Thus Alex, married and working full time (but with flexible hours) explained:

‘If I were to take promotion I would be expected to be available more and I have said directly to the managers, I wouldn’t want their job in my current circumstance with young children. Presently, I don’t have to travel to meetings, I can do on-line or conference bridges so I don’t have to travel up and down the country. But that is less the case for more senior staff. So I have put promotion on hold, I try to keep (travel) to an absolute minimum at present’.

Similarly, Premen put off applying for promotion because of what he might ‘lose’ in relation to involved fathering – but he was concerned about the impact of this decision on future prospects:

‘If I was to take promotion there would be increased pressure on me, more things I would have to do which might make it difficult to like, pick up kids up from school. So that’s my choice as to whether I want to [prioritise] … kids, or get the benefits of promotion. But it comes at a price. I worry about what I am losing, putting off promotion’.

Mark, who also worked full time but flexibly, expressed his ambivalence about balancing breadwinning and child care:

‘My family is more important than my work. But I need my work to support my family. And my work, my income is, it’s *very* important to me. Part of who I am. But I will absolutely never consider a job that means spending time away from them while they are so young, I would just never consider it. So it’s difficult’

Mark’s stance is at odds with some research findings from the 1990s (for instance Hochschild, 1997) whereby fathers immersed themselves in paid work, avoiding exhausting and often repetitive care work for dependent (especially infant) children. It is also in contrast to research by Dermott (2008) and Miller (2011) which shows fathers often ‘falling back’ into gendered behaviours (with female partners undertaking a higher level of child care) because alternatives appear limited, and difficult to access.

However, the approaches of Mark and Premen (valuing paid work, yet foregoing workplace rewards through prioritising children over promotion) are in keeping with observations by Holter (2007) and Kimmel (1993), which demonstrate a determination among some men to build direct and engaged relationships with children even if this limits career advancement.

Among involved fathers who were single, being with children appeared to over-ride promotion prospects and fathers preferred to engage in as much direct child care as possible rather than out-sourcing this in order to work longer hours. Jim, whose children lived mostly with him (but who shared care with his ex-wife) expressed his desire to prioritise his children:

‘With regards to the promotion side of it, the rolling question is ‘would that support the working options I have now?’ If it didn’t then to be honest with you, the kids are the most important thing. Would I want to go for promotion for a job that basically is going to take me away from the kids? I would probably think twice about it; the application wouldn’t actually go in for the job, its ‘well, that’s just thrown in the bin.’

**Discussion**

Contextualising the experiences of the fathers within the context of breadwinning and involvement enabled the identification of a range of fathering practices. Some men adopted breadwinner fathering styles, following gendered patterns of behaviour and prioritising employment (Miller, 2011; 2010). Others (both single and partnered) embraced involved fathering. In keeping with observations by Christiansen and Palkowitz (2001), breadwinning was important for most men including involved fathers, for practical and personal reasons, even in situations where men were fathering alone and finding this stressful as in Ian’s case.

Yet among involved fathers, economic provision was balanced with the need, or desire to engage in child care. This does not negate Christiansen and Palkowitz’s theories about the importance, for men’s self- esteem, of providing for their families. As Mark explained above, both breadwinning and child care were important to him and he sought a balance between the two. Nevertheless, the tendency among some men to prioritise child care over paid work suggests a shift in the practices of contemporary fatherhood from ‘breadwinner’ fathering towards a more involved parenting style. Thus, Patrick, Mark, Jim and Alex avoided travel assignments, even if this meant postponing promotion opportunities, seeking to maintain physical presence at home in a manner more commonly associated with employed mothers (Schwartz, 1989). A further shift in approaches to fathering lies in the indication that many lone fathers were directly involved in child care, with children resident full or part time, this suggesting a shift in family practices with fathers taking greater responsibility post-divorce.

Yet it remains unclear whether the experiences of lone fathers would be accurately reflected in social statistics. Would never married Sol, for example, informally sharing child care with his ex-partner, be classified as a lone father household? A feeling of being in the ‘shadows’ of fathering research was a certainly concern for divorced/separated involved fathers, who argued that social policy and research underestimated the level of engagement between fathers and children, especially post-separation. As divorced father Sean explained:

‘I think we’ve moved on, but we sort of need to shift more. A lot more fathers are taking more responsibility, a lot are staying at home to look after kids or it’s shared. I think we need to move towards that’.

This raises important questions for future research regarding which fathers may be visible in research, and whose experiences will be reported (or otherwise) with potential for influencing organizational policy and practice regarding flexible working. Given the evidence that lone fathering increases stress, greater understanding of how this group manage work-life commitments seems imperative.

In conclusion, while we cannot be sure whether the experiences of the fathers considered here are reflected among wider populations, this research nevertheless indicates a growing range in fathering practices. Apparent shifts in desire among these men to be involved fathers suggests a need for more widely available flexible working and a need for further research on fathering and family practices, especially among divorced fathers where fathering practices may be fluid and unpredictable (Morgan, 1996) and dependent on relationships with previous and future partners, as well as men’s personal attitudes regarding the prioritization of fathering and paid work.

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