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# Fathers as sexuality educators: aspirations and realities. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Men can play a significant role in teaching their children about sexuality but fathers' practices and perceptions in this domain remain under explored. This study presents an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of eight fathers' perceptions and practices in educating their ten-year-old children about physical maturation, reproduction and relationships. A Foucauldian analysis with a focus on governmentality and biopower revealed tensions and contradictions between the fathers' aspirations and their realities, which appeared to be underpinned by the dynamic, contradictory, shifting, plural nature of fatherhood identities. Whilst fathers wished to adhere to the cultural imperative for father-child emotional closeness, a disparity between their ambitions and their conduct emerged. Care appeared to be a deeply gendered concept for the fathers and despite their aspirations for an intimate relationship with their children, gendered norms for motherhood and fatherhood prevailed resulting in passivity in their role as sexuality educators. The study concludes by arguing that challenges to structures and subcultural contexts, which may deter fathers from fully engaging with their sons and daughters in this aspect of communication are required.

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Fathers; Sexuality education; educators; role; governmentality; biopower

## Introduction

Internationally, young people are a key vulnerable group for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and are more likely than any other age group to be diagnosed with a STI (CDC 2016; ECDC 2015). For the individual, the psychological, social and physical ramifications of an STI can be significant and for governments STIs incur substantial economic costs (CDC 2016; Lucas 2013). Early sexual debut is also associated with unintended pregnancy which is frequently associated with significant social, psychological, relational, educational and economic burdens both for young people themselves and the next generation (Yazdkhasti et al. 2015).

Globally, considerable investment has been made in young people's sexual health promotion but systematic reviews suggest that traditional pedagogic approaches have limited impact (Lazarus et al. 2010; Shepherd et al. 2010). The focus of health promotion has,

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therefore, shifted towards strategies that aim to increase young people's self-efficacy and resilience (AYPH 2016).

This study relates to one particular approach to addressing young people's self-efficacy and resilience, namely through parent–child sexuality communication. There is a growing body of research that suggests a protective relationship between open parent–child sexuality communication and young people's sexual decision-making (Flores and Barroso 2017; Widman et al. 2006, 2016). However, findings from a recent systematic review (Widman et al. 2016) suggest that there are gender differences in this relationship in that the impact appears more significant in mother–child communication than father–child communication. However, the paucity of studies that have specifically explored the father's role in this regard makes this relationship difficult to understand (Dilorio, Pluhar, and Belcher 2003; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Wilson, Dalberth, and Koo 2010; Wyckoff et al. 2008).

This study aims to make a contribution to addressing this deficit by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the perceptions and practices of eight fathers, residing in England, in educating their ten-year-old children about physical maturation, reproduction and relationships.

## Background

Parents often struggle to provide effective, accurate and timely sexuality education for their children in general and pre-adolescent children in particular (Byers 2011; Flores and Barroso 2017). For example, El-Shaieb and Wurtele's (2009) survey of US parents of children with a mean age of 6.75 years identified that parents lacked confidence in their ability to discuss sexuality-related issues with their children. Similarly, Nguyen and Rosengren's (2004) study with US parents of 3–4-year olds and 5–6-year olds identified that parents were more reluctant to discuss issues of a sexual nature with their children than any other topic and they believed that children should learn about these issues at an older age than other biological concepts.

With regards to content, Ballard and Gross (2009) identified, through focus groups with parents of pre-school children in the USA, that parental discussions largely focused on the biological aspects of sexuality over personal relationships and discussions reflected what parents believed to be developmentally appropriate. In relation to this latter finding, Davies and Robinson's (2010) focus groups with parents and children aged 3–5 years in Australia, revealed a disjuncture between parents' perceptions of their children's understanding of sexuality and the children's actual knowledge, with parents underestimating their children's capacity to understand sexuality-related information.

Communication styles vary between parents as Dyson and Smith's (2012) focus group interviews with parents of children aged up to 11 years and young people aged 12–18 residing in Australia revealed, with some parents pro-actively engaging in sexuality-related discussions and others waiting for their children to prompt discussion. Similarly, Frankham (2006) identified through analysis of interviews with parents and families in the UK that parents relied upon their children's questions as an opening to dialogue but this frequently led to closed or incomplete responses. Stone, Ingham, and Gibbins (2013) study with parents of children aged 3–7 years in England, also identified that parents struggled in undertaking

the role of sexuality educator for their young children. More recently, Stone et al. (2015, 2017) identified that whilst parents wish to be open and honest with their children about sexual issues, for some, their anxieties stymie their attempts.

With specific regard to fathers, Wright's (2009) and Flores and Barroso's (2017) review concluded that across most of the US literature, mothers figured more prominently than fathers in children's sexuality education. For example, Wilson and Koo's (2010) online survey, with 829 fathers and 1113 mothers of children aged 10–14 in the USA, identified that fathers communicated with both sons and daughters about sex-related issues less than their mothers and fathers had lower self-efficacy and lower expectations of the benefits of discussing sexuality with their children than their mothers. In addition, Wilson, Dalberth, and Koo's (2010) focus group interviews with fathers in the USA revealed that there was agreement that fathers have a responsibility to teach their children about sexuality but many of the fathers acknowledged that despite their commitment to supporting their children in learning about sexuality they found it very difficult in practice. Similarly, in Australia, Downie and Coates (1999) survey of 371 parents of pre-school children and pre-adolescent children identified that mothers engaged in more sexuality communication with their children than fathers. In exploring this inequality Walsh, Parker, and Cushing's (1999) discourse analysis identified significant obstacles for the majority of the fathers in fulfilling the role of early sexuality educator with several fathers described as struggling with the dominant cultural ideologies surrounding fathers' roles in providing sexuality education for their children.

By focusing specifically on the lived experience of fathers in talking to their children about puberty, relationships and reproduction this study seeks to further our understanding of fathers' practices and perceptions regarding their engagement in this role with a view to informing sexual health promotion strategy.

## Methodology

The study employed IPA (Smith 1996, 2004; Smith and Eatough 2016; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) which has evolved from the inter-related strands of phenomenology and hermeneutics together with symbolic interactionism which, collectively, informed its approach. IPA has a dual aim of providing an in depth exploration of people's lived experiences as well as an examination of how people make sense of these experiences. By going beyond description and looking for meanings embedded in the fathers' experiences as early sexuality educators it was hoped that an insight in to their lifeworld (Brooks 2015) would be possible where the influence of contexts such as personal history, socialisation, culture, peer attitudes and beliefs would be illuminated. In addition, IPA's focus on social cognition, that is 'the relationship between what people think (cognition), say (account) and do (behaviour)' (Smith and Eatough 2012, 442), was of particular value to this research since it was concerned with both the perceptions and practices of fathers.

## Theoretical lens

The study also employed Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopower (1978, 1979) as its theoretical lens. Foucault coined these terms during a series of lectures in 1977–1978 which he described as 'thought fragments' (rather than a cohesive theory) the focus of which was on the *how* of power. In this context, biopower referred to a set of procedures

that manipulate basic biological features of the population into a political strategy (Foucault 1980). The series, initially entitled *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault later acknowledged, should have been called ‘Governmentality’, since the focus of the lectures was with ‘problem of government’ – that is, “how to govern oneself, how to be governed, by whom should we accept to be governed, how to be the best possible governor?” (Foucault 2007, 88). Thus power, for Foucault, operates in ways that are both overtly oppressive and more positive, and is asserted through processes of ‘governmentality’. In order to know and regulate the health of the population, biopower pursues knowledge about, and regulatory mechanisms over, the population (Nadesan 2008). In his later 1978–1979 course lectures on the ‘The Birth of Biopolitics’ at the Collège de France, Foucault offered an analysis of neoliberalism, taking it as a historical form of biopolitical governmentality. Here, the neoliberal subject is presented as central to reforms with the expectation, in that by maximising freedom in a post-welfare society, individuals will be autonomous and ‘look after themselves’ as a moral obligation (Hamann 2009). Governmentality thus encompasses institutions, practices and ideas with strategies of control distributed through a variety of mechanisms, merging the public and the private and the political and personal domains of everyday life and affecting even the most mundane of practices (Hamann 2009).

### **Methods**

A total of 8 fathers of 4 ten-year-old girls and 4 ten-year-old boys, respectively, were recruited through advertisements placed with schools, scout groups, football clubs, cricket clubs, rugby clubs, community groups and social networking sites. All of the fathers lived with their children and their children’s mother full-time and shared caring responsibilities for the child. The fathers were all white and were aged 42 to 46. Participants were professionals, educated to masters degree level or equivalent and lived in England. Thus the sample was homogenous; a quality which is advocated for IPA studies since the aim is not to generalise but to facilitate an in-depth exploration of a defined group’s or an individual’s lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

Data collection took place via face-to-face interviews conducted by the first author (CB). A semi-structured interview schedule was used with questions focusing on the fathers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding how children should learn about physical maturation, relationships and reproduction and how they approached these areas of learning with their children themselves. Interviews lasted between 30 and 72 minutes and took place within the participants’ homes or place of work. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis adhered to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) guidelines which advocate that analysis should be an iterative and inductive process with each interview analysed separately initially. Each transcript was analysed line by line and initial descriptive notes were made along with observations of the language used and semantic content. Finally, conceptual comments were developed which, in due course, became themes. Throughout the process, the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) was employed with an emphasis on the interplay between the parts and the whole and between the interpreter and the research participant(s) and their story. Smith (2004) draws on Ricoeur’s (1970) distinction between the hermeneutics of meaning recollection and empathic engagement and the hermeneutics of suspicion and critical engagement. By engaging both modes

of hermeneutic engagement, Smith (2004) argues that a more comprehensive understanding of the participant's lived experience can be gained. This study sought to achieve this depth of interpretative analysis by initially prioritising 'hermeneutics centred in empathy and meaning recollection' and then going on to a 'hermeneutics of questioning, of critical engagement' to allow for a 'more complete understanding of the participant's lived experience' (Smith 2004, 46). This process was cyclical in that emerging themes were tested against earlier data and themes were, on occasion, changed to become subordinate or superordinate. Throughout the process, presuppositions and judgements were suspended through a process of reflexivity, the aim being to focus on what was present in the data rather than what was assumed to be present (Spinelli 2002).

Finally, a cross-group comparison was made to identify areas of convergence and divergence between the fathers. To facilitate this process Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) guidance concerning the use of abstraction, subsumption, polarisation, contextualisation, numeration and function was used in order to establish a deeper understanding of the data.

The School of Healthcare Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University granted approval for this study. Participants were not provided with any financial incentives or compensation for their participation in the study.

## Findings

Three superordinate themes emerged from analysis across the eight transcripts: 'Childhood Innocence' (Bennett, Harden, and Anstey 2018), 'Sexuality: An Enduring Taboo' (Bennett 2015) and 'Fatherhood: Aspirations and Realities'. The last of these three themes forms the focus of this paper. Supporting data for the development of the theme are outlined below in relation to the subordinate themes that informed its structure. For ease of presentation, analyses are presented at the group level with quotes provided from individual fathers in order to ground the interpretations in the data. The superordinate theme emerged from binary tensions within the data whereby the fathers aspired to be involved in this aspect of their children's learning but remain largely detached. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### ***'I'm equipped to do it'/'[The] truth is I've not really thought about it'***

Fathers described feeling equipped to take on the role of sexuality educator, for example, Angus described feeling confident in undertaking this role because his job required him to deliver sexual health promotion:

I'm relatively lucky I've had to do it other times with kids at work and I've had quite a few practice runs at it ... In that sense I feel confident in being able to talk to my own children

Similarly, Nigel described feeling prepared for the role because of his occupational experience:

I am completely comfortable ...

Other fathers who did not have such occupational exposure also voiced confidence in their ability to undertake the role with only one father, Steve, describing himself as feeling 'limited' in his ability to engage in such discussions.

However, despite the fathers' apparent comfort and confidence only one father, Neil, had discussed these issues with his children. For example, Michael said:

On the sexual side I probably haven't actually approached it in a ... as a ... are you ready for a talk yet? I don't, I don't think I've said if you ever want to talk

When probed further it appeared that Michael had given little thought to this aspect of his son's development:

*CB:* 'How about say puberty? At around this age, some boys start to change don't they?'

*Michael:* 'Umm'.

*CB:* 'They might grow body hair, have wet dreams and so on? Have you talked about those kinds of changes?'

*Michael:* 'No I haven't, no'.

*CB:* 'Has it occurred to you?'

*Michael:* 'No it probably hasn't'.

Similarly, another father, Nigel, had not thought of having these discussions with his son until a professional experience served as a catalyst:

I saw a twelve year old who came in with testicular pain ... it was a complete shock to me, he'd gone through puberty ... I came home that night and said 'we need to talk to Jo about this ... I felt a bit of an idiot, I didn't see the need with my own child.

Likewise, when Angus was asked about his daughters' knowledge levels concerning puberty, relationships and reproduction, he responded:

*Angus:* 'I don't know it's weird to think about as I've never thought about it'.

*CB:* 'Do you plan to check that out?'

*Angus:* 'I am not sure I do, I don't know'.

Another father, Steve, said:

... I've been thinking 'hmmm actually what do I do?' It's nothing very proactive ... I really haven't thought this through at all ...

Likewise, on six occasions another father, Andy, explained that that he had not thought through how he would discuss puberty, relationships and reproduction with his daughter:

Truth is I've not really thought about it

... umm, we've not really thought about that

I don't know

I don't know actually

I haven't really thought about it

I don't think we do. I haven't really thought about it

Thus, fathers' perceived comfort and confidence in discussing sexuality with their children was at the odds with their practices.

### **'We talk about everything'/'They'll learn it in the playground'**

Fathers felt that they had close relationships with their children and that they communicated openly. For instance, Michael said:

*[we] have got a good relationship. We talk ... we're open with each other*

However, in relation to sexuality communication, the majority of Michael's son's learning was taking place in the playground:

[he is] *possibly not learning it from the right* [long pause] *either from parents or teachers but maybe from other ten year old kids which might not be the best* [laughs]

Nigel also felt that he had an open relationship with his sons and was proud of how he had taught his older son, Jo, about sex and relationships:

I don't think my dad could have talked to me about it which is why I've gone to the extreme with Jo.

However, an analysis of Nigel's words suggested a dissonance between Nigel's perceptions and his behaviour:

We talked a little bit about hairs but we didn't talk about wet dreams or erections particularly. We talked about relationships and a little about sex but not the full mechanics. It feels a little bit like you don't have to explain it in full.

Thus it would appear that going 'to the extreme' was, in reality, a brief and superficial discussion. The linguistic shift to 'you' rather than 'I' and reference to the euphemisms 'it' and 'the full mechanics' suggested a discomfort. When probed further, Nigel's language intimated a reluctance to be the open father that he aspired to be:

*CB:* 'Going back to Jo, he told you he's got a [pubic] hair, when will you talk to him about other things such as wet dreams?'

*Nigel:* 'I suppose, I'm going to have to do it in the next two years or even less ... sooner rather than later or even before he starts secondary school!'

Nigel's language, 'I'm going to have to do it', suggested a reluctance to engage in such discussion and, in reality, the discussions were too late and incomplete:

Jo, came out with this book on how to do everything and said 'Dad you should read through this as there is a bit on how to talk to your children about sex'. And I thought 'Oh My God', and he'd read it. He already knew.

Angus, James, Steve and Andy also said they would leave these conversations to their children's schools, although they did not know how their children's schools approached sex and relationships education.

The exception to this binary was Neil whose general level of engagement with his children in other aspects of their lives appeared to be consistent with his level of engagement regarding their learning about sexuality. For example, he described some of the more 'factual' discussions that he had had with his son, Tony, when he was age ten:

I said that every twenty eight days-ish a girl loses the lining of the womb and it leaks out through her vagina so they need tampons and panty liners to stop it being embarrassing, smelly or staining clothes ....

We talked about blokes first of all and sex ... slang terms for penis, vagina and sex. We talked about erections, hard-ons ... masturbating.

Neil's behaviours were consistent with his aspirations to be open with his children and the tensions characteristic of other participants were scarcely evident within his transcript.

### ***Gendered divisions of labour/no labour***

Gendered divisions of labour emerged within the transcripts; the fathers who had girls believed that it was more appropriate for their mothers to assume responsibility for this



aspect of parenting, and the fathers of boys asserted that it was more appropriate for them to take the lead. Andy said:

If she'd have been a boy it would have been more my role to do stuff whereas my wife thinks it's more her role because she is a girl.

Andy appeared to have felt excluded from his daughter's sexuality education because this was 'women's business' and he had assumed a passive position. Even when he suggested that he did not feel that all of the responsibility should rest with his wife, his position was passive in that his daughter would need to proactively raise the issue with him:

I don't think it's my wife's sole responsibility – if Charlotte asked me questions, I'm more than happy to answer.

Steve's dialogue also suggested the presence of gendered assumptions concerning his role:

I think that's maybe my wife's thing, not mine.

I'd just like her to have an open discussion with her mum where she feels comfortable to ask quite candidly what she needs to know really. And perhaps her mum could do a little steering to what she thinks is important to share with her; that would be my ideal really.

I'd be more prone to talk to Charlie ... I think it's far more fitting that my wife speaks to Lydia.

However, the reality was that Steve had not talked in any detail about puberty, relationships and sex with his son Charlie. Thus, it appeared that while a gendered division of labour with respect to these matters was Steve's ideal, when the 'labour' fell in his domain he had not acted upon it.

In discussing his daughter, Angus said:

... my gender does have an impact ... I'm a bloke; I am not going to understand about feelings in relation to periods and that sort of things. That isn't going to happen.

In contrast to the sensitive language Angus used throughout the rest of the interview this discussion was more defensive in tone. He appeared to absolve responsibility for this role because of his gender:

it's very much been my wife taking the lead.

With regards to Neil's dialogue with his daughter, a gendered division of labour was also evident:

It's Tony that I spoke to ...

... It seemed to make more sense for Sara to talk to Izi, as she could come from a female's perspective. I suppose it would be embarrassing talking about getting hair on your vagina and growing boobs with your dad.

In relation to the four fathers of sons, gendered divisions of labour were discussed but in practice the labour was largely absent. For example, Colin explained:

I think I find it easier to explain things [to Jake] than my wife because we are both males.

Paradoxically however Jake's mother was excluded from conversations about menstruation because of her gender:

He's asked questions like what's that on the toilet, it's a bit of blood and I have said 'it happens to mum sometimes'.

For Colin, this 'labour' was characterised by superficial responses and falsehoods:

He was five when my wife was pregnant with Thomas, and he saw her tummy getting bigger. We'd always talked about him coming out of mummy's tummy and he said 'you know how you said you saw my face before I came out of mummy's tummy' and I said 'yeah', he said 'did you look through mummy's mouth?' I said 'yes', because at five you don't need to know about the birth canal and stuff.

Another father, James, described feeling isolated in relation to his responsibility in this domain of parenting:

Their mum is terrified she won't know what to do, she's an only child, her first sexual experience was later than mine, and she was very cosseted ... she has had no exposure to these sort of things.

As a couple it appeared that James felt that they had conformed to a gendered division of labour because James' wife was at a loss with how to communicate about sexuality with their son. However, in practice whilst James appeared to assume responsibility there was no 'labour' or communication being undertaken by either parent because they were both equally unsure as to how to approach discussing these issues with their children.

Both Michael and Nigel also asserted that they should be the sexuality educators for their sons but, as outlined above, their input into their son's learning was minimal.

## Discussion

### *Fatherhood and neoliberalism*

Tensions and contradictions characterised fathers' accounts of their lived experiences. A chasm existed between the majority of the fathers' aspirations and the realities of their practices in that their reports fluctuated between being 'as one' with their children but 'at a distance' regarding sexuality communication. They desired to have an open, democratic relationship yet, in practice, the discrepancy between the ideal of a democratic relationship and the fathers' actual parenting practices prevented this. Fathers controlled the quantity and quality of communication about bodies, sex and relationships and used what could be termed as 'quiet coercion' to shape their children's behaviours, in the form of avoidance behaviours and partial explanations, to maintain their authority over sexuality-related communication.

A paradox exists here with respect to responsibilities of the state and family in the context of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is committed to limiting the role of the state and respecting the autonomy and privacy of families and individuals, but is simultaneously concerned with influencing and regulating social and economic life to bring about the desired values of the family institution in relation to securing the wealth and health of the family and, ultimately, the nation. Each of the fathers' discourses resonated with neoliberal values in that they all spoke at the individual as opposed to the societal level and their focus was on individual responsibility and self-management. Their lack of reference to social norms, state involvement and expectations was conspicuous by its absence. Instead, fathers' practices appeared highly individualised and independent of any forms of governance with minimal reference to school-based SRE, despite ongoing debate in England regarding what should be included in primary school SRE at the time of the interviews (Commons Select Committee 2014). External issues appeared not to have impacted the fathers' private worlds and a gap emerged between public concerns and private family practices.

### ***Cultural expectations and the conduct of fathering***

In contemporary Western society, fatherhood is widely believed to have become more nurturing and involved in recent years (Finn and Henwood 2009; Lewis and Lamb 2007) with fathers being expected to play an active and supportive role in their children's lives. However, disparities between cultural expectations and the actual conduct of fathering (Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal 2000; Gray 2006; Reeves 2005) are pertinent to both the findings of the current study and previous research in the field highlighting a gulf between fathers' intentions and their practices in discussing sexuality with their children (Lamb 2004; Wilson and Koo 2010).

Whilst fathers are expected to adopt a nurturing role in the family, the concept of 'main breadwinner' remains central to many men's identities (Lewis 2000). In keeping with neoliberalism, many fathers value emotional closeness with their children as much as their role as breadwinner (Hauari and Hollingworth 2009; Townsend 2002). In relation to the current study, all of the fathers made reference to their professional roles and appeared to be defined by their occupations as much as, if not more than, their role as nurturing father. Several researchers have suggested that men who perceive their identity as a father as central to their overall sense of self are more likely to enact behaviours associated with father involvement (Adamsons 2010; Dyer, Pleck, and McBride 2012; Townsend 2002). Indeed, identity theory has been applied to illustrate that a man's perception of himself in relation to his status as a father is likely to impact upon his involvement with his children (Habib 2012). Issues concerning fatherhood identity are, therefore, helpful in making sense of the fathers' lived experiences as sexuality educators with Neil, who communicated openly with his children about sexuality, being the only father whose interview suggested that he privileged his identity as a father over other, competing, identities.

Phenomenologically, the project of the family was central to the fathers' life worlds, with each of the fathers' transcripts suggesting that they cared about their children and aspired to be involved fathers. However, the degree to which this aspect of fatherhood affected their day-to-day lives differed significantly across the group. This may, in part, reflect the fathers' own experiences of learning about sexuality with all of them describing the absence of open sexuality communication with their own parents. Indeed, Kniveton and Day (1999) identified a significant relationship between British parents' personal experiences of learning about sex-related issues in their homes and their own parenting behaviours, concluding that if one's early learning about sex-related issues was a dysfunctional experience it is likely that this behaviour will be replicated. Similarly, Byers, Sears, and Weaver (2008) identified that parents' own experiences of parent-imparted sex education influenced their communication with their children in that those parents who had received comprehensive sex and relationships education from their own parents felt more comfortable in providing this guidance for their own children. Dyson and Smith (2012) found that parents who had had positive parental role models found it easier to communicate openly with their children about sexuality. Thus, the lack of role modelling that the fathers were exposed to in this context may have influenced their later behaviours in this respected.

### ***Gendered divisions of labour***

The fathers who participated in this study clearly cared 'about' their children but their engagement in caring 'for' them with regards to educating their sons and daughters about their

bodies, relationships and reproduction was, on the whole, minimal. The division of labour evident within the transcripts suggested that this aspect of care was a gendered concept for the fathers for whom despite their aspirations for an intimate relationship with their children, 'traditional cultural' norms for motherhood and fatherhood prevailed (McDowell et al. 2005; Tronto 1994).

What is described by Murphy (2003) as the 'biologico-moral responsibility' for the welfare of children has been seen as a maternal responsibility since the early 1800s onwards appeared to continue within the families of the men who participated in this study. These findings are congruent with Wilson and Koo's (2010) research which demonstrated that gendered norms were adhered to in their study of parent-child sexuality communication, with fathers of ten- to twelve-year-old children providing less sexuality education than their female partners. Indeed, a burgeoning body of research indicates that although the gap between the time spent by mothers and fathers in caring for their children has narrowed over recent years, mothers largely remain the primary carer and spend significantly more time undertaking childcare responsibilities than fathers (Hauari and Hollingworth 2009; Lader, Short, and Gershuny 2006; O'Brien 2005).

Foucault too wrote extensively about familial power, describing it as a 'sovereign institution'. In *The History of Sexuality (Volume 1)* he describes how prior to the Victorian era sexual practices were conducted openly and a 'tolerant familiarity with the illicit' (3) existed. The nineteenth century dawned with sexuality gradually being confined to the home where 'the conjugal couple took custody of it and absorbed into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule' (Foucault 1978, 3), and the parents became the single locus of sexuality. However, over time familial sovereign power has been diluted and the family has been infiltrated by discipline and co-opted by biopower in what Foucault suggests are 'supplementary' ways (Foucault cited in Taylor 2012, 202). In his *Psychiatric Power* lecture series of 1973–174, Foucault argued that despite the manner in which the family has been influenced by new technologies of power, the sovereign power of the family continues to play a role in maintaining societal discipline. However, Taylor (2012) argues that in the twenty-first century the power of the father has greatly diminished. She cites Margaret Atwood's description of middle-class families from the perspective of female children, in which fathers are almost invisible. Furthermore, it would appear that maternal gatekeeping regarding fathers' involvement in discussing sexuality with their children may be an additional mediating factor, since McBride et al. (2005) found that mothers' beliefs regarding fathering roles impacted upon fathers' perceptions of the importance of their role and their degree of engagement with their children.

### **Contemporary masculinities**

Contemporary fatherhood reflects changes in contemporary masculinities (Finn and Henwood 2009) linked to the assimilation and demonstration of sociocultural norms and scripts regarding 'manliness' such as physicality, aggression and tight emotional control (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2005; Thompson and Bennett 2015). Masculinities, as social constructs, are culture bound (Lamb 2010; Thompson and Bennett 2015) and in relation to fatherhood may, therefore, extend to the role of family protector and main breadwinner (Hauari and Hollingworth 2009) with broader masculine ideals of emotional control becoming less salient (Xu and O'Brien 2014). Gender ideology appeared to be central to the fathers

in this study with regards to their construction of fatherhood and may have significantly influenced their practices as fathers.

In keeping with identity theory (Habib 2012), traditional masculine values emerged within the data, for example, the fathers saw themselves as playing an important role in protecting their children from a number of perceived threats with many employing interventional measures and a panoptic gaze, for example by monitoring their children's Internet activity. However, the fathers did not adhere to hegemonic norms of masculinity which legitimise the subordination of women but instead appeared to identify with multiple and, sometimes, contradictory masculinities. For example, all of the fathers apart from Nigel conformed to hegemonic masculine ideals surrounding heterosexuality and all adhered to a gendered division of labour, yet they resisted stereotypical behaviours by their very participation in this study.

This finding is in keeping with a large body of literature which demonstrates that concepts of masculinity are dynamic and characterised by plurality and, at times, contradiction (Connell 2005; Henwood and Procter 2003; Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2001). However, it is also acknowledged that the interview context most likely elicited responses that provided insight into the men's private masculinities around fathering as opposed to their more publicly performed masculinities (Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2007).

### ***Study limitations***

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are limited by the small sample size employed and the nature of the sample, in that cultural and religious diversity together with class and sexual diversity as factors that may influence masculine identities and fatherhood practices could not be explored. In addition, there is a risk, as with all IPA studies that the language used by participants may have constructed rather than described the fathers' lived realities. The interview transcripts may, therefore, have told more about the way in which the fathers talked about their experiences than the experience itself. In addition, subjectivity on the part of the researchers is a central feature of this study since interpretations were, inevitably, influenced by their values and choice of theoretical lens.

### **Conclusion**

This study has gone beyond the psychological analyses of fathers' reticence to fulfil their role as sexuality educators for their pre-adolescent children that characterise much of the literature in the field. By using a Foucauldian lens of governmentality and biopower it has, instead, provided interpretations that have highlighted some of the structural barriers that may contribute to the challenges that fathers face in this aspect of parenting. The tensions and contradictions that emerged from fathers' dialogues appeared to mirror the dynamic, contradictory, shifting, plural nature of fatherhood identities. Whilst fathers wished to adhere to the cultural imperative for father-child emotional closeness, there was a significant disparity between their ambitions and their conduct in this domain. The division of labour suggested that care was a deeply gendered concept for the fathers and, despite their aspirations for an intimate relationship with their children, the cultural norms of motherhood and fatherhood prevailed resulting in fathers' role passivity as sexuality educators. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of this study and the need for further research that further

explores structural barriers that may deter fathers from more fully engaging with the role sexuality educator, the results suggest that challenges to structures and subcultural contexts and methods are required to enable fathers to overcome such barriers.

## Disclosure statement

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