

# Regendering care in the aftermath of recession?

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## Abstract

Against a backdrop of persistent gender inequalities around childcare, recent research suggests that some men – and especially fathers – are engaging to a greater extent in the everyday tasks of social reproduction. However, our understanding of the multiple factors, motivations and institutions that facilitate and constrain this nuanced ‘regendering of care’ phenomenon in different national contexts remains limited. Previous work has theorized the uneven rise of male primary caregiving in North America and Scandinavia. This article extends these debates through an empirical focus on the United Kingdom in the wake of the 2008–09 recession and double dip of 2011–12, to explore male work-care in relation to economic restructuring, welfare spending cuts, rising costs of childcare, policy interventions which seek to culturally and numerically defeminize care work, and concerns over work–life balance in an ‘age of austerity’. The final part of the article explains the significance of a larger research agenda that recentres the expansive work–life balance literature through an expanded focus of analysis on men, work-care intermediaries and socially sustainable modes of post-recessionary growth.

## Keywords

care, men, recession, stay-at-home fathers, work–life balance, fatherhood, social reproduction

## Introduction

It is becoming increasingly evident that the expectations that fathers have of the way and amount they are involved directly with their children are altering.

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Fathers want to spend more time with their children, and are doing more of the direct care...received social ideas in relation to family and childcare are in a period of profound change. (*Working Families*, 2011: 4)

Over the last two decades, a significant body of geographical research has explored the changing socio-spatial dynamics of care (Aitken, 2009; Boyer et al., 2013; Cox, 2010; England, 2010; Holloway, 1998; McDowell et al., 2005) and shifting relations between Waged work and care work (James, 2011, 2013, 2014; Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). This scholarship has increased our understanding of activities that have, until fairly recently, been largely ‘invisible’: not captured well in formal records and often undervalued. Not surprisingly, the study of care work – including housework, childcare and eldercare, school and extracurricular activities, and the emotional labour required to sustain homes and families – has focused overwhelmingly on the activities, struggles (and occasionally triumphs) of women. While women still undertake the majority of unwaged care work, recent research suggests some men – and especially fathers – are engaging more in the everyday tasks of social reproduction (e.g. Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; hook, 2006; Ranson, 2010; Rochlen et al., 2008; Smith, 2009).<sup>1</sup> To be clear from the outset, the proportion of men relative to women who carry the majority of social reproduction remains low but is rising. Indeed, the economic participation rate of men aged 16 to pension age has been decreasing over the last two decades (ONS, 2017), with around 250,000 men economically inactive due to looking after home and family, in 2016 (ONS, 2017). However, our understanding of the factors, motivations and institutions that facilitate and constrain this nascent regendering of care phenomenon among a growing number of men – in the context of stubborn gender inequalities of household care – remains partial. Previous work has theorized contemporary changes in gender divisions of care work as a function of shifting cultural understandings about fathering, with increased expectations for fathers to participate in caregiving and other domestic tasks (Dermott and Miller, 2015; Doucet, 2004). Recent research has also begun to

link the rise of male care to economic crisis and recovery and to capture the ways in which some men are redefining unemployment as an opportunity to reconfigure parental and personal identities (e.g. Smith, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

This article extends these debates in relation to the uneven geographies of the 2008–09 recession and double dip of 2011–12 in the United Kingdom and examines the links between gendered divisions of care, economic crisis and restructuring. Here there is some evidence to suggest that new models of social reproduction based on male primary carers or ‘stay-at-home fathers’ (SAHFs) are emerging, as uneven patterns of male job loss redefine the context in which household decisions around gender divisions of care are made (Boushey, 2009; Smith, 2009). The increased numbers of men living with a female breadwinner (Connolly et al., 2014) alongside evidence that fathers are assuming greater responsibilities for childcare when they have a partner who works longer hours (Norman and Elliot, 2015) begin to challenge existing assumptions about the gender politics of care. This raises a series of new research questions regarding the practical means for reconciling men’s paid work outside the home with unpaid caring activities, a problem once treated (for all practical purposes) as a ‘women-only issue’ but which is now a concern for an increasing number of men.

This article begins to engage with some of those research questions, namely, what are the multiple factors, motivations and institutions that facilitate this nuanced regendering of care phenomenon in different national contexts? What is the role of economic crisis, labour market change, austerity and economic recovery in shaping household decision-making around gender divisions of care? How can we best evidence this potential regendering of care phenomenon empirically? And what are the implications of these changes for repositioning the mainstream ‘work–life balance’ research agenda?

We argue that the uneven regendering of care is not happening in a vacuum. Indeed, changing patterns of male caring are also situated within increasing acceptance (and legal protection) for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) people and non-heterosexual families (including same-sex

and trans-cis gender couples) (Schacher et al., 2005) as well as a wider recognition of the role of grandfathers and single dads as carers (Tarrant, 2014). Accordingly, we need to recognize that experiences of male caring are diverse and that axes of embodied difference – including age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion and being a single parent – will shape experiences of male primary caring. Recent retheorizations of the changing nature of fatherhood (Aitken, 2000, 2009; Doucet, 2006) also seek to destabilize the way care work is entangled within extant systems of gender binaries as well as highlighting the bifurcated nature of understandings of ‘whose job’ it is to care.<sup>3</sup> As such, care work is identified as an *embodied practice* which differs depending on the gender and social position of the person doing the caring. Accordingly, scholars have troubled the normative association of ‘mothering’ with women and ‘fathering’ with men, raising the thorny question of whether men doing primary childcare constitutes mothering, fathering or both (Aitken, 2000; Doucet, 2006). The point, then, is:

to dislodge the simplistic alignment of women with motherhood and maternity, and men with fatherhood and paternity because these categories are ambiguous and encompass their own opposites. (Longhurst, 2008: 7)).

Our aim is to build on this scholarship by analysing the role of broader economic forces on the incidence of male caring on the one hand, and the way men’s caring work intersects with their engagement with wage-work on the other. We view our work as part of a broader effort to challenge the (still) normative idea that childcare should principally be the work of mothers. We are excited by conceptual work seeking to destabilize the binary nature of concepts of motherhood and fatherhood, but in this article we have chosen to use the term fathering for clarity and in recognition of the way men’s interactions with their children is typically spoken of within and beyond academia. Our core argument is that contemporary political and economic transformations in the aftermath of the UK recession are affording increasing numbers of men the

opportunity to assume primary responsibility for childcare, in a manner that reinforces longer-term shifts in sociocultural expectations around sharing unwaged care work at home and a greater societal acceptance of female-breadwinner households. However, the extent to which these new patterns of household care are sustainable in the context of post-recessionary growth and labour market recovery remains to be seen.

The article begins by reviewing previous studies in North America and Scandinavia, which have sought to document and explain the socially and spatially uneven rise of male primary caregiving. Extending these ideas to the United Kingdom, the main body of the article explores male work-care in relation to recessionary economic restructuring, welfare spending cuts and rising costs of childcare, policy interventions that seek to culturally and numerically defeminize care work, and concerns over work–life balance in an age of austerity.<sup>4</sup> We reflect on these elements in relation to dominant theorizations of gender and care, and core feminist debates around the transformative potential of men’s involvement in childcare to destabilize normative expectations around the gendering of care work. The final section outlines some possibilities for future research concerned to recentre the expansive work–life balance research agenda through an expanded focus of analysis on men, work-care intermediaries and socially sustainable modes of growth.

### Theorizing the rise of SAHFs

Over the last two decades, fatherhood has become an increasingly familiar part of the social research landscape on gender relations, employment and family life (Doucet, 2004: 103), as scholars have examined the means through which some men and women are ‘undoing gender’ (Deutsch, 2007) and reworking unequal divisions of household care. At the forefront of this growing agenda, a major empirical focus of the extant research literature on male care has been North America (specifically the United States and Canada). Here work has explained an increase in SAHF households in relation to

changes in women's education, increased labour force participation<sup>5</sup>; 'exchange bargaining' around household shifts in partners' relative earnings; and shifts in societal expectations around day-to-day fathering in defining acceptable masculine identities (Bittman et al., 2003; Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004, 2006; Kramer et al., 2013; Williams, 2010).

Based on a nationally representative sample of data from the US Current Population Survey, Kramer et al. (2015) document the characteristics of, and changes in, SAHF households over time. This work shows that SAHF households have risen from 2% of US households in 1979 to 3.5% in 2009, and that on average over 1.1 million children in the United States lived in SAHF households in 2009. This work also shows that drivers of the adoption of SAHF household structures have shifted from health and labour market constraints ('unable to work SAHF' households) to those motivated by family caregiving needs ('caregiving SAHF' households) (see also Fields, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Extending these insights, US research has also shown that these effects are far from evenly distributed: Rather, that families are more likely to choose caregiving SAHF household arrangements in households where the female partner's earnings are higher than females in 'stay-at-home mother' households; where the female partner has higher educational qualifications; and among younger parents with younger children in middle-class families (Kramer et al., 2015; see also Bittman et al., 2003).

Scandinavia represents another major empirical focus of the growing research agenda on male care, where studies have yielded important insights into the growth of more 'democratic' national models of childcare and fatherhood, albeit with different degrees of challenge to existing gender inequalities of care. Notably, scholars have focused on the different capabilities of 'fathers' quotas' (parental leave reserved for fathers) and 'cash for care' schemes in promoting greater gender equality in childcare. Norwegian evidence indicates that the gendered special leave quota for fathers (6 weeks reserved share of parental leave) has had positive effects on the participation of fathers in childcare, while the cash for care system did not challenge existing gender structures of childcare (Brandth

and Kvande, 2009).<sup>7</sup> Likewise in Sweden, research suggests that 'the full potential of Sweden's parental leave policy for degendering the division of labour for childcare will not likely be met until fathers are strongly encouraged by social policy to take a more equal portion of parental leave' (Haas and Hwang, 2008: 85). Swedish research also points to the role of age, migrant background and religion as sources of difference in male attitudes to fatherhood and willingness to adopt more equal gender distributions of care (Johansson and Klinth, 2008).

Importantly, this international body of research<sup>8</sup> has also documented constraints that SAHFs face in terms of stigma, social isolation and peer pressure to be earning (Doucet, 2004, 2006; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, 2005; Rochelin et al., 2008), with some working-class male primary caregivers reporting greater levels of conflict than their middle-class counterparts in breaking with the traditional male role of wage earning (Doucet, 2005; c.f. Minton et al., 2005). However, this literature also reveals an increased sense of connection by SAHFs with their own children, friends and the broader community (Rochelin et al., 2008); how male primary carers are crafting new ways of caring that are distinct from their female counterparts (Chesley, 2011; Smith, 2009); and how these men can serve as important change agents in promoting a work-life balance agenda if and when they return to Waged work (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004). In addition to class, male primary caring (like parenting in general) is also recognized as being shaped by the intersectionality of race, age, religion and sexual orientation, and there is significant scope for expanding research in this area (Doucet and Merla, 2007). Scholarship on fathering in the United States and United Kingdom has shown that race and racism shapes experiences of fatherhood and that fatherhood can open up new forms of masculinity and caring practices for African and Afro-Caribbean men (Livingston and McAdoo, 2007; Williams et al., 2013). There is also some evidence from the United Kingdom as to the influence of ethnicity, with the pattern of a mother who is full-time employed alongside a father who is not employed or working part-time most common in South Asian

families (Dex and Ward, 2010). And Schacher et al. and Bourantani have argued that parenting in the context of gay and non-cisgender relationships has the potential to degender (Schacher et al., 2005) – or queer (Bourantani, 2015) – dualistic gender conceptualizations of care. The development of the concept of ‘caring masculinities’ (Johansson and Klinth, 2008) is one way in which orientations to fatherhood and the practices of fathering can be seen as central to the project of reimagining possible and permissible masculinities (Dermott and Miller, 2015). This research suggests that the male primary caring (as a subset of fathering) is bound up with social identity and notions of hegemonic masculinity (and how these might be changing) in ways that warrant much more attention.

As such, the increase in men’s participation in childcare has implications for feminist theory in terms of how care work is conceptualized. While Iris Marion Young (1997) rightly notes that a rise in the number of male primary carers will not in and of itself eradicate underlying gender dualisms without broader cultural change, there is nevertheless wide agreement among feminist scholars that a more egalitarian gender distribution of childcare within households would be progressive (Doucet, 2006; Glenn, 2000; hooks, 2000; Silverstein, 1996). As hooks has commented, ‘one of the most positive interventions the feminist movement made... was to create greater cultural awareness of the need for men to participate equally in parenting’ (2000: 75). Noting the propensity of men to stand at an emotional and geographical ‘distance’ from the work of parenting, Aitken (1998: 72) highlights the need to examine childcare to understand how gender is being negotiated in contemporary families (see also Bianchi et al., 2012: 60).

The tacit assumption that care work is ‘women’s work’ has been linked to broader patterns of gender inequality (Glenn, 2000; hooks, 2000), with the different ways that care work and Waged work relate to one another theorized as leading to varying degrees of gender (in)equity. In Fraser’s (1997) schema, Waged work and care work can be related to another in one of three possible ways. In the first model, men and women spend equal and extensive time on Waged work and outsource care work to others (the

‘universal wage earner’ model); in the second, mothers work less and do more of the care work (the ‘mommy track’ or ‘caregiver parity model’).<sup>9</sup> In the final model, men and women share care work equally, engaging in less than full-time Waged work and doing most or all of their own care work (the ‘universal caregiver’ model). The existence of male primary caregiving is not captured in these conceptualizations of work-care arrangements. Newly emerging landscapes of care suggest new patterns and practices which may challenge the current gender coding of care work, through the development of new forms of caring which do not simply invert existing gender dualisms but fundamentally destabilize them (see also Bourantani, 2015).

### **Gender, recession and changing divisions of work/care in the United Kingdom?**

While previous research has offered some important insights into the rise of male primary caregivers, the bulk of this work has focused empirically on the United States, Canadian and Scandinavian contexts. Important questions therefore remain around fathers’ capabilities and agency for balancing work and family across countries with different welfare regime configurations (Gregory and Milner, 2008; Hobson and Fahlén, 2009; Perrons et al., 2010b). At the same time, previous work has theorized contemporary changes in gender divisions of care work in relation to shifting cultural understandings about fathering, and policy interventions to support that shift, with increased expectations for fathers to participate in caregiving and other domestic tasks. In contrast, surprisingly few studies have examined the rise of male care in relation to broader processes of economic crisis and recovery and associated labour market change. That is, to capture the ways in which some men are redefining unemployment as an opportunity to reconfigure parental and personal identities (e.g. Smith, 2009). In response, this section sets out the significance of the UK case for extending debates around the regendering of care and its particular salience in the aftermath of the 2008–09 recession and double dip of 2011–12.

Recent reports indicate that many women in the United Kingdom have been hit hard by the economic downturn and UK austerity measures (Fawcett Society, 2013; Rubery and Rafferty, 2013; Women's Budget Group, 2014). Job losses in the female-dominated public sector; public sector pay freezes; reductions in part-time contracts (in which women predominate); ongoing government refusal to interfere in firms' right to manage; and continued scepticism among many employers of the 'business case' for providing workplace arrangements to help workers juggle work, home and family have meant that women's employment is likely to be less secure and of poorer quality (Hogarth et al., 2009; James, 2014). Reinforcing these problems, the recent UK coalition government's emphasis on encouraging mothers into paid work occurred alongside a retrenchment of public caring provision that might otherwise have facilitated that transition through policies designed to ease the burden of care work, including childcare tax credits and subsidies, longer maternity leaves and efforts to expand access to flexible working (MacLeavy, 2011; see also 2007). In combination, these outcomes highlight the practical challenges for pursuing gender equity in the aftermath of recession and for reducing the majority burden of childcare and household social reproduction that many women continue to juggle with paid employment.

Yet while women have been hit hard by the recession, the period from 2008 to 2009 was also labelled a 'mancession' in the United Kingdom because men were initially hit harder in terms of job losses and because women did not do as badly as initially anticipated (Philpott, 2011). In short, male lay-offs in a range of sectors (Swaffield, 2011) have transformed the economic context in which decisions about household divisions of care are now being made by many families, with effects that are now being documented across a range of data sets. Thus, for example, Connolly et al. (2013) documented a fall in usual weekly working hours of fathers in the United Kingdom, working full-time between 2001 and 2011. Similarly, Warren's (2013) analysis of data from the *British Household Panel Survey* and its follow-on *Understanding Society* suggests that the recent UK recession has affected the

number of hours men spend at work: Whereas female employees' weekly work hours (defined as their usual paid normal and overtime hours plus unpaid overtime) has remained rather stable on aggregate before and after the 2008–09 recession, there has been a doubling of part-time employment for men over the same period, albeit from a low base (rising from 3% to 8% of male employees). This growth in part-time hours for men (often achieved through a process of labour adjustment as an alternative to making redundancies) is particularly noticeable for men working in 'personal and protective', 'sales' and 'elementary' jobs,<sup>10</sup> which tend to be characterized by shift working, unsocial schedules and work time that is tightly monitored by employers (Fagan et al., 2008).<sup>11</sup>

This analysis suggests that recessionary developments in the UK labour market, and policies designed to support labour market participation, are prompting some workers at the top and bottom of the occupational hierarchy to modify their participation in paid work in different ways. Indeed, while both adults in low income families are expected to engage in paid work, the tax credit system privileges a more traditional single earner model for middle-income families.<sup>12</sup> This is inducing a rise in the number of UK families claiming working tax credit on the basis of a female sole or joint earner (Rubery, 2010) in marked contrast to previous recessions where the lay-off of the family breadwinner often resulted in the labour market withdrawal of the secondary (usually female) earner to ensure household qualification for unemployment insurance (Rubery, 1988). The consequence of unemployment and increased job insecurity for low-income families is thus work intensification, whereas for middle- and higher-income families – who are most likely to express preferences for working fewer hours – the drop in the number of hours spent at work and in the numbers of workers reporting very long weeks (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011) can yield improvements in work–life balance. In both instances, there is some evidence of families choosing new – and potentially more equitable – models of household social reproduction and care. Statistics indicate greater diversity in couples work–family arrangements post the 2008 recession (Connolly et al., 2014).

**Table 1.** Documenting the recent rise of SAHFs in the United Kingdom over the last two decades.

Year (July–Sept. annual data points)	Men aged 16–64 economically inactive due to 'looking after family or home' (1000s)	Women aged 16–64 economically inactive due to looking after family or home (1000s)	SAHF-SAHM ratio
2015	246	2007	0.12
2014	237	2081	0.11
2013	231	2130	0.11
2012	214	2168	0.10
2011	215	2174	0.10
2010	205	2146	0.10
2009	216	2185	0.10
2008	201	2196	0.09
2007	192	2264	0.08
2006	200	2306	0.09
2005	193	2253	0.09
2004	202	2290	0.09
2003	191	2331	0.08
2002	175	2357	0.07
2001	183	2354	0.08
2000	172	2319	0.07
1999	176	2410	0.07
1998	182	2526	0.07
1997	167	2525	0.06
1996	156	2671	0.06
1995	148	2793	0.05

SAHFs: stay-at-home fathers, SAHM: stay-at-home mother.

Source: Office for National Statistics – Table INAC01 NSA: Economic inactivity: People aged 16–64 by reasons for inactivity (not seasonally adjusted).

Further evidencing UK shifts in household divisions of care, Bradley (2010) has documented a numerical increase in SAHFs in the United Kingdom through the recession, from 190,000 (2008) to 216,000 (2010). Significantly, she has also documented a decline in 29,000 mothers staying at home to look after family over this same period. And while in absolute terms, these numbers represent a still very small percentage of UK households, the direction of change is nevertheless encouraging and offers rich opportunities for research analysis. Indeed, these data are consistent with the work by Connolly et al. (2013), which identifies increasing numbers of female full-time sole breadwinner households in the United Kingdom over the last decade. And while media reports suggest a rise in the number of UK men staying at home linked to the 2008–09 recession and ongoing economic crisis (e.g. Daily Mail, 2011; The Guardian, 2010; The

Telegraph, 2011, 2013), these claims also find support in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which has documented 200,000 fathers who state that they are not in employment because they are looking after family or home (LFS, 2009; c.f. O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003). Updating these figures to 2015, data from the UK Office for National Statistics – also documenting a longer-term upward trend in SAHFs in the United Kingdom over the last two decades – are provided in Table 1. But as scholars have noted, documenting the numerical and spatial extent of this male primary caregivers (and its implications for re-rendering of everyday care within the home in practice) remains complex because of competing definitions (and hence empirical measurement) of SAHFs based on where caregiving is done (see Table 2; c.f. Boyer, 2003), the amount of time spent in childcare, the amount of time spent in childcare *relative* to the mother, level of financial provisioning

**Table 2.** Regendering household divisions of care: Competing definitions of ‘SAHFs’.

Study	Label	Definition
Merla (2006)	Househusbands	Men who had stayed at home to take care of a child for at least 6 months while their partner remained in the labour market
Anderson (2005)	‘At-home fathers’	Men who defined themselves as at-home fathers or primary caregiving fathers had sole or primary responsibility for their youngest child at least 30 h per week and had partners who were the primary wage earners for their households
Frank (1995)	‘Male primary caregiver’	Men who are the caregiver of the youngest child under the age of six for at least 30 h per week. In addition, the male primary caregiver is responsible for the majority of caregiving hours of this child at least 4 days of the week.
Doucet (2004)	‘Primary care giver fathers’	Men who had left full-time work for a period of a year or more or through arranging their part-time or flexible working around their childcare responsibilities (later broadened to include ‘shared caregiving fathers’)
Grbich (1997)	Male primary caregivers	Criteria for inclusion are as follows: The role change had been recent; the men were defined as ‘primary caregivers’, that is, they had sole charge of a preschool (under four) child or children for a minimum of 25 h per working week (Monday to Friday, 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.), and their wives were in the paid workforce during this period of time; the families included the two biological parents of the child/children under care; and the wives were the primary breadwinners for the family unit

SAHFs: stay-at-home fathers.

and the length of time the male caregiving arrangement has been in operation. Crucially, the LFS and other official figures undercount the levels of male primary caregiving in the United Kingdom as they only include men who are engaged in family care and not otherwise employed. Indeed, qualitative research suggests that ‘primary caregiving’ may be undertaken alongside (sometimes sporadic and short hours) part-time employment or self-employment (Dimmock, 2014). While continued documentation of these men remains an important task,<sup>13</sup> their existence seems certain to be more extensive than typically acknowledged.

### **Enabling non-traditional masculinities of work/care? Policy intervention, class difference and place-based lag**

Without claiming economic determinism, this article argues that the combination of contemporary political and economic transformations in the

aftermath of the recession affords increasing numbers of men the opportunity to assume greater responsibility for household care, in a manner that reinforces longer-term shifts in sociocultural expectations around sharing unwaged care work at home and a greater societal acceptance of female breadwinner households. In addition to these drivers, commentators have also highlighted the work of third-sector advocacy organizations (e.g. *Working Families* and *Fatherhood Institute*) and a greater range of policy entitlements in promoting increased male uptake of care alongside paid employment (Fox et al., 2009; O’Brien et al., 2007).

While in policy terms the United Kingdom has been viewed as lagging behind Scandinavian countries in terms of support for working parents, developments have occurred over the last decade. Legislation introduced paternity leave for the first time in 2003, with 74% of fathers currently making use of their statutory entitlement (Moss, 2013). In addition, access to ‘shared parental leave’ is now available for fathers (whose child was due to be born on or after the 5th April 2015). These reforms give

greater acknowledgement to fathers' caring role. Mothers will have to take at least 2 weeks of leave after birth but the remainder of the 50 weeks available for parental leave can now be shared between mothers and fathers, including the option of having both parents at home together and to 'mix and match' by taking leave in turns (BIS, 2013). However, the decision not to include a 'daddy quota' specifically for the use of fathers, which was originally in the proposals and which is common in Scandinavia, has been criticized as a significant omission that will limit the impact of the new measures (Moss et al., 2012). In addition, both parents have a right to request flexible working – though there is no requirement for employers to agree, and this right only applies to parents of children aged 6 years or under (18 if the child is disabled). The extension of flexible working rights in 2014 slightly strengthened the obligation of employers with a new duty to deal with requests in a 'reasonable manner' and within a 'reasonable' period of time, potentially enabling greater numbers of men in the United Kingdom to adopt 'non-standard' work-care orientations.

Research from the United States has identified a subgroup of 'superdads' (Kaufman, 2013) who are radically altering their work arrangements in order to perform a much greater childcare role. Other research suggests that even non-voluntary changes to work patterns which result in men spending more time in the home can lead to greater participation in everyday childcare (Halford, 2006). However, despite these trends there remains a lag in male uptake of care which is stark if measured against mothers' increased contribution to paid employment over recent decades (Perrons et al., 2010b; also Lewis and Campbell, 2007). This may partly be due to a lack of sensitivity over differences between groups of fathers with men in the least economically secure positions typically the *most* constrained by paid work in taking on greater levels of childcare responsibility (see also O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003). In contrast to higher earning fathers, lower-earning men are often not fully remunerated for ordinary paternity leave by their employers and so often cannot afford to spend as much time with their partners and babies when they become fathers (O'Brien

et al., 2007; c.f. Braun et al., 2011). They are also less likely to be able to access job-protected leave (such as through a career break scheme). Research also suggests that many lower-earning men are not aware of their rights to request family-friendly working practices including part-time and flexi-work as well as permission to work from home where possible (Camp, 2004; see also Connolly et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, more equitable gender divisions of childcare and domestic labour may emerge among some lower-income groups due to partners rotating in and out of paid work and adjusting their responsibility for care accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

Reinforcing the patterns of uneven change identified above, we also highlight the role of place and localized geographies of recession and recovery (see Coe and Jones, 2010) in differently mediating men's contemporary work-care transitions and the outcomes of policy intervention. Three major recessions have affected the UK economy since the 1970s: 1979–82, 1990–92 and 2008–09. The recession of 1979–82 was largely felt by those working in the traditional male sectors of manufacturing and heavy industry – epitomized by the wholesale closure of the mining industry – and had dramatic regional variation in its impact, with the North of England and South Wales especially affected (Cooke, 1982; Hudson, 1989). Studies of male employment conducted at this time emphasized its huge negative impact on men and their families, both financial and psychological (Gosling et al., 1994). However, for working-class adult men in these locations, there was no meaningful alternative to paid work for their sense of identity and those men that did take on housework and childcare while their female partners went out to work did not embrace the label of 'househusband' or SAHF. As such, the radical restructuring of the labour market in this period did not lead to a wholesale rethinking of the organization of gender roles in relation to paid work (Morris, 1990). While general societal perceptions of fatherhood and male caring have changed substantially since then (Dermott, 2008) – broadening the range of household responses to everyday challenges of reconciling paid work, family and care in ways which do not necessarily fall back on segregated gendered work/

care roles – geographical research has also highlighted persistent place-based variations in acceptable forms of working-class masculinity and gender-coded work/care norms (e.g. Fagan, 2001; McDowell, 2003).<sup>15</sup>

Based on studies of gender care shifts in earlier UK recessions (e.g. Massey, 1984; McDowell, 1991; Morris, 1990; Rubery, 1988), we suggest that there exists a much wider diversity of male work-care orientations than is currently captured in secondary data sets (see also Kramer et al., 2013). As a function of entrenched social and cultural expectations for men to engage in the labour market, alongside the increased economic necessity to do so when possible, it may now be that larger numbers of fathers are combining work and family care in various ways which do not rely on a long-term break from the labour market but nevertheless entail the doing of and responsibility for significant amounts of childcare.

### **Regendering work/care: Expanding the research agenda**

Much work remains to be done to explore the lived experiences of men at different stages of the transition between paid work outside the home and unpaid care work within the home. These transitions include, but are not limited to, from full-time work to reduced hours and shared childcare; from dual earner to SAHF; and from at-home father to re-entry to the formal labour market ('male returners'). We also need to understand how the contemporary regendering of care in the United Kingdom is *sustained* in practice (in other words, what prompts SAHFs to maintain an increased responsibility for childcare in the longer term as the United Kingdom moves from a period of economic crisis to one of recovery and growth), how policy interventions at different scales can prevent and/or facilitate men taking on a greater share of childcare responsibilities, and how experiences of male primary caring are shaped by different dimensions of social identity such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and/or religion. In this section, we delineate two key avenues for future research that emerge from this article and highlight how these can help to advance

understandings of how Waged work and care work relate to each other.

### ***Repositioning the mainstream work–life balance agenda***

Despite an expansive cross-disciplinary research literature on work–life balance in industrialized countries, our review of the literature suggests that the majority of studies to date are concerned with how to support flexible employment for women (Burnett et al., 2010; Gattrell and Cooper, 2008; Perrons et al., 2010a). Indeed, scholars have noted how family-friendly policies introduced to address the 'time famine' faced by parents with young children (Bruegel and Gray, 2005:167) tend to define work–life balance as a concern of women (Ransome, 2008), with men portrayed as merely 'shadowy figures' (Pocock et al., 2008: 26). Far less is known vis-à-vis the work–life balance agenda about 'reciprocal change' among men (Gambles et al., 2006): Specifically *how* to support men who are 'going against the grain' (Ranson, 2010) in assuming a greater proportion of childcare (see also EHRC, 2009). More needs to be known about barriers to male uptake of care as well as the practical means for overcoming those barriers at common points of transition between paid work outside the home and unpaid care work within the home. More also needs to be known about different types of employer-provided work–life balance arrangements – as part of a broader nexus of organizational support arrangements for male primary caregivers – that are relevant to the needs and preferences of fathers and their families at different stages of work/care transition. Such research would help increase understanding about how differently gendered household strategies of 'micro' flexibility (Dermott, 2011) allow families to reconcile competing work/care demands.

### ***Documenting the activities of male-dedicated 'work-care intermediaries'***

In seeking to understand how a progressive regendering of care might be facilitated in practice, it is also imperative that future research engage with the establishment, operation and outcomes of a range of

male-dedicated work-care intermediaries whose activities remain largely under-researched. We argue that relative neglect of these organizations within the work–life balance literature emerges from a narrow analytical focus on employer-provided work–life balance arrangements (see also O’Connor, 2005). While effectively rendered invisible by analyses delimited at the firm scale, these *extra* firm intermediaries offer additional means of building and sustaining male primary caregiving through networks of peer-to-peer support, provision of advice on policy entitlements at various stages of the transition between paid employment and unpaid caring work, and guidance on the practical means of reconciling the responsibilities of work and family upon returning to the labour market. Thus, in addition to the efforts of national-level organizations such as *Working Families* and *The Fatherhood Institute* who work with employers and carers to introduce more flexible models of employment and lobby policymakers on behalf of SAHFs, we also need to analyse the male work-care support arrangements provided by the growing number of SAHF online forums (e.g. [homedad.org.uk](http://homedad.org.uk) and [dadstayshome.com](http://dadstayshome.com)), voluntary organizations, community groups, sports clubs and religious organizations operating at a range of spatial scales to support male primary caregivers in different ways.

Future geographical research needs to explore the functional and organizational diversity of these male-dedicated work-care intermediaries in different urban contexts of economic crisis and recovery, and the everyday lived experiences of using (or not using) those intermediaries by men from different social groups and at different stages of the transition between full-time paid work outside the home and majority unpaid care within the home. This alternative *extra* firm focus is especially important in the aftermath of recession as some employers seek to scale back work–life balance provision in pursuit of short-term cost savings. In short, we need to situate employer-provided work–life balance arrangements for working fathers as part of a broader nexus of organizational provisions targeting men with different work-care orientations.

These two proposals suggest where best to focus attention that has been thus far neglected; on fathers

who have transitioned between different care work combinations and on the intermediaries who may be influential in supporting or undermining paid and unpaid working arrangements that go ‘against the grain’. We suggest that developing a future research agenda, it is important to think about what this would look like methodologically. Formal labour statistics may fail to capture increased diversity in work-care arrangements since they are intended to register engagement in economic activity *per se* rather than primary caregiving status which may be combined with some element of paid work as has been recorded in previous studies (Table 2). This detailed mapping of work-care patterns is especially important when attempting to capture change over time. In addition, in placing centre stage both the rationale for changes in practices and the experiences of them, we advocate the value of methods that can get at motivations and details of the everyday. Taken together we therefore would argue for ongoing value of interview-based methods which allow fathers (and their partners) to give accounts of their work-care trajectories but also that it is the fine-grained variations that occur over time, offered by qualitative longitudinal accounts, that should become an important research tool.

### **Conclusion: Exposing the diversity of contemporary male work/care orientations**

Fatherhood has, since the 1990s, ‘become a familiar part of the social research landscape on gender relations, employment and family life’ (Doucet, 2004:103). Yet continued academic concentration on the ‘stalled revolution’ (Hochschild, 1989) and stress on men’s lack of equal participation in housework and childcare has, paradoxically, fostered an absence of attention to households where men are taking primary responsibility for social reproduction. In this article, we have sought to address the ongoing knowledge gap that exists around shifting patterns of male work/care, by also exploring the rise of SAHFs in relation to recessionary labour market change and subsequent period of austerity welfare, and their combined role in (re)shaping the

household decision-making processes which transform gender unequal divisions of care. Previous work has suggested that to understand fully the socio-spatial dimensions of fathering, we need to move beyond the oversimplified, oppositional categorizations of male caring evident within policy and media portrayals of ‘caring hands-on fathers’ versus ‘absent fathers’ (Braun et al., 2011; Lewis, 2002). Likewise, the need to move away from conceptualizations of the regendering of care premised on simple ‘role reversal’ (see e.g. Hakim, 1996), which are anyway less viable now, given the decline in jobs which pay a family wage and significant changes in welfare policy.

Within this framework, we identify a series of possibilities for future research, as scholars seek to extend the dominant focus of the male work/care literature from the North American and Scandinavian contexts to the UK context and to explore the ways in which labour market changes in the aftermath of recession inform household decision-making around male care. An in-depth interview-based work might explore what these emerging work/care configurations in the United Kingdom mean for men’s sense of self, given widespread associations between full-time employment and socially acceptable forms of working-class masculinity (see e.g. McDowell, 2003). Likewise, the ways in which male primary caring differently experienced by the partners of these men, in ways consistent with and/or divergent from the partners of SAHFs as documented in earlier studies in the United States and Scandinavia, and how does male primary caring intersect with other axes of men’s identities. And, as communities differently rebound from the effects of recession, longitudinal analyses need to explore the longevity of new patterns of male primary caregiving prompted by recessionary male unemployment and long-run spatial variations in the future operation and outcomes of male primary caregiving (and in relation to future recessions).

In grappling with these complex issues, previous work makes clear that we need to avoid using a ‘maternal lens’ to view and understand male caring (Dermott, 2006; Doucet, 2004). Instead, we should seek to expose the contemporary diversity of male

work-care orientations and identities under new welfare models. This work should also include consideration of the social class differentials that shape men’s work-care orientations (Braun et al., 2011; c.f. Ball et al., 2004; Vincent et al., 2011), as well as the potential importance of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and/or religion in fathering practices, and geographical variation across different localities and scales through the use of fine-grained intra-urban studies and regional comparisons. It is also crucial that future work explores the temporal evolution of male work/care through longitudinal research (indeed, across multiple recessionary periods), in a manner that remains relatively underdeveloped in the male work/care literature. Indeed, there may be a generational effect in the uptake of male caregiving roles that warrants further investigation through co-production of research with fathers and their fathers (see Sundström, 2002). Such research would serve to broaden current typologies of male caregivers while at the same time expanding the evidence base to better inform policy-making and to improve third-sector campaign strategies for change.

In the aftermath of the UK recession and subsequent period of austerity, the practical and organizational means for increasing male uptake of household socially reproductive care work, and hence for reducing the majority burden of care that many women continue to juggle with paid employment, is critical to the future of work, family and new household dynamics. Though changes are afoot, there remains ‘a lack of alternatives to conceptualise possible understandings of being and doing fatherhood’ (Braun et al., 2011). We have argued that the economic downturn, despite its negative effects, may also have opened up the possibility for more progressive arrangements of work and care. Exploring the challenges and opportunities afforded by the recession in fostering more gender-equitable divisions of care forces us to re-examine existing models of how care and work can be combined. The research agenda we outline is vital for the formulation of properly informed UK policies and third-sector interventions, alongside more effective employer-provided work-care support arrangements, in pursuit of improved labour

market gender equity; improved quality of life for workers and their families and socially sustainable economic growth in the post-recessionary period. Crucially, as Rosemary Crompton argues, ‘gender equity is only likely to be achieved if... men become more “like women”, combining the work of both employment and caregiving in their day to day lives’ (2006: 17).

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### Notes

1. In other words, despite a rise in the numbers of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs), it continues to be the case that women are less frequently in a position to choose either to do less social reproduction or to persuade and/or expect their men partners to do more of it (and here we gratefully acknowledge one of our reviewers for pushing this point).
2. Official statistics refer to males and females, while the research literature also employs the terms men/women and masculine/feminine. When citing empirical research herein we retain the terminology used in those studies (which obviously differs).
3. Caring work and emotional labour are also undervalued as a form of wage labour.
4. The term work–life balance emerges from growing concerns around the difficulties of successfully managing a job alongside care for dependents, friendships, communities, personal life interests and leisure (Bunting, 2005; Lewis et al., 2003). At the

individual level, work–life balance has been variously defined as ‘the absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands’ (Greenblatt, 2002: 179), or ‘the extent to which individuals are equally involved in – and equally satisfied with – their work role and family role’ (Greenhaus and Singh, 2003: 2). Gambles et al. (2006) have summarized the problems of work–life ‘balance’ terminology, in terms of its implicit suggestion that work is somehow not part of life; its potentially undermining unpaid care work by implying it is just another part of the non-work domain; and its (false) implication of work and personal life as mutually exclusive (see Gregory and Milner, 2009). In response, a series of alternative work–life balance monikers includes work–life reconciliation, work–personal life integration, work–personal life harmonization and work–life articulation. However, the work–life balance term retains a useful currency among employers and policymakers (see James, 2014).

5. Women now account for over 50% of the US labour force for the first time in history (Boushey, 2009), with most employed mothers working full-time rather than part-time (Tomlinson, 2007).
6. In 2009, 22% of SAHF households in the United States were ones in which the husband chose not to work in order to care for home and family, compared with 1% in 1979 (Kramer et al., 2013: 18).
7. Cash for care

aims to encourage working parents to spend more time with their children... It leaves it up to the family to choose whether the mother or father, or either of them at all, should stay home with the child. All the Nordic countries have home care allowances in addition to a parental leave system. (Brandth and Kvanne, 2009: 178)

There is also some spatial unevenness in its provision: ‘in Finland and Norway, it is granted by the state and guarantees the right to return to work after the end of the period. In the other countries, it is granted by local authorities’ (Brandth and Kvanne, 2009: 178).

8. Beyond the United States, Canadian and Scandinavian contexts, a smaller body of work has also begun to document the nuanced experiences of SAHFs in other countries including Australia (Grbich, 1997) and Belgium (e.g. Merla, 2008).

9. Or do not engage in Waged work at all and do all the care work (Crompton, 1999).
  10. These terms are from the standard occupational classification scheme. ‘Protective’ includes police, fire and prison offices, ‘personal’ includes leisure and care roles and elementary is a wide-ranging category including agricultural and construction jobs.
  11. Reduced working hours may increase levels of economic insecurity for those on low wages rather than necessarily offering a welcome opportunity for workers to dedicate more time to other areas of their lives (Lautsch and Scully, 2007).
  12. This inducement results from the classification of primary carers as ‘secondary earners’ in the household calculation of working tax credit for dual earner families. This means that they are subject to a high marginal tax on their contribution to the household finances.
  13. For example, in addition to an ongoing need to document the lived experiences of male primary carers in the United Kingdom, more extensive empirical analysis is needed regarding the ethnic breakdown of male primary carers, and to determine what proportion are in gay or trans families.
  14. Although this more equitable arrangement may not be better for work–life balance and well-being.
  15. While we might also anticipate that ethnicity and religion may play a role in shaping the practices and identities of SAHFs, we do not have robust evidence as to how the extent and nature of the ‘racial economy’ constructs acceptable male parenting in the United Kingdom.
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