



"What's wrong with him then?" An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of becoming a stay-at-home father

Simon Rowbottom

“What’s wrong with him then?” An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of becoming a stay-at-home father

ABSTRACT

Pleck (1983) offers a theoretical viewpoint of gender roles that defines the dominant theoretical ‘gender role identity paradigm’ as problematic. Pleck’s alternative paradigm states that both conformity and nonconformity to gender roles will lead to negative psychological consequences conceptualized as discrepancy strain and dysfunction strain. Six men who have become stay-at-home fathers and therefore undergone a radical change of gender role were asked to explore their experiences during semi-structured interviews. The resultant transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999). Dominant superordinate themes underpin their experience of gender role discrepancy strain, and are shown to be critical in the process of successful adaptation of the self structure under these conditions. These themes: *socially induced strain from gender role discrepancy*; *direct familial validation of role change*, and *developing self through learned skills*, are discussed with reference to Pleck’s paradigm and other pertinent self-processes outlined in the relevant literature. Implications for social policy are considered.

KEY WORDS:	GENDER ROLE STRAIN	STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS	GENDER ROLE DISCREPANCY	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	GENDER ROLE DYSFUNCTION
------------	--------------------	----------------------	-------------------------	--	-------------------------

Introduction

The Gender Role Strain Paradigm

In his book *The Myth of Masculinity* (1983), social psychologist Joseph Pleck presented evidence that a single theoretical model had dominated gender research in psychology for a large part of its history. He coined the term *gender role identity paradigm* to sum up the overarching functionalist ideal that permeated much theoretical work on gender roles. Pleck pointed out that these models are suffused with the idea that “conformity to sex role norms is what promotes psychological adjustment,” (Connell, 1995, p.25) and “promoted the patriarchal bifurcation of society on the basis of stereotyped gender roles,” (Levant and Pollack, 1995, p.2). The gender role identity paradigm holds an intrinsic assumption that people possess an inherent psychological need to hold a gender role identity. Only by embracing a traditional gender role, can this need be entirely met. According to Pleck’s conception, the paradigm is therefore inherent in psychodynamic (Freud, 2004 - orig. 1930; Horney, 1932; Chodorow, 1978), behaviourist (Watson, 1913; Skinner, 1953; Epstein and Liverant, 1963), early cognitive (Piaget, 2002, orig. 1929; Kohlberg and Zigler, 1967) and evolutionary (Buss, 1995) perspectives on gender roles.

Pleck instead offered up a replacement paradigm: the gender role strain paradigm (1995). This model views socially ascribed gender roles as problematic both for those who conform to them and those who do not. He conceptualized specific theoretical psychological states that he framed as the negative results of the gender role strain paradigm; these include *gender role discrepancy* and *gender role dysfunction*. Gender role discrepancy is encompassed in the idea that not conforming to the expectations and norms associated with a specific gender role will result in low self-esteem and other negative consequences. Pleck viewed discrepancy strain as a *process* rather than an outcome, and asserted that “discrepancy strain seems particularly relevant to males,” (1995, p. 13). He stated that when strain occurs, men will not passively accept the strain imposed upon them, but will attempt to interpret it and make sense of its effects. He states that they may, “adapt to it by changing their behaviour, by changing their perception of gender role norms or disengaging from them, or by changing their reference group,” (1995, p.14). In this way, the experience of nonconformity to gender role expectation may have positive results, especially if men adapt their gender role norms and therefore do not suffer negative effects but benefit psychologically from the new role through increased familial participation.

Gender role dysfunction is the theoretical notion that even if traditional male role expectations are achieved, the characteristics that are exemplified by that role may have implicit negative effects. Pleck cites the example of the traditional masculine norm of low-level family participation as having possible negative consequences not only for the men in question, but also for others around them (1995).

Work following on from Pleck has attempted to provide models of how men may experience discrepancy strain. For example, Mahalik, Talmadge, Locke and Scott (2005) provide a model of how gender role norms may affect the level of discrepancy strain a man might experience. They state that “there are benefits and costs to men for enacting traditional and non-traditional masculine gender roles,” (2005, p.662)

and contend that it is men's relative position in conforming or non-conforming to the gender norms explicit in their culture that determines how they will experience a transgression of gender roles. This gender role norms model (Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Scott, Gottfried and Frietas, 2003) attempts to build on the gender role strain paradigm and define how gender role expectations are formed, maintained and interpreted. The model conceptualizes that conformity to *masculine* norms lay on a continuum ranging from extreme conformity to extreme nonconformity. A man's relative conformity to the norms pertaining to masculinity within his culture may therefore have a large role to play in how he interprets the transition to a non-typical gender role. However, despite these and other attempts to elucidate the processes involved in gender role discrepancy strain (see O'Neil, Good and Holmes, 1995, for an overview) none of these studies have given real insight into how men might *experience* the process. These studies have been mainly quantitative and have attempted to measure a man's level of conformity to masculine norms in order to understand the level of discrepancy strain. There is a dearth of both qualitative studies on this subject, and studies which offer an understanding of how the process may unfold. For example, although it is stated that increased family participation may hold in check the negative consequences caused by men experiencing gender role discrepancy strain, how these processes are interpreted and internalized by the men are not expanded upon. The present study hopes to gain insight into the experience of discrepancy strain and to that end has elected to seek an understanding of the discrepancy strain process undergone by stay-at-home fathers.

Rationale – Why Stay-at-Home Fathers?

Despite cultural and societal changes relating to the gender of caregivers over the past fifty years, the "practices around motherhood in the West remain grounded in assumptions of mothering as biologically determined, instinctive and natural," (Miller, 2005, p.64). This predominant essentialist viewpoint means that the role of primary caregiver is still normatively defined as belonging to the female gender role. However, in the last thirty years there has been a significant increase in the amount of men who have chosen to become the primary caregiver, thereby challenging the traditional gender role norms and expectations (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley and Scaringi, 2008). Doucet (2007) states that in Canada "stay-at-home fathers have increased 25% in the past ten years while stay-at-home mothers have decreased by approximately the same figure", (p.14) and reports that stay-at-home fathers make up 18% of all stay-at-home parents in the USA. In the UK, the Office of National Statistics showed that in 2007 there were 200,000 stay-at-home fathers in Great Britain – almost double the amount recorded in 1993 (Morrison, 2007). It seems pertinent to question, therefore: how do men experience the psychological discrepancy when they move away from a traditional male role and immerse themselves in one that has been traditionally viewed as women's work, i.e. that of nurturing and raising children (Smith, 1998)? Given that Pleck's gender role strain model suggests that non-conformity to a gender role will result in negative psychological effects, how do these men negotiate the gender role discrepancy strain they may experience and incorporate their new role into their understanding of their self and identity?

Very few studies on stay-at-home fathers have been undertaken. Although, studies have been conducted in the USA (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley and Scaringi, 2008),

Canada (Doucet, 2007) and Australia (Smith, 1998), qualitative studies in the UK are underrepresented in the literature. Guided by Pleck's gender role strain paradigm, this study seeks to comprehend the transitional experiences of men who choose to make this change. It utilises Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter IPA) to attempt to understand how men might interpret, experience and understand the transition to stay-at-home father.

Method

Participants

Four participants were recruited directly through the researcher's social network and the remaining two were accessed through a snowball method after being recommended for the study by those who had previously been interviewed. The study sought to utilize a purposive homogenous sample (Langdrige, 2007) in order that participants share the experience that is under investigation. In this instance, it was a pre-requisite of inclusion in the study that the participants should currently be stay-at-home fathers and have made the decision for pragmatic reasons (e.g. financial, to support a partner's career) rather than fulfilling a desire to stay and care for the children. The rationale behind this condition was to ensure that each participant experienced a *change* in their perceived gender role, rather than maintaining continuity of an existing form.

Table 1**Participant Demographics (Note: all names are pseudonyms)**

PARTICIPANT	AGE	AGE AND GENDER OF CHILDREN	PREVIOUS OCCUPATION	WIFE/PARTNER'S OCCUPATION
Alan	36	Boy (8), Girl (6)	Builder/Site Manager	Enterprise Account Manager
Brendan	44	Girl (9), Boy (6)	Policeman	HR Director
Charlie	46	Girl (13), Girl(11), Girl (9)	Salesman	Assistant teacher Head
Declan	48	Boy (3), Boy (4 months)	Tiler	Saleswoman
Eric	36	Boy (7), Boy (4)	Head of Internal Systems Services for large telecoms company	RAF Medical Officer
Fraser	38	Girl (8), Girl (4)	Management Consultant	Learning and Development Director

All participants were e-mailed a participant information sheet (Appendix A) that outlined the purpose of the study and made explicit their right to withdraw at any point. It also informed them that the research study had been cleared by Ethics Committee of the supervising university: Oxford Brookes. Upon agreeing to take part, all participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) that gave approval for interviews to be audio recorded and for anonymised quotes to be used.

Data Collection

In order to gather data pertaining to the topic under investigation, semi-structured interview schedules were developed. The originator of IPA, Jonathan Smith (1996a), states that “the vast majority of IPA studies have been conducted from semi-structured interviews and this form of data collection might be considered the exemplary one for this type of research,” (Smith, 2004, p.50). Whereas a structured interview is constructed in a manner conducive to eliciting responses falling within predetermined categories, the semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to

pursue pertinent or interesting facets of the topic in question that may arise out of the participant's experience. In this way, as Smith and Eatough (2007) state, "the participant is an active agent in shaping how the interview goes," (p. 42). The interviews were constructed according to the principles laid out for a biographic-narrative interpretive methodology (Wengraf, 2001; Appendix C). Each interview was divided into three subsessions. Subsession one comprised a single question that was designed to elicit a narrative from the participant relating to the experience in question. The question was conceptually focused on the relevant life-phase of the participant, (i.e. becoming a stay-at-home father). Subsession two was based around the narrative elicited in subsession one and attempted to draw out further narrative by asking questions derived from the participant's initial biographical discourse. In this way, the interviews were guided by the participant's phenomenological experience and remained rooted in his own personal perspective rather than having pre-conceived theoretical considerations imposed on them by the interviewer. Subsession three, however, was structured by the interviewer's concern and was rooted in theoretical issues related to gender role discrepancy. These "default questions" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 145) covered areas of interest to the interviewer, but were not necessarily always asked as the relevant areas were often covered in the previous subsessions.

Prior to embarking on the interviews, a pilot interview was carried out. This allowed a refinement of the pre-designed questions. Following the pilot, all reference to 'masculinity' was removed from subsession three as it was felt that it was possible participants may interpret this as a pejorative term when asked about how they view themselves as men. The interviews, each lasting between 40 and 50 minutes were carried out in quiet environments (participants' homes in four instances, cafes in two) by the same interviewer. They were audio recorded using a digital recorder and these recordings were later transcribed verbatim in order to be analysed.

Data Analysis

The resultant transcripts were analysed according to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis laid out in Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999). IPA is a qualitative research approach with emphasis on the experiential. It is interpretative in that it is an attempt by the researcher to make sense of the experience that is being reported to them by the participant. In this sense, it can be said to be "double hermeneutic," (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.3) as it is the process of the researcher attempting to make sense of the participant's attempt to make sense of their own experience. The phenomenological aspect of IPA resides in the philosophical roots of the study of experience. Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009) point out that IPA's phenomenological methodology is informed by the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre who have a focus on "understanding the perspectival directedness of our involvement in the lived world," (p.21). IPA is also an idiographic approach, which is in direct contrast to much psychological research which tends to be nomothetic and therefore attempts to extrapolate research findings to the general population. Idiography concentrates on the particular, rather than the general, and in the case of IPA relates to how an event is experienced by a *particular* participant in a *particular* situation. For this reason, a sample size of between four and ten participants is usually suggested by adherents of the methodology (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

The analytic aspect of IPA requires a deep engagement with the transcripts of the interviews. The researcher attempts to discover and identify emergent themes that arise from each participant's unique data. Each transcript is analysed in turn, with the researcher initially outlining and noting down significant or interesting points (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999). These preliminary notes are then used to draw together emergent themes. These themes are then grouped together in a manner that is both coherent and theoretically relevant. The process is repeated for every participant in the study and once a complete group of emergent themes are established, links are drawn between the emergent themes for each participant so that overarching and superordinate themes can be identified and presented. This presentation of themes is accompanied by a selection of direct quotes from the participants in order that the reliability and validity of the interpretations can be assessed (Smith, 1996b). The revealed themes are not presented in their entirety. Throughout the process, the themes are refined, with irrelevant themes being discarded. What is presented here is a selection of superordinate themes and their subthemes that the researcher feels are directly relevant to the issue under examination. Space considerations mean that each subtheme is illustrated by only a small number of edited examples. Complete examples and evidential quotes for all relevant participants are contained in Appendix D.

Analysis and Findings

The table below presents the superordinate themes along with their accompanying emergent themes. Through a discussion of these themes it will become apparent that challenge, conflict and attempted resolution of self for these participants is deeply rooted in the social environment.

Table 2
Superordinate themes and accompanying emergent subthemes.

SUPERORDINATE THEME	EMERGENT THEME	PARTICIPANT					
		ALAN	BRENDAN	CHARLIE	DECLAN	ERIC	FRASER
SOCIALLY INDUCED STRAIN FROM GENDER ROLE DISCREPANCY	Social Criticism	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Social Isolation		7	8	9	10	11
DIRECT FAMILIAL VALIDATION OF ROLE CHANGE	Personal achievement rooted in children	12	13	14		15	16
	Validation through interaction with children	17	18	19	20	21	22
DEVELOPING SELF THROUGH LEARNED SKILLS	New nurturing skills are learned	23	24		25	26	27
	Extant organisational skills are used		28		29	30	31

(NB. Evidentiary quotations for each participant are listed in Appendix D along with the subsection of the interview they are derived from and the corresponding transcribed line numbers)

Socially Included Induced Strain from Gender Role Discrepancy

This was found to be a constant overarching theme throughout many of the participants' experiences. Their interpretations were suffused with social challenges regarding the social expectations of what men usually do. The inability of others in the social realm to accept the incongruent nature of the participants' role change leads to behaviours and sanctions which mean the stay-at-home fathers are challenged and ostracised on a variety of fronts.

Social Criticism

Participants discussed the experience of social comparison in terms of how others compared their new role with what they felt they *ought* to be doing. Alan discusses how the gender role change is viewed negatively by other males:

"My two best mates are the only people that have said to me 'Alan, for Christ's sake go back to work. What're you doing? You know?'"

Charlie receives the same treatment from women. The social environment in which he is subjected to these social sanctions is not one that is directly related to his role as a primary caregiver. His quote demonstrates the pervasive nature of sanctions for transgressing gender roles, as it shows that these negative reactions extend into other domains – not necessarily those directly connected to the role of caregiver:

“I was shelf stacking evenings, and that is primarily a stay at home mum role, so I was working with loads of stay at home mums. And I was treated almost like an outsider there as well.”

In the following extract, Fraser outlines how directed and overt the repercussions of deviating from gender role norms can be. He also describes in this quote an attempt to reassert his credibility. However this is expressed as pride in something he *once* did, rather than the new gender role.

“I was saying I was a house daddy and I had these people laughing at me. And I was like going ‘Do you know what I did?’ Pushed my chest out, trying to create some kind of, you know, there is credibility to me actually.”

Charlie provides a concrete example in which indirect sanctions (exclusion) and direct sanctions (name-calling) are demonstrated. This quote also demonstrates the ramifications of the social condemnation of the role change, in that it is Charlie's *children* who suffer for the role transgression. The fact that the name-calling is perpetrated by children demonstrates that gender norms are internalized at an early age and accepting these norms causes children to perform the punitive sanctions Charlie discusses:

“Our kids have been excluded from parties. I’ve been called names in the playground by children. It’s been quite unpleasant.”

Charlie also feels that much of the criticism derives from the new social environment and is couched in terms of a direct comparison with those significant males who remain in gender appropriate roles. The implication here is that acceptance and psychological stability reside in remaining in non-transgressive gender roles:

“If you’re not in the City earning a six figure salary there, you’re not accepted, you know, like a lot of these husbands were at the time. You know - “well what’s wrong with him then if he’s not out working?”

The criticism that Declan receives is overt, pointed and rooted in gender norms that are connected to the role of the traditional working male. The assumption here is that it is not a ‘proper’ role for a male to undertake – that the worth of primary caregiver derives not from its inherent nature, but from the gender of the person who undertakes it. It would be difficult to imagine the following criticism that Declan receives being levelled at a woman who stays at home in order to be the primary caregiver to young children:

“People are quite dismissive of it, ‘it’s not a real job, what are you doing, it’s not a proper job.’ I’ve had that comment, yeah. Saying ‘why don’t you get a job?’”

This criticism has a personal impact on these men, to the extent that they begin to question their own place in society. As Fraser reflects on a diffuse and general level of criticism, he also reflects on its source, unsure of the root of the tension he feels. Such is the pernicious effect of the social criticism that Fraser is unsure whether the personal strain he feels is a result how he views himself, rather than as a result of how others see him, and act towards him:

“I felt like a victim of it. I really felt like at the harsh end of society’s stick, where house daddies weren’t necessarily accepted... I think, was that more to do with me and how I saw myself, or was that to do with society?”

Social Isolation

The social criticism outlined above is predominantly verbal. The events and situations that the participants describe are those in which the social criticism is vocalised and overt. However, other forms of social sanction are manifested in behaviour that may not be directly aimed towards the participant but may cause them to feel isolated through adherence to gender specific social norms. This subtheme was particularly resonant for Charlie, who recounted a specific incident where he felt the isolation imposed upon him was related to the discrepancy in his gender role:

“There was loads of mums coming out of the classroom... saying ‘Oh yeah, that’s a good idea. You can count me in, yeah, I’ll be there.’ And they just walked past me... and at lunch time I was walking home across the recreation ground, and they were all gathered...and I was the only one that was excluded.”

Fraser discusses an incident in which parental roles and gender roles are blurred, and which resulted in social isolation:

“One of the ladies... was talking quite openly and handing out invites for the next mother/toddler group meeting... she didn’t speak to me, and I sort of joked with her ‘Are all parents allowed, or is it just blokes you’re against?’ And she openly said ‘I’m not sure how appropriate it is. Because it’s a ladies’ club, it’s a women’s club. We talk about ladies’ things’. And I suppose if you put it that way - that it’s a women’s club - then OK I get that. But... I’d like to be there, you know... and I remember thinking at the time they ought to set up a daddies’ group or something.”

Charlie also relates his sense of social isolation to others who are in social environments where gender discrepancy may lead to exclusion, such as the school playground:

"It's just not the way socially that things are done... at the primary school... there's a couple of dads, and they are always lone figures dotted around the playground and there are these strong rings of steel these women, you know, these little cliquey groups, and it's very, very difficult for blokes to break into that."

Eric points out that social isolation is a risk factor for any new parent, but discusses the additional difficulties that a gender role transition can pose.

"You have to make sure that you have a network of friends that you can go and see. And that's the same for women, but maybe men don't like to admit it, and maybe the problem is that it's typically other women, so you have to find a group of women, but I think you'd find it very difficult if you were a man being a house husband and not having the support network around you. You need that otherwise, in anything, you cannot live in isolation."

Declan comments on the psychological effects that this social isolation caused:

"It became quite lonely because you've got nobody else to speak to. You know, apart from going into shops and asking 'where's this, where's that', there wasn't anybody to sit down with."

Here, the processes that cause Pleck's 'negative psychological effects' can be seen at work. The negative impact that social isolation has on a sense of self can cause feelings of loneliness and lowered self-esteem. The stay-at-home father who has chosen to transgress gender role boundaries finds himself consistently challenged, isolated and excluded by the social world beyond the immediate family unit. It could be assumed that facing these challenges, the participants' immediate reaction would be to return to their old roles, thereby reducing any sense of discrepancy strain. This, however, is not an option for these men, who have taken on these roles not through choice but through pragmatic considerations. Under these circumstances, is there anything that these men can draw on to combat the social attacks on their self-esteem and create a resilient sense of self based on their new rather than old gender role?

Direct Familial Validation of role change

This superordinate theme reveals the processes by which the family environment allows the men to build a positive sense of self through their interactions with their immediate family, especially the children to whom they have become primary caregiver.

Personal achievement rooted in children

Throughout this subtheme, participants related a sense of achievement that was directly rooted in the daily interaction with their children. Their participation in their children's lives became even more salient under the conditions of social isolation that

were previously outlined. There was evidence that a sense of achievement previously found only in the goal-directed drive towards achievement resident in their previous working roles had been displaced and found new roots in the achievements of their children's development. This is from Eric:

"My son's gone from being a two year old who couldn't write and read to now being a four year old who can do all those things. He's grown into a proper person, so... I've achieved something with him."

Alan relates his sense of satisfaction at being able to participate in his children's education:

"I can now sit down with them, we can do it formally, in the conservatory together, or we can do it while we are driving along in the car to the clubs, teaching my children how to tell the time, or the difference between 25 and 35 and it must be what teachers get when they are teaching, but it's a fantastic feeling knowing that you've helped your kids in their education. It really is."

The above quote demonstrates how Alan utilises the interaction with his children to carve a new sense of self and identity. In this context, Alan views himself as an educator, deriving satisfaction and an enhanced sense of self-esteem from the new role. Removed from the negative context of the social environment the relationship between Alan and his children is discussed in terms of mutual growth and development. Other participants' accounts described how this sense of personal achievement they felt in taking an active part in their children's development extended into the wider social world, rather than just the immediate family context. For Brendan, the achievements in his children that he is most proud of are those that reflect his own standards and aspirations of interpersonal behaviour. His sense of self-esteem with regard to the role he has taken on derives from the behaviour of his children:

"For people to say 'I've just got to say – your children were really lovely and very polite'. That is my sense of achievement."

The above quotes give examples of how the developmental achievements of their children provide the stay-at-home fathers with positive psychological benefits. Their children's behaviour provides a concrete sense of self-worth. However, specific behaviours are not always necessary in order to bring about positive psychological effects that negate the gender discrepancy strain that the men may suffer. The following theme demonstrates how their children's perceptions of their role as both normal and desirable, offers the participants valuable validation and offers an opportunity to construct a robust sense of self in the face of isolation and criticism.

Validation through interaction with children

Charlie illustrates the stark dichotomy that exists between the gender role discrepancy strain that is evident in a wider social context and the fact that his children accept his new role without reservation:

“Not on one occasion did they say to me ‘Why are you the only dad here?’ Cos they just accepted it, it was part of their upbringing. They just see things through their own eyes, don’t they?”

This acceptance undoubtedly provides strength and resolution in the face of external criticisms. It allows Charlie to seek refuge in the interpersonal relationship with his children and build a sense of self-esteem that is not reliant on the external conditions imposed by those who view the gender role change as normatively deviant. For Declan too, there are positive effects inherent in being with his children. For him however, these reside in the comparison between his relationship with his son, and the relationship that he had with his own father:

“I’m glad I had that chance actually, to bond with my son. I mean my Dad, me and my Dad, we never bonded at all really, and I only realised how much we didn’t bond when I started with my son, because actually he just worked all the time.”

Here, Pleck’s *dysfunction strain* is evidenced, in that the low-level familial participation that Declan experienced with his own father has been negatively framed in terms of ‘non-bonding’. In contrast, Declan views the chance he has had to bond with his own son as an *opportunity* and a validation of his decision to stay at home and undertake the role of primary caregiver. This positive bonding process takes place within the private family arena and therefore is not subject to wider social criticism. Brendan gives an example of how, removed from the normative cultural environment, his role is viewed as natural by his daughter:

“She just had this idea that well, the Mums go out to work and the Dads don’t. It was a real moment and I thought, ‘that’s just amazing. In your little world, Mums go out to work.’”

There is a contrast for Brendan, in that he is aware that in the wider social context his role is viewed as ‘unnatural’, and yet his daughter does not question the reality that has been created by their personal interaction together. In effect, a new normative environment has been created within the immediate familial arena which provides acceptance and validation for the role and acts as a buffer against the social criticism that may cause Brendan to question his role and therefore impact upon his sense of self. And yet, the participants share awareness that this new normative environment – one that provides acceptance and validation – is a construct that exists only between themselves and their family. They remain aware of the disparity that exists between their private familial norms and those of society in general. This awareness becomes evident when participants discuss their children’s perceptions of the role change. Here, Alan relates how he hopes his children will come to view his role change and the motivations that drove it.

“I’m hoping that when they’re, say, in their twenties or even in their thirties, it’ll be then that they’ll turn around and go ‘Hey, do you know what my Dad did?’ You know, ‘this is what my Dad did. I can’t believe what he did. That’s amazing. And he did it for me.’

The underlying message is that Alan realises that there will be a time in the future when his children will encounter and internalise the societal norms that dictate that fathers are not primary caregivers. This reveals his unconscious knowledge of the general perception of his new role as 'unnatural'. There is tension here between the current 'natural' situation in which his children's conception of his role as natural and desirable, and the impending awareness that one day his children may become aware of his role transgression. Given strength by his children's current acceptance, Alan's perception of their future opinions are hopeful and positive. However, Alan later tempers this optimism with concerns about how the negative effects his role transgression may have on the children. In this quote, Alan is specific about the fears that assail him, which are based in the social criticism evident in the first superordinate theme. The exclusion and behavioural costs he feels his children may suffer are caused by the knowledge that sanctions are exacted for deviation from gender role norms.

"They might feel a little bit awkward about it... "Oh, my dad doesn't work," you know, it could almost be a point for being teased in the playground."

The above extracts reveal that despite the validation that the participants receive from their children there is a constant awareness that their behaviour is not normative. The men receive positive psychological benefits such as improved self-esteem from being with their children and enacting their primary caregiver role, but their psychological well-being is constantly under attack from the normative messages in the environment that define their new role as 'unnatural'. In seeking to protect themselves from this onslaught and build a robust sense of self, the participants found a source of strength in the interactions with their children. In the next superordinate theme '*developing self through learned skills*' the participants reveal how they combat the negative psychological consequences that arise from the awareness of social criticism by framing their experience as one of development and growth.

Developing self through learned skills

The criticisms outlined in the first superordinate theme hold an inherent assumption that the experience of the stay-at-home father will be retrograde. Tied up in these criticisms is a belief that this is a 'backward step' for the men choosing to make this change. However, in the face of these criticisms, it becomes clear that the men do not accept this belief and instead view the experience of becoming a stay-at-home father as one of development of self achieved through an integration of utilising existing skills and learning new ones. This theme of skills appears to be anchored in the discourse of work of the participants' previous gendered roles as working men. The view that nurturing and caregiving contain 'skills' to be learned is the polar opposite of the essentialist viewpoint that 'mothering' is instinctive and natural. This 'skills' discourse of caregiving views it instead as a set of practices that are gained temporally and with experience.

New Nurturing Skills are Learned

Alan views the necessary skills for caregiving as developing from social interaction rather than being rooted in an essentialist viewpoint of innate caring abilities. He

outlines how he feels he has developed during his time as a stay-at-home father and reveals that he views his development in relational terms, reflecting how he has become attuned to his children's needs:

"I remember the first six weeks that I had with them, on holiday. By the end of it I was getting a bit stressed out... The last one I've had, I didn't want them to go back to school. I just loved being with them. So yeah, I'm probably getting better at it, I enjoy being with them more, I can, you know, I'm learning their needs as well... so, it's a learning curve for me, and it's been a learning curve for the kids."

The theme here is one of abilities that are developed and honed and stem from the particular demands of being a primary caregiver. Declan specifically defines *patience* as a necessary skill that is prompted by the environmental factors surrounding the role.

"You learn to be a bit more patient. It's a learnt skill. It's one you've definitely got to have to be a stay at home parent, I think."

Eric provides an example of how the description of learned nurturing skills is often rooted in the discourse of work, an arena that the men are familiar with. He discusses how the particular demands of the caregiver role require a new set of nurturing skills that were not previously necessary in his working role:

"You can't fire your kids. So if they annoy you or you annoy them, you've still got to crack on, so I think you do become a bit more caring. But I think you just have to be overall softer. You can be a hardnosed person at work during the day, but you can't be like that with the kids."

The above examples reveal how the male participants do not appear to conform to the essentialist viewpoint of caregiving that is 'innate' and 'instinctive' but instead these skills as developed within the context of the environment. In this way, the negative psychological effects that come from the role change are combated by an awareness of a growing sense of self as someone with a wider skill-set. This enhanced sense of self derives from the knowledge that far from being a retrograde step, becoming a stay-at-home father has given them skills beyond other men. However, the distinction between 'old' skills and 'new' is not clear-cut. As revealed in the next subtheme, this sense of development through skills also encompasses skills that were already in existence that have been brought to bear on the new gendered role.

Extant Organisational Skills

The discourse of a working role is also evident in this subtheme, where it appears that the new gender role is being described in terms that relate to skills that were developed in a previous environment. Here, the concept of *organisation* is dominant. In discussing it, Eric specifically refers to the transference of skills,

exemplifying how skills that have been traditionally conceptualized and socialized as male can be incorporated into a role that is typically viewed as feminine.

“You can take your organisational skills across, if you are good at organising. What are we going to do today? Let’s do this – you know, planning, organising.”

Brendan not only refers to his organisational skills, but also discusses what he views as the gendered dichotomous nature of organisation in general:

“I had a sort of male chauvinistic approach to it, really, in that I did think to myself ‘I’m sure women make a lot of this bringing up a child, because I feel they are quite disorganised.’ (Laughs)... I genuinely had a feeling that you can organise things a lot better.”

Fraser extends this organisational discourse into a fully blown metaphor that corresponds to his working role.

“I’m the house daddy, in the sense that I manage the house now... I suppose we run it like a business.”

This discourse of work and skills reveals how participants have attempted to make sense of what they *do* in terms of what they have *done*. It is possible that these employed descriptions of their new environment, couched in the terms that they understood their old one, are a way to describe their development of self. This integration of new and extant skills becomes the basis for an enhanced sense of self that guards against the negative psychological consequences the outside social world creates. When aspects of self and identity are threatened by the new role, the familiar environment of extant skills and their pertaining discourse may offer stability in an uncertain world. Learned skills too may offer a defence by giving the stay-at-home father a sense of development and growth.

Discussion

As was evidenced by the first superordinate theme (*socially induced strain from gender role discrepancy*) the attacks on stay-at-home fathers are largely social and operate interpersonally. Yet, it is so consistent an onslaught that it inevitably leads to the intrapersonal questioning of their role change. In the light of Pleck’s contention that gender role discrepancy will result in negative psychological consequences, it is easy to see how the subthemes of social criticism and social isolation can represent causal factors in these negative consequences. Both isolation and criticism are likely to result in lowered self-esteem, which has been viewed as a “vital human need” (Greenberg, Soloman, Pyszczynski, Rosenblatt, Burling, Lyon, et al, 1999, p.105). Research findings indicate that a low level of self-esteem is related to depression, anxiety and stress (Leary, Tambor, Terdal and Downs, 1999.) However, these deleterious effects appear to have been successfully combated by positive effects evident in the superordinate theme, *‘direct familial validation of the role change.’* Increased family participation provides sufficient strength and resilience to enable the men to cope in the face of sustained social criticism and isolation. The conception of their new role as providing an environment for learning new skills and utilising older

valuable ones (*developing self through learned skills*), gives the men a sense of growth and development that also protects against negative psychological forces. One explanation for this may come from the theoretical notion of gender role strain *dysfunction*. This concept, outlined by Pleck as part of the gender role strain paradigm, contends that the characteristics exemplified by the traditional male role may have implicit negative effects. The example of low-level family participation is given as an example of a traditional male role expectation that may have these psychological effects. Therefore, the converse may well be true. The present study has outlined the processes whereby this enhanced familial participation leads to a defence of the self against negative effects, as the superordinate themes of '*direct familial validation of role change*' and '*developing self through learned skills*' describe the positive self-processes that are involved in Pleck's notion of the process of gender role discrepancy strain. There is also resonance with the work of Mahalik et al (2003), which stated the importance of norms in how men might interpret the transition to a non-typical gender role. The direct familial arena can be seen here as creating a new normative environment in which the men's new role is not seen as unnatural. If this *new* normative environment is viewed as more salient than the cultural normative one that offers only criticism and isolation, then it will provide an enhanced sense of self-esteem that protects against the negative effects of the wider social world.

The subtheme '*extant organisation skills*' may at first seem unconnected to the theoretical psychological strain of undergoing a gender role change. However, one theoretical perspective may elicit an understanding of the importance of this theme: drawing on theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1985 - orig. 1957), Claude M. Steel puts forward a theory of self-affirmation processes that may be relevant in this context (1999). According to his theory of self-affirmation, if an important self-concept is threatened "an individual's primary self-defence goal is to affirm the general integrity of the self, not to resolve the particular threat, (p.376)." This is particularly apt in the case of a gender role transgression, if we assume that a participant's masculinity stands as an important self-concept that may be threatened by the assumption of a gender role change. Furthermore, Steel asserts that "the motivation to adapt to a specific self-threat of one sort may be overcome by affirmation of the broader self concept... without resolving the provoking threat, (p376). It is possible therefore to view participants' perceptions of their childcare as utilising 'organisational skills' as an attempt at re-affirmation of their masculine self, as these sort of planning skills are typically transmitted to males during socialization (Eagly, Wood and Diekmann, 2000; Burr, 1998).

Issues for Consideration

Study design

The framing of gender role discrepancy as a *process* has important connotations for the present study. This conception means that as discrepancy strain is not a static outcome, those men undergoing a change in gender role (such as the men in the present study) will likely be experiencing different levels of discrepancy strain at different temporal points. This means that the present study only provides a cross-sectional analysis of the gender-role discrepancy being experienced by those men at the specific time the data was collected. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the

process of discrepancy strain, a longitudinal approach may be more suited. Using this design, it may be possible to gain an insight into how these men internalise and interpret their experiences and adjust their perceptions accordingly. Another methodological issue relating to the design of the study is that, in some cases, participants were being asked to reflect on processes and experiences that they underwent many years previously. As Smith (1994) has shown when comparing contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of the transition to motherhood, the theoretical notion of self-reconstruction may play a part when participants are recounting their experiences. Smith suggests that cognitive, motivational and rhetorical factors serve to produce biographical accounts that are often modified to promote self-enhancement. For this reason also, a longitudinal study may be desirable, as it would hopefully highlight these processes if they are present.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes, (Hardy, Philips and Clegg, 2001). Mauthner and Doucet (2003) highlight the importance for researchers to be reflexive when undertaking qualitative research analysis. They state that analysis of qualitative data is a fundamentally subjective process far removed from the positivistic model of an entirely neutral researcher, and argue that research that relies on interpretation accounts can only make sense if researchers are “self-conscious about, and articulate, their role in research processes and products,” (p.424). In relation to the present study, therefore, two issues arise: i) that the interviewer and author of the present study is a man, and ii) that he himself is a stay-at-home father. With respect to the former, Robb (2004) has written on the issues surrounding the processes of interview, interpretation and analysis when both researcher and researched are men. He suggests that men being interviewed by male researchers will “feel a need to validate their masculinity in the terms privileged by the social and interactional context,” (p.403). He also states that men talking openly to another man about emotional issues can be construed as “threatening the boundaries of the masculine self” (p.403) and may produce a distance between men during the interview process. With respect to the latter, it is important to note that the researcher’s position as someone who has undergone the experience being studied may have affected or influenced the interpretation of the data. Given the nature of the subject under research, it is an important part of the reflexive process to note the effect that these issues may have had on the research process. One benefit may have been that the researcher’s familiarity with the issue under scrutiny may have provided valuable insight when constructing the interview schedule. The possibility that the interpretative endeavour was unduly influenced by his experience has been ruled out by a process of auditing (Yin, 1989), meaning that another researcher (Mark Burgess, Oxford Brookes University) has reviewed the analytic steps of the investigator and established reliability.

Summary

A large proportion of men in this study suffered negative psychological consequences during their gender role transition. The interpretations of their experiences included recurring themes such as social criticism and isolation. The latter in particular seems to be a common theme in previous studies that have looked

at stay-at-home fathers (Smith, 1998; Lutwin and Siperstein, 1985). However, the present study reveals that increased family participation creates a more favourable normative environment, so that men are able to build a sense of self-esteem strong enough to cope with these negative effects. This begs the question – are there other steps that can be taken to smooth the future path for men choosing to take on this role change? The conception of gender role discrepancy as a *process* is helpful here and may point the way towards better negotiation of the likely negative consequences of a gender role shift. Pleck (1995) states that when discrepancy strain is experienced, one way that men may attempt to cope with it is to change their referent group. In this way, by identifying with a new set of norms rather than traditional male role norms, the discrepancy-strain experienced may be lessened. In the light of this, social groups specifically encompassing stay-at-home fathers would appear to be both desirable and necessary. These social groups may serve a dual purpose, both to relieve the social isolation felt by many stay-at-home fathers and also to provide a new referent group that will lessen the impact of the gender role transition. In the UK, several websites exist offering advice and information (stayathomedads.co.uk, 2010; homedad.org.uk, 2010) but perhaps what is needed are locally based and promoted social groups for stay-at-home fathers, which would provide both a relief from social isolation and a new normative environment.

References

- Burr, V. (1998). *Gender and Social Psychology*. GB: Routledge.
- Buss, D.M. (1995). Psychological Sex Differences: Origins through Sexual Selection. *American Psychologist*, 50, 164-168.
- Chodorow, N. (1978). Mothering, object relations, and the female oedipal configuration. *Feminist Studies*, 4, 137-158.
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cornwall, UK: Polity Press.
- Doucet, A. (2007). *Do Men Mother?* Canada: University Of Toronto Press.
- Eagly, A.H., Wood, W. and Diekmann, A.B. (2000). Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: A current Appraisal, In T. Eckes and H.M. Trautner (Eds) *The Developmental Social Psychology of Gender*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum associates.
- Epstein, R. And Liverant, S. (1963). Verbal conditioning and sex-role identification in children. *Child Development*, 34, 99-106.
- Festinger, L. (1985, orig. 1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. USA: Stanford University Press.
- Freud, S. (2004). *Civilisation And Its Discontents* (originally published as *Des Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930). Penguin: UK.
- Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., Rosenblatt, A., Burling, J., Lyon, D., Simon, L. And Pines, E. (1999). Why Do People Need Self-Esteem? Converging

Evidence That Self-Esteem Serves an Anxiety-Buffering Function, In R.F. Baumeister (Ed) *The Self in Social Psychology*, 105-118. USA: Psychology Press.

Hardy, C., Phillips, N. and Clegg, S. (2001). Reflexivity in organization and management theory: A study of the production of the research 'subject'. *Human Relations*, 54, 531-560.

HomeDad.org.uk. (2010). *About homedad.org.uk*. Retrieved 22/02/2010, from http://homedad.org.uk/?page_id=2.

Horney, K. (1932). The dread of woman: observations on a specific difference in the dread felt by men and by women respectively for the opposite sex. *International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 13, 348-360.

Kohlberg, L., and Zigler, E. (1967). The impact of cognitive maturity on the development of sex-role attitudes in the years 4 to 8. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75, 89-165.

Langdrige, D. (2007) *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*. London: Pearson.

Leary, M.R., Tambor, E.S., Terdal, S.K., and Downs, D.L. (1999). Self-Esteem as an Interpersonal Monitor: The Sociometer Hypothesis, In R.F. Baumeister (Ed) *The Self in Social Psychology*, 87-104. USA: Psychology Press.

Levant, R.F. and Pollack, W.S. (Eds) (1995). *A New Psychology of Men*. New York: Basic Books.

Lutwin, D.R. and Siperstein, G.N. (1985). Househusband Fathers, In S.M.H. Hanson and F.W. Bozett (Eds), *Dimensions of Fatherhood*, (269-287). USA: Sage Publications.

Mahalik, J.R., Locke, B.D. Ludlow, L.H., Diemer, M.A., Scott, R.P., Gottfried, M. and Freitas, G. (2003). Development of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory, *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 4, 3-25.

Mahalik, J.R., Talmadge, W.T., Locke, B.D. and Scott, R.P. (2005). Using the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory to Work with Men in a Clinical Setting, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(6), 661-674.

Mauthner, N.S. and Doucet, A. (2003). Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis, *Sociology*, 37, 413-430.

Miller, T. (2005). *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morrison, B. (2007). The Paternal Instinct. Retrieved 1/11/2009 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/jun/16/childrenservices.familyandrelationships>

O'Neil, J.M., Good, G.E. and Holmes, S. (1995). Fifteen years of Theory and Research on Men's Gender Role Conflict: New Paradigms for Empirical Research,

- In R.F. Levant and W.S. Pollack, (Eds) *A New Psychology of Men*, (164-206). New York: Basic Books.
- Piaget, J., Gabain, M, (translator) and Gabain, R, (translator). (2002). *The Language and Thought of the Child* (originally published as *Le Langage et la pensee chez l'enfant*, 1923). London: Routledge Classics.
- Pleck, J.H. (1983). *The Myth of Masculinity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Pleck, J.H. (1995). The Gender Role Strain Paradigm: An Update, In R.F. Levant and W.S. Pollack, (Eds) *A New Psychology of Men*, (11-32). New York: Basic Books.
- Robb, M. (2004). Exploring Fatherhood: Masculinity and Intersubjectivity in the Research process, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 18, (3), 395-406.
- Rochlen, A.B., Suizzo, M-A, McKelley, R.A. and Scaringi, V. (2008). "I'm Just Providing for My Family": A Qualitative Study of Stay-at-Home Fathers. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 2008, 9 (4),193-206.
- Skinner, B.F. (1953). *Science and Human Behavior*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Smith, C.D. (1998). "Men don't do this sort of thing": A Case Study of the Social Isolation of Househusbands. *Men and Masculinities*, 1 (2),138-172.
- Smith, J.A. (1994). Reconstructing selves: An analysis of discrepancies between women's contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of the transition to motherhood, *British Journal of Psychology*, 85, 371-392.
- Smith, J. A. (1996a). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, 11, 261-271.
- Smith, J.A. (1996b). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J. Smith, R. Harre and L.V. Langenhove (Eds). *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (9-26). London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A., Jarman, M., and Osborn, M. (1999). Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In M. Murray and K. Chamberlain (Eds.) *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods* (218-239). London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 39-54.
- Smith, J.A., and Eatough, V. (2007). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In A. Coyle and E. Lyons (Eds.), *Analysing Qualitative Data In Psychology*, (35-50). London: Sage.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage.

Stayathomedads.co.uk. (2010). *Welcome to the stay at home dads' website*. Retrieved 22/02/2010, from <http://www.stayathomedads.co.uk/index.html>.

Steele, C.M. (1999). The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self, In R.F. Baumeister (Ed) *The Self in Social Psychology* (372-390). USA: Psychology Press.

Watson, J. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it. *Psychological Review*, 20, 158-177.

Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods. London: Sage.

Yin, R.K. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Newbury Park: Sage.