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## **Not Being a Father: Deconstructing Dad**

**Dr Robin Hadley**

Yesterday was Father's Day in the UK and it had been unavoidable for the last few weeks. On every high street, shops and stalls bristled with merchandise aimed at 'The World's Best Dad/Grandad'. Similarly, all forms of media resounded with invitations to acknowledge biological and social fatherhood. For the approximately 25% of men in the UK who are not biological fathers then Father's Day can be a challenge. The reality for men who don't conform to the ideal of fatherhood is something I examine in my chapter 'Deconstructing Dad' in The Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health.

In most societies, biological parenthood is one of the most highly valued social statuses. Although parenthood and childlessness are mostly associated with women, recently there has been a substantial increase in interest in the role of father's in parenting.

Typically, this links an ideal of 'involved' fatherhood where men are encouraged and expected to be involved in parenting. Significantly, active engagement in childcare and home life has been found to be important to fathers' sense of identity. For example, sharing their experience of fathering with colleagues improved place work relationships. However, many contemporary fathers in the UK struggle to combine childcare and breadwinning – not least because of poor paternity rights.

Similarly, many fathers feel excluded from health and care services during and after their partners' pregnancy. Moreover, 'stay-at-home-dads' and 'house-husbands' report being stigmatised and pressured to conform to traditional provider roles.

Likewise, other men who challenge traditional stereotypes such as gay men, male nurses and primary school teachers, are often subject to exclusion, isolation, mistrust, and stigmatisation by both men and women. However, research has highlighted how fathers reported greater happiness, subjective well-being, psychological need satisfaction, and daily uplifts than did men without children.

The ideal of 'involved fathering' is weakened by the traditional views and practices of individuals and institutions. Within these traditional are social practices and policies that denigrate men's desire for fatherhood. On the one hand, fatherhood is a distinct social achievement yet, on the other hand, there is a dismissal of men expressing a desire for fatherhood. For example, two common myths are that 'men can father children from puberty until death' and 'men are not interested in parenthood'.

Unfortunately, this belief that men are not interested in reproduction is widely embedded not only in everyday life but also across the social sciences. The majority of men are fertile from puberty onwards typically with sperm in constant production. However, there is increasing evidence sperm declines in efficacy from about the age of 35 years onward with a correlation between older fathers and genetic issues. Moreover, sperm is affected by the day-to-day environment – diet, heat, and stress all adversely affect sperm. In fact, few men become older fathers: less than 2% of men in England and Wales, listed as fathers aged 50 or over.

In addition to biological subjects, there are social and cultural expectations to contend with most societies have expectations of when is the most appropriate time to be a parent. Becoming a parent too early or too old for non-celebrities is not generally approved of.

A study of the European Social Survey found that most people held a common belief that the maximum age to be a parent was 40 for women, and 45 for men. The factors that men report in their desire for parenthood include 'biological urge', 'societal duty' and 'personal desire'.

An online survey found that compared to male parents and female parents and non-parents, non-parent men who wanted to be fathers had the highest reactions to 'isolation' and 'depression'.

In addition, childless men indicated a sense of time running out to become a father deepened from their mid-30s onwards. Consequently, men described that compared to peers, they felt they were 'off-track' and were concerned regarding how age would affect the quality of their interactions with any future offspring.

Not every man and woman want to become parents. But it is wrong to dismiss all men, as 'not interested.' To do so does a great disservice to both men and women. For men, as well as 'missing out' in an important element of their expected life journey and identity, men-who-wanted-to-be-dads are 'missing' from important institutions such as academia; government (national and the world); health and social care; and wider social discourse.