

Stay at Home Dads:

How fatherhood is evolving in Irish society.

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Declaration

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Date 14/08/2006

For Simon, and for my darling son Arthur.

Thanks for all your love, support and patience throughout the year.

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Abstract

This research project is an investigation of the changing role of fatherhood in Irish society, with a particular focus on stay at home dads. The main research question was “is masculinity an issue for stay at home dads in Ireland?” My aim was to look at how men experience at home parenting in a society that is only beginning to recognise the validity of such a phenomenon, and how this effects their place in the social world. In the literature review, I look at how fatherhood was viewed in the past and how much of this was socially constructed, and at fatherhood in Irish society today. I also look at ideas concerning masculinity and what that word means, and how feminism has affected men. The experiences of stay at home dads in America are also looked at, as this is where the largest concentration of them exists.

The methodology section deals with the research methods I chose for the project, and their suitability for the cause. Details of how I went about conducting the research and gathering my data are provided. The data analysis section deals with the issues that were raised as being important by my interview participants, and also my participant observation calls into question some of the old myths about men and their ability to care for children while out in public. In my conclusion, I discuss my how my research questions were revised after the conducting of the actual research, and what the implications for this are. I look at the support that these men receive, what are the problems that they encounter, and what is it that drives them to take this role. It is clear that the government need to stop discriminating by gender when it comes to parental leave and social welfare, and the reasons for this are discussed in detail.

Introduction

Stay at home dads are a modern phenomenon that could hardly have been envisaged fifty years ago. Ireland, in particular, has gone through great social change over the past fifty years, and tradition, mainly the Catholic Church and its moral hold on the country, have slipped from the main stage of social life. As more and more women with children are participating in the workforce, the problem of childcare has become increasingly visible in recent years. Many parents are not comfortable with the idea of sending their child or children out into the care of strangers for the majority of the day, five days a week. So where do men fit into all of this? With the traditional bread-winning role that men once has almost exclusive rights to now being called into question, fatherhood is filling in some of the spaces in men's lives that bread-winning once held. The number of men in Ireland who stay at home on a part time basis has not been measured, so we have no true account of the amount. However, the census informs us that there are 5,100 men in Ireland who do this full-time (www.cso.ie). Although this is a very small number, it is nonetheless culturally significant.

My main concern is to probe into the social consciousness of men who take such an active role in their children's upbringing by matter of choice. The research questions are as follows: "Is masculinity an issue for stay at home dads?" "What are the reasons that prompt men to take on this role?" and "How do they feel that they are treated in society"? I try to answer these questions by conducting in-depth interviews and also by doing some participation observations at a playground and shopping centre. I must attest to the fact that this study is only concerned with the experiences of the stay at home dads interviewed in this study, it is not meant to be a theoretical work which encompasses the stay at home dad role in general. But I believe that by looking at a

small sample, we can tease out some of the issues that might also relate to other stay at home dads, and other fathers too.

I became interested in this topic when I saw an RTE television documentary on stay at home dads, following the experiences of two men in that position in today's Ireland. As a parent myself, I am naturally aware of the difficulties surrounding childcare. In the past the problem of childcare was seen as a women's issue, I would like to see a shift in this attitude, that child care would be viewed as being a parental concern rather than simply a mother's concern. The male-bread-winner model was once viewed as the calling card for masculinity, along with characteristics such as aggression, sexual promiscuity, and emotional detachment. Therefore, I was interested in seeing how it comes about that men, who are seen as having the above traits, can be stay at home parents, a role of which many opposing characteristics are called for. Masculinity can encompass so much more than what popular culture allows for, and I agree strongly with the idea that gender is sociologically constructed, and adapts to different environments.

So why are stay at home dads a useful category for studying masculinity? According to David Morgan, "one strategy for studying men and masculinity would be to study those situations where masculinity is, as it were, put on the line" (1992:99). This research was aimed at discovering if the masculinity of stay at home dads is being put on the line or not. Prior to my investigation, I had no assumptions concerning this issue, I wanted to deduce from the data gained through interviews whether this was the case or not. Many men, though they may not play any part in at-home parenting,

may soon realise that with a childcare crisis looming, caring for their children in the home may become part of their daily lives.

Stay at home parenting has on the whole declined since 1999, from 579,700 people to 544,600 people. The number of men “on home duties” has fallen since 1999, but has fluctuated in between and is on the rise again, going from 4,500 in 2004 to 5,100 in 2005 (www.cso.ie). There are many men who play this role part time and who are not recorded here, and also there are men who work split shifts, so the total number of men who are sharing in the at-home parenting role is probably much, much larger than this. If more men are to play a greater role in childcare an expansion of the common conceptions that many in our society hold about fatherhood, not a radical upheaval, or “motherisation” of the masculine is necessary. In this research project, how men see the emotional aspect to what they are doing is investigated. “Men don’t need to act like women in order to be good at the role, they can just be themselves” is what one of the interview participants told me, and this is a central theme being looked at in this work.

This investigation uses the medium of qualitative research, in-depth interviewing and participant observation to be exact. My goal was to seek out the issues that were impacting upon these men’s lives, and how they felt they fitted in with society in Ireland today. By gaining an understanding of how fatherhood was seen to be in the past, we can look back and see what is happening with men today in context. By looking at what motivated these men to take a more active role in their children’s upbringing, we can prophesise on what might be the way to get more men interested. By

encouraging men to talk about their emotions, we can dispel all the old myths about so-called emotionally backward men.

Literature Review

Introduction

My main research question is “Is masculinity an issue for stay at home dads?” The purpose of this literature review was to look at how fatherhood is changing, and society’s expectations of fatherhood role, how society has evolved to facilitate men who wish to be the primary care-takers of their children, and also the issues that are raised by stay at home dads with regards to their experiences in today’s society. I feel that there are great gaps in the literature when it comes to fatherhood, particularly in the 21st century, when new ways of fathering are being crafted. When doing my background research for this project, I found that there was limited sociological material available concerning stay at home dads, particularly in the Irish context. This further highlights the need for more research into fatherhood in Ireland today, particularly in the form of interviewing men themselves. This is where this research project comes into play. By asking men themselves about how they feel, issues such as masculinity can be discussed with the use of information from a primary source.

Traditional notions of fatherhood in Ireland and abroad

For McKeown et al., the Irish father was the hard-working bread-winner, who was typically unavailable, both emotionally and physically, to his children (1998:2). They also traced this concept of the father back to the Catholic religion, once powerfully influential in Ireland, where

God is the father and ruler of heaven and earth; the king is the father and ruler of his people; the priest is the father of his flock and the man is the father and head of his family... In the Christian tradition, the father is a central image of God. The unseen father in the New Testament is incomprehensible but intimately involved with human affairs (1998:14).

The decline of the power of the Catholic Church's hold over Ireland may indeed have some part to play in the changing role of the modern Irish father, as women are given greater freedom of choice with regards to family planning for example. Most women have the freedom to control their own bodies; they cannot so easily be forced into bearing as many children as their partner wants. With the decline of the power of the Catholic church came a lesser adherence to church teachings of celibacy before marriage, and of marriage for life, both of which have affected the structure of families in Ireland today.

Another important part of the Irish story is that the role of the woman as being in the home is enshrined in our constitution; as by implication this means that the role of the man is not so placed.

Article 2.1 In particular the state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the human good cannot be achieved.

2.2 The state shall, therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (Bunreacht na hEireann).

It is indeed understandable that at the time the constitution was drawn up, 1937, it was an alien idea that society should include fathers who might choose, or be otherwise obliged, to remain in the home and look after their children. Eamon de Valera was Taoiseach at the time that the constitution was enacted and he was a man with firm beliefs in traditional family values. As Desmond O'Leary reminds us "it is probably fair to say that it was a true reflection of most people's opinions at the time and that many women appreciated the formal recognition given to their invaluable role in society" (2000: 292/293). However, surely it is time that this is amended, as it is long out of date in this day and age. The era that saw the constitution enacted was also an

ear where children born out of wedlock were viewed as second class citizens. If you didn't have a father, you didn't exist. Thankfully, this attitude is now part of Ireland's conservative past.

Interestingly, McKeown et al. draw attention to the fact that few men have themselves had the experience of being fathered in an intensely practical way, and therefore are at a disadvantage to women due to their lack of same sex role model (1998:3). This is a disadvantage from the point of view that men will have grown into manhood without having seen their own personal exemplary of manhood "doing" childcare. This highlights the need for external education in a man's life, possibly while at school, or through advertising campaigns in the media. If men can internalise from a young age that they need to be ready to be more involved in their child's up-bringing, and how they can do this in a practical way, then they have a much better chance of actually doing this. For a man to feel that it is socially acceptable to be involved on a day to day basis with the care of his child, and this is where the media could come in, a significant barrier will have come down.

Lynne Segal provides an interesting insight into American fatherhood in the 1950's, which allowed me a vantage point into *the* decade of the traditional family. Segal points to the fresh outlook at the dawn of the 1950's where men were seen as returning to the domesticity of the home after the second world war, both in popular and academic fiction (2000:73). Interestingly, she draws our attention to a handbook entitled *The Mans Book*, published in 1958. The particular chapter of interest, "Man About The House", focuses on a man's role as handyman about the home and discusses tools and techniques, without ever mentioning any kind of general

housework such as cleaning or taking care of children (2000:75). Such was the feeling of the day that domestic duties were women's work, and therefore had no place in a masculine world. The focus of the day was on "adequate mothering" (2000:76), and on all that society needed from women who could provide the backbone for the correct functioning of the system. Segal points out that although motherhood was accorded new importance, women were all too often told to remain silent on subjects such as loneliness, boredom and stress (2000:76). Men simply did not want to hear any complaints, lest they be forced to acknowledge the importance of a person's role within the home.

So why have men continuously worked outside of the home, and women inside it? Christine Heward discusses how families are the "first site in which masculinities are constructed" (1996:37). If traditional role models for men are continuously being repeated generation after generation, then surely breaking this cycle will be very hard to achieve. However, when we look at the women's situation, we can see that there have been great changes in the overall conditions of women's lives in terms of their roles outside the home. So why have women broken down the old gender code, and men have not? The answer is to be found in social movements theory. A grievance must exist amongst a broad range of individuals in order for a social movement to form. There are other conditions that must be met, depending on the situation but grievance is the basic condition. Men on the whole have no major grievance with their breadwinner situation, therefore there will be no major effort for men to change unless men themselves feel that they are unhappy with the current situation. I will ask my interviewees if they feel that there is a desire amongst men to change, and how they see the future in terms of men's involvement in their children's up-bringing.

How fatherhood is inhibited by the Irish legal system

In Ireland, men do not possess the same rights as women when it comes to children. If we look at who gets custody of children when the parents are not living together, we will see that it is usually the woman. How much a man gets to see his child/children can be determined to a great extent by the mother. Father's issues are often ignored in favour of the mother in support groups and policies and discussions of lone parents, marital breakdown, work/family balancing, and so on (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004:20). If we look at paternity leave we will find that it is "not recognised in employment law in Ireland" (www.gov.ie). This is like saying to men that their role following the birth of their child definitely does not lie in the home. There is parental leave, which entitles either parent to take unpaid leave in respect of their children born after 1993 for a period of up to 14 weeks (www.gov.ie). While this is a good thing, it does not make up for the fact that whether or not men are able to get paternity leave, paid or unpaid, is left at the hands of their employer, whose prime interest at the end of the day is having their worker present.

Fatherhood in Ireland Today

According to the Central Statistics Office, the number of males "on home duties", as a separate category from unemployed or retired men, was 5,100 in 2005 (www.census.ie). Comparably, the number of females similarly classed in the same year was 539,400, which is more than one hundred times the amount of males. However, this figure only incorporates full time stay at home dads, as men who do it part-time would fit into the employed category. Then there are men who work split shifts with their partners, sharing in fully in the parenting role. There is no way of

knowing how many men are involved in some sort of shared parenting, but the fact that there are 5,100 who are on record as doing the job full-time is an indication that there are many more out there who are doing it in a smaller capacity.

If we look at a time use in Ireland study by the ESRI, we can see that clearly women are still the main carers in our society, spending five times longer on such activities than men (McGinnity et al., 2005:11). Also interesting to note is that men spend an average of two hours and twenty-five minutes with their children on weekdays, and three hours and twenty-seven minutes with them at the weekend. Comparably, women spend four hours and thirty-four minutes per weekday, and five hours and thirty-five minutes per weekend day (McGinnity et al., 2005:15). Thus women are spending almost twice the amount of time with their children than men are. So the image of the new father is not so clear-cut as it might seem. It is apparent that today's fathers are still less available to their children than their mothers are.

Has a change in fathering really taken place?

So has fatherhood really changed, and if so to what extent? While most authors agree that changes have occurred, nobody can pin down the actual extent of these changes as information is hard to come by, particularly dating from before the 1970's. Ralph La Rossa speaks of the "asynchrony between the culture and conduct of fatherhood" (1988:451). He believes that the culture, which he explains as the shared norms and ideas about fatherhood, is changing at a faster pace than the conduct, which is fathers actual behaviour (1988:451). He presents a theory as to how the idea that men have changed has become so engrained in the present day psyche, that people are so used to

reading about it in the media and in academic journals that such thoughts have become implanted into their brains (1988:452).

McKeown et al. state that there are four main factors that have had an effect on Irish fatherhood in recent times (1998:25). The first is the rise in the number of women who are entering the paid labour force outside of the home, more about this will be discussed in the following section. The second refers to the high level of unemployment which prevailed in Ireland in the 1980's and early 1990's, and which McKeown saw as undermining the breadwinning role of many men (1998:26). The third factor affecting change in Irish fatherhood for McKeown et al. is the growth in the number of one parent families. Men can be pushed aside due to the fact that the absence of a father is one of the conditions for receipt social welfare (1998:26). Finally, and most relevant for the purpose of this discussion, changes in society's expectations of what it means to be a good father have occurred (1998:27). Change is slow, but these days nobody would blink an eye-lid if they saw a man out pushing a pram by himself during the day, whereas they probably would have fifty years ago.

What has caused this cultural shift, whereby men who are seen out in public taking care of their children has become a norm in Irish society today, rather than a taboo? The feminist wave of the 1970's spearheaded a long and arduous campaign to improve the lives of woman, and to free them from what was seen as domestic oppression. It was argued that men needed to be as active in the care-taking, and decision making of children, and therefore women would no longer have to shoulder the burden of responsibility alone, whilst having greater freedom to be active in the paid labour force. As patriarchy is actually socially and historically constructed, and

not a structural given, it follows that change is possible as ideas about fixed masculinities that are linked to power and authority no longer hold true. (Seidler, 1998:291). According to the CSO, the number of females at work has risen from 595,800 in 1999, to 776,800 in 2005.

Another good point made by McKeown and co. is the fact that it is no longer seen as a good thing for a man to be solely involved in the bread-winning aspect of child-rearing and thus that men are compelled to spend more time hands on with their children (1998:28). Another way of looking at it is that some men have always wanted to be more involved in their children's care, and are now finally more free to do so without fear of judgement. Society in Ireland was shaped to accommodate the male-breadwinner model, for example the marriage bar was in place up until the 1970's, parental leave was and is geared towards women, and of course the constitution still enshrines the woman's place within the home. Now, however, there seems to be a cultural shift in place before there is a structural shift, therefore it is acceptable for today's fathers to be active in their children's day to day care yet most still do so at a level that is well behind their female counterparts. I want to ask my interviewees what is the reason for their position as stay at home dads, and see whether or not they talk about the fact that it is an acceptable option in today's society.

Joseph Pleck discusses why the new terminology "work and family" which is often used to describe issues concerning work/home time management can be somewhat controversial. For some women, it implies that such concerns should not fall solely on their shoulders, others feel that it renders them invisible as such issues are usually

dealt with by them, they want to be accredited for it (1993:217/218). Pleck has himself observed at conferences and meetings that men often react negatively to the term, dismissing it as wishful thinking or political correctness. There seems to be two types of men dominating the discourse of fatherhood and family, those who want to be more involved in their children's lives and who call for more family friendly work policies and tolerance for stay at home dads, and then those who are totally dismissive of the idea that child-care should be a concern for men.

There are dangers involved with the assumption that the "new" man has arrived and is here to stay. The media in particular are guilty of parading this idea of the new, modern man doing as Rowena Chapman states:

He is everywhere. In the street, holding babies, pushing prams, collecting children, shopping with the progeny, panting in the ante-natal classes, shuffling sweaty-palmed in maternity rooms, grinning in the Mothercare catalogue, fighting with absentee mums and the vagaries of washing machines in the Persil add (1988, 226).

Do these images have a role to play in encouraging men to partake more in their children's care, or are they merely fuelling the fire of popular and academic discourse that further reinforces public belief in this new and improved male behaviourism?

What it means to be a father in today's society

First of all, there no blue-print for fatherhood, just as there is none to motherhood, but in this section I try to bring together various sociological investigations into men and fathering and try and piece together a contemporary idea of what is expected of the modern man. Theodore F. Cohen undertook an interesting study of Boston men who had recently become fathers, and his data brings forth the idea that researchers have indeed been too limited when investigating fathers involvement with children, concentrating too much on the economic side (1993:6). Most of the participants in

Cohen's study had definitions of their role that extended far beyond the traditional bread-winning model to incorporate the more nurturing aspects of parenthood (1993:12). This is significant; as those types of qualities must be tapped into if a man is to become a stay at home parent. I will learn whether or not this applies to my stay at home dad participants or not.

Most of the men spoke of seeing themselves as being a role model or an active figure in their child's socialization (1993:12). This seems to be an important part of what today's men expect to provide for their children. As Cohen says, "Despite a question that invited reference to the breadwinner-provider role, less than one third of the fathers even included this role among fathers' "major responsibilities" (1993:13). This would indicate that a modern concept of fatherhood is certainly not one which is solely bound by the man as a financial provider. Many of the men's difficulties with their own fathers came from the fact that they felt their fathers had been very work orientated with little time for involvement in family life (1993:18). I intend to find out what kinds of relationships my interview subjects had with their fathers, and see whether this has had any bearing on their current position.

Masculinity

According to R. W. Connell, the words "masculine" and "feminine" are both problematic because their meanings are contested by differing systems of knowledge and discourse in the modern day world (1995:3). One such paradigm is biological knowledge, which people make inferences about male and female characteristics from. Another one is popular discourse which tends to look to the natural sciences for references in order to re-enforce stereotypical images of men and women. Then there

are the humanities and social science disciplines, where gender is seen to be socially constructed, or existing in discourse only (1995:5). According to Connell, psychological sex differences are too insignificant to explain common gender imbalances in social life, such as unequal pay, unequal access to forms of power and childcare responsibilities that are polarized by women being in the majority (1995:21). Then how can we explain why such social inequalities occur? Is it explainable in terms of biological differences? Connell argues against the theory that “masculine” traits such as aggression and promiscuity are predetermined by genetics which have evolved over time, or that it is our male or female hormones which determine advantages in life, in favour of the male (1995:46/49). These claims, which Connell determines are untrue due to the lack of evidence concerning biological determinism, often carry a lot of weight in popular discourse. Connell states that when the idea of genetic codes of masculinity or femininity enter the popular discourse, they often pre-determine how evidence is interpreted (1995:48). This is part of what I hope to avoid during this research project. I hope to leave aside any pre-conceptions that I myself may have acquired through years of exposure to popular cultural ideas of what it masculinity is supposed to entail, and how fathers are seen to act out their roles.

“That gender is not fixed in advance of social interaction but is constructed in interaction” is a key theme running throughout the modern sociology of gender. This would imply that while some pre-conceptions may be influential in terms of whether or not a man is willing to take on the day to day tasks involved with child-rearing, gender as a learned experience is no longer paramount. The constant creating and re-creating of social norms is now the main focus of social research on gender (Connell,

1995:29). If the boundaries that define masculinities are constantly being re-moulded, then we need to focus upon looking at how interaction shapes ideas, and not the other way around, as the older sex role theory suggests. Another important point that Connell raises is that the very existence of masculinity is purely relational, it only exists in contrast to femininity, and that thinking of men and women as having a sort of polarised character is the only way in which these two concepts can be sustained. Therefore, masculinity is never a fixed entity, and looking at stay at home dads will enable me to determine some of the ways in which masculine stereotypes are overcome in daily life. Also, by looking at how the position of women in society, particularly in relation to the paid labour force, has changed, I can see the effect this might have on masculinity as a whole.

Men's issues are becoming more widespread in today's world. (Connell, 2000:4) Connell uses the example of Japan, where there has been a media campaign behind changing men: marriage for companionship is becoming the increasing norm, traditional ideas of gender are being questioned and most relevant to this discussion, shared childcare is becoming a more popular choice. As debates concerning masculinity shift into the public arena, Connell stresses that the real worth in modern debate about men is that of the importance of their emotions "To emphasise that men do have emotional troubles, that masculine stereotypes can be damaging, that men suffer from isolation, and that men too can hold hands and cry- this is not a bad thing" (2000:5) My research will investigate how emotions come into play for a man who is a shares, or fully takes on , the at home parenting role. Now, how to apply this new awareness of men's emotional lives to the central concerns of men's public issues-

those as mentioned by Connell to do with men's health, education problems and violence (2000:4), is the burning question.

How public perception affects stay at home dads

“Feelings about being a parent are related in part to the values of the outside society. Parents attempt to measure their ability and their satisfaction against a societal yardstick that tells them what they should be doing and how they should be feeling” (Rapoport, 1978:74). Today's parents are often left confused about what their role expectations are amidst the vast literature that exists on the subject today. We are finally at a point in time where a man can at least think about doing as much of or more than, as in the case of full-time stay at home dads, their female counterparts, without shame.

An interesting article by Marilyn Gardner points out the manner in which men are perceived to act like when left to care for their children, that of someone who is not capable of taking on all the tasks associated with working with children. He highlights the role that movies have had in this image creation. A 1980's film, called Mr. Mom, featured a stay at home dad who “bumbled” his way through daily chores associated with childcare and housework such as nappy changing and vacuuming (www.slowlane.com:1).

More popularly, Eddie Murphy breathed new life into the role of the bumbling male when he starred in Daddy Day-care, where he plays a man who runs a day care centre with a male friend. Of course, the old formula remains true: men coupled with children results in hilarity (www.slowlane.com:1). This cinematic and media portrayal

of such fathers often mirrors what happens in real life. Jokes are often cracked at the expense of the father when a new baby arrives for instance, while it is assumed that the mother will take “naturally” to the role of parenthood. Then there is another, almost contradictory role that stay at home dads and fathers in general, are expected to play, that of the caring, nurturing “new” father. Gardner points out that there have been numerous books published aimed at “househusbands”, most of which play up an idealistic image of men who are caring, gentle and take their roles very much in their strides without so much as a black moment (www.slowlane.com:2). Both of these images must be confusing for men, who desire not to be laughed at but not to be presumed to be indestructible either.

While stay at home dads may experience a lot of the same highs and lows that woman engaged in the same role may, there are also separate issues, which come into play. These feelings of illegitimacy all stem from the fact that it was once the man’s and only the man’s duty to be the breadwinner, and the stigma attached to a man doing “woman’s work” will not completely erode overnight. So how can couples be expected to turn tradition around, and actually view the man doing some of, or indeed all of, the day to day parenting? In my interviews, I ask of men where the motivation behind them becoming a stay at home dad came from, and how the couples coped with the situation. Then a picture of how people invert the traditional feminine and masculine roles will form.

Stay at home dads in the United States of America

Stay at home dads are more prevalent in American life than they are anywhere else. Upon searching the Internet, I came across dozens of websites devoted to stay at

home dads. One site, called Rebeldad, features the diary or “blog” of an American at home dad. Various issues that are applicable to stay at home dads in general were raised. In general, product advertising for household cleaning tends to feature women, as if there is no need to appeal to male consumers. Rebel dad discusses his debate with Procter and Gamble concerning their recent sweepstake campaign aimed at “cool moms”, where no dads are allowed. Rebel dad recognised that such companies need to appeal to their target audience, yet did not concur that they should ignore all outside of this, ie. men (www.rebeldad.com:3). Could this potentially be another factor that is adding to the problem of how men are perceived by society? By constantly being bombarded by advertising featuring women doing domestic chores, the male mind must find it difficult to adapt to the idea of such duties becoming more gender equal.

Some people may ask, why should those men who stay at home to care for their children be applauded, when women have been doing the very same for a long time. My answer is that there is an extra set of issues to be dealt with for the modern day man. Anne Oakley points out that men have long been seen as “outsiders” when it comes to family values (2002:107). This moral understanding of women as being at the heart of the family, and possessing special bonds with her children, etc. has created a barrier for men when it comes to taking more interest in their children, they may feel that they are flying into uncharted territory, so to speak. Thomas W. Laquer writes of how, when his daughter was in the nursery in hospital, his role as parent was pre-judged due to his gender. In the “social comments” section of his daughter’s chart, nurses had written “father visited” whenever he came in to be with her, whereas when the baby’s mother was there, that had been recorded as “mother in to bond”

(1992:158). This social ideology which places the mother as bonding with the child during their time together, and simply reflects upon the fathers role as just being there cannot be encouraging to men who want to develop a more emotional type of bond with their children.

Upon reading the list of seminars that were taking place at an at home dad s convention posted up on slowlane.com, it was apparent that stay at home dads are interested in most of the types of topics that any other parent would be, as well as issues specifically targeted at them. Included were topics such as fire safety, children's education, father and daughter bonding, as well as isolation and social challenges associate with at home parenting, "nurturing", and the highs and lows of the women who are the breadwinners (www.slowlane.com:3). This is surely a far cry from the men's handbooks of the 1950's whose only discussion of the home was in reference to maintenance. Still there is no discussion of topics like feeding and pregnancy which leads me to conclude that these are still powerfully linked to the biological role of the mother. The fact that these days, many women are choosing not to breast-feed, or do so for shorter periods of time due to work commitments or for other physical/ psychological reasons, seems to have been overlooked. The support that a man has the potential to offer during pregnancy could have been discussed. It appears that yes, men can become very involved in their children's day to day care, but there is still, and perhaps this is too strong a word, a taboo surrounding men and the physical development of their children. For so long there has been a strong cultural sense of the mother and child bond, a bond which is sometimes revered as being sacred, thanks to Christianity. Whether this will ever change is debatable.

Robert A. Frank is an at home dad who is also researching the phenomenon. He encountered a lack of previous research on the same topic, but still pursued with his investigations (1). Using the mailing list of an at home dads website to find willing subjects to complete his questionnaires, Dr. Frank completed two studies, one in 1994 and the other in 1996. Although he was operating from a psychological rather than social research background, his data is still relevant. He collected information from 49 primary care-giver fathers and their employed wives concerning the manner by which they organised time for housework and childcare. According to Frank, comparisons with earlier studies show that these new primary care-giving dads do not replicate the exact role of the traditional mother, but are usually a mixture of the traditional mother and traditional father roles (1). In the first study, Frank discovered that at-home dads did the same tasks as at-home mothers during the day, but when the mother returned from work she tended to revert back into her traditional role (2). It seems as if the public and the private roles of both genders are out of sync here. Being an at home dad makes a man more likely to be called upon in the night by their child, there's a fifty per cent chance of it, whereas in the traditional family, the child will go to the mother eighty per cent of the time (2). This shows that the overall level of closeness between the man and the child is generally increased when traditional family roles are abandoned. So the old idea that masculinity implies distance in emotional relationships has been disproved by Frank.

The second study revealed that there are indeed different levels of satisfaction experienced by at home mothers and at home fathers. According to Frank, "63% of the at-home fathers felt somewhat isolated, compared to 37% of the at-home mothers" (3). Why is this? Is there a reason why masculinity and childcare participation

generate greater complexity than femininity and the same? I will be interested to see if any of my participants mention isolation as a concern. The reasons given by the participants for their at home dad childcare situations were varied. 65% of men and 78% of women said that it was because they did not want to put their children into day care. 67% of fathers said that the working parent making more money was a reason, along with 52% of mothers saying the same. It is interesting to see that men are still more concerned with the financial aspects of this, and the women with the more child-orientated, caring aspects. Is this a trend to be seen also in Irish society also? I will be asking my respondents what has led them to be in their situation, will they be the same reasons, and will there be any surprises in there?

What some Irish stay at home dad's experience

One particular Irish website for parents that I found very useful was www.rollercoaster.ie. In the discussion section, where people can post up any topic they like and others can respond, I found some Irish stay at home dads that were reaching out to each other in an effort to connect with somebody in the same position as themselves. It is a real shame that there is no organisation set up specifically for dads like them to contact each other and get support and advice. I found on this particular website, in the Just For Dads section, some men expressed concern about the lack of interaction they experienced with mothers when they attended baby and toddler groups "The local mothers have their own little circle of friends and it is very difficult to make friends" said one Meath father. Another man described how he felt like a "social lepper" during the first time he attended a toddlers group.

I find that if you are in D4/D6 etc attending Montessori, park, riverview, crèche etc the moms view you with deep suspicion. I know the ones who will not talk to me a mile away because they drive 4x4's and dress to impress. Which is fine. I believe that most of them would enjoy having this male parent at their coffee get togethers or whatever but they would be wary of how their partners/husbands reaction).

One man spoke up and declared that he himself had no such trouble, and that it could be the case that the other men just needed to take the plunge and “wade in and talk to them... I don’t think it’s the local mothers who have a problem”. The stay at home dad who felt that he was being treated like a social lepper” seems to have as much of an issue with the fact that these moms who he felt were excluding him were affluent as the fact that he perceived them to be austere. Maybe these women were not engaging him in conversation because he exists outside of their income bracket, rather than because he is a man in a predominantly female setting. Also the fact that he felt that the husbands of these women were influencing the maintaining of their distances from him implies that he himself has not moved on from hetero normative ideas of men and women. So if the loosening of traditional gender ideology has not shifted this man into the stay at home dads role, then what has? Finding information like this out from my participants will allow me to build upon my theory of how men make the transition to getting involved in childcare.

Other women and men on the site were eager to share their belief that stay at home dads were a positive development for society. One woman emphasised the fact that her daughter gets to spend quality time with both of her parents, as her husband is at home minding her 3 days a week. One man had an interesting proposal as to why some people might make fun of stay at home dads “I used to get slagged off for being a househusband, I laughed at people who slagged me because I think they were jealous of my stress-free lifestyle.” This shows that while stress may be an issue for some stay at home men, as it is indeed for some stay at home moms, others relish the opportunity to escape the types of stress such as heavy traffic, crowded public

transport, deadlines and office politics that often accompany paid employment outside the home.

John O' Mahony, writing in the Irish Examiner, detailed the difficulties that he would have were he himself a stay at home dad, while calling for more support for at home parents.

There is not a job like it in the world – part chef, part chauffeur, part clairvoyant, part cleaner, part doctor, part educator, part entertainer, part facilitator, part guardian, part psychologist, part motivator, part mediator, part ruler, part tailor, and part shopper.

And the chances are, all that on just a few hours sleep.

For me, this high-lighted the fact that the role of an at home parent is all too often dismissed as being a uni-layered skillless task whereas in reality men are often surprised by the sheer amount of work that is involved in child-minding. He also brought up the issue of masculinity when he stated that children need “proper stimulation”, and that seeing a grown man “break down and cry” would not provide this. Although he has never tried out the role himself, he seems to believe that first of all it would be difficult, second of all his children might suffer from seeing the image of him, a “grown” man, shedding a few tears.

Men as research subjects

Pyllis Chrysler, in her work entitled *About Men* details her experiences over the years of researching men. She believes that men can become notoriously “uneasy and silent” (1978,xiii) upon being questioned directly about personal matters.

Upon being questioned about themselves by a woman, many men are reluctant to be tape-recorded, nervous about note-taking, possessive of their information, cautious about revealing anything of themselves. Most of all, men find it startling, absurd, insulting –humorous- to be

interviewed *as men*: as part of the “male” condition, as representatives of only one-half of the “human” condition (xiv)

She also says that men are usually the ones doing the interrogating, and they do not like being asked a question which they cannot answer (xiv). Men can have notions of masculinity that do not allow for feelings of inferiority, powerlessness or lack of control. It must be noted, however, that Chrysler is writing in the late 1970's, at a time when patriarchy had a much stronger presence. I intend to prove her wrong, the conclusion that men are closed up individuals is exactly the sort of idea that men who want to stretch the borders of what it can mean to be a man, have to fight against.

Methodology

I chose qualitative research as my means of conducting this investigation into stay at home dads. The reasons I have chosen this type of research methodology is because it is by far the most suitable one to cater for the needs of my project. As Ragin so aptly stipulates,

Because of its emphases on in-depth knowledge and on the refinement and elaboration of images and concepts, qualitative research is especially appropriate for several of the central goals of social research. These include giving voice, interpreting historical or cultural significance, and advancing theory (1994:83).

As all three of the above mentioned goals are on my agenda of intentions, I believe I have made the correct choice of research methodology. There has been no sociological research done in Ireland about stay at home dads specifically, and as men are playing a greater, though to what extent is debatable, role in the care of their children it is time that their stories were heard. The cultural significance of this shift whereby more men are sharing in the parenting role is huge. The impact that it potentially will have on gender relations, both in the home and in the workplace, could be huge. I hope I can add to sociological literature on men and parenthood, as I feel there is still a gap in the understanding of how society can encourage better gender equality when it comes to childcare.

Marshall and Rossman write that social issues that are complex are best dealt with qualitatively (1995:11), the issue of men and childcare is one that incorporates many different factors such as masculinity, family relationships, gendered work, childcare, and therefore requires an in-depth investigation to tease out all these issues correctly.

Two other valid points about the usefulness of qualitative research that Marshall and Rossman discuss is that “natural” solutions to problems can be discovered, ones that people come up with without policy intervention (1995:12); and that it is useful in examining cases where experiments would be un-ethical. Certainly I will be looking at the ways in which men deal with the social problems, both of being a stay at home parent and specifically of being a male stay at home parent. There is no question that experiments would not be very ethical here, where there are children involved.

If I were to use quantitative methods, I would only get surface data that would leave me with no indication of men’s actual feelings in relation to the experience of being a stay at home parent. Quantitative research typically involves having a hypothesis, which the researcher subsequently sets out to test. In my case this would have been problematic, as due to the lack of previous research, it was better to let the hypothesis forge itself after the work was done, as any assumptions I might have had would have over-looked what emerged as being the real important issues. Quantitative research is more a more useful tool in measuring attitudes and opinions, among a broad range of people. Since men part-time and full-time stay at home dads are a select group, quantitative methods would not have allowed me to gather very much information.

As my main manner of obtaining the required data, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed me to ask specific questions, but allowed the interviewee scope to answer beyond the exact frame of the question. It also allowed for greater ease of comparability than an unstructured interview would. As Marshall and Rossman state, “the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames

and structures the responses (1995:80). It is obvious to me, that the men themselves are the experts on this topic, and that I can only document their experiences without pre-selecting the important aspects. The questions were designed to obtain information about gender and child care, about how men feel about the role in conjunction with their manhood, and also the problems and joys that the role brings to their lives.

I had to rely on purposive sampling, “whereby a selection of those to be surveyed is made according to a known characteristic” (May:2001: 95) in order to select suitable candidates for interview. To find people who would be willing to participate in interviews, I first contacted an RTE show called “Meet The Family” where I had seen a programme involving two stay at home dads. The producer gave me the contact details of one of the men, and I got in touch with him via telephone and he indicated his willingness to do the interview, albeit reluctantly. He told me he would call me at a suitable time, but never did. I then proceeded to ring him anyway, but all I got was his answering machine. Despite having left several messages, he never called me back. I used a web site, www.rollercoaster.ie to find most of my other participants. I posted an add in several of the different sections, the buy and sell, chit chat, miscellaneous, and most importantly in the Just For Dads section, where I got all my replies from.

It was brought to my attention that in the Irish Times, there was a column written by a part-time stay at home dad about his experiences. I sent and re-sent an e-mail to him until he replied, and we arranged a suitable time. These were all face-to-face interviews. One other way that I got in touch with a candidate was through a friend’s

mother, who's work colleague had a husband who was a part time stay at home dad. I arranged and conducted the interview over the telephone, as his location in Carrick-on-Shannon was too far away to realistically access. Postings on the website were followed up by emails and then phone-calls, where we arranged a suitable time and place to conduct the interviews. I also posted notices in the following local shops in Maynooth : SuperValu, Londis, and Tesco. The process whereby candidates for interview were selected was a slow and time-consuming one.

Overall, there was a general difficulty in finding people who were willing to do the interview. Even when men had indicated their willingness to participate, it was hard, and in some cases impossible, to get them to follow through. Repeated e-mails and posts had to be written, often without success of reply. This was very disheartening, particularly as I thought I had a certain number of men, and that turned out not to be the case. I was surprised that I did not get a single reply from anybody who had seen the adverts in the shop's message boards. One avenue for advertising my request for candidates, that of placing an advertisement in a newspaper, was overlooked by myself. I feel that doing so perhaps would have yielded some results, and as the project has suffered due to the shortage of candidates, this is something I would look do if I were to do it all over again. I feel that such a project that focuses in on a group of people who are not located in any one area, or are not part of any one organisation and who are notoriously hard to locate, would benefit from a longer period of time. At least a year fully dedicated to obtaining candidates for interviews would be necessary in order to give this research the depth it needs.

The data, once collected, had to be transcribed, and then read through time after time in order to get a feel for the information I had been given. I then had to decide what the most revealing and relevant topics that had come up were. A fair amount of editing had to be carried out, as some of the men discussed issues that were not of interest for this particular research, for example participant number four talked about the issues concerning being a single parent. As some of the excess information given was interesting, though not for this research, it was difficult to make the decision to exclude it, as the temptation was there to discuss everything that had been told to you.

Participant observation was a useful tool for me to use in relation to information that I could glean regarding the social interaction of fathers with their children. Marshall and Rossman offer a definitive statement on what participation observation entails: “the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviours, and artefacts (objects) in the social setting chosen for study” (1995:78). If this is done correctly, it gives the researcher all the tools necessary in order to build an idea of what is going on. According to Tim May, “participant observation is said to make no firm assumptions about what is important. Instead, the method encourages researchers to immerse themselves in the day to day activities of the people whom they are attempting to understand” (2001: 148). The fact that the men I was observing had no idea that they were being observed was part of the key to my success in assessing how men play out their roles in the social environment. The “cultural universe which people occupy” (May, 2001: 153) was just what I wanted to explore. It is the researchers job to get out there and enter the social setting where subjects of interest are enacting their roles.

I approached the local girl's primary school and the boy's secondary school to see if I could obtain permission to stand outside their schools at the time that children were being collected, but was told that they don't normally allow such things, as letters obtaining permission would have to be signed by parents first. Ethically, there was no need to ask permission in the super-market, as it is a public space. I went there on a Wednesday morning and a Saturday afternoon, to see what kind of numbers of men would be out with their kids, shopping. The playground by the canal in Maynooth was my third choice for participant observation. In order to preserve my anonymity, it was necessary for me to bring my own child and play with him as usual, whilst keeping an eye on what was going on, and engaging in conversation with some of the men. I then went immediately home and recorded the event.

There are some limitations associated with qualitative research, as with all research methods. One drawback of such a method is that it is very time-consuming (May: 2001: 143), both for the interviewer and for the interviewee. This can be a potential incentive for people to choose not to participate in an interview. And for the researcher, it involves time taken to locate potential participants, time taken to get to their location, time taken to complete the interviews, time taken to transcribe the data, and then time taken to analyse it all. There is also the fact that because a small sample is used, generalisability for the population as a whole, or whatever segment you are interested in, is difficult to claim. And therefore the relevance of what you are doing can appear doubtful. However, in my case I do not claim that the people in my interviews are representative of all stay at home dads, only that they will allow me to discover the issues that are important for them, giving me an idea of what might also be relevant for other men in their position.

Data analysis

Introduction

One thing that is clear about the experience of stay at home dads in Irish society is that it is by no means uniform. Each of my interviewees raised different issues, and though there were commonalities present, none can be applied to all 8 of the participants. This diversity of experience encountered is a testament to the difficulties we currently have in our society in allowing for a more equal opportunity parenting role. We are still seeing that women are in the majority when it comes to being out in public alone with their children, in shops, at playgrounds, and outside of schools for example. Commonly held assumptions about men's ability to cope with children must be consigned to the dustbin along with the location of baby changing facilities in women's public toilets, and the reasons for this will be discussed hitherto.

Reasons why these stay at home dads took on the role of stay at home dad, part and full time

It was a mainly by choice that these men became involved in at home parenting, with the exception of one participant. Participant number three told me that neither himself nor his wife had considered the possibility of him becoming an at-home parent until their first child was born. After the birth, he realised that he did not want to have his child cared for by other people all the time. He was less happy in his job than his wife was, and therefore it made sense for them to choose that he would be the one doing the at-home parenting. Interviewee number four had had limited access to his children following a marital separation, and he was able to organise his work, being self-employed, so that it would be possible for him to take his children for 24 hours, three

days a week. The children's mother agreed, and he was more than happy to have this opportunity to spend time with his children.

Interviewee number 6 had been a full-time long-term student, as he put it, when he married and when the children came along it was clear to him that he wasn't going to be able to earn the kind of money that his wife was currently earning. For interviewee number two, it was a joint decision between himself and his wife that they wanted a parent to be looking after the child for the first few years of its life, and flexible working hours were possible for him to arrange. In the case of interviewee number 7, it was partly because he wanted to retire anyway, partly because he wanted to get to know his children well as he had been in a previous marriage where he had hardly seen those children, and also because his wife "liked the idea too, she like to know that the kids are happy and safe with me." Participant number one had no choice, as the mother of his son left when the baby was 18 months old. There is variety in these reasons, and it further shows tells us that stay at home dads are not to be easily categorised.

Support from family and friends:

I found that in general, support received by these stay at home dads was at a high level. If we look at interviewee number one, he witnessed a growth in his friendships due to his new role through websites, through going to pick his son up from school. Candidate number two lives right beside his wife's parents, and they are always on hand to help. His own two sisters are both at home parents also, and so they are another support network. His own parents are both deceased, but his sisters support him fully. My third participant likewise received support from his family. A lot of his

friends initially were taken aback because they thought he was “nuts” to leave his career. They also felt that he would not stick it out, being at home with his child all the time. This seems to be typical of the way men were perceived to behave when confronted with minding children, as was popularised in the Hollywood films that were discussed in the literature review.

The fourth man I interviewed had no support from his own sister, as he had separated and she was a born again Christian and the only immediate family member left. His friends were all supportive, because some of them have gone through the same splits with their partners, and they understand the need to be with your children.

Interviewee number 5 had great family support, friends were initially sceptical though not harshly so, but now they have realised this is his choice and he’s happy, their relationship with him remains as it always did. The sixth man I interviewed received full support from his wife’s relatives, his own family being based in Scotland. As he has other work colleagues doing the same thing, it was not an issue that his co-workers would be negative towards him. Interviewee number seven did experience scepticism from sections of his family, but they have since gotten used to his role, as he has been doing it for two years now. He mentioned that friends didn’t really come into it as far as he was concerned, as they “wouldn’t really understand why I’m doing this. They’ll pay it lip service, if you know what I mean.” This indicates to me that his position as full time stay a home dad is not something which he discusses with his friends on a day-to-day basis. There must be some degree of uncomfortableness on his part, or on their part, in order for this to be occurring.

How men out with children in public are looked upon

These days, as was pointed out to me by interviewee number 4, it is quite common to see men out in public pushing buggies, it is not perceived to be an unusual occurrence. However, this same interviewee told me that three or four years ago he rang up a hotel to book a room for himself and his two children, and the reaction from the staff member on the telephone was one of surprise. She immediately asked who the adult was, and seem taken aback that it was himself, normally such a question would not be asked if it was a woman booking the room. This participant felt that this reaction was caused by the idea that men are unable to cope alone with children, a pre-conception that women sometimes have. Participant number five told me that he had never had to contend with negative reactions form people, "it's never anything that I've come face to face with, unless people are talking about me behind my back". This indicates that he is not fully confident that people are not judging him.

The participants experience with their own fathers

For the most part, my interviewees did not credit their own fathers with being an influence at all when it came to the way they themselves played the father role. They all had fathers which conformed to traditional ideas of masculinity. I got the feeling that interviewee number one's father had physically assaulted, or abused in some sense, himself and his mother. This overly aggressive masculine presence in his life gave him the knowledge of "how not to be a father". Interviewee's number's 2,3,4,5 and 6 all spoke of how their own fathers had been in the background as far as they were concerned when they were growing up. "I suppose he was a typical '60's/'70's dad. His had to learn off his dad, you know as far as he was concerned he regarded his role as I go out and earn the money" is how candidate number four spoke of his

father's role in his life. Interviewee number three told me that his father was "kind of just always well in the background so no, he wasn't really prevalent when we were small children. When we were older it was different." This is interesting, do men engage more with their children when the close physical bond they had with their mother, that is one of Ireland's so called "sacred cows" is now distanced? Is it because there is less work to be done in terms of the intensity of the hands on care that a small child needs? This is a topic for another thesis.

So where does masculinity come into play?

The men whom I interviewed did not speak of masculinity as being a pressing issue for them at all. Interviewee number three did say that, as part of his identity he always felt the need to tell people that he did other jobs as well as being an at home dad.

When asked directly did he feel that people in general see stay at home dads as being less "manly" than other men, he said that masculinity didn't come into the picture at all, maybe because he felt very "comfortable" with the situation. All of my participants, with the exception of participant's number 3 and 6, spoke of their emotional attachment to their children. The first man told me that he valued the opportunity to be there for his son, and the "special relationship" that they have.

The difficulties of being an Irish stay at home dad in today's society

The most pressing issue raised from these interviews is that the government need to recognise men as being equal as women when it comes to financial assistance relating to parenthood. This will be discussed in more detail in the financial section of this analysis, for now I will focus in on what two of the men who were no longer living with the mother of their child. My first interviewee raised the point that he had broken

Not being able to earn enough money as you would like was cited by the first participant as being a concern for him.

Men and money, how society treats stay at home dads

The first point that should be raised is that all of the men interviewed called for more paternity leave. As interviewee number 4 said, it is time that the government started to recognise men as parents first and foremost. There should be no gender discrimination when it comes to parental leave. No more maternity leave and paternity leave, just parental leave, is clearly desirable. Interviewee number three stated that for the government to invest money in some sort of an allowance for stay at home parents would have other knock- on effects. The fact that “the greatest resources you have in a country are the people” means for this man that it would make sense for them to invest in “manufacturing people”. The benefits for society as a whole are clearly being discussed here. He spoke of how paying more taxes would make sense in light of this fact. The other positive effect that an allowance for at home parents would have, as out-lined by interviewee number three, is that it would be like giving a “stamp of approval” to the role. If bread winning is still an important part of identity for men in general, then maybe this would remove that barrier for men, allowing male at-home parenting to be more acceptable.

Participant number one also spoke of how he would like to be earning more money, but is restricted in what jobs he can do due to his role as a stay at home dad.

Participant number four discussed the issues that affected him financially in light of the fact that he was a separated father. His ex-partner is entitled all of to the children’s allowance money, and rent allowance that covers accommodation for three people. He

is currently renting and gets no financial assistance. Although he has the kids for three out of the seven days in a week, the children's mother is seen as the primary carer and therefore gets all of the financial help that should, in his opinion, be coming to him also. Interviewee number seven spoke of how the government need to look at the situation of stay at home parents in general "the whole issue needs to be scrutinised, I mean it's a job. It's unpaid, but it's still a job, and needs just recognition of that." The idea that the position of a parent who chooses to remain at home needs to be recognised as a job is a key issue for stay at home dads.

How women affect the manner in which men parent

Interestingly, women were cited by three of my participants as posing difficulties to men when it comes are taking care of children. The first man I interviewed spoke of how women: wives, mothers-in-law, sister, etc. always make too much of a fuss when it came to the man doing something practical, like changing a nappy. He felt that if women would just let men get along with it, they wouldn't feel like it was such a big deal. Interviewee number four also spoke of how women are too likely too fuss over men who are caring for a child while alone, surely this implies that men need more space to get stuck into child care without fear of failure and the recognition of that failure by the women in their lives. Participant number 6 told me that he would be a full time stay at home dad if his wife would let him. But this can be more complex than it seems. First of all, the wife's reasons are unclear. It could be for want of the financial rewards, or must-haves in some cases, that accompany dual-income families. If this is the case, then the root of the problem lies with the lack of financial support for at-home parenting.

Interviewee number four informed me that men with children are considered “babe magnets”! He told me the story of when a friend of his was holidaying in Spain and found himself surrounded by women “mothering” him. It comes down to the same idea again of how women tend to perceive men to be incapable of coping with children single-handedly. All of the participants agreed that they were well capable of coping, and would advise other men to try it if they have the inclination.

Parent and toddler groups were not high on the agenda of attendance for my participants. When I asked participant number six about this, he replied “No that’s the wife’s duty, not mine! I go to the park.” This tells me, that while this man is engaging in work that was once perceived to be women’s work, there are still some aspects of the role that he will not engage in as he perceives it to be his wife’s “job”. My second candidate does go, but his focus is mainly on his daughter. He said that the women mostly talk about their kids. He doesn’t have any other male to talk to, and believes that if there were more men there, they’d all be talking about other things, whereas the women would always chat about their children. Interviewee number three told me that he had attended one once, but that it had been “uncomfortable”. The presence of another man had put him off going again, as he felt that he would be encroaching upon his territory “he had his harem of women and I’d be edging in on him or something”. This male competitive edge here is interesting, in a setting where the child is supposed to be the important actor, a man can still feel that he is in a competitive male world. The women here are then seen as being dominated by the men in this situation. I feel that this is probably an isolated case, but it would be interesting to find out what does go on with men at parent and toddler groups, do they all bunch together, do they keep to them selves, or do they attach themselves to

various groups of women. as was the case here? I have come across examples of the other two possibilities mentioned in the discussion forums in www.rollercoaster.ie (see literature review). Participant number five did go before he moved house, and said that “I didn’t feel ostracised or anything”, so clearly he was comfortable in that setting.

Positive aspects of at-home fathering in today’s society

All of the men talked about the pros and cons of being a stay at home dad, but by far the pros were seen as out-weighing the cons. Getting to spend precious time with their children was listed by all my participants, which shows that these men are willing to display emotion towards their children. Participant number one liked the idea of being there for his son, of having a special relationship with him. He felt lucky to have experienced that, as he thought that the same would not be true for most men. The second interviewee told me that he would love to be a stay at home dad full time, but that financially that would be an impossible feat. The third man I interviewed spoke more of the benefits for his children, but he did tell me that he had become more organised and open-minded as a result of his new role. My fourth candidate was very forth-coming in discussing his emotion for his children. He feels the emptiness in the house when they are not around. He only has them for three days and nights a week, so his at-home parent role is all the more desirable to him.

Interviewee number five told me that if his wife would let him, he would become a full-time stay at home dad and by inference I can deduce that his at-home parenting experience is by far a positive one. Interviewee number 6 is a full time stay at home dad, who mentioned a plus that comes with the role that nobody prior to him had

discussed, that of being your own boss. . My final interviewee had been previously married and had rarely spent time with his children from that marriage, due to his workload. He therefore feels the benefits of what he is doing to a higher degree, having experienced what it is like for a man playing the more traditional male breadwinner role in a family previously.

Are children affected by having an at home father?

All the men agreed that it was beneficial for their children to have a parent looking after them in the home. Participant number one told me that it didn't matter that he was the father, what mattered was that he had one parent at home. Participant number two told me that it would be good for his daughter to have a strong relationship with both of her parents. For my third interviewee, the fact that his children were having a male presence around for part of their week was essential. He said that as children are more likely to have a female teacher in primary school, they need a male influence in their lives. "It's important for a child that age to have a male role model, I know single mothers where the dad isn't involved in the kid's life, and the child has no interest in football because the mother has no interest in football. Doesn't play sports, and they're all kind of male things to be doing you know." This is interesting, as this man obviously attaches things like sports to the male personality and feels it is an essential part of a boy's upbringing. My fifth interviewee is the only one who spoke about his children's financial well-being "we are an upper middle class family, so they certainly won't have any worries money-wise." He obviously feels that money, or lack thereof, can be a concern for some families where only one parent is in the paid labour force. Also, he may have sub-consciously felt the need to justify his position to me.

How does being a stay at home dad change these men personally?

The way they see children has changed for most of the participants. Interviewee number four said that his perception on kids had changed. As interviewee number seven told me, men don't know what it is like, and indeed women don't either, having children until they have children themselves. He had been through the experience of being the breadwinner in his previous marriage, and this time around he values the relationship that has been forged with his children. Interviewee number three told me that he was now more focused as a consequence of looking after his kids, "I'm actually better at getting stuff done... I was always missing deadlines and all that stuff, very disorganised. I'm still as you can see very disorganised but, em, things get done eventually". Interviewee number one told me that he has become "more compassionate, more caring, more understanding, and patient of course." This is what I am interested in discovering, do men have to adopt what were traditionally seen to be as feminine traits in order to play this role? I feel that these traits are inside men and that they just have to be released. As participant number three said, he didn't know that he would ever want to be a stay at home dad until his daughter was born.

How does being a stay at home dad affect the traditional idea of the male breadwinner role?

Well, my first interviewee spoke of how he would like to be earning more money, but that he wouldn't do that at the expense of his son. This tells me that the old sociological literature, which details masculinity as a state whereby work comes before family, needs to be up-dated. Interviewee number seven is very happy to be at home with his daughter full-time, this is indicative of the fact that being a bread-

winner for his family is a role he is comfortable relinquishing. My third participant was not so sure of the idea of giving up working so much, he told me that he had been worried that his wife might “pull the whole I’m the one earning the money thing”, but that she doesn’t normally do so. He told me that he would like to work more if he could, and he was the only respondent to say so. Whether it is the fact that he minds not earning so much money or that he minds what is actually involved with childcare is unclear. The fact that he did complain of getting stressed while being at home with his kids, and that he spoke of his wish for a payment for at home parents, tells me that it is both.

Participant number four told me that if women want out and work, then they should go ahead and do so, it’s fine by him. Therefore there is no deep-seated need for this man to validate his existence by means of an income. The fifth participant, a full time stay at home dad, did say that his wife earned all of the “bread”, and sometimes he was aware of that fact. The fact that the person who is earning most of, and indeed all of the money in a household holds a certain degree of power is another factor which may be putting men off making the choice to be an at home parent. However, both the men who spoke of this did not mention that it was a deterrent for them the final interviewee being the other one to do so. Interviewee number six informed me that he would love to be at home full time, and not be in paid work, but that his wife would not let him. Therefore he is not affected by the idea of not being a breadwinner.

How a man’s sense of place in society is affected by his at home parent role

None of the participants mentioned isolation or loneliness as being part of their experience as a stay at home dad. I was a little surprised by this, but it just goes to

show that pre-conceptions about men need to be ignored when theorising about them. Participant number's three and seven did recognise that their social life was suffering due to their new role. Candidate number three's reason for this was because of the drop in household income. Candidate number seven's reason was that he had to get up early in the morning with his children; so late nights were not practical. He described his social life as "non-existent". There seemed to be no problems with how integrated into society that these men felt.

The participants outlook for the future of at-home male parenting

The first candidate could see no rise occurring in males taking on the role

Interviewee number two said that at home parenting is on the decline among both genders, but that the male/female balance will probably shift a little more towards more men sharing the role with their wives or partners. Participant number three said that unless there was a major government effort, there would be no real increase.

According to the fourth candidate, a growth happening as we speak, but that it really lies in the hands of employers "I think it's important that employers have that degree of flexibility, like introducing longer paternity leave when the child is born, flexible hours of work.... If you need to take four hours off work you should be able to and then make it up somewhere along the line".

When asked "do you think men want to change?" the replies varied. The first candidate was strongly in support of the view that men did want to change, and indeed that this was already happening. My second interviewee felt that men just needed to adapt to the changing circumstances of women remaining in the workforce en masse.

The fourth interviewee gave the most enthusiastic response concerning men and their desire to change, “well any man that I know, who has kids, wants to spend more time with their kids”. Is this an unusual occurrence, or do men in general want to change. Unfortunately the real answer to that question would require a study on a much larger scale, which would probably be quantitative in nature. There were two negative responses towards this question that came from interviewee’s number three and number seven. They both felt that men had no desire to change, and would have to be pushed into taking more of an interest in the day to day care of their children. Interviewee number seven said, “a lot of men don’t really want to know. They want to leave the kids up to the missus, and go out to work and do their thing without having to worry about them.” Obviously this is not the case for the men featured in this research project. A large scale quantitative survey would be useful here in measuring the attitudes of fathers in general.

At the shopping centre

When I visited a local shopping centre, it came as no surprise that the greatest number of men were out alone with their children at the weekend. On the Wednesday morning, there were few people in the shops, and even fewer dads.

There seemed to be no difference in how the men coped with children who were acting out and how women coped. I saw neither sex resorting to slapping or shouting. The Hollywood image of the bumbling, grumpy dad who is out of his depth certainly doesn’t hang around shopping centres!

Men at play, observations at the playground

It was no real surprise that when I visited the playground on a Wednesday afternoon, that most of the adults there are female. There are only two men there alone with children. One is minding his grand-son, whom he minds once a week, the other is with his own children whom he only sees on a Tuesday and for most of the weekend. Overall, there was no difference, in contrast to the picture painted by one of my interviewees in an Irish Times article, in how the women and the men were acting while at the playground. The men were involved in chat amongst other parents as much as the women were.

Conclusion

In this project I set out to answer my research questions. The questions however, during the course of the study, evolved as is want to happen with an investigation that is approached qualitatively. This has strengthened the research as I have adapted to the participants experiences and worldview. I initially asked the question “is masculinity an issue for stay at home dads?” When the research had been completed, I realised that this question, though relevant, is not the main question that crops up in relation to stay at home dads. The real question is “why isn’t there more of an effort on society’s part to facilitate men who wish to do this?” This is a question that emerged as an issue upon completion of the data analysis, and is not one which is answered here. This research is more valuable as an indication of what the issues are for stay men who choose to play a bigger part in the hands-on parenting care of their children.

Masculinity is not seen to be an issue from the point of view of the men interviewed, and they were all of the view that the attitude that stay at home dads are less “manly” than other men no longer holds true in today’s society. We cannot rule out the possibility that there could be a certain degree of sensitivity on the part of some of the men when it comes to such a subject, but this did not appear to be the case to me, as there was no indication, body language wise, that this was evident. Most of the men seemed to view their role in conjunction with the growing numbers of mothers remaining in the paid labour force.

One point that clearly emerged from this investigation is that the government needs to look at men as parents first and foremost. They should be given the same amount of leave as mothers are entitled to, and it should be paid also. There should be no question that if you should be entitled to less as a parent on account of your gender. This would help encourage more men to be more active in their children's upbringing, if they know that the possibility is there then that might just be the "stamp of approval" they require. The fact that it should be paid is important, as the time that a baby is born can be a very costly time, and there may be a considerable drop in income of the mother had been working and now is off work too.

All of the men were happy sharing the at-home parenting role, and the two that did it full time were content to do so. Just one of the participants said he wished, not to give up the role altogether, but to scale it back a little to enable him to work more. The male bread-winner model is becoming out of date in the 21st century, as many women share in the role. Though there is discrimination in the workplace as regards women's ability to obtain promotions, and subsequently they tend to earn less money, this is mainly due to their family obligations. If the burden of child-care could be shared more equally between the sexes, then we would see a rise in the number of women remaining in the work-force, and getting the promotions they deserve.

For too long men have shrugged off the responsibilities of rearing children by asserting that they have the power to earn the most money. The government needs to help move the problem of childcare out of the laps of the mothers and into a place where it is the concern of both parents, if present. And there are fathers who would not have to be pushed into it, who would like to make the choice, but it is not a real

choice in monetary terms for many people, men and women to make. As one of my participants pointed out, if there was some sort of payment available for stay at home parents, then it would be like putting a stamp of approval on the role, and therefore more men would become involved. Why do men need this stamp of approval, women have been at home parents for a long time without any financial compensation? Perhaps the male bread-winner ideal is so deep-set in our culture, that it will take more than a few generations of men to change their mind-set.

Women, too, have their part to play in encouraging men to be more forth coming when it comes to childcare. The attitude held by some women that men are incapable of coping when left alone with children might have the knock- on effect of discouraging some men from taking on the stay at home dad role. With the number of women in the labour market in 2005 being 776,800, and the number of males being 1,080,000 (www.cso.ie) there is no longer a major difference in the numbers at work gender-wise. As women invade the paid labour force, this might allow for serious questions being raised concerning the plight of women due to the childcare burden.

Why don't more men take on the stay at home dad role? If we look at the data gathered from the interviews, we can see that several issues that might act as potential barriers emerge. First of all, there is the fact that there is no payment for the role. Women, apparently don't always have full confidence in men to do the job of caring for children. The fear of being ridiculed by other men is another potential deterrent. My findings indicate that there is no real need for this fear, as only two of the men reported negative reactions, and even then they were more on the surprised/sceptical side than being opposed to the idea. And none of them were ridiculed. The point was

raised by one of my interview participants that the “keeping up with the joneses” factor is very much on the agenda for modern day men. And of course, it often isn’t an option that one parent gives up their paid employment, as mortgages are so high these days. When asked how society can encourage men to play a greater role in their children’s up-bringing, the response was that employers must play their part. In order for men to take a more active role in their children’s up-bringing, more flexible working hours must be reduced.

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Appendices

Two samples of the interviews:

Interviewee number 3

I: What is your name?

P: Adam Brophy.

I: And what is your age?

P: 34.

I: And for how much of the week are you a stay at home dad?

P: two to three days, it varies if I'm on holidays, usually two and a half to four.

I: And for how many years have you been doing it?

P: four and a half.

I: So, how did you come to the decision to take on the role of part-time stay at home dad?

P: When my missus was on maternity leave I was working for a publisher, Gill and Macmillan publishing, and ah initially we planned both of us would work, there was no consideration it would be, that we'd both go back to work but after the baby was born everything changed, after Edel was born. You have a baby and have to decide what to do. And I'm like alright, of the two of us I was the least happy in my job so I figured, right I'd do this, I'd look after her and also look for a change of career at the same time.

I: In your own childhood, who cared for you?

P: My mam.

I: So did you learn anything from your won father about how to be a father?

P: How to say this while being nice to him (laughs). Em, about being a father to small kids, no he was really kind of just always well in the background so no, he wasn't really prevalent when we were small children. When we were older it was different.

I: Does being a part time stay at home dad impact upon other areas of your life, such as work, your social life, or sports?

P: Yeah, well, the work thing. I freelance, it kind of curtails it a bit. The area that I work in, you can get some freelance work but it isn't really enough to make a living from. There's been jobs that I've been well qualified for, would have experience for that I've had to knock back, because they'd be like, oh we need someone to work full-time. Socially we're less well off than we were five years ago you know, there was just the two of us and we both had reasonable jobs and now it's one, she's a good salary and I bring in a bit.

I: So are you happy with your current work/family balance?

P: Ah, for the most part yeah. It's pretty good. The girls are minded two days a week. Cathy works four days and then one day from home. I do studying as well you see so the last four years have been a bit chaotic. But what I would like is, I'd like to work more and she'd like to work less. We both want to work but we don't want the kids having to be looked after all the time so ideally we'd like to balance it out more.

I: Do you think people view you in a different light at all because you stay at home some of the time looking after your kids?

P; I would say... definitely I would say so yeah. And I've written about this. Like when I left it was a big shock. You're giving away a decent career and, em, parents were supportive, well our parents, but they weren't really sure. Friends, particularly my friends were like nuts!, crazy you know and em I was told you won't last it, you'll go nuts, you won't be able to handle just being with your kid all the time. The biggest question is about identity. You know, the first thing when you meet someone it's like hi, what do you do. And em, that puts me in a box, and afterwards I always have to say what else I do. It was more to do with me than other people all the time, that I had to say I had something else because people would sort of look at you inquisitively.

I: Has your relationship with your wife changed due to your new role, and if so, how?

P: Ah it has a bit, it has a little bit. In ways like I was really worried that, you know, she'd throw the I'm the one earning here line, and in fairness to her she hasn't, except in extreme rows (laughs). In a way it does because you do feel a little, a little lost yourself. Kind of the ground shifts underneath you. I probably got a bit defensive about it. Whether it's changed or not? More than me leaving work...

I: How do you think your children will feel when they're older about their dad minding them for some of the time?

P: It's not going to be any different.

I: Did you attend parent and toddler groups at all?

P: I did one! Em, just one that was in the North Strand health centre. I went down and it was okay. Nell was nine months at the time and it was uncomfortable. There was one other guy there and I think he'd been going for a while and, ah, it was like coming into his territory, he had his harem of women and I'd be edging in on him or something. I didn't really have care, because I have a lot of family around, my mom and Cathy's mom.

I: Has being a stay at home dad part-time changed you in any way?

P: Am, possibly. I'm actually better at getting stuff done. Before when I used to work nine to five I was actually pretty crap, I was always missing deadlines and all that stuff, very disorganised. I'm still as you can see very disorganised, but, em, everything gets done eventually.

I: Do you think that people feel that stay at home dads are less manly than other men?

P: Absolutely not. No I don't think so. Masculinity never was an issue. No, that wouldn't have affected me. Maybe I'm just comfortable about it but I don't know but it was never one of my concerns. The more I speak to people the more I think that the concerns you get from other people are the ones that are reflecting your own, know what I mean?

I: What are the pros and cons about being a stay at home dad?

P: The biggest pro is that the kids spend time with at least one parent. You have more time in general. Em, the whole thing about work/life balance, what you get out of it.

Pros.. I suppose you learn to think laterally in some ways and think of different ways of earning a living, that you don't have to be in a career. Mainly the reason for it is the kids, and that's a hard thing to keep at the fore-front of your mind when you get frustrated with yourself. A lot of the time I do want to be doing something else, but they don't and forty/fifty hours at a time, you know yourself, it gets difficult to accept. And its at the same time the down side of that is not.. people have to do that and others have to work to pay for whatever situation they're in and I don't want to sound preachy or anything about it.

I: Would you like to see any changes in legislation, for example better paternity leave or anything that would make it easier for men to do what you do?

P: Yes, I think it's really important, there should be some sort of encouragement for that to happen, like paternity leave. Even the week, I got a week off my job but I think that was at my companies discretion. I don't think there's any legislation for paid leave, it's up to your employer. There should be... there is allowances there through EU legislation for the first five or so years you can take a certain amount of time off and your job will be left open, but it's unpaid. I think the legislation, it's important that it's there, that there's some sort of support, particularly the way our economy has grown. Like there's a lot of money floating around and yet there is no... if you look at purely financially the greatest resources you have in a country are the people so you are manufacturing people, shouldn't there be some sort of support payable to you if you make the choice? And it's a choice to stay at home. And the choice when you do make it, it tosses you afloat. And you accept losing your salary. But that acceptance is massive, huge. If there was some way of paying the parent who decides to stay at home in some way, I think it would be essential. To make it not only viable, but to make it more acceptable, because it's an option as opposed to a step-back, like it's not a cop-out it's actually a real choice.

I: How do you think that society can encourage men to be more active in their children's up-bringing?

P: Well, that's one, to make it a real option, to make it an accepted option to stay at home by making it paid. It's like giving it a stamp of approval. We think... you taking a step back from your work to stay with your kid is an important thing, therefore we will pay you a certain amount, it's probably never going to cover what

you would earn, but something. And that would be a good step. Apart from that you're talking about changing a whole mind-set. The maternal bond is a slightly more physically strong one. How do the Scandinavians do it? A lot more free time. I think the way our government is operating in the last few years is to cut back on taxes... and taxes... and taxes. But anyway the healthcare is in shit. This isn't a good way to be that we're expected to put our kids into care all the time. If it involves paying more taxes, it involves paying more taxes. More should be siphoned into supporting parents particularly in the pre-school years. And the emphasis shouldn't be on the mother... but there still is the whole... the top of the glass ceiling isn't there anymore but there still is a growing acceptance that women in their thirties will probably leave their career at some point but the emphasis is still on them. If there was some way of balancing that out, that fathers could step back at some point.

I: Do you think that today's fathers in general are any different than they were when your generation and generations before were growing up?

P: In general, yeah I do. I mean my father and his cronies wouldn't have even considered being the one staying at home if the mother was alive. Whereas now, while it's only a small minority, but people do consider it as an option.

I: Do you think men want to change?

P: Probably not. Some do, like I do know fathers who would really like more time with their kid but again that's another option as well. In a way it balances up, it doesn't balance up. Most men that I know don't have to worry about getting up at night, if the kids are crying the mother will do it. They get up in the morning, they go off to work and everything's taken care of. It's like having a facility manager in your house! They get up and they just go and do their job and they go well, I do all that so I shouldn't have to worry about the kids. So in that sense its... you ask do men want to change, like you do have the better position. Like I don't in this particular relationship (laughs) but for most men they do have a slightly easier, though maybe more pressured in terms of having to bring in the cash. But in terms of day to day crap they have it so much easier.

I: Do you think we'll be living in a better society if men do change and get more involved in their children's rearing?

P: Yeah I do.

I: Is there much support out there for men who do want to stay at home?

P: None that I know of,... em I've never really sought in out. Like I said I have family on both sides on hand in Dublin so I wasn't alone, lie if I had to do this in the midlands I wouldn't know anyone to bring the baby down to. I don't know really.

I: Did you receive much support from your family and friends?

P: Yeah a good bit. Well family in particular. It was really the thing that kind of happened to me you know the way when you're a kid yourself, you grow up, you're involved in your family then you go to college and you run away from them as much as you can! (laughs). Because it's only when you have your own kids that you realise how important that connection is and you kind of pull back into the family

I: How do you see the future in terms of men's involvement, do you think there'll be a growth or not?

P: I think there'll be some small growth, but unless there's a real concerted effort to change at legislative level, at government level it'll be those people like will just say at the moment it's not viable. There's a funny thing about this, there's an election coming up next year and I remember the last election, people going round like we'd get Bertie doing a run on this road. You know the whole Fianna Fail posse would arrive on the street, you'd get a bang at the door and it' be Bertie going by and he might even come to your door and have a chat. And then stop and go give your issues. And this is, I think the last time was around Nell was just born maybe Cathy was pregnant, can't remember but I mentioned childcare. Now I'm minding my baby at the moment, you know childcare is very expensive, what's your stance and your man at the door actually said to me to be honest with you that isn't an issue in this election, next election it probably will be, like your predicting it down the line and already you hear about a lot more talk in the media about you know the developmental effects on children of going into childcare and the price of it. It's only, but it's still only a kind of, while it's quite prominent it's not a major issue in terms of like how healthcare would be but it's growing. But unless someone really shakes up and goes lets have a complete change in the approach it's not really going to make much difference.

I: Is there anything else you'd like to add about the experience of being a stay at home dad?

P: Yeah, like it's worth it. I just... it's one thing to just stay at home then you can just say you've a presence in the house. Just to make sure the kids are fed, and keep the place and keep them alive, but that's not even the important bit, the important bit is that the kids are probably better off somewhere else. The important bit is you have to engage with them, you have to be creative with them, you have to you know come up with ideas to entertain them and educate them and that's really difficult... and because you are bored. You know like a lot of the time you are by yourself. And if you're stuck at home all the time, you know you feel like telling them to just shut up... Daddy Daddy Daddy I want this, I want that and they're always making a mess and you can get into a kind of cycle of just being pissed off, the hardest thing I found is to put yourself out there and engage with them, because I will get into slumps where I will resent being here and I'll just be pissed off there and what else. And I realise it myself when I really have to drag myself out of it. It's not just good enough to be at home, you have to interact you know.

I: Is there any advice you'd have for other men who were about to take the leap?

P: I'd say do it, you know em... I really would say to it because things open up for you, em, getting out of... you know it's always, the defence is always saying I can't leave my job, I have my safe pensionable, VHI, company car job and I can't leave that. And you get out of that and the first thing you realise is your security net is gone and it's very frightening and your stuck at home with the kids, your neighbours environment and you're out on the road, you're in your kind of locale that you would never have been in before, you get to know your neighbours and em, but after a while you realise that all you saw as your security net meant nothing really and what you're doing is actually very important and the kids thrive on it for the most part. And it's weird, I've found anyway, other fields come up particularly if you're willing to be, to do things you wouldn't have done, you'll end up doing... I've done some awful jobs in the last few weeks but I've also got into doing stuff that I probably wouldn't have, like the journalism has opened up, so I think it's really worth taking a bit of a leap, it's a lot better than the nine to five.

Interviewee number 4

I: What is your name?

P: Dave White.

I: Can I ask you your age?

P: Yeah, 41.

I: So how long have you been a stay at home dad?

P: Well initially... I'm separated four years, so it's only in the last year I've had the kids for half the week.

I: So for how much of the week do you be at home with the kids?

P: I would have them from Wednesday morning, overnight Wednesday night, Thursday, Thursday night and Saturday night, so practically three days a week.

I: Can you tell me how you made the decision to be a part time stay at home dad?

P: Em, well initially when I separated all access was withdrawn, I had to go to court and go back to court again, and again, and again just to keep the access going. And it came to a head there last October when I was at home and there was a knock on the door, well I wouldn't say a knock, there was a rattle on the door and she basically flung the kids at me saying she couldn't cope with them anymore and I had been thinking about it anyway, because my work process had changed that I could now start taking them three days a week or four days a week. And so I just said to her look, if it helps... at the time I was seeing them for two hours on a Wednesday evening, two hours on a Thursday evening and overnight Saturday night.

I: In your own childhood, who cared for you?

P: Em, it was my mother. Although she worked part time, when I got up in the mornings she had the breakfast ready and then came at lunch from school and she was

there, she worked from say half nine till half twelve. My father went out to work at half six and he wouldn't be back till maybe five o'clock.

I: Did you learn anything about being a parent from your own father?

P: Em, no. My father was quite a withdrawn man. Strict, but not strict. He would, I suppose he was a typical kind of '60's, '70's dad. He had to learn off his dad, you know as far as he was concerned he regarded his role as "I go out and earn the money". While some days he's bring us off to the cinema, and he'd bring us to the park or something like that, he never, no he didn't really have a huge amount of an on-hand parental role. That's been coming through the generations that father turning up, went out, worked, brought in the money and once the money was there that was fine, then you'd get the odd treat every now and again.

I: So, does being a part-time stay at home dad impact upon other areas of your life, such as your working life and your social life?

P: Em, well I've structured the work thing now that I can be at home, because I do a lot of work from home, so obviously there's more technology now the internet, and mobile phones, it obviously aids that in that way. Socially, I have this philosophy that I have a personal life and I have a family life and I don't involve the two. So while I'm seeing somebody for the last two years, she's never met my kids, and I've never met her kids and it's an agreement that we've worked out together and it working. The kids aren't affected.

I: Are you happy with your current work/family balance?

P: Em, yes. I think it works out fine. It's really since last October/November that their mother has come around to the fact that there is another parent in the kids lives. Its important that both parents fulfil their role as a parent.

I: Do you feel that people view you in a different life since becoming a stay at home dad?

P: No, I don't think so. Certainly if you're away... I had an incident a couple of years ago where I was taking the kids on two weeks summer holidays and I rang a few hotels. When I said how much would it be for one adult and two kids, they were kind of like "well, who's the adult?" And I was like, "me." And they were actually quite

surprised, they were kind of “yeah, but you’re a man”. I think they were more inquisitive more than anything else. That I was going away with two kids. On my own. And would I be able to cope. And I found that actually quite surprising. I’m sure if Linda rang up and said one adult, two kids, they wouldn’t even question it. Most of the people know me from around the area and they think that you know I’m a single dad and that’s it, I don’t think they view me any differently. The kids aren’t starving, they’re fine, they’re flyin in school. Well, school now is a different issue. Because I’m an unmarried father, initially I had no rights to school records, or anything like that. So I had to approach the principal, show him my guardianship papers give her ten stamped addressed envelopes, so that anything that goes out to my ex will also go out to me. Supposedly, I’ve never got anything from the school. Its funny, like when you take the national aquatic centre or something like that, you will get people kind of looking, going he’s on his own with the kids. There’s an element of that, but it’s becoming more wide-spread you know.

I: How did people, in particular other men, react when you tell them what you do?

P: Most of them say fair play to you, if you can do it, do it. Most of my friends that have kids, they’d love to be able to take, re time off, if employers would kind of be a bit more flexible. I’d say ninety per cent of my friends would say yeah, I’d work the odd hours, then I could spend more time with the kids.

I: How do you think your children feel about having a stay at home dad?

P: Em they love it. I’m a bit more easy going, than maybe their mother, as you can see from the state of the place. It’s a tendency unfortunately when you only see the kids, initially I was only seeing them for twelve hours a week. You do tend to spoil them. It took me three or four months, and I had to knock it on the head, because it was getting ridiculous because it was always “where are we going dad?” I knocked it on the head to be more... do things at home, play games and even if it means just sitting down and watching a video or something like that, hat’s important like that you can sit there and watch a dvd, or watch a video and whatever. Not have other, like I know an awful lot of people who do other things, but if they’re watching a video and if they want to ask questions or whatever they can bounce it off me, usually I fall asleep!

I: What ages are your kids?

P: Elizabeth is 7, she's nearly 8, she's 8 now in two weeks time, and Alex is six. Do you feel that stay at home dads are treated any differently than stay at home moms?

P: Yeah. Without a doubt. Especially with the social welfare. I don't receive any contributions from the likes of children's allowance. Everything all goes to their mom. I was unemployed for a little while and because I was self-employed (well I was actually sick) all I qualified for was the lone, the single man's allowance of 165.80 and I explained to her and I said "look I have the kids for three days a week." And she said "I'm sorry." There's nothing in the social welfare thing that you get three days of the children's allowance. So I had to support meself, and having the kids three days a week on 165 euro a week. Whereas Linda would get I think its 480 a month children's allowance, and she would also get the lone parents allowance which is another 180 a week or something like that. Men get nothing towards that, eh, I sold the house in Ranelagh there, and I'm only renting this house. I get nothing towards rental allowance simply because the mother is deemed as being the primary carer. Get no support in regards to medical cards. For instance if I walked up to social welfare and said I'm homeless, they would put me on the one-bedroom housing list, even though I have the kids three days a week. If Linda walked in to social welfare, now she has three kids; two are mine and she has a child is from a previous relationship, she'd be put on a four-bedroomed housing list because you're supposed to have a room for each child. But social welfare won't recognise that. So if I was to go on social housing as such, I would only qualify for a on-bed, a bed-sit basically, so therefore I couldn't take the kids overnight, because by law you have to have a bed for each child.

I: Do you think that having their father take care of them will impact upon their lives.

P: O it will yeah. I seen a report there recently, about a year and a half ago where post-primary and primary school teachers, something like 85 to 90 per cent are now female. So you have a boy going through a school system and the chances are he will have a female teacher from the time he is four up until the time he is twelve. Now in secondary school I think its slightly different, the figures are lower, there's predominately a 50:50 split. It's important for a child that age to have a male role model, I know single mothers where the kid isn't involved in the kids life, and the child has no interest in football because the mother has no interest in football. Doesn't

play sports, and they're all kind of male things to be doing you know. I think its very important from a young age that the father is involved, especially in my childhood while my father was there... he wasn't. As I say he came from a background where his job was to go out and work bloody hard work long hours to earn the money that would pay the mortgage, pay the bills and that was his primary , em, role, basically. But as I say I think that's changed in the last twenty years. Basically since the women's revolution in the mid seventies/early eighties, women have become more.. they want to work more so if a woman wants to go out working and I've to stay at home I've no problem with that (laughs).

I: Has being a stay at home dad changed you in any way?

P: No, I don't think so. It's probably as it is. I suppose my perceptions on kids and stuff like that has changed. I love being here for the kids, em love having them around love the noise. When they're not here the noise, when I say noise I mean silence is deafening. When they're here, okay now and again "GO AWAY", like this morning! The silence is deafening and you do miss that.

I: Did you experience anything unexpected?

P: Well I was the one that got up for feeding in the middle of the night, I was the one that did most, well bar when I was at work. I used to be thrown the kids when I came in the door like. "They're yours, look after them!" (laughs). That didn't .. when we split up Alex was only two, he was still in nappies like but that didn't phase me at all, it wasn't a shock to the system, it was fine. I did what I did before, simple as that. I took them on holidays, take them at Christmas.

I: Do you think people view stay at home dads as being less manly than other men?

P: I don't think so. Maybe twenty/thirty years ago, maybe. If anything now the tide has turned and you're actually given more kind of credence because you're... It sounds very sexist (laughs) kids are babe magnets! I go out to sit in Malahide castle or the playground. And women do come over to me and go "are you on your own with them?" "Is your wife around?" A friend of mine this year, he's only back from holidays, he brought his young fella over to Spain. And he was saying, women were flocking, they thought he was brilliant! "Oh you're over here on your own with him?" Women flocking around, mothering him if you will. Twenty or thirty years ago there

would have been an attitude that “he must be under the thumb”. But its all to do with equality. I know if I was still with Linda and she was earning more than me the thing to do would be for me to stay at home, that would be the obvious thing to do and it certainly wouldn't bother me. And I think its, people are now copping on that it's the norm. You have to adapt and you have to change. “I've changed”.

I: So what are the pros and cons of being a part-time stay at home dad?

P: Well the pros are your kids. Spend more time with your kids. Sometimes you wouldn't call it a pro at all, (laughs) especially if you've been out the night before and you're dying and they're coming in at half seven in the morning screaming and shouting. No, definitely it is a pro that you spend more time with your kids, you're putting more of a male input in I think. Con, I suppose the worst con is having to send them back, that's the hardest. On a Sunday evening, or a Thursday afternoon or Friday afternoon because you have to hand them back over and you know you're not going to see them till... which is very hard for the first six months or a year. I've got used to it now, and they've got used to it. There's a routine there. It has its drawbacks, this morning I had a hard morning with him, traipsing around town I had a few things to do and it was “when are we going home?” Ah no, its grand, its good.

I: Would you like to see any changes in legislation, for example better paternity leave, that would make it easier for men to be at home with their kids?

P: Well I think they are talking about bringing in after the baby's born, more parental leave. At the moment I think its three days, which is ridiculous. Em, the likes of Finland and Sweden you can have it up to a year. Now I wouldn't say, lot of employers would go hold on a sec, you're not going to get out of here for a year. But certainly I think the first two months, even just to help around the house or something like that, certainly there should be at least two months paid leave for men. Unmarried fathers, they should change the law that unmarried fathers should automatically be guardians of their children. That's an area where I'm fighting for, having first hand experience of it. Living in a house where I thought I was the father and then finding out after she left with the kids that I had no rights at all. Then having to go to court to get my rights. Just simple things like knowing, if the kids go to the doctor, doctor's report, school report. With the issues around social welfare, you know if I have the kids three days a week I should get three sevenths of the children's allowance.

Because obviously it costs me money, I have to feed them, clothe them, heating. Because the mothers automatically the primary care-giver, she will get all those benefits. Certainly they should be looking at social welfare issues, housing issues.

I: How do you think society can encourage more men to be active in their children's up-bringing?

P: Employers have a lot to do with it, I mean they have to be a bit more flexible, give men the flexibility "I can't work Friday because my son or daughters ill, I'll work Saturday" They just have to start realising that men are there as parents too. The group I represent, that's the separated parents of Ireland, we're trying to get this idea across that whether you're a man or a woman, you're a parent, and that's the important thing. You know whether it be male or female, being a parent is the thing. Certainly the likes of parent courses, I think they should be mandatory, before the child is born. That any couple who are having a child should be made go on a parenting course. I've done them, a lot of people I know have done them, and found them interesting, you always get something out of it. But it just prepares you. I think society as whole just has to recognise whether you're male or female, you're a parent, and that's the main thing. Bringing up kids isn't easy, but if you're given encouragement, with the likes of you know extra time off, or when you need time to.. I see people in school on sports days, you know you'll only get the one parent there. The dad or the mam mightn't be there, and its down to you know, they HAVE to work. So a little more flexibility in that regard.

I: Do you feel that today's fathers in general are different than they were when your generation was growing up.? And if so, how?

P: Well I can only go on my own experience, everybody's experience is different. My own father was as I say a tremendous father, but he worked and worked and that was his thing that he had to work to bring in the money. But then there wasn't the opportunity then for women to get into employment, not like today where it's well, supposedly equal. I don't believe it is, it's getting there but, eh, there's more of an opportunity for women to get into employment. So I think men are playing more of a role in bringing up their children than twenty or thirty years ago when I was growing up. Going back to what I said about sports day, my father was never at a sports day, I think he brought me to school twice. Eh, whereas I see more and more men up at the

school in the mornings, bringing their kids to school, which is great to see. And I think because of the employment opportunities and the range of you know, as I say women have become more involved in employment, there are more opportunities for them, and men now are starting to play more of a role in the family. Which is great.

I: Do you think that men want to change?

P: Em, well any man that I know, who has kids, wants to spend more time with their kids. Again it's down to employers, a lot of it is, you know, where you work, your working times, your working shifts, that sort of thing. Without a doubt I think men want to play more of a role in the up-bringing of their kids, want to spend more time with them if possible. Its not always possible unfortunately you know, but a friend of mine whose wife is expecting, and he can't wait for the child to be born. There's two months to go and he's all set. (laughs). But I think a lot of it is down to your employment status, how much time you can get off. There's still that keeping up with the joneses factor, trying to keep the two cars running, and the mortgage you know. A lot of its down to that: how you can juggle your time between work and your kids.

I: Do you think that we will be living in a better society if men do change?

P: Em, well I think we're seeing it now, I think there's more and more men you know, twenty years ago you wouldn't see a man wheeling a buggy. If you go through Dublin city centre, the amount of men pushing buggies! You know you wouldn't have seen that twenty years ago. It can only be for the benefit of the kids that they spend an equal amount of time with both parents so they get the female aspect and the male aspect. The revolution had started ten years ago, that it's changed.

I: Is there any advice that you would give to another man who was about to take on the role of stay at home dad?

P: Get out of the country! (laughs). Just be yourself. Don't try and be a woman. Simple as that. Mothers can't be fathers and fathers can't be mothers, and don't try to be a mother. Just be a father and do the best you can for your kids. And just be yourself, and that's basically it. Simple as that. I let Linda do the mothering and I do the fathering. She can't do my job and I can't do hers. That's basically it.

I: Did you receive support from family and friends when you told them that you were going to become a part-time stay at home dad?

P: Well, no. When I separated I lost all contact with my sister, she's a born again Christian. Separation, those aren't the done thing! Well from friends, yeah. If I need to do something if I have the kids say on a Thursday morning, there's three or four people I can ring and say listen do you mind if I drop the kids round to you? There are people who are in a similar situation, and they know that if they need to do something and they can drop their kids over to me, you know that kind of a way so it's nice to have that bit of support that enables you to do that.

I: And how do you see the future in terms of men becoming more involved with their kid's up-bringing.

P: Well, I think it's happening now, but I think it's important that employers have that degree of flexibility, like introducing longer paternity leave when the child is born, flexible hours of work, eh you know we've full employment now. If you need to take four hours off work, you should be able to and then make it up somewhere along the line. I think for years we were penalised if I was going to take four hours off work then I'd lose four hours pay, and it goes back to that seventies/eighties kind of thing that I'm working to pay a mortgage. It's very high energy out there now, everything's about cars and houses. People lose sight of... kids grow up very, very quick and before you know it they're "I'm going out with me mates Da, be back tomorrow" and it's only a short time really, my daughter's now nearly eight, she's growing up so fast it's unbelievable. It only seems like yesterday and pushing her around in a buggy. I was in Santa Ponz and she started to walk, towards the pool! In reality there's only really ten years. Certainly they're more adult than we were, than when I was growing up as a kid, they know a hell of a lot more than we did, I don't know where they learn it, what they were in a past life, but they seem to know more than we do! Just in relation to this new social welfare thing that they're bringing in, or they're talking about bringing in, eh ourselves as a group and we meet with the likes of Treoir every few months, totally opposed to it. What they're talking about is forcing primary carers, when the child starts school at five, into re-training for employment and when the child reaches eight the children's allowance will be scaled back according to the time that from the age of eight that you haven't got employment. So within a year you actually lose your child benefit, unless you have a job. Now what we're saying is

what you're going to see is back to a nation of latch door kids, the key is left in the front door, they come home and there is no parent there. So they're actually forcing people back into employment instead of supporting them for staying at home and looking after their kids, which is... I mean that's ridiculous.

I: Is there anything else that you'd like to say about being a man and being a stay at home dad that hasn't been covered?

P: I'd encourage more men to look after their own kids if they can, it's very difficult. As I say I work in a kind of situation where I could do work from home, eh which means I can't.. the kids'd be down here playing away or whatever they'd be out with their friends, but I'm here. But not all jobs lend themselves to that kind of way, and it is difficult you know, there's a type of job where you have to work nine to five, what can you do! There's job-sharing availabilities out there, but the supports aren't there. If you job-share then you're losing, obviously money-wise and there's a certain degree of people trying to keep up to a certain standard. I've discovered recently the joys of just going down to the park and playing football. Doesn't cost anything, whereas today we were going around town looking at games for fifty- nine euros (noise of disgust), am I going to sit looking at a bloody t.v. all day? I'll be saying enjoy the time you have with them because it's very, very short, particularly coming from a separated background, you know I only have the three days a week, so those three days I'm with them twenty four hours a day. Come hell or high water I will spend twenty four hours a day with them, which loads of statistics, the average married, happily married, man spends about twelve minutes with his kids a day, and it's proved a separated man will actually spend more time. No I'd certainly encourage more men to get involved in looking after the kids. It's only good for the kids, at the end of the day it's in their best interest to have an influence from both sides.

Participation observation at Playground

The playground is very busy at this time. I count seven women alone with children, two women with a man and children. and two men by himself with children. I decide to casually engage in conversation with the two men who are alone with children. The first man appears to be in his sixties and I ask him first how old the child is, he informs me the boy is three. My own son starts taking an interest in this boy, named Alex, and we talk about how nice the playground is. The man informs me he comes every Tuesday, that his daughter works part time, and that his own wife is diseased. The other two days she works Alex is with a child-minder. He tells me that Alex is great, but minding him can be very hard work.

Then I went with my own son over to where the other man alone with two girls was to see if I could discover his reason for being at home with the kids on a weekday. My own son runs into a little covered seated area under the slide that he calls his kitchen when he sees the two girls go in there. The man says to me “there’s one adopted for me!” and I laugh. The girls take a liking to my son, which allows me more scope to quiz the man. I start off by saying that the playground is a great facility, he tells me that he comes from Kilcock to bring them over. He tells me he only has them on Tuesdays and at the weekend, as he has split up with their mother. I ask him does he manage to fit a job in as well, and he tells me he does, as he is self employed so he can do it, although he is not able to earn as much money as he would like. I ask him do the kids drive him mad all day, and he answers that no, they are very well behaved and he loves having them around. I ask him do people ever look at him funny, being out in the middle of a week day alone with kids, and he says that never happens. Only

that if he brings them to a restaurant/café, the women working there fuss over him, as if he cannot cope himself!

I watched how the men were interacting with the children, and how the women were, to see if there were any discernable differences in the kinds of activities that the women are doing with the kids, and the kinds that the men are doing. My conclusion was that there was none. Both sexes were getting in there and playing with the children, or sitting chatting to other parents.

Observation at Dunnes Stores:

11.30 pm, Wednesday.

I take a quick walk around the shop and notice that there are:

2 men alone with children

3 men with partner and children.

The shop is moderately busy.

Of the men alone with children, they are both coping well with the whole experience of having small children accompanying them in the shops. I can see no difference in the way men are disciplining children who are acting up, or children who are asking for things from off the shelves. In the entire shopping centre there are no men alone with kids.

3.00pm, Saturday.

There are a lot of families here, including men. The fact that more fathers are getting out and about with their children, as stated by the ESRI, seems to be true. There are four men alone with children. The same observations as before were noted. There were no hapless men, or raging men, or any such thing to be seen.