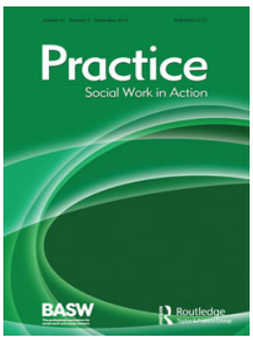

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A Systematic Review of Research on Social Work Practice with Single Fathers

Simon Haworth

This paper presents a systematic literature review that explored social work practice with single fathers. The literature search identified 7 studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The small number of studies identified that met the inclusion criteria suggests that single fathers are under-researched in social work, which aligns with their relative invisibility in practice and welfare debates. The findings suggest that social workers did not genuinely or comprehensively understand the needs of single fathers and did not effectively engage with them. This paper's discussion relates these findings to Doucet's interpretations of borderwork and border crossing and relates these concepts to questions of whether social work is inclusive of single fathers or assesses their needs fairly. The discussion is located within wider discourses that propose that societal assumptions about the feminised role of caring and lone parenthood exclude fathers and place responsibility for children primarily on mothers. This paper found that current research into social work with single fathers has not effectively considered the array of social influences on their capacities to parent and thus areas for future research are suggested to promote an agenda of inclusion for single fathers and greater awareness for social work and social work practitioners.

Keywords: single fathers; social work; borderwork; border crossing; systematic literature review

Introduction

This paper explores the topic of social work practice with single fathers through a systematic review of the available research and examines what can be learnt from the published studies in this area. The primary aims of this review were to explore what the research says about the experiences of single fathers in their interactions with social work and to ask whether social work practice is inclusive or excluding of single father families. It utilises the concept of borderwork (Doucet 2007) to develop understanding of single fathers' experiences of marginalisation and exclusion within this professional context. It locates these arguments within the context of western welfare states that

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remain predicated on traditional family norms and gendered expectations around care and caring. This paper seeks to encourage research that develops more effective and constructive engagement with single fathers and supports their participation in social work processes and avenues of support.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), of the 2.9 million lone parent families in the UK in 2016, 1.9 million had dependent children, with 10% of those with dependent children headed by single fathers. This equates to 190,000 families headed by single fathers in the UK (ONS 2016).

Single fatherhood is not a straightforward term, rather its definition is used in different ways by different individuals, dependent on the context in which it is being used. In fact, as Letablier and Wall (2018) suggest, there is a lack of a common agreed definition for lone parenthood more generally. Duncan and Edwards (1997) define lone parent families as those 'where a parent lives with his/her dependent children, without a spouse/partner, either on their own or in multi-unit households' (p. 3). The official UK government definition of a lone parent, according to ONS (2016), is 'a parent with a dependent child living in a household with no other people (whether related to that dependent child or not)' (p. 5).

Building upon these definitions, for the purposes of this paper, single fathers will be understood as: *'Fathers acting as the primary caregivers for their child(ren) through sole or joint care arrangements with no wife or partner living with them'*. I recognise that this definition is open to debate and, indeed, improvement.

The Wider Context

This review was conducted within the wider contexts of single parenthood in the UK, government policies, societal attitudes and the continuing progression of social work as a profession. A number of scholars have commented that the British welfare state remains primarily predicated on traditional family and gendered parenting roles (Christie 2006; Daly and Rake 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Pascall 2012). The UK welfare state and dominant societal discourses have, and, indeed continue to, placed mothers as children's primary carers and fathers in a supporting role, as the breadwinners for the family (Christie 2001; Doucet 2000; Featherstone 2009). Having stated this, authors such as Brown et al. (2009) suggest that societal norms are progressing towards greater appreciation of father engagement. However, general public attitudes persist to identify mothers as more able childcarers (Parker and Livingston 2017).

Dominant models of parenting and normative expectations are not static, but are structurally and socially highly influential, influencing the views of policymakers, professionals and parents themselves (Christie 2006; Philip 2013). For instance, in their enquiry of 2014, the Equal Opportunities Committee in Scotland publicised that services, including children and families

social work, often equate parent to mean mother and have not kept up with the changing expectations of fathers in society (Scottish Parliament, 2014).

There is growing interest in research into social work with fathers and some enlightening articles by a range of scholars including Featherstone (2009), Featherstone and Lee 2012, Featherstone et al. 2017), Scourfield (2001, 2006), Ashley et al. (2006), Gupta and Featherstone (2015), Ferguson and Hogan (2004) and Brandon, Philip, and Clifton (2017). Having stated this, Shapiro and Krysik (2010) found that within social work journals, only 7.26% of family-related articles considered fathers. Research repeatedly finds that fathers are not regularly engaged with in social work practice and that social workers are not supported or encouraged to work with fathers in meaningful ways; rather, research often finds that practice focusses mostly on mothers, with the burden of care and responsibility and blame for family difficulties, neglect and abuse placed firmly on their shoulders (Ashely et al. 2006; Brandon, Philip, and Clifton 2017; Brewsaugh Masyn and Salloum 2018; Featherstone et al. 2017; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Scourfield 2006).

Problematically, social work research itself has tended to use the terms parents and families as proxies for mothers (Brewsaugh, Masyn, and Salloum 2018; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Strega et al. 2008), mirroring issues in policy and practice and potentially further excluding fathers in the process. Furthermore, single fathers are single parents and the perception that single parents 'always take and don't give back to the state' is so routinely suggested that it can be considered normative (Garner 2009). Based on this thinking, all single parents can be understood to be marginalised to varying degrees through dominant societal narratives.

The Research Questions

In light of the above information, these research questions emerged and were used to construct this literature review:

Primary

> *What can we learn about social work practice with single fathers from the published research studies?*

Sub Questions

I. *What are the experiences of single fathers within children and families social work practice?*
II. *What are the attitudes and narratives of children and families social workers towards single fathers?*

III. *How do these attitudes and narratives of children and families social workers influence the experiences of single fathers of social work practice?*
IV. *Is children and families social work practice inclusive and supportive of single fathers, and if so what are the key features of inclusive and supportive practice with single fathers?*

Theoretical Standpoint

A theoretical framework assists the definition of relevant research questions and can help provide the scope of a literature review (Paterson 2001). A variety of theoretical frameworks have been used to examine fatherhood, notably feminist theory, sociobiological theory and psychodynamic perspectives (Scourfield 2001). Most social work research into fathers adopts a feminist framework (e.g. Ashley et al. 2006; Featherstone 2009; Gupta and Featherstone 2015). However, a feminist framework can be considered to develop only partial understanding, with its central focus on the omnipotence and domination of men in our society. As a result it is likely that this theory struggles to fully explain the experiences of single fathers, given the likelihood that, in many contexts, they can be considered to hold nonhegemonic masculinities (Smith 1998), be viewed as failed and deviant men through potentially not working and acting as primary caregivers (Doucet 2007), and to engage in traversing female-dominated and multifaceted maternal worlds (Scourfield 2001).

The concept of borderwork was originally envisioned by Thorne (1993), has been briefly discussed in relation to social work by Featherstone (2009), but has been more significantly developed by Doucet. Doucet (2000, 2006, 2007) has written about men as primary caregivers and her work draws attention to the socially constructed gendered norms of parenting and masculinity. She describes borderwork as 'spaces and times where intense gender differences are intensely perceived and experienced' (2007, p. 42). Meanwhile, she conceives border crossing as times where gender boundaries and barriers are deactivated and the gender divide can be successfully crossed. These concepts offer some possibilities as frameworks for considering social work practice with single fathers, their experiences and how they interact with complex maternal-dominated worlds. They will be interweaved through this paper to cultivate understanding of the experiences of single fathers with social work.

Single fathers cross gender borders and enter female-dominated spaces when accessing health visiting services, children's centres or social work support and entering the school playground or discussions about employment and caring responsibilities for example. This can involve moving between equality and difference, and between stereotypically masculine and female roles and tasks. As will be seen below, single fathers can find social work to be excluding and stigmatising, while the narratives of social workers can be based upon common gender stereotypes. The concept of borderwork will be used to articulate some of the links between stereotyping, marginalisation and

heteronormative assumptions about parenting evident within social work practice with single fathers.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was undertaken employing established methods of formulating questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria and a search strategy, followed by quality appraisal and data analysis (Bryman 2014; Gough 2007). This review uses a method of systematic literature reviews that include qualitative as well as quantitative research. As Dixon-Woods and Fitzpatrick (2001) identified a number of years ago 'The argument for giving a place to qualitative research in systematic reviews seems to have been won' (p. 765).

Systematic literature reviews can bring together all known knowledge on a topic area, identify important gaps in the evidence base, provide new analyses and insights yet to be discovered within the available research literature and disseminate findings in an explicit and systematic manner (Grant and Booth 2009; Rutter et al. 2010). This review has aimed to realise these prospective strengths and provide as broad and detailed understanding of social work with single fathers as is possible from the research literature.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were set to focus the review and identify literature that addresses the research questions (Bryman 2014; Kiteley and Stogdon, 2014). No limits were placed on the year or country of the study, but only completed studies were included. The search was limited to literature published in the English language and included only published literature. Search terms were developed and refined after an initial trial search. The final search strings were:

Father* OR Dad* AND Lone OR Single AND Social Work* AND Stud* OR Research

Relevant specialised electronic databases were identified based upon their relevance to the topic and social work. The following nine databases were searched: ASSIA, Social Services Abstracts, IBSS, Social Sciences Citation Index, Campbell Collaboration Library, Cochrane Library, Social Care Online, ZETOC and Ethos. 'Snowballing' and hand searching were employed to potentially identify further studies.

The searches generated a total of 5236 references. 2989 references were excluded after reading the title and a further 2174 after reading the abstract, based on applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. 73 full articles were read as they were considered to be of potential relevance and **seven papers** were consequently finally included. Articles were omitted at this stage due to a lack of focus upon single fathers and/or social work. The included papers were:

Table 1. Search outputs.

Author(s)	Date	Title	Research method(s)	Main findings
Cohen, O., Finzi-Dottan, R. & Tangir-Dotan, G.	2014	*The Fatherhood Experience of Divorced Custodial Fathers in Israel*	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews. Research sample 20 divorced single fathers in Israel (non-random).	Conceptualised single fatherhood as a choice but also constraint and relationships with children's mothers were found to hold significance.
Coles, R.	2003	*Black Single Custodial Fathers: Factors Influencing the Decision to Parent*	Quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews. Research sample 10 African American Fathers (non-random).	Found a distinction between enabling and motivating factors into primary caregiving.
Kullberg, C.	2004	*Work and Social Support: Social Workers' Assessments of Male and Female Clients' Problems and Needs*	Quantitative: Gender-comparative vignette-based questionnaire. Research sample 880 Swedish social workers (random).	Found that practitioners largely conformed to heteronormative expectations of mothers and fathers, linking single fathers' issues more with paid work but single mothers more with social networks.
Kullberg, C.	2005	*Differences in the Seriousness of Problems and Deservingness of Help: Swedish Social Workers' Assessments of Single Mothers and Fathers*	Quantitative: Gender-comparative vignette-based questionnaire. Research sample 880 Swedish social workers (random).	Found that practitioners assessed single fathers as having more serious problems. Its results suggested that support offered followed gender-traditional patterns.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Author(s)	Date	Title	Research method(s)	Main findings
McArthur, M. et al.	2006	*Dad, Where are we Going to Live Now? Exploring Fathers' Experiences of Homelessness*	Qualitative interviews. Research sample five fathers in one Australian territory who had experienced homelessness (non-random).	Identified that the single fathers had a strong desire to be 'good' fathers, but had a certain reluctance to seek professional support.
Miall, C. & March, K	2005	*Community Attitudes toward Birth Fathers' Motives for Adoption Placement and Single Parenting*	Qualitative interviews with sample of 82 'community members' and quantitative questionnaires with a random sample of 706 respondents that was Canada-wide.	Found that community attitudes were more positive towards birth fathers raising their children over adoption.
Saleh, M.	2013	*Child Welfare Professionals' Experiences in Engaging Fathers in Services*	Qualitative focus groups. Research sample 22 child welfare professionals from one US agency (nonrandom).	Significant proportion of the findings not specifically focussed on single fathers. Suggested that child welfare professionals could engage fathers, especially if specifically trained.

Quality appraisal was used to ascertain the credibility, relevance and trustworthiness of the included studies, based upon the weight of evidence approach. Each study was critically appraised and categorised as low, medium or high in terms of trustworthiness (generic criteria), appropriateness (review-specific research design criteria) and relevance (review-specific evidence focus criteria) (Carpenter, Webb, and Bostock 2013).

This review used the hierarchy of evidence proposed by Daly et al. (2007) to assess the research in terms of trustworthiness. This hierarchy grades studies

Table 2. Weight of evidence summary.

Author(s)	Trustworthiness	Appropriateness	Relevance	Overall
Cohen, O., Finzi-Dottan, R. & Tangir-Dotan, G.	Low	Medium	Low	Low-Medium
Coles, R.	Low	Low-Medium	Low	Low
Kullberg, C. (2004)	Medium	Low	Medium-Low	Medium-Low
Kullberg, C. (2005)	Medium	Low	Medium-Low	Medium-Low
McArthur, M. et al.	Low	Low-Medium	Low	Low
Miall, C. & March, K	Medium	Low-Medium	Low	Low-Medium
Saleh, M.	Low-Medium	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium-Low

from the lowest level IV for single case study, descriptive study at level III, conceptual study at level II and at the apex, generalisable studies at level I. Relevance was a significant consideration as a number of the studies included were undertaken to answer quite different questions from those of this review. Therefore, questions of focus and purpose, study design, outcomes measured and analysis of results were attended to by referring to this review's research questions and analysing these criteria accordingly (Rutter et al. 2010). Informed judgements about the relevance of each study were then made.

This review gave equal weighting to each criteria and calculated an average of the three criteria to produce an overall judgement on the strength of evidence each study provides. It is noteworthy that none of the papers selected were rated as high based on any of the criteria. Table 2 provides a weight of evidence summary:

Thematic analysis was the chosen method for data analysis; as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest it can be a valuable method for identifying themes within data, describing the data in great detail and developing fresh interpretations and meaning. The analysis focussed upon a rich depiction of the entire data set, as this is an under-researched area with a scarcity of available research (Braun and Clarke 2006). As Fingeld (2003) suggests the aim of a literature review is to 'produce a new and integrative interpretation of findings that is more substantive than those resulting from individual investigation' (p. 894).

However, like any research, this review has some limitations that mean that the findings should be interpreted appropriately. The reliance upon electronic databases for searching, combined with inclusion criteria including English-only studies, has raised the potential for a bias towards more recent studies from the USA or UK. The studies employed mostly descriptive methods and were mainly based on small and specifically selected participant samples. Thus, their findings are not generalisable. Furthermore, none of the included studies were UK based, meaning that transferring the findings to the UK would need to be undertaken with care.

The Findings

Themes were derived from the data identified as important and relevant to this review (Braun and Clarke 2006). The review found negligible research into social work with single fathers and this should be considered a finding in itself. Of the seven studies, only three were focussed on social work or child welfare services and none of the studies were UK based, instead from countries with different cultural, legal and political contexts influencing social work (Green 2009). This incorporated Sweden, Australia, Canada, USA and Israel.

This review has been conducted in the UK and considers the findings in relation to UK social work policy, practice and research. Two predominant themes were generated from the analysis: misunderstanding and stereotyping of single fathers by social workers; and lack of social workers' engagement and support of single fathers.

Theme 1: Misunderstanding and Stereotyping

Analysis suggested social workers did not genuinely or comprehensively understand the needs of single fathers, rather tending to stereotype along heteronormative and gendered lines. This theme aligns with community and societal attitudes and gendered assumptions about caring, as well as an inability to recognise single fathers as a unique group with unique experiences. This theme was represented in all of the seven selected studies: Cohen, Finzi-Dottan, and Tangir-Dotan (2014), Coles (2003), Kullberg (2004), Kullberg (2005), Mcarthur et al. (2006), Miall and March (2005) and Saleh (2013).

In Coles' study on black single fathers in the USA, subjective data from fathers revealed that they felt services were not designed or organised to support single fathers, rather that they were principally intended for women. For example, one father stated that '… I felt the system doesn't work for fathers as much as for mothers. I can't blame the system, because most of the single parents are mothers. But I definitely feel that it doesn't work for fathers … ' (p. 256).

Kullberg's studies from Sweden analysed responses from a random sample of 880 Swedish social workers to a gender-comparative vignette presenting a single father and single mother facing very similar problems. They found that social workers assessed the single father as having more serious problems and yet less deserving of support. Practitioners were also less likely to assess that the single father had taken sufficient steps to address the presenting issues and more likely to assess him as more responsible for his own situation. Kullberg's (2005) paper states that 'the results lend some support to the hypothesis that single fathers in the situation in question tend to be assessed as being less deserving of help from the social services than single mothers in the same situation' (p. 379). Furthermore, in Kullberg's research, the single mother's social networks were viewed by social workers through a more

holistic lens, with parents, social workers and the social work agency all viewed as more important sources of support than for the single father. For single fathers, a permanent relationship with a partner was viewed as the priority.

Saleh's research with 22 child welfare practitioners in one state in the USA focussed upon their experiences of, and perspectives towards, working with fathers. This revealed that foster carers could hold negative stereotypical views towards single fathers; in one case the foster carer actually tried to restrict the father's contact with his children. Meanwhile, in their study into fathers' pathways into homelessness in an Australian territory McArthur et al found that single fathers held beliefs that services, including social work, were not designed to include them and were inadequate for their needs, 'with the strong suggestion that men were not regarded as potential victims of family and domestic violence' (p. 296). Their study does not detail how services were experienced as inadequate. Cohen, Finzi-Dottan, and Tangir-Dotan's research within Israel identified that single fathers were not conceived as a unique group by professionals. Their research suggested single fatherhood was experienced as a complex mix of reward and responsibility.

The findings that comprise this theme start to portray that the attitudes and narratives of social workers towards single fathers in these studies were at least in part based on common gender stereotypes and that they intentionally or unintentionally served to alienate single fathers from suitable social work support and erect barriers to accessing support. The social workers, according to Kullberg (2005), 'assessed the two sexes according to different standards' (p. 381), and the findings have conveyed that social workers struggled to understand single fathers' strengths and needs.

Theme 2: Lack of Engagement and Support

Theme two suggests that social workers did not successfully engage with single fathers or offer appropriate support. This was evident in the studies of Coles (2003), Kullberg (2004), Kullberg (2005), and McArthur et al. (2006).

In Kullberg's research studies, the support offered to single fathers and mothers tended to follow traditional gender lines. Social workers assessed the single father as primarily needing support to return to work whereas they viewed the single mother's social networks as a more significant issue and assessed that she would benefit more from advice and guidance around social support networks. For example, 84% of respondents assessed that the single mother had serious or very serious problems in terms of her social network vs 69% for the single father.

Notably, despite both facing almost identical issues, social workers recommended less supportive measures for the single father and assessed the single mother as in greater need of support. Kullberg (2005) asserts that his findings

suggest that single fathers were viewed as less deserving of help from the welfare state than single mothers. In McArthur et al.'s study anecdotal reports from single fathers demonstrated a distrust of services and reluctance to seek support from agencies.

As with the first theme, this theme resonates with the welfare state as conceptualised and operated along gendered stereotypes, but also binary lines, with fathers viewed as 'deserving' or 'undeserving', 'good' or 'bad' (Bowl 2001). It raises questions about social work's role as an apparatus of states that continue to be predicated on such archaic gendered norms. It also chimes with the wider literature on social work with fathers. For instance, that social work remains dominated by psychological theories that posit women as primary carers and focusses on mothers, much less so fathers, in this role. In the process, leading to exclusion and alienation of fathers and responsibility for children being placed primarily on mothers (Ashley et al. 2006; Brandon, Philip, and Clifton 2017; Scourfield 2006).

However, a Few Examples of More Inclusive Practice Were Apparent

Saleh's study (2013) shows three examples of potentially more inclusive practice with single fathers. These included child welfare professionals discussing single fathers taking responsibility for the care of their children and challenging negative stereotypical views held by foster carers towards single fathers. One foster carer had set very high expectations that made life difficult for a single father and another had tried to restrict a father's access to his children. These examples of practice demonstrated acknowledgement and acceptance of single fathers' distinctive needs and present as a counter theme to those of misunderstanding and stereotyping and lack of engagement and support.

Discussion

The findings indicate that single fathers remain largely invisible in social work research. Only a small number of papers were considered to be relevant from the literature base and the findings of these papers suggest marginalisation and invisibility of single fathers in practice. Social work is practised at the interface between the public and the private and thus contributes to gender identity discourses (Christie 2006). This review should be located within the discourse, as discussed by Christie (2001) and Featherstone (2009) amongst others, that societal assumptions about the feminised role of caring and lone parenthood can still dominate social work, excluding single fathers in the process. These narratives can stigmatise single fathers in the context of their 'nonmasculine' relationships with their children and as part of a welfare state still predicated on traditional family norms.

The Literature Reviewed Overlooks the Wider Social Context

This review found that the research into social work with single fathers has not effectively considered the array of social influences on single fathers' capacities to parent, failing to explore the links between structural factors, social injustice and social work practice in any meaningful sense. The reviewed literature offered no cogent analysis of how single fathers' personal experiences emerge from public discourses.

Goetz (1997) identifies three main institutional arenas of state, market and community within society and suggests that organisations and social institutions such as the family are formed within these. She argues that these arenas and the institutions within them should be understood as 'frameworks for socially constructed norms which function to limit choice' (p. 6), but frameworks that are open to change. Social work can be conceived as straddling the state and community arenas and it is important to analyse how hospitable these arenas and social work are to single fathers; and how intensely gender differences are perceived and experienced. It is apparent that practice is influenced by normative gendered ideologies that stigmatise, but it remains unclear whether this leads to unequal outcomes for single father families.

Gendered stereotypes and assumptions likely influenced social workers' assessments and narratives in the studies, leading to barriers to support being erected. As Scourfield (2001) suggests gendered identities are constructed in practice and within practice encounters. Single fatherhood raises challenges for socially constructed gendered norms, hegemonic masculinity and how children and families social work is practised. The themes identified in the literature portray that single fathers experience challenging systems and practices when engaging with social work and can experience social work as alienating and unattentive to their holistic needs.

Returning to the Concept of Borderwork

Social work is a female-majority profession (Cree 2001; Christie 2001; Payne 2006; Schaub 2017). This review found that single fathers can be positioned as lone males within predominantly female professional networks, feeling misjudged and marginalised within these contexts. The words of Brandon, Philip, and Clifton (2017) seem relevant here, when they state that: '…the longstanding issue of 'father engagement' is better understood as an interactive two-directional process, rather than a 'problem' with either men or social workers' (p. 3). Clearly the gendered identities of social workers also influence such engagement (Pringle 2001; Scourfield 2001).

Doucet (2006) describes that borderwork can engender conflict and intense feelings, while involving gender boundaries that can be strong and rigid. Through daily interactions and interactions with social work single fathers are

engaging in borderwork and border crossing, when the stakes are often high. They act as primary carers for their children within a female-dominated terrain, under a social gaze dominated by social and community norms on caring and masculinity from which they stray (Doucet 2006; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). They may try to conform to socially acceptable identities and present as especially sensitive to rejection when interacting with our profession. Such rejection will clearly be exacerbated by any fixed or immovable gender borders being erected during assessments or interventions. Borderwork involves role confusion, identity management, othering and potential rejection and this will likely feed into assessments of parenting capacity. These issues can be found in both themes 1 and 2, with single fathers experiencing feelings of othering and rejection by services and the undertaking of gendered assessments by social workers.

Placing These Ideas Within Wider Social Work Debates

Practice with single fathers should be understood within wider debates about the current nature of children and families social work in the UK and indeed abroad, where practice is typically framed within an increasingly unequal society and increasingly bureaucratic and authoritarian systems (Featherstone, Morris, and White 2014; Warner 2015). Children and families social work has established barriers to the involvement of fathers (Brown et al. 2009; Featherstone 2009; Scourfield 2006), despite the exclusion of fathers potentially increasing the risks of abuse (Douglas 2017; Klevens and Leeb 2010) and research indicating that the involvement of fathers can be considered beneficial for children and their development in a variety of ways (Field 2010; Hauari and Hollingworth 2009; Jones 2008). These barriers can make successful border crossing more difficult for single fathers, as illustrated within the literature reviewed and especially theme 2 where support offered to single fathers followed traditional gendered lines for example.

Single fathers who have previously not achieved social status through traditional masculine routes may face compounded stigma and harsh moral judgements of failure as men and fathers when social work intervenes. Ferguson and Hogan (2004) define fathers who are involved with child protection as ‘vulnerable fathers’ (p. 3), with such vulnerability encompassing issues from relationship problems to poverty and social exclusion. This vulnerability may then be amplified or diminished by further intersectionality of advantage/disadvantage through race or sexuality for example. Each single father and their family will therefore likely have different experiences of society, culture and professional interventions.

Single fathers subject to social work interventions, experiencing compounded stigma and moral judgements, may find it even more difficult to successfully engage in borderwork and border crossing. They may consequently

portray protest masculinities where they present as a threat or risk or disengage (Scourfield 2001) and further alienate themselves from support. In effect, they are out of step with societal, community and social work norms and therefore potentially viewed with suspicion and self-suspicion. Within the literature, there was evidence of this in Cole's, Kullberg's and McArthur et al.'s studies.

Which Leads to Some Questions About Practice

The complex interactions between masculinity, status, intersectionality, vulnerability and marginalising or authoritarian systems need to be understood to develop inclusive practice. Therefore, mutually influencing micro-level identities and interactions need to be linked with macro-level conditions and inequalities to analyse and understand the experiences of single fathers within social work and how their masculinities are being constructed in practice. Based on the literature reviewed, there must be concern that their choices and chances are limited through borders and barriers being constructed within the institutional arenas of state and community that shape their needs and how social work responds. A pertinent question is whether children and families social work is looking to address such stigma and disadvantage, failing to challenge and address them, or in fact amplifying them. The literature reviewed mainly suggests the last of these options.

A further question is whether we are assessing and supporting single fathers through maternal lenses and female-centred practices (Doucet 2007), reinforcing the othering and potential rejection that constitute aspects of borderwork. Doucet (2006) suggests that fathers acting as primary carers tend to show different types of nurture, for example through more playfulness. Further, that they engage in more physical activities with their children, with more inherent risks. In our currently risk averse professional context do assessments fairly capture these styles of care? Certainly, from the literature reviewed, social workers' assessments and views tended to reflect gendered and heteronormative assumptions about men and caring. If assessments do not, the question needs to be asked as to how single fathers' narratives can be heard and social work can develop more inclusive and less judgemental practice.

More Inclusive Practice?

The pockets of potentially more inclusive and nonjudgemental practice with single fathers recognised in Saleh's study are therefore clearly worthy of discussion. These included one single father actively engaging with social work support and social workers respectfully challenging prospective single fathers about their own gendered views of caregiving.

Writers such as Featherstone (2009) and Ashley et al. (2006) have proposed that father-inclusive practice is influenced by institutional norms and practitioners' constructions of gender and parenting. This was indicated within theme 2, where such norms and constructions fostered single father-exclusive practice. Father-inclusive practice for single or other fathers can be understood to feature practical support, a sense of collaboration and the promotion of more expressive and self-aware masculinities (Ashley et al. 2006; Ferguson and Hogan 2004). It is only then that the conditions for successful border crossing can be supported, where single fathers can, as Doucet (2006) articulates, 'challenge the oppositional structure of traditional gender arrangements around parenting' (p. 201). Successful border crossing requires social acceptance, moral verification and challenging stereotypical suspicions of men as primary caregivers (Doucet 2006).

Within the literature reviewed, Coles suggests that practitioners should directly target single fathers to inform them about available support services. She also recommends that non-resident fathers should be approached as potential carers for their children, adding that few parents fall simply into a good or bad category. Meanwhile, Cohen, Finzi-Dottan and Tangir-Dotan recommend that single fathers need to be recognised as a unique group with unique paternal identities, and that through such recognition professionals can focus more effectively on their needs. These suggestions should arguably form part of a systemic change in social work practice where support to single fathers can start to act as a bridge to more comfortable and stress-free engagement with female-dominated professional networks of support, parenting communities and community/societal networks.

The engagement of single fathers should form part of everyday practice, but this requires structural, cultural and individual changes, including challenging widespread gender stereotypes and assumptions (Brandon, Philip and Clifton 2017). Inclusive and gender-sensitive social work with single fathers would appreciate the roles of borderwork and stigma in life chances and engagement with services, while being alert to gender theorising (Scourfield 2001); recognising patriarchal privilege while engaging with the gender complexities and contradictions posed by single fatherhood.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This literature review has identified a neglected research area and shown that there is a clear absence of systematic knowledge about social work practice with single fathers to draw any clear conclusions about their experiences with children and families social work, the nature and quality of practice or whether practice is inclusive and supportive. Thus, further primary empirical research is recommended.

The literature portrayed that practice tends to exclude and marginalise single fathers and that social workers generally did not effectively understand

their needs or successfully engage with them. Within this paper, these themes have been related to the concept of borderwork. As there has been negligible empirical research into this area, practitioners have little research evidence to inform their practice, leading to few examples of lessons being applied in practice. It appears a negative cycle has therefore been established, where research is not informing practice and practice is not informing research.

Thus, it can be argued that further in-depth qualitative research should be undertaken to explore single fathers' experiences of social work and how gendered stereotypes and stigma may influence policy and practice. Such research could also explore how practitioners can be supported to effectively work with single fathers and whether social work recognises potential distinctive parenting styles of single fathers in assessments and interventions. Perhaps most importantly, as Smith (2009) proposes, any future research should ask questions of what changes can be anticipated if it is undertaken and how can these changes be taken forward.

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