

Fathers at Work: A Ghost in the Organizational Machine

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This article first provides a review of fatherhood in the gender and organization literature on work and family, and the body and (in)visibility. It observes how organizational assumptions which frame fathers as breadwinners, ignoring their paternal role, remain extraordinarily persistent because policies (no matter how long established) do not necessarily change social attitudes and behaviours. The article then draws upon original qualitative data to demonstrate how while male workers may feel valued as employees, they often feel invisible at work in their paternal role. Fathers perceive that, while family-friendly policies might in theory be available to 'parents' these are in practice targeted at working mothers. The article considers why working men's paternity is so often ignored, as though fathers are a ghost in the organizational machine. A recommendation for the establishment of a fatherhood and motherhood passport is made.

Keywords: fatherhood, work, gender, family, invisible, machine

Introduction

Whilst motherhood has historically been seen as a central aspect of feminine identities, fatherhood has always competed with other elements in the constitution of masculinity, particularly with paid work. (Halford, 2006, p. 385)

When I see ghosts they look perfectly real and solid — like a living human being. They are not misty; I can't see through them; they don't wear sheets or bloody mummy bandages. They just look like ordinary people ... and sometimes it is hard to tell who is a ghost. (Woodyard, 2010)

In organizations, employed men are defined primarily through their paid work: as managers, workers or team players (Kimmel, 1993; Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011). Despite an increasing plethora of work-life balance policies aimed at raising the visibility of paternal responsibility, men with children remain relatively invisible at work in their role as fathers (Gatrell, 2005; Holter, 2007; Kimmel, 1993). Even in Scandinavian countries, where parenthood is politicized in order to facilitate fathers' greater engagement in childcare, organizational expectations about the division of household and paid labour between couples may still assume gendered patterns of behaviour, with fathers as main providers and mothers as principal child-carers (Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006; Lammi-Taskula, 2006).

Drawing upon qualitative research data from a UK study we argue here that, despite social policy attempts to open up work-life balance initiatives so that men as well as women may combine employment with childcare, fatherhood often remains invisible in organizational contexts. We show how, although paternity is life-changing for many men (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), it often

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remains ignored in professional spheres (Holter, 2007; Lewis, 2009). In practice it appears that — despite social policies targeting employed men and the increasing focus on fathers in gender and social policy research — fathers' work–family needs are often unacknowledged, especially in comparison with maternal requirements (Holter, 2007; Tracy and Rivera, 2010). In the context of their employment, fathers remain metaphorically, a 'ghost' within the organizational 'machine'.¹ The association between organizations and machines has a well-established scholarly and literary history; from Blake's 'dark, Satanic mills' (cited in Fuller, 2000, p. 295) to Weber's admonition of overtly rationalist capitalist institutions (cited in Brubaker, 1984).

The article first outlines the current cultural context in which working fathers find themselves, then reviews the extent and nature of the gender and organization literature on work and the family. We suggest that, although existing scholarship on fathers (especially in gender and social policy arenas) has begun to address working fathers' role as both parents and employees, further research is nevertheless required to reflect men's significance as fathers within both home and organizational settings.

A related review of this literature on parenting, the corporeal body and paternal (in)visibility is then provided, in order to secure a sound theoretical base for our empirical observations that while men in organizations are most certainly visible, fatherhood remains relatively invisible at work. This argument is then supported with original, qualitative interview data drawn from 100 employed fathers from two large UK organizations (one private, one public sector), culminating in the call for more pronounced scholarly and organizational awareness of paternity, to render visible these paternal 'ghosts' in organizational machines.

The cultural context of working fathers

Western perceptions of fatherhood have shifted dramatically over the past two hundred years. This is tracked in Burnett *et al.*'s (2010a, p. 160) discussion and presentation of their model of the cultural transitions of fatherhood that outlines the temporal developments in paternal engagement since the late 1800s. In terms of generic, culturally sanctioned images of identity, fatherhood has transitioned from the 19th century image of the colonial father: the 'moral overseers' who worked at home but remained distanced from their offspring; and the distant breadwinner: who tended to work away from home; to the aloof but present gender role model of the early 20th century: fathers who taught their children how to be, or interact with, men by way of example and finally the co-parent: fathers who, in response to the increasing prominence of gender equality movements, shouldered a greater proportion of childcare responsibilities. Recently, these later models been extended (predominantly in terms of idealized imagery rather than universal behaviour) to include the iconography of the flexible father who is expected to mediate effectively between family and employment responsibility using the intermediary tool of flexible working practices (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Accordingly, in recent years there have been many policy advances dedicated to enabling working parents — both mothers and fathers — to cater for the needs of their families, while maintaining gainful employment. These came about, in part, as a reaction to research demonstrating the link between increased pressures at work and the resultant stress exerted upon parents' relationships with each other and their children (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Kossek *et al.*, 2011; Worrall and Cooper, 1999). The notions of parenting and work are thus at the forefront of contemporary political and organizational agendas (Lewis and Cooper, 1999, 2005; Swan and Cooper, 2005). Arrays of deliberately flexible working practices have thereby been lauded as 'key elements within family and employment policy ... in relation to desires to facilitate improved work–life balance' (Burnett *et al.*, 2010a, p. 158).

Yet in practice, most workplace initiatives, intended to elicit greater flexibility in order to ease and facilitate the parental provision of childcare, appear still to be aimed at mothers rather than fathers. This is because the concept of parenting is hard to disentangle from traditional, 'socially embedded assumptions regarding the embodied roles which [parents] are oft-expected to play' (Burnett *et al.*, 2010a, p. 159). While work–family policies typically proclaim themselves to be gender-neutral, many are still (perhaps inadvertently) developed and written to be utilised in conjunction

with motherhood, rather than fatherhood (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009, p. 10; Lewis *et al.*, 2007; North West Women and Work Task Force, 2010, p. 1). In organizational contexts, such policies have been shown to be predicated on underlying but prevailing cultural assumptions that women, rather than men, will relegate themselves to the status of dependent second income earners or non-earners in order to meet their family commitments (Gatrell and Cooper, 2008; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lewis and Cooper, 2005).

Furthermore, in theory, flexible working offers an intricate bundle of practicable arrangements covering job sharing, flexi-time, flexi-space and homeworking (Hill *et al.*, 2001). In practice, however, (with exceptions such as the homeworking arrangements detailed in Halford's 2006 study) organizations tend predominantly to utilise 'the double-edged opportunity of reducing [typically female] employees' contractual hours to part-time working' (Burnett *et al.*, 2010a, p. 158). Part-time working has been symptomatically linked to significant numbers of mothers enduring lower pay and their reduced capacity for career advancement (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gatrell, 2007a; Williams, 2000). Nevertheless, acknowledging the damage it can wreak upon women's careers, we suggest that part-time working remains problematic from the perspective of equality at work if such opportunities for flexibility are not offered to fathers, despite the present rhetorical and ideological theory that these should be offered to 'parents' (Hochschild, 1997).

Indeed, it could be seen as ironic that, across the employment spectrum in Britain at least, fathers, especially white-collar middle class men whose implicit social capital renders them most likely to be able to embrace the culturally desired flexible image, are reported to show greater degrees of inflexible presenteeism and work longer hours than their peers (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001, p. 384; Halford, 2006, p. 387; Hearn and Pringle, 2006). Paternal presenteeism is heightened even further if the men in question are responsible for dependent infants, as these fathers tend to work more intensely and traditionally at this point than at any other in their careers (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

Özbilgin *et al.* (2011) have observed that the idea that fathers in organizations are more visible as employees than fathers is reflected in the general literature on management. While scholarship that focuses specifically on gender, masculinities and social policy is beginning to frame employed men as both workers and as fathers (for example, Hearn and Pringle, 2006) more general management studies continue to define men through their paid work. Even if the topic is work-life balance, men in organizations are often visible in management research mainly as breadwinners and less often as engaged fathers (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011). Such scholarly characterizations of men as workers (but not fathers), combined with the lack of organizational focus on paternity, negatively affects men's ability to contribute as much as they might wish to raising their children. Interactional fathers remain metaphorical ghosts in organizational machines (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011; Holter, 2007; Tracy and Rivera, 2010).

At this point it is important to acknowledge that we do not argue that mothers 'have it all' due to their more pervasive, historical access to flexibility, nor indeed that men are the forsaken sex. Rather, we suggest that the organizational positioning of employed fathers as metaphorical ghosts in the machine leaves the lion(ess) share of direct and 'ancillary' childcare to be mopped up by mothers (Burnett *et al.*, 2010b, p. 168). As a consequence, it tends to be mothers who sacrifice career progression, drop out of the workforce entirely or return on a part-time basis only (Blair-Loy, 2003). In order to begin to redress this imbalance, impacting punitively upon both fathers and mothers, not to mention the family unit as a whole, there now follows a review of the gender and organization literature, split into two parts. The first outlines what has been written by scholars about fathers in the context of work and family, and the second looks at bodies and (in)visibility.

The working fathers' literature

Work and family responsibilities, and their consolidation under the mantle 'work-life balance' are the focus of much scholarly attention. As declared by Fagan and Press, 'parenting and paid work demands continue to challenge ... families in the 21st century, [and] researchers are increasingly interested in studying the intersection of work and family' (2008, p. 1136). There is an array of

publications detailing the dynamics between work and family life across a diverse range of themes and classifications, such as the economy (Fleetwood, 2007; McDowell, 2004; Perrons, 2003); employment (Berman, 2002; Byrne, 2005; Cohen *et al.*, 2009); the family (Caproni, 2004; Greenhaus and Powell, 2003; Hill *et al.*, 2001; Tausig and Fenwick, 2001); human resources (Felstead *et al.*, 2002; Hyman and Summers, 2004; Lockwood, 2003); sociology (Bond, 2004; Campbell Clark, 2000, 2001; Warren, 2004) and women (Doherty, 2004; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Similarly, flexible working practices have also been thoroughly considered in relation to work organization (Gittleman *et al.*, 1998; Pil and Macduffie, 1996; Smith, 1997); techniques (Kathuria and Partovi, 1999; Kalleberg, 2000; Osterman, 1994); trade unions (Croucher and Brewster, 1998; McNabb and Whitfield, 1997; Mueller, 1992) and family life (Lu *et al.*, 2008; Papalexandris and Kramar, 1997; Staines and Pleck, 1986).

However, a conspicuous absence has been observed within such interests. As noted by Stout in the *Wall Street Journal*:

There has been a lot of press, books and talk-show chatter recently about mothers on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The endless pressures of drop-offs, pick-ups, school work and sports practice along with jobs (if they have them) and other household obligations has spawned a new genre of pop culture with TV shows like 'Desperate Housewives ... There is [though] something missing in much of this talk: fathers. (2005: D4)

Amongst the general arena of management and organization research, with certain exceptions (for example, Kimmel, 1993), even studies that purport to focus on work and family either fail to acknowledge the significance of working fathers or play down paternal responsibilities for childcare (as noted by Tracy and Rivera, 2010). In comparison with the maternal care agenda, paternal involvement is often rendered invisible. When fathers are visible, particularly in the arena of organizational psychology, they are often depicted as stereotypically heterosexual, married, work-oriented and unlikely to prioritise childcare (which is interpreted as an added pressure in men's lives due to women's increased labour market participation [Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985]). As Özbilgin *et al.* (2011, p. 12) observe in their review of work–life balance literature: 'the management of the work–life interface is implicitly rendered a women's issue ... the work–life experiences of men should be brought into the mainstream of work–life research, rather than remaining at the margins'.²

In observing the invisibility of fatherhood in management research it is not our intention to downplay the significance of gender and social policy literature on fathers. This literature does demonstrate an increasing focus on fatherhood and paid work, and on the problem of what Gatrell (2005) calls invisible fatherhood. Building upon earlier work by, for example, Lewis (1986), sociological research on fathers explores the complex relationships between the state, families and social policy across Europe and the USA (see, for example, Dermott, 2008; Featherstone, 2009; Lewis, 2009; O'Brien and Moss, 2009; O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003; Scott *et al.*, 2010). Thus, for example, Holter (2007, p. 425) renders more visible the problems faced by employed fathers by considering how fathers who desire deeper engagement with childcare may feel invisible at work because, although some men are developing more relational forms of masculinity in their homes, many still battle with deeply ingrained organizational presumptions about breadwinner masculinities.

In agreement with Holter's observations both Miller (2010) and Tracy and Rivera (2010) observe that fathers may be discouraged by employers from prioritizing childcare. Miller's study shows there is a disparity between fathers' intention to engage with childcare and the lack of organizational support offered to new fathers. Similarly, Tracy and Rivera reveal that management assumptions render fathers valuable as economic providers but invisible as fathers, so that paternal needs or desires to access family-friendly working are ignored at work, and in their role as fathers, men remain metaphorical ghosts in the organizational machine. Focusing on working fathers, Cabrera *et al.* (2000) discuss the evolution of 'ideal' fatherly subject positions in relation to shifting employment and caring trends in the 21st century:

[Presently] the structures and functions of family life are rapidly changing ... [leading to] different expectations and beliefs about the roles of fathers (p. 132)... The next generation of boys and girls

will be more likely to experience mothers who work full time outside the home and fathers who cook dinner. (p. 133)

Collier continues this cultural analysis of working fathers by assessing their macro-political appropriation within 'the dominant welfare discourse' and the extent to which fatherhood has recently become visible in governmental legislation (2001, p. 541). He ultimately calls for the current political and sociological debates on working men with children to be embedded in a broader understanding of the contemporary 'process of change' being enacted across the 'normal chaos' of 'employment, family life, sexuality, sexual identity and commitment, and relationships between adults and children' (2001, p. 523).

Similarly, Eggebeen and Knoester, in a quantitative study drawing upon government statistics (sample size 5226) examine how paternal engagement among resident fathers compares with that of non-resident fathers. This study attends to the differences witnessed in the complexities of 'social connections, family relationships and work behaviour' among this group (2001, p. 381). They observe how 'fathers evidence greater attachment to the labor force or greater commitment to their careers out of a sense of responsibility to provide for their children' (2001, p. 384); yet ironically they also find that 'happiness, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction ... are more rooted in the family roles of men than their work roles' (2001, p. 382). In keeping with Miller's 2010 findings, this indicates that some employed fathers might desire a more visible and involved parenting role than is currently available to them.

Halford offers further valuable insight into how 'everyday fathering practices' are 'underpinned by the spatial separation of work from home' (2006, p. 383). In a qualitative study using primary data (sample size 48) she considers the impact of homeworking on paternal engagement with children. Halford notes that certain organizations feel threatened if men are visible in their role as fathers because the expression of men's commitment to a realm other than that of work represents an erosion of the employers' power base. 'New accommodations' (2006, p. 383) for working fathers are emerging; however, they are still commonly underpinned by a traditionally gendered organizational allowance for the distribution of paid and domestic labour.

A cross-national review co-ordinated by O'Brien and Moss (2009), which covers a range of countries including Europe, Australia, the Russian Federation and the USA, demonstrates that work-family policy and paternal take-up varies according to place. However, no matter how generous or otherwise policies may be, gendered assumptions about the division of labour between mothers and fathers can still transcend national boundaries. As Fusulier (2009, p. 24) observes (referring specifically to Belgium); managing the relationship between family and work' falls mainly to women:

this results in part from an economic calculation, but it often hides a gendered social structure.... Socio-culturally, the main responsibility for family duties is still left to women, which is ipso facto an obstacle for men who wish to invest more in parenthood.

On a more optimistic note Brandth and Kvande (2001) investigate the flexible working initiatives available to fathers in the 'cutting edge ... egalitarian society' of Norway (p. 251). They report how, upon the birth of a child, governmentally legislated efforts are made to distribute parental workplace benefits equally, in order to 'strengthen the father-child relationship' (2001, p. 252). In a subsequent, related article, Brandth and Kvande (2002, p. 186) discuss how men construct 'different fatherhood practices' in relation to parental leave options. Outlining how the schemes are linked to heightened 'reflexivity', they say that fathers' actions are not typically dictated by pre-existing norms and traditions (2002, p. 188), but by their individual work and family contexts. Elaborating on this point, Kvande (2005) states that such systems represent the cultural acknowledgement that: 'in addition to being *working bodies*, fathers' bodies are also *caring bodies*' (p. 75, emphasis in original). The Norwegian state's deliberate intervention and its manifestation in organizational practice and recognition in scholarship demonstrate the theoretical possibilities of pursuing such change in other cultural environments.

Yet, even in Scandinavia (where work–family policies aimed at promoting gender equality have survived over many years despite economic and demographic pressures), mothers may still be assumed to be the lead child-carers. Ellingsaeter and Leira's 2006 collection of papers on the complexities of relationships between work, family and state considers how far Scandinavian policies may be considered a 'success story' as far as gender equality is concerned. The authors conclude that organizational assumptions that position men as breadwinners, rather than visibly framing them as fathers, remain extraordinarily persistent. This is because policies, no matter how long established, do not necessarily change social attitudes and behaviour. Thus, for example, as Lammi-Taskula (2006) observes, attempts to encourage (or even enforce) paternal leave entitlements are only partially effective due to 'prevailing conceptions of good motherhood' that emphasise, at the expense of paternal engagement, the requirement for mothers to be visible as carers. Narratives of good mothering, even in Scandinavia, 'do not encourage mothers to leave a baby in the father's care (page 93–4). It is important to acknowledge here that some mothers are ambivalent about paternal engagement with children, especially in situations where fathers have been shown to draw on their paternity as a source of power in order to weaken women's position within the household (Gatrell, 2007c; Smart and Neale, 1999).

Fathers are often, then, in the context of organizational expectations about men's roles, shown to be less visible than mothers (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011). Fathers are also seen within gender and social policy research on work and family to be often invisible in the context of employment, in a manner which does not apply to mothers.

Working fathers in absentia

Corresponding with the preceding review, this section analyses gender and organization literature concerned with bodies and (in)visibility. The designation of fathers as in absentia does not denote those who happen to reside separately from their children or who have no active financial or emotional involvement with them. Rather, it relates to the degree of recognition working fathers are afforded in scholarly and policy discourses, which foreground the body in relation to the care required by dependent children; reiterating that in such arenas fatherhood also, often, tends to remain invisible.

Many academic studies concerned with parenting focus upon women's unique biological capacity for reproduction and the resultant impact of employer attitudes towards the 'maternal body' on women's careers (Gatrell, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2010). For example, the medically recommended act of breastfeeding is a task that can, typically, only be carried out by a mother, unless milk is expressed. But new mothers who work are often subjected to unjust hostility when breastfeeding in the workplace and it has even been shown to be deliberately discouraged by certain employers (Galtry, 1997; Gatrell, 2007b; Kitlinger, 2005; McKinlay and Hyde, 2004). What Gatrell (2005) describes as the hard labour of employed parenthood is thus treated almost exclusively as residing within the domain of the mother; while, as discussed above, fathers are still widely assumed to be principally concerned with the iconic activity of breadwinning and, as such, as being unaffected by the visible bodily and domestic responsibilities of having children (Lyng, 2010; Tracy and Rivera, 2010).

Burnett *et al.* (2010a) suggest that maternity has taken centre place in gender and organization debates on the body and (in)visibility because, despite over 30 years of equal opportunities legislation, the onset of parenthood continues to render employed mothers more vulnerable than fathers to workplace discrimination. In 2007 the British Government report *Fairness and Freedom* identified motherhood as the factor which, 'above all', leads to the unfair treatment of women in labour markets (Equalities Review, 2007, p. 66). Further, a number of employers unfairly assume there is a correlation between maternity and reduced work-orientation and competencies (Blair-Loy, 2003; Cockburn, 2002; Collinson, 2000; Cooper and Davidson, 1982). Lyng (2010, p. 95) suggests that this is due to organizational beliefs that mothers cannot maintain 'up-and-go-career' trajectories, especially in professional and managerial settings (Haynes, 2008a, 2008b; Gatrell, 2011). Visibly pregnant and newly

maternal bodies at work can evoke discomfort among colleagues, employers and even other employed mothers (Acker, 2003; Longhurst, 2001; Mäkelä, 2005; Warren and Brewis, 2004). Despite evidence that mothers continue to prioritise their paid work during periods of ill-health and physical exhaustion, women's 'maternal bodies' are then often unfairly associated with unreliability, unpredictability, irrationality and poor health (Hopfl and Hornby Atkinson, 2000; Longhurst, 2001, 2008; Warren and Brewis, 2004).

Conversely, common perceptions of the masculine body are a significant benefit to men in relation to their potential for career progression. Men are assumed by employers to be healthy, rational, reliable and highly committed (Hopfl and Hornby Atkinson, 2000): literally embodying the norm at work (Hausman, 2004). While such social expectations about men's healthy minds and bodies have been shown to disadvantage those who do not easily meet such criteria, for example, in the case of disability (Connell, 2005), the correlation between masculinity and ideal workers has led to men being 'marked as a gendered and privileged group' (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p. 4). As such, male workers are more likely than women (and particularly mothers) to be highly visible when it comes to being singled out for reward and remuneration.

However, while these common cultural assumptions frame men, rather than women, as both idealized and highly visible workers, such discourses may disadvantage those who are fathers as they result in male workers being excluded from family-oriented policies. As discussed above, and as observed by Gatrell (2005, 2008), Lyng (2010) and Tracy and Rivera (2010), even in organizations where work-life balance policies are well established, senior managers often assume that family-friendly initiatives apply only to women, and men neither desire nor need access to them. As a result, mothers are assumed to be responsible for obligations of care in the home (Gershuny, 1997; Gershuny *et al.*, 1994; Morgan, 1996) and motherhood is highly visible. Thus, mothers are at the centre of work and family scholarly and policy debates; while fatherhood becomes invisible and men are assumed at best to be secondary parents or helpers (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Gregory and Milner, 2009, 2011; Maushart, 2002; Miller, 2010; Morgan, 1996). Arguably, this compounds the situation whereby 'policies promoting fathercare are more significant on the symbolic level of gender relations than on the level of actual division of labour between mothers and fathers' (Lammi-Taskula, 2006, p. 95) and it perpetuates organizational assumptions that — at least in their role as fathers — men should be neither seen nor heard.

Thus, while employed men may be pan-visible when it comes to awarding workplace privileges, promotions and reserved places in management hierarchies (Puwar, 2004), the organizational recognition of fathers' role as carers of children is largely absent and fathers at work remain invisible — like metaphorical ghosts in the organizational machine.

Studying working fathers

The above reviews of gender and organization literatures will now be contextualized with excerpts from original qualitative data drawn from an empirical study undertaken in the UK between 2009 and 2011, on the impact of flexibility on the well-being of fathers in employment. Initially in 2009 over 1,100 working fathers were enrolled onto a stress evaluation survey 'ASSET' (Donald *et al.*, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2005); producing detailed demographic, psychological and physiological data survey. Fathers were drawn from two UK based organizations (a large public-sector employer and an internationally known private-sector company). Jointly these organizations employ over 40,000 staff across multiple sites spanning a range of income levels from high to low, and both offer similar and apparently generous opportunities for family-friendly and flexible working. All survey data was completely anonymized and although the employing organization for each respondent was known to the researchers, no individually identifiable personal details were held.

Statistical analysis of this quantitative data revealed that, while fathers acknowledged apparently excellent work-family initiatives on offer within each organization, many felt excluded or discouraged from accessing these opportunities. In order to understand why fathers felt thus discouraged, we supplemented our survey research with a series of qualitative multi-user (audio only)

tele-conference focus groups in 2010, recruited from the same organizations, in which we enquired how easily or otherwise fathers experienced accessing and utilizing the flexible working options on offer within their organizations. It is upon this qualitative data which we now draw.

The opportunity for working fathers to sign up to these tele-conferences was presented within each organization within an electronic 'Call For Fathers' hotlink. Fathers signed in to chosen sessions via a secure web-link (independent from either their employers or the researching university) against an available time-slot. One hundred fathers contributed, all of whom were guaranteed anonymity as only first names (or pseudonyms) were required for these audio only tele-conferences. The qualitative tele-conferences ran for fifteen available sessions for each organization (i.e. 30 tele-conferences in total), each of which were kept separate from one another. In contrast to Halford's (2006) study on homeworkers, we did not target one particular group of workers, but sought participation from all employed fathers within the two organizations.

Each session catered for between two and eight fathers, and was chaired by at least one member of the research team, who took responsibility for outlining and orchestrating the proceedings for all participants. To protect anonymity we did not ask for personal details from respondents, thus while some volunteered information about posts and salary (and while this information indicated a range across low and higher incomes) we did not request details regarding age, ethnicity, seniority, or pay and benefits, across the sample. The tele-con facility enabled participants to join from any location without prolonged periods of time away from work and, again, without compromising anonymity because—unless this information was offered—we did not know from which regional area they hailed. All of the sign-up information was subsequently deleted and each tele-conference was transcribed and analysed, searching for key themes, using the computer package Nvivo.

The promise of anonymity produced an excellent response to our call, however it could also be seen as a (necessary) limitation within the research design as it means we are unable to draw comparisons relating to region and/or class within the qualitative data (Kuramoto and Dean, 1993; Tolhurst and Dean, 2004, p. 2).

Invisible fathers

From the onset of the research project, it became evident that male employees with children did not consider themselves to be overtly visible as fathers, but rather in their roles as employees. This view was shared across both the public and the private organization and demonstrated a remarkable commonality in attitudes between public and private sector. As encapsulated by an employee from the private sector company:

My manager knows [I am a father] because I've told him, but above that I don't think they know anything to be honest. That's not really an issue they bother with in the slightest.

Likewise, a father from the public sector organization said: 'As for being a father: is it a visible commodity at work? No, I don't think so ... I think I'm seen as the role. And that's as a Manager'.

The qualitative findings generated three key contexts that appeared to render employed men's paternity invisible, or 'ghostly', within their employing organizations. Based on the qualitative research data generated, these can be understood in terms of the role of line managers; the gender disparity between how men and women are perceived to be treated; and the impact of peer relations.

Line managers

For fathers wishing to structure a balance between paid work and childcare/familial responsibilities, either through formal flexibility or merely having their family-life acknowledged, a common theme throughout the research was the facilitating role (or otherwise) of line managers (Gregory and Milner, 2009). Irrespective of organizations' apparently generous policies on the right to request flexible working (and regardless of whether these were public or private sector), it was predominantly an

individual's immediate supervisor who enabled or blocked access. Encouragingly, some fathers across both the public and private sector had a personal relationship with their immediate superior sufficiently conducive to expedite amenable arrangements. A sympathetic line-manager would often champion the employee's request, seeking ratification on their behalf with the higher echelons of the organization.

I talked it over with the new manager just to get a feel for how they felt about it and my particular situation ... and see what reaction I got. I suppose I've been quite lucky really in the managers I've had over the last couple of years who have been very flexible.

However, not all working fathers were so fortunate, as demonstrated by another from the same organization as the individual quoted above: 'My current boss doesn't have children ... her eyes glaze over if you say anything about your family'.

It was strongly asserted by fathers working under an unsupportive supervisor, that a 'deliberate blind-eye' or 'wilful ignorance' to their paternal role was a near insurmountable hindrance to their self-perceived ability to access their right to request flexibility at higher levels. The adage 'I didn't want to rock the boat' was iterated by several; who felt that without the support of their line-manager, seeking flexibility would likely cause more problems than they already faced. This is in keeping with the findings of Tracy and Rivera (2010) who observe how senior managers may in practice block men's access to flexible or family friendly working—no matter how generous organizational policies may appear.

Similarly across both organizations, even for those men who in theory had been able to secure flexible options, there was limited confidence regarding whether supervisors would honour these:

I work what is laughingly referred to as 'gentleman's hours'; which means you work until the work is done: only of course the work is never done. We are entitled to Time Off In Lieu with the discretion of your manager. I've got 5 weeks off I can formally request [from my supervisor]. But if it would be granted or not is [hesitates] ... questionable.

In common with the mothers in Gatrell's (2005) research, men who were reliant upon external childcare arrangements such as nursery and after school clubs experienced a lack of understanding from line managers when they had to leave work to collect children—even if they had been in the office for full days: 'I have to say: I will be finishing work at 6 o'clock regardless of what I've got to do because I've got to pick up the kids from nursery'.

This is not to denigrate line managers as uncaring gate-keepers, preventing fathers from utilising their right to balance work and family commitments, but rather to highlight how the formal organizational instantiation of family-friendly policies does not automatically result in their implementation: despite paper policies, working fathers can still remain invisible.

Gender disparity

The second, related, theme to emerge from the research data was confirmation of the previously discussed disparity between how men and women are treated by their organizations. There were a few surprising results, with a minority of male employees with family commitments receiving preferential treatment in comparison to mothers. One participant in particular described how his line-manager had thoroughly examined how they could: '[B]est deliver my work and also [do the best] for my son'. While his wife, making similar requests to her employer, was informed less helpfully: 'Oh, you women are always making a fuss about kids!'

However, far more common were the recounts by fathers within both organizations who perceived that their experiences of requesting to alter work patterns to care for children were not taken seriously because fathers' needs were considered neither relevant nor necessary in comparison with mothers' requirements. In accordance with the predictions of Tracy and Rivera (2010), fathers in

our study perceived themselves to be invisible compared with employed mothers because, as explained by private sector worker Phil: 'Quite frankly: if you're a father you're not seen in the same way as a mother'.

Public-sector employee Mike recounted similar views:

I asked for a period of unpaid leave ... to look after children. It raised more eyebrows than rounds of applause. I think mothers have still got the positive image as carers.

Mike's experiences were correlated by those of Joe, a private sector father, who suggested:

I think [my employer] views fathers less seriously as parents than mothers. There's kind of an inbuilt perception that a mother is the main parent and the father is something else; who might occasionally do the run to the swimming pool, but not much more.

Some line managers were so opposed to the idea of fathers' working flexibly that they were not prepared even to negotiate the possibility, as public sector worker Nick recounted: 'My manager was completely anti the idea—in fact she [completely] refused to discuss it'.

While not universal, such organizational dismissal of the familial needs of fathers, and assumption that the required care will be 'mopped up' by mothers (recall Burnett *et al.*, 2010b, p. 168 cited above), appeared to be reflected in the manner in which human resources advisers interpreted organizational policy. A line-manager from the private sector explained how the formal guidance he received from his Human Resources function: 'concentrated on the mother having the time off'.

Confirming that while paternity leave and the right to request flexibility had been extended by legislation, driving the emerging *flexible father* iconography discussed above, this manager noted: 'things are still geared for mums and we need to shift more in the other direction'.

Paternal invisibility at work posed a particular problem for single fathers. Tim describes how:

'Being recognized as a single parent father is [difficult] because people look at you as if you've grown two heads like: 'But where's the mother?' So [my being the sole carer] does take a bit of explaining for people to actually kind of get their heads round'.

Similarly Joe recounted his view that he was regarded as 'unusual' due to his status as a single father, which he believe compromised his image as a committed worker:

I certainly have the perception that if you're a father with, you know, unusual child care responsibility i.e. it's predominantly down to **you**, that's 'unusual'. And then I think people think, you know, that you're maybe not as committed to your job as other people are.

Peer relations

Having demonstrated how working fathers perceive themselves as invisible compared with mothers; the final prominent theme to emerge from the data relates to how fathers at work are treated by their peers. It is important to acknowledge how a small number of fathers who were seen to prioritise childcare (often by working flexibly) perceived some colleagues to be supportive. For example Mac, an employee from the public sector explained that he still receives: 'strange looks at playschool because all the other parents doing the drop-off are mums' but appeared confident that he had been able to demonstrate to colleagues his ability to perform equally despite alternate work patterns.

Mac, however, was the exception and most fathers perceived that highlighting the requirements (or even existence of) dependent children could cause then professional problems. Many encountered prejudice from fellow employees of an equivalent hierarchical level who: 'didn't have kids ... or were more mature, or single', and were thus 'unburdened' with dependents.

Some participants even confessed to being treated as though they were 'second class' or 'part-time' for working flexibly (even if they were doing full-time hours), or sometimes having to: 'say "no" due to commitments at home'.

As encapsulated by private sector employee Brad:

I've done it for 10 years but people still almost assume I'm part time because I work five days condensed into four. They think on Friday I'm lounging around on my own doing nothing. There isn't the 'oh right you're at home with your children' type concept. It's not something people assume blokes do. I tend to think that [fathers] get a raw deal.

As a consequence, fathers felt that traditional 'breadwinner' models of work-care allocation between men and women continued to predominate, with men expected to keep their role as fathers firmly out of sight and in the background (*cf* Hochschild, 1997).

Furthermore, in the current economic climate (and in keeping with the predictions of Kossek *et al.*, 2011) participants from both the public and private sector were concerned that the current recession might reduce their access to flexible working practices. One private sector worker said of his organization:

A few years ago we were very family-friendly, people would say 'yeah, we'll look after you and your kids'. Now though it's a business and not a family company. The new guys coming in don't have kids, or don't care that we do.

Conclusion: making fathers more visible

The contemporary age is marked by an array of contextual difficulties for employed fathers, culminating in their being effectively invisible at work. As shown above, fathers may in theory be included in corporate and political policy but in practice they often find themselves marginalized, enduring gender disparity and negative peer relations.

Thus, while cultural ideals and practical realities regarding active paternal engagement in the realms of work and family are out of synchronicity: 'the perception of what a father should and can be are still very different things' (private sector participant). Based on the views of our research participants, we now make a specific recommendation to increase awareness and acceptance of the paternal qualities and capacities of working men with children.

Morgan (1996) has argued that social policy must acknowledge parents' changing social roles in contemporary households. Hearn and Pringle (2006, p. 5) further argue that men in both personal and organizational situations should be 'understood as historical, cultural and changeable, both as a social category and in particular constructions'. They note the need to examine men as part of historical gender relations ... 'the notion of men is social and not to be essentialised and reified'.

In addition to heightening the academic and political focus on fathers, we suggest one potential tool that organizations could employ is a fatherhood or motherhood passport. As voluntary documents made accessible to human resources departments and line managers, the passports could hold relevant information provided by employees who have, or are expecting, children. The passports would be gender-specific in order to make fathers visible and to avoid assumptions that the term 'parenthood' applies only to women. The passport could allow, for example, the provision of reciprocal cover arrangements in the event of regular childcare needs or emergencies. As one public sector participant said:

I am a new father, and I would say over the last nine months, I'd quite happily admit my performance has dipped because of: becoming a new dad, the added stress and responsibility. So, yeah it would be nice if somewhere it could be formally recorded and understood, so you don't get fired because of what's going on.

Likewise, a public sector employee said:

I do think a father's passport or a parent passport would be a good idea because they've got that information there and you wouldn't have to tell and negotiate with every new manager who might not care you have kids. It would be protected, and you could stop worrying and focus on work.

Such an act would begin to redress the invisibility of working fathers, alleviating their ghost-like status in organizations and allowing a more functional and mutually beneficial work–family balance to be established. A passport for fathers (and mothers) could constitute one small step towards equalizing the gendered organizational and cultural expectations placed upon parents, so that fatherhood is no longer the ghost in the machine.

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Notes

1. The reference to the ghost in the machine comes from Koestler's (1967) text.
2. Özbilgin *et al.*'s (2011) review further highlights the importance of class. It asserts that low paid parents of both genders have limited access to work–life balance initiatives compared to better paid workers, and calls for further research on this issue (see also Featherstone, 2009).

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