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Fatherhood, Bereavement and Masculinity: An exploratory study of partner loss

Research Summary

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BACKGROUND

- Experiencing partner bereavement when young is a highly stressful life-event involving significant change for surviving parents and their children.
- Community expectations of how men should think, feel and behave are understood to influence fathers' experiences; as they inform division of labour, social position, and health behaviours.
- This study sought to explore the ways in which being a father specifically shaped bereavement, and how everyday fatherhood today is impacted by partner death.
- It aimed to contribute rich insights to better inform future support of fathers and consequently sought to better understand how bereaved fathers' cope.
- This summary reports findings from interviews with 18 fathers who each participated in two in-depth interviews (35 in total) during 2018. Participants resided in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland and represented a range of backgrounds and family configurations.

KEY FINDINGS

- Fathers commonly began to transition to a new caregiver role before their partner's death and this transition extended over a prolonged period. Participants described significant role change when their partner's health deteriorated, and the majority inherited primary caregiving for the first time.
- Before their bereavement, fathers were already involved in domestic duties (more so than previous studies have suggested) and they drew on these experiences as they became primary caregivers.
- Contrary to other research findings, fathers in this study prioritised being there for their children. However, many encountered significant challenges in trying to reconcile care work and paid work. Full-time employment and primary caregiving were viewed as incompatible by most.
- Inflexibility of employers was reflected in reduced hours of employment for many.

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- Men described how major transition blurred the boundaries between traditional male and female roles in the home and workplace. Yet, many described how public encounters alternatively highlighted gender divisions.
- Fathers felt scrutinised by others and felt their ability to cope as male primary caregivers was under question. Despite this, they themselves often endorsed gender stereotypes around the superiority of women's parenting.
- In response to what they saw as a gap in nurturing many men sought to perform 'mothering'. Performances were often informed by idealised images of partners' parenting practice and broader cultural ideas about what it is to mother. Efforts to accomplish ideal mothering led to feelings of parental inadequacy and disenfranchisement for many.
- Significantly, all engaged in routine and/or ritual acts of remembrance to facilitate children's bonds with their mother. Men performed a 'mothering' role as a way of continuing a bond between children and their deceased mother.
- On becoming practical as well as intellectual guardians of the family's welfare, fathers sought to maintain structure and construct a sense of normality.
- To establish a greater sense of their own health stability and to provide reassurance to children of their survival, most fathers took up healthy behaviours and expressed an aversion to risky behaviours.
- A significant proportion of participants considered suicide; however parental responsibilities kept men alive.
- Decisions to seek and/or accept support from others were shaped by ideas of how men should behave. Formal and informal support were viewed quite differently. Men were hesitant about informal support because it suggested dependence, indebtedness and impacts upon social standing.
- Though most men drew on informal support, preference was expressed for formal support.
- Considerable inequities in UK bereavement support provision across the UK were observed, and participants ideas for formal support improvement mostly centred on greater facilitation of bereavement support access.

MORE INFORMATION

- This study was carried out by Dr Rebecca Phipps; and was supervised by Prof Shona Hilton, Prof Kirstin Mitchell, and Dr Amy Nimegeer (MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow).
- The full findings summarised here can be found at: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/82332/>
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