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*'I just think something like the 'Bubs and Pubs' class is what men should be having':*

Exploring men's preparations for first-time fatherhood in Australia and the United Kingdom.

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### **Abstract**

Increasingly in international research and popular media a growing interest in men and fatherhood is discernible. These changes occur as other aspects of the socio-economic world shift, necessitating the need to re-address how caring and paid work responsibilities are configured and practised. However, interest in men's experiences as fathers has emerged in ways which reflect cultural assumptions and practices associated with dominant understandings of masculinities. Consequently, research and evidence of changing behaviours has been culturally and geographically uneven. In this paper, two qualitative studies are drawn upon to examine how men living in Australia and the UK engage in/narrate experiences of preparation for first-time fatherhood. These studies compare men's in-depth accounts of preparing for first-time fatherhood in cultures where understandings of masculinities overlap, but where differences are also discernible. The findings illuminate the ways in which biology, gender, temporality and histories of masculinities frame men's preparation activities and service provision.

**Key words:** fatherhood, gender, masculinity, pregnancy, Tasmania, United Kingdom

## **Introduction**

There is a long history of culturally rich research on women's experiences of mothering and motherhood, while men's experiences of fatherhood have garnered less attention. Where research was conducted, it was often occupied with measurement (e.g. time men spent on activities with children and/or economic, 'breadwinning'). But significant changes including in (women's) education, global economic and workplace demands, caring needs (children and elder care) and more nuanced theorisations of gender, have served to refocus research agendas. Thus, for the past 20 years, there has been a growing body of research focused on (mainly heterosexual) men and fatherhood in the UK, mainland Europe and North America (e.g. Dermott 2003, 2008; Dermott and Miller, 2015; 2015; Dolan and Coe 2011; Doucet 2006; Ives 2014; Miller 2010, 2012; Shirani and Henwood 2011). This broadly shows that men who are fathers are now expected to be more emotionally involved in family life and caring as more women who are also mothers become significant earners (and sometimes the main 'breadwinner') in many UK households (Ben-Galim and Thompson 2014). Indeed it has recently been noted 'that in many European countries men who are fathers now engage in a wider range of childcare practices, to a greater extent than previously reported and in ways that are significantly different to their own fathers' behaviours' (Miller 2015). Broader global shifts have then altered elements of cultural practices at the household level within Europe, underpinned by different welfare strategies and other support mechanisms (e.g. grandparents) (Miller 2013).

Research on Australian fatherhood has received less attention compared to the UK and mainland Europe (see Dempsey and Hewitt 2012; Habib 2012). However, several key changes have influenced heterosexual family formation and the ways that families operate. Increased education and employment opportunities for women has meant that Australia is experiencing similarly dramatic shifts in family finances as nearly 25% of dual-income heterosexual households with children have a female 'breadwinner' (Richardson, Healy and Moskos 2014). Similarly, social expectations associated with fatherhood have changed. Heterosexual fathers are more likely to be involved parents (Barclay and Lupton 1997; Singleton 2005) who play a hands-on role in childcare (Craig 2006). For instance, 41% of Australian fathers of 2-3 year olds report changing nappies and engaging in other care activities (Baxter and Smart 2010). Qualitative research has also suggested that new fatherhood is a time of great change, anxiety, and stress for Australian men (Boyce et al. 2007; Condon 2006; St. John, Cameron and McVeigh 2005). However, compared to the large body of literature on fatherhood in the UK, much less is known about how Australian men envisage fathering and how they experience the transition to fatherhood (e.g. Barclay and Lupton 1999; Camilleri 2003; Cosson and Graham 2012),

Changing expectations and cultural assumptions about men as fathers and fatherhood practices in Australia and the UK are also configured in relation to pronatalist discourses and policies which shape maternal and paternal domains. Historically, these have emphasised biological and cultural reproduction, with a central focus on women as mothers, reinforcing binary (and 'classed', 'raced' and heteronormative) dimensions of reproduction (Brown and Ferree, 2005). Thus men have been largely absent from pronatalist rhetoric and associated policies,

reinforcing expectations and particular constructions of hegemonic masculinities, which in turn overlook possibilities of caring, emotionally involved paternal forms of masculine practices and paternal desire (Hadley and Hanley 2011; Hinton and Miller 2013; Marsiglio, Lohan and Culley 2013). However, gradual shifts in these arenas are apparent, for example the cultural expectation that men will attend the birth (Dolan and Coe 2011; Dermott 2008). Further changes are discernible, both in terms of theoretical contributions to more nuanced understandings of masculinity and more practical changes signalled through the recent introduction of policies in both countries. These include Australia's first national Paid Parental Leave scheme which was introduced in 2011 and entitles the main caregiver to 18 weeks paid leave at minimum wage (Australian Government 2015). The policy was extended in 2013 to include a two-week payment for working fathers or partners, called Dad and Partner Pay (DAPP) (Australian Government 2015). The introduction of DAPP has resulted in small, but statistically significant increases in the average length of leave taken by fathers' and in their participation in the care of their babies (see Martin et al. 2014). In the UK, paternity leave of 10 days was introduced in 2003 and more recently in 2014 Shared Parental Leave legislation was introduced (UK Government 2015a). This policy enables mothers to share maternity leave with partners, allowing both parents to spend periods of time with the new baby following birth (see UK Government 2015a, 2015b). Since October 2014, UK fathers and partners may take unpaid leave to attend two antenatal appointments with their wife/partner (UK Government 2014). These policies signal change in how family/work life around a newborn might be organised, but changing actual behaviours requires cultural acceptance of new practices too.

In the past, the idea of aligning reproductive, caring realms, and facets of hegemonic masculinity would, in many western societies, have felt counter-productive at best and/or illogical. However, more nuanced theorisations of masculinity (e.g. plural, 'caring', and 'intimate' aspects of masculinities) are challenging earlier hegemonic constructions (e.g. Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2006; Flood 2002; Doucet 2004). These indicate cultural acceptance of changing masculine practices in behaviours once seen as exclusively feminine and potentially 'weak' or 'effeminate', for example being a stay-at-home Dad (e.g. Doucet 2006; Johansson and Klinth 2008). However men's increased involvement in the maternal sphere of pregnancy and childbirth is still novel, patterned by histories of culturally accepted gendered practices. In the following section, the ways in which practices of gender, which are not only culturally specific, but geographically specific too, are considered further.

In Australia, hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been linked with 'mateship' in which male identity and relationships are defined by independence, stoicism, and emotional suppression (e.g. Pease 2001). Although sharing elements of masculine ideals also found in the UK and associated more generally with being 'macho' or 'laddish', the concept of Australian 'mateship' embraces a celebrated culture of silence, emotional repression and suspicion of feminisation. These traits are argued to emerge from Australia's convict, settler history. In areas of Australia such as Tasmania, a long convict history is combined with rurality<sup>1</sup>, which is also important in constructing masculinity and which may heighten particular practices or render them more enduring. For example, dominant masculine identities and associated practices in Tasmania historically align with working-class images of labourers, loggers, and farmers - 'tough', 'active' men who work outside the home, having practical/hands

on' knowledge of the world, contending with/controlling 'nature', and overcoming adversity (Campbell, Bell and Finney 2000; Liepins 2000). Even though working-class Tasmanian men may not hold institutional power, idealised 'working class manhood' invokes a 'shared sense of quintessential Australianism' (Beasley 2008: 5).

Although this imagery demands fairly rigid masculine performances, in recent times, more flexible middle-class performances of masculinity are discernible in Australia more broadly. These include accommodating and rejecting hegemonic conventions and constructing new, alternative masculinities particularly in relation to childcare (Coles 2008). Yet as researchers have shown in other geographical spaces (e.g. rural Norway, see Brandth 2015), this flexibility in masculine practices can be more limited and certain hegemonic traits maintained. Indeed, hegemonic ideals of acceptable masculine behaviours can have negative consequences for Australian men, for example in relation to health-seeking behaviours (Alston and Kent 2008; Condon, Boyce, and Corkindale 2004). Geographical and cultural histories can then be an important consideration as hegemonic masculinities are theorised in relation to novel domains. In the forthcoming sections, men's preparations for first-time fatherhood are explored through their preparation activities (e.g. where/how men prepare for becoming a father) and who informs their journey into first-time fatherhood, as well as men's anticipatory behaviours (e.g. activities the men engage to demonstrate their preparation) and how these are narrated (e.g. the language of biographical shift and new paternal identity). Using data from two qualitative studies conducted in Australia and the UK, the men's experiences unfold against a backdrop

(outlined above) of broader cultural shifts and offer insights into changing understandings of masculinities.

### **The studies**

The qualitative data used in this article were collected in two independently designed and conducted studies undertaken in the UK and Australia. The justification for sharing and comparing the data rests upon the findings which emerged following a series of data analysis workshops undertaken by the two authors as part of a visiting research programme. These findings revealed similarities as well as differences within and between the data sets and countries (which share similar cultures and models of maternity care) and offered the opportunity to theorise aspects of masculinities and practices as first-time fatherhood was anticipated in the two countries. The comparison was undertaken in order to illuminate the micro-processes of men's gendered performances in novel, antenatal preparation spheres, rather than to make claims of replicability or generalisability associated with comparison undertaken in quantitative research. The approach is illustrative and theoretical and provides a more detailed discussion of first-time fatherhood in an Australian context where scholarship in this area is less prevalent, set alongside men's experiences in the UK. Although the studies were carried out independently and not designed for the purposes of comparison, both used exploratory, in-depth interviews and interview schedules covering similar areas. In both studies, participants were engaged in discussions about their feelings about becoming fathers generally and more specifically on topics including antenatal care experiences and support and information sources they'd sought out/used. Both



studies interviewed men as they anticipated the birth of their first child. Subsequent post-birth interviews were conducted, but these are not discussed here.

### **The Australian study**

The Australian study (conducted by Nash) had two objectives: 1) to explore how Tasmanian men experienced the transition to fatherhood and 2) to identify their educational and care needs. University of Tasmania Ethics approval was gained for the study and purposive sampling was used to recruit 25 men who were about to become fathers for the first time in 2014. Participants were primarily recruited through two local partner organisations – Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Health and Parenting Service (CHAPS) and Good Beginnings Australia Dad's Connect programme (GBADC), in Hobart, Launceston, and Burnie. Several participants were recruited from *Bubs and Pubs*<sup>2</sup> (BP), a one-night session about childbirth taught by a male midwife at the pub.

The research design included antenatal interviews between the second or third trimester of the partner's pregnancy (from 20 weeks onward), followed by one postnatal interview (8-12 weeks following birth). Two research assistants conducted a total of 50 interviews (25 in the antenatal period and 25 post-birth). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in a mutually convenient public location or via a telephone. Demographic information was collected and interviews were audio recorded with consent. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts and a \$20 grocery voucher as a token of thanks for their participation. Participants were aged between 24 and 43 years, with a mean age of 32.8 years. This accords with national statistics – the average age of first birth for Australian men is 33 years (ABS 2013) Most men described themselves as Anglo-Celtic and 50%

were tertiary educated. All participants lived with a wife or female partner. The majority of men worked in full-time, paid employment (72% in full-time work) in skilled and semi-skilled roles, positioning them occupationally as mainly middle class.

Data analysis was undertaken by Nash and two research assistants and involved a thematic analysis, focusing on the men's constructions of masculinities and fatherhood. Each interview transcript was reviewed for meaningfulness in relation to the key research questions. Data was then clustered into categories based on shared ideas. Once categories were created, the data was re-read to refocus the analysis on themes instead of codes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

### **The UK study**

In the UK based study (Miller 2010, 2011) a qualitative longitudinal research design was used to collect data on men's experiences of transition to first-time fatherhood. The study design involved interviews with 17 participants on four occasions across two years. Antenatal data was collected in interviews carried out between 28-32 weeks. Interviews were carried out at 6 – 8 weeks after the birth and between 9 -10 months and when their child was two years old. Participants were recruited via posters and leaflets posted in workplaces, leisure centres and shops in Southern England and opted into the study. This study was approved by Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee. All participants were interviewed by Miller and most interviews occurred in participants' homes or workplaces. All interviews (approximately one hour) were recorded with consent. Interviews allowed men to narrate their accounts of anticipating fathering in the ways they chose. The men

were all white, employed, heterosexual, and living in (some ethnically mixed) dual-earner households in the southern half of the UK. They were employed in a wide range of semi-skilled and skilled jobs, positioning the majority of them (according to occupational classifications) as middle-class. The mean age of participants was similar to the Australian study at 33.7 years at the time of the first interview; ages ranged from 24 to 39 years. The average age of first birth for fathers in England and Wales was 32.6 years in 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2013).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were sent to participants, as a token of thanks rather than for data checking. Data analysis was initially thematic, focusing on individual transcripts and themes, temporal ordering of events and language used. This involved examining how and when men drew on different discourses (e.g. associated with masculinities, emotions, maternal assumptions) to narrate their intentions and experiences. Individual stories were compared and patterns identified across the data set (see Miller 2010 for further details).

## **Findings and discussion**

Across the studies, the broad themes of temporality, demonstrating 'appropriate' preparation whilst anticipating the birth, and envisaging being a father, emerged. Different discursive possibilities and 'choices' engaged by the men were identified. These cross-cutting themes provide the structure for reporting the findings below. The term 'expectant father' does not invoke recognizable visual images such as those associated with pregnant bodies. As our data demonstrate, men's antenatal experiences were perplexing, as they demonstrated support and engagement whilst also experiencing ambivalence, fear, and detachment. Men prepared for fatherhood

in several ways, including seeking out information about pregnancy and birth, talking to family and friends about their experiences, and attending antenatal appointments and classes with their partners. Participants reflected on the process of rationalising the 'news' of pregnancy and fatherhood occurring at an appropriate time in their life. For instance, participants discussed 'planning', 'time', and 'life plans', which follow recognisable adult life-course trajectories. Pregnancy was positioned as a milestone following education, travel, marriage, the purchase of house and financial/employment security. The language used to relay the achievement of 'milestones' reflected a sense of 'settling' down and into anticipated parenthood, where fatherhood fulfilled a longer-term goal:

Because we're both professionals, we've sort of approached this and it's been quite planned.... We've basically gone down the path of saying well, we've got a house, we've travelled a fair bit now, we're married; we'll settle down and we'll start thinking about what we're going to do for the next stage... (Ryan, 31, AU)

But yeah, we planned our lives fairly well. We've been together eight years now and it took us a while and then we decided to get married. Because my wife's 30 now, so obviously the clock was ticking...but I think we weren't in a financial position to have children earlier. (James, 37. AU)

Yes I've always wanted kids, it's no surprise that I work with kids, I have wanted kids for ten or fifteen years. I also wanted it at the right time which is why I didn't already have kids. My wife and I spoke about kids many times. (Nick, 33, UK)

In these extracts, the men who were mostly in their late 20s and early 30s, associated this time as being the 'right time' for fatherhood as they had gained life experiences as individuals and as couples, maturity, and material possessions, to become parents. Although none of the men discussed their own ages explicitly, their comments affirmed that the 'right time' for fatherhood was later than in previous generations. It is notable that James referred to a 'ticking clock' in relation to limits on his wife's childbearing abilities and not his own (Shirani 2014).

These accounts infer stability, control over decisions about timing as well as having envisaged paternal identity ('wouldn't have thought I'd get older and not be a father'). This was in contrast to responses to unplanned pregnancies. In the extracts below, the time was wrong, but the confirmation of a pregnancy was rationalised retrospectively in positive language:

Yes I did expect to become a father but not quite yet sort of thing but in retrospect I am very glad that it has come about and it has to happen sometime and I guess there is never the perfect time anyway. (Dylan, 33, UK)

When you think about it, there's probably never a right time...Obviously when it happens to you your mind starts thinking differently...It was more that life changing aspect. It will no longer be just about me...I like to have control over what my destiny is or isn't. Whilst I can go with the flow quite a lot...this just wasn't part of the plan at the time. (Sam, 28, AU)

Men acknowledged that a 'perfect time' for having a baby probably doesn't exist, but they also recognised the inevitability of fatherhood ('it has to happen sometime') and the emotional effort of 'getting on board'. It would be difficult in pro-natalist societies

for men and women to talk of not wanting a baby once a decision to continue with a pregnancy is made. In the face of an unplanned pregnancy, men reassessed their life course trajectories. For Sam, being unexpectedly propelled into a new life phase threatened his selfhood as it meant he could no longer pursue his own interests. Such a dramatic shift counters dominant configurations of western middle-class masculinities that represent men as being in control of their lives and time. Sam's discomfort with a lack of control over his 'destiny' highlights the normative trajectory that he assumed he would follow. The use of 'destiny' to describe his future is poignant because destiny, by definition, is a force outside of our control.

Across the studies, pregnancy engendered mixed feelings. While men were mostly excited, they also expressed anxiety and fear as they reflected on their involvement, worries about their partner, the birth and the unborn baby:

There was a point sort of halfway through sort of the 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester where I felt that I wasn't involved at all it was a very personal thing to [wife]and that was quite horrible. Trying to find ways to get in and share it and things like that. But now we've had a few discussions about ... and I feel totally part of it, it's a shared thing between us. (Stephen, 29, UK)

I'm very much a person that likes to be in control... and I don't like doing things that I'm really unsure about. That's probably what is more daunting for me than anything...I don't like change, I like to have a routine and stuff like that, and something that's out of my routine kind of scares me a little bit, so like, until I get used to it. (Joel, 34, AU)

In these extracts, there is a sense of uncertainty woven across aspects of what the men said even where fatherhood was planned and anticipated. Uncertainty was associated with a lack of control and change and sat uneasily in lives where control can be a feature of masculinist expectations and practices.

### **Preparation**

The question of what constitutes 'appropriate' preparation for first-time fatherhood is not straightforward. There was a sense of men needing to do *something* before the baby was born, but there was also ambivalence about when, what and how much because men were not expected to know this 'stuff' and hopefully their partner– or another 'expert' - would. For instance, most participants engaged with information (from their wife/partner, in books, the internet, teachers/midwives at antenatal classes) on a needs basis:

I do a bit of reading here and there but...the antenatal class is good because it's put right in front of you. I didn't feel like we had to seek anything out really.  
(Ben, 32, AU)

I've had a few books forced under my nose to read [and] just turn off very quickly my concentration isn't very good (laughs). I've found out a lot through [wife], hopefully sort of asking her about things and if she doesn't know she'll go away happy and read up on it then tell me about it. (Stephen, 29, UK)

I struggled to get interested but I think my attention was never going to be until towards the end [of pregnancy]. Then when I finally got there I thought this is really great. I wish I'd know this earlier. If there was just a simply 8 to 10 page

little kind of pamphlet – a simple way of putting things together. But I find out little things from her [his wife] along the way. (Brenton, 43, AU)

In contrast, Ryan rejected the need for information (as knowledge) as a route to becoming prepared:

I'd actually rather not know. Some things are best left to the professionals....The idea of it [birth] terrifies me slightly...I just don't particularly want to know anything about it. Well how's it going to help me because I'm not going to be down there doing anything...somebody else will be doing that. For me, not having the information just let's me deal with it as it happens... (Ryan, 31, AU)

Jareth too rejected the need for parenting information, but rather than the fear ('it terrifies me') described by Ryan, Jareth invoked 'natural' capacities usually associated (and claimed by) women becoming mothers:

I just feel that being a parent will just come naturally, rather than reading on how – what things to do and not to do. (Jareth, 27, AU)

British and Australian men preferred to have someone else, an 'expert', provide them with information rather than having to seek it out themselves. Antenatal classes were valuable because men felt reassured and could 'trust' the midwives as 'experts' as opposed to seeking out other forms of information (e.g. via an internet search). Concise information ('8-10 page pamphlets', 'fact sheets and information letters') was valued over a 'whole book'.



## Scans

Just as men's attendance at the birth has become normative, attendance at ultrasound scans is increasingly expected (e.g. UK Government 2014). The scan was important in helping the men in the studies adjust to the 'reality' of pregnancy and remains one of the primary ways healthcare providers can engage men in pregnancy (e.g. Locock and Alexander 2006).

Once you see it on the screen and it's an actual person, instead of a little peanut. Then it becomes more real, and now it's just excitement and wanting to meet it and see what it looks like. I don't know, it might look like one of our parents, it might look like us, I don't know, it's great. (Chris, 34, Aus)

'Well the dating scan was, that was very exciting because it was the first proof, I mean obviously that is a long time before it moves noticeably, that is the first sort of proof you've got other than chemical changes that it's really there and that it's going to be something like a baby kind of thing and that it's not all gone horribly wrong' (Ian, 30, UK).

'Oh the ultrasound's incredible. I just couldn't imagine what they did without it, because it gives you so much information on what to expect even, the sex of your baby versus what complications it might have. It allows you to kick off some of the nasty things that can happen, and make you feel better about the fact that you're having a healthy child, I think is the main thing about what to expect. It's reassuring and just incredible... you can actually see that it's got my nose and mum's lips and actually personalise with it and attach to it before it even is born. (Jareth, 27, AU)

These extracts demonstrate a number of things relating to men's attendance at scans. Ultrasounds allowed men to visualise their babies, bringing home that a baby was indeed there and development was 'normal' ('it's not all gone horribly wrong', 'that you're having a healthy child') (Draper 2002). Seeing the foetus/baby facilitated a sense of connection and attachment between the men and their unborn children, which could now be visually recalled ('my nose and mums lips'). The scan provided 'proof' of the existence of a baby and excitement. It also can be seen as a site where responsibilities and practices associated with 'good' fatherhood begin to be enacted.

### **Antenatal classes**

Attendance at preparation classes has also become a more expected aspect of paternal preparation. Across both studies only one father (in the UK sample) did not attend any antenatal preparation classes. Because of the method of recruitment in the Australian study the participants had attended at least one antenatal/preparation group and these were more likely to be specifically designed for Dads. Australian participants had access to three types of preparation classes; groups run by DHHS and delivered by midwives in hospitals for couples (2-3 classes over pregnancy); groups run by Good Beginnings Australia called 'Dad's Connect' (GBADC) (free) for men only (one-off class) in connection with hospitals, and; groups run by a private company, 'Bubs and Pubs' (BP) (costs \$55) for men only and conducted in pub (one-off class). UK participants had access to two types of classes; National Health Service (NHS) provided (and sometimes) hospital-based, classes (usually run by midwives and involving 2 – 3 classes) and; privately run National Childbirth Trust (NCT) classes. UK participants (except for one) all attended the NHS classes and 5 also went to NCT classes. The UK preparation classes attended in this study were

taught in couples.<sup>3</sup> The classes provided another site where the men could feel uncertain and/ or out of place, whether in couple groups or (even) all male groups. In the extracts below men from the UK study reflected on the limits of involvement and experiences of attending preparation classes.

Um.... yea, yea, I've felt involved... I mean, sometimes you do sort of .....you do feel a little bit sort of removed from it.... like, the NCT classes, I feel like nodding off in them sometimes, but that's because.. . you know...I've done a 14 hour shift at work, and then I go straight from work to there, I don't really want to be there, erm... but it's just them talking about either the birth, or things.... a lot of things that don't concern you really, you know, they're about the mum and the things that she can do, the stretches and that... but yea, I mean, I've felt involved. (Gus, 28, UK)

I guess all the practical, tangible aspects I've been involved in. You know we've both been to NCT classes and everything like that we've done together. But I guess it's the emotional responses and the physical feelings that separate us. (Nick, 33, UK)

The couple classes emphasised perceived differences between the fathers and mother-to-be ('they're about the mum') and also discomfort ('we just sat there open mouthed'). In the all-male Australian classes men felt more secure especially when the class was taught by a male midwife.

It was good to get that bit of man-talk out in the open...I found it very useful to hear from a guy [male midwife]. We heard all the time from the lady's

perspective what to expect in birth, but never from the guy's point of view. So it was good to get his perspective on it (Jason, 29, AU, BP)

But even while 'man-talk out in the open' may imply a sense of collective sharing or 'mateship' about the forthcoming birth, the all-male classes also provoked anxiety about how masculine performances in this novel setting were interpreted:

...From the vibe I got in the room, everyone's sort of scared to ask questions so they didn't look stupid or anything like that...The class needed more structure. It just sort of feels like you're at an AA meeting. You sit around and talk about your feelings and stuff like that, and blokey blokes, a lot of the time don't want to talk about it. For me, it's about getting information from others and experiences and being able to share our thoughts...rather than talking about feelings and emotions and stuff like that... (Ivan, 37, AU, GBADC).

I think the class should be less of a "let's talk about our feelings" class which guys on the whole aren't good at, especially Australian guys, and more of a hands-on thing' (Marc, 33, AU, GBADC ).

These extracts show the interplay of types of (more prized?) masculinity ('blokey blokes') and performing masculinities in a context where discussion of feelings and emotions is encouraged, but felt to be at odds with how 'blokey blokes' behave. A distinction was made between 'getting information' and feelings and emotions. Interestingly, Marc suggested that 'Australian guys' are poor at talking about feelings. Yet other men felt that outdated male stereotypes (e.g. men's drinking, watching/doing sports etc.) were drawn upon both by other participants and the instructor and they wanted to challenge these:

What annoys me is the negativity from some blokes [in the group], that 'oh well your life's over now sort of thing', that mentality. I don't see it like that. 'Oh you're not going to sleep'. Okay well we're not going to do that, but the end product is pretty awesome (Chris, 34, AU, BP)

The classes [at the public hospital] were horrendous. They were gendered, they were sort of the idea there, yeah guys, you're going to have to put the beer down and now watch the footy for sort of a few days, type of thing, and I thought they were extraordinarily condescending...Towards males, well, towards me. I felt extraordinarily that this was basically a sort of engaging in male stereotype, that you might have to change a nappy, well of course I'm going to have to change – there's this, of course I am, I'm going to be up feeding my child, of course I am, so yeah, I found that, yeah, a bit insulting...I just knew that I wasn't going to be that type of dad (Matt, 39, AU, DHHS).

There was a recognition that men can engage in caring practices, once exclusively associated with mothers, and an intention on the part of some men to do so: but also that some men still conformed to such stereotypes ('I wasn't going to be that type of dad').<sup>4</sup> However, while men had different opinions about sharing emotions with other men ('especially Australian guys'), there was a sense of comfort when it came to physically preparing the house for the baby.

### **Preparation of the home**

Preparation for fatherhood and enacting involvement was demonstrated by the men through the physical (and gendered) preparation of the house for the baby. In the early stages, men focused on the aspects of pregnancy that they *could* be involved

in such as acting on practical responsibilities including working ('breadwinning'/providing), doing more housework and caring ('I mean it's not hard to go and get a drink or get her a cold towel or something if she's feeling hot. But it makes a big difference', 'doing whatever I need to do to make sure that she's comfortable'). These activities were conceptualized by men as being a necessary part of fatherhood and aligned closely with hegemonic ideals of practical activity (Dolan and Coe 2011) as the following extracts show:

The cot arrived today and I've just put the cot up in the nursery and now the nursery has got everything whereas up to yesterday it was a room with lots of stuff in it, it's now got everything in it' (Nick, 33, UK)

...and I'm spending a lot of time obviously renovating because I'm building a nursery. But that's all - I started doing that seven months out. (Mark, 33, AU)

'Mostly [doing] pragmatic things like getting the flat ready....Mostly practical stuff thinking about how it might work and getting the flat ready and we don't have acres of space so it was kind of like you know I have done a lot of decorating and shifting things around to get things in order.' (Ben, 32, UK)

Yeah, I don't know, like, I'm the person that's getting stuff done: the nursery and painting and list as long as your arm of all the stuff that needs to be done before...pre-birth...(James, 37, AU)

Other recent research has shown how men can feel marginalised within particular settings, for example the antenatal sphere, and so draw on identifiable markers of masculine practice - here physical activities – as a means of maintaining their masculine identities (e.g. Dolan 2014). Alongside these practically demonstrated

modes of preparation (and masculinity), the data revealed how men imagined and anticipated fatherhood.

## **Conclusions**

This paper contributes to a growing body of richly detailed qualitative data on paternal subjectivities and transition to fatherhood experiences. Our data reveal similarities between the fathers-to-be in the UK and Australia and some differences in relation to more entrenched (rurally located?) aspects of 'Australian masculinity' and expressing emotions. The data also show that at the micro level 'individualised masculinities' were re-negotiated (Mann, Tarrant, and Leeson 2015) and there was evidence of self-monitoring and moderated masculine performances, which challenged traditional hyper-masculine stereotypes. The findings have implications for antenatal service provision especially in relation to facilitating men's attendance and involvement in antenatal care. The ways in which any preparation information for men is conveyed requires rethinking in relation to what is regarded as specifically relevant for a father-to-be to know and how this is delivered and by who.

The settings in which men are invited to prepare for fatherhood can be experienced in contradictory ways. The Australian men-only groups appeared to promote heightened sensitivity and monitoring of selves and performances of masculinity enacted by others, including fear of being judged by other men. In the UK data, couple groups could also feel alienating and the men felt out of place. All men maintained that their partners should be the primary focus and so there was ambivalence about exactly where and how they fitted in to the antenatal period preparations; but they also expressed having needs too. Thus there is a conflict between healthcare professionals encouraging men to be supportive figures but in

particular realms, for example at the birth, and new fatherhood discourses which emphasise broader involvement. Paradoxically activities associated with preparation for new fatherhood can involve men in non-hegemonic masculine practises of agency as well as moments of cleaving to heightened, stereotypical and hegemonic gendered roles as uncertain (and uncontrollable) paternal (and maternal) trajectories unfold.



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<sup>1</sup> Tasmania is a largely rural island and has the lowest number of people with tertiary qualifications (59.1%), and the lowest labour force participation rate (60.9%) in Australia (ABS 2012).

<sup>2</sup> 'Bubs and Pubs' is a pseudonym. All the participants names used in this article have also been changed for purposes of anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> 'Men only' classes are increasingly offered in the UK (Dolan 2014).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that the name of the men's preparation group and location in the pub also infer something about types of masculinity and masculine-associated locations.