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# Social Work with Single and Non-Resident Fathers: How Inclusive Is Our Practice and Where Do We Go from Here?

*Simon Haworth and Lee Sobo-Allen*

## Abstract

This chapter is focused upon social work with single and non-resident fathers. There is a dearth of social work research that explores the experiences of single or non-resident fathers' with social work, so this chapter starts to explore how we can work more sensitively and collaboratively with both groups. Both single and non-resident fatherhood raise challenges for socially constructed gendered norms, hegemonic masculinity and how children and families social work is practiced. Concepts of borderwork and the emotional regime are applied to develop understanding of these fathers' experiences with social work and how practice can change. The chapter is located within wider discourses about the feminised role of caring and increasingly bureaucratic and authoritarian social work systems. Key practice features of assessment and engagement are discussed and suggestions for developing and improving practice are tentatively made.

**Keywords:** single fathers, non-resident fathers, social work practice, borderwork, assessment, engagement

## 1. Introduction

This chapter will focus upon social work practice with single and non-resident fathers. Its primary aim is to explore how practice can be more inclusive, supportive and collaborative, positioning single and non-resident fathers in social work assessments and processes as potential protectors and resources for their children. We are both undertaking research with these respective service user groups and elements of our research will be incorporated within the chapter. We have chosen to focus upon both groups within a single chapter because in our discussions, we have identified numerous themes that appear mutually relevant. This introductory section will provide a brief overview of key ideas.

This chapter is located within wider discourses that propose societal assumptions about the feminised role of caring and lone parenthood exclude fathers and place responsibility for children primarily on mothers. Also 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.

Despite an epochal change in the discourse in wider society, where fathers are now being more actively and emotionally involved in the care and nurture of their children [1–3], research studies have found that this is not necessarily reflected in social work practice. It has been suggested that a gendered discourse exists within social work [4–6] which places the care of children as the sole responsibility of mothers. This can not only lead to the oppression of mothers through the scrutiny of social workers [7] and blame being placed on their shoulders for family difficulties, neglect and abuse [8, 9], but also fathers becoming ‘secondary clients’ [10] or invisible where:

*“This invisibility exists whether or not the fathers are deemed as risks or as assets to their families.” ([11], p. 25)*

It can be argued that social work literature predominantly constructs fathers as a problem, through over emphasis upon their negative characteristics and behaviours [12, 13], creating stereotypes of fathers as uncommitted and unwilling to change [4, 7, 9, 12, 14–23, 100]. This poses challenges for the profession, as single and non-resident fathers can act as important figures for children and their well-being, and need to be assessed as resources as well as potential risks comprehensively and fairly. Few parents fall simply into a good or bad category.

The authors conducted systematic literature reviews into social work with single and non-resident fathers to explore what the literature says about their experiences with social work. These employed established methods of formulating questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria and a search strategy, followed by quality appraisal and data analysis [24, 25]. Quality appraisal was used to ascertain the credibility, relevance and trustworthiness of the included studies and thematic analysis was the chosen method for data analysis. The analyses focused on rich depictions of the data sets, as these are under-researched areas, with limited available research [26]. Interviews were also conducted with non-resident fathers to gain their views directly.

It is clear that there exists a dearth of social work research that explores the experiences of single or non-resident fathers with social work. This reflects the international research on fathers and social work involvement in general [16], where studies have failed to explicitly look from the perspective of the father [23, 27, 100] or actually recruited them as study participants [28]. Instead studies have tended to use the mother as the source of information [29] or considered parents together rather than distinguishing between them [100]. When fathers have been included as an individual entity, the numbers involved have usually been small [19].

Single fathers are under-researched in social work, which aligns with their relative invisibility in practice and welfare debates. The current limited scope of research into social work practice with single fathers suggests that social workers do not genuinely or comprehensively understand their needs and do not effectively engage with them. The research that has been undertaken has not effectively considered the array of social influences on single fathers’ capacities to parent or effectively explored how, 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 this chapter, key theoretical concepts of non-hegemonic masculinities, borderwork [30–32] and Quick and Scott’s [33] ideas on emotional regimes within social work will be explained and used to examine social work with single and non-resident fathers. A variety of theoretical frameworks have been used to examine fatherhood, notably feminist theory, sociobiological theory and

psychodynamic perspectives [4, 7]. Most social work research into fathers adopts a feminist framework (e.g. [13, 29, 34]). However, a feminist framework can be considered to develop only partial understanding of practice with single and non-resident fathers, 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 and non-resident fathers, given the likelihood that, in many contexts, they can be considered to hold non-hegemonic masculinities within our societies [35, 36].

Both single and non-resident fatherhood raise challenges for socially constructed gendered norms, hegemonic masculinity and how children and families social work is practiced. It can be understood that both endeavours influence men's senses of moral and social identity and engender significant social and emotional meanings for them [37], as well as others.

So, let us now briefly think about working definitions of single and non-resident fathers and their prevalence in UK society.

## 2. Definitions and statistics

Single fatherhood is not a straightforward term and has not been clearly defined within the literature. Any definition can be used in different ways by different individuals, dependent on the context in which it is being used. Duncan and Edwards [38] 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 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [39], 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 the author's research and this chapter, 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'. This definition is open to debate and, indeed, improvement.

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 [39].

Similar to single fatherhood, non-resident fatherhood is a difficult term to define in the literature. As stated, it is estimated that of the total number of lone parents with the primary care for their children in the UK, 90% are mothers [40, 41]. This suggests that a large number of fathers live apart from, and do not have primary care responsibilities for, their children.

Studies have found that the experiences of becoming, and living as, a non-resident father can be ambiguous, complex and multifaceted [42–46]. Therefore, with single fatherhood, it is challenging to find a term that encapsulates the profusion of these father-child relationships. Within the research literature, terms such as non-custodial, non-habitual, non-residential or "live-away fathers" ([42], p. 13) are often used. Within the UK, a standard legal definition can be found under legislation pertaining to financial maintenance for the child:

*A parent who does not have his or her child living with them. A parent is a non-resident parent (or absent parent) under the statutory child maintenance services, if both of the following apply:*

- *The parent is not living in the same household as the child.*
- *The child has his home with a person who is, in relation to him, a person with care.*

*(Section 3(2), Child Support Act 1991.)*

Non-resident fathers experience nonstandard paternal biographies [47]. These can vary greatly and include them having never lived with their child, not knowing of the child's existence, living with the child, being married or cohabiting. Efforts have been made in the UK in the last 20 years to create equal post-separation/divorce parenting through gender neutral legislation and policy. However, for the majority of parents and children going through separation and divorce the gendered model of parenting is adopted, with a resident mother and a non-resident father [48, 49]. Fathers are habitually elected as non-resident by default due to both parents adhering to the assumption that this is what will happen [49, 50]. Accordingly, following separation or divorce, both parents can be recalcitrant to change:

*“...gendered patterns of caring become fault-lines for the reorganization of parental roles and responsibilities following separation or divorce”. ([37], p. 421)*

This chapter will now move on to discuss the influential social and political contexts for single and non-resident fathers.

### **3. The wider contexts for single and non-resident fatherhood**

Single and non-resident fathering do not take place in vacuums, rather within the wider contexts of parenthood, government policies and societal attitudes. If we consider child care within the wider notion of care, whether paid care or care for relatives, care has been a “woman-specific concept” ([51], p. 17) for a long time, with women perpetually performing the majority of this care work. There are a number of different perspectives that seek to explain this phenomenon. For example, it is argued that it has been socially constructed in both the private and public sphere of society as archetypically feminine, whereas others support the essentialist conception of women's natural disposition towards care work and caring [52].

A number of authors identify that the child welfare system in Britain mirrors the wider dominant societal discourses on parenting that are primarily predicated on traditional family and gendered parenting roles [18, 53–55]. Within these, childcare is constructed as “women's work” ([56], p. 64) and mothers are subsequently viewed as more able and natural caregivers [57, 58]. Fathers are then positioned in a supporting role, as the secondary parent [59], and often the breadwinner for the family [13, 30, 60].

Having stated this, there is evidence that societal norms are progressing towards greater appreciation of father engagement [11]. With studies identifying fathers populating a more positive range of roles in wider society [17], such as involved [3], reflexive [61, 62], deliberate [63], intimate [1] and caring [64]. Having said this, it has been argued that the behaviours of fathers are out of step with the emerging representations and discourses of increased involvement of fathers in the care of their children. This has been termed ‘lagged adaptation’ [3].

Single fathers are of course 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 [65]. Based on this thinking, all single parents can be understood to be marginalised and stigmatised to varying degrees. Doucet [30–32] has eloquently articulated some of the links between shame, stigma and the imposition of social and community norms on masculinity and parenting, which will be discussed in more detail below. Smith [36], in his research into househusbands, argued powerfully that 'To summarise, the men in this study encountered the gendered order in all its force at the level of experience...the gender order affected them in a way that challenged the legitimacy of their transgressive form of life' (p. 156). In other words, they were excluded and stigmatised based on their statuses as househusbands and as different or other.

When considering wider contexts, it is also important to consider how inclusive social work research is for single and non-resident fathers. Shapiro and Krysik [66] found that within social work journals, only 7.26% of family-related articles considered fathers. Social work research has tended to use the terms parents and families as proxies for mothers [9, 22, 67], mirroring very similar issues in policy and practice.

Single fathers remain largely invisible within the social work research literature. For his systematic literature review, Haworth [68] found only seven relevant studies that discussed social work with single fathers, some of them only vary briefly. Of these seven studies, only three were concentrated on social work. None of the studies were UK based, but from countries with different cultural, legal and political contexts [69]. This includes Sweden, Australia, Canada, USA and Israel. The findings of the papers identified within Haworth's systematic literature review suggest similar marginalisation and invisibility of single fathers in social work practice.

On the theme of social work practice, it is important to consider the wider debates about the nature and direction of children and families social work. In the UK, a variety of scholars have argued that practice is framed within an increasingly unequal society and increasingly bureaucratic and authoritarian systems [70–72]. Furthermore, child protection systems and practice have become increasingly punitive, intensely focussed upon risk to the exclusion of support and wider sociopolitical forces [73–76].

The current debates questioning whether practice is supportive and protective, or punitive and repressive, clearly provide an important context for practice with single and non-resident fathers. They bring into sharp focus whether practitioners challenge or amplify socially and institutionally generated harms and disadvantage, and challenge or amplify exclusion and stigma for single and non-resident fathers.

Prior to examining this in greater detail, we need to outline the legal contexts for single and non-resident fatherhood and our key theoretical frameworks.

#### **4. The legal context**

Having discussed the legal contexts, it is time to explore key theoretical frameworks for developing understanding of social work with single and non-resident fathers.

#### **5. Key theoretical frameworks**

As discussed above, the authors view a feminist framework as only providing a partial understanding of social work with single and non-resident fathers.

So the subsequent question has to be which theoretical frameworks can be useful to aid our understating?

Conceptions of masculinity are key to understanding social work with all fathers. Discourses in society and within services of the welfare state, including social work, promote specific masculinities and femininities [60]. Social work can be understood to frequently engage in a risk narrative around masculinity, with men often viewed as a risk to children, partners and the wider community [18]. Furthermore, binary ideas of fathers as 'deserving' or 'undeserving', 'good' or 'bad' can invade practice [77].

So how do these narratives fit with the focus of this chapter? Well, both single and non-resident fathers can be understood to possess non-hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity serves to legitimise men's dominance in society through subordination of women and other men. It enforces the idea that to be a 'real man', we must show traits such as authority, aggressiveness, strength, and competitiveness. Non-hegemonic masculinities on the other hand can be viewed in society as subordinate to their hegemonic counterpart [35, 78]. Hegemonic masculinities can be understood to be constructed through shaming and controlling these non-hegemonic masculinities [79].

Through such discourses, single and non-resident fathers can be viewed as deviant and outsiders as men and as carers for their children. This may then be amplified by further intersectionality of disadvantage through race, sexuality or class, for example. Fathers as primary carers subvert hegemonic masculinity and can then be victims of socially constructed gender ideologies that challenge their legitimacy and posit motherhood as preminent [36]. However, it is not this simple or binary. Masculinity, like femininity, can be understood as fluid, revealing opportunities for being redefined in line with societal changes, individual experiences [80] and less stigmatising narratives. This leaves opportunities for all social workers, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Such opportunities for positive engagement and change can be perhaps be better understood through the concepts of borderwork and border crossing. Thorne [81] conceived the idea of borderwork. This vital concept has been briefly discussed in relation to social work by Featherstone [13], but more significantly explored and developed within the field of sociology by Doucet in Canada, notably in her excellent book 'Do Men Mother?' Doucet [30–32] has written about men as primary caregivers and explored 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' ([32], p. 42). Meanwhile, she conceives border crossing as times where gender boundaries and barriers are deactivated and the gender divide can be successfully crossed.

Single and non-resident fathers cross gender borders and enter female-dominated spaces when accessing a variety of statutory and non-statutory services. This includes health visiting services, children's centres and social work support. Furthermore, they enter female-dominated spaces when accessing the school playground or engaging in discussions about employment and caring responsibilities.

Borderwork and border crossing offer possibilities for exploring and better understanding the experiences of single and non-resident fathers when they interact with social work. For these fathers, engaging with social work and female-dominated spaces and services can involve moving between equality and difference, and between stereotypically masculine and female roles. As will be seen below, single fathers can find social work to be excluding and stigmatising. In social work, we therefore need to appreciate how we can support successful border crossing. This requires, amongst other things, social acceptance and challenging stereotypical suspicions of men as primary caregivers [31].

A significant challenge that appears to exist within social work practice with fathers, and indeed parents in general, involves a disconnect between how social workers perceive and understand the emotional reactions of parents during involvement with social workers. Baum and Negbi [82], in their study in Israel, interviewed 15 fathers whose children had been removed into care. They found that the fathers experienced intense feelings of grief and loss. However, they suggest that as result of the social workers not engaging with the fathers, or lacking the skills in working with them, in practice these feelings were underestimated or dismissed. Similarly Hojer [83] in her Swedish study of parents who had children in foster care, found that despite experiencing strong feelings of loss, grief and guilt, these were not always recognised by social workers.

Paradoxically, the study found that when parents did demonstrate an emotional reaction, such as an emotional outburst and/or emotionally loaded language, they were often seen as undesired or inadequate reactions to a situation, and subsequently “interpreted as additional evidence of ‘bad parenting’ in the assessment process” ([83], p. 121) Similarly Smithers [84] observed that social workers held stereotypical or limited expectations of fathers exercising emotional depth, as he suggests:

*“If the emotional depth and complexity of the men is met with a blind eye and a deaf ear then it is little wonder that the one of frustration, which can be interpreted as aggression, thus fitting a stereotypical view of a problematic male client...”* ([84], p. 22)

In New Zealand, Quick and Scott [33] explored the experiences of parents and social workers where children had been removed into care as a result of parental mental health or addiction. Their study found that not only did the parents (including fathers) experience grief and loss, but also intense stigma of being involved with social workers. As a result, many of the parents expressed hostile emotions and resistance towards child-protection services, and this was viewed negatively by the social workers as non-cooperative and lacking self-control. Quick and Scott suggest that child protection services create an emotional regime where they can dictate and manage what they perceive as acceptable emotional responses. They recommend that social workers should not view such responses as negative, but instead see resistance, at least in some cases, as a sign of emotional resilience and strength.

Prior to discussing themes of social work engagement and assessment, we must acknowledge that there is a clear absence of systematic information about social work practice with single and non-resident fathers that leaves a significant gap in our knowledge base. 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. In some ways, it appears a negative cycle has therefore been established, where research is not informing practice and practice is not informing research.

## **6. Social work engagement**

Research has consistently found that barriers exist to social workers engaging and working with fathers in meaningful ways. [5, 6, 13], despite the exclusion of fathers potentially increasing the risks of abuse [85, 86] and research indicating that the involvement of fathers can be considered beneficial for children and their development in a variety of ways [78, 87].



With specific regard to non-resident fathers, there is the need for social workers to engage with the non-resident parent as soon as concerns are raised about the care afforded to the children, in order to ascertain levels of contact and type(s) of relationships with the children and ex-partner. Non-resident fathers can be used as a resource and source of protection for their children in such cases, and if necessary as an alternative permanent placement for the children should the children need to be removed into care. With the advent and growth of technology in our globalised world, virtual parenting and contact need to be considered. Virtual contact can provide increased contact opportunities and minimise distance when parents relocate, but can limit valuable face-to-face time and raise issues around supervision of contact [88].

It has been found in the UK that non-resident fathers often only hear second hand or belatedly that the local authority were involved with their children [29]. For example, the catalyst for the seminal study by the Family Rights Group into father's engagement with social services was prompted by:

*"...the increasing numbers of calls its advice service was receiving from non-resident fathers and paternal relatives. Some of these callers had only heard late in the day that their child had been taken in to care."*

It is understood and accepted by the authors that a number of non-resident fathers are a risk to their children through their violence and abuse, and both authors have experienced working with these fathers through their own social work practice. However, it can be argued that risks should be assessed in the present and not based purely on priori risk and behaviour. It is at this stage that the father can fairly and effectively be deemed as either unsuitable or as a support and resource for his children.

A study in Australia by Zazoni et al. [100] found that in contrast to the negative stereotypes, the fathers were typically committed and involved parents, who went to great lengths to work on previous behaviour and cease abusing substances. They stated that:

*"This study highlights the importance of child welfare workers engaging with and accurately assessing fathers without preconceived assumptions, as it is possible that some fathers are viable placement options for at-risk children." ([100], p. 1)*

The adoption of preconceived assumptions by social workers in their involvement with fathers was also found in the seminal study of Ferguson and Hogan [18]. They interviewed professionals, mothers, children and 20 fathers who were involved with social services. The fathers were seen in the study as vulnerable, due in part to their status of living outside the family home, with varying levels of contact with their children. One of the main findings of the study was how powerful the role of dangerous, or 'toxic' (p. 51) masculinities, were in practice, influencing engagement and professional judgements of men as fathers. The toxicity of the masculinities were based upon questionable past or present behaviours and physical appearance;

*"Some men were excluded from being worked with and seen as possible caring fathers simply on the basis of their appearance and perceived lifestyles, such as men who had tattoos, bulked up physiques, skinheads and who did hard physical prone work such as bouncing or 'security'". ([18], p. 8)*

Several studies have found that fathers struggle to prove that they are 'good enough' to be entrusted by social workers to care for children [18, 20–23, 28, 100]. A study by Dominelli et al. [17] found that the 'good dad, bad dad' binary ([89], p. 21) dominated and framed social work practice.

*"Stories uncovered by this study reveal that although the 'good dad - 'bad dad' binary frames fathers' relationships with social workers, these are difficult and complicated because social workers do not completely trust fathers to care for children". (p. 364)*

Practice consequently focusses mostly on mothers, with the burden of care, responsibility and blame for family difficulties placed firmly on their shoulders [8, 18, 29, 90]. This poses a problematic and unfavourable context for social work engagement with single and non-resident fathers.

Haworth's [68] systematic literature review identified two predominant themes on social work with single fathers. Firstly, social workers' misunderstanding and stereotyping single fathers; secondly social workers are not effectively engaging with or effectively supporting single fathers. The literature portrays that social workers struggle to genuinely or comprehensively understand the needs of single fathers, rather tending to stereotype along heteronormative and gendered lines. For instance, Kullberg [91] in his study found that support offered to single fathers and mothers tended to follow traditional gender lines, with social workers suggesting support for single fathers to return to work whereas focussing on support for social support networks for single mothers.

Social work engagement is dependent upon a variety of micro and macro social contexts and these practice issues align with community and societal attitudes and assumptions about caring being a female endeavour, as well as an inability to recognise single fathers as a unique group with unique experiences. Engagement issues raise questions about social work's role as an apparatus of states that continue to be predicated on archaic gendered norms as well as raising difficult questions about our profession's continuing captivation with psychological theories, which place women as primary carers and focus on mothers, much less so fathers, in primary caring roles.

Social work is practised at the interface between the public and the private and thus contributes to gender identity discourses [53]. Therefore, as Scourfield [4, 7] suggests, gendered identities are constructed in practice and within practice encounters. Single fatherhood raises challenges for such socially constructed gendered identities. It is therefore important that we are mindful that societal assumptions about the feminised role of caring and lone parenthood can still dominate social work [13, 60], excluding single and non-resident fathers in the process. These processes and narratives can stigmatise such fathers in the context of their 'non-masculine' relationships with their children and as part of a welfare state still predicated on traditional family norms. Certainly, Haworth's [68] paper identified that the research literature portrays 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.

Social work is a female-majority profession [60, 92–94] and the gendered identities of practitioners influence engagement with fathers [4, 7]. Single and non-resident fathers can be positioned as lone males within predominantly female professional networks, feeling misjudged and marginalised within these contexts. However, issues with engagement should not turn into a blame game and the words of Brandon et al. [8] ring true in this sense. 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).

It is here that we should return to ideas of borderwork and border crossing. Doucet [31] describes that borderwork can engender conflict and intense feelings, while involving gender boundaries that can be strong and rigid. Single and non-resident fathers engage in crossing such boundaries through interactions with our social work profession, when the stakes can be very high. It is critical that we are aware that these fathers, experiencing stigma and perceived moral judgements, may find it extremely difficult to successfully engage in both border crossing and with us as social workers. They may portray protest masculinities where they present as a threat or risk or disengage [4, 7] and further alienate themselves from support from which they may benefit.

Or 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 by practitioners. Ferguson and Hogan [18] define fathers as those involved with child protection as ‘vulnerable fathers’ (p. 3), with such vulnerability incorporating 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 social work engagement.

Borderwork involves confusion, identity management and feeling othered. Border crossing requires value-based social work high on acceptance, empathy and unconditional positive regard. It is for us as social workers to show sensitivity to these dynamics, as well as to the complexity of single and non-resident fathers’ identities, and adjust how we support engagement accordingly.

Having explored the issues and challenges in social work engaging with single and non-resident fathers, it is important to note that within the research literature, there are a few examples of more inclusive practice that can potentially be built upon and certainly need to be recognised and appreciated. These include professionals discussing single fathers taking responsibility for the care of their children and challenging negative stereotypical views held by foster carers towards single fathers. Such practice examples convey some hope and demonstrate that empathetic and sensitive practice is achievable. Within these examples, practitioners demonstrated acknowledgement and acceptance of single fathers’ distinctive needs and looked to genuinely engage and support.

Before proceeding to highlight our ideas for father-inclusive practice, inclusive of collaborative and supportive ways of working that promote self-aware and expressive masculinities, we need to discuss social work assessments.

## **7. Social work assessment**

Assessment is central to children and families social work. As Brown and Turney [95] state ‘Good assessment is key to effective intervention and better outcomes for children. Without it, practice is likely to lack focus and a clear sense of purpose; at worst, poor assessment may result in a vulnerable child’s needs being overlooked or misunderstood, with serious consequences for their well-being’ (p. 4). However, it must be recognised that too much emphasis on assessment as the all and end all, or simply a series of bureaucratic processes, is not conducive to child or family-centred practice [96].

Kullberg [91, 97] conducted two studies in Sweden that 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. These found that social workers assessed the single father as having more serious problems and yet less deserving of support. Further, social workers were more likely to assess the single father as more responsible for his own situation and less likely to conclude that he had taken sufficient steps to address the presenting issues. Despite the single father and single mother facing almost identical issues, the social workers recommended less support measures for him and assessed the single mother as in greater need of support. Kullberg [91] asserts that his findings suggest that single fathers were viewed as less deserving of help from the welfare state than single mothers.

These types of findings suggest that the attitudes and narratives of social workers towards single fathers can be based on common gender stereotypes and that they intentionally or unintentionally can alienate single fathers from suitable social work support. Within his studies, the social workers, according to Kullberg [91], 'assessed the two sexes according to different standards' (p. 381), and such findings convey that social workers can struggle to understand single fathers' strengths and needs. However, our practice and assessments do not need to mirror such issues and practice shortcomings.

It is vital to ask searching questions within social work and our assessments. For single and non-resident fathers, we need to ask if there are specific parenting styles evident and whether we in social work recognise and acknowledge these parenting styles in assessments and indeed interventions. Again, returning to ideas of borderwork and border crossing, whether we are assessing single fathers through maternal lenses and female-centred practices [32], reinforcing the othering and potential rejection that constitute aspects of borderwork.

Doucet [31] 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. It needs to be considered whether in our currently risk averse professional context assessments 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 ways of understanding how they care and nurture and avoid judging against maternal standards.

This resonates with Brandon et al.'s [8] recommendation that a differentiated approach should be adopted in policy and practice to better understand motherhood and fatherhood and design services accordingly. Our assessments need to explore the mutually influencing micro-level identities and interactions with macro-level conditions and inequalities to analyse and understand the experiences of single and non-resident fathers. Based on the literature reviewed, there is clear concern that their choices and chances are limited through borders and barriers being constructed within social work and beyond that shape their needs and how services respond to these.

However, we have choices as autonomous social workers, so we need to reflect upon how we can work collaboratively with single and non-resident fathers.

## **8. How can practice become more inclusive and supportive?**

Although this chapter has to an extent explored the barriers and challenges to social workers engaging with fathers, perhaps a good starting point is to reframe the

issue to one of mutual responsibility. It must be stated clearly that some men do not see themselves in the role of carer and/or avoid interacting with social workers [27]. Therefore, as Brandon et al. [8] suggest:

*“...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. 120)*

Father-inclusive practice for single and non-resident fathers should be multi-faceted and focussed on practical support, genuine collaboration and the promotion of more expressive and self-aware masculinities [13, 18]. Furthermore, to provide flexibility around working times and locations and support fathers within wider family contexts [29]. It is only then that the conditions for successful border crossing can be supported, where single and non-resident fathers can, as Doucet [31] articulates, ‘challenge the oppositional structure of traditional gender arrangements around parenting’ (p. 201).

Such changes need to be systemic, requiring structural, cultural and individual changes, including challenging widespread gender stereotypes and assumptions. Support needs to encourage social acceptance, while accepting and respecting difference. For single fathers, this should incorporate recognition as a unique group with unique paternal identities. Ethics of solidarity and minimising otherness, through the medium of relationships, should play significant roles in practice. Such practice requires organisations that encourage critical reflection, inclusive practice and specific training about engaging fathers [18].

For changes in practice to be sustained and developed further, there arguably needs to be an increased presence of single and non-resident fathers in social work qualifying programmes and training to raise awareness of their strengths, needs and experiences. Research by Malm et al. [98] found that practitioners who received specific training in working with fathers were more likely to identify and engage with fathers in practice. Specific knowledge about working with single and non-resident fathers could be valuable for all involved.

Inclusive and gender-sensitive social work with single and non-resident fathers should appreciate the roles of borderwork and stigma in life chances and engagement with services, while being alert to gender theorising [4, 7]. But at the same time, recognising patriarchal privilege while engaging with the gender complexities and challenges to masculinity posed by such fatherhood forms. Support to these fathers can then 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.

These are simply initial ideas. There remain many unanswered questions about how to empower practitioners and single and non-resident fathers to work in collaborative and compassionate ways to promote social change.

## **9. Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that there is a clear absence of systematic knowledge about social work practice with single and non-resident 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. We have suggested that there is little knowledge about support and services offered to single and non-resident fathers and that we currently cannot learn much about social work practice with single fathers from the limited range of published research.

However, the limited current literature portrays that practice tends to exclude both groups of fathers. The themes identified in this chapter include that social workers can struggle to understand and identify the needs of these fathers and struggle to effectively engage with them. Concepts of borderwork and emotional regimes have been utilised to explore these issues in greater depth. Marginalisation and exclusion from children and families social work can be reasonably understood to produce injustice, missed opportunities and lack of support for single and non-resident fathers.

The themes identified in this chapter reaffirm the influence of socially constructed gendered norms and welfare discourses on fathers' experiences and social work practice itself. As with us all, the identities of single and non-resident fathers are constructed and reconstructed in social, moral and cultural contexts and interactions [99].

This chapter has started to reveal the myriad complex issues around single and non-resident fatherhood and their relationships with social work. It is clear that social work needs a fuller evidence base to understand how best to engage with and support single and non-resident fathers. From such as base, models of practice and organisational cultures can be promoted that engage these fathers while ensuring the best interests of children remain paramount. Such changes need to embrace fathers' own perspectives. As Zanoni et al. [100] state, practice with fathers is only likely to improve if their perspectives are paid attention to.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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