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Bulging Biceps and Tender Kisses: the sexualisation of fatherhood

Abstract

This article explores recent developments in masculinity, focusing on the sexualisation of fatherhood in Anglophone media. As it becomes socially acceptable for men to engage with 'hands on' fatherhood roles that had previously been primarily associated with motherhood, the appeal lies not just in this shift in gendered performance, but the representation of this as an opportunity for men to reveal a desirably body image. Where previously the hands-on fatherhood role had been glossed as 'nappy changing duties', this more recent development focuses on men's bodies and in particular the act of carrying a young child which afford the chance for biceps to be flexed in juxtaposition with the gentle act of holding a child. Colloquially, this has led to the emergence of the 'dilf', particularly on social media where sites are devoted to photos of such men.

Key words: masculinity, sexualisation of fatherhood, the dilf, male body image.

In November 2007, *Men's Health* magazine in the UK reproduced a survey they had conducted of 800 women to rate how sexy men looked when doing 'everyday' activities. These included such sensitive, 'new-man' activities such as playing guitar, doing yoga, strolling through a museum, as well as more traditional masculine activities such as lifting weights, building something, as 'shaving while wearing boxer shorts'. The two most popular activities were 'working bare-chested in the garden' and 'playing with kids'. The idea of outdoor

manual work being attractive in the gaze of women is one that could be aligned with the more conservative form of traditional masculinity, as Pleck (1987 in Lupton and Barclay 1997) has suggested. It could be argued in this case, though, that this combination of traditional masculinity (the 1980s macho man reimagined) with hands-on fatherhood duties in fact indicates something has shifted in dominant forms of masculinity around this time: the sexualisation of the male body, but in a paternal context.

This article will explore the ways in which the media represents the male body in terms of fatherhood in the twenty-first century, in particular in a Westernised context. As Weiss and Wodak have observed, media texts 'are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance' (2003, 15). Litosseliti (2002) and others have argued that news media are prime public sites for the construction of dominant values and ideologies, so this subject positioning and construction of the idealized man is reflecting a shift in masculinity. As this article explores, it is the bare-chested caveat that is most interesting in this form of masculinity. In exploring this emergent form of masculinity, we will look at how media texts represent men who are fathers in the act of child care, and see how this can be sexualized to contrast with the more tender, nurturing role of looking after a vulnerable infant. Drawing on a biographical account of impending fatherhood by *Guardian* journalist Stuart Heritage in particular, we will see how, as Fairclough has pointed out, 'semiosis in the representation or self-representation of social practices constitutes discourses' (2001, 235) results in a tension between the mediatized 'sexy dad' image and the reality of the new man in a

childcare role. In so doing, we will explore how the discourse of masculinity has changed to include semiotics of both the new man and the more macho, traditional form of masculinity which is also playful and self-reflexive. As such, the traditional polarities of gendered stereotypes are blurred. The former divisions could be tabulated as follows:

Women	Men
Sympathy	Problem-solving
Listening	Lecturing
Rapport	Report
Connection	Status
Supportive	Oppositional
Intimacy	Independence
Cooperation	Competition

Eg, Coates 1995, 1996, Tannen 1991, 1995.

In this way, women were associated with the private sphere, with domesticity, whereas men were associated with the public sphere and acclaimed external domination. One of the consequences of the campaigns for greater gender equality has been the ways in which these gender stereotypes have become less pronounced and, indeed, how this blurring of the divisions has become desirable. This is particularly the case with masculinities, as we will see through an exploration of media texts, where a man's performance of some feminine characteristics can be argued to be feminist-friendly.

New man

The emergence of Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s saw issues of gender equality being raised in a global context, but particularly in western contexts. The rise of female empowerment as a direct result of this, in the law, education, employment opportunities and society in general, was initially seen as a threat to traditional masculine power. As many studies have pointed out (eg Susan Jeffords 1994, Yvonne Tasker 1993), 'classic macho' was revived as a dominant form of masculinity, as seen in popular culture characters such as Rambo. However, this 'hard man' dominance was short-lived and essentially masculinity morphed in an attempt to resolve the problems that this initial crisis in male identity posed. Chapman and Rutherford wittily describe what emerges; the 'new man':

Gone was the emotional illiteracy of the past, gone was all that nasty stereotypical role playing. If the old man was characterised by his abhorrence of all things female, the new man was invigorated by his enthusiastic embrace of female roles and qualities. He knew his Borsch from his Brioche, he could dangled junior on his knee while discussing the internecine convolutions of 'our relationship'. Tough but tender, he knew his way around a Futon, and could do more than just spell clitoris. Not for him the Wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am thrust of the quick fuck. He was all cuddles and protracted arousal, post-penis man incarnate, the doyen of non-penetrative sex. He abandoned a lifetime's belief in the myth of the looroll fairy, did his share of the household chores, ironed tramlines into his own shirts, and could rustle up a chicken chasseur, with an extra

portion for that 'surprise' guest, when 'she' brought the Boss home.

(1988, 228)

In this way, the new man proved masculinity could be adaptable to crisis in gender relations that the rise of female empowerment had produced. This form of masculinity 'shared' the domestic chores, and even dipped into the female stereotypical area of 'rapport', with relationship chats that had previously only been associated with female conversation and women's magazines. Various sociologists explored how fatherhood could be a means for men to reconnect with their emotions whilst also challenging the public and private forms of power that patriarchy traditionally governed (eg Hearn 1983, Seidler 1997, Elliott 2016). Pederson and O'Mara's (1990) study of American fatherhood found that men were looking back at their own upbringing and perceiving their fathers as being merely economic providers rather than a source of emotional support and care. These men contrasted their own 'traditional' fathers, whom they represented as 'absent, preoccupied with work' with an idealized 'new father' who was the hands-on, domesticated dad (1990, 83). The narratives Pederson and O'Mara collected all point towards an optimistic, up-beat outcome. For them, fatherhood

is a source of great personal joy, emotional development, creativity, personal "growth", a means of discovering and better understanding the self, of better emphasizing the relating to others, learning great powers of sensitivity, intensifying the positive feelings of love and altruism, forging a closer relationship with ones' wife or partner. (1990, 86).

But it is not just in the performance of domestic bliss that this form of masculinity can enact. As Pederson and O'Mara caution, the men in their study were also conscious of not losing a sense of masculine identity in that they felt the need to retain a paid occupation outside of the home. As Joyce Lee and Shawna Lee (2016) have shown, many studies have found that there was an associated rise in men's involvement in childcare at this time. In particular, one effect of the feminist movement had been to get more women into the workplace, and for women to continue to be in paid work after having children (in the UK, the ONS report that female paid employment rose from 56% in 1971 to 67% in 2016). The legal changes that made this possible in the 1970s and 1980s took another generation to make 'working mothers' socially acceptable, and conversely the rise in the stay-at-home father became increasingly normalised. Not only had it become possible for men to engage in a more active form of domesticity through hands-on fatherhood, but wider economic changes made this something of a necessity. As Lupton and Barclay commented, fatherhood 'is commonly portrayed as a major opportunity for modern men to express their nurturing feelings in ways that their own fathers supposedly did not, and to take an equal role in parenting with their female partners' (1998, 1). More recent studies show that this trend continues, with Lee and Lee (2016) exploring how aspects of masculine and feminine qualities have developed through the role of stay-at-home father to produce a new form of masculinity. In this way, men are able to distance themselves from the traditional models of masculinity that Second Wave Feminism had problematized, and thus make

themselves more acceptable to those who agreed with this ideology of gender equality.

As Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelly and Scaringi (2008) and others have found, a generation after the emergence of feminism as a powerful force, it has passed into common sense that fatherhood is a positive experience but is still regarded as being some of a novelty when it comes to public figures. Thus when Andy Murray won Wimbledon for the second time in 2016, his success was largely attributed not to his immense skill, nor to the change in his coaching team which had seen the reinstatement of former coach Ivan Lendl, but instead his new father status that was most frequently reported. In a widely-reported pre-match interview with the BBC, Murray commented that his priorities had shifted in that 'tennis is more of a distraction from [his] home life', and that he spent most of his time looking forward to seeing his wife and baby daughter rather than his next tennis match. At 29, Murray had fewer years left to play tennis at this top level, but his motivation to continue turned out to be not winning more major tournaments but wanting to continue playing to a point where his daughter would be old enough to acknowledge this. So not only is fatherhood perceived as making someone a 'better' person, but is acting as a motivational force for further improvement.

What studies of fatherhood and the new man have found is that popular culture plays an important part in making such performances of masculinity acceptable, even desirable (see Kilmartin (2000) for a comprehensive overview of this). The image of the 'sensitive new age man' appeared in countless tv shows, films and

novels, with the concurrent rise in media reporting of well-known personalities who were keen to demonstrate their feminist-friendly credentials. In particular, in 1996 in the UK, then-Leader of the Opposition, Tony Blair, appeared in the British *Parents* magazine under the headline 'Being a dad is harder than being a politician'. As Jane Sunderland has argued, 'it is the "celebrity" of a celebrity father that is responsible for the media representation of his fatherhood' (2004, 125). She goes on to claim that celebrity fatherhood is newsworthy on both a national and international level 'since it provides an insight into the private and personal life of a public figure' (2004, 125) whilst non-celebrity fatherhood is less interesting because of the lack of immediate public recognition of the man involved, and so is not usually newsworthy. In the case of Tony Blair, elected in 1997 'as a potentially dynamic and modern leader, the family man who already had three children, and no shortage of convictions and principles, who might be expected to promote (if not practise) "shared parenting" more than most prime ministers' (ibid, 125). When Blair became the first British prime minister for 151 years (at least, that we know of) to become a father when in office after the birth of his fourth child, Leo, in 2000, the juxtaposition of ultimate political power and child-care duties ensured his new fatherhood credentials were visible globally. In her study, Sunderland noted that 'nappy changing' was the action most readily associated with this sort of hands-on fatherhood.

Like Blair, other politicians have used their new fatherhood status to engage societies where Second Wave Feminism had led to assumption of gender equality at the level of common sense. Barak Obama in the 2007-8 presidential campaign in the USA highlighted his hands-on role as father to two daughters

(see Smith 2016), and back in the UK, David Cameron, as the younger leader of the Conservative Party emphasized his image of hands-on father throughout that leadership campaign, despite the more traditional stance of his party. During the 2010 British general election campaign, this also played well to a wider voting public (see Smith 2011). Cameron contrasted with the more traditional masculinity of the incumbent prime minister, Gordon Brown, whose own young family were only mentioned elliptically and never photographed from the point of the official photo after their birth through to Brown's final minutes in Downing Street in 2010 (see Smith 2008). Whilst Brown's failure to be re-elected in 2010 cannot be attributed to his resistance to performing this type of masculinity publically, if viewed in the wider context of allowing the public access to their private lives (or at least a version of this), then his generally low personal ratings might be viewed as being as at least a partial result of this.

So, if we can now acknowledge that the collocation of new man and fatherhood has become an acceptable, or desirable, attribute of masculinity in the public sphere, then we can now begin to explore how this has been expanded to include a curious manifestation of popular masculinity that is combining macho masculinity with new fatherhood, and had led to the evolution of the 'sexy dad'. By 2016, the best-selling 'fatherhood manual' was Neil Sinclair's *Commando Dad*, which had been translated into 15 different languages since first publication in 2012. This book is written by a former soldier and uses playful military metaphors to explore a more macho version of hands-on fatherhood that is being marketed as a favourite of celebrities such as actor Benedict Cumberbatch, tennis player Andy Murray, and even Prince William (Carlyle, 2016).

Sexualisation of men

The impetus behind the traditional shift of the 'male gaze' on women to a gaze directed at men is in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, with the challenge to patriarchy and in particular John Berger's highly influential 1972 work on the male gaze being the best known instance. In 1979, an all-male dance troupe was formed in Los Angeles. Their striptease act proved popular with female audiences and soon The Chippendales were being promoted as the 'ultimate girls' night out'. Despite being caught up in a dark underworld of business rivalries, the company that owned The Chippendales continued to expand throughout the 1980s when it became a global phenomenon and led to innumerable copycat troupes developing across the world. This coincided with the rise of gym culture. In Foucault's theory of the body as a central location in the context of power (1980), we can see how the contradictory desires to indulge and pamper associated with post-war affluence are in conflict with the need to engage in bodily discipline through exercise. Although physical exercise had long been a site of masculine power, the 1980s saw the rise of a more public form of gym culture with the male body being displayed for its bulk and associated physical power. The hairless, tanned torsos of the Chippendales reflected the body images previously favoured primarily by body builders. As Niall Richardson (2010) has suggested, the more extreme versions of competitive bodybuilding from the 1980s onwards can be seen to be a reaction to the mainstreaming of the previous form of macho male body image as it became popularized by The Chippendales. Thus the Chippendale-esque body itself is a stylized version of the macho body builder as a result of its

mainstreaming and, as Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki and Cohane (2004) have shown, is a body construct that can be aspirational for men to the point of affecting their self esteem if they feel they do not attain it.

The emergent normality of the sexualised male body took hold in popular culture in the early 1990s. In 1992 in the UK, Northern & Shell launched *For Women*, a soft-porn magazine aimed at women. It was accompanied by two sister publications, *Women on Top* and *Women Only*, which joined a market already populated by earlier publications such as *Playgirl*, *Ludus* and *Bite*. As Clarissa Smith has argued, these magazines emerged for a market perceived as being women who 'wanted more than *Cosmopolitan*' (2007, 10), although by the end of 1992, only *For Woman* continued in print. What made *For Women* so successful was that it recognized that there was a distinct readership for male porn that was not the same readership as for gay porn. Rather than focusing entirely on sexualized images of men, the magazine followed the established format of women's magazines and offered celebrity stories, diet and health advice, fashion tips, and generally offered a normalized view of sex as being part of a social world. An early indication of this market had appeared in the form of what became an iconic image of the 1980s: the Athena poster 'Man and Baby', or 'L'Enfant'. This black and white image showed model Adam Perry holding an infant, Perry's upper torso bare to reveal a gym-toned body. This poster became the best-selling image of the era, embodying the notion of the 'handsome hunk' whilst also pointing to the caring, nurturing side of the 'new man'. Along with other black and white images of semi-naked, gym-toned male bodies (often

depicted engaging in hard manual labour), they proved to be best-sellers for the Athena chain throughout the 1990s (Milmo, 2007).

During the first decade of the 21st century, there was a marked decline in the popularity of male striptease acts, and whilst the market for women's magazines has not collapsed in the same way as it has for those aimed at men, *For Women* has also since folded (although it could be argued that the pornographic content of *For Women* can be freely accessed online now, just as the female porn content of men's magazines shifted the market away from print media to online media and thus led to the demise of lads' mags). However, rather than a decline in the female gaze where there is a playful sexualized objectification of men, I would suggest that this gaze has simply shifted from the apparently unattached man to the man who has a young child. The 2007 *Men's Health* survey mentioned earlier seems to mark a beginning point for the emergence of this figure, and the first prominent celebrity to be identified as such is footballer David Beckham.

Beckham had achieved the rare honour of being the cover image for *Marie Claire* (in 2002, with the warning 'Man on cover alert!') and *Elle* (2012) at various points in the early part of the century, in both cases being the first man to be so featured by these magazines. Whilst the photos of him in both magazines focus on his athletic body and brooding gaze, the accompanying text makes frequent mention of his children and the very clear message that he is a hands-on father. The photos primarily show Beckham in t-shirts or vest tops, his tattoos clearly visible. This body image is one that has come to be a model for the sexualized father: the toned physique and anti-authoritarian body art contrasting with the softer image of hands-on father.

The sexy dad

In a self-deprecating, personal account of impending fatherhood, *Guardian* journalist Stuart Heritage sets the 'sexy dad' as an unattainable pinnacle of modern masculinity. Writing in November 2014, shortly before the birth of his first child, Heritage's playfully written article follows a heroic/antiheroic frame that Bethan Benwell (2004) identifies as being a central strategy adopted by magazine writers of the new man's successor, the new lad. In Benwell's model, such heroic masculinity 'tends to be active, rational, professional, autonomous, knowledgeable, and authoritative' and is particularly found in physical actions, especially violence. In contrast, she refers to 'antiheroic masculinity' as being in opposition to this, and 'is usually resolutely and good humouredly self-deprecating', where it is associated with ordinariness, weakness and a form of self-reflexivity (2004, 14). Whilst Heritage's article follows this pattern of anti-heroic masculinity, the heroic form is somewhat different in that physical power and strength are preeminent rather than physical violence. He describes the sexy dad through a specific aesthetic whereby he would need to have 'a hipster quaff (or failing that, a large collection of baseball caps), an entirely hairless torso, a fondness for vests, at least one sleeve tattoo, an unwavering dedication to physical fitness and [...] a fairly sizeable delusion that I'm the lead singer of Maroon 5' (2014). Elsewhere he expands on this, adding that the sexy dad is a 'semi-bearded, Wayfarer-wearing hunk' (2014). From this description, it is clear that David Beckham is the 'King DILF', as crowned by Heritage.

Colloquially, the sexy dad has come to be referred to as DILF ('dad I'd like to fuck'), which is the male equivalent of MILF ('mother I'd like to fuck'). DILF seems to have emerged in print media around 2011. A blog post on mommyihs.com is headed 'DILF beach; where did all these hot dads come from?' (27th May 2011). Since then, the term has spread into common usage with a similarly taboo status as MILF. In tackling this term, Heritage wittily seeks to downplay its appeal. Initially, he refers to it resembling the 'hideous portmanteau of "disappointment" and "filth"' before suggesting that to spell it out, letter by letter, carries connotations of a 'third-rate, cut-price sofa warehouse on an industrial estate in the Thames Valley'. In so doing, he is attempting to remove the appeal of this term. The reference to the similarity between DILF and the cut-price furniture retailer DFS also serves to domesticate this form of masculinity, and thus removes the public gaze. In keeping with the gender equality ethos of *The Guardian*, Heritage also gives passing sympathetic nods to the MILFs by referring to the mothers who are criticized for their post-baby bodies, their breast feeding routines, and their uses of maternity leave. However, Instagram accounts carry names which alliteratively encompass the sexy dad criteria: *Dilfs of Disneyland*, *Dilfs of Disneyworld* being two of the most popular. Other accounts are devoted to photos of sexy dads doing what is commonly associated with mothers: visiting coffee shops with their babies in a buggies, but here referred to as the *Dilfs of Starbucks*. The generally unposed photos on these accounts all show the photofit sexualized father figure with a small child either in a buggy, on his shoulders, or holding his hand. The miniature human serves to emphasise the physical bulk of the adult male. What is also very noticeable is that the mother is most frequently not present in the

photo, even if this means it has had to be closely cropped so that there is just a disembodied female arm in shot. As has been pointed out in other studies of fatherhood and constructions of masculinity (such as Sarah Edge, 2014), the absent mother in such images contributes to the an underlying misogyny when associated with the Zeus myth whereby women were seen as being redundant as if men could in fact give birth to themselves. However, the quite astonishingly uniformity of the physical image of the sexualized dad is clearest in these Instagram accounts. The sheer number of such photos indicated Heritage's dismissal of the sexy dad as unattainable as being slightly too antiheroic.

Whilst there are anonymous fathers on *Dilfs of ...* sites, popular print media and social media contain many examples of the sexy dad in the form of celebrities. Heritage's article lists singers Robbie Williams and Jay Z, actors Ashton Kutcher and Mark Wahlberg, as well as Beckham. During the 2016 European Cup in France, the British media widely circulated photos of the Wales players in post-match interviews holding their young children, this in turn being reported as 'sending Twitter into meltdown' with the fantasising adoration of female users.

To return to Heritage's article, he engages in self-mocking in describing a hypothetical scenario of life with his yet-to-be-born son:

Not only do I have to learn how to clip a BabyBjörn baby carrier together, I'm expected to gauge the safest level of swagger that I can successfully deploy while I'm wearing it. Not only should I remain alert for nasty-looking rashes, but I should also know which sunglasses will make me

look coolest while I'm rushing my son to hospital in a panic to get his rashes examined. Will my biceps look big enough when I lift my son out of his pram? (2014)

Here, Heritage's contrast between the ordinary mundanity of hands-on fatherhood (fastening the complex clips of a child carrier, worrying about seemingly inexplicable rashes on the baby), with the image he anticipates as the heroic stance of the sexy dad. He refers to his walking needing to be a 'swagger', reflecting the confidence and self-assurance of the heroic father. The business of his own clothing is reduced to a choice of 'cool' sunglasses. And the toned body of the sexy dad can be best demonstrated by the flexing of muscles to carry the child (here glossed as 'biceps'). The act of carrying a baby is one that seems to be regarded as an opportunity for a man to best display his physique, as we shall see. What is clear from Heritage's article is that his self-presentation is antiheroic, grounded in a sense of realism that centres around the interchangeable wonder and terror of new parenthood. The heroic sexy dad image he is contrasting himself with is one that is largely media generated.

Holding the baby

The honed and toned body of the sexy dad is one thing that media reporting picks up on repeatedly. Social media has become crowded with postings of men in gym wear holding their infant child in the manner of a dumbbell, showing off the flexed biceps whilst simultaneously displaying a version of hands-on fatherhood. This has been popularized by actors such as Chris Hemsworth, who frequently posts such photos of himself holding one or more of his three young

children on Instagram in wittily-posed gym shots. A report in *Daily Mail Australia* (Pustetto, 5 December 2015) is based around a comment Hemsworth had made in a magazine interview where he talked about how fatherhood had changed him. In the interview, he describes an epiphany in his relationship with his children:

'There's the idea that we as parents spend all this time protecting our children - No, I think they're protecting us. Sitting in the car with my head on her lap and her singing to me, there was this understanding of, 'Wow, she's looking after Dad, and that's her job.' You know? And that was such a joy,' he said. 'I looked at my wife, who was in the front seat, and she had tears in her eyes, he said of the moment which he described as 'the happiest moment of my life.'

He is recounting an occasion in which he had put his head in the lap of his three-year-old daughter, India, and the resultant epiphany that the tender, affectionate actions of children provide emotional watchfulness for their parents. This realization that fatherhood means more than looking after children and can in fact be seen as a two-way process is the trigger for this story to be printed. The story is illustrated with seven photos of Hemsworth, in five of them carrying India (the other two, at the end of the piece where the narrative moves to a brief review of career, is illustrated with a photo Hemsworth in his latest movie and then finally a glamorous, red-carpet shot with his wife, carrying the caption 'Loved up: the actor currently resides in Byron Bay with his wife Elsa and their three children'). The other photos are captioned 'Family man', 'The happiest moment of my life', 'Doting dad', 'Protecting his kids' (beneath a photo of him on a treadmill with an infant over one shoulder, flexing the biceps of his other arm

in symmetry), and 'For the first time, it's not about me anymore' (beneath a photo of him kissing one of his children). The quotations from Hemsworth and the other captions present him as a devoted father. Elsewhere in the article, however, Hemsworth is presented as a hyper masculine figure: 'the Thor actor', 'the Australian hunk', 'the Australian heartthrob', and 'in hot demand'. The article therefore is predicated on a quotation that emphasizes the 'doting dad' figure, but the photos and the text are highlighting a more macho, sexualized form of masculinity.

This juxtaposition of hands-on fatherhood and sexualized male body is one that appears with great frequency, often featuring Chris Hemsworth. In another article a little later in the December 2015 (by 'a *Daily Mail Australia* reporter'), Hemsworth was spotted out for lunch with his brother Liam and daughter India. In an article based around these photos, the headline 'Lads that lunch' is subtitled 'Chris Hemsworth carries daughter India Rose as he and brother Liam pick up some food in Byron Bay', with the first two photos being of Hemsworth carrying his daughter above a caption declaring him to be 'doting dad', and 'father of three', whilst again in the article he is referred to as 'Thor star' and 'buff boys', along with four photos of the Hemsworth men in their shorts and 'singlets' that 'showed off [their] impressive muscles, Wayfarers in place. A final photo shows Chris Hemsworth with Elsa and the three children. The article describes the image:

Doting father Chris pushed the double stroller, with one of the couple's one-year-old twins sat on his hip and the other in the pram, while wife Elsa carried their three-year-old daughter, India.

Thus once again, Hemsworth is described as 'doting dad' whilst multi-tasking in pushing the pram and carrying a child. Elsa, on the other hand, is not premodified by any adjectival judgement of motherhood but instead of her relationship to Hemsworth: wife. In this way, motherhood is not seen as being exceptional, whereas fatherhood is not only highlighted in terms of its access to care and tenderness, but also in the potential to show off the male body.

Even when there is no overt sexualisation of the male body, male celebrities frequently appear in the media not for their latest film or tv appearance, but for the fact they have been photographed carrying a young child. For example, actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt is famously protective of his private life, but when he was seen in the streets of New York carrying his ten-month-old son, the headline focuses on his fatherhood:

Doting dad Joseph Gordon-Levitt cradles his baby son in his arms as he makes public debut with the 10-month-old tot. (Waheed, 4 June, 16)

Here, the act of carrying the child is represented in a much more intimate, tender manner: he 'cradles his baby son in his arms'. The verb *cradle* is most commonly associated with young babies, yet here the child is ten months old. In other contexts, *cradling* refers more conventionally to the child lying in a sleeping or

resting position in a care-giver's arms, whereas here the photos, despite the pixilation of the child's face, he is clearly shown to be alert and engaged with the wider world, as befits a ten-month-old. This strategy of placing the father in a more tender and protective frame continues in the article itself, with the description of 'cradling his son close to him' and 'kept the youngster close to his chest'. Gordon-Levitt is also described as 'planting a tender kiss on the side of [his son's] head', again enhancing the tender intimacy between father and child. Like the Hemsworths above, Gordon-Levitt's clothing is also described, despite being largely unremarkable: 'dressed for maximum comfort in a basic blue ensemble, topped off with an LA Dodgers cap'. Jeans and t-shirt, but also the baseball cap that Heritage identified as a staple of the sexy dad wardrobe. Interestingly, throughout the article Gordon-Levitt's son is not named. He is instead described as 'adorable tot', 'youngster', and 'son', his mismatched socks articulated as 'cute as can be' rather than badly organized or sloppy. The absence of a name for the child links back to the earlier point about Gordon-Levitt being fiercely protective of his private life. He is not posing for these photos and, if looked at closely, he could be said to be holding onto his son very tightly to protect him from the photographer seen lurking in the street. However, the newspaper has chosen to reframe this as a display of affectionate fatherhood, deliberately set up (triggered through the headline's reference to *public debut*).

Another actor, James Van Der Beek, is elsewhere described not as carrying his infant daughter but using 'his bulging bicep to gently haul their four-month-old princess resting in her carrier' (Carpenter, 9 July 2016). Like the fragmentation

of women's bodies, reduced to legs and breasts, the sexy dad is most frequently reduced to his biceps. His excessively powerful form of masculinity, the heroic masculinity of the sexy dad, is emphasized by the choice of 'gently haul' through the contrast between the softening adverb and a verb more usually associated with great physical effort. The baby, in turn, is given a fairytale framing through being referred to as 'princess' who is 'resting' in the manner of Sleeping Beauty. The fact that the photograph does not show anything of the baby so there is no indication of whether or not she was even asleep further highlights the way in which the father can be framed to appear in this heroic, newly sexualized way. What the accompanying photo does show, however, is a quaffed, Wayfarer-wearing young man with gym-honed muscles visible beneath his fitted t-shirt.

The act of holding a child is one that is often used to symbolize hands-on fatherhood. On occasions, this can over-emphasise the masculinity of the father. For example, John Legend (in Valadez, 11 July 2016) is described as 'first-time father gazing loving down at his precious baby as he cradles her tiny frame'. The adjectives *precious* and *tiny* emphasise the vulnerability of the baby, before this gender division is emphasised in the description of the 'dapper dad was dressed in a sharp grey suit, whilst his little ladylove donned a floral onesie'. The hyper masculinity of the 'sharp grey suit' contrasts with the baby's 'floral onesie'. Alliteratively, Legend is described as a 'dapper dad' whilst the baby's vulnerability is again emphasized through the description of her as 'little ladylove'. The associated photo in this report actually shows Legend to be wearing a grey dressing gown. By describing this clothing in a way that

emphasizes his masculinity rather than the sloppy reality of babycare, Legend is being raised up to a higher status of masculinity.

Perhaps the most interesting male celebrity to be represented in the media as the 'sexy dad' is the Northern Irish actor, Jamie Dornan. A former model for Calvin Klein underwear, Dornan moved into acting and, in 2016, appeared as the lead male protagonist in the film adaptation of the 'mummy porn' novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. As with the female porn texts of the 1990s, this trilogy and its film adaptations sought to provide an acceptable form of escapist pornography for female consumers (see Watz, 2017). The novels and film play on the male power and domination aspect of sadomasochism. The explicit sex scenes in the film required an actor with a well-toned body to represent the character of Christian Grey, and Dornan, who has previously starred as a sadistic killer in the BBC crime drama, *The Fall*, was chosen for the role. Thus Dornan's public persona has become well established as a particular form of well-toned, sexual masculinity. In contrast, in his private life, he is married and, at the time of the first film's release, he had a 22-month-old daughter and his wife Amelia was pregnant with their second child. Thus Dornan's fictional roles of sadomasochistic sexual masculinity contrast markedly with that of caring, tender fatherhood. However, this apparent contradiction seems to actually play into the media representation of the sexy father. On the few occasions when Dornan has been photographed with his young family, the online version of media reports are accompanied by dozens of photos leading to the suspicion that these are actually authorized in some way. However, if we look at two such articles, we can also see the tension between the sexualized fictional Christian Grey and the

sexualized Jamie Dornan-as-father as the mediated form of masculinity that appears to be so desirable maps the fantasy figure of Grey onto the undoubtedly good-looking actor who plays him.

The first such article appeared in various forms in the media, but the longest was in the *Mail Online* (Thomas, 19 September, 2015), where it stretched to 36 photos, all taken of the family on a beach in Ibiza. The headline sets the tone for the article:

Shirtless hunk Jamie Dornan shows off his rippling muscles as he enjoys beach holiday in Ibiza with his wife Amelia Warner and daughter Dulcie.

The first few pictures are all of Dornan carrying his daughter along the beach. Wearing beach-appropriate clothing of swimming trunks and Wayfarers, the headline chooses to represent this as being 'shirtless', thus emphasizing his physique in terms of clothing, whilst also premodifying him as 'hunk'. Rather than carrying his daughter, he is 'showing off his rippling muscles'; once again the act of carrying being represented as an opportunity to pose. This is further sexualized in the article with reference to his body before this is balanced with a more protective, caring frame:

Jamie sent pulses racing by going shirtless on the beach, showing off his rippling muscles and defined six pack in his pastel pink and purple swimming trunks.

The bearded hunk, who became a household name when he landed the lead in the adaptation of E.L. James' risqué trilogy, lived up to his heartthrob status as he sunned himself by the sea.

He whipped off his sunglasses to enjoy a dip in the crystal clear ocean, keeping a watchful eye on Amelia and Dulcie from the water.

The owners of the 'racing pulses' are not identified, but are assumed to be the heterosexual females who witness his 'rippling muscles and defined six pack'. He is referred to in the sexualised terms of the female gaze, as 'bearded hunk' and 'heartthrob, in a similar way to we saw Chris Hemsworth described earlier, but here is the added narcissistic element of 'sunning himself', which is added to later by a photo of Dornan applying suncream to 'ensure he didn't burn'. These are elements which combine both the sexualisation of the male body with the new man's attention to personal grooming and skin care, as identified by Chapman (1988). The masculine power of Dornan's physique is also carried into the act of removing his sunglasses – they are 'whipped off' – but this then shifts into a more protective stance as he keeps 'a watchful eye' on his wife and daughter. This focus on his family continues as Dornan seeks to amuse Dulcie by 'throwing his hands in the air', which is termed 'adorable' by the journalist. Other picture captions highlight Dornan's role in the family, where he is a 'doting dad', a 'hands-on dad', and 'cradling his daughter'. The latter use of cradling reflects that used in the case of Gordon-Levitt earlier, where the act of carrying a child (this time, a 22-month-old one) is rendered more intimate and cherishing.

Several months later, Dornan is again the subject of a story that is simply based on him being photographed with his family. In this case, he is in Vancouver filming the

sequel to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and now has a second child. The number of photos (20, this time) perhaps again indicates a certain amount of cooperation and access, but again the way in which this is reported is interesting in terms of the representation of masculinity. The article, once again from the picture-heavy *Mail Online*, appeared on 18 May 2016 and is curious in other respects as the famously private Dornans, like Gordon-Levitt, had not made any public announcement about the birth of their second child, the gender of which is not known by the journalist and the parents had not used gender-specific clothing to indicate this. This intrigue is the trigger for the story:

Family man Jamie Dornan and wife Amelia are seen with their newborn for the first time... as precious daughter Dulcie steals the limelight in a Cinderella costume.

The opening of the article focuses on the expanded family, but is full of tentative statements and the use of *newborn* as a noun rather than adjective to avoid committing a gender. Again, Dornan is premodified as *doting dad* who is holding ‘an excited Dulcie’s hand’, thus acting as a caring, protective father to his young daughter, whilst the fact he is carrying the car seat for the baby adds to his hands-on father image. The photos are mostly taken in the same place, a Toys R Us store. Dornan is represented as sacrificing his spare time for the pleasure of his children:

Now a father to two young children, Christian Grey star Jamie was spending his day off at Toys R Us for their enjoyment.

He is at the toyshop ‘for their enjoyment’, not his own. The premodification of his name with that of the fictional character also serves to remind readers of his public renown. This hands-on parenting is further carried through:

The beautiful family enjoyed dinner in the Kits Beach District later that day as Jamie and Amelia shared their parenting duties, successfully.

The joint parenting is played up, although in referring to this as a ‘duty’ there is an implication that this is not natural or part of normal routine. This contrasts with the way ‘duty’ is used to refer to Dornan’s off-set wardrobe as ‘off-duty’, where he is ‘characteristically good looking in just a charcoal sweatshirt and dark chino trousers with trainers’. One of the last photos in this article shows Dornan lifting Dulcie out of a car. This is captioned ‘Family man: the hunk would no doubt melt hearts with his paternal instincts’. Like the article that used photos of the Ibiza holiday, this tension between the sexualised masculinity of Dornan (‘the hunk’) is contrasted with hands-on fatherhood (‘family man’), and like the racing pulses on the beach, here we have melted hearts that are not caused by his muscular physique, but by his ‘paternal instinct’, in other words, his fatherhood status.

These representations of Jamie Dornan, as with those of other young, muscular male celebrities, juggle the female gaze that sexualises the male body with the new man’s persona of caring, nurturing father.

Conclusions

Changes in the way society has perceived masculinity in the latter part of the 20th century led to the emergence of fatherhood as a positive force in men’s lives. As a result, men were free to talk about their childcare practices as having a positive effect on them. Stuart Heritage, the *Guardian* journalist who entered fatherhood with the fear he would fail to live up to the sexualised expectations of the wider community, charted the first year of his son’s life writing a column in the *Guardian*, ‘Man with a

Pram'. This charted his experience of fatherhood as one of exhaustion, bafflement, amazement and joy. At the end of this year, just before signing off for the last time, Heritage wrote retrospectively about his time as a new father, concluding that 'This was the year I grew up. But 2015 was also the year I realised that I could handle it' (Heritage, 2015). In other words, fatherhood had changed him for the better. This is a common theme that runs through the self-presentation of fathers, from Chris Hemsworth's epiphany to Andy Murray's motivation. There is also the occasional ironic framing of the sexy dad through the social media posts of the gym-toned father posing with a young child as a dumbbell. However, it is in the broader world of the media that the representation comes to be more overtly sexualised. As we have seen, this is often through the way the act of carrying a child is represented, in some ways as an echo of those ironic gym poses. As Jane Sunderland found in her study of fatherhood in the media (2004), the act of childcare was often glossed as 'nappy changing', but I suggest here we can see it has morphed into something that allows for the demonstration of the buff male body: the physical act of carrying the child. This is contrasted with the tender and nurturing description of intimate acts of childcare, although as we saw in the case of Jamie Dornan, the more powerful fictionalised images of his film career heavily influenced how he was described in the private sphere.

Another feature of these articles is that they are nearly all written by women. Whilst this may not be surprising, as several appear in the 'family' section of broadsheet newspapers, the more overt sexualisation comes from those articles found in other newspapers, particularly the *Mail Online*. It could be that the rise in the number of female journalists in the last 20 years has also had the effect of introducing themes that seek to engage female readers, just as the *Chippendales* and the female porn

magazines of the late 20th century did. Although the newspaper articles discussed here often included images of the mother, it could still be argued that the Zeus myth is continuing in this form of masculinity in that the number of photographs of the father considerably outweighs that of the mother in each of these articles, and the father is always the focus of the text.

This convergence of factors – feminism, gym culture, the mainstreaming of pornography – all add up to the emergence of the sexualised father figure. Men now feel that they can freely discuss their roles as hands-on father, with the associated change in lifestyle and life expectations, and often with a sense of playful antiheroic incompetence. However, the mediated form of this seems drawn to the sexualisation of the man for a readership familiar with the display of the male body for female pleasure.

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