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Performing social work: Young fathers' reflections on social work

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Abstract

Young fathers are marginalized by parenting discourses which focus on women and negative discourses about young people as parents. In this study, young fathers explored their discursive constructions of their own and social workers' identities and considered their perceptions of social workers as professionals involved in their children's lives, as well as their thoughts about how they felt social workers view their role as fathers. The study applied Butler's performativity and gender performances with young fathers to explore how they think social workers perform social work and used critical discourse analysis to examine data from an online focus group of young fathers. While the fathers demonstrated capacity to recognize their own parenting and how this has evolved, they explained social workers expect them to reproduce negative parenting stereotypes and inhabit a role less deserving of support than mothers. This study highlights how young dads experience intersectional discrimination as young people and fathers and concludes by recommending that safe spaces are needed for relationships of trust to be developed between social workers and young dads where their own needs for support can be voiced. Meeting these needs is critical if fathers are to be encouraged and recognized as involved parents.

Keywords: young fathers; parenting; social work; gender; performativity; discourse analysis.

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Introduction

This article reports young fathers' reflections on their experiences with social workers. Research interest in young fatherhood has increased in recent years (Davies and Hanna 2021) but there remains little literature focussing on young fathers' experiences with social workers (Featherstone et al., 2017; Mniszak et al., 2020). This is a gap when social work is the means to support parents and children, and through this article, we intend to add to the available knowledge on how young fathers interact with social work. Applying Judith Butler's (1990) work on performativity and gender performances, we explored with young fathers how they think social workers perform social work and used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013) to examine data from a focus group of young fathers.

Through this study, young fathers were able to explore their discursive constructions of their own and social workers' identities and consider their perceptions of social workers as professionals involved in their children's lives, as well as their thoughts about how they feel social workers view their role as fathers. By exploring this intersubjective negotiation of self, we discuss the implications for young fathers' current and future relationships with professionals and implications for social work. Young fathers, in this study, experience intersectional discrimination as young people and fathers. We argue this discrimination relates to complex socialization, dominant discourses, and discursive practices, discourses which lead to marginalize and discriminate against young fathers.

Fathers, youths, and social work

There is little research on how young fathers relate to social workers and traditionally, young fatherhood has received little research attention (Featherstone et al., 2017; Hanna and Coan 2018; Neale and Tarrant 2024). Young fathers are subject to public discourses concerning fatherhood, young people, and youth parenting. Fatherhood is understood socially and mostly negotiated, through private family roles, and with young fathers these roles can be contested both publicly and privately. Ribbens and Edwards (1995) argue the private and public spheres are highly gendered ideological concepts, in which diverse ways of caring and behaving are discursively constructed. Young fathers are subject to

pejorative discourses in the public sphere, being typically labelled as absent and feckless (Clayton 2016). In the private sphere, becoming and being a young father can be equally challenging, especially for those who live apart from the child's mother (Davies and Hanna 2021). Negura and Deslauriers (2010) comment that the literature mostly relates young fathers to poverty, school drop-out and parental disinvolvement. Ferguson (2016) points out that though literature and attention on fatherhood has increased the focus remains mainly on motherhood and points out that 'social care professionals tend to ignore men, who are often reluctant to engage with services' (p. 99). This focus is replicated internationally. For instance, in Israel Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al. (2023) report services are predisposed to one primary contact which tends to be the mother, and in America, Brewsaugh et al. (2018) suggest a child welfare worker's ambivalent sexism may affect a father's engagement. In the context of family social work, the professional surveillance of parenthood looks at the private family through the lens of the public sphere (Dominelli 2002), bringing with it a scrutiny that can invoke feelings of mistrust and distance. In England, governmental policy and legislation establish social care duties and powers which local authorities (local government) must operationalize in relation to childcare and parenting. Local authorities exercise their childcare responsibilities and safeguarding duties through social workers working in children's services childcare teams. Social workers therefore work to support families and ensure children are cared for safely and appropriately and here the negotiation of identity for young fathers in relation to social work intervention can be a particularly complex terrain to navigate.

In England, parental responsibility (PR) is automatic for birth mothers, while for fathers, PR is granted if they are named on the birth certificate; are married to the birth mother and/or have agreement by the birth mother or through the Court. Once acquired, it is difficult to lose PR and those with PR have a right to be involved in decisions made about the child for which PR has been granted. While fathers with PR have rights that support their involvement in a child's life, when children services intervene, these are maybe not always afforded in practice, particularly given the public discourse backdrop of them being viewed as feckless, irresponsible, and uninterested in their child's life (Clayton 2016). Davies (2016) points to a general perception that young fathers are a hard and difficult to reach group while Davies and Hanna (2021) argue they are not so much difficult to engage, but rather, it is the procedural and communication routes that do not encourage their involvement. This leads Davies and Hanna to suggest greater consideration needs to be given to how they can be reached outside of social workers' contact with the mother as well as to the places and spaces that young dads inhabit.

Fathers and young people report adverse experiences when engaged with social workers (Hanna and Coan 2018). However, there is evidence

of a practice shift, particularly when services and/or practitioners are motivated to work with fathers. In their Canadian study, Negura and Deslauriers (2010) argue young fathers are often motivated by the desire for social integration and suggest social workers should proactively engage young fathers when working with their children, at, for instance, prenatal meetings. Ferguson (2016) in his UK-based study on the engagement of young fathers in early intervention and safeguarding work through the Family Nurse Partnership, identified three patterns: fully engaged from onset, partially engaged, and not engaged from onset. Ferguson found that the relationships with family nurses deepened over time when fathers were fully engaged from the onset. In sharp contrast, fathers remained resistant and sometimes hostile to the service when they were only partially engaged or not engaged at the onset. He concludes that engagement should be promoted from the start and that 'fathers' vulnerabilities, especially in the face of powerful professionals, and their reasons for refusing services, need to be taken into account' (p. 109). Featherstone et al. (2017) report young fathers' masculine identity is often defined by locality though this identity can be fluid and complex. They highlight the importance of the young fathers' individual biographies and where engagement was successful, this often related to services that understood certain groups, such as marginalized men.

Many factors influence how families are formed, which include social class, ethnicity, gender, and geography. Young parenting (generally defined as under 25 years old) is often seen as a policy concern (Clayton 2016; Hanna and Coan 2018) rather than valued. Young fathers are seen as unprepared and often absent from their children (Clayton 2016; Mniszak et al., 2020). Young parents are typically presented as social problems (Neale 2016). Young mothers are stigmatized (Wenham 2016; Jones et al., 2019), and problematized as requiring support. Young fathers, on the other hand, appear to be ignored. Our paper seeks to interrogate how and why young fathers are rendered invisible in social work assessment and intervention (Neale and Tarrant 2024). Davies and Hanna (2021) point out that the prioritization of research is on young mothers and the lack of focus on young fathers, their concerns, needs and roles, renders them doubly marginalized through current fatherhood discourses and a general lack of understanding about their perspectives.

Historically, individualistic masculinity and the traditional paternal role became synonymous with being seen as the breadwinner of the family (Parsons and Bales 1956). Women, on the other hand, were afforded a role more oriented to socioemotional concerns and relationships. Such entrenched stereotypical ideas around masculinity and femininity have hegemonically filtered through to how parenthood discourses shape gendered roles for men and women today. This is despite critiques of the concept of the nuclear family (Warren 2007) and a growing awareness in some circles of gender fluidity. Butler et al. (2022) note how

heteronormative, binary-gendered discourses remain predominant in society, reinforcing traditional notions around what it is to be a man and a woman. That such discursive patterns impact professional practices is highlighted by The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Report, 'The Myth of Invisible Men' (2021), which notes that though most infant non-accidental serious injuries and fatalities are caused by men, there remains a lack of attention to father involvement in parenting. It is argued that deeply ingrained gendered stereotypes concerning men, women, and parenthood remain and universal services, such as midwifery and health visiting, do not substantially or regularly engage fathers, missing a valuable chance for successful intervention:

> This then appears to set a pattern in practice which is replicated throughout targeted and specialist services, and into the family courts. The opportunity for offering support to men who might need it in their role as fathers, for early identification of both parental and children's vulnerabilities, and potential risks that these indicate, are not maximised. (2021 7)

The differentiation of gender-based parenting roles, with the premise that mothers are seen as the primary protective carer for children, is also evident in social work practice (Nygren et al., 2021), and, arguably, may inform fathers' disengagement with any subsequent interventions (Scourfield et al., 2012; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel 2021).

Social work discourses on fathers generally appear to locate them at either end of a risk-asset continuum, marking a struggle to understand the complex, multiple needs of fathers and to effectively engage with them (Sobo-Allen and Howarth 2020). Mniszak et al. (2020) found that young fathers experience stigma and barriers to accessing support services, while their own identifications with traditional masculinity also acts to discourage them from seeking support. Despite assertions that young fathers are not inherently a hard-to-reach group, they remain viewed as such by social workers who work within processes that define the mother as the primary contact (Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023). There is a need to change systems, processes, and practices to fully identify and support young fathers and their needs (Sobo-Allen and Howarth 2020).

Performing young fatherhood and social work

Family structure and roles have come a long way since Parsons' nuclear family and its apparent functional fit with society. Children are looked after by extended families, kinship carers (Wijedasa 2015), and same-sex parents (Weeks et al., 2001) pointing to a recognition of family types. More recent academic studies of fatherhood (Volling and Palkovitz 2021) have seen a push towards recognizing how diverse, complex and varied fathering practices are in contrast to previous research which, as

Blackwell (2024: 1058) points out, simplified the 'actualities of fathering'. There have been recent calls to pay attention to the dynamic multifaceted nature of fathering and to acknowledge that fathering takes place within a myriad of ecological systems and contexts which can change over time (Volling and Palkovitz 2021).

Given the varied nature of fathering, what constitutes 'good fathering' is equally as complex (Pleck 2004). Lamb (1987) discussed that high quality fathering took place when fathers were highly motivated; had good-enough parenting skills; were socially supported and, critically for this paper, where their involvement was not diminished by institutional and other factors. What defines good fathering is still up for debate and Blackwell (2024: 1060) notes that while 'engaged, accessible, actively involved, "responsible" fathers can significantly contribute to children's lives', further research is needed to evidence the lived experience of families experiencing fathering to understand its rich meanings within and across multiple contexts. Social work practitioners may find it challenging to move away from the prevailing pejorative discourses of fecklessness and irresponsibility around young fathers. Even when they are considered in social work assessments, the sense-making narratives (Weick 1995) that are employed to describe and fix identity, often fitting with bureaucratic classification systems and processes, arguably constitute a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001), particularly where unfamiliar complexity is encountered (Hood 2016). Subjected to these discourses, young fathers have at their disposal few official opportunities to disrupt this linguistic habitus. Support to exercise or apply for PR may be unavailable, especially in a context where over-stretched resources through state underfunding channel attention to mothers.

Although the profession espouses anti-oppressive ethics and values (Dominelli 2002; Green and Featherstone 2014), the everyday reality of negotiating the delicate balance between care and control in social work practice can be challenging and difficult for practitioners to navigate. Beckett (2018) argues the pendulum has fallen heavily into control, and though social work espouses social justice, this control involves power. Tew (2006) highlights that professional frameworks may not always identify the range and complexity of power relations enacted through social work practice. As Adams et al. (2002) point out, the dynamics inherent in public, official authorities intervening in the private sphere of family life, must be recognized and should critically consider, in assessment, the varying access to resources and power of those involved.

Language and how people are categorized by social workers point to role identities and power relations (Duffy et al., 2022). Butler (1990), drawing on Austin's (1975) Speech Act Theory which described how words can go beyond merely describing something, and instead, constitute social reality through language, discussed how gender roles are performatively enacted, re-enacted, maintained and contested. Butler's reflections on

power, gender, language, identity, and subversion have not received much recognition in social work. Mniszak et al. (2020), in their Canadian study, highlighted how gendered role performances influenced both young men as well as service providers as young fathers encountered barriers when seeking to access services. Such adverse experiences, when seeking support, alongside societal pressure to identify as traditionally masculine, may result in fathers avoiding asking for help. Performativity has implications for contemporary debates in social welfare over agency, subjectivity, and resistance. As Powell and Gilbert (2007) suggest social workers embedded in discursive institutions practise according to expectations around performativity. Social workers enact their role within expected norms and behaviours, discursively setting up others' identities that fit with this. In contexts where there is very little space for young fathers to negotiate their own role, they may be left with little option but to perform as they think social workers expect them to, their talk reinforcing the narrowly defined pigeonholes into which they have been slotted.

In this study, we focussed on the ways young fathers feel that power relations are enacted and reproduced by social workers, and through young fathers' own words, looked at the performances they undertook. The study considered the impact of these discursively produced performances in terms of how young fathers felt viewed and judged and explored their attempted repositioning of self through their talk when inhabiting safer, less judgemental spaces. In recognizing how language intersects with power and identity, we followed a critical discourse analysis approach (Wodak 1999; Roscoe 2019; Leotti et al., 2022) to explain how this performativity of young fathers' gendered roles may function, for them, to contest stigmatization. We argue that this study has practical professional relevance. It is important to know how young fathers feel social workers perceive them, and, in contrast, how they would rather be defined, as this helps appreciate their lived experiences. This knowledge informs a greater understanding of how constructions of identity and power inform their interactions with social workers, and, ultimately, their access to support services for them as parents.

Method

This research employed qualitative methods by using an online focus group of young fathers through *WhatsApp* to facilitate discussion, share themes about their experiences of parenthood, and reflect on social work practice. *WhatsApp* is a social media platform which can facilitate closed, member only groups. The participants and researchers joined a secure *WhatsApp* group set up specifically for this study. Written questions were posted for the group to reflect on, discuss and respond by providing written responses to the set questions and posts made by other young fathers in the group.

Several benefits of using this method were: participants could choose the space they operated in while taking part in the study; they had time and space to consider their responses and comments; and, as the participants responded, the discussion was transcribed in real time.

Participants

Seven participants were recruited, using purposive sampling, in collaboration with the Northeast Young Dad and Lads (NEYDL) organization which is a charity specializing in working with young fathers. NEYDL is a community-based project which aims to support young fathers and fathers-to-be, in various aspects of their lives. The work of NEYDL includes working with young men on their relationships, skills, parenting, and their confidence and also seeks to explore the lives of young fathers in the North East of England (Hanna and Coan 2018). As a specialist charity, the NEYDL successfully engages in research and has a database of young fathers. Research sample inclusion criteria included: (1) male; (2) father or father-to-be; (3) having sufficient written and spoken English to take part in an online focus group with/or without support; (4) aged 18–25 years; (5) having reliable internet access; and (6) having capacity to consent to take part in the research. The information sheet and consent form were sent to potential participants through the NEYDL. Interested potential participants were invited to contact the researchers directly, which included an NEYDL worker. Written informed consent was sought from all participants and seven young fathers chose to take part. The participants' identities have been anonymized through pseudonyms. The research was ethically approved via the Northumbria University Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

This study was undertaken through an online focus group on the social media platform *WhatsApp*. A focus group of young fathers was chosen to facilitate discussion and share themes around identities, as well as to reflect on experiences of social work practice. Porta (2014) suggests using focus groups as a qualitative research methodology is appropriate when seeking to identify collective narratives and new themes. As a research method, focus groups provide rich language-based data and can support in-depth analysis of in-group discourses. An online focus group allows participants to elect when they answer questions and respond to other participants' opinions. It affords an opportunity to engage in research with those populations who are otherwise defined by statutory

services as 'difficult to reach' and offers a space to discuss topics that go unheard in other domains (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

Procedure

One closed, members' group was created on *WhatsApp* through a private members' account. Participants were instructed on how to join the *WhatsApp* group. Members already knew each other through NEYDL and the thematic discussions in terms of this project were solely channelled through this *WhatsApp* group. The focus group ran for three weeks and allowed participants to comment on and respond to posts as and when they chose and when a new theme was introduced. The online focus group posts were text-based only with respondents typing their responses to the questions posted by the moderators. As such, data of the WhatsApp posts were transcribed automatically. The six questions posted on the *WhatsApp* account were:

- How have you experienced being a parent?
- What beliefs/opinions of social workers do you have?
- What do you think social workers do?
- What social work support do you as a parent need?
- What do you think social workers expect from you?
- If it has been difficult to get help, why do you think that is?

The researchers were responsible for posting the questions, monitoring group discussion, reading through participant responses, providing follow-up questions, and encouraging participants to elaborate on specific responses. Participants were invited to respond to posted questions, read, and reply to other participants' entries at their convenience during the 3 weeks.

Data analysis

Following Fairclough (2013), analysis focussed on participants' contributions to the discussion as discursive events at microlevel; discursive practices at mesolevel and broader social structures at macrolevel (see Table 1).

Findings

Using a critical discourse analysis approach, the data evidenced several cross-cutting themes: articulated accounts of young dads' own parental experiences; their perceptions and experiences of social worker performativity; and a wary mistrust that social workers typically expect young

Table 1. Critical discourse analysis methodology.

Phase	Description of process
Transcription	*WhatsApp* written postings were automatically transcribed.
Familiarization with the data	Transcripts read several times.
Initial ideas on language	Transcripts re-read; preliminary identification of key nouns, words, phrases, and discursive events (first researcher).
Searching for discourses	Discourses categorized, identifying overarching discourses, and discursive practices (first researcher).
These prospective discourses were used to further progress the analysis	Underlying social structural power-relations categorized by critical analysis of discourses (all researchers).
Discourse reviewed	Quotations critically reviewed to understand the micro, meso, and macro discourses (all researchers).

fathers to fit into a narrowly defined role as irresponsible, unreliable, and hard to reach. Despite this, it was clear that young dads wanted to engage with those practitioners who offered supportive intervention, as Lloyd, one of the participants, explains 'social workers are there to give support and advice to mothers and fathers.'

Hard times and unprepared

The young dads had all experienced adversity and/or misgivings about becoming a father. Several described their experiences as 'hard'. Mike states 'My experience as a parent has been hard at first' with David agreeing that 'my experience as a parent was also very hard'. Fathers presented themselves as ill-prepared and unsupported, particularly when it had coincided with other stressful events in their lives. Paul stated that 'at the time of finding out [I was to be a parent] I was going through some tough times'. Peter spoke to how being unprepared triggered a rollercoaster of feelings, saying 'from the start of my experience was up and down emotions'. Despite this, the young fathers were keen to voice how they had recognized that they needed to transition to perform and do good fatherhood.

Becoming a good dad

The desire to perform as a good father was evident in the positive way the young men described, not only their own growing sense of maturity, but also how being a father enriched their own lives:

> I was still very immature at the start, so I struggled to be a good dad but then as time went on and I got older I started to find it easier. I love being a parent now it's great lots of fun memory making with my child (David)

For some, being a father brought with it a heightened reflexivity around the benefits of talking with others who are going through the same process to understand the emotional impact that becoming a father entails. Steve reflected on the need for emotional literacy and that 'we need to talk about each other's feelings. Understand the change [in becoming a parent]'. They were clearly aware of the dynamic process of becoming a good dad and described transitioning into the role. For some, like Paul, being able to perform as a 'present father' had been life-changing:

> being a dad was a turnaround in my life … and [I] wouldn't say I would have been an appropriate dad but knowing that and understanding where I needed to improve I was able to change my life around completely for the better, for the sake of my little boy who now has a present father and I truly believe it saved me from a painful life. From day one experiencing an unconditional love which would be the sunshine in your life everyday even though it's not easy being a dad I wouldn't change it for the world

Performing good fatherhood, for these young men, involved expressing a strong desire to care for their children, whether they lived with their child or not. They were keen to demonstrate their awareness that being a good dad meant coping when things became challenging:

> as my child grew up and I have more contact I find it easier, and I have learned to love being a parent no matter how hard things get (Lloyd)

In describing how they father well, recounted moments of irritation are contextually voiced to sit alongside the lighter moments of parenting, as Mike explains:

> then when I started to get used to it everything else came … the annoying moments, crazy and funny moments, I have a good mix between my kids, so I get a bit of everything. So being a parent for me is the best job in the world

Interestingly, some of the participants used the *WhatsApp* space to evidence how they had resisted discourses that positioned young fatherhood as a 'dead end'. Peter noted how:

> [there were] background figures telling me how hard it is and how I'm going to be stuck in the system now with no job and ambitions to do anything … For a while, that was replaying in the back of my thoughts but as time went on being a father, I have found it surprisingly easy and natural.

The performance of self by young dads offers a very different narrative here to that which defines them as feckless. Within this safer discursive

space, young dads have opportunities to contest hegemonic pejorative discourses and (re)constitute themselves as caring and responsible fathers.

Social worker knowledge, intervention, and support

Contrary to representations of young fathers as disengaged and resistant to social worker intervention, the young men perceived social work intervention as potentially positive. The professional knowledge that social workers possess was seen as an identifiable source of support. Lloyd stated that:

> social workers are there to give support and advice to mothers and fathers who are having trouble working things out themselves and look mainly to help the children out

While David points out that social workers provide 'some guidance in what's acceptable to do as a parent for the child', Mike highlights that their role is to 'focus on the children who need the support, but they also need to focus on the mothers and fathers'.

Despite this recognition, the young dads expressed frustration in not being afforded space by social workers to perform good fatherhood. Each of the participants explained that they had received very little or no support. Aiyden commented how he was not listened to, and his needs ignored 'when you want something from a SW it's like talking to a brick wall'. Others felt the overwhelming focus on mothers meant there were no routes for men to access support:

> social workers focus on the self not actually the kids who are at harm they always try to push for support around the mother and question the fathers about things that they notice (Mike)

The fathers see social workers as expecting them to perform as problematic rather than as parents worthy of support. Steve explained that when a social worker visit is made, there is no sustained follow-up, commenting that 'only one [social worker] turns up the others [social workers] don't'. When social work with young fathers is performed, they are left feeling alienated and subject to processes and procedures which do not accommodate their support needs, to the extent that Aiyden comments social workers 'get in the way of your life'.

Do as I say (compulsory performances)

In describing their own experiences with social workers, young fathers point to the very visible power dynamics between themselves and social

work practitioners in how their role is circumscribed. While there is a recognition that while:

> social workers they are there to make sure that all requirements are in place to make sure children are not in any negligence or harm (Paul)

there is a strong sense of young fathers feeling that they have to comply with whatever is requested. Perceiving themselves to be already stigmatized by social workers, and with very little discursive space afforded to renegotiate an identity of a good father, it is perhaps unsurprising that some young dads choose to opt out of challenging the hegemonic discourses. As Aiyden notes:

> when a SW wants something from you, you have to do it and do it quickly … [I have] kept out their way, just let them sort stuff out

The young dads felt they were expected to perform compulsory performances as acquiescent or problematic fathers, rather than enacting a role with specific needs for support. As such, they felt scrutinized and directed by social workers who sought to control the space in which they might act as experts in their own fatherhood identity:

> [the social worker] set up loads of meetings about kids, give recommendations of where to go … try and make my kid go to my grandparents (Aiyden)

Social workers were seen to have power to determine where a child lived, which carried, for the young dads, the implicit threat of losing contact with their children. Perceiving themselves to be already stigmatized by social workers, these fathers felt that they had no option but to engage with the role and tasks that had been circumscribed for them, even if other ways of doing things may be more appropriate. David explains feeling scrutinized and restricted when:

> I think social workers expect from me is to always do stuff by the book, like how [their] expectations are for doing something and if you do it another way [then] I feel like you're looked on as negative

Mike reiterates this, claiming that 'they want us to go by the book, but no 2 kids are the same'.

This perception of a lack of negotiable space to define an alternative young fatherhood in social work intervention, together with a neglect of young dads' needs, and rigid, regulatory practices that stigmatize, discourages co-productive engagement or positive relationship-building. As Aiyden concludes:

> I'm not bothered about social workers … they talk rubbish … say stuff that doesn't happen … promise stuff that don't happen … they just aren't nice people

Discussion

There are several limitations in this study. First, it is a relatively small study involving seven participants taking part in one online focus group. Second, the study was confined to northeast England and cannot claim national generalizability. Notwithstanding these limitations, we would argue that the findings from this study are interesting and valuable. The young dads' comments shine a light on an under-researched area, and point to how young fathers feel unsupported, victimized and marginalized. In contrast, they evidence how young dads themselves, in this group, very much perceive themselves to be a positive factor in their child's life. The data from this study show that both social workers and young fathers are seen as performing social work and fatherhood. While the fathers in this study demonstrate the capacity to recognize their own parenting and how this has evolved, they highlight that social workers expect them to reproduce negative parenting stereotypes and inhabit a role less deserving of support than mothers. Despite social work's ethos of anti-oppressive practice and commitment to social justice, young fathers feel that they are given no discursive space by social workers to perform as a good dad. That is to say, even if they voice a more nuanced alternative to the identities discursively constructed by professionals, young fathers here believe that this would be negatively inflected as uncooperative. Given the perceived overhanging threat of losing contact with their children, it is unsurprising that young fathers explicitly perform compliance.

These young fathers' stories point to a need for social work to recognize the challenges in their accessing support and serve to highlight gaps in provision. It is only in safe spaces that young dads felt able to reflect on their journeys from finding young fatherhood challenging at first, to developing into what they now see as being a good dad. They were aware that, outside of this safe space, talking about their own immaturity and their need to grow may be seen as underscoring hegemonic discriminatory discourses around young male parenthood. They believed that social workers would reframe and inflect this negatively to fit expectations of them as irresponsible. Moreover, the young fathers evidenced a sharp awareness of the differential power relations at play, explaining how they felt these were discursively enacted by social workers to render them, inter-sectionally, marginalized and oppressed (Walby et al., 2012). In doing social work, young fathers' inputs into their children's lives were seen to be considered invalid, and sometimes, made invisible by social workers. Even when their parenthood was acknowledged, young fathers felt they were expected to perform 'by the book' and fit with circumscribed stereotypes. In not recognizing the everyday reality of young fathers' involvement in their children's lives, their need for support goes unnoticed. Moreover, young fathers themselves believed that there

simply is not the space for them to request this, and that if they did, whatever they articulated would reinforce a view of them as incompetent. It is telling that when afforded space to safely perform different versions of fatherhood, this group evidenced a sensitive and reflective appreciation of the process of becoming and being a father which disrupted the prevailing hegemonic discourses that negatively positioned them.

In this study, through their posts, young fathers made references to wanting to be a good father or dad. Pleck (2004) argues how good fathers, and the good dad is conceptualized has altered over time as men's roles have changed to include more involved fatherhood. However, Pleck suggests conceptualizing negative fatherhood, or the bad dad, has remained rigidly associated with the absent and feckless man. The data and themes from this study highlight how young fathers understand social workers perceive them as not being a good dad, despite their demonstrations of evolving and adapting to become fathers. Social work, in England, is premised on risk and child safety and it seems that within this environment, at least according to the fathers in this study, young dads feel left out in the cold when it comes to being involved by social workers in their children's lives. This is important to understand because the evidence from Ferguson (2016) as well as The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021) is that opportunities for father engagement are lost when they are not engaged from the onset of service involvement. Our study indicates young fathers see social workers as only not on their side but as professionals who mostly discount their involvement in their child's life. When services and practitioners are motivated to work with men, then fathers are seen to be more fully engaged with services involved in their child's life (Ferguson 2016; Featherstone et al., 2017).

Conclusions and future research

This research points to a need to research further the part that young fathers do and can play in the lives of their children. Following Tyler and Slater's (2018) call to investigate further processes of stigmatization operating under neoliberalist structures, it calls for a closer interrogation of statutory processes that appear to curtail and restrict young fathers' role to one which is negatively inflected and rendered unimportant. Relatedly, it also obliges the profession to honestly consider the complex power differentials at play in interactions with such fathers, particularly given the profession's ethical value base (BASW 2021). In addition, there needs to be consideration of how to more successfully access young fathers' views. It is evident that safe spaces are needed for relationships of trust to be developed between social workers and young

dads. It is only then that young fathers' own needs for support will be voiced. Meeting these needs is critical if fathers are to be encouraged and recognized as involved parents.

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