Reviewer’s report

Title: Fatherhood and children with complex healthcare needs: qualitative study of fathering, caring and parenting

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Reviewer: Deborah Warr

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This paper explores the experiences of fathers who are involving in caring for their children who have complex health needs. This is an interesting and important topic that merits further understanding as there tends to be fewer studies that consider the experiences of fathers.

The current paper has good potential to make an interesting and useful contribution to our understanding of the needs of men who are caring in difficult and challenging situations. However, it does need substantial rewriting and tightening and I hope my comments are helpful for these tasks.

Comments: major compulsory revisions

• I was dubious about how a ‘Heideggerian phenomenology’ would be useful for the proposed analysis and I wasn’t persuaded that framing the analysis in this way added anything. The authors don’t spell out in any clear way how this theoretical approach adds anything beyond performing content and thematic analysis of the data. I suggest that if they wish to keep this in the frame than it needs to clearer how it adds to the analysis. Indeed, the objectives of the study (as outlined on pg. 7) don’t immediately suggest how Heidegger will be useful. The objectives are straightforward (and useful) aims of understanding the everyday experiences of the fathers.

Linked to this, it seemed that the authors were suggesting that the analytic method dissolved differences between the nurse/researchers and that subject/fathers. I might have expected that the theory might have problematised the possibilities of reconciling these quite different experiences (role compared to the limitless responsibilities of parents; gender). This needs to be explained more carefully or removed because it is unnecessarily obtuse and used to ‘glide over’ important methodological issues.

• Generally, the authors need to push their analyses harder – often their commentary is restating (describing) what the fathers reported. I would have liked to see more analysis of the data – how might we interpret the themes in light of the fathers’ roles as parents and men. In regards to the latter, I am surprised that there is no mention at all of the gender even though it is the fact that men are performing ‘non-traditional’ gender roles that is of central interest.

• The explanation of the methods needs simplifying. I was confused by the
images of ‘charts and maps’ and it seemed unnecessarily complex, particularly as I go on to read the analysis which is quite straightforward content/thematic analysis. I wasn’t clear about the need for ‘theoretical sensitivity’ because the findings were linked back into a particular theoretical perspective and the idea of ‘uncovering any bias’ would seem to go against the hermeneutic approach that was adopted for the study. The aims of the study (as stated) and the analysis itself is largely descriptive and the explanation of the method would be clearer if it reflected this.

• Often the headings and sub-headings were awkward. For eg. on pg. 11. Both the headings could be tweaked to improve clarity of the argument – what is meant by ‘Full time father and carer’ – that the fathers don’t live in the family home or that they don’t combine caring with breadwinning roles? They’re fathers all the time but they may not be carers all of the day? Similarly, ‘non full-time father’ is a confusing way of referring to men that are still involved in paid work if this is what you’re referring to? ‘Positive rewards’ (a sub-heading on pg. 17) is a tautology and I just don’t understand what is meant by ‘Negative challenges and needs not understood’ (pg. 28).

• Often I wondered why you were telling us about some of the issues – for instance on pg. 12 the quote about doing things as a family. I understand the commonplace significance of this but why are you telling us in this paper – in other words, drawing out the analytic significance of the men’s roles in their families. Related to these points, it is not usual practice to end sub-sections with quotes – they just seem to hang there. It would be preferable and strengthen the analysis to outline the point, show the evidence (quotes) and then summarise and point to the thematic/analytic significance. Another eg. of this is on pg. 13 where a quote is presented without any comment or interpretation from the authors. It seemed to me the respondent was explaining his struggles to maintain dual commitments to work and caring and these pressures were not well understood by his employer who didn’t grasp the strain the situation put on the parents. Indeed, much of the commentary on the excerpts from the interviews just restated the point.

Again on pg. 17 where some really difficult issues about caring are explored. Why don’t you explore ideas of ‘appropriateness vis-à-vis fathering roles and then the added difficulties of the social norms of caring for disabled children who aren’t babies any more? It also seems to me to have something to do with the formalisation and bureaucratisation of care.

• I agree with the point that caring in these circumstances has unexpectedly positive aspects and these aren’t always acknowledged or well-understood. We have found similar things in a study of ours (Fraser and Warr, in the American Journal of Men’s Health (2009). Again, I would have liked to see this unpacked more – is it that caring presents opportunities to take on non-traditional roles in the family for men?

• Throughout the paper the writing needs to be clearer and there are grammar issues in sentence structures.
The section on Support and accessing services is not sufficiently focused to develop a tight argument. Again, too much description and not enough analysis and situation the accounts in broader issues. The issue of feeling guilty about accessing services or seeking support is really interesting and important in understanding how men can best be supported in difficult caring roles and would have justified spending more time exploring specific issues that were identified in the research then trying to cover all the aspects of caring, including more mundane aspects.

The’ reflections’ section avoided discussing important issues, such as sample size (which is not necessarily an issue but should be discussed as to how these circumstances might be representative or not of other situations. Some of the claims in this sections should be removed or justified – for eg. was it significant that they were female researchers? If so, explain how.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.