



Why is there no supermum?

Damien Riggs has been called a superdad, but as he looks ahead to Father's Day he questions why gender stereotypes persist in parenting.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, MY LIFE AS A SINGLE FATHER of five children would have been far less tenable. While we still have a long way to go towards proper recognition and support for the role that many men play in raising their children at least now, in 2017, men can receive (limited) government support to stay at home and care for their children, can access flexible work opportunities so as to be involved in the daily care of their children, and are increasingly seen as capable caregivers.

Fifty years ago a single father would have been expected to place his children with a relative, hire a female carer, or marry a woman willing to care for his children.

So what has brought about this change? My research with Sarah Hunter and professor Martha Augoustinos on primary caregiving fathers suggests that as much as there has been change, there is also continuity. On the one hand, there is increased recognition of the caregiving role that men can play, and increased support for this. Increasingly men are encouraged to be actively involved in caring for their children, rather than simply being the “fun” parent who “helps” his partner.

On the other hand however, many men still face a considerable social expectation to financially provide for their family.

This change and continuity is reflected in findings from research by Dr Clare Bartholomaeus and I on South Australian first time fathers. In a recently published article we reported that the men we spoke to drew on two different reasons for why they wanted children. The first was a more traditional account, and emphasised continuing the family line. The second was a more contemporary account, emphasising the desire to have loving and caring relationships with a child.

Importantly, while it is increasingly possible for men to actively care for their children, the bulk of family carework still falls to women in the context of heterosexual relationships. Women are still expected to stay at home with newborns much longer than are men. Women are expected to sacrifice career progression in favour of raising children. And women do the greatest amount of emotion work in families (such as organising routines, ensuring adherence to them, and planning for the family's future).

Even in families where there is not a mother and a father, such as my own, women still make a significant contribution. For example, both my mother and sister provide childcare support, and I am fortunate to be able to afford someone – a woman – to help with the cleaning of the house.

The fact that women, in many different ways, facilitate men's care work thus provides something of an answer as to why there is both change and continuity with regard to men and fathering. With the support and encouragement of women in our lives, men are able to

balance both work and caring. While not all men choose to be actively involved in caring for their children on a daily basis, those who do benefit from the contributions that women make, whether they be partners, family members, or those who come in from outside the family.


In an essay intended to celebrate Father's Day, it begs the question as to why I would both acknowledge but also question men's involvement in carework, or at least question the degree to which such carework is facilitated by women. I do this because of my own experiences as a single father, and the ways in which I see my caring treated as exceptional.

I was shopping just the other day with an infant in a carrier, and two children on the trolley. Another man stopped me and said “wow, superdad!”. Yet while I was at the shops I saw many women with as many children, and I would be sure that no one stopped them and said “wow, supermum!”. Women are still primarily expected to care for children, whereas for many men providing day-to-day care is still very much an option, and thus seen as something to be celebrated.

I have had similar experiences while travelling. Airline staff often go out of their way to comment on my “well-behaved” children, or to offer to assist me with my children. Again, I do not see women with children complimented, or so readily offered assistance. This reinforces to me that women are expected not only to care for

children, but to do so independently and without affirmation.

What should we celebrate, then, on Father's Day? I would suggest that we should celebrate that men are increasingly willing and able to make an active contribution to raising their children. Social change is slow, but positive representations (such as the television show *House Husbands*) affords some recognition that men can be competent and capable parents. Slow to change, however, are attitudes towards women as compared to men. The carework that women do should be equally praised and supported, if not in some cases more so than for men.

Celebrating Father's Day, then, requires us to situate men's carework in its broader social contexts, where gender norms, despite changing, still always situate fathering in a relationship to mothering, and in relation to the expectations placed upon women in general. 

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