

# Evolving fatherhood: shifting intergenerational dynamics among first-time fathers in contemporary Ireland



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# Introduction

- Growing sociological interest in fathers, fatherhood and fathering
- Limited attention to experience of fathers in contemporary Ireland
- Major changes in family formation in recent decades in Ireland
- How much have fathers in Ireland changed?

# The study

- Semi-structured interviews (pre & post birth)
- 20 first-time fathers
- Average age 34, mostly highly educated, working in professional/managerial jobs
- Broad ranging interviews
- This paper focuses on one strand, the intergenerational dynamics between the fathers and the previous generation

# Focus of presentation

- influence of own fathers – extent of influence on own fathering ideas/ideals
- levels of support from own parents – practical and emotional involvement of grandparents
- changes in relationship between generations – impact of the transition to parenthood on the parent/grandparent relationship

# Legacy of own father: reject?

“I missed having a father who had an interest. It was an old fashioned fatherly thing. Distanced. Shirt and tie. Every day. Would never come and watch me play football. Would never ask how your day was, would never do anything like that. And I’m not necessarily saying that’s wrong, that was just a way of doing it. But it wouldn’t be my way.”

Tony

## Legacy of own father: compensate?

“Obviously, you know, with my dad being not reliable, and him not being there and not being involved... you’re going to react to that and go the other way and say well I’d rather be there... so it’s just trying to balance it so that you don’t go too extreme.” Shane

# Legacy of own father: refine?

“Definitely you look at the way things happened for you and you tick boxes of things you like and things you didn’t like, like the unsociable hours were hard.....So I wouldn’t like to go down that route, but again when he was home he was great so you’d like to take that on.” Des

# Legacy of own father: replicate?

“I had a great dad, so I was lucky, my dad is brilliant, I wouldn't say I want to try and copy him, but I'll definitely use a lot of his traits...I don't want to be one of these parents that's bothered by their children, children are in their way. I hate seeing, kids coming up and saying 'daddy, daddy, why is the sky blue?' and turn around and go 'it is, cause it is'. That attitude stinks, I think... My dad wasn't like that at all. He'd always, even if he made it up, he'd have an answer for you. [small laugh] I'd like to be that kind of dad... He was always there... He was never down the pub, he's a family man, so if he wasn't in work, he'd be at home, simple as that.” John

# Own father's influence

“I find myself saying things that he'd say. Already. Like songs that he used to sing to me when he was changing me. He used to sing songs, and I find myself singing them songs to [the baby], when I'm changing him, giving him his bath. They just come back to me.” John

## Support: reluctant granny?

“My mum wouldn’t tend to be that much of a hands-on granny in terms of she, she loves [the baby] and she’s very good with him and all that but she wouldn’t generally be volunteering to babysit.” Eoin

# Support: respite grandparents

“Her family have been excellent especially her mother... they live ten minutes away, close, but not too close, and you can just, you can ask them anything.” Tony

“A few times we’ve left her over with my mam and we’d go out for the night... having the support network around enables you to do fun things.” Frank

# Support: compensating granddad

“He’s more interested than I thought he was going to be... he’s never been a particularly good parent to me, so why would he be any good at being a grandfather? But ...he writes to [the baby], so you get these letters addressed to [the baby], you open, you have to read it out, “today I did this and this and this and here’s a picture” which is really quite sweet, the sort of thing my granddad used to do. But I would never have reckoned my father would do it.” Tom

# Support: disappointing grandad

“I felt very annoyed at him ‘cos his attitude was you know, “no I didn’t find it all hard because it was nothing to do with me and if you’d any sense you wouldn’t be dragged into it like this” and he was going on about something he’d read in the Daily Mail how some doctor said that males shouldn’t really be involved and that they’re being emasculated and the women have them doing all this work and it’s not their role... but I remember feeling, god, is that the best you can come up with.” Frank

# Support: tensions?

“We had Liz’s mother over for six weeks and my mum over for three weeks... Liz’s mum got a bit cross with me cos now, we spent six weeks together and all the bad habits would come out on open view... I like to walk around the house in my underwear for example and I wasn’t gonna give it up because my mother-in-law was around [laughter]... With my mother we got to know each other again, we had a difficult three weeks... there were all these little things that we had forgotten about each other or had drifted apart.”  
Alex

## Support: “it didn’t work”

“Sinead’s mum would be very...not really wanting to get involved or not really wanting to interfere... they get on very well as mother and daughter but, she didn’t really take the initiative... then my mother, I don’t know...I always knew my mum would be a challenge because she’s a doula type person, this is the first [grand]child so this is a big deal... I said to her “now, can you just stand back a bit and just, Sinead’s in charge but she’d appreciate the support” ... it didn’t work... the two of them just don’t meet.” Tom

# Support: who for?

“With my dad it’s almost like we feel like we’re supporting him. By having an extra grandkid around and having him round to dinner and so on, coz with my mother dying recently it’s more difficult for him than for anyone.” Aidan

# Changing relationships: new insights

“You have an appreciation of maybe the other side of their relationship with you ....you see a relationship from a completely different perspective, you can empathise to a certain extent.” Conor

“Jesus, we should phone our parents and just apologise and thank them, you don't think about it until you go through it.” Des

## Changing relationships: families merge?

“I’m more relaxed. I feel like I’m part of her family more now than I did before... because I’m not just Aisling’s boyfriend any more now. I’m kind of *in* a bit more than I was.” John

# Changing relationships: priorities

“We both agree that long term we’d like to be either near her family or my family... we have realised how important those family networks are.” Bill

# Changing relationships: damage?

“Anytime I call home it’s a ‘hi and how’s [the baby]?’ ... you don’t get much of a look in cos your grandchild is the all important number one.” Robert

“Her parents are nearby but you’d rather leave [the baby] with a dog to be honest, sorry, I know that’s a bit harsh... I don’t think anything positive has come out of it at all, from her relationship with her parents and even my relationship with her parents, cos I’m like, I don’t want her mother touching [the baby].” Shane

## Changing relationships: ambivalence

“The big impact [the baby] has had overall, which would probably have been a surprising thing for us, is that .....you have to bring family more into things now.” Shane

# Changing relationships: reflection

“I think it turns you to reflect on family generally but in a good way, in a positive way, so in our cases it’s probably a little bit more poignant as well ... I miss the fact that he doesn’t have a grandfather, he won’t have a grandfather and I miss that I can’t talk to my father about him, or about it generally... I think he would have been a good grandfather.” Donal

# Conclusion

Legacy: reject, compensate, refine, replicate

Support: reluctant, respite, compensate,  
disappoint, tensions, two-way

Change: new appreciation, new priorities,  
ambivalence, reflection