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Chapter 6

Single Dads in the Entertainment Arena: Hegemonic Hierarchies and Happy Endings

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Introduction

Single fathers make up a small, yet growing number of families in the UK, US and beyond. Irrespective of whether these men are divorced, widowed or single fathers by choice via adoption or surrogacy, there exist few media depictions of this paternal role beyond children's animation and the situation comedy genre¹. While Disney and DreamWorks have presented a myriad of animated single fathers over the past twenty years, it is the television situation comedy that has the longest running history of depicting the single father as caregiver. For nearly six decades, in shows ranging from *My Three Sons* (1960-65), *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-68), *Who's the Boss* (1984-92) and *My Two Dads* (1987-90) to *Full House* (1987-95), *Blossom* (1990-95), *Two and a Half Men* (2003-15) and *Suburgatory* (2011-14), the single dad has been a staple of the situation comedy schedules. More recently, there has been a trend for single dads within police and crime procedurals, with *Bones* (2005-17) and *Castle* (2009-16), like their sitcom counterparts, leaning heavily on the comedy within their crime drama credentials. Alternatively, with less scope for comedic containment, single fathers such as Jack Bauer/Kiefer Sutherland (24, 2001-10) and Rick Grimes/Andrew Lincoln (*The Walking Dead*, 2010 -) are held to different paternal standards as they are saving the world from terrorist and zombie threats respectively² (Feasey 2008, 80-93).

Although there exists a number of popular and long running depictions of single fathers on the small screen, it is worth noting that such figures exist within and alongside a broader entertainment landscape. With this in mind, this chapter will look at the ways in which single fathers are depicted in popular media culture, from single fathers speaking about the triumphs, trials and tribulations of lone parenting in the *Good Men Project* to their fictional screen counterparts in the UK and US. The analysis will consider the relationship between the key themes and recurring tropes that exist in such media texts in relation to broader debates around single fatherhood. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which lone fathers are both represented and responded to in contemporary scholarship and broader

¹ The popular TV Tropes wiki does not have an entry for 'single father'. There is a link to the television show of the same name, but not to the plot conventions and devices that inform the sole paternal role in the media. This exclusion cannot be overstated. (TV Tropes 2019).

² Extant academic literature and popular media commentary share a consensus when they tell us that the bar for acceptable, appropriate, and even 'good' fatherhood is set lower than that for acceptable motherhood and motherwork (Feasey 2008, 32-44; Feasey 2012). Irrespective of whether we find the representations of 'bumbling, bungling single dads' entertaining, endearing or troubling (Williams 2012; Smith 2015), these men appear to be judged differently than their maternal counterparts.

channels of discourse. Indeed, a consideration of extra textual materials that surround a media text, or what Martin Barker refers to as ‘ancillary materials’ (Barker 2004) is an important part of the analysis due to the fact that media texts are not experienced in isolation from cultural commentaries or popular debates. Rather, they are consumed amongst a myriad of wider entertainment titles, information channels and networks.

Single fatherhood in the UK and the US

The figure of the lone father in general, and the single father by choice in particular, can be said to challenge problematic stereotypes as they relate to hegemonic masculinity, ineffectual and absent fathers and the ideology of intensive motherhood; however, the lone paternal role is underrepresented in the media and barely supported in the current pronatal climate (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). This absence of representation is at best surprising, and at worst, problematic, when one considers the number of single fathers in contemporary society.

Almost three million families are headed by a single parent in the UK, and while single mothers make up the majority of those households, around 10 per cent are headed by lone fathers (Rabindrakumar 2018; ONS 2019; Gingerbread 2020). And although there are small peaks and troughs in the number of single male and female headed households, the statistics are relatively stable in that approximately twenty-five per cent of families have been headed by a single parent over the past two decades (Rabindrakumar 2018)³.

On the other side of the Atlantic there are numerous similarities of experience. According to the most recent report released by the U.S. Census Bureau, 13.7 million single parents are currently responsible for 22.4 million children in the US (U.S. Census Bureau cited in Wolf 2020, Grall 2020). In short, 27 percent of children under 21 are being raised in a single parent household, similar to the figure in the UK. Similar patterns emerge between

³ Statistics are available relating to the number of single households in the UK and to the ways in which these households vary across different ethnic groups. Recent government figures tell us that while Asian families have the lowest number of single parent households (8.8 per cent), White and Other families rise to 10.2 and 10.5 per cent respectively. The numbers increase again for both Mixed and Black households at 19.1 and 24.3 per cent (GOV.UK 2019). These figures are useful but tell us little about the ethnic breakdown of single fathers. Future work should look to examine the breakdown of single fathers by ethnic group in relation to existing media representations, considering where and how these figures are over or under-represented. In their recent work on the representation of single fathers on the small screen Jennifer Turchi and Laurena Bernabo concluded that they could not ‘draw conclusions regarding the impact of race because all but two fathers’ in their sample were white’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2000). They were, however, we are told ‘clearly stereotyped as unknowledgeable and irresponsible caregivers’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2000).

the two countries in that the majority of single parents were married or cohabiting, not planning, choosing or expecting to be single parents with the vast majority raising small families. However, while around 10 per cent of single parents in the UK are lone fathers, that figure rises to nearly 20 percent in the US (U.S. Census Bureau cited in Wolf 2020; Grall 2020).

In a verywellfamily article⁴, Jennifer Wolf examines the aforementioned statistics in order to challenge the myths and stereotypes often associated with single motherhood, particularly as they relate to employment, economic status, age and family size (Wolf 2020). However, there is little mention of single fathers in the article, an article entitled ‘The Single Parent Statistics Based on Census Data’ (Wolf 2020, emphasis added). What is missing is an indication of the number of men who are single through divorce, bereavement, never having married, or choice, looking to the ways in which such data could help to inform media representations, challenge partial stereotypes and help guide relevant support services.

Although the notion of ‘Single Mothers by Choice’ or ‘Choice Moms’ is becoming commonplace as single women look to either surrogacy or adoption for family building and extension (SMC 2019), it is currently less common for single men to take this route to parenthood. The lower figures are due in part to legislation and complications associated with finding a gestational surrogate (Feasey 2019). According to the founder of NGA Law⁵, Natalie Gamble, current UK policy states that ‘surrogacy is such a serious undertaking it should be restricted to couples’ (Gamble cited in Blincoe 2013) and although some men travel abroad for such services ‘[t]here is no legal framework to support these fathers’ (Blincoe 2013). Even though intercountry adoption provides married, co-habiting and single females with a route to family building, many countries do not allow men to adopt as single parents (Travel State Gov 2019). There is no question that growing numbers of men are taking on the challenge of single parenthood; indeed, the number of lone fathers in the US has increased nine-fold since the 1960s. However, we have little data and scarce

⁴ Verywell is a health and wellness website whose content is created by health experts and certified physicians. The website employs a deliberately engaging and energetic tone to counter more traditional health information portals.

⁵ NGA Law was the UK’s first specialist fertility law team who have changed law and policy through their cases, campaigning work and non-profit surrogacy agency (NGA Law 2020).

acknowledgement of the single father by choice in the contemporary period (Ludden 2012; Parker 2019, Blincoe 2013)⁶.

Conforming or confounding hegemonic masculinity

Support for single mothers, by choice or otherwise; expectant mothers, new mothers, adoptive mothers, other mothers and women affected by an infertility diagnosis exist in a myriad of online and traditional media forms and formats including blogs, vlogs, online networking sites, magazines and book length volumes (Feasey 2019, 37-86). However, even a cursory glance at online forums and more traditional media texts make it clear that while a wealth of support is offered to mothers in general and single mothers in particular, there remains a paucity of such support, practical or emotional, for their paternal counterparts. Jennifer Turchi makes this point when she states that single fathers ‘have a much harder time adjusting to the primary caregiver role and find little parenting and social support’ (Turchi, 2014). This disparity of representation, and by extension, available visibility and support continues from screen to magazine media, because while there exists a wealth of maternal titles in the online and print market, there is little in this sector dedicated to fathers. Moreover, the few supporting events and materials that do exist tend to rely on action-packed fun⁷ (Dangerous Dads 2020) or a militaristic iteration of masculinity that appears to value male performance over paternal connectedness⁸ (Sinclair 2012, Sinclair 2014, Sinclair 2016).

⁶ Research on paternal adoption routinely looks at gay couples as they start or extend their family and yet little work to date examines the gay or straight single father by choice (Tessier 2010, Newman 2012, Carone, Baiocco and Lingardi 2017, Scher 2018, White 2018). Speaking as a choice father, Brian Tessier states that what such prospective fathers by choice need most is visibility, information, emotional support and ‘a community of likeminded individuals in which to connect’ (Tessier cited in Newman 2012). However, this community is slow to find a media presence. Back in 2013, Nicholas Blincoe stated ‘[i]f celebrities are any pointer to long-term trends, we could be seeing more single fathers by choice’ based on the fact that the singer Ricky Martin had twins back in 2008, while Cristiano Ronaldo became a father by choice in 2010. However, more than a decade after Martin welcomed his twins into the world, only Andy Cohen, the *Watch What Happens Live* (2009-) host, has offered further celebrity visibility to this form of family building (Blincoe 2013).

⁷ Dadfest is the only festival in the UK targeted to men as parents and carers, and their children. Although there is no discussion as to the marital status of the fathers who attend the event, the ‘adventurous’ activities on offer align with those of commando Sinclair, as they include camping, storytelling in the woods at night, bushcraft, campfire pancakes, spoon carving, den building, archery, star-gazing, water rockets, drumming workshop, mud kitchen, mackerel fishing and bat walks (Dangerous Dads 2020).

⁸ Neil Sinclair, ex-commando and dad of three, has written several book length volumes on the importance of fatherhood from pregnancy through the formative years (Sinclair 2012, 2014, 2016). Playing on his status as a former commando in active service, Sinclair peppers his books with military terminology and operative phrasings, and the commando father

Research on the ways in which new fathers use social media to make sense of their roles, informs us that these men employ ‘DIY language to describe work traditionally considered feminine’ in order to imbue their chores and domestic routines with a more predictable, traditional iteration of masculinity than the paternal responsibilities might otherwise warrant (Ammari 2018). The point here is simply that the active, action and adrenaline fuelled father might well score high in the hegemonic hierarchy, but this may be at odds with the idea that successful fatherhood combines paternal authority, protection and security with listening, affection, connectedness and patience (Momjunction 2019).

Where have all the single fathers gone?

While an Amazon search for ‘Single Dad Parenting’ books offers more steamy titles in the Mills and Boon tradition than it does volumes that look to help or support lone fathers, what is also interesting here is how few titles in this category acknowledge lone fathers by choice. Within the first 50 entries of the search we are provided with notebooks, books marketed towards new mothers, more general parenting manuals and litigation volumes. Although a small number of advice books do exist for new and expectant fathers, there is a paucity of material available for the single father, and virtually nothing for the single father by choice.

Single fathers in general and single fathers by choice in particular are less visible in the traditional pregnancy and new parent market, and as such, it is crucially important that we acknowledge where these men are seen and where these paternal voices are heard in the media landscape. After all, ‘representations of families and individuals impact our understanding of fatherhood’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). Therefore, this examination of single fathers is crucial, not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but rather, because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide ‘common-sense’ understandings about male identity, paternity and family for a contemporary audience (Turchi and Bernabo 2020)⁹.

There is a wealth of research that looks to the ways in which contemporary media representations can offer emotional camaraderie and more practical support to viewers,

approach is interesting here for the ways in which it exploits long-standing and traditional iterations of hard bodied, powerful, forceful, authoritative, hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell 1998).

⁹ Patty Kuo and Monique Ward examine the ways in which paternal representations impact on first time fathers (Kuo and Ward 2016) while Jennifer Turchi and Laurena Bernabo note that representations of families on the small screen ‘implicitly provide lessons about how families ought to behave’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020)

audiences, listeners and readers on topics ranging from disability (Ashton and Feasey 2014), infertility (Feasey 2019, 37-86), motherhood (Feasey 2016, Le Vay 2019) and new fathering (Tawfig 2018). In terms of the ways in which media representations can help parents make sense of their new found or changing role, it is clear that visibility and diversity of visibility are key (Feasey 2016, Le Vay 2019). In this way, representations of the single father on screen and beyond has the ability to make single fatherhood routine, ordinary and unexotic. Speaking about the acceptance of gay and lesbian characters on screen Benjamin Svetky stated that “in 2000 A.D. (After DeGeneres), gay characters are so common on television, so unexotic, that their sexual orientation has become all but invisible to most viewers. It is, in a sense, the ultimate sign of acceptance” (Svetky cited in Battles and Hilton Morrow 2002). However, representations of single fathers remain exotic, our desire to single them out, put them on listicles¹⁰, like and share on social media and offer praise and plaudits for their efforts sets them apart from single mothers or more traditional nuclear units. It is clear then that media representations have a role to play in the wider social acceptance of single fathers, removed from explanation, justification or romantic ‘fixing’.

In a range of mainstream media texts, fatherhood is less prolific than motherhood, single fatherhood is less visible again, and single fatherhood by choice is noticeable in its absence (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). In a recent spate of television documentaries that take adoption as their starting point, we spend time meeting social workers, foster carers, children in need of forever homes and prospective adopters. However, even here, where the notion of much needed loving homes is central to the narrative, we do not meet any single fathers by choice (*Wanted: A Family of My Own*, 2014; *15,000 Kids and Counting*, 2014; *Finding Me a Family*, 2017). The documentaries make it clear that all families are welcome, and indeed, encouraged: older, younger, married, gay, straight and single. However, single in these examples means lone mothers. This is not to suggest that the documentaries are agenda setting, merely that this potential paternal demographic is not represented. At a time when both the media and society appear to be embracing gay and straight stay-at-home fathers in a range of television shows spanning age and genre conventions - be it *Two and a Half Men* (2003-15), *Modern Family* (2009- 2020), *Doc McStuffins* (2012-), *The Blacklist* (2013-), *Broadchurch* (2013-) or *Motherland* (2016-) - the omission of the single father, divorced,

¹⁰ A listicle is a blend of both list and article, made up of facts, tips or examples orchestrated around a theme, topic, category or genre. Numbered or bulleted, they are common online, in magazines and the blogosphere. They routinely pick up on the zeitgeist of the period and are a popular media reference point for contemporary audiences.

widowed or by choice, must be acknowledged¹¹. This could be due in part to the fact that although the the stay-at-home dad appears a relatively stable figure, the single father might be less so.

Single father or divorced dad?!

There are difficulties in trying to reach a ‘precise definition’ as it relates to single parenthood (Letablier and Wall 2017). Single parenting is not a static or rigid status and some families ‘transition in and out of marriage, cohabitation and single parenting’ (Robinson 2019). While this difficulty of definition applies to single mothers and fathers alike, the issue of definition is further complicated when Doug Zeigler differentiates between ‘single fathers’ and ‘divorced dads’ (Zeigler 2018). The two terms, we are told, are used differently, rather than interchangeably. Writing for the good men project, a site that looks to challenge the gendered stereotypes that present men as ‘mindless, sex-obsessed buffoons’ or ‘stoic automatons’ that ‘our culture so often makes them out to be’ (Good Men Project 2019), Zeigler is speaking from the point of view of those eponymous good men who work to be ‘smart, compassionate, curious, and open-minded ... good fathers and husbands, citizens and friends’ (Zeigler 2018). He finds that:

men who do not have their children full time are not single fathers. They are considered divorced dads. Single fathers are those that care for their children full time and ‘understand’ what a single mother contends with on the day-to-day as a result. Divorced dads are men who have their children every other weekend and have all kinds of freedom in between, and as such do not act like fathers during that time. They don’t always consider the time they have outside having their children at all intersecting with the time they spend with their kids, which makes them seem irresponsible (Zeigler 2018).

Zeigler, himself a ‘divorced dad’ rather than a ‘single father’ to use the terminology presented in the article, suggests that the reason for the differing terms and their meanings and the values associated with them are based on a number of interconnected factors. In part

¹¹ In a blog post entitled ‘Where Are All The Stay-At-Home Dads On Film And TV?’ we are told that ‘[m]ost of the examples of dads spending time with their kids appeared to be because the partner had died / left, or they’d lost their job’ (Dadventurer 2017).

to the long-standing assumption that women are innately more nurturing than men and the reality of custody demographics whereby children are still more often living with mothers than fathers (Rabindrakumar 2018); in part due to a nostalgic longing for a bygone nuclear family unit routinely depicted in post-war situation comedy family structures¹² (Feasey 2012), and in part to more recent representations of single fathers in prime time television. In relation to this final point, it has been argued that those ‘men with primary physical custody are more positively stereotyped’ than their ‘divorced dad’ counterparts on the small screen. Indeed, these single fathers are said to be ‘increasingly depicted as warm and nurturing, mirroring an increase in custodial single fathers’ levels of “mothering activities,” [and] rejecting the notion of father-as-backup’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). That said, ‘because of our historically gendered notions of parenting’ single dads, even those in the position of sole caregiver, struggle with day-to-day childcare. Representations of single fathers who are strained and stressed by the daily chores, physical and organisational labour associated with their paternal role are routinely exploited in programmes such as *Guys with Kids* (2012-13), *Splitting up Together* (2018-19) and *Single Parents* (2018-20) as they show these men leaning on ‘outside assistance in parenting their children’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020).

Single dads in the media: aka widower seeks new wife and mother

On-screen single fathers, widowed or divorced, have a tendency to rely on ‘some kind of surrogate mother, who often works or volunteers in a caring capacity (housekeeper, cook, teacher). This both “reassures” the audience that traditional gender roles are still in play and provides the possibility of (heterosexual) romance’ (Shipley 2012). Codes of romance are not new in relation to the depiction of the single father on screen. Rather, back in the 1950s and 1960s, *Bachelor Father* (1957-62) and *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father* (1969-72) introduced a romantic narrative thread for the central paternal protagonist. Indeed, the plot synopsis for the latter is simply that ‘Widower Tom Corbett must raise his son Eddie ... who is always scheming to get his dad remarried’¹³ (IMDB 2019). Widowed fathers have long been seen on our screens, with plot lines routinely looking to ‘fix’ the problem of single fatherhood.

¹² These affable sitcoms were presenting a fantasy of economic security, social stability and family togetherness that was not necessarily in keeping with the wider social or sexual context of the period. The economically stable nuclear family unit with a breadwinning father and a satisfied stay-at-home wife and mother has only ever represented ‘a certain population, and only for a very restricted period that is now long past. *It was never, in fact, traditional*’ (Kinser 2010, 26; italics in original).

¹³ There is evidence to suggest that widowed parents are slightly more likely to re-partner than their separated or divorced paternal counterparts (Robinson 2019),

Children look to create happy nuclear units by finding a new wife for their father and by extension, a new mother for the home. The problematic suggestion here is that ‘men cannot be happy and functional without a love relationship, and that a dad cannot properly parent without a woman by his side’ (Shipley 2012)¹⁴.

Although most single fathers have become solo parents via divorce (ElHage 2017; ONS 2017; Rabindrakumar 2018), it is widowers rather than divorced dads who have dominated televisual representations of lone fatherhood. Television’s commitment to the representation of widowers over their divorced counterparts has existed since the 1950s (*Bachelor Father*), through the 1960s (*The Andy Griffith Show* 1960-68, *My Three Sons* 1960-1972, *Family Affair* 1966-71, *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father*), 1970s (*Diff’rent Strokes* 1978-1986), 1980s (*Who’s The Boss?* 1984-1992, *Full House* 1987-95), 1990s (*The Nanny* 1993-99) and into the millennium (*24* 2001-10, *Arrested Development* 2003- , *Supernatural* 2005- , *Glee* 2009-15, *Hannah Montana* 2006-11, *Ugly Betty* 2006-10 and *The Walking Dead*). In their work on the structures and characteristics of families on popular prime-time television from the mid 1940s to 1990, Marvin Moore noted that nine out of ten single fathers on screen during this period were presented as widowed in the text (Moore 1992), a stark difference to the lived experience of single fathers in society. In short, there remains a ‘disconnect between media representations’ and the reality of single father families. After all, while representations of single fathers on screen are dominated by widower narratives¹⁵, only 11 per cent of single fathers in society have experienced bereavement¹⁶ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). Jennifer Turchi and Laurena Bernabo have suggested that ‘this misrepresentation of single fathers could be due to cultural “push back” of the rapid shift away from traditional family structures during the 1980s and 1990s’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020).

¹⁴ While family friendly entertainment narratives look to combine a single father storyline with a romance narrative in line with the heterosexual imperative that drives much mainstream media fare (Demory and Pullen 2013), this drive to tame and contain lone fatherhood by way of PG-rated romance, cohabitation and marriage is not restricted to the fictional widower. After all, a longstanding and ubiquitous link exists between support for single fathers and relationship advice for these selfsame men (Parker 2019, Browning 2017).

¹⁵ Jennifer Turchi and Laurena Bernabo looked to update Moore’s seminal study and found that ‘successful family series of the past decade more accurately reflect broader demographic populations of families: 35% are single-parent households, of which 52% are mother-led, 26% are father-led, and 22% share custody’ (Turchi and Bernabo 2020).

¹⁶ While two per cent of single mothers are widowers, that number rises to 11 per cent for their paternal counterparts, helping to explain why the average age of a single father is older than that of the average single mothers (Rabindrakumar 2018).

The aptly titled mini-series, *Single Father* (2010) follows Dave/David Tennant as he is widowed and struggling to raise his four children before developing feelings for his deceased wife's best friend. Complicated and emotionally challenging, yes, but also wholly predictable in line with existing representations of single fathers on screen. In her work on the absent mother and post-feminist fatherhood in the media, Berit Åström highlights the longstanding trend for mothers as 'expendable, untrustworthy, and dangerous' (Åström 2015, 595) compared to their more reliable and supporting paternal counterparts. We are told that '[u]nlike most other narratives employing the trope, *Single Father* goes beyond simply negating the mother before moving along with the narrative. The death of the mother is instead invoked repeatedly as a romantic necessity, creating a narrative, which viewers perceive as a love story with a happy ending'¹⁷ (Åström 2015, 595). Another narrative, another partial representation. After all, research suggests that single fathers in society 'regularly forgo romantic relationships in order to keep their home lives "drama free" and to protect their kids from possible disappointment' (Turchi 2014). These single fathers 'also indicate that sacrifices allow them time to adjust to their new role as a single parent' (Turchi and Bernabo 2020). The point here is that 'on-screen single fathers who maintain their lifestyles are the minority and do not accurately represent off-screen single fathers ... today' (Turchi and Bernabo 2020, emphasis in original).

With the exception of Henry Warnimont (*Punky Brewster*, 1984-88) and Joe West (*The Flash*, 2014-), there are few examples of single fathers by choice, be it via adoption or surrogacy, on the small screen. Indeed, we are as likely to find stories of maternal abandonment as we are narratives of single fatherhood by choice¹⁸ (*Blossom* 1990-1995; *Suburgatory* 2011-). The only routine and consistent exception takes us from live action television to children's big screen animations. In films such as *Brother Bear* (2003), *Chicken Little* (2005), *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), *Despicable Me* (2010), *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011) and *Mr Peabody and Sherman* (2014) the single father has adopted, rather than been left to care for children through death or divorce. Although lone fathers in the cartoon realm are

¹⁷ The lone father is routinely second to the missing, dead or absent mother as she exists in teen drama (Feasey 2017a), the horror genre (Träger 2017) and family films (Åström 2017). This research has come to the conclusion that single fatherhood looks like an energetic and engaging alternative to having a maternal presence in the home (Boxer 2014).

¹⁸ Playing to the absurdity of the comedy genre, *Raising Hope* (2010-14) finds Jimmy Chance having a one-night stand with a serial killer, discovering that she was pregnant only when she ends up on death row.

compassionate, caring, patient and authoritative in line with the ideal paternal role, what they are not, is human. Adoption in the cartoon canon positions anthropomorphic animals as choosing to take on solo paternal roles (Åström 2015, Åström 2017). The fact that single fathers by choice are seldom seen beyond this particular media form leaves us to question if it is animation, children's animation, or the depiction of animated animals more specifically, that makes these single fathers by choice less challenging and therefore more acceptable than their live action counterparts. The fact that much children's animated fare routinely features anthropomorphic animals, be it *The Jungle Book* (1967) or *Jungle Beat* (2020), leads us to conclude that it is indeed the cartoon format which either finds space for, or actively encourages complex images of single fathers. Animation is in an ideal position to present alternative and even subversive representations of family, friendship, masculinity and paternity on the silver screen. Paul Wells makes this point when he comments that the film form 'offers a greater opportunity for film-makers to be more imaginative and less conservative' in their depiction of contemporary family structures (Wells 1998a: 6; See also Tueth 2003: 140). Although mature audiences find enjoyment and escapism in children's animation (and adult animation in its own right as it is popular with their target demographic), cartoons are routinely understood as a children's medium. While many of the most positive and progressive depictions of single fathers are created for children, the suggestion here is that younger audiences are more open to diverse family units than their more mature counterparts. In the same way that children's animation is able to educate its audience about tolerance and acceptance of non-binary characters and relationships (Feasey, 2017b), so too, the form is able to present viewers with family dynamics which challenge the hegemonic nuclear family unit. As Åström states 'there is no suggestion' in these films that these single parent households are incomplete (Åström 2017, 254)¹⁹.

From screen space to social support

Although much screen and media fare suggests that men are keen to date and/or find a mother substitute in the home, the reality is that single fathers are struggling to secure

¹⁹ Åström is building on the work of Hannah Hamad, who analyses mainstream films such as *Minority Report* (2002), *Road to Perdition* (2002), and *Signs* (2002) for their turn away from motherhood to the representation of the widowed single father as caregiver and provider (Åström 2015, Åström 2017, Hamad 2013). She notes that although it is important that children are exposed to a range of family units, the recent turn to single father in much animation is at the expense of the maternal role. She concludes that fathers have 'gone from being bumbling and inept to being the *only* parent a child ... needs' (Åström, 2017, 254; emphasis added).

targeted emotional support, and are suffering from loneliness and isolation. Recent research from the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences tells us that ‘single fathers are significantly less likely to have ... social networks that could help to enhance their health, productivity, and wellbeing in society’ (Chiu 2018, 120)²⁰. We are told that these men ‘have a greater risk of mortality ... poorer self-rated health and mental health, higher levels of psychological distress, and generally a lower socio-economic status’ than their female counterparts (The Lancet 2018, 100). That said, although single fathers are said to be less likely to have a supporting social network around them (Chiu 2018, French 2018), it is not yet clear whether men are asking for but being refused emotional support, or whether the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity is at play, stating as it does that men should be stoic and self-sufficient rather than connected and willing to seek help (Connell 1995).

Extant literature from the social sciences, health services and from single fathers themselves make it clear that having emotional support and access to a like-minded community is the key to successful single parenting in general, and single fatherhood in particular (Tessier 2010; Chiu 2018; The Lancet 2018). However, in order to encourage such community building, visibility is key. The depiction of diverse, complex and multifaceted single fathers are needed to challenge the paucity of partial, playful and problematic representations (Wiltsher 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the ways in which media representations are committed to the depiction of lone fathers as widowers rather than divorcés, with these men routinely positioned in romantic situations so as to alleviate the potential challenge of single fatherhood to more traditional depictions of family life. Returning to a traditional family unit via dating, engagement and re-marriage enables single fathers to embrace or regain their traditional masculine credentials rather than disrupt or destabilise the hegemonic hierarchy.

What remains clear throughout is that media representations of single fathers are key, not just to creative entertainment, but to broader cultural visibility, and by extension, family support. Visibility is key, and as such, here is a call to those media researchers, creatives, practitioners and commissioners who are in a position to bring ‘more emotionally authentic depictions of the realities of single fatherhood’ beyond the romance drive, assertive hard

²⁰ This research builds on a previous study that discovered that ‘single fathers were twice as likely to report poor self-rated health and mental health as single mothers, but were only half as likely to access health services’ (Chiu 2018, 115).

bodies and bumbling buffoons to our collective attention (Wiltsher 2019). Future research needs to speak to the creative industries about the role, representation and responsibility of single fathers in the entertainment and media marketplace, drawing on audience research to understand the ways in which readers, viewers and listeners make sense of these representations. Such research could in turn be used as the basis for localised support for single fathers in society.

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