SEXTANT

Panel Conversation

SEXTANT
Masculinities, Sexualities & Decolonialities
Vol. 3(2), 101-116
© The Authors 2025
https://doi.org/10.65621/JQRC4483

Fatherhood and Caring: A Conversation on International Men's Day

Alan Bromhead, **Tom Costello**, **Jonathan Ilan**, **Joe Mooney**[1]
University College Dublin

with **Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila**

Abstract

This panel conversation, held by the University College Dublin College of Social Sciences and Law to mark International Men's Day 2025, focuses on fatherhood and caring. The panel includes four male colleagues: Dr. Alan Bromhead, Tom Costello, Dr. Jonathan Ilan, and Dr. Joe Mooney. Professor Niamh Moore-Cherry opened the event, and Associate Professor Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila conducted the conversation. The discussion focused on the importance of fatherhood and caring in men's lives. In an intimate and warm environment, the panellists shared their personal experiences and professional perspectives on how they navigate perceived contradictions of caring as 'not masculine' within their lives and wider society. The conversation addressed the tensions between traditional masculine roles and the emotional, practical, and time-intensive realities of being a father and engaged caregiver in current times. It highlighted the challenges and rewards of embracing care responsibilities and the importance of institutional support for male caregivers.

Keywords: caring, fatherhood, conversations, International Men's Day

[1] Corresponding Panellists: De Bromhead, Alan (alan.debromhead@ucd.ie); Costelloe, Tom (tom.costelloe@ucd.ie); Ilan, Jonathan (jonathan.ilan1@ucd.ie); Mooney, Joe (joseph.mooney1@ucd.ie)
SEXTANT: www.sextantnotes.com. ISSN: 2990-8124
Observatory of Masculinities
University College Dublin, Ireland

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). License terms: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Introduction by Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila

The foundational work of Connell (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) on hegemonic masculinity highlights how, in every society, there is a socially valued form of being a man that legitimises male dominance and is characterised by aspects such as the exacerbation of certain emotions (e.g., anger and fury) and the suppression of others (e.g., vulnerability, sadness). Within this framework, toughness and traditional roles such as protector and provider are more valued than nurturing and caring.

To mark International Men's Day 2025, the University College Dublin (UCD) College of Social Sciences and Law hosted a compelling panel conversation that directly engaged with these critical themes. The event was opened by Professor Niamh Moore-Cherry and chaired by Associate Professor Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila. It featured four male colleagues: Dr. Alan Bromhead, Tom Costelloe, Dr. Jonathan Ilan, and Dr. Joe Mooney. The discussion centred on the profound importance of fatherhood and care in the panellists' personal and professional lives, offering valuable insights into the lived experience of modern male caregivers.

In an intimate setting, the four panellists share personal anecdotes and professional perspectives on navigating the complexities of fatherhood and caregiving. A central thread of the conversation is the tension men experience as they embrace nurturing roles that often challenge traditional, restrictive notions of masculinity. Specifically, the discussion addresses the perceived contradiction between emotional, time-intensive care and established gender expectations that usually stereotype care as 'not masculine'. The panellists share their experiences balancing professional demands with domestic responsibilities. The conversation highlights the vital necessity of institutional and structural support, ranging from flexible work policies to a cultural environment that validates men's roles as engaged caregivers, to enable and sustain fatherhood and caring as fundamental components in men's lives.

This panel conversation contributes to the current discussion on work-life balance, the need to challenge and deconstruct rigid gender norms that constrain men's emotional and familial engagement, and the crucial role of institutional support for male caregivers.

Panel Conversation: Opening Remarks by Niamh Moore-Cherry

Thank you very much, Ernesto, for inviting me to open the discussion today. This is the first time we are doing a big event for International Men's Day in the college. It's a significant milestone to mark and so encouraging to see so many people here today. When Ernesto and I were discussing the event in planning, and he mentioned 'Caring and

Fatherhood' as a theme, it resonated so much with me. I am mum to a 16-year-old and a 14-year-old and see the importance and special relationship with their dad and the importance of male role models to both girls and boys. In my own life, my dad has been a huge influence and support for me. One immediate example was a conversation in our house last night where myself and my husband realised we are both, unusually, out for work this evening. My first reaction was 'ask my dad' to help us out and do the lifts and drops for the kids. It's through support like this that my dad has been so crucial to enabling me to have been able to do the things that I can do. Fatherhood is not just for the early years but right through life enabling children to reach their full potential.

I also want to acknowledge the second part of our theme today: the importance of caring. We're living in a society where older people are living longer, where those with additional needs are now cared for at home, so the range of caring throughout society in people's lives is so vast. For a functioning and an inclusive society we need to acknowledge this. When we understand caring, we need to move beyond the sole lens of children, and understand it in the sense of caring for all of those in our society that need support, whether they're older people or whether they're people with additional needs.

Caring for each other is also critical and something I believe should be at the heart of our college. As colleagues and as students, we should be focused on looking out and caring for each other as best we can. We might not always get it right, but we must try, and care should be the point of departure in our decision-making and action. I want to thank all of you for coming and our panellists in advance for what I'm sure will be a thought-provoking and engaging conversation. Thank you to Ernesto and all of the organising team around the event today.

Ernesto: Thank you, Niamh. I am delighted to welcome our panellists: Dr. Alan Bromhead from the School of Economics; Tom Costello from UCD Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Dr. Jonathan Ilan from the School of Law; and Dr. Joe Mooney from the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice. If you could introduce your family, how would you describe your family?

Alan: I'm a father of three. I have an 11-year-old boy, a five-year-old girl, and an eight-year-old girl. And both myself and my wife work full-time. So, that probably poses a shortage of time.

Tom: I'm part of a two-dad family. Our son is four. He was born in Canada with an egg donor and a surrogate. We work full time as well. So, juggling that is kind of tough. I do love talking about our story because it's a really lovely story. I think one of the things I think of is the Irish word *meitheal*

because it was a real support and a community effort to get us to where we are.

Johnny: I'm a husband to a wife. I have two boys, seven and four, but my wife works in tech and works very, very, very long hours. So, you know, the school has my number if anything goes wrong and I make the school lunches and that kind of thing. I don't know how we're supposed to talk about that these days, but yeah, that's kind of my role in the family is probably taking the lead on childcare and domestic issues.

Joe: My name is Joe and I'm married to Aoife, my wife, and we have two kids, two girls. A 12-year-old girl, just securing secondary school places this week, an absolute head-melter for anybody who's done or is about to do it. And then we have an eight-year-old girl as well, her little sister, Charlie. So, Cara and Charlie. And we both work full time as well. My wife is in pharma, so she has long, much longer hours than myself and a lot of travel. So, in fact, she's gone in the morning. I'm staying in here this evening until whatever time, writing on a project that's due, and she's gone first thing in the morning. She'll be gone until Friday. Then we have something out at the GAA club Friday evening. We're going to walk you through the whole calendar now [laughs]. And she'll fly back in. But we're used to this, and everybody's used to this logistical piece, which I think you're going to come to. So yeah, that's part of the juggle, isn't it?

Ernesto: It's 2025 and still society tells us that being a man is being the provider, being the protector, and caring is something that is not masculine. What are some of the stereotypes about fatherhood that you have consciously rejected, that you wanted to do different in your family?

Joe: I wouldn't say consciously reject stereotypes... I don't experience some of the stereotypes. So, as I said, my wife is in pharma. She is, in terms of providing, she's the breadwinner, I suppose, in terms of salary and financial input into the house and always has been. It's been that way. So, in terms of doing the lunches and that sort of thing, we're a 50-50 split, but I would take a little bit more of a role in that side of it. I know dads in my circle who have maybe a more hands-off approach, and we would talk about it at times and I see some differences. I mean, we had some friends in last night because they're getting their house done up next door, so they have no running water or anything. We were talking about kids and bedtimes and all that. So, my youngest daughter, eight, is autistic and she requires a little bit more care. And we were talking about how long it takes to get them to bed in the evening. So, I was sitting up there on the bedtime routine because we do it alternatively. And I was thinking of the questions you had here. And I said, `right, I'm going to just do a little back of the envelope totting up'. So, parents for 12 years and

you divide that out into your days of the week or whatever. We're looking at about 4,800 days. Yeah, this is where it went. And then, you know, that's 4,800 single hours of bedtime. You divide that by 24 to get the days of the week and you split in two between myself and my wife. So, I've sat on the floor in a bedroom for three months, which I hadn't thought about until you prompted the question. So, that surprised me, but it does counter some of the stereotypes of what fathering is. And as a social worker from child protection practice, we're missing dads and father figures more generally in children's lives. So, yeah, I think this hopefully helps break some of the stereotypes, but we've a long way to go.

Johnny: For me, when I was thinking about stereotypes, I thought I would kind of personalise it a little bit in that… Well, I'll say now, I don't have a close relationship with my own dad. My parents split up when I was very, very young, which was weird for Ireland at the time, but there's many things about me that were very weird for Ireland at the time. Both my parents were immigrants, et cetera, et cetera. But in any event, yeah, I saw my dad a lot growing up but I've never been very close to him. At this point, I really don't see much of him at all. So, in terms of what did I reject in terms of being a dad? And it's hard to say this in front of quite a few strangers here, but I suppose it was that I had a very personal experience of what I didn't want to be for my kids. For example, my dad and his generation boast that they've never changed a nappy in their lives. They've never made a bottle. I had a lot of luck in a lot of ways. I'm a criminologist, but I quite often sit very close to sociology. So, we've always got a material basis for the things that we say. So, I was really lucky to have a lot of different resources. Being able to take six months off work when each of my kids were born is huge. So, you know, my wife and I did six months each off. So, I was always doing feeding, doing nappies, kind of from day one. So, it feels natural. But I also recognise that that was possible because of resources that most people won't have. And it was a combination of our own family resources, but also I happened to be in a university that hadn't costed really what it would be like giving kind of equal paternal leave, but just went with it. And I'm grateful for that. But yeah, I don't know how it worked for them financially.

Tom: For us, we’re already breaking tradition as a same-sex couple and as parents. In our home, everything is shared; there’s no ‘main carer’ and no ‘nurturer’. We divide it equally. Our son is growing up seeing that a man can be strong and also caring. That you don’t have to choose one or the other. And that’s something we really want him to grow up knowing—that you can be both.

Alan: Thinking about stereotypes, and I suppose it's probably my own personal experience that those sort of traditional male roles or father roles, I don't really see them among my social circle anymore. They are

from something that's passed. There may be other parts of society that this still does persist. But the more I kind of got involved, some of you guys have said, it's sort of 50-50 split, that's sort of how we've approached it. And that's always been, there's no reason to, in our relationship, to do it any other way. But what's made me very aware of the stereotypes that other people have about men and fathers is, when I show any kind of engagement with my kids, I'm seen as a hands-on dad. Whereas with my wife… You know, the bar is so low for men in society to be dads. And it just really made me realise just how high the bar is for mothers. And we're not yet there to kind of close that gap. We're moving in the right direction, but it's still very easy for dads to kind of go, 'ah, sure, I'm not very good at this. Look, I leave this to the mothers'. And society's pushing it that way as well. So, anything we can do to support the mothers or our partners in this is going to be really helpful. In terms of the overall stereotypes, the only one I can think of is the idea that dads are useless. And that's usually followed by an eye-roll. Disorganised and can't be trusted to organise the appointments and all the things, have the school lunches ready or have the PE bag ready at the door to go. I really do try and fight that and show that, look, I can be someone who can be relied on, share those kind of scheduling tasks. To ring the doctors to do this and that, and to not leave it all with my partner, who is very good at that and that's part of her job, as well, so, I'm fighting that. But just to challenge that stereotype that we're not all useless and *can* be trusted with the very certain micro-level tasks.

Ernesto: How do you reconcile these different spaces? Your work here in UCD and your work at home caring?

Johnny: I have to say, I feel that UCD, certainly in my corner of it, is good. It's family friendly. I'm only at UCD two years and three months. I'm only a dad seven years. I'm still working out how to balance work-life. And I don't have a clue. I'll be really honest. But certainly, you know, I've never felt that the institution would be a barrier to that. And I'm not just saying that. That's my genuine feeling. I wouldn't have said that about everywhere I was. But yeah. But yeah, I don't know how it works yet. Maybe in 20 years, I'll know.

Tom: I'll be honest, I still find it hard. As men, there are assumptions made about us that often go unspoken: that we're always available, that we don't have caring responsibilities. I've had to remind people that I do, that I need to collect my son, that I have commitments outside of work. I'm fortunate to work in equality, diversity and inclusion, where my team and manager are genuinely supportive. When we were expecting Shay, they went above and beyond for us, and that made a real difference. But even with that support, I've learned the importance of setting boundaries, being clear and saying, 'no, I can't take that meeting, I can't attend that

event, I need to collect my son.' Those boundaries matter, not just for me, but for changing expectations more broadly.

Ernesto: And you feel that that's legitimised, that's recognised when you say, no?

Tom: Once you're consistent and clear about your boundaries, people start to understand and respect them. So, yes, it does get there in the end.

Joe: Yeah, kind of the same as Tom. I don't feel they necessarily do reconcile with each other, those two worlds. I think one ebbs and flows at a given time. Sometimes it's going grand and you're getting your work done, you're getting home and it's working. And other times, home comes in and everything else needs to drop. My stress points are teaching. Most things, we're really lucky we're in jobs that more often than not… I remember working in child protection, if you got a phone call on Friday evening, that was it, you were gone. You had to make arrangements, and we don't have family in Dublin. But here, most things can be moved and you can give apologies. But if you're in the classroom, that's my real stress, if I get a call during class time. Unfortunately, when I was teaching, a lot of that fell to my wife because I'm in the classroom, I can't go. And she would cancel everything and go. So, I don't feel they do reconcile. I'm not sure if they can reconcile. I feel they ebb and flow. And, it doesn't matter how many years in, I think we're just grappling with it as best we can. Not to be too negative. There's lovely parts of it as well.

Alan: Just to echo what's already been said, I think, you know, the flexibility that UCD gives you, both the institution and the actual job that we do as academics, or even support staff. It's probably different to everywhere else. I can't imagine any place is better than UCD for helping you. The cultural things are harder to change, such as that unconscious judgment about whether you're available at 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening to do something or to come to an event. Maybe people's expectations haven't caught up with how fatherhood has changed, that I'm just as likely to need to pick up the kids as my partner. This maybe hasn't sunk in yet, hopefully it will, but there has been a dramatic change in a generation as to how fathers take on their roles. So, I think it might take a bit of time to catch up on that. Flexibility is great, but it doesn't create any additional time in the week. And so, you're still up against that. And I agree with Joe's point about the teaching. That's where we really feel it because, you know, it's very hard to cancel a class of 500 students and reschedule that and do all of this. It causes all sorts of trouble. So, that's where you feel that pressure. But, again, flexibility doesn't create more time for you. If you want to compete in a very competitive environment like we're in, you have to just put in the hours and there's a very little substitute for that.

So, maybe in the longer run, you feel it's a constraint on your career development.

Ernesto: We talked a little bit about culture, but there are also structural factors that shape fatherhood and caring. We only have 14 days for paternity leave in Irish legislation. How can UCD, the institution we are working in, support you specifically in reconciling these roles, which, as you mentioned, is quite challenging at times?

Alan: In terms of paternity leave and being quite limited in time, I mean, most of the challenges that dads face are faced by women as well, and by mothers and by people who have caring responsibilities in general. And UCD is a good place to be, and I think their policies are broadly right in terms of what they're aiming to achieve. Changing the culture of the place is probably the biggest barrier, I'd say, that remains. And I think an event like this really helps just to have people have an open conversation about, you know, 'these are the things that I deal with'. They can sometimes go unobserved because they happen after the work is done, and they don't see it. Acknowledging that there's this other constraint in your time out there that has to be obeyed, more so than many other things in your life, I think that's a good way to allow people to understand what's going on in people's lives and have a bit more patience at times, and understanding.

Tom: UCD does have strong policies in place, but awareness is still the challenge. Men need to be actively encouraged to take the leave available to them, without the stigma of having to put their hand up and to say, 'I need this leave to support my partner or my family'. It's important that men know taking leave won't harm their career or progression. That cultural reassurance still needs work. My own experience was slightly different, as I was able to avail of the surrogacy leave policy, and UCD was one of the first universities to introduce it, which is genuinely commendable. I took the full time and was able to be there with my son, and that was incredibly meaningful. The policies are there; now we need to be better at talking about them, promoting them, and normalising their use.

Johny: My observation is a bit around universality. Like, things like core hours are brilliant, right? Because if meetings are only between 10:00 and 4:00, I always know I'm going to be able to do my pickups, drop offs, no problem. And what's great about that is nobody says, you know, 'it's for mums, it's for dads'. It's just a policy, it's a universal policy. And so that's great. And it means you don't have to get into the recognition thing as much. An anecdote again, which sociologists are never supposed to do, I had a good friend at a different university who attended a lot of the women's leadership sessions. And she was very, very proudly child-free.

And she just said, 'why do they always talk about parenting at these things?'. And where, structurally, most women are burdened with so much of the care, I think her point was right in that part of that is our culture, we kind of put parenting in as a woman's issue. Now, I completely recognise it most often happens to be that way. But I think that there's that cultural thing of recognising that parenting is its own thing, too, and that it's an injustice that it has tended to fall entirely on women. I think there's reflection that can be done, which is kind of exactly what we're doing now, around how we gender parenting, et cetera, et cetera. And I think, as well, it's always any of those things that don't necessarily cost money that are good for universities. So, a lot of the changes you want just can't happen because they can't afford it. And that's fine. But then there's some things you can change that actually don't cost very much at all. And there's always room, I think, for thinking around that. How can we do it there? But, generally, as I said, I've got positive experiences. Things like any universal policy, it's great, usually.

Joe: I think those policies, what they do is they increase choice for you, and they help you make decisions. Like the core hours there, if there's a meeting until 5 o'clock, we're lucky to be able to use an after-school and our kids are there till 6 o'clock, if needs be. We hate leaving them there until 6 o'clock because it's 8 o'clock to 6 o'clock. It's a huge day for them. So, you juggle then. If there's a meeting coming up, or if there's a seminar on, if there's something… 'Do I choose to go to that and do the networking and learn a little bit and add to something maybe I'm thinking about somewhere else? Or do I take them out? It's just one day, will 6 o'clock really harm them, leaving them in?' But you are making that decision. And I've made a conscious decision in my own life, and with my wife as well, to veer towards taking them out and going to collect them. And I'm probably missing opportunities, and I know I'm not as far ahead as I could be in terms of publications and research, but I'm okay with that decision. And if it comes to affect me, it'll come to affect me. But in the grand scheme of things, that's where my priority is always going to be. But policies that help you make those decisions are hugely beneficial because you're not making them against the grain, then.

Ernesto: I have the privilege to know you as dear colleagues, you are men who are comfortable with your own vulnerabilities, and you are kind and compassionate men at work and in your social relations. So, bringing mental health into our conversation, how can we promote healthy and caring masculinities for our young men? And show them that vulnerability is part of being a man, that caring is also part of being a man?

Tom: For me, it's about action, not just words. It's about living the change you want to see, especially as men. That means speaking up,

stepping forward, and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. I often get emotional when I talk about our journey to becoming dads, but I choose to share it anyway, because these stories matter. Creating understanding and respect matters. Talking about men becoming parents through different paths matters. Letting people see the real experiences of gay dads matters. That's how we challenge assumptions about men and fatherhood. That's how progress happens. And that's how we truly move the dial, by being the change we want to see.

Joe: I absolutely agree with Tom on that. And I think there's still big issues. I think it is changing to a degree. Speaking in my own personal experience, the guys in my social circle, I think, are comfortable talking about, you know, issues they might be facing, troubles they might have. And what I consciously do is kind of double down on that. I go full on social worker with them, and I will lean in and we will have a conversation. But I do that, obviously, because I'm there and a friend. But when they start going, it's just setting the stage, it's setting the example. And, it might be one person that day and one person the next. But I think the more we do it, the more it becomes the norm. And I think it is. Hopefully, my sense is, it's becoming more the norm. But it's up against such a toxicity now that, you know, there's a fragility around all of our knowledge and awareness about all of these things that we need to mind. So, I think, by doing it, and when it arises, you're there as that ally, whatever the situation might be.

Johnny: I think it's so fraught. My research is generally, nearly exclusively, about tough younger men. And often my observation will be that there's such pressure. So, the young men I'd have worked with are particularly marginalised socioeconomically. And, for whatever reason, there's such pressure to be tough. And really weakness, vulnerability is not in any way tolerated. It can actually be dangerous, you know. And so, I feel personally, I always reflect on the multiple privileges that a man like me has. And it was the point that I made earlier, like, male privilege, everyone's like, 'oh, you're great with your kids', and that never gets said to a woman. But I also feel a little bit that my capacity to be here talking about a guy who can be vulnerable is, to a certain extent, a privilege as well. And if this is a little bit controversial, I apologise, but I have a lot of concern and sympathy for a lot of those young men who are buying into the manosphere nonsense. I would feel that a certain amount of that is driven by fear. A huge amount, I think as well, by the pandemic and a lack of proper socialisation. I think those key years when young men were rounding out some of the edges about how they're to be about romance and who they are to be in this world were kind of taken away from them. I think that the problem of the manosphere has a lot of different tendrils. And I would say this because of my academic background, but I feel a lot of it won't ever really get discussed. The socioeconomics of it, the idea

that you should be a provider, which is intensely problematic, but it sort of doesn't even matter because most of these young men will never have the economic opportunity in some ways. And so, you know, they're buying into the gambling, they're buying into the crypto grifts, all sorts of stuff. And so, for me, that whole problem about masculinity is, again, it's part of my research, but it's just so dense... So, it's great that we can kind of be trailblazers for a more inclusive masculinity. I just despair at all the structures forcing many other men into that caricature that's so unhealthy. But I don't want to be controversial, I don't want to be pessimistic. I'm sure there are ways, but, right now, we're all stuck in the morass; 'what is this? This is awful'.

Alan: I was thinking about this as you guys were talking, and the idea has come up already, about the importance of role models. And that's kind of what we're, as fathers, trying to provide for, particularly our sons, let's say, but also our daughters. But we're talking about sons now more, you know, passing on a good model of what it is to be a man. And so obviously we play a key role in that. I think you just have to walk the walk, as Tom said. But it struck me as well, I was doing parent-teacher meetings on Monday for the kids in school. And my son, he's been in school, he's in sixth class now, and for the first time in school, he's had a male teacher. And the teacher was fantastic. And we had a great conversation, and really kind of came in willing to help and positive and a really good role model. And he's also the sports coach, he's doing all of the things that would have been traditionally masculine, but he was putting out this very well-rounded and sort of caring model of a man. And I think there's just throughout education, not providing our sons with those positive role models and something fills the void and that can be, you know, bad influences from elsewhere. On a note of optimism, trying to end on a note of optimism, I think, you know, what Johnny said about, some groups under pressure to be tough, those peer effects are really strong, but they can also work in the opposite direction. Where, if we create enough of a critical mass of sons who see masculinity in a certain way, then others will sort of fall in around that norm. So, you know, it may not be a completely lost cause to be able to change things. It may just need a little bit of a push to move us towards a better definition and a better picture of what it means to be masculine in general.

Ernesto: Today is International Men's Day and we are careful about this day… Myself, when I started to welcome you, I said we are 'celebrating,' and then I corrected myself and said that we are 'marking' the day. What does this day mean to you?

Joe: I still, almost physically, I recognise myself lowering my head when you're talking about International Men's Day. We were talking about it, with Tom, just a little bit before we started there. There's still, for me

anyway, a real sense of unease about, 'is the time right? Are we there yet?'. We're not. I know we're not. So, it's a strange one. There's a visceral kind of reaction as to, not, 'are we okay to do this?', of course we are, and it's lovely and it's nice to mark events, but there's something there unaddressed, I think. And maybe more of these addresses it. But is it an important day to me, going through my life? Probably, no, it hasn't been. Is it important to mark it? Yes, I think it is. And I think we need to do what we're doing. And for all the reasons you've mentioned at the outset, and Niamh has mentioned as well. But there is a bit of discomfort. Yeah, I'm not fully… I'm still sitting quite close to the door. The windows are open... [laughs].

Johnny: You know, structurally, 365 days of the year, isn't it International Men's Day, in a way? Structurally, right? So, I don't know how I feel about a day to celebrate, in that sense. But, equally, I think perhaps a more kind of holistic idea of what it is to be a man certainly deserves a day. And, apart from the structural issues, which are so total, it is, even in these privileged spaces, it is good to be thinking about doing masculinities differently. But I won't even say differently, it's always been there, right? There's always been dads and gentle guys and caring guys. And everybody can think back in their own life to men who, as men, had something beautiful about being strong and caring. And have had, in some ways, quite traditional masculinity, but so much more on top of that. So, I think it's always been there. I think it's good to think about how we can expose that out more, you know, let it grow and have more of masculinities, as the world now is not having a great moment, with the Tates et cetera, et cetera. That would be my reflection.

Tom: In my role in EDI, we do a lot of work around key awareness days, including International Women's Day. When it comes to International Men's Day, we're very conscious of the distinction between 'celebrating' and 'marking' the day. For me, there is real value in doing both. I think it's important to mark the day in a way that promotes positive, healthy models of masculinity, particularly at a time when some harmful narratives are becoming more visible. There is a need for men who support equality and inclusion to be visible, to show that we stand for respect, care, and fairness across all genders. Bringing it back to parenthood, this matters even more. As a parent, I want my son to grow up confident in who he is, comfortable expressing himself, and proud of the values he holds. Marking days like this helps create that wider culture.

Alan: I kind of get very uncomfortable with International Men's Day, and it was a great question, I know you sent it to us. And you even had a question mark, whether this is an okay question to ask. Let's discuss it. Which I think, you know, really speaks to the difficulty around discussing this. Yeah, you feel like a trespasser and that, by marking this, you're

somehow detracting from International Women's Day or covering over the structural inequalities that are out there. But I think that makes it a big barrier, then, for men to get involved in EDI issues more generally. It's very hard because we're all fathers here, and we're trying to sort of redefine what being a father is or trying to at least define what it is today. And we want the silent majority to speak out, basically, now. And I think the silent majority of men and dads are the 'good' type, let's say. We don't want the small minority that are giving masculinity a bad rap to have control of the narrative. And I think things like this are a good thing to move this feeling, as well, that these issues are sort of zero sum, that, if I celebrate International Men's Day, that's taking away from International Women's Day. And I think that we can move to a better, more inclusive view of what these issues are to everybody. And I think actually, in the long run, the more men, the more open we are about EDI and issues around it, the more chance that this will be firmly embedded in our culture going forward. I think it can't be done without the buy-in from that side of the majority of men who believe in it, but keep their head down. We need to give an opportunity like today for people to speak up for a very positive view of fatherhood.

Ernesto: And now we will open to questions from the audience.

Question One: Thank you for sharing your stories. I would like to ask if there are any role models in your life that shape the kind of father you are today?

Joe: My dad is a massive imprint on my fathering and caring. Huge. So, I'm trying not to get emotional now. He died in 2018 of cancer and he was my primary school teacher as well for two years. But I see him almost on a daily basis now in my interaction with my kids. I think that'd be my experience.

Tom: My dad is from Kerry and very traditional, and very much a man of his generation. He was an incredible father, but expressing emotion didn't come easily to him, and that shaped me in many ways. It made me consciously choose a different approach. I try to lead with openness, connection and emotional presence. With my son, I've made that part of our everyday life. I tell him I love him all the time, including at preschool drop-off, even when others are around. That's important to me. I want him to feel comfortable and confident expressing emotion, without embarrassment or hesitation. I see that as giving him something I didn't always have growing up: emotional safety and reassurance. That's not about rejecting the past, it's about breaking cycles in a positive way. And it's something I'm genuinely proud of.

Alan: I'd be the same as Tom. I think that generation had a different view of fatherhood. And I see it now with my dad in terms of becoming a dad myself. In some ways he was a victim of the society that he was brought up in. There was much more pressure for those stereotypes to be there. So, I think I've seen that and I see the sort of tragedy. Probably oversharing now… But, you know, you just feel that those opportunities to express things were taken away from him in some ways.

Question Two: I'm from a very traditional community where I suppose men choose to be hands off because of pressure. So, it seems a very feminine thing to care or a very feminine thing to be a father, something that has to kind of be hidden. I wonder if that's something that you've ever gone through? I know that you up there are quite forward thinking in my idea of being a father, but is that something that you've dealt with where you're seen as less masculine because you've taken such a hands-on role?

Joe: I was never the most masculine to start, so maybe I don't notice it. As I said, the majority of my social group, I won't say would be on the same page, but I think things have progressed. But there will always be one or two who do still take a hands-off approach, for whatever reason, in terms of their own setup, or their own backgrounds, or whatever the case may be. And I bring it home as evidence to say, 'look, they're not doing any of this'. No, I don't… [laughs]. But, maybe it's my social group and maybe it's a privilege as you're talking about, I see it less and less, but they do kind of stick out to me now more than, I suppose, the contrary, which is ourselves and a lot of others. So, still, it's there. What do I do about it? I don't know if I actually engage in it in terms of, 'well, have you thought about doing this?', or, 'how do you show you care?', and things like that. But I think there is still an unease about it for some men and particularly men who have been heavily influenced, maybe by their own backgrounds. And that piece around the teacher that you were mentioning, Alan, you know, I was talking about it earlier on from social work, and the communities you're working with, Johnny, as well… You could go through your whole childhood and early adulthood without really coming into contact with a positive male role model. You're up against it there, as you were saying, you know. So yeah, I think that's an issue. I don't have an answer, unfortunately, but yeah, it's definitely still there.

Question Three: What struck me as I was listening to you all was that I'm probably one of the oldest people in this room. So, I'm thinking about generational change. In essence, when I look around this room, you are all probably younger than me, so you're at the frontier of making change here. In terms of, then, how do we translate that down into our earlier career scholars coming in, what do you see as your role in supporting them? And how can we

better support them so that we don't end up in 10 years with them having the same experience you have? That we're actually learning from your experience and bringing them on in a more supportive environment.

Johnny: I've got one or two. So many of my female friends, when I talk to them about work, life, everything, they're always like, 'welcome to being a woman'. And so, I would say that a lot of these issues, certainly around men as carers, as parents, women know. And you struggle with it as much as we do. So, no, I do think some of that is universal, again, or should be universal, if men have been let out of it. But then, I think other things then as well come into play potentially. Certainly, when I talk to early career folk from all sorts of backgrounds, I tend to say, 'well, speed, speed of career advancement, that's not the only thing in life'. I would say that. It's not just about the rocketship up, because if you do that, you will have other sacrifices as well. That tends to be what I say, is to see a career in the round of a life. And I feel that, very often, and I was the same, is early career, you can really fetishise that *career* aspect, and then nothing else matters. But then a few years and you feel, 'well, there is also more to life'. My thoughts, anyway.

Acknowledgements

The organisation of this event was made possible with the support of the UCD College of Social Sciences and Law, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion / Widening Participation, the UCD Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit; and the UCD Observatory of Masculinities.

ORCID iD

Alan Bromhead https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4704-2331
Tom Costelloe https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1977-5645
Jonathan Ilan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4080-2898
Joe Mooney https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9476-8621

Funding

No financial support was received for the research, authorship, or publication of this panel conversation.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Statement on AI Use

The authors declare that audio data were transcribed using the Microsoft Word Online automatic transcription service and subsequently reviewed and corrected by the authors.

References

Connell, R., and Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005) 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society,* 19(6), pp. 829-859. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.