

# Secret fathers: Navigating fatherhood through workplace performance

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**Martyn Bradley** 

University of Liverpool, Management School, UK

**Caroline Gatrell**

University of Liverpool, Management School, UK

**Laura Radcliffe** 

University of Liverpool, Management School, UK

**Gary Brown** 

University of Greenwich, UK

## Abstract

How do fathers navigate work and family in light of the conflicting ideals associated with breadwinning and involved fathering? Utilizing an ethnographic methodology and drawing upon Goffman's work concerning dramaturgy and secrecy, we answer this question. We discover how fathers employed within the high-pressure UK legal profession develop a suite of strategic tactics to mislead colleagues into assuming that they are not fathers at all. We untangle and reveal how fathers achieved these impressions, highlighting the complex nature of covering and counter-uncovering moves that men used to conceal their paternity. We show how, when performing on the organizational front stage, fathers adopt the role of job-oriented ideal-worker, casting fathering, in Goffmanian terms, into the shadows as a dark secret (Jaworski, 2021). As a result, men restrict 'involved fathering' to the backstage of their home settings. In offering new perspectives on the choices that fathers make in relation to how they navigate the contradictory

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## Corresponding author:

Martyn Bradley, University of Liverpool, Management School, Chatham Street, Liverpool, L69 7ZH, UK.

Email: [m.bradley@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:m.bradley@liverpool.ac.uk)

ideals of traditional and involved fatherhood, our paper challenges prevailing notions of workplace fatherhood, illuminating how fathers experience and respond to workplace glorification of the ideal-worker image, with important implications for theory and future research on work and family, and fathering practices.

### Keywords

fathering, fatherhood, work family management, secrecy, performance, professionalism

## Introduction

Studies on fatherhood within neo-liberal, or market-led, economies such as the UK reveal how employed fathers face conflicting obligations as they balance paid employment with childcare responsibilities (Beigi and Shirmohammadi, 2017; Cooklin et al., 2016). Despite campaigns to promote family-friendly working for men (Burgess and Davies, 2017), traditional ‘breadwinner’ archetypes continue to be glorified within organizations. Employed fathers, including men who are professionally employed, are pressured to present themselves as job-oriented, ideal workers who afford primacy to work, striving for promotion while supposedly casting off the burdens of childcare (Gatrell, 2024; Ladge et al., 2015; Shows and Gerstel, 2009).

Employer expectations that fathers should comport themselves as ideal workers (Acker, 1990; Bierema, 2016; Gatrell, 2024) are at odds with societal shifts that have, since the 1970s, emphasized the importance of involved fatherhood (Cabrera et al., 2000). Such changes, driven by women’s increased labour market participation (as well as by health advice regarding the familial benefits of paternal engagement Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008), have promoted active father–child engagement (Humberd et al., 2015; Ladge et al., 2015; Pleck, 1997). Fathers’ involvement with childcare has grown not only due to increases in mothers’ working hours (that are known to precipitate enhanced paternal engagement: Gershuny, 1997) but also due to intensified paternal desire for close relationships with children (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995; Gatrell et al., 2022; Tanquerel and Grau–Grau, 2019).

The divergence between wider societal ideals about involved fathering and workplace glorification of breadwinner-father ideals means that employed fathers are often conflicted – especially given that in the UK, inadequate statutory provisions are available to support paternal involvement, with only 1 or 2 weeks of paternity leave offered by many organizations (Feldman and Gran, 2020).

Presently, a rich array of studies considers paternal work–family conflict through exploring reasons *why* employed fathers ‘fall back’ into gendered patterns of traditional breadwinner fatherhood (Miller, 2011: 1094) at the expense of involved fathering (Børve and Bungum, 2015; Dermott, 2008). Many such literature centres on the organizational structures that create barriers to paternal involvement with childcare (Cooper, 2000; Tanquerel and Grau–Grau, 2019). However, less attention has been paid to examining *how* fathers navigate the competing norms of work and family. Grau-Grau et al. (2022) and Gatrell et al. (2022) argue the need to understand more about how ideal-worker

norms affect employed fathers. These authors call for further research regarding the impact on paternal behaviours of employer expectations that work should take precedence over family. In response to these calls, this paper explores the following question: *How do employed fathers navigate work and family in light of the conflicting ideals associated with breadwinning and involved fathering?*

To explore this conundrum, this paper conducts an ethnographic study within a law firm (Law Ltd), exploring from an insider, or ‘emic’ perspective, the lived experiences and daily work–family practices among fathers employed within the firm (Cooper, 2000; Kvande, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; Reimer, 2015; Tremblay, 2013).

Our first contribution to research on work and family research lies in our finding that fathers are profoundly influenced (not to say oppressed) by the idealized figure of the job-oriented, ideal-worker (Gatrell, 2024) who is unencumbered by family responsibilities and who prioritizes organizational imperatives. We show how men’s concerns regarding the potential career disadvantages of deviating from an ideal-worker persona (Tanquerel and Grau–Grau, 2019) induced them to treat their paternity as a dark secret to be concealed from the ‘front stage’ of their work environment (Goffman, 1959: 141–143; Jaworski, 2021: 395). Men took strategic action to obscure their fatherhood status from colleagues and line managers (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1969), effectively taking the role of *secret father*.

Drawing upon the work of Goffman (1959, 1961, 1969) regarding dramaturgy, performance and the management of secrets, our study offers a second, central contribution to work–family research. It makes visible the previously hidden strategic and tactical ways in which employed fathers perform the role of ideal worker. Extending present research on working fathers that identifies structural reasons for *why* men fall back into gendered work–family behaviour patterns (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2019; Cooper, 2000; Mauerer and Schmidt, 2019; Moran and Koslowski, 2019), we reveal, here, *how* fathers navigate work–family obligations. Specifically, we illuminate how men conducted paternity in secret by ‘covering’ up fathering activities, ensuring these were hidden backstage and presenting themselves ‘front stage’ in the image of the ideal worker. We show how some fathers, like the secret agents in Goffman’s (1969) study, utilized counter-uncovering moves to intentionally mislead their colleagues into assuming they did not have children at all (see Table 3).

Third, we observe how maintaining fatherhood in secret is not a solo undertaking. Fathers’ navigation of work–family experience is a process supported by others in the back-stage arena (here, parents and partners), and we argue the need for future work–family research to include employees’ personal networks (Beigi et al., 2017). We suggest that, so long as men continue to treat fatherhood as a dark secret, they are unlikely to benefit from family-friendly policies and other initiatives designed to facilitate and support involved fathering.

## Literature review

To understand employed fathers’ daily actions amidst conflicting work–family norms, we first examine organizational studies that focus on fathers as ideal-worker breadwinners, before turning to those literatures that investigate involved fatherhood. We then

introduce our theoretical framework based on Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1969) perspectives on dramaturgy and secrets, arguing that this approach facilitates new theoretical insights into the study of working fathers, enabling the illumination and articulation of the novel concept of the 'secret father'.

### *Fathers and the spectre of the ideal worker*

Much of the literature regarding fatherhood, work and family has centred on identifying the structural reasons why men might interpret their paternal role in terms of breadwinner, rather than caregiver. Prior research has centred on the notion that employers place greatest value on employees who appear in the guise of ideal worker (Bierema, 2016; Gatrell, 2024) by being available to work long hours, and apparently with no significant caregiving responsibilities (Cooper, 2000; Humberd et al., 2015; Kvande, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; Reimer, 2015; Tremblay, 2013). The figure of the ideal worker is known to disadvantage mothers because it privileges organizational glorification of excessive workplace commitment, while bolstering, often unsubstantiated, employer assumptions that mothers are usually primary carers and less work-orientated than men (Kossek et al., 2010). It has been observed, however, that fathers seeking to share childcare might also find it hard to align with the hegemonic image of work-oriented 'ideal' employee, who is supposed to 'absent' himself from his home setting, going 'out' to work to provide income for his family (Gatrell, 2024: 13).

Governments within market-centric economies, of which the United Kingdom and the United States are notable examples, find very appealing this traditional, heteronormative blueprint whereby fathers 'provide a strong economic base' for families (Horna and Lupri, 1987: 54), while mothers prioritize childcare and household consumption (Ashman et al., 2022). Relatedly, the spectre of the 'ideal' worker, who is by implication male, continues to be upheld by organizations as a role model to which men are expected to aspire (Höpfl, 2000; Höpfl and Atkinson, 2000). Employers are believed to reward breadwinner fathers with wage bonuses and career advancement (Burnett et al., 2013; Gatrell et al., 2022), and fathers, especially those with infant children (Gatrell, 2024), are encouraged to work long hours as well as respect standardized office schedules (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2019; Humberd et al., 2015; Kvande, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; Reimer, 2015; Tremblay, 2013). Given the apparent associations between fatherhood and higher earnings, it might be assumed that fathers would advertise their paternal status to employers in the hopes of realizing enhanced pay and promotion. As our findings show, however, such associations are not straightforward.

Other studies on paternity, work and family report how fathers, especially those in professional roles (Shows and Gerstel, 2009), strive to keep work and family separate, enacting segmentation practices and prioritizing organizational demands (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2019; Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Gatrell et al., 2014; Humberd et al., 2015; Mauerer and Schmidt, 2019). Paternal tendencies to separate work and family are consolidated by organizational discouragement of paternal access to flexible working initiatives (Gatrell et al., 2014; Horvath et al., 2018; Sallee, 2012; Thornton, 2016; Tremblay, 2013). Men who contravene ideal-worker norms might also experience 'flexibility

stigma', and its associated career-progression penalties, especially if family matters spill over into the workplace (Coltrane et al., 2013; Rudman and Mescher, 2013).

### *'Involved' fatherhood*

Although employers persist in expecting fathers to realize a status akin to 'ideal worker', health and social agencies encourage greater paternal engagement with children's upbringing (Ladge et al., 2015; Miller, 2010). The challenge for men who aspire to such contemporary fathering ideals, however, lies in the conundrum that – while health and social imperatives might encourage involved fatherhood (Miller, 2011) – organizations often are less enthusiastic. Employed fathers who engage openly in childcare may be categorized as overly 'care' orientated and denigrated at work (Coltrane et al., 2013; Doucet, 2018; Halrynjo, 2009: 115) and experience limited job advancement opportunities (Banister and Kerrane, 2024; Holter, 2007; Rudman and Mescher, 2013). The exploration of conflicting fathering ideals is thus key in understanding how employed men navigate work–family imperatives.

Previous studies seeking to investigate employed paternal engagement with childcare have begun to hint at the covert tactics that fathers may employ to hide paternal responsibilities, for example utilizing annual leave rather than drawing upon flexible working initiatives (Reid, 2015; Tremblay, 2013) or claiming non-family reasons when requesting flexible working (while in practice using such options to accommodate childcare: Tanquerel and Grau–Grau, 2019). The above studies propose mainly structural explanations regarding the barriers that discourage involved fathering. Below, we build on these discoveries, illuminating how men balance fatherhood and work through the notions of performance and secrecy to reveal the strategic and tactical approach fathers take in navigating work and family.

In sum, the conflicting ideals with which fathers are faced relate to social change and the ways organizations (especially within market-led economies like the United Kingdom) consistently resist such shifts (Dermott, 2008; Gatrell et al., 2014; Miller, 2011). Management research has tended to focus on organizational treatment of men from an etic, or external, viewpoint, showing how workplace structures, attitudes, and ideals combine to pressurize fathers into adopting economic provider, ideal-worker behaviours (Cooper, 2000; Kvande, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; Reimer, 2015; Tremblay, 2013). Yet to date, we know less from an emic, or insider, perspective. Calls have thus been made for further qualitative research that explores how employed men balance work and family and 'do' fathering from a personal perspective (Gatrell et al., 2022; Miller, 2011). Responding to such calls, we have undertaken an emic, ethnographic study that took place over an 18-month period, set within the legal profession in the United Kingdom.

As a lens to illuminate our findings, we utilize Erving Goffman's work on dramaturgy, strategic interaction and secrets (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1969). We chose these lenses retrospectively, having analysed our data and discovered how men performed strategically to maintain secrecy around their fathering activities. To contextualize our use of Goffman's work, we summarize below the key elements we have employed.

*Dramaturgy, performance and secrets.* Erving Goffman's (1959) metaphor of 'dramaturgy', or what comprises theatrical representation of character and performance, explains how people manage social interactions. He employed the term 'performance' to refer to 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on observers' (Goffman, 1956: 13). Through performance, Goffman argued that individuals might emulate an idealized type of self as determined by 'officially accredited values of the society' that the person, in our case employed fathers, seeks to impress (Goffman, 1956: 23). Central to Goffman's ideas about performance are the notions of the 'front' and 'back' regions, that correspond to the 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' areas of a theatrical performance. When performing front stage, individuals may project a desired image to others, strategically managing their behaviour to fit the audience's, here colleagues' and line-managers', expectations: 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (Goffman, 1959: 13). By contrast, backstage comprises private space where individuals can drop their public personas, 'forgo speaking [their] lines, and step out of character' (Goffman, 1956: 70). Goffman's dramaturgy highlights the effort required to maintain coherent performances across different settings, as well as the pressures of concealing actions that could challenge an individual's claim to an 'ideal' persona (Goffman, 1959).

Building on his earlier notion of dramaturgy and drawing upon his explorations regarding the behaviours of spies and undercover agents, Goffman (1969) identified how employed individuals curate information about themselves through concealing specific truths to maintain a desired persona and to protect their interests in situations where revealing the truth could lead to reputational damage (Goffman, 1969; Jaworski, 2021). In particular, Goffman noted how the concealment of what he terms 'dark secrets' (Jaworski, 2021: 395) requires a strategic, and performative presentation of self (as well as limiting the number of people who are privy to such dark secrets: Božič and Keston-Siebert, 2024).

As a lens through which to explore how individuals manage information to align themselves with notions of what is ideal in given situations, Goffman developed the notions of 'concealment', 'covering moves', 'uncovering moves' and 'counter-uncovering moves'. In Goffmanian terms, concealment refers to efforts to hide potentially damaging or stigmatizing information from others to maintain a favourable image (Jaworski, 2021). Covering moves involve the strategies utilized to prevent others from learning about secretive information. Uncovering moves are actions that could be taken by others to probe performance validity and expose hidden truths (Siebert and Czarniawska, 2020), threatening the person's projected persona. In response to fears of being 'uncovered', individuals, in our case, fathers, may employ tactics to resist exposure: counter-uncovering moves. These actions can appear extreme; they may go beyond obfuscation of the truth, purposefully and strategically misdirecting and disguising (here, fatherhood) to divert others from gaining insight into the dark secret (Goffman, 1969). Below, we detail how fathers sought to conceal and keep secret their paternity and fathering practices, through purposeful use of the front- and back-stage strategies to navigate competing

expectations, reconciling the back-stage demands of childcare with professional expectations that must appear to be met within the front-stage environment of Law Ltd.

## Method

### *Ethnography*

We employed an emic ethnographic approach to qualitatively investigate the nuanced, in-depth and day-to-day experiences of fathers employed in the UK legal sector as they navigated the complexities of ‘doing’ fatherhood to balance work and family (Van Maanen, 1979). Ethnography was selected for its ability to generate rich, field-based insights and foster deep engagement with participants, enabling us to move beyond the broad structuralist approaches that currently characterize much of the existing literature. By immersing ourselves in participants’ everyday lives and employing iterative, reflexive methods, we aimed to capture the contextual subtleties and everyday interactions essential for understanding how fathers navigate work and family, in light of competing cultural norms. Our object of study was social interaction, with findings obtained from both interviews and observations of men’s workplace interactions. As others have emphasized (e.g. Bloomfield et al., 2024; Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009), research methods should align with theoretical choices. In that regard, the ethnographic approach aligns with our adopted lens and the work of Goffman, which focuses on interaction in contextually specific settings. Methods consistent with the emic standpoint, such as ethnographic and observational studies, allow researchers to observe micro-interaction and engage in an insider’s nuanced questioning (Louis and Bartunek, 1992), providing ‘ability both to see and understand what is occurring’ (Van Maanen, 1979: 548). These benefits were illustrated in Van Maanen’s (1978: 408–416) hallmark police studies, where taking on a police role in the field helped ‘see beneath the shield’ such that division between the researcher and the researched may be reduced through active participation. In our study, ethnographic methods uncovered novel insights into myriad secretive practices employed by fathers to navigate complex work and family pressures, allowing us to build a nuanced picture of back-stage and front-stage behaviours, revealing concealment, covering moves and counter-uncovering moves.

*Case organization and participants.* A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the case organization. We followed Eisenhardt and Graebner’s (2007: 27) suggestion to select a context that enabled us to ‘explore a significant phenomenon under rare or extreme circumstances’, as phenomena are likely to be most observable within heightened contexts. We therefore decided to study fathers within the legal services profession due to its well-documented culture of long working hours, client servitude and hyper-masculinity (Sommerlad, 2016; Susskind, 2008; Thornton, 2016). In addition, this profession has been critiqued for creating environments where work–family choices are constrained by deeply ingrained gendered norms and expectations (Collier, 2009, 2019; Tremblay, 2013), making it an ideal site for ethnographic inquiry into how fathers navigate such challenges.

We benefited from the lead author's substantial professional network within the legal profession. Through this network, we were able to identify, approach (via email) and secure (following telephone and in-person discussions) a suitable case organization. The management team at Law Ltd was supportive and open to learning how employed fathers balanced work and family. To facilitate contact with potential participants, Law Ltd's Human Resource Director circulated invitations to male employees asking if they would be interested in taking part in our study. Twenty-one fathers responded to this invitation, with one respondent later leaving the study owing to changes to their circumstances. From there, the Human Resource Director shared contact details of each of the interested fathers, which we used to circulate participant consent forms and participants' information documents. Our participant population held various roles within the company's hierarchical structure (see below), which enabled us to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on fatherhood and its negotiation within a demanding professional environment. In retrospect, it could be seen as curious that a traditional organization like Law Ltd afforded us such liberal access. We can only speculate that their generosity was related to the lead author's strong insider networks within the legal field.

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Pseudonym	Age	No. children	Job role	No. of interviews	Period interviewed and observed
Ahmed	32	3	Legal practitioner	3	13 months
Alex	35	2	Legal practitioner	3	14 months
Anthony	34	2	Senior manager	3	14 months
Curtis	32	1	Senior manager	3	14 months
Daniel	35	1	Senior manager	3	14 months
Edward	29	3	Legal practitioner	3	13 months
Francis	30	2	Senior manager	3	14 months
George	26	1	Legal practitioner	3	11 months
Graham	29	1	Accountant	3	14 months
Greg	27	1	Senior manager	3	14 months
Howard	30	1	Legal practitioner	3	14 months
James	35	2	Senior accountant	3	14 months
Kevin	31	2	Legal practitioner	3	14 months
Leonard	48	2	Director	2	9 months
Mark	34	2	Legal practitioner	3	14 months
Paul	31	1	Legal practitioner	3	12 months
Peter	43	2	Director	3	14 months
Sean	44	3	Director	2	9 months
Stephen	28	2	Legal practitioner	3	14 months
Thomas	29	1	Team manager	3	14 months

The structure of Law Ltd was strictly hierarchical, starting from Administrative Assistants through to Legal Practitioners, Team Managers, Senior Managers (Operations Managers and Account Managers) and, finally, Directors. Within these roles were 180 employees, the majority of whom were female. The firm predominantly practiced property law with minor cases involving wills, probate and commercial law. The space in which these disciplines were practiced, or what one might consider the front stage for performance, was an open plan with only a few directors having defined, separated office spaces. The majority of staff worked at small, cluttered terminals with limited separation between neighbouring workstations. The focus at Law Ltd was client servitude with case management, email and telephone systems used to log and track work (Sommerlad, 2016; Susskind, 2008; Thornton, 2016; Tremblay, 2013). Away from the open plan space, the office benefited from a board room, three restrooms, two kitchen/canteen areas and several smaller offices to the rear of the building, which were generally unoccupied and were used to conduct interviews. Alongside access to interview participants, we secured 18 months of access to conduct participant observation to better understand this culture. Extended engagement and multiple data collection methods helped capture inconsistencies between interview accounts and those observed via participant observation. These inconsistencies, which we explore below, were supported by both covering moves and counter-uncovering moves, which were used to conceal the dark secret of fatherhood.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data collection comprised of organizational observations, active participation and accompanying field notes over the 18-month period, supported by repeated interviews with 20 fathers (Table 1). Table 2 summarizes the data sources and how they were used in the analysis. These data helped build a comprehensive and contextually sensitive understanding of fathers' social interactions as they attempted to navigate work and family, providing interesting and poignant accounts and eventually leading us to comprehend fathers' beliefs that keeping their paternal status secret was essential as they navigated work and family. Moreover, learning about participants' daily lives in situ, obtaining personal and intimate insights into their work–family experiences, meant we could appreciate from an emic perspective how work–family management occurred front stage, enabling us to make a valuable contribution to a literature more readily characterized by etic explanations (Van Maanen, 1979).

Data collection and analysis took place in tandem, moving from an inductive to a deductive undertaking over three phases (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018; Strauss and Corbin, 1990):

*Phase One:* We initially focussed on learning more about fathers' work and family roles; our focus was yet to be concerned with how fatherhood was kept secret at work, so we employed an inductive approach with an unstructured data collection design (Spradley, 1979). During initial interviews, which lasted on average 43 min, we employed a relaxed, conversational interview style to encourage broad insights into fathers' work–family lives and to cement rapport and trust which would become important for later data collection via participant observation and active participation (Spradley, 1979).

Our analysis focused on an array of phrases and sentences of interest, finding commonalities in how fathers experienced work-related pressures, client expectations and limited

**Table 2.** Data sources.

Data source	Details	Purpose and analytical importance
Initial Unstructured Interviews	Conducted with 20 participants lasting an average of 43 min, resulting in 174 pages of transcribed data. Aimed to understand personal perspectives on fatherhood and work–family balance.	To build rapport and trust with participants and explore initial narratives about work–family navigation. Initial interviews revealed active fathering desires and practices.
Participant Observations	Observations were conducted during 14 sessions, each lasting on average 6 hr and undertaken throughout the 18 months of fieldwork. During these sessions, we documented participant's daily activities in the workplace capturing contextual details and performative actions.	To gain insight into participants' daily routines, organizational settings, and interactions. Observations juxtaposed with private interview data were fundamental in evidencing discrepancies between private fathering desires/practices and workplace performances.
Active Participation	Researcher actively participated in organizational activities, participating in multiple team activities and meetings over the fieldwork period over 18 months involving both father participants and other organizational staff.	To immerse in the organizational setting and better understand cultural and political dynamics. Much of the data collected during this time, as active participation took place on the front stage, did not relate to fatherhood and was amongst the first signs that fatherhood was kept secret from colleagues and that a performative guise was being constructed by participants.
Informal Conversations	Documented during workplace observations with the 20 participants and others in the local environments including back rooms (previously private spaces for partners of a previous firm which rented the building), kitchens and the company car park.	To capture nuanced and spontaneous insights into participants' perspectives and experiences. Many of our most detailed and specific examples of strategic decisions were shared during these times and given by Graham who was far more forthcoming when interacting within back stages.
Field Notes	Field notes taken during and immediately after observations and participation to ensure richness of detail resulting in 52 pages of field notes.	To document observations, reflections, and iterative adjustments in research focus. As with active participation, the lack of instances in which fatherhood was discussed during observation was a prominent consideration when analysing this data type.
Two phases of follow-up Semi-Structured Interviews	Conducted after initial observations and analysis, focusing on evolving themes, with 2 further iterative phases the first conducted 1 month after initial interviews resulting in 51 pages of transcribed data and the final phase, resulting in a further 32 pages of transcribed data, conducted 3 months after the conclusion of second phase interviews.	To explore emergent themes further and refine understanding of performative navigation strategies with an eventual focussing growing on understanding the ways that performance was used to cast fatherhood roles as secret.

free time, yet offered contrasting accounts regarding how they understood and managed fatherhood (Humberd et al., 2015; Ladge et al., 2015). This phase of analysis highlighted recurring meta-themes of paternal responsibilities, aspirations and work–family conflict, but did not help us comprehensively understand men’s work–family navigation.

*Phase Two:* We next engaged in participant observation, active participation and semi-structured interviews. Building on insights from phase one, we focused on exploring paternal responsibilities, aspirations and work–family conflict. This phase integrated data from multiple methods, revealing distinct contrasts between fathers’ narratives during interviews and their behaviours and interactions observed in the workplace, which consisted of an avoidance of fatherhood-related communication and an absence of physical symbols of fatherhood in the workplace setting. This inconsistency highlighted the utility of ethnographic methods for capturing multi-layered understandings beyond that which any one data collection tool might provide. It also prompted a reflexive turn in our analysis, instigating a return to the literature to explore theoretical lenses that might help make sense of what we had captured.

Although we had originally considered Boundary Theory (Clark, 2000) and Impression Management as conceptual lenses, we found that these lacked the depth and flexibility needed to explain the inconsistency we had recorded. Further consideration guided us to Goffman’s (1959) work on dramaturgy, which provided a suite of concepts that helped us begin to frame this inconsistency as a distinction in performances.

*Phase Three:* As our focus shifted to Goffman’s work on dramaturgy, our study evolved from an inductive to a deductive approach, enabling us to ask more explicit questions of both our participants and data, ensuring we were able to clarify how our data and interpretations from phases one and two made sense from a dramaturgical perspective (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018). At this point, our focus on dramaturgy and continued data collection helped reveal the strategic approach fathers took in creating performances that cast fatherhood as a secret. For this reason, we revisited Goffman’s (1961, 1969) work, focussing on strategic interaction and secrets. We realized that men’s strategic approach to concealing paternity, utilizing covering moves and counter-uncovering moves to play the role of ideal worker, emanated from their treating fatherhood, in Goffmanian terms, as a dark secret. Employing Goffman’s (1959, 1961, 1969) work in tandem allowed us to build a comprehensive understanding of how fathers navigated work and family performatively so as to personify the role of *secret father*.

## Findings

Our interviews and observations showed how fathers were working long hours within a masculine culture, in which high expectations predominated. As a result, fathers sought to keep secret and, in Goffmanian terms, ‘conceal’ their fatherhood. This desire emanated from a determination to avoid the stigmatization associated with fathering that could exclude men from the image of ideal worker and might, thereby, eliminate them from career-advancing assignments (Goffman, 1959: 141–143). We illustrate below the strategic steps that men took to conceal their paternal status and keep fatherhood secret. To obscure their paternity, men treated Law Ltd, both in the office and digitally, as the front stage where they sought to perform the part of ideal worker. Men adopted covering moves to hide fathering activities, restricting childcare to the back-stage arena (i.e. the home) where they were supported in these concealment tactics by others, usually the mothers of their children. Acutely aware of the negative implications associated with ‘involved’ fathering, men engaged in counter-uncovering moves,

**Table 3.** Goffman's concealment, covering and counter-uncovering moves.

Concept	Definition	Example actions
Concealment	The desired result of undertaking covering and counter-uncovering moves.	The cumulative efforts of men pursuing covering moves and counter-covering moves, concealing fathering, which casts fatherhood as a dark secret.
Covering Moves	An action undertaken to cover up potentially damaging or stigmatizing information to maintain a favourable image.	Removing family-related artefacts such as children's car seats from 'front-stage' settings (office and car park). Censoring conversations about fatherhood topics Audience segmentation.
Counter-Uncovering Moves	An action undertaken to avoid the likelihood of being subjected to uncovering moves of others, which might challenge concealment.	Logging into the IT system early to create 'digital stamps' (arrival emails, logon times, clocking in times). Misleading audience members regarding arrival times (sending arrival emails, making morning drinks). Misleading audience members regarding work commitments following normal office hours (utilizing physical files as props when leaving the office, ghost meetings). Utilizing annual leave in place of parental leave. Utilizing back-stage support (family and friends shouldering childcare) so that a physical office presence and work prioritization can be maintained during and beyond normal working hours.

going to, arguably, extreme lengths to mislead colleagues and line managers into assuming that they were childless. These front-stage covering and counter-uncovering moves enabled fathers to maintain fatherhood as a dark secret within the organizational setting of Law Ltd (Goffman, 1959: 141–143; Jaworski, 2021: 395).

### *Concealing fatherhood as a dark secret*

Fathers indicated their intent to conceal from their colleagues at Law Ltd not only their fathering practices, but the fact of their fatherhood status. When operating ‘front stage’ in their office settings, men treated their paternity as, in Goffmanian terms, a dark secret (Jaworski, 2021: 395) to be carefully guarded and shared only on rare occasions with co-workers (usually women) who could be trusted not to use such information against them (Siebert and Czarniawska, 2020). At work, the site of their ‘front-stage’ performance, men wanted to present themselves in the image of professional, ideal workers who were unencumbered from fatherly responsibilities. Mark explained in his interview how he wanted to appear work-oriented and sought to avoid *‘disrupting my work persona’*. James affirmed that fathers pro-actively concealed their status as fathers from one another (Burnett et al., 2013; Lyng, 2010) and noted how *‘I very rarely talk about my kids in work’*. Kevin (whose manager was also a father) described how he never discussed matters of fatherhood at work: *‘because nobody . . . talks about family in work. My ops manager doesn’t really talk about his family life, and you feed off that I suppose’*. George, similarly, avoided, citing his supervisor, who was also a participant in our study, discussing the intricacies of fathering and its related accoutrements because doing so could risk the disapproval of his line manager *‘It is hard, working in this environment. Me and my manager, we’re so busy that we don’t really talk about life stuff. If there was something serious then I know I can speak to him. But if he has files on his desk, he’s stressed. And if I start talking about nappies and bottles . . . he isn’t going to be impressed!’*

Visually, our in-office observations showed how fathers’ arrangement of artefacts (or props) within the front stage purposefully erased signs that referenced fatherhood (though some, like Mark, hid small keepsakes in desk drawers). This tactic was contrary to the approach of mothers: at Law Ltd most women displayed photos, personalized calendars, mugs and mouse mats at their workstations, all portraying their children. By contrast, fathers’ workstations were devoid of such artefacts and were decorated instead with corporate accoutrements and sports-team-branded goods. Several men (Francis, Daniel, Howard Mark and Curtis) referred in their interviews to concealing the visual signs of fatherhood as a deliberate choice. Curtis reported how, although his wife displayed a sonogram of their second child on her desk, he preferred to keep his impending fatherhood secret (Goffman, 1969) due to his belief that making ‘front-stage’ reference to paternity could risk exposing him as less work orientated than others, which could restrict his subsequent chances for career advancement: *‘. . . the last thing I want to do is be perceived as unprofessional when I want more responsibility’*. Daniel, similarly, explained how he purposefully removed a photo of his son from his desk to avoid contradicting the image he wanted to portray at work: *‘When Andrew was born, I did have a photo on my desk, [because my wife] . . . said I should have it [there]. Okay, but then everybody notices, and everybody says something. And I just felt like I had instantly*

become 'Daniel the dad' rather than 'Daniel the operations manager'. And that isn't how I wanted to be considered'. This account suggested that fathers were acutely aware of how they might be perceived by colleagues. As a result, men gave strategic consideration regarding how they might avoid creating an impression of family orientation at work.

Similar strategic tactics were recorded through our observations. For instance, men were careful to avoid being seen to keep child-related items about their person or in their cars. Francis, like Daniel, invested care in presenting himself on the front stage as primarily work-oriented. Francis described how, on Sunday evenings, he deliberately removed all 'props' associated with fathering from his care, including toys, car seats child safety belts, etc., ensuring that his *'family car'* was transformed into his *'work car'* on Monday morning. Paul, similarly, was observed being quick to remove a stray child's sock found in his pocket, sliding this under his desk. Other fathers, including Alex and Mark, ensured that personal mobile phones were hidden from their audience, *'stashing'* these in desk drawers so communications from home did not disrupt their ideal-worker veneer. Effectively, desk drawers and car boots provided back-stage storage spaces for props that men wanted to hide from their audiences.

In relation to secret service officers, Siebert and Czarniawska (2020: 287) note Goffman's observation that 'At the very root of distrust in secret service organizations lie interpersonal relations between spies'. These authors suggest that, to understand how 'strategic interactions' develop within organizations, it is necessary to consider 'the individual's capacity to acquire, reveal, and conceal information' (Goffman, 1969: 4, cited in Siebert and Czarniawska, 2020: 287). In line with Goffman's narrative regarding espionage and the importance, among spies, of knowing in whom they might safely confide, fathers in our sample appeared to mistrust their male colleagues and line managers. Apart from an exceptional and private discussion observed between Daniel and Stephen (who were back-stage friends outside of the office), we have no record, across 18 months of field notes, of any discussions regarding fatherhood taking place among and between fathers. This speaks to the consistent maintenance of fathers' performances as they continue to strategically avoid discussion of child-related matters, understanding that paternal status might be perceived by co-workers as disrupting men's capacity to fulfil professional expectations. Specifically, respondents disclosed little or nothing about their paternal status to male colleagues, especially those with influence in the organization. George pointed out: *'you play to your audience'*. While George shared some thoughts about fatherhood with a more junior (female) colleague, he refrained from discussing this with his *'manager [who] does my PDR. . . He's the one, at the end of the day, who decides if I'm ready to be a Team Manager which is the next career goal for me'*.

Should paternity be referenced at all, this was veiled within a more general attempt to reassure senior managers that fatherhood would not impinge on men's ideal-worker status. For example, Curtis, whose partner was pregnant during the study, concealed that news from everyone but his immediate manager. Notably, Curtis was keen to emphasize to his manager his persona as the ideal-worker employee: *'I very briefly broached it with him [and] I said: 'don't worry about [impending fatherhood] taking any effect on what's coming and what I mean by that is that because this merger we've got, this – this [sic]*

*team is going to be particularly busy. And I don't want to be excluded because of my situation'.*

In Goffmanian terms, men communicated their paternal status strictly on a need-to-know basis. They did this in a careful manner that would not 'contradict and discredit' the definition of the situation [they had] 'officially projected' of themselves as meeting the work-oriented persona of the ideal worker (Goffman, 1959: 168). These strategies of treating fatherhood as 'hush-hush' were enacted by senior level as well as junior managers, senior lawyers concealing their paternal status from colleagues in the front stage of the office setting, affirming the sense that fatherhood and professionalism were incompatible. Thomas noted, of a senior male colleague: *'When Sean comes to the office he doesn't say: "hey, how are you finding being a dad?" he asks me how my team are performing because that's what is important for the business. He's the consummate professional in that way. You wouldn't know if he has had a bad day, no sleep, or if something had gone wrong. That's the way to operate'.*

Secrecy and circumspection regarding paternity went beyond concealment of fathering practices and included the concealment of paternal status. Even if it was known among and between male colleagues, men's fatherhood status was politely ignored. Stephen remarked: *'maybe the fellas I speak to don't adopt that [fatherhood] role. I don't know because I've never had that kind of conversation with them'* and George observed how *'I don't think any of them have come up to me and spoken about [fatherhood]'*. Stephen noted how *'...after you have your leave, if you let people know it is paternity leave, we don't really bring it up. It's up to you if you discuss it...and most of the lads don't!'* Thomas shared how, instead, men discussed *'inherently stereotypical'* topics: *'we just talk about football and sports'*. Thomas's statement aligned with our observations that in social conversations (over coffee and so on), fathers discussed the table tennis league they had created, football results, and previous workplace escapades and exploits . . . but never fatherhood.

What seemed to prevail was a web of what Shills (1956) refers to as 'secondary secrets' in which fathers' knowledge of other fathers' roles as fathers itself becomes a secret. Thomas explained this phenomenon to us, referring to his return from paternity leave *'It's just, erm. . . You get your congratulations and stuff and [after that] it's just not really spoken about, no. It's very much like: we know you know we know'*. Fathers, it seems, when they knew of others who were also fathers, held this knowledge as a secondary secret, effectively keeping quiet the fact that they knew about others paternal status (Shills, 1956). Careless talk might cost a colleague the opportunity to be involved in a merger or other important chance to support career progression. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the strategic practices among fathers in our sample to conceal their paternal status, most men in our sample were unsure who was, and who was not, a father. We spoke to Howard about his lack of knowledge regarding which male colleagues had children, and Howard explained, *'I've known someone here for over two years . . .and I only just found out he had a kid'*. George, on referencing his paternal status to a colleague, realized how effectively he had concealed this when the colleague responded: *'Oh I didn't know you had a son'*.

Interestingly, following Goffman's observations about secrets kept among and between secret service agents (Goffman, 1969), some men did occasionally share secrets

about their paternity with five women colleagues who were mothers. These five mothers held limited responsibilities, worked part-time and were relegated to a downstairs space in the office. They held no organizational influence regarding men's career progression, so were considered unlikely to penalize men on the premise that paternal responsibilities might challenge men's ability to remain work-oriented (Božič and Keston-Siebert, 2024; Siebert and Czarniawska, 2020). Greg, who was actively involved in childrearing activities such as morning feeds, reading, playtime and bathing (but concealed this from male colleagues), explained why he sometimes revealed fathering activities to the part-time working mothers because *'they're just a little bit more open about talking about what; what [sic] they do at home and where the little one is today and showing pictures and things'*. In this regard, fathers practiced what Goffman (1959) referred to as 'audience segregation'; their fatherhood being masked by a performative front-stage veneer to most of their colleagues, with that same performance lowered when talking with the five women whom they saw as trustworthy and not as competition, or as power brokers at work (Božič and Keston-Siebert, 2024). We originally learnt of this practice when asking if Stephen kept his role as father secret from his colleagues: *'You keep it to yourself. . . but not from everybody. Jennifer on team two, I will update her occasionally [when I need to]'*.

In sum, and in keeping with literatures on fatherhood and work (Burnett et al., 2013; Gatrell et al., 2022), men were concerned that revealing their paternal status at work could lead to them being identified by line managers as fathers (who could be encumbered with childcare responsibilities rather than as ideal workers whose high work-orientation prioritized breadwinning and precluded involvement with domestic-care agendas). Our data showed fathers concealing fathering practices to varying degrees, treating paternity in Goffmanian terms as a secret to 'hold on to' because it was 'incompatible with the image that [fathers were] attempting to maintain before their audiences' (Jaworski, 2021: 396). The dark secret of fatherhood comprised stigmatizing and potentially damaging information that might discredit men (Goffman, 1959; Jaworski, 2021) who responded by concealing paternity from the front stage.

### Covering moves

Having observed men's desire to keep fatherhood a dark secret, we now consider the complex, ingenious and often time-consuming strategic tactics that fathers devised and implemented to conceal their paternal status. To prevent others from learning that they were fathers, men developed and utilized what Goffman terms covering moves (Goffman, 1969). For the greater part of their working lives (while some men did trust women colleagues with their secret) to appear front stage in the image of the 'ideal' employee who was continuously present and available, all men, like the secret agents in Goffman's (1969) study, were tactical in their use of covering moves. Such moves did enable men to enact their paternal responsibilities in secret, but these required them to engage in demanding activities such as 'feinting' (i.e. pretending to do one thing when in practice doing another: Goffman, 1969; Jaworski, 2021) to keep secret their fathering practices (see Table 3).

Many fathers skilfully employed technology to facilitate feinting – that is, covering up the fathering activities in which they engaged, while manufacturing the

false impression that they were attending to Law Ltd matters. Thomas explained how he utilized technology as a cover when concealing his childcare responsibilities. He refers to his strategy as creating apparently indelible, but fabricated, digital stamps that enabled him to pretend he was undertaking workplace commitments, when in truth he was involved in childcare. We utilize Thomas's terminology of *stamps* to delineate men's covering moves as they strategized, both digitally and in person, to conceal childcare from the front stage.

Anthony, for instance, admitted to using, as a 'covering move', a counterfeit digital '*stamp*', falsifying his electronic diary through entering '*ghost*' meetings with clients during the evening to pretend he was working. Should Anthony's line manager review his online calendar, Anthony would be documented as working late, when in practice he was undertaking childcare. Edward, similarly, created his digital '*stamp*' through drafting and then (in his words) '*banking*' outgoing emails, using a delayed delivery function so that these messages were sent automatically at varying times during the evening, 'covering' up childcare activities through falsely indicating he was performing tasks for Law Ltd. Other men drafted emails then manually sent these after hours. These tactics allowed fathers to '*be there for [the children] for whatever they need. Whether it be a bit of playtime [or] reading to them*'. The prevalence of feinting was summarised by Daniel: '*If somebody says they're on their phone at ten o'clock [at night] for . . . the client . . . well, they might not be being honest*'.

During the working day, the ultimate goal of the secret father was to present himself as wholly committed to Law Ltd, encouraging his 'audience' of co-workers to assume he was without family obligations. Daniel, speaking about family events that occurred during office hours, explained: '*Leslie's got a play. Leslie's got sports day. Okay. I'm gonna nip out. I've got my phone*'. The phone enabled Daniel to 'cover' his parenting activities whilst maintaining a work-dedicated impression. He further explained, '*[my phone] allows me to stay engaged with work even if I'm doing things like the sports day. I can ping off an email to a colleague or if there is a complaint, I can make sure that I [respond]*'.

In person, men's covering moves involved affixing their '*stamp*' in the office before and after standard hours (09.00–17.30) to ensure that their workplace 'audience' would see them playing the role of the ideal-worker who is not tied to childcare tasks such as morning feeds or school runs. This approach required fathers to rely on their partners or their parents to manage the back-stage arena of the home, though men secretly engaged with these activities via mobile phones. Fathers were thereby facilitated in arriving at work early and beginning to craft their performance for the day. Alex noted in this regard that '*I get in in the mornings as early as I can. I like to be seen to be here and ready*'. Our observations showed how fathers created physical *stamps* marking their presence at work through simple indicators such as hanging a blazer or jacket on the back of a chair or securing the parking bay closest to the office doors to demonstrate their early arrival. Peter, a director, explained: '*I know a few of the young lads like to get the . . . parking spaces to the right of the entrance. It's unsaid but those spaces are basically filled by the first that arrive so it can send a message let's say*'.

On their early arrival at work, fathers were observed sending emails to be amongst the first logged onto the case management system (the equivalent of electronically

clocking-in). This action was important because the firm relied on quantitative data to consider productivity and performance. Having firmly affixed their 'stamp' on the electronic system as dedicated, ideal-worker early birds, some fathers (Stephen and Graham) were observed, then, to discretely engage in child-related activities such as digitally checking-in with their partner or nursery that children had arrived safely. In an emergency, parents and partners were on-call to collect sick children so that family demands were relegated to the backstage, enabling men to maintain the role of secret father.

Pursuing such *stamps* meant, ironically, that in many instances, fathers had completed their work before the morning started. This enabled fathers, once they had made child-related phone calls, to take a break to eat breakfast cereals (Mark, Francis, Greg and Stephen), make a morning drink (Graham, Francis and Mark), indulge in a cigarette outside of the fire exit doors (Alex and Graham) or catch up on football scores (Thomas, Alex and Mark). Effectively, fathers forfeited time that they would otherwise spend with their children to craft a suite of physical and/or digital *stamps* presenting a type of work, rather than family, orientation. Once fathers had fulfilled their goal of maintaining a physical 'stamp' within the office, they enacted a new suite of covering moves to obscure their fathering activities. These occurred at the end as well as at the start of the day. As Edward noted: '*everyone knows 5:30 is not home time, 5:30 is just a 20-minute break until you start again for the next 2-3 hours*'. In shoring up the impression of long working hours, we witnessed fathers staying at their desks well beyond 17:30 but engaging, covertly, in family-related activities such as online shopping (including ordering food and baby supplies) or checking in with their partners regarding childcare. Covering moves were utilized so that child-related calls were made in secret. For instance, we observed Graham using the large handset from his desk phone to cover his smaller personal mobile phone while he called his wife. From the front-stage perspective, Graham appeared to be making work-related telephone calls, but in truth, he was conversing with his wife about when to collect their child from her parents' home.

Some men expressed regret about the requirement to conceal fatherhood and to conduct their fathering activities in secret: '*I just want to stay there and be with them as much as I can*'. Greg described how he wished he could take a more active role in their child's life – '*It is sometimes hard, you know, some weeks my mum will see Daisy more than I do*'. It was, therefore, frequently evident that fathers desired greater involvement with their children, but this was something that they worked hard to keep secret from the organization.

### Counter-uncovering moves

Goffman observed that spies are constantly alert to the possibility that others might seek to uncover their secret activities (Božič and Keston-Siebert, 2024). We were not aware of efforts by any colleague to purposefully uncover the secret fathering of another; men working at Law Ltd appeared too consumed with performing their façade of 'ideal' employee to be concerned with revealing the fathering activities of others. What we did observe, however, was fathers' belief that, should they fail to conceal the dark secret of their paternity, colleagues might discover and expose their clandestine paternal lives. In keeping with Goffman's (1969) concept of counter-uncovering moves, men deployed

such diversionary tactics beyond concealing specific involvement in childcare duties. Our participants' counter-uncovering moves misdirected colleagues and line managers to assume that they were not fathers at all. Through practicing a type of work prioritization which is incongruent with parenthood, men developed intricate strategies to deflect attention from their fatherhood.

For instance, Graham, amongst the most forthcoming and candid of our participants, was observed on several occasions employing a counter-uncovering move in which he made tepid morning drinks for his colleagues. He did this so that when his team manager and peers arrived in the office, perhaps only a few minutes after Graham's arrival, they would believe that their drink had been made earlier and had cooled. Graham would then claim he had arrived in the office well in advance of his actual arrival. In the style of a true secret agent, Graham made his coffee tepid, in case hot steam from his mug might let slip his game.

Among those men who engaged in counter-uncovering moves (effectively pretending they did not have children at all), a common strategy was for fathers to avoid any daytime, child-related activities such as school plays, health/dental appointments and so on. Some fathers (like Daniel and George, above) took the risk of taking part in such events, but as previously noted, concealed these interruptions through a suite of strategic 'covering' actions to maintain fatherhood as a secret, including pretending to be at the office or in meetings when this was not the case. Other men, while they might regret missing out on children's activities, remained consumed by the desire to maintain their performance of the part of an ideal worker such that, through counter-uncovering moves, they concealed any aspect of family life that hinted at fatherhood. Thomas explained, '*I would like to be more involved with [childcare events] but when they occur during working hours you have to prioritize one or the other. You can't prioritize both*'. A similar perspective was given by Sean, who commented (having missed a school play), '*my wife went, and I watched it on video later on, that was that, so not ideal*'. Kevin explained his desire to avoid the problematic perceptions that he assumed applied to mothers at work: '*I wouldn't want to [miss work for childcare reasons] . . . because you see the women who leave and sort out this and that. I don't know for sure, but it can't look too good you know, leaving a client or a task open, for instance.*' Kevin's account is similar to those in other studies which conceptualize fathers as keen to avoid flexibility stigmatization (Coltrane et al., 2013; Leslie et al., 2012; Vandello et al., 2013; Wharton et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2013). Yet, what we perceived was a strategic and premeditated process, reflecting Kevin's perception that his absence from work for childcare reasons could disadvantage his career.

At the close of business hours, the transition between the office and home was important. Anthony shared a maxim that he lived by when leaving the office: '*If you leave work, you don't leave work*' (Anthony's emphasis). In other words, he and other fathers made sure to be seen leaving the office holding heavy files and documents, indicating symbolically that their working day would continue at home, thereby conveying, sometimes untruthfully, an intention to work into the evening, implying that they were without paternal responsibilities.

Fathers who wished to conceal paternal status at work did so by eschewing parental leave policies, taking annual leave or pretending to work as normal should they require

time off for childcare. George, for instance, whose partner worked full time, told Law Ltd that he wished to work from home for a short time – but without admitting that this was to care for his son, who had chickenpox. Parental leave in this case would have been unpaid, but George explained to us clearly that money was not the main issue – he was avoiding taking parental leave because he wished to maintain secrecy around his fathering role. George explained: *‘It’s partially financial in that I still get paid but it’s also, like, if I say I need to work from home to take care of Ben . . . [it would] cause an issue’*.

### **Back-stage support**

An important element of Goffman’s (1959: 105) thesis on secrets is that one might require the assistance of others to maintain a secret. As regards both covering moves and counter-uncovering moves, we witnessed how fathers would have struggled to perform the part of ideal worker without drawing, discreetly, upon close family members. For example, Daniel, who, as noted above, did sometimes take part in child-related events using his phone to pretend he was in the office, relied also upon the support of his wife, explaining: *‘dental appointments, hospital appointments, if they’re ever needed it tends to be that Sarah will deal with that kind of thing’*. As such, fathers’ covering moves relied on a ‘supporting cast’ who, adopting Goffman’s thespian vernacular, knew ‘the secrets of the show’ (Goffman, 1959: 53; Jaworski 2021: 395) – in other words, there was a complex interplay that shored up fathers’ performance as ideal workers. Women’s roles as mothers were openly acknowledged at Law Ltd through absences due to job sharing, remote-working, compressed hours or working part-time. However, fathers avoided accessing such flexible options because these made visible the existence of paternal responsibilities that might threaten the ideal-worker persona that they so carefully curated to imply they valued income provision and company loyalty before family.

Above, we have given examples of Peter’s and Sean’s experiences of covering moves and counter-uncovering moves; importantly, these individuals were directors of the firm. Reports from fathers like Kevin and George suggested that the actions of these individuals influenced more junior men to emulate these performances, continuing the tradition of keeping fatherhood a dark secret. Yet ironically, the directors who practiced secret fatherhood regarded this strategy as a source of regret. Peter, reflecting on the manner in which he had historically prioritized his status as ideal worker over that as father, shared with us: *‘I think the biggest thing that I, I think is, I’ve.. I’ve missed out on the kids growing up’*.

### **Discussion**

The paper has sought to understand, from fathers’ perspectives, how men with children navigate work and family. We have explored the conflict between organizational expectations that glorify the hegemonic persona of ideal worker (Gatrell et al., 2022) and the involved fathering ideals that are increasingly prevalent in society more broadly (Doucet, 2018).

Our central contribution is in identifying how fathers employ a performative work-oriented front (Goffman, 1959), employing tactical strategies to create *stamps* to pretend

they are conducting work for Law Ltd while in they are practice enacting secret fatherhood. Specifically, we enhance knowledge about fatherhood in three ways, extending insights by Reid (2015) and Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2019) through providing an in-depth exploration of the dramaturgical strategies of secrecy that fathers use to manage work–family boundaries.

First, we build on existing studies (Gatrell, 2024; Reid, 2015) by making visible how fathers were profoundly influenced by the hegemonic image of the job-oriented ideal worker, who is supposedly free from family responsibilities. Relatedly, we extend previous research on paternal oppression (Burnett et al., 2013) by showing how men were so concerned about maintaining their carefully curated ideal-worker persona that they treated paternity as a dark secret to be concealed from the front stage of their work environment.

Secondly, drawing upon the work of Goffman (1959, 1961, 1969) regarding performance and the management of secrets at work, our study has unmasked strategic and tactical ways of explaining *how* navigation of work and family takes place. This contribution is important as it extends existing research on working fathers, which more readily focuses on why navigation occurs in the ways that it does (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2019; Cooper, 2000; Mauerer and Schmidt, 2019; Moran and Koslowski, 2019). This perspective is also important as it extends how we understand paternal navigation to take place. While important studies like those of Cooper (2000), Halrynjo (2009), Reid (2015), and Tanquerel and Grau-Grau (2019) offer a typology of fathering styles, we hesitated to do so given our findings regarding the performative quality of paternal navigation, which showed that the roles played by men were nuanced and situational. Specifically, we recorded fathers taking, to differing degrees, multiple roles and building contradictory impressions depending on their audience. The degree to which one might claim a desired impression suggests that an absolute label of ‘conformer’ to the image of ideal worker (Tanquerel and Grau-Grau, 2019) or ‘super dad’ (Halrynjo, 2009) might be problematic. Moreover, that fathers claim contradictory impressions depending on their audience suggests that there is a degree of fluidity that can be exploited when one has knowledge of *audience, stage, props* and the use of *stamps* and a *supporting cast* such that a man might be labelled as a ‘conformer’ in one context, but that same father could be labelled among his family as a ‘super dad’ in another. We suggest that our findings do not challenge these findings, *per se*, but help understand that there is an extra performative dimension to which we should be sensitive when employing or applying typologies, categories and/or labels.

Thirdly, we have revealed how maintaining fatherhood in secret is not a solo undertaking. Fathers’ navigation of work and family is supported by parents and/or partners assisting backstage and keeping the show running while fathers are operating front stage. A disadvantage for mothers who are part of this *supporting cast* is that maternity, as our participants observed, is likely to be more conspicuous than fatherhood at work. It is well known that mothers who experience discrimination should their childcare responsibilities seen to disrupt work (Ashman et al., 2022). However, more fathers were encouraged to work flexibly, this could support workplace equality with both women and men supported in balancing employment with caregiving responsibilities (Borgkvist et al., 2021).

Our findings thereby extend the literature on fatherhood and employment, and we suggest changes thinking about fatherhood and employment in the following ways: Earlier, we observed how the extant literature on fatherhood and employment centres primarily on the organizational barriers that compromise paternal capacity for involvement with childcare. These studies offer important structural explanations as to *why* fathers are constrained from involved fathering (Cooper, 2000; Kvande, 2009; Ladge et al., 2015; Reimer, 2015; Tremblay, 2013). Through offering an intimate understanding of the daily process of work–family navigation from the perspective of fathers themselves, our paper builds on these insights through illuminating – and sharing – the secrets of *how* men manage the gendered aspects of combining work and family.

Our paper shows, further, how paternal involvement with childcare is more nuanced than extant literature, which frames fatherhood as a work-oriented/involved dualism, might suggest. We have found this distinction to be less straightforward than might have been anticipated based on previous studies (Burnett et al., 2013; Shows and Gerstel, 2009). For example, extending Shows and Gerstel's (2009) important exploration of public and private fatherhood, that focuses upon public displays of fatherhood outside of the workplace (e.g. at sports days), we demonstrate how professional fathers are pressured into proactively concealing childcare within organizational contexts, keeping fathering activities a dark secret to align with ideal-worker norms; yet performing fathering activities in secret, pointing to a new performative category – secret fathers – who simultaneously conform and subvert, maintaining involved fathering in private while crafting elaborate workplace facades that erase their paternal identity altogether.

## Future research

First, recalling Hochschild and Machung's (1989) insights into the importance of making caregiving visible if gendered norms are to be challenged, we argue that secrecy itself reflects how gender is both reproduced and contested within professional environments. Secret fatherhood, as a pervasive strategy, alongside the covering and counter-uncovering moves required to sustain these performative actions, demonstrates the persistence of ideal-worker expectations while illuminating the complex strategies fathers enact to navigate such constraints. It could be suggested that through concealing their parental status, fathers are contributing (unintentionally) to reproducing ideal-worker norms. Yet, it could also be argued that professionally employed men experience intense pressures to present a work-oriented image, leaving them with little choice but to hide their involvement with childcare. Future research might explore how the visibility of caregiving labour – the area highlighted as central to contesting gendered norms (Hochschild and Machung, 1989) – impacts workplace perceptions and policies. It might also explore further the concept of paternal agency in relation to balancing work and family commitments.

Second, our discovery of employed fatherhood as multi-faceted, as opposed to a more rigid dualism, extends management literature on fatherhood and employment by showing how fathers might represent themselves in a variety of contradictory ways, depending on their audience (Goffman, 1959; Reid, 2015; Shows and Gerstel, 2009). The above-noted assumptions that fatherhood has been characterized in terms of a dualism of work-oriented/involved fathering (Burnett et al., 2013) thus require further consideration. Greater

theoretical precision, especially regarding how men segment work and family lives, might be achieved through further qualitative work that reveals the hidden qualities of employed fatherhood – especially among men who perform fathering in secret.

Third, our study revealed the importance of the roles that significant others play in supporting fathers' ability to father in secret. Men's work-oriented performances were often realized only with support from parents and partners, who assisted men's front-stage presentations by being supportive of parental needs. The type of support we refer to, including daytime care activities, is under-researched within fatherhood-focused studies (Beigi et al., 2017; Kossek et al., 2021) and we need to know more – for example, how, if applicable, do men in single sex relationships, divorced or lone fathers access support, and what might be the needs of these groups in relation to policy?

Furthermore, we suggest that the hegemonic notion of the ideal worker, which emphasizes total commitment to professional demands and which all men in our study sought to align with, is a source of serious oppression and constraint among fathers. Ideal-worker narratives pressure fathers to present themselves at work in the image of what Gatrell (2024) terms the 'absent warrior', one who absents himself from childcare and the home, while fighting to prioritize breadwinning and the needs of his employer. In this regard, ideal-worker narratives not only disadvantage mothers but also marginalize fathers such that men are compelled to balance caregiving and employment through a complex web of lies and tactics that must be exhausting in the long term. Further research is needed, perhaps joining with policy agencies to understand what might be done to diminish the power of the ideal-worker narrative.

Finally, we suggest that the concept of secret fatherhood offers a valuable lens through which to explore work–life balance dynamics in the future, particularly regarding how fathers' concealment strategies may perpetuate gendered workplace norms that limit both maternal and paternal choices. Similar strategies of secrecy, observed among pregnant and breastfeeding women facing workplace stigmatization (Gatrell, 2011), highlight the broader relevance of secrecy in navigating marginalized identities. Comparative studies could examine how mothers and fathers adopt similar or different approaches to visibility and concealment, revealing the ongoing influence of gendered expectations on work–life balance and inclusion. This framework has the potential to deepen understanding of identity management, inclusivity, and the interplay between professional and personal demands in organizational culture.

## Limitations

Our study has a number of limitations that are linked with the above recommendations for future research. First, we learned how fathers, although hiding their paternal status from other men, shared this with women colleagues who were mothers. We observed fathers' assumptions that women employees with children might be less career-oriented than equivalent men. Studies show maternal and paternal perceptions vary regarding work and family (Gatrell et al., 2014), yet without data on maternal views, we cannot know whether the women employed at Law Ltd might have felt disadvantaged regarding the lack of career advancement should they access family-friendly policies. An important avenue for future research would be to explore and compare maternal and paternal

perceptions about parenthood and career. Secondly, our study recognizes the role played by parents and partners in supporting fathers' front-stage performances, yet we do not have empirical data to show how these supporting actors perceived and understood their roles. As mentioned above, studies employing both dramaturgy and ideal-worker lenses pay limited attention to the role of other, back-stage players. Our study offers accounts that illuminate the importance of partners and parents, and that this is an ideal area for further consideration (Kossek et al., 2021; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015; Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). To shed new light on paternity and paid work, further studies could include the views of significant others and could also consider important differences between parents with greater or lesser support (e.g. single parents), better illuminating how partners, parents and others interpret their roles in the context of employed fathers' management of work and family.

Finally, our study focused on professional fathers operating within organizational cultures with strong ideal-worker norms, but future research is required to explore, crucially, whether and how working-class fathers might engage in secret fatherhood practices in the workplace (Shows and Gerstel, 2009). This line of inquiry could reveal whether similar tensions exist between ideal-worker norms and internalized aspirations for involved fatherhood in working-class contexts. For instance, working-class fathers may experience unique pressures or find fewer opportunities to conceal caregiving roles due to differences in workplace culture or visibility of labour. Simultaneously, working-class men may be more likely to have employed partners due to the necessity for dual wage-earning, thereby reducing the availability of supporting actors who might work behind the scenes to enable secret fathering to take place. Comparative studies of professional and working-class fathers could provide deeper insights into how class shapes the strategies fathers use to navigate care.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing upon Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1969) work, we have shown how the ideal-worker persona constitutes a form of oppression for men who wish to be involved fathers, obliging them to treat paternity as a dark secret and compelling them to curate a complex web of lies to both care for their children and advance their careers. The ideal-worker figure is known to be damaging for many workers (Höpfl, 2000; Höpfl and Atkinson, 2000). Arguably, however, the damage to fathers has been previously obscured because of the need for employed men to conduct their fathering and family lives in secret, to satisfy the expectations of employers. In making secret fatherhood visible, we hope to open the door to future research that investigates further the roles that organizations play in reproducing and maintaining gendered ideal-worker narratives that coerce men into the role of 'absent warrior' (Gatrell 2024). Making secret fathering visible is essential if workplace attitudes and practices are to shift. Research based on men's front-stage performance, without recognition of what transpires backstage, is unlikely to invoke social change, especially in neo-liberal contexts where capitalist modes of production are a priority (Gatrell et al., 2022). The utilization of less traditional sociological perspectives, such as Ewald and Hogg's (2020) phenomenologically orientated research, could offer new ways of exploring how paternal roles remain persistently stagnant (Miller, 2011) as

well as offering novel perspectives regarding how we might instigate change, so that men may combine work and family without having to be secret fathers.

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## ORCID iDs

Martyn Bradley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0718-8056>

Laura Radcliffe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7801-1995>

Gary Brown  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1529-1244>

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Martyn Bradley is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Director for the University of Liverpool's Master in Management course. Martyn's research spans topics including fatherhood, work–family balance, management education and the legal services industry. His work has been published on academic and professional platforms, taking the form of book chapters, papers and podcasts. Martyn is also a member of the Oxford Network of European Fatherhood Researchers, the British Academy of Management and holds a Senior Fellowship with Advance HE. [Email [m.bradley@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:m.bradley@liverpool.ac.uk)]

Caroline Gatrell is based at the University of Liverpool Management School, where she is Professor of Management Studies and Deputy Dean (Faculty). Caroline's research centres on employment, health and personal lives, drawing upon the lenses of gender and embodiment to explore business and management futures in which employees' work–family lives are improved. Caroline is Chair of the Management Committee for the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide. She was formerly General Editor, *Journal of Management Studies*, and Editor in Chief, *International Journal of Management Reviews*. She is a Fellow of the British Academy of Management; Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. [Email [gatrellc@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:gatrellc@liverpool.ac.uk)]

Laura Radcliffe is Reader in Organizational Behaviour at the University of Liverpool Management School. Her research explores how employees navigate the intersection of work and family life, with particular attention to gendered and organizational norms and workplace inclusion. She is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* and co-lead of the Future Families Work research network. Her work has been published in journals including the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Human Relations*, and *Organizational Research Methods*. [Email [laurasr@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:laurasr@liverpool.ac.uk)]

Gary Brown is a Faculty Associate Dean for Student Success at Greenwich Business School, University of Greenwich. His research explores the intersections of culture, performativity and personal biography, particularly within higher education and public sector organizations. He has published on organizational culture, societal conflict and good judgement, examining how individuals navigate ambiguity and competing demands. His work has appeared in *AACSB Insights* and edited collections on education and AI. [Email [g.brown@greenwich.ac.uk](mailto:g.brown@greenwich.ac.uk)].