The Role of Love and Children's Agency in Improving Fathers' Wellbeing

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1 Introduction

“...love is also the very reason why we are ready to exploit ourselves in the process of achieving the resources and means to give the best to our beloved intimates.” (Seebach 2017:199–200)

Love might indeed entice family members to self-sacrifice as Swen Seebach's quote above reminds, but in this book chapter I argue for a different perspective, one that proposes a definition of paternal love as a source of energy and motivation, one which is influencing diverse spheres of life (such as men's engagement in paid work). Previously, and in earlier chapters of this volume, it has been shown that the close and nurturing bond that can develop in time, between involved fathers and their children, helps fathers maintain and increase their wellbeing and as such, fathers have reported becoming better at work (Ranson 2012).

In this chapter, I support this positive perspective, and rather than focusing on the fathers' relationship to their partners, I highlight the child's significant role and the emotions which support the child-father relationship. The aims of this chapter are the following: a) to bring attention to children's agency in relation to father's wellbeing, and b) to highlight the important role that emotions play in men's wellbeing in intimate contexts. To illustrate these arguments, my analysis centres on findings from a piece of research with two groups of European of fathers: Romanian and Scottish fathers, usually overlooked by the literature. By focusing on overlooked populations new insights can be gained as to the cultural variation of love, fathering, and children's agency. In the conclusion of this chapter, I also briefly reflect on how academic research on involved fathering and emotions can inform changes in family policies.

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279

1.1 Theoretical Background

In accurately analysing fathers, any discussion of the role of the father needs to begin with the delineation between the terms *fathers* (the biological or social parent), *fathering* (the everyday practices of caring for a child enacted by fathers) and *fatherhood* (the public meaning of *fathering*, the social discourse and cultural beliefs regarding fathers) (Featherstone 2009; Morgan 2011). However, some argue that *fathering* refers to the process by which a man becomes a father (be it biological or social) and includes aspects related to the care of a child which do not necessarily happen in the presence of the child (Smith-Koslowski 2008). In this chapter, I focus specifically on “involved fathering,” considered in the literature as a socio-psychological concept which refers to a father’s participation in his child’s life through four characteristics: accessibility (whether physically close or proximate), engagement, responsibility, and the more recently added dimension of “warmth” (Lamb 2010). The dimension of “warmth” is usually studied by sociologists as affection or even love, and thereby my focus fell on fathers’ overlooked experiences of love in their families. At the moment, there are no extensive sociological studies on paternal love, and mine is the first. Therefore, I was keen to understand men’s emotional experiences of fathering, as these were theoretically interpreted as being linked to the achievement of equal work and care arrangements in family life (Hooks 2004).

Considering that both *affective* practices and *social* practices feed into fathers’ personal biographies (Jamieson 1998), it is time that social policymakers take this often-neglected aspect into account. But why focus on father’s love? One reason for this is because amongst many emotions, love is perhaps one of the most powerful ones connected to the role of a parent, and it outlines usually one of the increasingly few long-lasting relationships that people experience across their life-span (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014). Advances in the study of emotions, allow sociologists to interpret the micro-social landscape of relationships in new ways. One such perspective is offered by the *aesthetic theory of emotion* (Burkitt 2014). Applied to the topic of fatherhood and love, Ian Burkitt’s framework considers fathering as part of everyday situations and as a deeply relational creation, embedded in family life in a complex network of relationships: to themselves, their own parents and family of origin, their romantic partner and their children. Seen from this lens, fathers are not just individual family members, but part of an interdependent network of support, as they are emotionally and relationally linked to their close family members. Therefore, if their children are affected by life circumstances, their fathers’ wellbeing is also affected. Because of this theoretical understanding, I challenge in my qualitative research the pervasive idea that men’s lives are governed solely by autonomy and individuality (Gilmore 1990).

At the moment in the literature on fathering there are two main models: the persistent *breadwinner/provider* model which relies on men’s adherence to traditional masculinity, emotional stoicism, and focus on work and authority (Jansz 2000; Larossa 1997) and the *nurturant father’s* model (Johansson and Klinth 2008;

Marsiglio and Roy 2012) reliant on caring forms of masculinity (Elliott 2015) and supporting a more progressive view of masculinity, which focuses on affective engagement in childrearing. However, there is a growing awareness that contemporary fathers experience tensions between new ideals of “good fathering” which equate it with love and nurturance, and “successful masculinity” which is still assessed based on toughness and emotional control. If such tensions are left unsolved, they could potentially affect men's health, as research into Scottish masculinity has shown (O'Brien et al. 2007; O'Brien et al. 2009). However, rather than understanding masculinity and fathering as separate and contradictory roles, one way to move beyond this simple dichotomy is considering the multidimensionality of men's emotions through a term I called “*emotional bordering*.” This term emerged from the grounded data I collected while interviewing a specific sample of European men on their emotional experiences of fathering (Macht 2019b). Results show that, contrary to the understanding that men have fixed emotional responses, men as fathers can express more diversified and complex emotions; as they are fathering they are also *shifting* emotionally between love and detachment, and between intimacy and stoicism in what they do and say in their everyday lives; this means that their emotional responses shift according to their social relationships, creating different ‘emotional boundaries’ between themselves and their loved ones. In this way, emotional bordering describes the process through which men experience more flexible emotional roles as fathers. The term also attempts to define masculinities in a more fluid manner and from an emotional perspective.

1.2 Presentation of Data and Findings

This study compared the fathering and emotional narratives of involved Scottish and Romanian fathers living in Edinburgh and Bucharest. Fathers self-identified as “involved” and were acknowledged as such by the people who helped me recruit them for the study through snowball sampling. Being involved meant that they were actively engaged in hands-on-care for their children, emotionally accessible to them, and made changes in their work life to adapt to their children's needs (Lamb 2010). The study explored whether the idea of “the involved father” was an equally relevant discourse in what are the Eastern and the Western parts of Europe, and whether these cultural variations influenced fathers' emotions (Johansson and Klinth 2008). A key aim of the research was to understand what fathers' love for their children means to them, if fathers value love, and how they feel that they can or cannot express it (Padilla et al. 2007). The core findings that have emerged from this qualitative investigation, and have appeared in a research report (see Macht 2017), are:

- Involved fathers experience love as something they “do,” as a verb and in this process, they exercise *emotional bordering*.

- Loving their children took time to develop; even if it was deemed a very strong initial feeling.
- Ways of displaying love varied with cultural background.
- Maintaining a loving relationship with the child required emotional effort.
- Fathers prioritised their unconditional love for their children over a certain conditional love for their partner and own parents.
- Children had a positive influence on involved fathers' health and engagement with work.

The data presented in this chapter is focused on the last finding listed above, because I have expanded upon the other findings in previous publications. To briefly sketch the theoretical and methodological background: it is worth mentioning that the socio-constructionist study design involved Ian Burkitt's (2014) theory of emotions as social relations and Kathy Charmaz's (2013) improved version of grounded theory. This adapted version of the grounded theory methodology was used in designing the research, through a pilot phase carried out with the purpose of sensitizing the interview guide. This consisted of seven initial and open-ended interviews which for reasons of time and funding, took place in Scotland. Based on the feedback received from the participants, questions were tested and re-tested. As fathers provided content, I generated preliminary concepts and then compared these with available concepts from the literature. This process continuously refined the interview guide by rearranging the order of questions or thinking through where the participants needed only gentle prompting. The analysis proceeded in the following way: paragraphs were given a code, N-vivo codes were selected, then, in a process of distilling the most often occurring and meaningful codes, categories were created. Afterwards, memos were written to define each novel category. Themes appeared and these were then re-checked alongside relevant quotes in the process of constructing arguments. The analysis was done by hand using pen and paper, to become familiar with the data and immerse myself in the research, after which the transcriptions were uploaded to the program NVivo and were queried by doing common word searches and mapping out concepts. Case-studies for each participant were compiled by incorporating field-notes with relevant quotes from the interviews.¹ The grounded theory approach was chosen to keep as close to the participants' interpretations as possible and explore their discourses on love and intimate relating in their families, as they viewed this process themselves.

In addition, a diverse sample was prioritized to ensure that a range of views was represented. This was because I was aware that fathers from the same culture and profession might describe love in a similar way. The final sample included qualitative interviews with 47 fathers from two different cultures: they were aged between 28 and 56 years old, of which 27 were Scottish fathers and 20 were Romanian fathers; 5 were self-identified carers (3 were full-time, 1 was a part-time dad and 1 was on extended sick leave) and from the remainder of the fathers, 41 were full-

¹For an in-depth description of how I employed Charmaz's grounded theory and the challenges I faced, see Macht (2018a, 2019a).

time working fathers and only 1 worked part-time. Almost all were married or co-partnered, and only 2 were undergoing separations. Interviews were carried out during 2014 and 2015, in offices, homes, and public cafes. Six situations permitted for spontaneous observations of direct interactions between fathers and their children, as their children were also present during our interviews.

2 Emotional Bordering and Family to Work Transitions

In this section, I explore the first aim of this book chapter which is to highlight the important role that emotions play in men's wellbeing in family contexts. It is important to underline that almost all involved fathers in my sample were also working fathers. In relation to employment, Gillian Ranson (2012:742) conceptualizes working fathers as "(...) men who do take advantage of the workplace initiatives most commonly used by mothers and who in other ways explicitly organize their working lives around the family responsibilities they are committed or obliged to assume." However, in what continues to be, for the majority of workplaces, a masculinist career culture, sharing family responsibilities is seen as weakening not only a man's work performance, but his identity as a breadwinner. Not only that, but fathers who want to be more involved incur work-place penalties, even if this happens to a lesser degree than the penalties incurred by working mothers (Haas and Hwang 2019). However, and again according to Ranson, working fathers are at the forefront of change, as they mediate the transition from the public sphere into the private one (for example, with couples deciding to share caregiving) and the other way around, as working environments adapt to parental demands (i.e., flexible parental leave, extended day-care services etc.).

In my own research, I uncovered that for fathers, spending time with their children at home, although sometimes hard to come by, also had the meaning of re-energizing them for engagement in work the next day. Fathers reported being more engaged at work if they had time to talk, play, and help children after the working day. However, fathers struggled with making time for their children, as their work responsibilities increased, and some of them would also bring their work home with them; they also felt that they had to raise an 'emotional border' and be more stoic in the workplace, due to the persisting traditional gender regimes of the workplace. Upon arriving home, some of the fathers felt that they could lower or relax their emotional border, and be more nurturing in how they expressed their feelings to their children. In addition, and as I describe at length in my book (Macht 2019b), fathers also bordered emotionally according to the ways in which they understood themselves in relation to their own fathers, and what kind of parent they aimed to be (not only in their provider's role but also in their intimate, nurturing role). Providing data in support of this view, the fathers in my study described how they externalized and internalized their emotions, in rather flexible ways, and according to their social contexts and to the degree of familiarity and intimacy they had with someone. In this respect, three strategies emerged from their

narratives, organised for clarity on an imaginary emotional spectrum that waddled between stoicism and intimacy:

- (a) *Some involved fathers set lower emotional borders in building their masculine emotional identity, resorting to increased warmth and intimacy* (these were situated at the intimate end of an imagined emotional spectrum)
- (b) *Some were ambivalently placed in the middle, preferring a balanced approach* (these were situated in the middle of the emotional spectrum because they combined stoicism with nurturance)
- (c) *Other involved fathers set higher borders by employing more emotional control and detachment* (theses were placed at the stoic end of the emotional spectrum)

According to the fathers I interviewed, the above strategies were employed through every day *emotional revisions* in the process of relating to their children, as they cared for them and spent time with them. The types of places and spaces they were in, their child's birth-order and age (not gender), and who else happened to be around (parents, partners, friends or co-workers) also influenced how much fathers raised or lowered their emotional borders in expressing love to their children. Emotional bordering is significant because it reminds sociologists of the "emotional costs" of parenting and not only of its material aspects (Zelizer 1994). Moreover, the concept describes how men resolve tensions created by their gendered identity in combination with their fathering discourses. Therefore, the basis of these role tensions might not simply be a "crisis of masculinity" (de Boise and Hearn 2017), but it could be enhanced by the emotional revisions which are necessary to maintain good fathering in relation to changing masculine norms. It could be more succinctly said that emotional bordering explains the process of creating a father's role in relation to masculinity.² The discussion around emotional borders and whether these could be 'raised' or 'lowered' depended therefore on fathers' close relationships, everyday circumstances, and how they understood their role in their family lives. For example, I focus below on just some of the many quotes from my research, and I focus here on those in relation to fathers' wellbeing to illustrate the rather tense connections between the satisfactions of loving their children and not having enough time to do so because of work. Nonetheless, when they had some time to spend with them, some fathers reported being re-energised by their children:

Daniel (Romanian, 38, Engineer³) explains how he can't wait to come home and see his son, no matter what mood the child might be in:

"I don't even know how to express it, love. It's something I feel for him. Simply put, I just can't wait to see him! Even if he's angry, when I come home from work. I never know if he's angry or happy. If he wants to hug me or he's been upset with his mom. But I just can't wait to come home and see him. And yeah, it really charges me up for the next day at work."

²For a lengthier discussion of this concept in relation to the commodification of parenting and emotions, see Macht (2018b); also for how fathers maintained love during family separations, see Macht (2019d).

³To help contextualize the quotes, demographic information on each participant concerning their culture, age and occupation is provided in brackets.

Mihai (Romanian, 43, Computer Specialist) describes that work takes too much of his time to be as involved as he would like, and therefore he experiences guilt in relation to his fathering:

"I'm not really happy with what I've done and how much I've done [in terms of parenting]. For example, a lot of my time is taken up with work. Now, I can't say I'm a hero or something, because this is not the case, the reality is that I can't do more. If I can't do my work, then I won't be here anymore [his workplace]. And if I'm no longer here, then our problems become worse."

In addition, Malcolm (Scottish, 42, Investment Professional) reflects on how loving his children means that he wants to spend more time with them:

"Coming back to your question of 'Do you feel you love her more or less at some times?'. . . No, it doesn't really matter. I want more time with her because I love her. I don't love her because I get time with her, if that makes sense."

The last two fathers whose quotes I present, describe how they carry-over private images or fragments of talk into their public professional role, with different effects. For Petre (Romanian, 28, pilot) looking at clips of his son on his phone works to soothe the stress he experiences in his high-stake occupation:

"When I'm at work he sometimes appears almost in front of my eyes so to say. And then a big smile appears on my face without even noticing. When there are slow moments at work I sit and go through pictures and clips of him on my phone, because, thanks to technology nowadays, we film him quite a lot, and as I look at his clips he brings me such great joy."

While for Nicholas (Scottish, 38, Engineer) talking about his daughter at work, must be done in a sarcastic way to express his emotions in what continues to be a highly-masculinized work environment, that of engineering:

"I work in an entirely male industry. There's no women in engineering (. . .) So, you can't gush too much, if you're in a coffee room and there's somebody else whose got a child you might afford yourself a couple of minutes of being loving about your children. But for the main part, you have to be sarcastic. If I'm asked 'How's your daughter?' 'She's alright, but she's very selfish' I would say. You still have to hide. You wouldn't gush. It's different in the way women and men describe their children [at work]."

The themes of needing more time with their children, of benefiting from seeing them and relating to them and yet having to conceal their loving and positive emotions at work, emerge from these quotes. These could be interpreted as denoting the inherent pressures for contemporary fathers to reconcile their ideal worker role to that of caring fathering; this happens despite disagreeing with the idea that "love is a chore." Building upon these quotes, Andrea Doucet (2013) reminds us that men speaking in a language of care might provoke social and political anxieties in a system created by their fathers, as modern men might want to do things differently. This attitude certainly relies on father's agency as some decided to be different than their own fathers, where these elderly fathers were deemed stoic or emotionally closed off. However, such a progressive intimate attitude encounters conflict where there is a continuous and fixed male work-norm, one that does not allow for flexible adjustments in workplace environments and blocks men from exercising a public form of emotional pleasure and engagement in childrearing. In this way, caring forms of

fathering that are hidden and concealed should become public, in order for workplace attitudes to visibly change. If men continue to be associated with the public realm, then as they are transforming a traditional form of masculine identity into a more loving, intimate and respectful one to their children, this transformation needs to become visible and publicly supported.

From this perspective, it emerges that fathers' emotions and strategies for handling them, are integrative parts of their wellbeing both at work and at home. For example, it has been shown that emotions influence male embodiment. One study found that there are correlations between experiencing discrimination and enacting stoicism (or the more popular term "taking it like a man") which increases men's likelihood to develop depression (Hammond 2012). Additionally, anger was found to be linked to higher rates of substance abuse, and mistrust plays a part in mediating men's relationship to social institutions and their subsequent health outcomes (Hammond et al. 2016). It is therefore important to remain aware that both caring fathering and breadwinning are *emotional identities* as well as social roles. In the next section, I present selective excerpts from the main data analysis, that specifically focus on father-child wellbeing.

3 Towards a Child-Led Understanding of Paternal Wellbeing

In this section, I focus on the second aim of the chapter which is to bring attention to children's agency in relation to father's wellbeing. In this manner, new theoretical insights can appear, if researchers interested in father's wellbeing shift their attention from the parent to the child's role in the family.

A child is increasingly seen as a person with agency and human rights,⁴ particularly in nations of the North-Western part of the world. In the UK, this is due to the rising strength of the judicial protection of children's rights.⁵ For example Tisdall (2012) defines children's agency as: "Children are to be seen as agents and not passive objects of concern nor empty vessels to be filled with adult wisdom. (. . .) If children were agents and worthy of respect, then their human rights – and particularly their civil and political rights – gain a foothold." Moreover, discourses of intensive parenting construct the child as affection- and protection-needy (Lupton 2013). However, it is not always true that children are disempowered and vulnerable (Valentine 1997), as they manage to have an important influence and often guide parental behaviour. In line with this, the quotes below illustrate that having children

⁴It's important to keep in mind that conceptualizing children and their roles remains culturally dependent. There are cultures who continue to use physical and verbal violence to discipline their children since this is considered a core practice of the "good parent" role (Selin 2013).

⁵Children and Young People Scotland Act, 2014. Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8/pdfs/asp_20140008_en.pdf [Accessed 03/02/2020]

played an important role in getting fathers to stop bad habits, such as smoking, reckless driving and the consumption of drugs. To this end, it appears that children, through their mere presence, were engaging fathers in ceasing drug-use, losing weight, or driving more carefully. Some fathers explained that these changes happened as they became fathers and realized that they had to remain healthy and present in their children's lives for longer. For example, Stephen (Scottish, 35, Part-time dad⁶) talks about how having his daughter changed his life, by helping him get motivated to let go of drugs:

"She changed my whole life around. I was on drugs and other stuff and now because of her I'm not on drugs. And that's 'cause of myself realistically because I chose not to be anymore. I'm quite strong-minded that way when it comes to my daughter [...] you want her to look up to you, and say 'That's my daddy!'"

Mark (Scottish, 36, Team leader) as well, describes how becoming a father made him aware that he had to be 'available' for the long-term and therefore he cut back on his smoking:

"That probably scares me quite a lot as well, that I don't particularly look after myself [...] I think I'd be devastated that what I did to myself meant he didn't have me around. So that's something I need to change as well and I am gradually. But it's a good thing. He has helped me cut down smoking a lot."

And lastly, Emil (Romanian, 37, Executive director) reflects on how having two daughters made him aware of needing to lose weight to maintain his health, as well as driving more carefully:

"Since I had the girls, I became very careful with myself. I started losing weight. I realise that they need me long-term, and I have to behave in such a way so as not to endanger myself. Up until they were born, I used to drive around like a mad man. Now I'm more careful behind the wheel, I drive slowly and not only when I'm in the car with them, also when I'm by myself. I think because I'm aware now that I have to remain available for a longer time."

Another interesting finding that emerged is that children of both genders could energize and empower their parents, but they could also conflict with them. Children were far removed from the image of *intimate subordinates* to their parents' socialization practices. What this means is that instead of seeing children merely as dependent on their fathers and mothers for love, children could also play a central role in how love was perceived in the family and sustained. In my study, for most fathers, love for their children was described as a powerful emotion, one that could energize them to deal with the obstacles encountered in their everyday life. This is because love was understood as *an emotional complex* as Ian Burkitt (2014) described it in the literature; so love as a complex, contingently included other emotions such as worry. [*Editors' Note*: see also chapters by Kotelchuck in this volume for more on the reciprocal relationship between the emotional health of father and child.]

⁶The participant specifically filled in the demographic form I offered him on the day of our interview in this way; this is not my own classification.

Worry⁷ in fathers' narratives appeared linked to wellbeing and played an important part in enacting control and protection in how fathers related to their children. However, there were some cultural nuances: Scottish fathers overall were worried about external dangers in the environment that might harm their children, while Romanian fathers were preponderantly more worried about their child's agency in getting sick and putting him-/her-self at risk unnecessarily. Worry was the energizing and emotional engaged component of the good father's role, even if some fathers struggled with describing this vulnerable side of their fathering. The conclusion of this section, as illustrated by the data, is that even if fathers have the overall responsibility for their children's wellbeing, they were also influenced by the child's own agency in how they emotionally self-regulated. Loving their children and being engaged in their lives gained an everyday distinctive meaning for fathers; this was connected to a reshaping of their identity as *healthy or better men*. In this way, being involved signified not only being a "good father" but also improving as a man.

4 Dependable and Inter-Dependent Men?

The literature on fatherhood has consistently addressed issues of father's employment (Ranson 2012), their responsibility and levels of involvement (Lamb 2010), adjustments to fatherhood and fathering practices (Shirani 2013), but in the quest for gender equality it has reached a certain impasse, whereby fathers are just being continuously redefined according to the same categories of analysis, that is *when* emotions are not taken into consideration. On a more pragmatic level, it is not only that focusing academically on the social significance of understanding fathers as emotional beings might be important, but also seeing intimate fathers as such in *social policies* makes a difference for their inclusion in hospital rooms, parenting classes and playgrounds, and might help reduce discrimination and stigma. It is conceivably odd and illogical that caring men continue to be socially stigmatized for showing emotions in public, and especially when these are positive ones.

The employment conditions and structural support that fathers receive is important *alongside* the emotional characteristics of their professed involvement in childrearing. Social policies aimed at sustaining the work-family balance must consider that men do not only *acquire* a fathering role but they also *embody* and *feel it*, which could have potential consequences for their long-term health. In addition, as women take on increasing work responsibilities, having support from their partners at home becomes quintessential for gender equal opportunities. It is not a question of reshaping only the public sphere to include women, but also the private sphere to allow more men to participate in what was traditionally considered a

⁷For an in-depth analysis of how worry is part of love as an emotional and relational complex, see Macht (2019b, 2019d).

“feminized” domain. And much like women are given options to tackle the world of work according to a variety of options and increasingly flexible schedules, so should men be allowed to practice nurturing/caring/intimate forms of masculinity according to their own choices. ‘One-size fit all’ models should be decisively avoided in both women’s career advancement and men’s participation in child-care.

It has been argued before that the workplace needs to be considered a family-friendly environment (O'Brien et al. 2007), much as the home has become more recently, a place of extended work through digital and technological accessibility. Fluid interactions between the two are usually mediated by both parents, although continuous unequal, systemic arrangements usually over-burden working mothers. On the path towards establishing long-term and realistic gender equal opportunities for both men and women as parents, states must get involved to support their working families and their intimate lives. One such avenue of opportunity is to equate “manhood” with everyday acts of care and nurturance in public and visible social images of support (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) and to dissolve the exclusive association of acts of caring and love with the mother’s role. Promoting caring forms of masculinity (Elliott 2015) means no longer thinking of loving as something to hide, to be ashamed of or as “un-manly”, but rather seeing love in both the public and the private sphere as a core characteristic of a progressive, intelligent and respectful man.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that involved fatherhood offers the opportunity to resist risk-taking practices which are intrinsically linked to traditional images of what it means to be a (tough) man, images which are also harmful to men’s wellbeing. Incipient data was presented to illustrate how children were re-energising fathers for work and helping them let go of negative health habits (smoking, consuming drugs, reckless driving). In turn, fathers adopted a future-oriented and emotionally-engaged perspective with the aim of spending more time with their children, which was essential in the transformation of their daily habits. In this process fathers of both cultures had to border emotionally to appease the tensions they experienced as they were balancing work with personal life and their masculinity with their good father’s role. Children could therefore play a key role in counteracting toxic masculinities, as they could help fathers shift from sustained emotional stoicism (which can be harmful to health due to consistent emotional repression), to increased nurturance and intimacy (which can increase the well-being of both family members through emotional attunement).

However, a father’s desire to be involved in childcare and his need to show and receive love from his family members, remains incomplete without state-supported measures that can foster more progressive gender regimes in the workplace and the legal right for paid parental leave. Men with children need social and governmental support to practice nurturing fathering, and this needs to be done in a serious manner,

rather than just by supplying men with a symbolic couple of weeks of paid paternal leave and in some cases only just some days of unpaid leave.

At present, the available provisions of paternity leave of 2 weeks in Scotland and 5–15 days in Romania, are insufficient towards fostering involved fathering (Koslowski et al. 2019). It is obvious that in the world's population not all men are fathers, and not all fathers are involved. And yet fatherhood emerges as a key stage in the life-course transition of men (Draper 2002). The literature has certainly evolved from portrayals of fatherhood as either “good” or “bad” (Furstenberg Jr 1988) to depictions of fathers as “struggling” with their “complex” and “problematic” role (Johansson and Klinth 2008). This is because becoming a father is considered to have the potential to contest hegemonic masculinity, as evidence suggests that this life-transition can emotionally and relationally transform men's identities. Some consider fatherhood to be especially important for men who are looking to embody more nurturing masculine roles, especially as ideals of “new” and “nurturant” fatherhood entail *both* providing and active, engaged parenting. For example, Andrea Doucet (2013) who investigated the important role of men's emotional responsibility for their children, showed that fathers enact masculinity in practices of both “holding on” and “letting go.”, which bring to mind the similar emotional process I identified in my own research, that of employing emotional bordering to shift flexibly between stoicism and intimacy.

Dissenting voices have argued that fatherhood continues to be peripheral in the construction of adulthood for men, since successful masculinity is not usually tied into the achievement of fatherhood (Connell 2002). It's important however, to underline that in some situations, men's dominant social role can be reinforced through fathering, as this new position adds to a man's social capital without interfering with other social privileges which are not so easily granted to women as mothers. It is therefore arguable whether becoming a father leads to more caring masculinities (Elliott 2015), as it could be just re-asserting masculine dominance in more subtle ways. To ascertain the extent of such practices, social-policy makers should base their decisions on research grounded on data depicting fathers' practical experiences of care and everyday involvement in their families' lives. Investigating men's subjective and emotional understandings of fathering and how they are fathering *in practice* remain equally important for future sociological analyses. And it needs to be underlined that children play an important, if often neglected role, in counteracting the toxic aspects of traditional forms of masculinity.

5.1 Future Research

Some argue that men's fixed emotional models, stem from a traditional understanding of masculinity which continues to block gender equality efforts, preserve a tense work-life imbalance, and affect men's long-term intimacy and personal relationships (Macht 2019c). Studies have shown that where there are marked gendered differences in parenting there are also increased tensions and dissatisfactions, while dual

sharing strategies and de-gendering parenting has the effect of lessening conflict and tensions between family members (Hochschild 2001; Ranson 2010). On a different note, it could be that researchers are struggling to resolve tensions between fathering and masculinity because they are recruiting participants for their studies from similar cultural backgrounds; so diversifying recruitment and opting for heterogeneity instead of homogeneity in sampling, might be a solution forward in fathering research.

What stands out in the current fatherhood research is the fact that knowledge-production overwhelmingly represents Anglo-American perspectives, limiting thereby the representation of other cultural groups (usually deemed “marginal”). This continues to be a curious development of knowledge, since evidence is pointing towards a panoply of cultural variations in fathering (Inhorn et al. 2014). Views “from the margin” of Western-focused research have the potential to challenge the prevailing values of individualism, stoicism, and autonomy, by shedding light on how different models of masculinity and fathering roles exist in relation to distinct values and emotional rules. More research is needed with non-white populations and also from outside the European perimeter, as well as comparing working class with middle-class, and elite masculinities, in the effort to represent neglected samples of working and involved fathers. Researching overlooked populations remains important since it is also part of the decolonizing process (Connell 2018). In this way researchers, who mainly stem from Anglo-Saxon, North-American, and Scandinavian cultures in the Global North can avoid over-generalizing from their specific populations and thereby reduce the application of policies and creation of research designs that are culturally insensitive to diverse families in other parts of the globe (such as marginalized populations from Eastern-Europe and the Balkans and from countries in the Global South).

5.2 Policy Suggestions

Lastly, there needs to be a consideration that both men and women are emotionally attached to their families. Seen from this perspective, analyses could focus more on how both parents are influenced by worry, motivation to engage in work (or lack thereof) and the spaces within which they work (as some are increasingly moving to nomadic or home-based forms of economic activity), and capacity to express love, not only to provide; the material and emotional levels should be considered in non-gendered ways. As future citizens of any country, children benefit from the emotional involvement, physical presence *and* material resources that their parents or parental figures provide. As such nation-states need to support flexible parenting practices and father's agency in moving beyond the unidimensional role of the breadwinner. Considering the data presented in this chapter and the subsequent reflections throughout this edited volume, it could be that the best manner to *elevate* contemporary fatherhood is to include, in pragmatic and policy-focused ways, the relational and emotional interactions between fathers and their children into

programmes that foster father-child wellbeing in family lives. These programmes could have educational and preventive goals, but they need to be aimed at the general population of working fathers and not solely designed for at-risk groups of fathers (Waller and Swisher 2006).

Some further suggestions for policymakers would be granting fathers the same amount of leave as mothers, or providing choices, such as a set of benefits and flexible times which parents can adapt to their individual circumstances. In establishing a work and life balance families must be supported by states; they simply cannot achieve this balance by themselves. Moreover, nation-states need to move away from a “one size fits all” approach in family policy-making by taking into account the diversity of family forms which exist in societies (from blended and mixed-race families, to surrogate, one-parent and adoptive families, to foster- and young-carers, to LGBTQ parenting, to name just a few). This would mean creating a set of family policies which refrain from gendering the role of the caregiver but describe its role, responsibilities and benefits according to skill-sets rather than biology; state-supported leave policies should let the parents decide whether they choose to gender their intimate relationships, as the leave provision should be focused on pragmatic aspects that take into account the type of occupation, time spent away and with the child, and emotional effects on each parent’s and child’s wellbeing that an assigned leave can have. As my research has shown, love is a form of activity which develops as the caregiver does things together with the child, and by getting to know the child. Therefore time and adequate resources are needed to support families as they balance their emotional, relational, mental, and material wellbeing.

Furthermore, fathers themselves need to be brave enough to care and love, and to be willing to take risks in the workplace to defend their fathering role. Perhaps the new measure for masculine ‘heroism’ can be to show how men persevere in tackling a social system that does not allow them the right to a well-paid paternity leave and limits their chances of becoming everyday “superdads” (Kaufman 2013). The time has come for feminist men to encourage and educate other men in their environment to take gender equal leaps of faith at work and in their private lives. Since feminist women’s work has achieved as much as it could (Deutsch 2007), it currently needs men supporting other men to complete the unfinished gender revolution. This is because, caring for future generations is a collective responsibility rather than a “female” one. In order to help societies thrive, governments must provide flexible and inclusive family policies that benefit as many people as possible, rather than merely a select few. To conclude, I leave social policymakers with the following pragmatic questions:

- How are children helping their fathers increase their health and wellbeing in everyday situations?
- What are the positive health consequences of involved fatherhood *both* for fathers and their children?
- How can father involvement be fostered to resolve men’s identity tensions in the shift from work to home and in the transition to fatherhood?

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