

Chapter 2

The Ethics of Care and the Radical Potential of Fathers ‘Home Alone on Leave’: Care as Practice, Relational Ontology, and Social Justice

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2.1 Introduction

It was several decades ago that feminist, fatherhood, and family scholars began to argue that father involvement has significant generative benefits for families, for children’s development (e.g., Lamb 1981), for men (e.g., Chodorow 1978; Parke 1996), for women (Pleck 1985; Okin 1989), and for the attainment of gender equality and wider social change. In relation to the latter, gender and feminist scholars speculated that father’s enhanced participation in childrearing could reverse the metaphoric relation between “rocking the cradle and ruling the world” (Dinnerstein 1977) and could potentially inhibit “a psychology of male dominance” (Chodorow 1978, p. 214). As Sara Ruddick put it, “the most revolutionary change we can make in the institution of motherhood is to include men in every aspect of childcare” (1983, p. 89). My focus in this chapter is on father involvement as part of a larger field of gender divisions of labour, with specific attention to changes and continuities in gendered parental responsibilities and how fathers taking home alone leave, as advanced in this collection, constitutes an innovative approach to the intransigence of shifting gendered parental responsibilities. This chapter focuses on the benefits of fathers taking parental leave time alone, while also pointing to some of the challenges, inside and outside the home, for fathers who engage in primary caregiving. I also attend to several conceptual and social issues that underpin this field of research.

This chapter is framed by an ethics of care perspective, which highlights: everyday care practices and ways of thinking and being that evolve out of these practices; care identities and processes as constituted by relational ontologies; and connections

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between care and social justice. An ethics of care perspective helps to illuminate what caregiving responsibilities *are*, why they remain gendered, and the on-going challenges both for families and for researchers who study these issues. I also take up one specific point mentioned in the Introduction to this book, which is that “involved fatherhood and gender egalitarianism may emerge as different dimensions and have to be conceptualized and analyzed separately” (O’Brien and Wall 2016, Chap. 1, this volume). I agree that these are not always synonymous, and, moreover, I argue that greater attention must be given to the conceptual fit, broadly speaking, between equality and care, and, more specifically, with specific reference to parental leave policies, the complexity of drawing causal links between the uptake of leave and its potential effects.

The chapter is organized into five sections. After briefly positioning myself as a fatherhood and feminist scholar, the first section provides a brief sketch of a large field of research on gender divisions of domestic labour, with its recurring finding of the resilience of gendered parental responsibilities. Second, drawing from ethics of care theorists Sara Ruddick and Joan Tronto, I define and explore parental responsibilities as a three-fold set of practices (emotional, community and ‘moral’). In the third section of the paper, using a select set of research findings, including my own work in Canada and the United States, I point to changes and continuities in the taking on of parental responsibilities; I also highlight how this book’s project, which promotes the importance of fathers having time at home alone with children is critical to the shifting of deeply rooted everyday processes of gendered responsibilities, especially around infant care. Fourth, I draw from two key insights from the ethics of care literature on care as practice and as a relational ontology. Finally, in the fifth section, I discuss how an ethics of care is also an ethic of social justice and I discuss the conceptual fit between care and equality.

2.2 Where I Am Writing From

I come to this chapter from a twenty-year history of writing about fathers as primary, or shared primary, caregivers. My journey with this topic began with a doctoral thesis on men and women trying to share housework and childcare in the early 1990s in the south-east of England; it was the stories told by one of the stay-at-home fathers in that study, Sean,¹ that led me into another fifteen years of researching fatherhood with varied foci on fathers who were primary caregivers for at least one year; fathers who took parental leave in two Canadian provinces; new fathers, particularly gay fathers and recent immigrant fathers; and two recently completed

¹“Sean”, a stay-at-home father I interviewed three times between 1992 and 1993, appeared in several of my first research articles, and his words appear in the title of one of my articles: “There’s a huge gap between me and other women” (Doucet 2000).

longitudinal research projects on breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers: a 5-year Canadian and American study and a 14-year Canadian study.²

While my research was initially concerned with *what* is occurring in these households and who-does-what-and-why, I have increasingly moved to consider *how* we study and make sense of the narratives that arise in these simultaneously intimate and political corners of social life. Informed by Bourdieu and Wacquant's concept of "epistemic reflexivity," which entails a "constant questioning of the categories and techniques of sociological analysis and of the relationship to the world they presuppose" (1992, p. 41), I have thus turned more and more of my focus towards scrutinizing the theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological underpinnings of this field, as well as the taken-for-granted concepts that guide research, constitute data, and produce findings. Some of these reflections on concepts of care, responsibilities, and equality underpin this chapter.

2.3 Gender Divisions of Domestic Labour and Gendered Parental Responsibilities

As indicated in this book's Introduction, the study of fatherhood has been approached through many disciplinary and conceptual lenses using a broad array of questions and methodological approaches. One large area of work on changing father involvement is a burgeoning cross-national and cross-disciplinary field of research of gender divisions of domestic labour, which focuses on assessing gendered changes in domestic time, tasks, and responsibilities. This field evolved slowly with key works emerging in the 1980s (e.g., Berk 1985; Pahl 1984) and, concurrent with feminist work, focused on how households renegotiated domestic labour in the context of male unemployment, redundancy, and rising rates of female employment (e.g. Brannen and Moss 1991; Morris 1990; Wheelock 1990). In the last twenty years, a large subfield of family and feminist sociologies has emerged (for excellent overviews, see Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Coltrane 2000, 2010; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010; Sullivan 2013).

The overwhelming consensus from many of these studies across many countries in the global North is that men's participation in housework and especially childcare have increased gradually, in terms of time and tasks. However, it remains the case that women take on most of the *responsibilities* for care and domestic life (Fox 2009; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Kan et al. 2011). That is, across time, ethnicities, social class, and culture, mothers overwhelmingly organize, plan, orchestrate, and worry about children. As Sarah Fernstermaker Berk (1985, p. 195) noted thirty years ago, there has been an "outstanding stability" in mothers' responsibility for children. Similarly, Arlie Hochschild recently confirmed, over twenty years after

²A sampling of my work includes Doucet 1995, 2006, 2009, 2015, 2016. My writing from my longitudinal research program on stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers is still in progress (for an overview, see Doucet 2015, 2016).

her initial comments on women's "second shift" of gendered responsibilities, that mothers "felt more responsible for the home" (Hochschild and Machung 2012, pp. 7–8); that is, they "kept track of doctors' appointments and arranged for children's playmates to come over," "worried about the tail on a child's Halloween costume or a birthday present for a school friend," and were "more likely to think about the children while at work and to check in by phone with the baby-sitter." Building on Hochschild's arguments about a "stalled revolution," Michael Bittman writes that "Although recently men have shown a willingness to spend more time with their children... change has been very slow and the proportion of men assuming equal responsibility is currently very small" (Bittman 2004, p. 200; see also Bianchi et al. 2006; Doucet 2006; Fox 2009).³

The fact that "equality" has been very slow to materialize, inevitably raises the question of how it is defined and, thus, measured. Indeed, a recurring challenge for researchers who study gender divisions of labour is the issue of how to effectively measure change and to define and assess issues of gender equality in domestic life. In this vein, there has been some critical attention paid to the importance of distinguishing between housework and childcare, both conceptually and methodologically (e.g., Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Perry-Jenkins et al. 2013; Sullivan 2013). However, there has been less attention given to determining what parental responsibilities *are* and how to measure them. Scott Coltrane has argued that one of the problems is that the field of gender divisions of labour is dominated by an approach that has added childcare and parental responsibilities to household labour without fully considering the conceptual implications of an "add and stir" approach. He writes:

In most studies, the concept of housework or household labour is rarely defined explicitly, except for explaining how variables are measured and providing some indication of whether childcare is included in its definition.... Although this concept can include child minding, household management, and various kinds of emotional labour, most household labour studies have excluded these less visible or overlapping types of 'work' from study ... The lack of attention to child care and emotional labour continued to be a major shortcoming of research on housework (Coltrane 2000, p. 1210; see also Perry-Jenkins et al. 2013; Sullivan 2013).

As Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine argued over three decades ago, although parental responsibility "is extremely important, it has been researched much less thoroughly" (1985, p. 884). I build on this recognition of the critical lack of attention to conceptual issues in measuring childcare and emotional labour (see also Budig and Folbre 2004; Leslie et al. 1991) and argue for a wider understanding of parental caregiving responsibilities. To do this, I begin with well-known work in fatherhood studies and then consider how these are widened by insights from ethics of care approaches.

³This does not mean that there has not been changes in father involvement and fathers' taking on of parental caregiving; indeed, the changes in many countries have been significant (for an overview in the United States, see Pleck 2010).

2.4 The Ethics of Care and Parental Responsibilities

One of the most comprehensive definitions of parental responsibilities comes from the work of fathering scholars Lamb et al. (1985) who defined it as a broad range of practices, including meeting children's needs through interaction (direct engagement), accessibility (physical and psychological presence and availability), and responsibility (indirect childrearing tasks, such as planning and scheduling). This conceptualization attends to how the first two practices (interaction and accessibility) also have dimensions of responsibility woven into them, in that they also require cognition and commitment (Palkovitz 1997); moreover, all three dimensions of responsibility are "complex phenomenon to operationalize" (Milkie and Denny 2014, p. 3; see also Leslie et al. 1991; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Palkovitz 2002). Pleck's recent work (2010) takes this definition even further by deepening the meaning and scope of the three practices originally envisioned thirty years ago and also adding two additional dimensions that tie in well with the arguments that I make below. In revisiting the original formulation, he emphasizes that this definition "refers to responsibility as both a *process* ('making sure the child is taken care of') and to *indirect care*, a type of activity ('arranging for resources to be available')" (Pleck 2010, p. 65); he also goes further to extend responsibility (as planning and scheduling) to include the "fostering of community connections" (2010, p. 67) and "process responsibility" which refers to ensuring that needs are met (2010, p. 67).

Ethics of care writer, Sara Ruddick also approaches parental responsibilities as a set of processes and *practices*⁴ (see also Morgan 2011). She argues that the practices of caring for a child involve "preservation, growth and social acceptability" (1990, p. 22); in my work, I have worked closely with her conceptions and have adapted and named her three-fold approach as emotional, community, and 'moral' responsibilities (see Doucet 2006, 2015). Another leading ethics of care scholar, Joan Tronto provides useful contributions to this discussion, particularly her long-standing and recent scholarship on "processes of care" as a series of interconnected practices that are "nested" together (2013, pp. 22–23). These interconnected phases include caring about someone's unmet needs, caring for these needs, caregiving or making sure the work is done, and care-receiving or assessing the effectiveness of these care acts (Tronto 2013, p. 22–23; see also Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 1993).

⁴ While Ruddick's work was framed around *maternal* responsibilities, it is important to read her in terms of her overall intention, which was to argue that these were responsibilities of primary caregivers. She wrote in a historical moment when it was mainly women who took on primary care. She argued that men could be primary caregivers but rather than allow for the possibility of fathers as primary caregivers, she argued that when men were taking on primary caregiving, they were mothering. In her words: "Briefly, a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I mean '*her or his*'" (Ruddick 1995, p. 40). She held firm to this philosophical position throughout her life; nevertheless, she did acknowledge to me that she understood the basis for my own overall argument, based on empirical qualitative research, which is that men who take on primary caregiving are not mothering (personal communication 2007; see also Doucet 2010).

While agreeing with Tronto's assessment, I also maintain that these care practices are entangled with social, emotional, community, relational, moral, temporal, embodied, and power dimensions (see Doucet 2015; Gabb 2011; Morgan 2011).

Weaving together Ruddick and Tronto, I thus conceptualize parental responsibilities as emotional, community, and 'moral' responsibilities. Emotional responsibilities in parenting are skills and practices of attentiveness and responsiveness; they include "knowledge about others' needs" and "attentiveness to the needs of others" (Tronto 1989, pp. 176–8; see also Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 1993), "parental consciousness," and steady processes of "thinking about" children (Walzer 1998, pp.15, 33). To conceptualize community responsibilities, one must recognize that parenting is not only domestically-based but also community-based, inter-household, and inter-institutional and involves a set of cognitive and organizational skills and practices for coordinating, balancing, negotiating, and orchestrating those others who are involved in children's lives (Collins 2000; Di Leonardo 1987; Hansen 2005; Marsiglio 2008). These parental responsibilities—emotional and community responsibilities—bring together all of Tronto's four caring phases, and especially the phases of caring about, caring for, and care-receiving. As Pleck argues, these point to responsibilities as processes.

The third type of parental responsibilities, 'moral' responsibilities, emerge partly from Sara Ruddick's argument that parental caregiving is a set of practices that is not only governed by children's needs and responding to those needs but by the "social groups" with associated "social values" within which parenting takes place (Ruddick 1995, p. 21). This concept of moral responsibilities is also rooted in a wide scholarly literature on gendered ideologies and gendered discourses of mothering and fathering and studies on parenting rooted in symbolic interactionism, which refers to people's identities as moral beings and how they feel they ought to and should act in society as parents and as workers (see Daly 1996, 2002; Finch and Mason 1993; McMahon 1995; Wall 2014). These moral responsibilities also encompass expectations and gendered norms about breadwinning and caregiving where "masculine norms create workplace pressures that make men reluctant or unable to contribute significantly to family life" and that women face "hydraulic social pressure to conform to societal expectations surrounding gender" (Williams 2010, p. 149; see also Bianchi et al. 2000). They are also entangled with emotional and community responsibilities, as women and men often feel that they should take on particular emotional and community responsibilities based on social, community, peer, and kin judgments, gendered "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977, 1990), and ideologies and discourses about mothering and fathering, breadwinning, and caregiving. This approach also has resonance with ecological approaches to studying families (see Allen et al. 2012; Bronfenbrenner 1986; Doherty et al. 1998; Perry-Jenkins et al. 2013), which highlight how the care of children unfolds in wide intra-connected networks that comprise individual family members, family relations, communities, institutions, and socio-economic cultures.

2.5 Fathering and Parental Responsibilities: Is Change Happening?

In recognizing and categorizing these responsibilities, it is also important to consider whether they have shifted across time between women and men, and how and why change has occurred or not. While all three responsibilities are, as Tronto (2013) argues, “nested” into one another, I will pull them apart for analytical purposes. With regard to *emotional responsibilities*, ample studies from diverse groups of fathers in a number of countries have found that men can and do take on this responsibility of attentiveness and responsiveness to children (e.g., Biblarz and Stacey 2010; Chesley 2011; Coltrane 1996; Doucet 2006; Doucet and Merla 2007; Goldberg 2012; Kaufman 2013; Marsiglio and Roy 2012; Rehel 2014; Wall 2014). Stay-at-home fathers and fathers on parental leave demonstrate how time at home alone with children is a critical pathway for shifting emotional responsibilities. As revealed in the chapters in this book, it is the hands-on practices of care that can lead to confident and competent caregivers.

North American research has pointed to how fathers' involvement in *community responsibilities* have also shifted over time, with men becoming more involved and accepted as primary caregivers in schools, community organizations, parenting programs, and the sites where adults and children cluster, and they have increasingly been accepted as the parent to take on responsibilities for connecting home, school, and community activities (Doucet 2006, 2013; see also Kaufman 2013; Marsiglio and Roy 2012; Ranson 2013).

In spite of these changes, I would argue that, even in stay-at-home-father families, women still take on much of the organizing, networking, and managing of children's activities and lives (Doucet 2006, 2015; see also Lareau 2011). Part of this slow movement of change in community responsibilities relates, in turn, to how, in many countries, the community landscapes of parenting, especially with infants and pre-school children, are still female-dominated, by mothers and female caregivers. Across the past decade, my research has pointed to continuing challenges for men, where they can feel like misfits in what one father called “estrogen-filled worlds” (Doucet 2006, 2013). In fact, with few exceptions, most of the stay-at-home fathers I have interviewed have narrated at least one uncomfortable experience in community settings with children, especially in parent–infant playgroups. One Canadian stay-at-home father, Bruno, told me in 2003, “It’s like a high school dance all over again: girls on one side, boys on the other.” Ten years later, Geoff, a laid-off factory worker and now stay-at-home father and part-time school bus driver, said, “I never felt like I belonged there... I totally felt out of place. I felt like I was intruding on their sort of little world, and that I wasn’t part of it.” In spite of these narrations of discomfort, it is also important to add that the “dad-in-the-playgroup” narrative has shifted over the past decade. In some North American communities, more and more fathers in urban settings are joining these groups, either as members of female-dominated groups or as participants in fathering groups (Solomon 2014; Doucet 2013). Fathers in community spaces help to shift assumptions, and this is

another reason why fathers home alone on leave represent critical interventions into the material-discursive widening of community parenting spaces. This also begins to slowly shift gendered moral dimensions of parenting so that men are seen less as intruders and more as part of the relational landscapes of parenting.

From my longitudinal research on stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers, I maintain that one of the slowest gender changes in parental responsibilities has been in the *moral responsibilities* of parenting, which remain tied to the “shoulds” and “oughts” of what it means to be a good mother or a good father as set against a persistent shadow of hegemonic ideals of the male breadwinner and female caregiver family (Townsend 2002). Social class matters in this articulation (Williams 2010); being a male primary caregiver without having achieved success as a breadwinner can conflict with what many communities consider a socially acceptable male identity (Doucet 2006, 2009).

Moral responsibilities are especially marked with infants where there are strong assumptions that the care of infants is women’s work. This is partly related to how parental leave policies, outside of the Scandinavian countries, have only slowly come to recognize fathers’ roles in the care of very young children. These conceptions are, in turn, rooted in the many social, relational, institutional, embodied, ideological and discursive forces that coalesce to lead women (in heterosexual couple households) to start off as the primary parent and therefore the assumed expert in infant care (Doherty et al. 1998; Fox 2009). Mother presence and assumptions of expertise then shadow negotiations between parents and workplaces around parental leave time for infants (Bygren and Duvander 2006; McKay and Doucet 2010). One example from my longitudinal research in Canada is from a stay-at-home father, Peter, a part-time home-based web designer who has been at home for over a decade while his wife works as a high school teacher. From our four interviews across 10 years, he told me how when his two sons were infants, he felt constantly judged by onlookers.

When he was a tiny baby, there was always that sense that I was babysitting rather than taking care of my child like I do every day—where I had to understand his wants and needs because he can’t speak. That’s where I felt it was very different from women. There was a bit of an assumption that I felt like I was just tiding things over until the *real mother* showed up, or the person who really knew what they were doing would show up.

Nine years later, Peter gave a frank assessment of the social acceptability of fathers as carers: “Even in a society where people believe that men and women are equal and can do just about everything, they don’t really believe that men can do this with a baby, especially a really tiny baby.”

Gender differences do continue to occur in parental caregiving responsibilities, especially in relation to the care of infants and young children. These differences are created and recreated through interactive relations with persistently gendered social institutions, ideologies and discourses (Folbre 1994; Fox 2009; Williams 2010). Fathers taking time alone with infants, however, can begin to engender change and to lay a foundation for an on going dismantling of gendered responsibilities. As Almqvist and Duvander recently argued, father involvement with infants and young

children “matters for fathers’ care later in their children’s lives” (2014, p. 24). This is yet another reason why this book on fathers’ caregiving is critically important for shifting community norms around men and parenting, as well as the still gendered moral responsibilities of parenting. As Karin Wall writes (2014, p. 8), when fathers have time at home alone, they not only discover a new found confidence and set of skills, but “this type of leave seems to challenge, in varying degrees, the notion of parental care mediation as a female prerogative.” As Kathleen Gerson notes, “dissolv[ing] the link between gender and moral responsibility” could lead to a “social order in which women and men alike are afforded the opportunity to integrate the essential life tasks of achieving autonomy and caring for others” (2002, p. 25, 26; see also Gerson 2010).

2.6 Lessons from the Ethics of Care: Care as Practice and Ontology

Drawing on the philosophical work of Habermas (1971) and Wittgenstein (1953), Ruddick’s ethics of care approach argues that primary caregiving of children is neither an identity nor a set of tasks; it is “work and practice.” This work encompasses both a rational and an emotional set of practices (see also Duffy 2011). As a set of practices, it leads to new ways of thinking and being; that is, “all thinking, arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage” (Ruddick 1995, p. 9). She also argues that primary caregiving leads to ways of thinking and being that prioritize “concrete” (p. 93), and “contextual, [and] flexible” (p. 89) ways of thinking and being; it is a “deeply rewarding, life-structuring activity that tends to create ... distinctive capacities for responsibility, attentive care, and non-violence.” These observations are of particular importance to this book, where it is confirmed that being at home alone with children can lead to profound changes for men. This is an argument that I have also made in my work on stay-at-home fathers and single fathers: when men have time at home alone, without relying on women to take on primary responsibility, they come to know through everyday trials and tribulations of their caring practices, the depth of what it means to be fully responsible for a child. As I wrote about a decade ago:

It is this responsibility for others that profoundly changes them as men. That is, having the opportunity to care engenders changes in men, which can be seen as ‘moral’ transformations. Three such changes can be mentioned. First fathers notice generative and personal changes in themselves as men. Second, many come to recognize the value and the skill involved in caring work. Third, men begin to question what social commentators have referred to as ‘male stream’ concepts of work, and to adopt perspectives traditionally espoused by women on the need for work–family balance (Doucet 2006, p. 208).

An ethics of care approach also underlines how care is governed by and enacted through a *relational ontology*. That is, the ethics of care “has a different starting point” where “individuals are conceived as being *in relationships*” (Tronto 2013, p. 41). As Tronto argues, this conception is informed by a “different ontology and

epistemology.” To view care as part of the “relational revolution, is to move it further away from standard theories of justice which starts from the premise of competing separate parties” (Tronto 2013, p. 183). As Fiona Robinson argues (2011, p. 12), “the relational ontology of care ethics claims that relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence.”

This is a critical point that brings to light how fathers home alone on leave signifies a critical metaphoric and policy perspective. Yet, it is also important to underline the relationality that underpins these ‘at home alone’ experiences. The decisions for fathers to take parental leave are negotiated relationally with their partners and workplace bosses and peers within a larger relational network that can include other parents, peers, and kin. Fathers are not alone in their daily practices, which are enacted through inter-actions with others, or even more strongly put, through *intra-actions* where their own subjectivities are being shaped by and are shaping other inter-dependent others (see Doucet 2013; Lynch 2007; Lupton 2012). In short, an ethics of care perspective recognizes the importance of fathers caring on their own, while also highlighting the conceptual limitations of pairing ‘alone’ and ‘care’.

2.7 Care, Equality, and an Ethic of Social Justice

In addition to Tronto’s four stages of care processes mentioned earlier in this chapter (caring about; caring for; caregiving; and care-receiving) she further argues that we need to think about larger democratic processes of care. She writes: “In order to think about democratic care ... it now seems to me that there is a fifth stage of care” (Tronto 2013, p. 23). She titles this fifth stage as “caring with” and defines it as “a final phase of care” that “requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all” (p. 23). For Tronto, all five stages of care practices are “nested within one another” and the “goal of such practices is to ensure that all of the members of the society can live as well as possible by making the society of democratic as possible. This is the essence of ‘caring with.’” (Tronto 2013, p. 40). Tronto also assists us with thinking through complexities in the meanings and enactments of the concept of care. She argues that “care, like any concept, can be situated in a number of theories, and depending upon the theory within which it is placed, it will have different meanings. The normative adequacy of care does not arise from its conceptual clarity, but from the larger political and social theory within which it is placed” (p. 36).

The issues that I want to raise in this final section of the paper relate to the conceptual fit between care and equality and the varied ways that this conceptual combination might be approached and with what effects. Here I will make four points. First, drawing from Tronto, her version of democratic caring “presumes that we are equal as democratic citizens in being *care receivers*” (Tronto 2013, p. 40). In the context of this particular book, this would mean considering parental leave policies and their possible generative effects for fathers and for families, but also considering

social justice issues that highlight the interplay between parental leave policies and class inequalities between families. With specific reference to fathers and parental leave, an ethics of care approach draws our attention to class and racial inequalities tied up with parental leave provision and eligibilities. As Mignon Duffy argues, while a focus on care as a set of nurturant practices “illuminates many important pieces of the care–inequalities puzzle, it obscures others. In particular an approach to care work that focuses exclusively on relationality does not provide a clear picture of critical racial–ethnic and class hierarchies” (Duffy 2011, p. 10). Moreover, a focus away from intra-household gender equalities towards class and racial inequalities also leads to a focus on how these inequalities affect the cared-for, in this case infants and young children. As Margaret O’Brien has argued so well, “Tensions associated with differential access to statutory leave raise the possibility of a new global polarization for infants: the risk of being born into either a *parental-leave-rich* or a *parental-leave-poor household and indeed country* (O’Brien 2009, p. 190, emphasis added).

Differential access to parental leave is evident in Canada, for example, where a full quarter to a third of mothers, and an unknown number of fathers, have been consistently ineligible for parental leave benefits.⁵ The divide between a majority of parents who receive benefits and sizable minority that do not receive them is consistent since data collection began in 1997 (Marshall 2003). Thus, in Canada a loosening of parental leave provision from its current ties to full-time standard employment, a widening of eligibility to parental leave, and greater access to “employer top ups” to current levels of leave replacement (70–75% in Quebec and 55% in the rest of Canada), are several ways of facilitating these “democratic processes of care” and greater equality in caregiving conditions of possibility.⁶

A second point about care and equality also builds from Tronto’s work but is well addressed through the work of feminist legal scholar Martha Fineman (2008, 2009) and her argument for a shift from the concept of equality towards that of “vulnerability.” Fineman moves away from formal equality, which is often defined as “sameness of treatment,” as well as away from her earlier position (Fineman 2004) which argued for “some notion of substantive or result equality” that considers “equality of outcome” (Fineman 2009, p. 122). Like Tronto, Fineman recognizes that the concept of equality has diverse meanings depending on the context within which it is used. With specific reference to state and family policies and approaches to care, she argues that “vulnerability analysis concentrates on the structures our society has and will establish to manage our common vulnerabilities” (Fineman 2008, p. 1). Working implicitly with a relational ontology on the interdependence of the human

⁵ Statistics Canada does not collect data on the eligibility of fathers for parental or paternity leave other than posing this question to mothers.

⁶ As argued by Katherine Marshall (2010), only about one in five mothers across the country received a top-up for an average duration of 16–19 weeks. Statistics Canada does not collect top-up data for fathers (See Doucet and McKay 2016, McKay et al. 2016, for a fuller analysis of class inequalities in parental leave provision in Canada).

condition and the “profound insights that come from confronting dependency and vulnerability on a day-to-day basis,” (Fineman 2009, p. 107) she argues that,

Our equality is weak, its promise largely illusory because it fails to take into account the existing inequalities of circumstances created both by inevitable and universal vulnerability inherent in the human condition and the societal institutions that have grown up around them, most notably the family and the state (Fineman 2009, p. 113).

Fineman reminds us about the effects of inequalities in access to and eligibilities for parental leave benefits; this includes countries like Canada where benefits are tied to full-time standard employment. As she argues, “those who care... through essential caretaking work are themselves dependent on resources in order to undertake that care. Those resources must be supplied by society through its institutions” (Fineman 2009, p. 110) and must be approached through a lens that prioritizes “our collective destiny of vulnerability and dependency” (Fineman 2009, p. 116).

My third point about equality is one that draws together relational ontologies and concepts of equality. The conceptualization of parental responsibilities put forward in this chapter as constituted relationally, intra-actively, temporally, and contextually raises epistemological and methodological questions about how to begin to determine what equality would look like in practice. Here it is important to consider the historicity and cultural specificity of the concept of equality. As Fineman (2008, p. 2) argues, “the concept of ‘equality’ in Western thought has been associated with John Locke’s philosophy of liberal individualism (and the creation of the liberal subject).” These underpinnings of liberal subjects and a focus on individual rights have several shortcomings in relation to care practices. For Fineman, this “version of equality” is “weak in its ability to address and correct the disparities in economic and social well-being among various groups in our society. Formal equality leaves undisturbed—and may even serve to validate—existing institutional arrangements that privilege some and disadvantage others” (Fineman 2008, p. 2). A related issue is one that ethics of care and feminist scholars have highlighted for three decades, which is how liberal notions of equality cannot adequately address interdependency and the multiple relational matrices that constitute daily practices (e.g. Fineman 2004, 2008, 2009; Gilligan 1982; Held 1995; Kittay 1999; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Tronto 1993, 2013; Williams 2010).

A final point about equality and parental leave is the need to consider the ontological compatibility between care and equality as well the methodological and epistemological dilemmas that arise from attempting to measure a relational object of investigation. In other words, how do we, as researchers, define and assess equality in relation to parental responsibilities? In the case of parental leave, does equality mean that men and women take the same amount of parental leave time? Or does it mean that the outcomes of this time will be the same? If the latter, how will these outcomes be measured, and from *whose* accounts? That is, if care is relationally constituted, and if it is an object of investigation that is constantly in a process of flow and change, is it possible that “equality” might not be the most apt concept?

My own approach, informed by the assumption that it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure parental responsibilities, has been to argue for a shift from

measuring gender equality in parental caregiving responsibilities towards making sense of gender differences in these responsibilities (Doucet 2013, 2015). Shifting from equality to differences would mean, as Barrie Thorne (1993) has argued, looking at “how, when, and why does gender make a difference—or not make a difference” and “when gender does make a difference, what sort of difference is it?” (p. 36). As Deborah Rhode (1989) asked many years ago, in her reflections on gender, law, and the interplay of gender differences and gender equality in specific contexts, it is important to ask, “What difference does difference make?” (p. 313). In the case of parental leave, this would link back to the points made by Tronto above; this would imply a shift from attempting to measure gendered parental responsibilities to studying wider processes of inequalities, including politically urgent questions, such as how “affective inequalities” unfold in a “nested set of power, class, gender and global race relations” (Lynch 2007, p. 564).

2.8 Conclusions

This chapter – informed by an ethics of care theoretical and ontological approach as well as research on gender divisions of domestic labour and a 14-year longitudinal qualitative research program on breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers – confirms the radical potential of this overall book project and its case study chapters. I also highlighted how an ethics of care perspective, especially the work of Sara Ruddick and Joan Tronto, widens and deepens a research focus on ‘fathers home alone on leave’ and, more broadly fathers’ caregiving. It does this by attending to parental responsibilities as a set of unfolding practices, ways of thinking and being that emerge from these practices, the relational ontologies that underpin an ethics of care approach, as well as the importance of connecting an ethics of care with ethics of social justice. I also outlined a series of reflections on the conceptual limitations that recur when attempting to link parental care and intra-household gender equality while also pointing to the critical importance of attending to class inequalities in caregiving provision and practices between households and families. Finally, there is a need for greater attention to the conceptual fit between concepts of equality and caregiving. The concept of equality brings with it questions of ‘equal to whom?’ and ‘equal in what?’ Applied to parental leave provision and fathers’ time alone at home, this means reflecting on the complexities of causalities between parental time in the home and longer-term processes of gender equality in paid work and care work.

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