

"Fatherinities" – exploring constructions of masculine child care – problems, reflections and challenges of postmodern fatherhood¹

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Short Introduction – Presentation of context

What sort of masculinity emerges in the frontiers between being that of a modern man and a caring father on the one side, and the more traditional hegemonically masculine oriented father on the other? – How is this expressed or problematized - how is it constructed?

How do fathers, in late modernity, reconceptualize and reconstruct their role as a father - their own styles of masculinities combined with the task of being fathers.

The following is based on a project gathering data from meetings with fathers of children in kindergardens / preschool institutions in Oslo. These were the background questions for this project.

¹ The project is linked to a research project on "Gender, Complexity and Diversity in Pedagogical Institutions for Children Aged 0 - 10", presently going on at The University College of Oslo. Leader of the project is

Among the purposes was to produce and delimit a discourse in which the fathers of children in kindergardens talk. -About being fathers. The aim is to give fathers a unique opportunity to talk about their experiences as everyday life childcare workers. Establishing more or less permanent arenas for meetings between fathers was a more distant, but as it turned out to be, was also a desired thing. Through this talk I hoped to initiate processes and practices of self reflection – the very construction and reconstructions of their own identities and roles as fathers. What was gained was, among other things, a level of reflection to the level of actual theorizing, on their own every day life experiences. The theme was pretty vast, concerning various aspects of fathering. When basically informants start to theorize I think there is something interesting happening methodologically, and epistemologically. I will shortly get back to this.

Living in western welfare societies, specifically in the Scandinavian ones, one of the great structural changes is the one connected to changes in gender roles or gender relations towards the more or less exaggerated attainment of the goal of gender equation. Indeed, one of the key elements of the welfare state in Norway, is exactly a policy of equation of sexes. An important landmark is the political establishment of the “paternity” leave (*“pappapermisjon”*). This system was launched in 1993, as an initiative toward the fathers of late modernity to take their share of the responsibility of the child care work, as another means of gaining the goal of equation. It meant that the father not only got four weeks of the parental leave. It was also launched as a condition for the parents to any parental leave at all.

Jeanette Rhedding Jones. The project is financed by the Norwegian Research council (*Norges Forskningsråd*). This part of the project went on during the autumn of 2002.

So it was a way for the government not only to recommend, but also to force fathers home to take their share of the parents obligations.

Soon it became focused on how this historically “new” father came to shape his role and style of fathering.

I guess we’re localized historically in what Australian sociologist Bob Connell has described as “the age of diversity”, being the last stage in the history of ideas of gender:

Science, suffrage and Empire (1860-1920)

Psychoanalysis and Empire (1920-1965)

The movement of women’s reaction (1965-1980)

The age of diversity (1980-2000) (Connell, 2002: 116)

“Diversity” is exactly the case here. It opens up for possibilities, multiplicities, showing the complexity of the social and cultural world in general, and of course more specifically when it comes both to gender, as well as parenthood and fatherhood.

"Why Multiple Fatherinities"? The point of diversity

The phrase “fatherinities” is the result of a poor attempt to construct a concept that neither was found in the English, or the Norwegian vocabulary, for this context.

A short explanation is required.

The phrase is inspired by Connell and his key points. Instead of applying "masculinity", he used the plural form of "masculinities" as the title on his famous book on male gender roles. This is also emphasized in his later work *The Men and the Boys*, where he claims (quote)

"It is clear from the new social research as a whole that there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. We need to speak of 'masculinities' not 'masculinity'. Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct masculinity differently." (Connell, 2000:10)

So diversity, Connell continues, "also exists within a (specific) given setting." (Connell, 2000: 10) And diversity is the result of processes of social construction that also, of course, are local. (Connell, 2000)

In his recent book *Gender (2002)*, Connell continues emphasizing the diversity point by opposing it to and abandoning the old fashioned "socialization model" of gender.

One of the reasons put forward to this is that "there is not just one sex role for boys and one other for girls. There are multiple patterns of masculinity and femininity in contemporary societies." (Connell, 2002: 77)

What Connell says about masculinity goes of course just as well for fatherhood. A constructionist view towards fatherhood is demonstrated in much recent work on the topic (See for instance (Dowd, 2000), (Hagström, 1999) (Bergsten, 1996), (Björnberg, 1996) (Oftung, 1994))

Methodnote, or sociocultural background?

I started out by sending invitations to "Daddy-meetings", with the aim of initiating "daddy-talks" to three kindergardens that were singled out in advance. I wanted in the first place to choose kindergardens with up to date, socially oriented profiles, being active in working with parent groups and so forth.

The function of talks in groups is also that the participants themselves may comment each other's talks, and thus construct and reflect both pictures of themselves and of the others as fathers.

On the invitations I had formulated an open list of questions, that both functioned as an agenda for the meetings and as my "questionnaire", trying to operationalize the issues of the project.

- Experiences in daily life connected to being a father
- The ideal daddy - who is he?
- What are men good at when it comes to childcare?
- What do we need to be better at?
- Points of view towards childhood and child rearing - do men see this different from women - how?
- Is this OK or difficult?
- Can fathers as childcare-persons learn something from the mothers?
- Can mothers learn something from the fathers?
- What does it mean that men (also) are role models for the children?
- Which role do you think fathers play in children's lives?

- Sexual division of labor between mother and father
- Is dad let through?
- Other issues

These were to structure the conversations performed in the daddymeetings, three in all.

Before starting the conversations, I gave a 10 minute monologue on the sociological-historical context, which is the background of the very project. At one of the meetings, I also used a photo, symbolizing social change through the concept of generation: We're in a subway exit, in the staircase, where a young and obviously dynamic father struggles to push his little child in a wagon upwards on the stairs. An old man looks with wonder; another guy, aged in between the two former, looks with compassion (medlidenhet) in the direction of the young struggling father.

Two functions were connected to this:

1. Contextualizing the project: it has an explanatory function to the participants;
2. Structuring the conversations. It supports the focusing on the very subject of the conversations and thereby the attaining of goals of the project: the participants focus on their own fatherroles and fathering in the late modernity.

My questions alone couldn't do that. And really, it wasn't the interview I wanted to structure, it was the discourse: I wanted them to be the very subjects of discourses or talks about this specific issue. In order to be able to do that, I first needed for them to "get on the right track", so to speak.

The 10 minute monologue was based on the following illustration, presented orally, which I made reading Danish social psychologist Dion Sommer on the topic:

“Traditional” vs. “Modern” Father (dichotomy of ideal types of aspects of fathering, based on Hyvönen, 1993 and Sommer, 1999)

Disciplining - Psychological

Inviolable authority - Democratic, equality, negotiating

Distant - Close

Respect and discipline - Care and compassion

Formal – Informal

The monologue consisted of a compact, popularized version of the picture that much of the literature on late modern fatherhood gives, when summing up the changes, potentialities or challenges concerning the role of the father in many western welfare states during the last 30 years.

Such literature for instance produces a shift that Sommer mentions in his study of father's relations to their small children. This shift, or more precisely, this contrast is constituted between two main styles or types of fatherhood: A "traditional father", opposed to what he together with Hyrvönen has termed the "modern father" (Sommer, 1999). The "traditional father" here represents a figure of "inviolable (and hegemonic) authority" (*ukrenkelig autoritet*) and a distant "breadwinner". It is the father for instance described by Richard Sennett in *Authority* (Sennett, 1981), typically demanding respect, often along with a demand for fear, successively achieved through the disciplining use and threatening of violence.

The "modern father" is, on the other hand, a figure oriented towards equality and negotiations, both with his wife or spouse, or as a means of childraising to democratic western welfare states. He is interested, and stands out as a close and (historically new) "psychological father".

(Hyvönen, 1993) (Sommer, 1999) But he is also a far more complex figure, being the very incarnation of the modern project of change, like that described by Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self Identity*. (Giddens, 1991)

One of the themes of the conversations were exactly this: how are the structures of social change concerning parenting, and especially the changing role-system of the late modern father experienced, and problematized among the fathers themselves?

It is important here to regard the traditional and the modern fatherhood's as *ideal types*, in the weberian sense: the two are not historically represented in an empiric way, as clean types. Socio-cultural-historico complexity demonstrates the need to make a weberian avoidance of such stereotyped and simplified versions.

As one of the fathers in the project put it, after my theoretical presentation of the traditional versus the modern fatherroles:

"...I represent two roles. (...) I've experienced two different ways of being a father. To day I think I change more diapers than my wife. (...), I think I make more meals than she does, so the whole structure is turned totally up side down for me."

The Weberian avoidance of stereotyping through the use of the idealtypes is not just relevant on macrolevels such as western society and western culture. They also become individually

embodied projects of reflections of identity. And these are of course related to macrostructural changes. But here is an example of a father telling the story of his own historical changes, and how they relate to social change.

Concerning the traditional father, there are many serious experiences of absence or psychological damage and other negative experiences recorded among men: an "(e)xperience of emptiness, loss, and longing", as Norwegian masculinity researcher Lorentzen puts it (Lorentzen, 1998: p 55).

The experience is pretty much summed up by one of the fathers in my project, who bluntly puts it this way:

(...) My father just wasn't there. (N., 2002)

- Or as Adam, one of Connell's case figures, bluntly put it, when he talked about the relation to his father in his suburban, conventional nuclear family-childhood:

"I used to love him coming home, and love him going to work." (Connell, 2000: p. 90)

Similar experiences of absence were recorded in a Norwegian study by Gullvaag Holter and Aarseth performed in the beginning of the 1990ies. (Holter & Aarseth, 1993)

Focusing on gender through a masculine perspective is still historically new, and a growing business, and is therefore necessary, something that is shown through the existence of research centers like "The Network for Research on Men" (*Nettverk for mannsforskning*) in Oslo. And masculinity research directly in correlation with

childcare institutions is even newer. It is important, and it's also historically "about time"! Nevertheless - there has been some recent work done: For instance Tobin (2000) and Silin; and in Norway - Rhedding-Jones (2001), Askland (1998; Askland, 2001) and Dingstad (2001).

Epistemologically breaking the academic code

Do we need references to say that fathers are competent as child carers?

We go...

"Fathers are generally competent as child care persons." (Sommer, 1999 s. 219).

Or we write...

"There is no proof documenting that women are biologically better prepared to be more effective as child care persons than men." (Berk 1997 i Sommer, 1999 s. 219)

And then we call it theory, or we refer to it as theory. Now, the following sentence was formulated by one of my respondents:

"Basically, you've got the same requirement (forutsetning) as a woman, except you can't breastfeed! (...) There are a lot who uses the pump (melkepumpe), so you've got a chance there as well." (S.)

Usually, referring to such a statement when it comes from a person having been interviewed or having been subject to some sort of research project, is not understood as referring to theory, but to the concept "using data", or "citing from the empirical data". Why is that? Or, does it have to be like that? They are all statements, they all, to some extent produce meaning. When what has been said is turned into text the point becomes even clearer: They are both statements that should be treated on the same level.

What *anybody* says can come out in different enunciating modalities. It may be in the form of reflecting or theorizing in one end, as well as a mere banality in the other. And one of my main methodological, or epistemological key points in this study, is as the citations show above: The best theory does *not* have to be a piece of written between bookcovers, even by prominent professors or researchers. It *may* be, but it certainly doesn't *have* to be. A grave example is the following:

"Babies are hard work, psychologist Morss (1995) points out".

Does one have to refer to psychologist theoreticians to say that babies are hard work?

Epistemologically this perspective seems to follow the guidelines firstly of sociologist Harold Garfinkel who in his famous *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) sought "to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, (...) (sought) to learn about them as phenomena in their own right." (Garfinkel, 1967: p1). Secondly, it is in line with the notion of "dealing with informal groups of discourses", and of the unlimitedness of the field of discourse analysis in Michel

Foucault, as he described it in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1986) and also performed elsewhere in his “empirical” or “analytical” works.

These theoreticians epistemologically broke the academical code and are therefore good examples of boardercrossers.

In the following I will present some examples from the project, showing good, reflected analytical boardercrossing comments on the roles of late modern fatherhood.

Examples of theorizing / reflecting of fathers on certain themes – the competent, reflecting fathers

Post modern fatherrole - a fatherrole in change: Complexities, diversities

First, one of Tom´s reflections on changes surrounding the fatherrole historically:

”...of course it’s fun being a father. All fathers must agree to that! I would presume that (...) fathers 30 or 50 years ago would think it was fun being a father. They probably had more of the ’(lying on the) couch and mother cooks – life’.” Tom, 2002.

Let us next listen to a conversation that took place between Tom and Sean about perceptions on differences between men and women. *Multitasking*, or being able to do many things at once, came up as a theme. Tom starts out:

- I can manage to fry meatballs, cook potatoes, and make sauce and everything without any of it getting burnt. But eh... I can also change diapers and brush my teeth just about simultaneously, so that works just fine. That’s not the big... (but) when we guys manage to

sit in a chair and follow nine different TV-shows at once, then we can manage to do (different) things in the kitchen or other stuff if we try. I think it's just a question of trying.”

Sean: -I agree, but I'm no good at cooking, to be honest.

Tom: -Yeah, but if you have to...

Sean: -Tight schedules every day soon makes you fall out, if you cant do many things at once.

At this point Sean's view as we can see, is about to change, probably through Tom making him look at things, and making him look at things in different ways: these are reflections or theorizings on what is possible and what is not. This is an interesting point because Sean seems to demonstrate a process of reflection.

Another point is that Sean's strategy is to use the conventional male argument of having too little time. He turns the traditionally female perceived phenomenon of multitasking into a male thing through the rationalization of an economics of time. Entering a part of the female world – the world of planning things at home, of having to cope with many things at once, is something these fathers now experience or theorize as something they also might have to face. Doing this demands a bit of rationalizing for many men. It must so to speak be turned into a part of their masculinity, from traditionally perceived as an important part of femininity. It must be processed through a male rationalization, so to speak.

The discussion ends up with the underpinning of the idea that men are capable of change, and that anything is possible when it comes to what men can do and what they cannot.

Many variants showed up concerning the point of "multicapacity" or "multitasking". The conventional type seemed to show up as well. The one who goes: Don't disturb me! Can't you see I'm cooking! But interesting enough, the same guy would be a sales company manager, holding two important telephone lines at the same time, talking to a colleague standing in the door about an important work issue, while having a meeting with a guy who's sitting down in front of him!

So, it's multicapacity at work, mono-capacity at home!

So talking about views on differences between men and women when it comes to childcare the diversities soon show up.

Postmodern fatherhood A question of construction

How do the fathers experience the complex tasks of constructing a role that pretty much isn't there?

Tim puts it beautifully this way: - Then you've gotta like enter the fatherrole without maybe having that clear father-picture / image. So it's been pretty tough to work with. How is one then supposed to practice as a father today, as opposed to the time when you were young? And it's a pretty tough job to do actually. Because you gotta read a little and feel a little in your heart and think a little with your head, and actually it becomes a big challenge. And you have to put it together and pick the right stuff and get rid of the wrong stuff and... it has, I think, been a tough challenge. (S.E, father of a 5 year old, before starting one of the interviews)

Orson: - Yeah, I see what you mean. (Ja, jeg kjenner meg litt igjen.) (...) I was very conscious about my role as a father – long before I got children. (...) I was very conscious about (...) not being the father that my father was.

Swedish ethnologist Charlotte Hagström, puts it this way in her doctoral thesis:

"A great deal has changed since the days when they themselves were born, and their fathers experiences can't be taken for granted as reform points" (Hagström, 1999): 259

She doctorated among other things on showing that a father is not something one is but something one becomes". Both the "theoreticians" and the informants theorize and reflect upon social constructions of fatherhood.

Another Example of Theorizing social change

Tom is thinking back to when he was a kid, comparing his own and his son's childhoods:

"He's just as horrible as a 10 year old as I was as a 13 year old. Today's youngsters (...) skip the period we had, running around playing cowboys and indians, they skip that whole... they leave those years out... they move right on from the the three wheel bike or bike with support-wheel, to hanging around in the back yard of the school. - It was lost somewhere around there. -Why? That I don't know. We were children much longer. We weren't supposed to be so big and grown up all at once (med en gang)" (Tom, 2002)

Here Tom theorizes social change through the use of comparison of generations, much in the same way as that of Karl Mannheim, and others after him, analyzing the process of

socialization in relation to generation differences. He also expresses the link between macro level change and changes at micro levels, in ways not unlike that of Philippe Aries. Given the low level and technically specialized education this father has undertaken, to a sociologist, this level of theorization is quite impressive. He sees how the role of children and childhood changes along side the declining of the housewife based nuclear family. The total picture of childhood, changes, and, thus, the very figure of the child becomes a socio-cultural construction as Aries so thoroughly has shown us in *Centuries of childhood*. (Ariès, 1982)

It is also a good methodological example, as much of the daddy-discourse demonstrated – showing the methodologically complex relations of theorizing and interview, dialogue, conversation. If an interview is a sort of dialogue, then this seems to be the constructionist way of blurring the positivist strictly drawn borders between theory and empirical data. Already Habermas (Habermas, 1984) made this possible in his *Theory of communicative action*, by placing reason and thus theorizing in the conversation between people, as dialogic, communicative project.

Summary

These daddymeetings have taught me a lot. The point of showing diverse fatherhoods, and the complexity of the role of the postmodern father was thoroughly demonstrated through the talks. They also taught me to rethink epistemologically as well as methodologically the need to reconceptualize the conventional classifications and dividings of academic research. This rethinking could be summed up as follows:

1. Disturbing of the rigid borders like those between theory and practice, - or empirical data; those between as David Howarth has put it, “theory and its objects of research”

2. The need for an informalization of the academic code and the need of the avoidance of an academical fear of authority, the unlimitedness and regarding of discourse as groups of general, informal phenomena.

3. Antiobjectivism, but still treating discourse and discursive events, as Foucault puts it, as “material in its raw, neutral state” - something that made Foucault call himself “a happy positivist”; seeking to learn about discourse or every day activities as “phenomena in their own right”: This means avoiding critique or correction. The goal is to let the research objects come forward as subjects or initiators of discourse, not to change their habits or attitudes, nor make them deliver objective data in order to supply the researcher with more “knowledge”.

Garfinkel demonstrated as early as the sixties methodologically to pay attention to processes rather than statics, giving priority to the epistemological forces of subjectivity and processes of construction rather than objectivism and taking things for granted. And the point of not taking things for granted – not even truth - is of course an important principle underlying all of the work of Foucault. Examining, as it was, “the historicity of discourse”, how discursive objects are produced through speech.

4. Consequences of viewing the world dynamically, changing, through individual constructing and reconstructing, are complexities and diversities, the very name of the network of which my work was a part, as for instance Bob Connell has shown, and as my work has shown me, talking to fathers of children in kindergardens.

The need to make for where fathers can meet and talk about every day life as a father was obvious, and also explicitly mentioned by the fathers. And it seems to become increasingly important, as the daddies of modern societies enter the arena of childcare work.

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