

It's just not good for a man to be interested in other people's children':  
Fathers, public displays of care, and 'relevant others'

In **DISPLAYING FAMILIES:**

**A NEW CONCEPT FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF FAMILY LIFE**

Edited by: Esther Dermott, University of Bristol, UK, and

Julie Seymour, University of Hull, UK

Palgrave Macmillan, Forthcoming 2012

Andrea Doucet

## **INTRODUCTION:**

### ***Sean: 1992, Cambridge England, stay at home father of two***

*I was passing a postman cycling by and I was pushing the push chair and holding Luke's hand and I thought he's given me a sort of 'What a big sissy. A big sissy'! You know that may have been my response because you do interpret things according to your own level of comfort or discomfort to a certain extent. And then on another occasion, I walked past some builders just round the corner and one of them was knocking a wall down and turned to his friend and he said: 'That's what you ought to do'.*

### ***Archie, 2002, Ottawa, Canada: stay at home father of two***

*"Initially, when Brad was in kindergarten, this woman comes up and introduces herself and says I am a little embarrassed but I am coming to check you out. I said okay, she said my daughter came home and told me about this man hanging around the schoolyard reading stories to the kids. She said I hope you are not offended. At this point I am used to it. I said isn't it interesting, if a kid came home and said a mom is reading to kids in the yard, you would say "isn't that nice", and wouldn't give it another thought. She admitted that was true" (Archie, interview 2002).*

### ***Christopher, 2009, Boston, USA, stay at home father of four:***

*You know like when I first found out that I was going to be a staying at home my friends all made their little comments... I don't care but they definitely all made their smart alec comments that oh you know - Mr. Mom or whatever. Yeah so um so that is everybody's initial reaction but it is changing times. It's amazing if I tried to do this or we did this 15 years ago I would look like a freak show probably. You know a dad walking around with 4 little kids. I'm already a freak show as it is.*

This chapter is rooted in two decades of research on mothering and fathering, and gender and care work, in households where women are shared or primary breadwinners and where fathers are shared or primary caregivers. My research, conducted especially in Canada (2000-09) as well as in the UK (1992-95) and in the United States (2008-10) has included a series of inter-locking qualitative research projects where I have personally interviewed over 250 women and men, including a small case study of men and women who have been followed over the course of a decade in Canada (Doucet, 2006a, forthcoming). Across three distinct countries, I have spoken to men, as well as women, about the personal and political challenges and opportunities that recur when ‘doing family’ means reversing or re-adjusting what are still dominant and hegemonic conceptions of male breadwinners and female caregivers.

My sustained interest in this research area began two decades ago where one father’s story stayed with me as a compelling narrative of the difficulties for women and men who were charting different ways of ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing family’. The first quote at the beginning of this paper from British stay-at-home dad Sean, articulated twenty years ago on how he felt that he was viewed as a ‘big sissie’ by a postman and a male construction worker, pulled me into the puzzle of what enables and constrains men’s involvement in care work. Moreover, it was Sean’s narrative, and many more since then, that instigated my thinking on how community responsibilities, enacted in spaces that combine households and communities, are an integral part of the ‘doing’ of family and the social judgments of families.

Janet Finch’s new concept of ‘display’ provides a further way of conceptualizing the challenges faced by mothers and fathers who attempt to ‘do’ gender and family differently. As indicated in the quotes that open this chapter, men who care for children repeatedly mention how their ‘displays’ of care work, as well as of alternative family forms and non-hegemonic masculinities are scrutinized and surveilled by others; specifically, men can often find themselves under a community spotlight, where they feel treated as ‘sissies’, potential pedophiles, or a ‘freak show’.

Three of Finch’s key contentions about the display of family (2007) are employed in this chapter. First I draw from her point that narratives and objects are tools for displaying family. Second, I draw from her argument about how displays of family involve “the conveying of meaning through social interaction and the acknowledgment of this by relevant others” (Finch, 2007, 77). There is, moreover, an on-going “process of seeking legitimacy (which) necessarily entails displaying one’s chosen family relationships to relevant others and having them accepted” (Finch, 2007, 71). My third argument extends my second point about public legitimacy as I further develop Finch’s point (2007, 72) about how it is important “to think about *degrees of intensity* in the need for display, depending on circumstances”.

## **METHODOLOGICAL, THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL LOCATIONS:**

While this chapter is rooted broadly in two decades of research on mothering and fathering, it is specifically rooted in four qualitative research studies carried out over the

past ten years (2000-2010) in Canada, as well as more recently in the United States. The first study (2000-2005) of fathers who are primary caregivers (single fathers and/or stay-at-home fathers), included in-depth interviews with over 100 fathers and with 14 heterosexual couples (see Doucet 2006). The second (2004-2008) is a qualitative research study with 26 Canadian couples (25 heterosexual and one gay) where the father has taken some parental leave (see McKay and Doucet, 2010) while the third research project (2004-2009) focused on transitions to new fatherhood for a diverse sample of fathers, mainly gay fathers and immigrant fathers, from across Canada; focus groups were conducted with fifty fathers and in-depth interviews with twenty fathers (Doucet, 2009a). Finally, this chapter is influenced by my current research and writing on Canadian and American households (2008-2010) where women are primary breadwinners and men are primary or shared caregivers (Doucet, forthcoming). Across all of these studies is a small case study of men and women who have been followed over the course of a decade in Canada (Doucet, 2006a, forthcoming). While the majority of individuals that I have interviewed are lower middle class and middle class, of varied white ethnicities, heterosexual, and living with dependent children, my projects also span diversity across class, race and sexuality, across Canada and more recently in the United States.

The empirical context that informs my work is one where there has been some evidence of fathers' increasing participation in the care of children in many western countries. In the case of Canada, its social terrain is characterized by the rising labor force participation of mothers of young children and gradual increases in the numbers of stay-at-home fathers; the latter have increased 25 percent over the past decade so that, on average, men constitute 1/10<sup>th</sup> of stay at home parents (Statistics Canada 2002). The proportion of lone parents who are male has also increased over the past three decades; between 1976 and 2008, the proportion of male single parents increased from 14 percent of all lone-parents to 20% percent (Statistics Canada LFS, unpublished data 2009). It is also worth noting that women are primary breadwinners in nearly one-third of Canadian two-earner families (Sussman and Bonnell 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Over the past ten years, fathers' participation in infant care has also increased, partly as a result of policy changes in parental leave provisions<sup>2</sup>.

Theoretically, my work has long-standing roots in socialist feminist work on the importance of valuing unpaid work (Luxton, 1980/2010; Luxton and Vosko 1998); a focus on gender relations, men and masculinities (Connell, 2005); and feminist

---

<sup>1</sup> With women's average hours increasing, the wage gap is narrowing and the financial contribution of spouses is becoming more equal. However, differences still exist. For example, husbands in dual-earner couples earned on average \$1,040 per week in 2008 compared to only \$740 for wives (Marshall, 2009; Perusse, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> In 2001 paid parental leave benefits in Canada were expanded by 25 weeks, and, in 2006 Quebec introduced a separate and more generous parental leave policy with three to five weeks reserved for fathers. Correspondingly, Canadian fathers increased their use of paid parental leave from three percent in 2000 to 33% in 2008, with, however, far more Quebecois fathers – at 82% – taking leave than fathers outside Quebec at 12% (McKay, Marshall and Doucet, in press; Doucet, McKay and Tremblay, 2009; Doucet, Tremblay and Lero, in press).

theoretical and philosophical writing on the connections between care work and social justice (Held, 1993, 2005; Okin, 1989; Ruddick, 1995; Young, 1990, 1997). For over a decade, I have argued for a conceptualization of care that is intrinsically relational, embodied, embedded in daily practice, linked with what symbolic interactionists would call ‘moral’ identities’ (Finch and Mason, 1993; Finch, 2007), framed by varied kinds of time (biographical, generational and historical), and articulated in domestic and community spaces (see Doucet 2000, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b). I agree with many feminist and family scholars who have argued that gender *should not matter* to the ways in which care is undertaken and indeed that men can and do take on care work in ways that can be viewed as indistinguishable from that enacted by their female partners (see Biblarz and Stacey, 2010; Doucet, 2006a; Ranson, 2010; Smith, 2009). Nevertheless, while men can and do partake in childcare, I have also argued that there has been little shift in the *responsibility* for care work. As argued in this chapter, at least part the puzzle for this continuing resistance in gendered divisions of domestic responsibility and carework lies in the differing pressures exerted on men and women who display their care of children in community settings.

## **(I) DISPLAYING FAMILIES THROUGH NARRATIVES AND THROUGH FAMILY OBJECTS**

I am in agreement with Finch that “narratives are one tool which can be used in displaying families” (2007,78). She also maintains that “a fundamental driving force in presenting families to an external audience is to convey the message ‘this is my family and it works’” (Finch, 2007, 70; see also Finch and Mason, 1993). In addition to how families can be displayed through narratives, there are, as Finch argues (2007, 77), “ways in which such displays are supported” by particular domestic objects or what “we might think of as ‘tools’ for display”. Several examples emerge from my research on how fathers display particular conceptions of family through narratives as well as through domestic objects. Four examples will be discussed in this section.

### ***(i) Display of family and fathering through heroic narratives***

First, in relation to display through narratives, my research on primary caregiving fathers reveals that ‘heroic narratives’ are often employed by men in order to display their families as ones that work, in part because of their extraordinary efforts towards making them work in social environments that often assume men’s incompetence in caregiving. Heroic narratives are defined as ones that are framed partly by a telling of a ‘heroic tale’ that is “oriented around some heroic struggle” (Presser, 2004, 92; see also Doucet, 2008). Two examples of such heroic displays of family can be mentioned here.

The first is from Dennis, an ethnic minority and low-income single father of a 10-year-old girl. In his interview with me in 2003, he told a story of a father facing considerable strain and difficulty as he balanced a heavy debt load, long hours working as a cook in a fast food restaurant, a highly conflictive relationship with the mother of his daughter who lived two thousand miles away, and living in a small apartment that he and his daughter shared with two male boarders. Sitting with me in his kitchen with a basket of perfectly folded laundry beside him, two constant themes in his interview were

how he said he wanted to be on the Oprah Winfrey show and how people kept telling him: “I can’t believe your daughter is so good. I’ve never seen a kid this good.” However, such exuberant statements of believed, or hopeful, heroism were out of sync with much of his narrative as well as with my sense of this father as gleaned from the interview setting and from the detailed field notes that my research assistant and I took after the interview.

Looking back to this interview, and drawing on Finch, I would argue that Dennis wanted to participate in my study because he wanted to display that his version of family worked. Moreover, his desire to appear on Oprah, and his constant references to others’ comments on how his daughter was ‘so good’ could be viewed as instances of displaying and legitimating family through narrative. My case study of Dennis also revealed objects of family display; I refer here to the basket of perfectly folded laundry, which he had beside his chair. Dennis deliberately displayed this as part of his family life while other less noticeable aspects of his home and family life – such as the peeling wallpaper in the kitchen or the entrance of the two male boarders who lived in his basement – were objects and subjects that Dennis tried to downplay and, indeed, not to display.

A second example of a ‘heroic narrative’ can be illustrated through the case of Mick, a 45-year-old transport truck driver and the sole-custody father of a 16-year-old daughter. Mick was jolted into becoming a primary caregiving father when Mary Kate’s mother left when her daughter was three years old. Interviewed in 2003, he told the story of how he learned of this state of affairs when he was out of town and received a distressed phone call from his father who lived with Mick’s family. As he described it, Mick then drove his transport truck over five hundred miles back to his home to find his pre-kindergarten daughter standing on the street wearing “her little summer dress with the flowers” In his words:

“Mary Kate came home from school. She was in pre-kindergarten and her mother was not home. She was supposed to be there. My father called me. So I went to Windsor, I dropped the truck’s trailer, and I came from Windsor with no trailer, just my own truck. I came as fast as I could. When I came down the street she was in her little summer dress with the flowers. And she was standing there holding onto the street sign on our lawn. And my Dad was on the verandah, sitting there watching. I promised Mary Kate that never would I let this happen again. I parked my truck and ended up selling my truck. I never went back on the road again. I promised her that I would do that. That’s when it started”.

Mick’s narrative was filled with heroic statements about how he “had to do it” and how he was “going to stick with my commitment, my damn commitment”:

“There is no way that I would have said—‘go to Children’s Aid or something like that.’ Her mother is not going to do it. Well damn, I am going to do it. I’m not going to let someone else do it. It is my job. It was a choice that I had to make. I knew that I had to do it. It was never a question. I was there and I had to do it. There were days when I used to sit there and cry when Mary Kate was sleeping and wonder. It wasn’t a case of—‘Am I doing it right or wrong’? It was—‘I had to do it. I am going to get through it.’ [...] It is my responsibility. I took a

commitment and I am going to stick with my commitment, my damn commitment’.

He also constantly referred to the misfit between ‘my transport truck in the yard’ and ‘folding Mary Kate’s underwear’; this counter-posing of a strong masculine and an equally strong feminine image was meant to convey a deliberate display of how, against many odds, he was still capable of such heroic efforts. Mick, along with Dennis, both low-income and sole-custody fathers used the interview process, and these heroic narratives produced therein, to convey the idea that their family forms ‘worked’.

***(ii) Display of gendered domestic space***

A second example of the display of family through narrative and domestic objects emerges from my observations across two decades of visiting couples in their homes. Women are more likely to display family and domestic life, as well as ‘good mothering’ through the presentation of a clean and ordered home while men are more likely to display their place in the family and their role as a good father through their work in household renovation. That is, domestic space and domestically acquired identities have different connotations for women and men (see also Young, 1997)

One example of this is provided by Kyle, a Canadian stay-at-home father interviewed in 2004, who made a point to let me know that his wife Carole “did the vacuuming before she left for work today because she knew you were coming to interview me”. While Kyle admitted that he was “fanatical” about cleaning as well as a “neat freak”, he did not worry about the presentation of their home to others to the extent that his wife did. He confessed that he liked to keep the kitchen clean because he was the one who did most of the cooking: “If I’m going to cook, I have to do the shopping. If I’m going to cook, I have to make sure the counters are clean. I suffered many years ago from two bouts of salmonella, I don’t intend to do that again”. In contrast, his wife Carol was more concerned about the house being clean, especially when *it is seen by others*. He gave the example of people coming to assess the house:

“I was in the home show, met up with one of the real estate agents who offered to do an assessment. I said - ‘Oh, ya, sure come on over at such and such a time’. Carol was absolutely in a tizzy over that because, could she guarantee that the house would be perfectly clean when someone comes in to deliberately look in every corner? And I said – ‘*So what?*’”.

Across the four studies that inform this chapter, many stay-at-home fathers reconstruct the meanings of work and home to include unpaid self-provisioning work (Pahl, 1984; Wallace & Pahl, 1985), specifically “male self provisioning activities” which includes “building, renovation... carpentry, electrical repairs and plumbing, furniture making, decorating, constructing doors and window frames, agricultural cultivation for own use, repairing vehicles” (Mingione, 1988, 560-561). While some of these can be viewed as masculine hobbies, which these men would have likely picked up from their fathers or male peers, these are also activities which display or justify men’s masculinity and which seem to alleviate some of the discomfort men feel with giving up breadwinning.

### ***(iii) Displaying 'happy families' in interviews***

Building again on Finch's point that "a fundamental driving force in presenting families to an external audience is to convey the message 'this is my family and it works'" (Finch, 2007, 73; see also Finch and Mason, 1993), I would argue that men and women often engage in such displays of 'happy families' in interview settings. That is, in couple interviews, there is a tendency, as Duncombe and Marsden (1993) astutely pointed out many years ago, to present the 'we are ever so happy really' face to the interviewer and, more generally, to their social worlds.

Recognizing this persistent tendency in family research, while also echoing John Law's broader point (2004) that particular methods produce particular social realities, I maintain that the close connections between issues of deeply held 'moral' identity and how families are displayed and judged by others requires that sustained attention is paid to the methods we use in family research. One commonly used strategy is that of interviewing different family members who can provide different windows into family realities (see Edwards et al, 2006; Mauthner, 2003). Even where couples are the center of the analysis, interviewing both couples and individuals can provide different angles on family life while longitudinal interviewing over time can pull forth and reconfigure varied understandings from participants (see McLeod and Thomson, 2009). Finally, an approach that focuses on networks of relations (see Hansen, 2007) can provide wider understandings of the meanings of family life that disrupt the smooth displays provided by some participants. In this vein, Karen Hansen path-breaking book *Not So Nuclear Families: Class Gender and Networks of Care* (2005) moves away from traditional interview studies of "independent individuals" to focus on "connected individuals who are part of a parent's network of care" (2005:13). Working from four in-depth case studies, Hansen "focuses on a network, a web of people, rather than on a collection of separate individuals" as she probes "the interaction and interpretations and meaning people assign to their involvements and interactions with other people" (2005, 13).

Finch also maintains that display is different from performance in that the audience is not passive and indeed participates in the ongoing construction of meaning. She writes (2007, 77): "the concepts of performance/performativity – and the associated concepts of actors and audiences – are not adequate in themselves for understanding how 'family' meanings are conveyed". While I agree with the general tenor of this argument, I would, however, argue that methodologically there can be a performative element that recurs in interviews so that interviews can be used as vehicles to display particular understandings of self and family life to interviewers and to the retelling of those stories to others (See Doucet, 2008, Presser, 2004).

### ***(iv) Displaying masculinities***

In addition to displaying family in their narratives, men also work to display their masculinity in appropriate ways that resonate with hegemonic conceptions of masculinities. What seems very clear in most fathers' narratives is their determination to distinguish themselves *as men*, as heterosexual males, and as fathers, *not* as mothers. (Doucet, 2006a) Throughout my two decades of interviewing fathers, I have heard recurring interjections by fathers that confirm how they are adamant to 'display'

hegemonic masculinity in which the devaluation of the feminine is a central part (see Connell, 2005). For example, in a focus group with stay-at-home fathers held in 2000, Sam, stay-at-home father of two for five years, interjected several times, half jokingly: “Well we’re still *men*, aren’t we?” Several years later, another stay-at-home father, Mitchell, made several pointed references to how he often worked out at a gym and enjoyed “seeing the women in lycra”. These men’s words support what theorists of work have underlined about men working in non-traditional or female dominated occupations (such as nursing or elementary school teaching) and how they must actively work to dispel the idea that they might be gay, un-masculine, or not men (Fisher & Connell, 2002; Sargent, 2000; Williams, 1992).

From my research on fathers who are actively involved in care work, I have argued that these men are thus attempting to carve out their own paternal and masculine identities within spaces traditionally considered maternal and feminine (Doucet, 2005). A recent example of this tendency comes from an interview in 2009 with Sally, an engineer who is the primary breadwinner in her family; she notes that one difference between her experiences at home with two pre-school children and that of her husband Wilson was the following:

“Wilson was more about doing work and bringing Ryan along. So he would take him to like a job site where he was fixing someone’s radiator and he’d either bring a couple of toys or a book or let Ryan have a toy wrench. So Ryan went with him for the first couple of years to jobs. Or he was renovating the basement at the time so they would just renovate the basement together. The cutest videos of Ryan are where he is in diapers with a power drill - drilling holes in a piece of plywood that Wilson had set up for him”.

## **(II) PUBLIC DISPLAYS THAT ARE ‘LEGITIMATE’ AND MANAGING DISPLAYS**

Finch (2007, 71) points out that: “The process of seeking legitimacy necessarily entails displaying one’s chosen family relationships to relevant others and having them accepted”. While she relies mainly on examples of non-heterosexual families, it is also the case that in heterosexual two-parent families as well as in single parent families, particular displays of family life are rendered more palatable than others. That is, families who adopt differing patterns around care and breadwinning can also face scrutiny. From my research, there are three recurring examples of how fathers seek public legitimacy as they work to display the acceptability of themselves as carers while simultaneously attempting to refrain from disruptive displays in community settings. their unconventional families. Specifically, my research demonstrates that fathers without female partners often work particularly diligently to convey that they are suitable caregivers and that they are ‘doing family’ in socially acceptable ways. Furthermore, I argue that some fathers need to *manage* their displays and that this is especially marked for fathers who display alternative masculinities, notably low-income or unemployed fathers, gay fathers, and fathers caring for the children of others<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> While I characterize these fathers as ‘groups’, I am not implying that they are homogenous ones. Rather, there are particular combinations of gender, class and sexuality that bring men to the point where they need to manage their displays of family so as to avoid negative community



*(i) Low-income or unemployed fathers*

To be placed in a position of primary caregiver without having achieved success as a breadwinner signals something out of sync with what many communities consider as a socially acceptable ‘moral’ identity for a male and for a father<sup>4</sup>. My argument here is that fathers need to work to display both their masculinity as well as their family in socially acceptable ways. From my study on fathers as primary caregivers and my recent work on women who are primary breadwinners, I would argue that fathers without jobs or those in low-income jobs, especially single fathers, can be viewed with particular suspicion within communities. For example, Henry, who was periodically out of work, highlighted how his lower social class and frequent unemployed status was one of the reasons why his house was not viewed as an acceptable option for his daughter’s sleepovers:

“My daughter sleeps over at a friend’s place right across the street, and her friend never comes back. I push it in the sense that it isn’t fair. I actually try to mention it to the parents and stuff, but it’s no big deal. They live in a nice big detached house. The girl mentioned has two full sets of parents that both live in nice big detached houses with multiple cars, or that kind of thing. And I live in this townhouse co-op place”.

In contrast, Jacob, a physician in training, noted that sleepovers were never a problem at his house, either for his two sons or for his 11- year-old daughter. He reflected on how this and his acceptance as a frequent helper in his children’s schools may be rendered unproblematic, partly because his occupation is one of high status:

“I am involved in the school. I help out on field trips. I go in and help to read whatever I can. I am also the head lice coordinator. Once or twice a month I go and look at heads! I know the teachers and the principal and a lot of the kids. I also know them from ringette and hockey. I feel very accepted. [...] Being a doctor may be part of it. It might be different if I was a plumber”.

Stay-at-home fathers, fare slightly better, although not working can still spark community alarm bells if it seems that the father may have lost his job and is not in his caring situation due to a family ‘choice’. For example, Theo, who left his job in the high tech sector told me in 2004: “Everybody assumed I was laid off”. James, a gay and divorced father who took a four-month paternity leave also commented in 2004:

“I think there is still a stigma for men with staying-at-home particularly around other men. I can’t tell you how many times people ask as a first liner; ‘So, what do you do for a living?’ When I answered ‘I stay-at-home’, most wondered – ‘well what happened?’”

What is at issue here is how a key resource of hegemonic masculinity – that of social status acquired through being a family provider, especially in a high income or high status profession - helps to increase fathers’ ability to display socially acceptable fathering within both families and communities, while also cushioning them from being

---

judgments.

<sup>4</sup> I am using ‘moral’ in the symbolic interactionist sense of the ‘shoulds’ or ‘oughts’ of socially acceptable behaviour of men and women (see Finch and Mason, 1993).

viewed with suspicion. What is playing out here are the links between hegemonic masculinity and earning. In effect, the economically unsuccessful male caring for children represents a form of double jeopardy because he is judged as being a “*failed male*” (e.g. not a breadwinner) (Thorne, 1993, 161) and as a *deviant* man (e.g. a primary caregiver). On the other hand, a male who is visibly providing economically for his family, or has temporarily left a career that allows him to do this, is involved in more acceptable displays of both masculinity and fathering practice.

***(ii) Gay fathers and the display of heterosexuality as a ‘resource of masculinity’***

The constitution of gay families is incredibly diverse with varied configurations of men raising children with other men and/or with other women, often across several households (see Dunne, 2001). What emerges from my interviews with a small sample of 16 gay fathers over the past decade is that space and community setting matter for the public legitimacy of these diverse family forms. Nevertheless, issues of social acceptability are especially acute for gay fathers, many of whom can face extra scrutiny over their role with children. They can confront ‘multiple jeopardy’ (King 1990; cited in Ward, 2004, 82) in that intersections of gender, class, sexuality, as well as geographical location can facilitate particular kinds of exclusion and social judgment for some gay fathers. One good example of this expressed by Jean Marc, a French-Canadian 43-year-old gay and divorced father of seven-year-old twin boys; I interviewed him in 2004. He lived in a small town in Ontario and his ex-wife had sole custody. Although he had taken a four-month parental leave when his twins were infants and was very involved in their lives, his ‘coming out’ led to him being shunned by his wife and her family:

“I thought that she would be accepting and that she would understand this. It was the opposite. The kids were removed from the house. I was told to get out. I cried for a week. I was clinically depressed for quite some time. What really helped me was Gay Fathers of Toronto. And I got some counseling. It really hurt me that Monique didn’t want joint custody. That really cut me to the chase. I think she was absolutely terrified of me taking the kids to Toronto and maybe bringing them into some kind of immoral life style”.

Even though Jean Marc gradually became more involved with his children over time, he remained disinclined to ‘come out’ to the school and the wider community because he feared that community members, particularly teachers’ knowledge of him as gay, would lead them to think he was “riff raff off the street”:

“I think it’s important that I go and meet their teachers. I have not met any of their teachers yet (long sigh). [...] I am perhaps somewhat timid. I don’t know. I just didn’t know what to expect. It’s a situation where their teacher is married to a police officer in the town. Everybody knows me. I will go. [...] I want them to know that- ‘hey I am a good father. I am involved. And you may have heard that I am gay and that is absolutely correct. But I am not some riff raff off the street”.

Several gay fathers were less concerned about managing their displays of fathering and the key factor here was when there was greater community acceptance of diversity in parenting, combined with organizations that have provided both support and information for gay fathers in their ‘coming out’ processes. Such resources are more

available in larger urban settings where there is a rich heterogeneity of lifestyles, and a positive acknowledgement of such choices. Bernard, for example, (interviewed in 2005) who lived in Toronto and shared custody of a four-year-old son with two lesbian mothers, found his situation is palatable since “there are other children at the school who have two dads or two moms. So he is not alone there. We live in a progressive area”. Similar stories of acceptance were told by Ray and Carson (interviewed in 2004 and again in 2006) who adopted two infants over the course of four years and were “embraced by the community”. What is demonstrated here is that in order to facilitate family and fathering displays that are treated as ‘normal’ or acceptable, gay fathers often have to demonstrate that they can blend into parenting settings so that gender and sexuality lose such critical significance.

### ***(iii) Fathers and the children of others***

Across two decades of interviewing fathers who are primary, or shared primary, caregivers, I have noticed that a dominant father-daughter narrative revolves around the hidden, unspoken sense of dis-ease that fathers can face when they are caring for the children of others. For example, this sense of dis-ease can occur when fathers are babysitting, are caring for children where issues of undressing are involved, and where fathers are supervising girls’ sleepovers.

Babysitting children is an issue that has come up often in my interviews with men and this is a theme that first arose in my first study on mothers and fathers in Britain in the early 1990s (Doucet, 1995). More recently, in 2003, a Canadian stay-at-home father Jess, spoke about how he could only babysit the children of a very small group of friends and that this barrier was caused by his gender: “It’s kind of bad for men to be interested in other children”.

Caring for children where it involves physical tasks such as changing diapers or young children’s clothes also leads men to manage their displays of care so as to avoid scrutiny of their alternative family arrangements around caregiving. Again, this theme runs throughout a long trail of my interviewing fathers over many years. A recent example comes from David, a stay-at-home father of three in a suburb outside Toronto, Canada. While he was clearly the primary parent of their three children while his wife Bonnie worked long hours as a pharmacist, he still found that there was one area where he had to manage his displays of care. He says:

“Well right now, like changing Molly(7 years old), bathing her, it just doesn’t sit right. Or her friends come over, right. Get undressed, put on costumes and stuff and they call me for help. It doesn’t sit right”.

Finally, girls’ sleepovers are the window through which many men see the need to be very careful around their teen daughters and their friends. As Ryan, a sole-custody father of a son and a 12-year-old girl put it in 2003:

“I have purposefully not had anybody to sleep over, especially girls, because I’m really leery of the possibility that somebody might think something bad.”

### III. INTENSITY IN DISPLAY

My third and final argument on fathers' display of family and care work is informed by Finch's point (2007, 72) about how it is important "to think about *degrees of intensity* in the need for display, depending on circumstances". While Finch (2007, 72) points to how these changed circumstances can be when "new individuals – new relationships – come into the picture", she also notes that such changes can involve particular changes such as when "a woman who has previously focused on caring for children takes a full-time job". Set against hegemonic conceptions around gendered paid and unpaid work, many women and men still point to how they are judged and observed and thus there is a constant sense of intensity to their displays of family. The 'intensity' is thus not related to change in particular family circumstances but a disjuncture between what is expected of men and women and thus some intensity to their need to display that "this is my family and it works" (Finch, 2007, 75).

I argue here that the need for display that family 'works' is especially intense in relation to the gendered arrangements for the care of infants. Quite simply, it is assumed that women will care for infants and will take time off from work, either through unpaid leave or through maternity or parental leave.

#### *(i) Fathers caring for infants*

Across the two decades that I have been researching fathering, the issue of men caring for infants recurs as one that invites scrutiny, and well as public judgment. Craig, for example, a Canadian stay-at-home dad who has one twin son with physical disabilities (interviewed in 2002), reflected on how an ongoing issue for him as a father is that "the incompetence thing comes into play", and how social onlookers "very much want to make sure that the babies are okay". He remembers how he was often "approached with offers of help. It was very much like the incompetent father needing a woman's help to get the job done".

Peter, a stay-at-home father of two sons (interviewed twice in 2003 and again in 2010) also points to how community sentiments of assumed incompetence on the part of fathers are particularly strong with young or preverbal children because onlookers may worry about the baby's care, while also assuming that the father is a secondary, and less competent, carer; he also highlights how this perception wanes as the children grow older:

"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 everyday—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".

At the end of his interview in 2003, 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.”

***(ii) Women giving up the care of infants***

Assumptions about men as secondary caregivers also filter into men's desire to take parental leave and women's decision to give up some of their parental leave time to fathers. That is, when women give up primary caregiving to focus on breadwinning, either through not taking all of their allotted leave quota or through prioritizing work over caregiving, they also must work to dispel community judgments that they are not doing family in appropriate ways. For example, when Arianna (interviewed with her husband Brandon in 2006) returned to her job as a schoolteacher, she was confronted by disapproval from her colleagues:

“I think it's becoming more common, but it's not common at all, really...People kind of think...that somehow that I'm not as good a mother cause I wanted to go back to work and I'm ok with letting my husband stay home. It was kind of like, 'ok, that's weird' ... (It was) mostly women”.

This systemic sense that infant care is women's care is strongly demonstrated in my co-authored work on couple decision-making around the take up of parental leave (see McKay and Doucet, 2010; Doucet et al., 2009). While Canadian policy now has a six month gender-neutral entitlement that is available to both mothers and fathers, many parents still refer to this as 'maternity leave' and there is a strong sense on the part of both mothers and fathers that this is 'her leave' (McKay and Doucet, 2010). When such dominant norms are violated, families feel an intense pressure to display that their family still 'works' even though they have gone against the grain of strongly rooted norms around infant care.

***(ii) Fathers in child centered spaces***

There is an intensity of display required of fathers who find themselves having to work against community notions that men do not always belong in child-centered community spaces. The quotations at the beginning of this chapter from men, across two decades and three national contexts, aptly capture this sense of community judgment and surveillance that men can experience when they take on care work. As indicated in these fathers' narratives, men who take on full-time care work can sometimes find themselves under a community spotlight, where they feel that they are viewed as 'sissies', potential pedophiles, or a 'freak show'. It is important to note that class, sexuality, locality, as well as time also mediate community judgments around men and care. There is thus some intensity to the need to convince community members that men doing care represent acceptable forms of care work and family.

While there has been some change over the past decade, there is still a recurring thread of suspicion about the proximity between male bodies and children, especially the children of others. As indicated earlier, notable instances of strong community scrutiny can occur in households where single fathers are raising teenage girls, where men enter female-dominated childrearing venues or what one father termed 'estrogen-filled worlds' (Doucet, 2006b), and where men are primary caregivers of infants (and concurrently,

where women do not take up maternity or parental leave to care for their infants). In spite of the points made here, I would also posit that over time, there has, nevertheless, been some change in the community acceptance of male caregivers.

That is, changing ideologies over time, and the increased presence of fathers in community sites with children are easing at least some of this scrutiny. In my recent work on breadwinning mothers, I have returned to interview 12 individuals that I interviewed over 8 years ago. That is, my research program has a longitudinal focus that spans a decade around a small case study of men and women. One example is Richard and Aileen who I interviewed three times between 2000-2005 and recently returned to visit them in 2009. While Richard, a stay at home dad, tried to open a home daycare in 2002, he was told by the local authorities that a day care run by a male would not work in the community. But recently he informed me that things had changed, at least somewhat. He said:

“About three years ago things were getting tight financially. So I decided to try again to open my daycare. I didn’t know how they would react to me, but I approached the ‘ABC’ daycare agency. To my great relief I was greeted with open arms –literally- by a team of open minded individuals who were excited at the prospect of having a male childcare provider on there team. But one question remained: would a stranger trust a man to care for their child? Well - The answer came quickly. Before all the paperwork and security checks were finalized I already had my first kids! Today my daycare is full with five kids and I have 8 kids on my waiting list who want to come to my daycare specifically. But I am not accepted by all. *Some parents refuse to have a man as childcare provider, and I can respect that. But to many, it is an alternative they favor*”.

Where fathers are actively involved in care work, they must work to display not only family forms that ‘work’ but also that their display of caring and working arrangements with reversed gender roles are acceptable within gendered community norms and judgments.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has argued that Janet Finch’s concept of ‘display’ can enrich sociological understandings of family forms that challenge traditional or hegemonic gendered assumptions around work and caregiving. Building on two decades of research on fatherhood, with a particular focus on research conducted in Canadian households where fathers are primary caregivers and mothers are primary breadwinners, I developed three key arguments from Finch’s seminal article on the display of families.

First, building from Finch’ argument that narratives and domestic objects are tools for displaying family, I discussed how narratives, as well as domestic objects, can be used as tools to convey heroic acts towards making families ‘work’, as well as the display of gendered domestic space, ‘happy families’ and appropriate masculinities. Second, family forms where men are primary caregivers require an on-going “process of seeking legitimacy (which) necessarily entails displaying one’s chosen family relationships to

relevant others and having them accepted” (Finch, 2007, 71). Here, I pointed to how particular groups of men must work to display legitimacy, while also managing their displays of care; such groupings include low-income or unemployed fathers, gay fathers, and fathers caring for the children of others.

Finally, drawing from Finch’s point (2007, 72) about how it is important “to think about *degrees of intensity* in the need for display, depending on circumstances”, I have argued in this chapter that the intensity of such displays is less related to change at the level of particular families but more related to social and ideological changes. Nevertheless, these ideological shifts are still lagging behind actual patterns of gendered work and care in most western countries where processes of globalization, economic restructuring, and neo-liberalism have led to situations where women are primary breadwinners in families and where men, by choice or not, become caregivers of young children. I have also argued that there is a particular intensity, or urgency, to the display of care, in households where fathers are caring for infants, where women give up the care of infants, and where fathers are moving through child-centered spaces where they may not always be welcome.

## References

- Biblarz, T. J., & Stacey, J. (2010). How Does the Gender of Parents Matter? *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 72(1), 3-22.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Doucet, A. (2000). There’s a Huge Difference between Me as a Male Carer and Women: Gender, Domestic Responsibility, and the Community as an Institutional Arena. *Community Work and Family* 3(2), 163-184.
- Doucet, A. (1995). Gender Equality and Gender Differences in Household Work and Parenting. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18(3), 271-284.
- Doucet, A. (2001). You See the Need Perhaps More Clearly Than I Have: Exploring Gendered Processes of Domestic Responsibility. *Journal of Family Issues* 22(3), 328-357.
- Doucet, A. (2005). It’s Almost Like I Have a Job but I Don’t Get Paid’: Fathers at Home Reconfiguring Work, Care and Masculinity. *Fathering*, 2(3), 277-304.
- Doucet, A. (2006a). *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care and Domestic Responsibilities*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Doucet, A. (2006b). Estrogen-Filled Worlds: Fathers as Primary Caregivers and Embodiment. *Sociological Review* 23(4), 695-715.
- Doucet, A. (2009a). Dad and Baby in the First Year: Gendered Embodiment. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 624, 78-98.
- Doucet, A. (2009b). Gender Equality and Gender Differences: Parenting, Habitus and Embodiment. *Canadian Review of Sociology* 48(2), 99-117.
- Doucet, A. (2008) ““On the Other Side of (her) Gossamer Wall” Reflexive and Relational Knowing,” *Qualitative Sociology*, 31: 73-87.
- Doucet, A., McKay, L., & Tremblay, D.-G. (2009). Canada and Québec: two policies, one country. In S. Kamerman & P. Moss (Eds.), *The Politics of Parental Leave Policies: Children, Parenting, Gender and the Labour Market*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

- Doucet, A (forthcoming, 2012) *Bread and Roses – and the Kitchen Sink*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Doucet, A. McKay, L. and Tremblay, D-G. (2009) “Parental Leave Policy in Canada” in Peter Moss and Sheila Kammerman (Eds.) *The Politics of Parental Leave Policies: Children, Parenting, Gender and the Labour Market*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press; pp. 31-48.
- Doucet, A., Tremblay, D.-G., & Lero, D. (2010). Leave Policy and Research: Canada. In P. Moss (Ed.), *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research (5th edition, revised) L* (pp. 136-145). London: Employment Relations Research.
- Duncombe, J., & Marsden, D. (1993). Love and intimacy: The Gender Division of Emotion and 'Emotion Work' *Sociology*, 27(2), 221-241.
- Dunne, G. (2001). The Lady Vanishes? Reflections on the Experiences of Married and Divorced Gay Fathers. *Sociologica Research Online*, 6(3), 1-17.
- Finch, J. (2007). Displaying Families. *Sociology*, 41(1), 65-81.
- Finch, J., & Mason, J. (1993). *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*. London: Routledge.
- Fisher, M., & Connell, R. W. M. (2002). *Masculinities and Men in Nursing*. Paper presented at the 3rd College of Health Sciences Research Conference “From Cell to Society”, Leura, Australia.
- Hansen, K. V. (2005). *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender and Networks of Care*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Held, V. (1993). *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics*: University of Chicago Press.
- Held, V. (2005). *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Law, J. (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* London Routledge.
- Marshall, K. (2009). The family work week. *Perspectives on Labour and Income (Statistics Canada catalogue no. 75-001-XPE)*, 21(2 (Summer)), 21-29.
- McLeod, J. and Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching Social Change: Qualitative Approaches*. London: Sage.
- McKay, L., & Doucet, A. (2010). ‘Without Taking Away Her Leave’: A Canadian Case Study of Couples’ Decisions on Fathers’ Use of Paid Leave”, *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice About Men as Fathers (Special Issue on Men, Work and Parenting, edited by Linda Haas and Margaret O'Brien)*, 10(3), 300-320.
- McKay, L. Marshall, K and Doucet, A. (in press, 2011) “Fathers and Parental Leave in Canada: Policies, Practices and Potential” in Jessica Ball and Kerry Daly (eds). *Engaging Fathers in Social Change: Lessons from Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Mingione, E. (1988). Work and Informal Activities in Urban Southern Italy. In R. E. Pahl (Ed.), *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Okin, S. M. (1989). *Justice, Gender and the Family*. New York Basic Books
- Pahl, R. E. (1984). *Divisions of Labour*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Perusse, D. (2003). New maternity and parental benefits. *Perspectives on Labour and Income (Statistics Canada catalogue no. 75-001-XIE)*, 4(3), 1-4.
- Presser, L. (2004). Violent Offenders, Moral Selves: Constructing Identities and Accounts in the Research Interview. *Social Problems*, 51(1), 82-101



- Ranson, G. (2010). *Against the Grain: Couples, Gender and the Reframing of Parenting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ruddick, S. (1995). *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon.
- Sargent, P. (2000). Real Men or Real Teachers? Contradictions in the Lives of Men Elementary Teachers. *Men and Masculinities*, 2(4), 410-433.
- Smith, J. A. (2009). *The Daddy Shift: How Stay-at-Home Dads, Breadwinning Moms, and Shared Parenting Are Transforming the American Family*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Statistics Canada (2002). *Annual Average 2002 Family Characteristics of Single Husband-Wife Families. Labour Force Survey*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Statistics Canada (2009). *Labour force survey. Unpublished data*.
- Sussman, D., & Bonnell, S. (2006). Wives as Primary Breadwinners. *Statistics Canada: Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 7(8).
- Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Wallace, C. D., & Pahl, R. E. (1985). Household Work Strategies in an Economic Recession. In N. Redclift & E. Mingione (Eds.), *Beyond Employment* (pp. 189-227). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Williams, C. L. (1992). The Glass escalator: Hidden Advantage for Men in the 'Female' Professions. *Social Problems*, 39(3), 253-267.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Young, I. M. (1997). *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.