Fathers and the Responsibility for Children: A Puzzle and a Tension

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a qualitative study of Canadian fathers who self-define as primary caregivers, this paper explores men's unique challenges to the gendered politics of unpaid work. While recognizing that fathers' narratives can widen our understandings of what it means to care for and take on the emotional responsibility for children, I also draw attention to the political and theoretical tensions that sit on the edges of feminist research on fathering.

RÉSUMÉ

En se basant sur l'étude qualitative des pères canadiens qui se définissent en tant que prestataires de soins primaires, cet article explore les politiques basées sur les sexes du travail non rémunéré. Tout en reconnaissant que les récits des pères peuvent élargir notre compréhension de ce que signifie de prendre soin et d'assumer la responsabilité émotionnelle pour les enfants, j'attire l'attention sur les tensions politiques et théoriques qui sont sur les bords de la recherche féministe sur le rôle 'des pères.

INTRODUCTION

In Anne Crittenden's best selling book *The Price of Motherhood*, she writes:

> Years ago Nobel prize winning economist Theodore W. Shultz observed that the development of human capabilities does not come free. There are always costs that someone has to pay. According to Shultz...the basic questions about (the development of) human capital are: Who will bear the costs? Who will reap the benefits? The answer to the first question is families and mothers in particular. The answer to the second question is everyone. *The entire society benefits from well raised children*, without sharing more than a fraction of the costs of producing them. And that *free ride on female labor* is enforced by every major institution, starting with the workplace.
> (2001, 86; emphasis added)

Crittenden is one small voice amidst a large feminist conversation and debate that has been waged and has raged over the past three decades. Feminist scholars and activists have highlighted not only the deep seated social, economic and political issues implicit in women doing most of society's unpaid work, but they have also pointed to ways of moving beyond this gendered stalemate. Several lines of argument have been put forth as ways of challenging the gendered politics of unpaid work including: the valuing of unpaid work (Folbre 1994; Fraser 1997); its inclusion in census data as well as in national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) accounting (Crittenden 2001; Luxton and Vosko 1998; Waring 1988); universal childcare (Jenson 2002; Mahon 2002); and flexible working options for both parents (Brandth and Kvande 2001; Moss 1996). Many have also argued for the importance of men taking on a greater share of domestic responsibility (Coltrane 1996; Dowd 2000; Ehrensaft 1987; Hobson 2002).

My own work has been located mainly within this latter strand on men and domestic life and labour. Whereas fatherhood was deemed "a hot topic in the 1990s" (Marsiglio 1993, 88), it has now become a familiar part of the social research landscape on gender relations, employment and family life. With growing international consensus on the need for state policy to assist fathers in meeting their parenting obligations and with many women continuing to push for greater equality at work and at home, there has been increasing interest on the part of researchers in examining the obstacles and facilitating factors for men's greater involvement in their children's lives. Yet in researching men's contributions to domestic life, a puzzle has remained unsolved. In spite of men's growing participation in domestic tasks and their slowly increasing contributions to the time spent in childcare and housework, the connection between women and domestic responsibility persists. Across time, countries and cultures, it is overwhelmingly mothers who organize, plan, orchestrate, and worry. Is there something different about the ways

in which men take on domestic responsibility? Might we be missing some of men's contributions because we have been using a maternal lens to view and understand their caring? In assessing this puzzle, the ways in which we define, interpret and understand domestic responsibility matters. Speaking to fathers helps to widen our understanding of this concept, both theoretically and empirically.

In researching the linkage between women and domestic responsibility, I have also become aware of a political and theoretical tension that sits on the edges of feminist research on fathering. Intricately tied up with this puzzle of trying to understand, encourage and value fathers' unpaid caring work is the possibility that we may be detracting from mothers' struggles to have their own unpaid work valued.

This paper draws on an in-depth qualitative research study of changing Canadian fatherhood with a focus on fathers who are self-defined as primary caregivers (stay at home fathers and single fathers). The project explored caring processes, household negotiations, and mothering and fathering as practices, identities and social institutions. The choice of a "critical case study" sample of fathers involved the recognition that while these fathers are exceptional pioneers, their stories nonetheless have relevance for understanding changing fatherhood since they are challenging the ways in which practices, identities and ideologies of caring remain strongly associated with femininity and women's social lives (Fox 2001; Graham 1983; McMahon 1995). Central to my project were evolving observations and a theoretical engagement with three kinds of domestic responsibility: emotional, community and "moral." This article deals only with the first, that of emotional responsibility (for a fuller discussion, see Doucet 2000; 2001; under review).

This article is structured along the following lines: first, a brief overview of theoretical, epistemological and methodological background to the research that informs this paper; second, some key findings around fathering and the emotional responsibility for children, and; finally, brief highlights of the political tensions that can arise for feminists who study fathering and a proposed theoretical strategy for grappling with this conflict.

THEORY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

My study on fathering is framed by a layered process of investigating and understanding the social worlds inhabited and co-constructed by fathers and others. Several overlapping bodies of theory underpin this research, four of which will be briefly mentioned here: structuration theory, symbolic interactionism, a focus on gender relations and gender regimes, and a critical realist position. This study is rooted in the interplay between agency and structure (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Connell 1987; Giddens 1984; Smith 1987 & 1999). Second, a view of agency as relational and collectively enacted and experienced is posited. Influenced by principles of symbolic interactionism and by a tradition of family research which employs such principles, emphasis is placed on attempts to gain people's own understandings and meanings as well as how they interpret these meanings and actions in light of the observations and judgments of other people (Barker 1994; Daly 1993 & 2002; Finch and Mason 1993; McMahon 1995). The third theoretical strand in my work is that of placing these observations about relational and interactionist agency within larger sets of social relations (Stryker 1980 & 2003). Building particularly on the work of Dorothy Smith, individuals, couples, families, and communities are located within larger "relations of ruling" (Smith 1987 & 1999). Fourth and finally, in taking a position such as Smith's, I am thus holding a position that resembles "mitigated relativism" (Code 1993) or, set in different terms, a "critical realist" (Porter 2002; Sayer, 1999) or a "subtle realist" (Seale 1999) approach whereby I am making claims about how I believe the social world works. Combined with this position is a strong sense of theoretical, methodological and epistemological accountability (Code 1987; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Seale 1999).

METHODOLOGY

The sample of respondents for my study are 120 fathers who self-define as primary caregivers of their children (mainly single fathers and stay at home fathers). Most of the fathers (58% or 70/120) were found in Canada's capital city, Ottawa, while the geographical location of the other 50 fathers were as follows: 16 from other Ontario cities; 13 from rural Ontario; 8 from Quebec; and 13 fathers from six other provinces. Fourteen couples (with a stay at home father and with some diversity along the lines of income, social class and ethnicity) were

interviewed in order to include some mothers' views in the study. A wide sampling strategy was used: fathers were recruited through schools and varied community centers (i.e. health-related, community, and ethnic minority groups), in parks and playgrounds, as well as through placing ads in mainstream Canadian newspapers and in many small community papers. Several fathers were also found through snowball sampling whereby one father would provide me with the name of friend or relative (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The study includes an extensive range of care giving experiences: 40 single fathers (28 sole custody, 9 joint custody, and 3 widowers); 55 stay at home fathers (at home for at least one year); 12 fathers who are single and are/were stay at home; and three fathers currently on parental leave (including one father living in a same sex partnership). In the latter stages of the study I broadened my categories to include 10 shared caregiving fathers in an effort to include participants who did not necessarily fit into the categories of stay at home fathers or single fathers. I was thus able to include gay fathers who did not have legal custody but were active caregivers in their children's lives and several immigrant fathers for whom stay at home fathering was not readily compatible with their cultural traditions.

In terms of diversity, there are 9 gay fathers with considerable variation in the parenting arrangements. The sample had a fairly high degree of ethnic diversity with 3 fathers of Native origin and 18 fathers from visible minorities (with all but one being first generation immigrants). In addition, there were 14 first or second-generation immigrants of varied white ethnicities (e.g., Italian, Polish, Czech, British, Irish, Greek, German, Danish, Scottish). Finally, the social class, income levels, and education levels of the respondents were diverse.

Of the 120 fathers who participated in the study, 62 fathers were interviewed through in-depth individual interviews, 27 through telephone interviews; 12 in one of three focus groups; and 34 through web correspondence. Within these numbers it is important to point out that 19 fathers participated through web based correspondence only, while 101 were interviewed in person through the varied methods described above or by telephone. Twenty eight fathers were interviewed two or three times using different methods.[1]

THE PUZZLE OF EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Unpacking the connection between women and emotional responsibility requires establishing what emotional responsibility is. As evinced in Joan Tronto's description of caring, emotional responsibility involves skills which include "knowledge about others' needs" which the carer acquires through "an attentiveness to the needs of others" (1989, 176-8). An understanding of emotional responsibility is theoretically rooted in literature on an ethic of care (Gilligan 1982 & 1993; Noddings 1984 & 2003) combined with more recent recognition of the close integration of connection and autonomy, and the ethics of care and justice (Benhabib 1992; Gilligan 1988; Sevenhjuisen 1998 & 2000; Tronto 1993 & 1995).

In spite of women's dominance in taking on the emotional responsibility for children, there is increasing evidence that fathers can also be nurturing, affectionate, responsive and active with their children (Coltrane 1996; Daly 1993; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Pruett 2000). These findings about fathers' capable nurturing were strongly confirmed in my research. For example, Cameron, a stay at home father of two small children as well as the foster parent of a mentally challenged teenager told me: "I often find myself even ahead of them. I know what they want before they even express it." When asked to describe his fathering, Jerome, living in a small Nova Scotia town and a stay at home father for ten years of two school aged children, chose only the following words: "Kind and gentle. Lots of hugs. Protective." The overwhelming majority of the 120 fathers interviewed for my study spoke about connection, hugging and holding their children, and knowing intuitively what each child wants. But do fathers' stories about caring add anything new to our understanding of nurturing and emotional responsibility? That is, can there be different kinds of nurturing and are these evident in fathers' narratives?

In my study, fathers' narratives draw attention to the following kinds of nurturing: its fun and playful side (Coltrane 1996; Lamb 1981; Pruett 2000); a physical and outdoors approach to caring (Brandth and Kvande 1998); promoting children's independence; and the encouragement of risk taking. The latter two aspects will be examined here.

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENCE

One aspect of father's emotional connection with children is, ironically, their role in facilitating processes of

autonomy in children. That is, most fathers in my study played a strong role in promoting the children's physical, emotional and intellectual independence. The most recurrent example that fathers pointed to as an instance of the promotion of the children's independence was how parents reacted to the child falling down. There were exceptions and variations, but the overwhelming majority of fathers said that they responded differently from their female partners when children fell down or hurt themselves, either through physical play or through exploring independently. The example of the child falling down came up on its own in so many of the first interviews that I began using it as an anecdote and having fathers as well as mothers comment on it. Denise gives the example without being asked: "If Nathan falls down, and hurts himself. I am more likely to go and pick him up right away."

The words of Shahin, an Iranian cabinetmaker and stay at home father of a 6 year-old boy, reflect those of most of the fathers in my study: "If my son falls, my wife immediately hugs him, whereas I would immediately go there and say 'no cut, no bruises - okay get on with it.'"

RISK TAKING

Closely linked with the promotion of children's independence was the encouragement of risk taking. That is, there is a relationship between encouraging the child to "get on with it" and letting the child climb just a little bit higher on a play structure or to try something else on his or her own. Burt, a self-employed sole custodial father of an 11-year-old daughter points to how his daughter learns from taking on physical risks. He compares himself to other mothers in the park: "For example, the approach to when she's going to hurt herself and what not, the mothers will try to prevent their kids from falling off the balance beam. They know it's going to hurt and they identify with the pain and the emotion. I would say - 'This is how she is going to learn'."

Bernard, an accountant and a gay father who shares custody of his son with two lesbian mothers, talks about his approach in contrast to the child's mothers: "If he were climbing a tree, the mothers would be sitting back and watching him and then yelling out that that was far enough. They would be more careful. I would be close by him helping him to make the decision about how far he can do; I would guide him through that decision."

Why are there apparent differences between mothers' and fathers' approaches to emotional responsibility? Within the narratives of fathers, as well as mothers, several reasons emerge. First, both mothers and fathers point to the residue of gendered upbringing. Second, strong beliefs are held by fathers, as well as by many mothers, that mothering and fathering are inherently different as identities. Third, many fathers speak about the social taboos around men and physical touching, both with boys and girls in the pre-teen and teen years.

GROWING UP MALE

It should not be surprising that most fathers exhibit more traditionally masculine qualities in their caring given that most boys grow up in cultures that encourage sport, physical and emotional independence, and risk taking (Connell 1995; Mac an Ghaill 1994). Alistair, a writer and father of two daughters points to how he learned on the playing fields (and arenas) of boyhood that the rules of the sports take precedence over the attention to somebody getting hurt:

> I was thinking we were out playing ball hockey and Vanessa got hurt. It is the kind of accident that happens in ball hockey, and someone gets hurt, you kind of stand around like a bunch of male apes and you kick them gently and say - well can you play or not? We're not a great nurturing bunch. Because you are learning certain things when you are playing ball hockey. Here was my daughter and she was hurt in the face, and you know I was concerned, but also this is ball hockey and you are learning certain things when you do that.

In contrasting her more cautious parenting approach with that of her husband Peter, Linda, a high school teacher says: "I don't know if boys take more physical risks than girls. I suspect that they do. Having grown up as a girl, you know you see the boys on the highest bars at the park, or riding their bikes on one wheel. I think that has some bearing on it." It remains to be seen, however, if these fathers' daughters - since they "are learning certain

things when playing ball hockey" - will also grow up to exhibit these "masculine" qualities.

A BELIEF THAT MOTHERS AND FATHERS ARE DIFFERENT AT NURTURING: "A LONGER & TIGHTER HUG"

One of the most surprising findings for me in my research was that although many fathers expressed few positive sentiments towards their ex-wives or partners, the overwhelming majority of fathers still pointed to how mothers are more protective, nurturing, and emotionally connected to children. Jack, for example, a civil servant and sole custody father of two children living in New Brunswick, reasons that although his ex-wife is an exception to his views, women are nevertheless more nurturing than men:

> I still think in general that the most common situation is that women feel an attachment, that attachment or whatever to the children. And in most cases - I don't know if this is driven from evolution or from society today - but the fact of the matter is, in most relationships, when things break down and people separate, the assumption, not only by the man, but in most cases, the assumption by the man and the women is that she will take the child. Because she's the mother, right?

Gary, a carpenter and stay at home father of three boys, speaks about how his wife Kathy, like most mothers, is more nurturing: "Well, like I said, men do nurture. We do give them a hug, tell them it's okay, sit them on our knee. But I just find with the mother, they do it more or longer, or a tighter hug."

TABOOS AROUND FATHERS' PHYSICAL TOUCHING

It may be that a mother's hug is "longer" and "tighter" because there are different social perceptions of fathers' and mothers' acceptable physicality with children. While the early years of fathering with infants and pre-school children provide fathers with ample opportunity to freely hug and hold their children, many fathers of pre-teen and teenage boys and girls noted that they were more closely scrutinized. In terms of boys, Brendan, a self-employed sole custodial father of four, exemplifies Connell's link between hegemonic masculinity and homophobia (1987; 1995; 2000). Brendan says: "I mean I hug and kiss them but it's not the same. And frankly I'm not as comfortable hugging the big guys as the little guys. Like the older guys go 'Hey man.' I mean we're not homophobic, but it's something you're raised with."

Similarly, most of the single fathers of pre-teen and teenage girls pointed to the ways in which public displays of close physical affection could be misinterpreted and specifically mentioned daughters' sleepovers as an area of tension and scrutiny. Alexander, a University professor who took two parental leaves and is now a joint custody father, reflects on how things changed when his daughter reached puberty: "When puberty arrives the entire dynamic changes. You don't think much of the physical thing that goes on with your kids until then. Embracing and hugging. I am trying to think about the parallel with a mother-son. Obviously the same thing happens to a degree, yet far less starkly."

AND YET IN PRACTICE: "MOVEMENT & FLOW"

While most fathers pointed to deep-seated differences between mothers and fathers in their caregiving styles and their perception that mothers have a greater propensity towards emotional connection, what emerged in the daily practices of care and emotional responsibility was not so stark. In everyday life, there is great deal of, in the words of one mother, "movement and flow" in emotional responsibility; these movements are, however, very much led by mothers. In two-parent households and in joint custody households where parents live apart, fathers tend to expect that the mother will be the more protective parent and that the children will turn to her when they are upset or emotionally troubled. In sole custody father households, and even in gay father households, there is often a mother somewhere (the birth mother, or a grandmother, an aunt, a close friend, a caregiver) and it is frequently expected that this mother will more readily take on the emotional responsibility for children. Yet, in practice, when mothers are not available, or where mothers let go of caring for brief or long periods, fathers do come to take on and fill that

powerful and protective space where emotional responsibility is taken on. There are times when women are unavailable, involved in other activities or where they simply need to let go. The mother moves over and the father readily or reluctantly fills that gap.

There are no clear predictors of when this "movement and flow" occurs. It plays out between parents in an infinite variety of ways. Most notably, where children are born premature or are seriously ill, where children have special needs such as learning disabilities or debilitating allergies, where a child dies, or when one parent leaves, families are thrown into situations where both mothers and fathers act in ways that challenge their own deeply felt beliefs about nurturing and emotional responsibility.

What is most revealing about the permeability of motherly and fatherly nurturing is where sole custody fathers were parenting without the children's mother. In their interviews, many found themselves admitting that they had become a different kind of father as a result of being on their own with their children. For example, Roy, a military technician and sole custodial father of a four-year-old boy says: "I probably try and give him more of a soft father than anything else. But a soft father that wants him to learn, not just have fun." Golin, an African Canadian civil servant and sole custody father of four school aged children, finds himself constantly moving between autonomy and connection: "I always have to remind myself to set boundaries. I have to remind myself to do that because I get lost in the nurturing."

DO FATHERS, THEN, TAKE ON EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN?

Primary caregiving fathers care and nurture in ways that demonstrate qualities that we would generally consider masculine (physical play, outdoors-oriented, sports, the promotion of independence and risk taking). In my research, this occurs for the majority of fathers across social class, income levels, occupations, ethnicity, and sexuality. Nevertheless three theoretical points help to widen out this discussion so as not to hold it trapped in what Barrie Thorne refers to as "the well worn grooves" of viewing and theorizing separate gendered worlds (1993, 95).

FATHERING WIDENS THE LENS OF EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is important to be clear that fathers draw attention to the differing dimensions of care and emotional responsibility. They widen the lens in terms of what we can look for when we study parental caring. Their words represent good empirical evidence for what theorists of care have been pointing to in the last few years: the intricate connections between autonomy and connection, justice and care, individual rights and relational responsibilities (Minow and Shanley 1996; Sevenhuijsen 1998, 2000). These qualities are part of the care of children, particularly as they develop and mature. The emotional responsibility for children, with its qualities of attentiveness, responsiveness and competence, involves both holding on and letting go and it is the careful letting go that fathers demonstrate particularly well.

PERCEPTUAL WEIGHT ATTACHED TO GENDER DIFFERENCES MAY AT TIMES SUPERCEDE PRACTICES

It is not at all clear that the differences to which fathers refer are differences in action or differences in their deeply held beliefs about how men should act. The "perceptual weight" attached to gender differences may at times supercede practices (Thorne 1993). This is particularly the case with caregiving because there are deeply held gendered scripts and discourses around mothering as primary caregiving and fathering as bread winning (Luxton and Corman 2001). In spite of efforts to challenge these discourses, they nevertheless remain as symbolic residues. As Sara Fenstermaker Berk highlighted nearly two decades ago, family life and labour encompass "interwoven structures of the material and the symbolic so that household labor is brought into line with an image of how it should be divided" (1985, 206).

THE LEADING ROLE THAT MOTHERS PLAY IN EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The role of the mother is a key factor in determining the ways in which fathers will take on the care and emotional responsibility of children. Some theorists within the sociology of the family have called this "maternal gate

keeping" (Allen and Hawkins 1999) pointing to how women may exclude men and may not want to give up this area of power and expertise. My research suggests that many fathers also expect mothers to take this on. Furthermore, the lead that mothers take in emotional responsibility cannot be reduced to its domestic negotiation between partners. Rather it is deeply rooted in women's profoundly felt "moral" obligations to care (Finch and Mason 1993; McMahon 1995) and men's "moral" commitment to financially provide for their families. It is also embedded in the differently embodied experiences of mothering and fathering with the unique pre-natal and post-natal connections available only to women and the socially perceived incompatibility between male adult bodies and pre-teen and teenage youth (Doucet, under review). Furthermore, women's greater propensity to take on emotional responsibility, and fathers' expectations that mothers will do so, is further facilitated by the advantage that women have in often becoming the early expert in care giving (Fox 1997 & 2001). This also combines with women's frequently greater ease with forming community networks around children, networks that assist parents in responding to their children's social needs (Doucet 2000 & 2001). In spite of all of these obstacles, fathers who have the opportunity to be a constant presence in the lives of their young children through parental leave, unpaid leave, or the experience of being a stay at home father or a single father can find within themselves the capacity for taking on, or sharing, the emotional responsibility for children.

HIGHLIGHTING A FEMINIST TENSION AND A THEORETICAL STRATEGY

Underlying my work on fathering and domestic responsibility is a positive encouragement of active fatherhood and openness to the promise and possibility of men taking on the emotional responsibility of children. I also recognize that this case study focused on 120 self-defined primary caregivers has limitations in that these were fathers who felt willing and able to tell their stories. Nevertheless, their narratives along with an emerging literature on fathering provide evidence that, in material and ideological terms, men's lives are widening to include caregiving in a more central way. My view is that, in challenging the current injustices of the politics of unpaid work and revisioning the ways in which societies' care for their young and dependent others, men should share in this important set of social responsibilities (Ehrensaft 1987; Held 1993; Ruddick 1989 & 1995).

There are, however, unexpected dangers and tensions in taking such an approach. This loomed recently when I was invited to give a public lecture about my work and to do some media-related interviews around this event. Outside of the safe spaces of academic and feminist conferences, I found myself with a sense of unease speaking about my work on fathering (Mandell 2002). The source of the discomfort was crystallized when I found that a father's rights group as far away as Australia had made a link to a newspaper article (Tam 2003) that was written on the general thrust of my public lecture.

This unexpected turn of events, and the way in which a positive light shed on fathers could be used to justify a completely different, indeed conflicting, set of claims is an example of the importance of recognizing "the epistemology of reception." As Tim May (1998, 173) points out, this "epistemology of reception" raises critical questions about "how and under what circumstances social scientific knowledge is received, evaluated, and acted upon and under what circumstances" (Grosz 1995). The epistemology of reception that awaits any positive work on fathering is that some fathers' rights groups (particularly the most militant and anti-feminist ones) may use this information to make their case that fathers are better parents than mothers are (Farrell 2001). Feminist and pro-feminist writing about fathers and men's rights movements have highlighted how these groups have taken up discourses of equality and gender-neutral parenting and use it to reinforce their claims for greater access to children, either through sole custody, joint custody and through limited support payments to their ex-wives (Boyd 2002).

This dark side of encouraging shared parenting pulls at the edges of feminist work on fathering. In recognizing the impossible task of resolving this tension, I was nevertheless keen to find a way of working through it. I thus revisited the gender equality, gender differences and essentialism debate which was particularly salient within feminist theory in the 1980s and early 1990s (Bacchi 1990 & 1991; Doucet 1995; Flax 1992; Rhode 1989 & 1990 & 1992; Scott 1988 & 1990). In sorting through theoretical and empirical conflicts between equality and difference, an interesting third position came to be struck between these two sides of the debate. Feminist scholars came to argue that not only were difference and equality not antithetical positions, but that feminist theorists needed to draw on both. In relation to women's caregiving, and the need to both value as well as critique it, Deborah Rhode (1989 & 1990) called this "taking a more contextual approach" while Joan Tronto called for a disentangling of the "feminine and feminist aspects of caring" (1989, 184). Referring to feminist struggles more widely, Luce Irigaray used the

metaphor of "occupying two positions at once" (Whitford 1994) while Diana Fuss (1989) employed "strategic essentialism" as an approach and as a strategy.

In taking up Irigaray's metaphor of the "two positions," the first position entails a close attentiveness to "context and the complexity of women's interests" in concrete situations (Rhode 1990, 204). The second position is to remain mindful of the fact that, while in some contexts, it is important to recognize gender differences, this should not translate into "absolutist categorizations of difference" but rather a recognition that "meanings are always relative to particular constructions in specified contexts" (Scott 1988, 175). Put differently, Diana Fuss argued that "essentially speaking we need to theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously, to deconstruct those spaces and keep them from solidifying" (1989, 118).

How might we employ such a theoretical approach in studying fathers? The first position of a "contextual" or strategic essentialist approach would look widely to the social positioning of women and men in most societies and the recognition that while gender equality remains a lofty goal, profound gender differences still exist in regard to caregiving. Within this "first position" we could, for example, recognize several social "facts": the invisibility of women's caregiving; that the fathers described in this study are the exception rather than the norm and that women still take on a disproportionate share of the responsibility for children; that women's earnings are still less than those of men; that domestic violence and spousal abuse do exist in some families.

The "second position" is the larger terrain of challenging the politics of unpaid work. As Selma Sevenhuijsen eloquently argues, this would entail integrating the work of care "into a wide set of social practices, not only when it concerns the combination of paid labour and informal care in the life plans of individual citizens, but also when it comes to integrating care as a consideration in the social infrastructure and institutions of civil society" (2000, 21). In concrete terms, this would include strategies to change the politics of unpaid work (Crittenden 2001; Luxton 1997) and specific measures to assist mothers and fathers to achieve greater symmetry between employment and caregiving.

Such measures would include income equity for women, greater acceptance by employers of fathers' use of parental leave, and work flexibility options for both men and women. It would also mean recognizing the possibility that men can nurture and care for children. This recognition is, however, not an unconditional one. Theoretically and politically, the feminist position I am advocating here calls for the inclusion of men where it does not work to undermine women's own caregiving interests. A feminist position on fathering must work towards challenging gendered asymmetries around care and employment, encouraging and embracing active fathering, while valuing the long historical tradition of women's work, identities, and power in caregiving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the 120 fathers who gave generously of their time and insights to the research project which informs this paper as well as to the fourteen mothers who were interviewed. The project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Many thanks to: my initial collaborators on the project proposal (Martha MacDonald, Patricia Connelly, Martin Richards and Oriel Sullivan); my excellent research assistants (Erin Mills, Phil Robinson, Maureen Flynn-Burhoe, Kelly McDonald, Chis Blahout, Pete Andrachyk and Liz Hall); and colleagues who assisted with group data analysis (Janet Siltanen, Allete Willis, Willow Scobie and Jen Budney). I am also grateful to Meg Luxton and Kate Bezanson for their comments and to the anonymous referees of *Atlantis* who reviewed my paper.

ENDNOTE

1.Analysis of the data was comprised of several components. First, research assistants carried out in-depth readings of verbatim interview transcripts on their own and then in conjunction with me, utilizing the "Listening Guide" (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Mauthner and Doucet 1998 & 2003). My layered theoretical approach, moving heuristically from individuals to social relationships to wider social structures was reflected in the four readings employed within this analytic strategy. Group discussions of common themes and issues were then conducted, followed by a lengthy process of coding (conducted mainly by myself) using the data analysis computer program, Atlas Ti.

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