

# Gender Equality and Gender Differences: Parenting, Habitus, and Embodiment (The 2008 Porter Lecture)\*

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S'appuyant sur un projet de recherche d'une durée de quatre ans concernant des pères canadiens dispensateurs de soins de première ligne ainsi que sur deux projets récents sur la première année de soins prodigués au nourrisson, l'auteure attire l'attention sur plusieurs questions théoriques importantes pour l'étude de l'égalité des sexes et de la différence entre les sexes au sujet de l'éducation des enfants. Elle propose d'abord de transférer le centre d'intérêt, qui porte en ce moment sur les *travaux* domestiques, vers les *responsabilités* familiales et communautaires. Elle soutient ensuite que le terrain politique à la base de l'étude du maternage et du paternage exige de la clarté sur la façon dont les chercheurs interprètent l'interaction constante entre l'égalité et les différences. Finalement, elle défend l'idée voulant que les responsabilités parentales, étant donné qu'il y a eu certains changements au cours du temps, demeurent influencées par le genre parce qu'elles sont profondément enracinées dans l'*habitus* et dans la personification dans des contextes spatiaux et temporels spécifiques.

Drawing on a four-year research project on Canadian primary caregiving fathers, as well two recent projects on the first year of parenting, this article highlights several theoretical and substantive issues in the study of gender equality and gender differences in parenting. First, I call for shifts from a focus on domestic *tasks* toward domestic and community-based *responsibilities*. Second, I argue that the political terrain underpinning the study of mothering and fathering calls for clarity on how researchers interpret the constant interplay between equality and differences. Third, while there has

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been some change over time, parental responsibilities remain gendered because they are deeply rooted in habitus and embodiment across specific spatial and temporal contexts.

MY INTEREST IN GENDER EQUALITY AND gender differences in parenting began nearly 20 years ago when I first read *Maternal Thinking* by feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick. Pregnant with my first child and in my first year of doctoral studies at Cambridge University, I was intrigued by how Ruddick wrote about men and mothering in the form of a noun (*men are mothers*) and as a verb (*men can and do mother*). In invoking mothering as both identity and as practice, she writes: “Briefly, a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I mean ‘her or his’” (Ruddick 1995:40). This conceptualization of mothers as a group of “genderless” persons, and the practice of mothering as one that could be equally embraced by women or men, was one that stayed with me as a constant question, preoccupation, and intellectual obsession through a period of five years, in which I wrote my doctoral dissertation and gave birth to three children.

One particular incident heightened my interest in the links between men and mothering. It was when my husband took our then 18-month-old daughter to a local moms-and-tots playgroup. While he was assured that all parents were welcome, it was also the case that each time he walked into the church basement with our daughter he felt like he was entering a club reserved for mothers only, and was viewed with a strange combination of suspicion, disdain, and, at times, congratulatory amazement. After a few weeks, he gave up going to the group, deciding that it was easier to care for our daughter on his own without this added stress of constant peer judgment. As I watched him trying to blend into this mothering venue, I was intrigued by how gender seemed to matter, at least in some community sites, when it comes to just *who* is doing the mothering.

In the years that followed, this issue of men and mothering stayed at the back of my mind. I gave birth to twins, I finished my doctorate, and I began my first tenure track job. As a professor with flexible working hours and three preschool children, I spent a lot of time walking in parks and playgrounds in the varied cities where we lived. First in Cambridge, UK, and then later in Halifax and Ottawa in Canada, I observed with each passing year that there were more and more fathers standing in schoolyards and walking with children in parks in the early morning hours. Who were these fathers? How did they come to be here? Why were there suddenly so many of them? Were they being warmly welcomed into the local versions of the moms-and-tots group that had coldly excluded my husband a decade earlier? I constantly wondered: were these men mothering?

As an emerging scholar with an interest in knowing what facilitated and constrained gender equality at home and in the work place, it became

clear to me that studying the issue of men and mothering could partly address this large puzzle around gender and social inequalities. Thus, I began to think about how to conceptualize and operationalize such a research endeavor. In grappling with this issue of whether men could be mothers or could engage in mothering, I first turned to scholars working within feminist studies and/or the sociology of the family to come up with a definition of mothering. There is considerable consensus on how mothering is linked to the *responsibility* for children. Sara Ruddick (1995), for example, defines a mother as “a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives” (p. 40), while Bonnie Fox and Diana Worts (1999) have written that “responsibility is the essence of motherhood” (p. 330). Martha McMahon (1995) posits that “it is the feelings of responsibility for children” (p. 273) and the ultimate responsibility for children that transforms women into mothers. From a broad range of empirical studies in diverse historical, sociocultural contexts, researchers have consistently argued over the past 30 years that, in spite of increases in fathering involvement, the persistent connection between women and domestic responsibility remains. That is, across time, ethnicities, social class, and culture, it is overwhelmingly mothers who organize, plan, orchestrate, and worry about children.

This deeply knotted bond between mothering and responsibilities has also been constantly commented upon in fiction as well as in classic works on mothering. Writers, such as Tillie Olsen (1961), Toni Morrison (1987), and Carol Shields (2002), have captured how mothers, individually or collectively, take on the burdens, anguish, joy, and weight of children’s lives. Adrienne Rich (1986) has written about how the “physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens” and that whatever her social location, “it is she, finally who is held accountable for her children’s health, the clothes they wear, their behavior at school, their intelligence and general development” (pp. 52–53). Jane Lazarre (1976) also depicts the weight of “this motherhood and its hold on us” (p. 211).

While I was in agreement with writers and researchers in their claim that mothering is the responsibility for children, and with the argument that domestic responsibility remains chronically gendered, I also wanted to know more about what these responsibilities looked like in practice. Moreover, I wanted to know if and how men took on such responsibilities.

In order to explore the issue of men, mothering, and domestic responsibilities, I conducted an ethnography of primary caregiving fathers at the beginning of this new millennium. At the center of my project was an in-depth qualitative interview project conducted with 118 Canadian fathers (stay-at-home dads and single fathers) and 14 heterosexual couples. As an ethnography, it drew on multiple sources from which I constructed knowledge about fathers: semistructured interviews, focus groups, couple interviews, Internet surveys, as well as a wide intellectual, academic, and personal immersion in mothering and fathering. The project was well-situ-

ated in a social and economic climate that has been characterized by rising labor participation rates of mothers with preschool children and increasing numbers of stay-at-home dads and single fathers.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of four years (2000 to 2004), 101 fathers were interviewed one to three times (62 in person, 27 by telephone, 12 in focus groups), while a further 17 participated through Internet correspondence.<sup>2</sup> The study's sample consisted of 40 single fathers (25 sole-custody, 12 joint-custody, and 3 widowers); 53 stay-at-home fathers (at home for at least one year); 13 fathers who were both single and stay-at-home fathers; 4 fathers on parental leave (including 1 father living in a same-sex partnership); and 8 shared caregiving fathers (mainly gay fathers and visible minority fathers who were recent immigrants to Canada). Fathers came from a wide range of occupations, social classes, and education levels, and included 15 fathers from visible ethnic minorities, 4 First Nations fathers, and 9 gay fathers. In addition to fathers, 14 women were interviewed through couple interviews with their stay-at-home male partners.<sup>3</sup>

This four-year project led to the publication of my book, *Do Men Mother?* When I completed the manuscript, I realized that I was only at the beginning of a long journey toward understanding how gender as well as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age play out in men's and women's identities and practices related to caring and earning. While my book touched upon several key theoretical and empirical issues within the sociology of gender, family, and masculinities, it also detailed some of the reflexive, personal, and political challenges in attempting to know and represent the everyday lives of mothers and fathers (see Doucet 2004, 2006a, 2008). In the intervening years, I have continued to actively engage in fathering research, some of which is detailed below in an expanded version of my Porter Lecture, presented at the 2008 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

In this article, I provide a brief overview of some of the theoretical, empirical, and political terrain that informed my research on men and mothering, and I highlight selected findings from my decade-long research program on gender equality and gender differences in parenting. I draw initially on my book *Do Men Mother?* and then broaden out that work with reflections gleaned from subsequent research projects on fathers and

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1. In 2007, the proportion of husband/wife families with dependent children at home (at least one under 16) who were dual-earners increased to 70 percent, the highest level since 1976. That same year, the proportion of single-earner families where the father is the stay-at-home parent increased from 2 percent (in 1976) to 10 percent in 2002 (Statistics Canada 2002) and 12.5 percent in 2007 (Statistics Canada 2008). It is also worth noting that women are primary breadwinners in nearly one-third of Canadian two-earner families (Sussman and Bonnell 2006). In 2006, one-fifth of single parents in Canada were male (Statistics Canada 2007).

2. With the exception of only three interviews, I met and conducted all of the interviews with fathers.

3. Most of the fathers (59 percent or 70/118) were found in Ottawa, while the geographical locations of the other 48 are as follows: 14 from other Ontario cities; 13 from rural Ontario; 8 from Quebec; and 13 from six other provinces. Data were analyzed using group-based analysis, the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet 1998, 2003) and the computer software AtlasTi (see Doucet 2006a, 2008).

parental leave<sup>4</sup> and fathers' transitions into new fatherhood.<sup>5</sup> Particular attention is given to habitus and embodiment, as well as to how spatial contexts and time can matter in the articulation of maternal and paternal responsibilities.

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPES: MEN AND MOTHERING**

In the past three decades, scholarly and policy interest in fathering has gone from being relatively ignored in the 1980s, a "hot topic in the 1990s" (Marsiglio 1993), to being a burgeoning field in the early years of the 21st century. Within this scholarship, there is a small but growing group of researchers who have studied shared or primary caregiving fathers (see Crittenden 2001; Deutsch 1999; Dienhart 1998; Ehrensaft 1987; Kimball 1988; Risman 1987; Smith 1998). It is interesting to note that most or all of these studies take the position that when men are taking on much or most of the family caregiving, then they are mothering. The most frequently cited proponent of the men and mothering position is, however, Sara Ruddick. One of the aims of her book, *Maternal Thinking*, was to challenge and disrupt the binary distinction between mothers and fathers and the taken-for-granted ideological and discursive lapse between mother/carer/homemaker and father/provider/breadwinner.

In the second edition of her book, Ruddick (1995) does acknowledge that there is a slight discomfiture between men and mothering, both for men "who insist that they are not mothers" (p. xiii) and for women, for whom "a genderless mother trivializes both the distinctive costs of mothering to women as well as the effects, for worse or for better, of femininity on maternal practice and thought" (p. xiii). Nevertheless, in rethinking her position six years after the first publication of her acclaimed book, Ruddick (1995) maintained that men "really can and often do in engage in mothering work" (p. xiii).

It is important to situate Ruddick's claims in the larger moral, philosophical, and political aims that inform her eloquent and persuasive writing about mothering. One of her goals is to demonstrate that the moral perspectives developed through maternal practices can form the basis for a peace politics and a broad social critique. As she puts it, "maternal thinking is a "revolutionary discourse" that has been marginal and peripheral but

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<sup>4</sup> The fathers and parental leave study is a qualitative research study (funded by an SSHRC Standard Research Grant) with 26 couples (16 from Ontario and 10 from Quebec) where the father has taken some parental leave. The study was carried out between 2004 and 2008.

<sup>5</sup> My third study on fathering (funded by an SSHRC CURA grant led by Kerry Daly and Ed Bader) is on transitions to new fatherhood for a diverse sample of fathers carried out mainly in Ontario but with some participation for fathers representing diverse regions of Canada; in this study, focus groups were conducted with 44 fathers and in-depth interviews with 21 fathers (mainly ethnic minority and immigrant fathers).

that, as a central discourse, could transform dominant, so-called normal ways of thinking” (Ruddick 1995:268) and lead to a possible “world organised by the values of caring labour” (Ruddick 1995:135). Ruddick’s larger project thus resonates with earlier work by Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977), who share similar concerns about the fundamental imbalances that occur in a society when one gender does the metaphoric “rocking of the cradle” while the other gender is engaged in “the ruling of the world” (Dinnerstein 1977:27).

This large project of attempting to radically alter gender relations is something that has preoccupied feminists for many decades. Yet, it is intriguing to note that there are opposing feminist positions on the “do men mother?” question as well as more broadly on issues of gender equality and differences in mothering and fathering. On the one hand, the argument that gender should not matter in parenting is grounded in the basic tenets of equality feminism and liberal feminism, which underpin most research on gender divisions of labor and on primary caregiving fathers (see Doucet 1995). That is, most of these studies are informed by the view that gender differences are to be avoided, and that gender equality is the gold standard to which couples should strive. As Francine Deutsch (1999) put it in her study on parenting, “Equal sharers, of course, were the stars of this study” (p. 7). Feminists taking such a position also find themselves, ironically, in the company of groups with opposing political and ideological aims, such as some fathers’ rights organizations, who espouse discourses of equality and gender-neutral parenting to reinforce their claims in child custody cases for greater access to their children (for a review, see Boyd 2003; Mandell 2002).

On the other hand, both feminists and fathers’ rights groups also unwittingly join together in taking a position that “men do not mother.” For feminists, a position that recognizes gender differences in parenting is theoretically informed by “difference feminism” or what feminist theorists have referred to as “the difference category” (Scott 1988). Particular manifestations of this position can be found in historical and contemporary arguments for wages for housework and the valuing of women’s unpaid work, as well as feminists working on issues of child custody and divorce who accept and reinforce caregiving differences, largely based on the unequal social and political positioning of women and men. Fathers’ rights groups also fall into this category. These include groups formed under the umbrella of the Christian Right, such as the Promise Keepers, and some sections of the Fatherhood Responsibility Movement, which emphasize differences in both the practical roles and the nurturing natures of women and men (for an overview of these movements, see Gavanoas 2002; Messner 1997).

Clearly, positions on gender differences and equality in relation to parenting are not uniform. Feminists find themselves on different sides of this issue, and some of this disagreement has to do with whether men and women are living together in cooperative and loving relationships, or in

acrimonious and conflictual relationships. There are high political and ideological stakes attached to the issue of men and mothering. As a source of women's joy and power—and their social inequity with men—mothering is a contested terrain, for both women and men.

My own choice, as I navigated this difficult social and political terrain through four years of researching and writing about men and mothering, was to straddle an approach that advocated gender equality while recognizing gender differences (see Doucet 2004, 2006a). Theoretically, I drew on work first developed in the 1990s in French, Italian, and American feminist theory (e.g., Bock and James 1992; Bono and Kemp 1991) which calls for the constant interplay between gender equality and gender differences, a focus on how context (space, time, and relationships) matters in how equality and differences interact (see Thorne 1993), and analytical shifts from equality to differences, from differences to disadvantages, and to “the difference difference makes” (Rhode 1989:313; see also Rhode 1990). Drawing parallels with recent Canadian work that resonates with this approach, it is one “not based on essential differences between men and women, but rather on social patterns of caring” (Boyd 2003:4; see also Mandell 2002; Pulkingham 1994).

In exploring the specific question “do men mother?” in my study of men as primary caregivers, my research required not only a wide theoretical approach to men and mothering; it also needed to settle on a definition of maternal responsibilities that could be translated into empirical research questions.

## RESEARCHING MEN AND MOTHERING

For a definition of maternal responsibilities, I drew directly on Ruddick's (1995) threefold conception of maternal demands—“preservation, growth, and social acceptability” (pp. 17–25)—and explored them, not as demands, but as responsibilities: emotional, community and “moral.”<sup>6</sup> I investigated if, how, and when men took on these responsibilities, as well as the conditions and social contexts that promoted fathering and responsibility. A brief description of each responsibility and selected findings are presented below.

### *Emotional Responsibility*

A first maternal responsibility is rooted in a vast body of feminist work on the ethic of care in which care is defined partly as “knowledge about others’

<sup>6</sup> My understanding of parental responsibilities builds on the well-cited work of leading fatherhood scholars who have argued that it is important to recognize a broad range of fathering practices, including: meeting children's needs through *interaction* (direct engagement); *accessibility* (physical and psychological presence and availability); and *responsibility* (indirect childrearing tasks such as planning and scheduling) (Lamb et al. 1987). My own work widens this conceptualization of fathering involvement into three childcare responsibilities, recognizing that the first two tasks also have dimensions of responsibility woven into them, partly because they also require cognition and commitment (see Palkovitz 1997).

needs,” which the carer acquires through “attentiveness to the needs of others” (Tronto 1989:176–78; see also Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2003). It refers to everyday conceptions of care as nurturing, and is akin to Susan Walzer’s (1998) discussion of “parental consciousness” and “thinking about the baby” (p. 15). The assertion that men can take on emotional responsibility is confirmed by a large body of research attesting to how fathers can be nurturing, affectionate, and responsive to their children (see Dienhart 1998; Dowd 2000; Lamb 2000). While these findings about fathers’ capable nurturing appear in my study too, my research also highlights how fathers draw attention to other kinds of nurturing, three of which are mentioned below.

First, my work confirms many cross-cultural longitudinal studies that have demonstrated that fathers use play as a way of connecting with their infants and young children (Coltrane 1996; Lamb 2000). Second, the overwhelming majority of fathers in my study referred to how they, in the words of Aaron, “made a point of going out every day” with their children, doing a lot of physical activities, and being very involved with their children’s sports (see Brandth and Kvande 1998; Plantin, Månsson, and Kearney 2003). A third form of paternal nurturing is found in how fathers actively promote their children’s independence. Recurring, everyday examples in fathers’ accounts include strongly encouraging their kids to be involved in housework, make their own lunches, tie their own laces (shoes or skates), and carry their own backpacks to school. As expressed by Alistair, who stayed at home for a year with his first daughter: “I might be less likely to go out of my way to help the kids if it’s something they can do themselves.”

### *Community Responsibility*

A second maternal responsibility is community responsibility, which connects the domestic realm to the community and involves social networking, coordinating, balancing, negotiating, and orchestrating those others who are involved in children’s lives. This concept of community responsibility appears in varied guises and with differing names in a wide body of feminist work on families and households. Concepts such as “kin work” (Di Leonardo 1987; Stack 1974), “servicing work” (Balbo 1987), “motherwork” (Collins 1994), and “household service work” (Sharma 1986) each describe, in assorted ways, the domestic work which goes on beyond the more commonly identified spheres of housework and childcare (see also Hansen 2005; Hessing 1993).

One avenue for exploring the issue of fathers and community responsibility is to look to their creation and maintenance of community networks, as these networks often establish relations that tie into all other aspects of community responsibility. More specifically, community playgroups are one of the main forums in which parents of young children make connections with other parents. Yet, many stay-at-home fathers face difficulties gaining full acceptance in these playgroups (see Smith 1998; Doucet 2000, 2006a). For example, Peter, a stay-at-home father of two young boys, highlighted



how community networking has “gotten easier” over the course of being home for six years; nevertheless, he added that “to me as a man, that was a pretty alien environment and it continues to be.”

Thus, how do fathers network around children, and how do they facilitate or promote children’s social development? While fathers are beginning to form networks as they stand in sites where children cluster—schoolyards, playgrounds, and at the doors of music or karate lessons—there are several other ways that fathers form networks, two of which are mentioned here.

First, fathers connect with mothers in extra-domestic spaces. If many fathers find it difficult, at least initially, to attend mother-dominated community playgroups, other fathers readily offer their own observations on the possible tensions involved with meeting up in other women’s homes. Many stay-at-home fathers mentioned this as an issue for themselves, for their female friends, and for the spouses involved. Aaron pointed to the challenges involved in the fact that “I work in a female world,” while Owen, at home for 10 years, said: “I would go to other women’s houses. But I was always conscious of how it would be read.”

A second venue for fathers’ networking is around their children’s sports. While typically not included in studies that look at parents and networking around children, this is a social site through which fathers comfortably connect with each other. While fathers are increasingly becoming involved in children’s sports activities, many men nevertheless pointed to how the “alien environment” of mother-dominated social settings, particularly with young children, still leaves them feeling either excluded or marginalized. Some of these sentiments relate, in turn, to the “moral” responsibilities of parenting.

### *Moral Responsibility*

The “moral” responsibilities of mothering, and of fathering, embrace the former two responsibilities, but they are also rooted in the wider meanings, ideologies, and discourses through which men and women come to take on care work. They relate to people’s identities as “moral” beings and how they feel they ought to and should act in society; moral responsibility is rooted in symbolic interactionism, with its interactionist sense as a basis for self-definition (Daly 1996, 2002; Finch and Mason 1993; McMahan 1995). As argued by Finch and Mason (1990), taking on caregiving within households is intricately connected to “people’s identities as moral beings” which “are being constructed, confirmed and reconstructed—identities as a reliable son, a generous mother, a caring sister or whatever it might be” (p. 170). That is, any individual is always “actively working out his or her own course of action” from within a social and cultural location and “with reference to other people” (Finch and Mason 1993:61).

This “reference to other people” occurs especially in relation to earning and caring for fathers. Each and every stay-at-home father interviewed in

my study of fathers as primary caregivers referred in some way to the moral responsibilities he felt weighing on him to be a family breadwinner or to earn at least some part of the family wages. As expressed by Andy, an Italian-Canadian stay-at-home father of two: "The only problem I have is finances, not pulling my weight financially because that was ingrained in me. The man goes out to work and brings in the money."

In addition to fathers being judged on their earning capacity within families, they are also sometimes judged negatively as carers. Within communities, there is a covert level of surveillance as men are scrutinized as carers of children. While many examples within fathers' interviews occur across different parenting sites, the most frequently mentioned were women-centered postnatal venues (e.g., community centers and schoolyards), and girls' sleepovers. With regard to the latter, single fathers of teenage girls feel particularly scrutinized. Girls' sleepovers are the window through which many men express their awareness of the fact that they have to be very careful around preteen and teenage girls. As Ryan, a military general and sole-custody father of two, put it: "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."

Despite many good intentions by parents to alter gender relations, men's and women's lives as carers and earners are cut with deeply felt, moral and social scripts about what women and men should do within and outside of household life. Although there has been movement around these moral dilemmas (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Gerson 2002), they nevertheless exist as strong ideological scripts to mothering and fathering.

## DISCUSSION

From my study of fathers as primary caregivers, with interviews with over 100 fathers and 14 heterosexual couples, many reasons emerged for gender divisions in parental responsibilities. Key among these were: hegemonic masculinities (see Doucet 2006a, 2005); embodiment (Doucet 2006b); maternal gatekeeping (Doucet 2008); gendered friendship patterns; habitus; and gender ideologies. In the years since my book *Do Men Mother?* was published, I have continued to elaborate on some of these explanations, both theoretically and empirically, from my recent research with mothers and fathers, including interviews with a further 96 fathers and 26 mothers. Two explanations for continuing gender differences in parenting are further touched on below. These are: first, habitus, and second, intersections between embodiment, space, and time.

### *Fathering and Habitus: "I Grew Up as a Guy"*

The tendency for fathers to exhibit traditionally masculine qualities in their enactment of emotional and community responsibilities is not surprising

given that most boys grow up in cultures that encourage sport, physical and emotional independence, and risk-taking (Connell 2001; Messner 2002). Devon, a technician and a sole-custody father of a seven-year-old son, said that he promoted risk-taking because he “grew up as a guy. We did dangerous things. That’s what little boys do.” In contrast to Devon, as well as to her own husband Peter, Linda takes a more cautious parenting approach, rooted partly in having “grown up as a girl”:

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.

Traditional sociological explanations for such statements point to these as evidence of gendered socialization. Yet, it is more than this. As Patricia Yancey Martin (2003) has recently written, gendering processes are deeply ingrained so that they “become almost automatic”:

Gendered practices are learned and enacted in childhood and in every major site of social behavior over the life course, including in school, intimate relationships, families, workplaces, houses of worship, and social movements. In time, like riding a bicycle, gendering practices become almost automatic. (P. 352)

What Martin is referring to is closely aligned with Pierre Bourdieu’s well-worn concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). In *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu 1990:53fn), he argues that the “concept of the habitus designate(s) a system of acquired, permanent, generative dispositions” which structures the “fields” of social life. The habitus as “a product of history produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history . . . [it] ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices . . . more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu 1990:54). Through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu maintains that, rather than being determined by the structures (including the family) in which we are born and raised, there is a common sense, taken-for-granted way in which we feel inclined toward one set of behaviors rather than another. Metaphorically, the working of habitus is like a “fish in water . . . it takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:127).

My argument here is that the gendered habitus of “growing up as a girl” or “growing up as a guy” is informed by deeply ingrained assumptions about gendered embodiment and about women as primary carers and men as secondary caregivers. There are certainly variations in how this plays out across class, ethnicity, age, and generation, and there is increasing evidence that these ideologies and norms are changing over time. Nevertheless, beneath the surfaces of everyday practices, there is still a constant pull back to those primary assumptions. In my study of fathers as primary caregivers, as well as in my recent study on fathers and parental leave, there is a strong

sense that women feel guilty about leaving their child to go back to work and men feel guilty about leaving their work to care for their child. Put differently, mothers feel pulled toward care and connection while fathers feel pulled toward paid work and autonomy.

While Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to everyday habituated activities of thinking, talking, gesturing, and moving, it also has embodied dimensions. That is, "(t)he way people treat their bodies reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus" (Bourdieu 1984:190). This is further explored below.

### *Fathering, Embodiment, Space, and Time*

Fathers' narratives reveal that there are embodied differences in parenting, as expressed through fathers' use of physical play with infants and toddlers and athletic activities with older children. There are also different social perceptions of fathers' and mothers' acceptable physicality with children. While the early years of fathering infants and preschool children provide fathers with ample opportunity to freely hug and hold their children, many fathers of preteen and teenage boys and girls note that they are more closely scrutinized. In relation to boys, Brendan, a sole-custodial father of four, drew links between hegemonic masculinity and homophobia (Connell 1995, 2001) when he said: "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 preteen and teenage girls pointed to how public displays of close physical affection could be misinterpreted. Henry, a sole-custodial father, reflected on how he was always "nervous" and "conscious" of what he did around his 13-year-old daughter because his actions could be misinterpreted: "As a single dad, all I have to do is breathe at the wrong time, or say the wrong thing in front of the wrong person. I am very conscious of that."

The underlying theoretical explanations for such statements can be found in a growing feminist and sociological literature on embodiment. Specifically, my approach to embodiment is informed by Chris Shilling's (2003) evocative mapping of theoretical positions on the body, with my own being situated between "phenomenological and action-oriented studies of the lived body" and "structuration theories of the body" (p. 66). In relation to the former, I draw on Merleau-Ponty's (1962, 1968) well-cited concept of "body subjects." I draw especially on his ideas on the indivisibility of mind and body, human beings as embodied social agents, and human perception as intrinsically embodied. In his words: "we are in the world through our body, and ... we perceive that world within our body" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:206; for a fuller discussion, see Doucet 2006b).

In my research on fathers as primary caregivers, I have noted that when a father is attending to children—by cuddling, feeding, reading, bathing, or talking to them—gendered embodiment can be largely negligible. At other times, and in other spaces, however, the social gaze upon men's movements with children is tinged with suspicion and surveillance as men move in female-dominated community spaces. That is, there are intersections between embodiment, time, and social spaces. The social sites where embodiment of fathers matters include recent versions of the moms-and-tots groups (community playgroups), schoolyards, classrooms, and other female-dominated venues, as well as instances when single fathers host girls' sleepover parties. From my recent research on new fathers, including fathers who take some parental leave, men expressed how they feel especially scrutinized as carers of infants. As one father put it: "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."

It is important to note that, theoretically, bodies should also be viewed as contingent objects whose effects vary across particular social sites and over time. As argued by many feminist scholars, there is no "'true' nature [of the body] since it is a process and its meanings and capacities will vary according to its context" (Gatens 1996:57). Part of this context includes *time* and the way in which ideologies, practices, and policies intersect and change over time. In Canada, the situation for fathers has changed gradually with each passing year so that the initial discomfort of joining the "complex maternal worlds" (Bell and Ribbens 1994) of early childrearing has given way to a slow increase in the visibility and acceptability of fathers in these settings. Specifically, two social changes have occurred in the past five to 10 years in Canada that will likely lead to a continued increase in the comfort level of fathers on the social landscapes of parenting. First, my research on new fathers in Canada reveals that there has been a dramatic increase from Canadian parenting resource centers in programs directed toward assisting fathers in making connections with their children as well as with other fathers (Bader and Doucet 2005). These programs are also specifically tailored toward the needs and conditions of diverse groups of fathers.

A second large change in Canadian policy over the past 10 years is the extension of Canadian parental leave in 2000 (from six months to one year) and the subsequent five-fold increase (from 2 percent to 10–11 percent) in the uptake of parental leave by fathers (Marshall 2003, 2008; Pérusse 2003).<sup>7</sup> This early involvement of fathers in caregiving could arguably lead

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7. The rate of fathers taking parental leave actually jumped to 23 percent of fathers in 2006. However, this increase is explained by the dramatic increase in Quebecois fathers taking leave under the new regime whereby the Quebec government manages its own program and offers fathers three to five weeks of nontransferable leave ("daddy weeks") (Marshall 2008). The issue of gender quality and differences in parental leave policy and fathers' uptake of leave in Canada and Quebec is a topic that warrants further investigation, but is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore (see Doucet, McKay, and Tremblay 2009; McKay and Doucet 2008).

to greater fathering competence and confidence with infants and, thus, to changes in emotional, community and moral parental responsibilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on key findings from my research on primary caregiving fathers (2000 to 2004) and my book *Do Men Mother?* and pointing to new results emerging from recent research projects (2004 to 2008), I offer five concluding points. First, while there has been much excellent work on the gender division of household tasks, the issue of *responsibility* is the one area where gender differences have stubbornly persisted in mothering and fathering. A focus on responsibilities reveals how gender differences in parenting are deeply embedded in habitus, “moral” identities, embodiment, and in diverse spatial and time-framed contexts. Moreover, understandings of the meanings and enactment of parental responsibilities also call for innovative methodologies for accessing these issues, such as participatory and creative methods (see Doucet 2001, 2006a) as well as longitudinal research that studies households over time.

Second, the assumption that gender differences are negative features in domestic life requires greater attention. The large majority of studies conducted by feminist scholars assume that gender differences are to be avoided and that couples espousing discourses or practices of equality are, as Deutsch (1999) argues, “the stars” of such studies. Aside from methodological and epistemological challenges of accessing people’s everyday lives, and the need to distinguish between what people *say* they do and what they *actually do*, there is also the issue of how gender difference may be more salient in particular sites and times. Moreover, as argued in this article, making arguments for gender equality can inadvertently work against feminist aims of achieving gains for particular groups of women.

Third, a key argument that continues to emerge from my work is that listening to, and theorizing from, fathers’ narratives through a maternal lens means that paternal forms of nurturing are ignored or obscured (see also Stueve and Pleck 2003). For example, with regard to the issue of emotional responsibility, a maternal lens misses the ways in which fathers promote children’s independence, and their playfulness, physicality, and outdoors approach to the care of young children are viewed only as second-best, or invisible, ways of caring. In terms of community responsibility, the use of a maternal lens means that we overlook some of the creative ways that fathers are beginning to form parallel networks to those that have traditionally existed by and for mothers. Further, we also underestimate how fathers are now heavily involved in their children’s athletic activities and how this may well be a dominant way that men network with other fathers.

A fourth point is that, while I am arguing for the importance of attending to some differences between mothers and fathers’ enactments of

parental responsibilities, these also vary across class, ethnicity, and sexuality. The particularities of these issues for distinct groups of fathers over generational and biographical time call for greater research attention. In Canada, this call has begun to be taken up by the Father Involvement Research Alliance. This is a national consortium of researchers who have been studying diverse groups of fathers for the past five years across Canada, focusing on how programs, policies, social contexts, and experiences are different and similar for teen fathers, divorced fathers, new fathers, gay fathers, Aboriginal fathers, and fathers of ethnic minorities (for an overview, see <http://www.fira.ca/>).

Finally, while, theoretically speaking, it is useful to deconstruct mothering and fathering as distinct practices and identities, I argue that they nevertheless recur at the level of community and interhousehold practices as embodied identities, and within social relations and discourses. As captured in Rich's (1986) oft-repeated observation, there is a distinction between the experience and the institution of mothering. As further detailed by Selma Sevenhuijsen, motherhood as an institution is expressed differently from fatherhood in "cultural representations, ideals of child-rearing, legal discourses, medical-technological inventions, the regulation of labour and care, norms of professionalism and the possibility of being able to combine these with care, a new canon of novels about the relation between mothers and daughters (and daughters and fathers) and, last but not least, the way in which care is valued as an aspect of the human condition" (Sevenhuijsen 1998:26; see also DiQuinzio 1999).

One of the main conclusions emanating from my research on gender equality and gender differences in parenting is that, rather than using a maternal lens and comparing fathers to mothers, what is required are novel ways of listening to, and theorizing about, fathers' approaches to parental responsibilities and how they are radically reinventing what it means to be a man and a father in the twenty-first century. This research program on fathering from a diversity of men's perspectives, which is still in its infancy in Canada, will require the creative efforts of many Canadian and international researchers over the next decade.

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