'There's a huge gulf between me as a male carer and women': Gender, domestic responsibility, and the community as an institutional arena

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the persistent link between women and domestic responsibility, a link that has been heavily documented and yet much less frequently theorised. Drawing on a qualitative research project with a 'critical case' study sample of couples trying to share housework and childcare in Britain in the early 1990s the paper argues that part of this puzzle linking women and domestic responsibility can be addressed by adopting wider definitions of domestic responsibility and of community. While domestic responsibility is often conceived as family labour that occurs within families/households, it also has inter-household, inter-institutional and community dimensions. With regard to a wider conceptualisation of the community, the paper argues that the community is more than a social institution; it is an* institutional arena *within which families/households, inter-household relations, community-based social networks and a wide array of community activities occur. The overall findings and implications of the research presented in this paper are three-fold. First, gendered socially constructed norms and gendered community-based social networks are highlighted as important factors that help to account for the persistent link between women and domestic responsibility. Second, taking cues from research carried out in Third World and low-income Western communities, it is important to shift research agendas on domestic divisions of labour to focus not only on intra-household divisions but also inter-household and intra-community relations. Third, the need is highlighted for greater attention to the links between socially constructed norms on masculinities, men's friendships and domestic responsibility.*

KEY WORDS *Gender; domestic responsibility; community; inter-household relations; masculinities; social networks*

RESUMEN *Este articulo explora la conexión persistente entre las mujeres y la responsabilidad doméstica. Se ha documentado mucho veces esta conexión pero se ha teorizado muy pocas veces. Se hace uso de una investigación cualitativa con un estudio tipo 'caso crítico' del cual proviene una muestra de parejas que intentan compartir las tareas domésticas y el cuidado de los niños, y se sostiene que se puede tratar parte de este enigma que une a las mujeres con la responsabilidad doméstica si se adoptan unas definiciones mas amplias de la responsabilidad doméstica y de la comunidad. Mientras que a menudo se suele concebir la responsabilidad doméstica como trabajo familiar que tiene lugar dentro de las familias/los hogares, también tiene dimensiones inter-hogares, inter-institucionales y comunitarias. Con respecto a una concep-*

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tualización mas amplia de la comunidad, este artículo sostiene que la comunidad es más que una institución social; es un ruedo institucional *(Goetz, 1997) dentro del cual se encuentran las familias/los hogares, las relaciones inter-hogares, las redes sociales basadas en la comunidad y una amplia gama de actividades comunitarias. Tienen tres aspectos las conclusiones e implicaciones globales que se presentan en este artículo. Primero, se ponen de relieve las connotaciones de género, que se evidencian en las normas sociales y en las redes sociales basadas en la comunidad, como factores importantes que ayudan a explicar la conexión persistente entre las mujeres y la responsabilidad doméstica. Segundo, es importante seguir el ejemplo de investigaciones realizadas en el tercer mundo y en las comunidades occidentales de bajos ingresos, y cambiar el enfoque de las investigaciones de las divisiones domésticas del labor para centrarse no sólo en las* divisiones *entre el hogar sino también en las* relaciones *entre los hogares y entre la comunidad. Tercero, realzo la necesidad de prestar mas atencion a los vínculos entre las normas sociales sobre las masculinidades, las amistades entre los hombres y la responsabilidad doméstica.*

PALABRAS CLAVES   *Genero; la responsibilidad domestica; la communidad; relaciones inter-hogares; las masculinidades*

Introduction

It is 1993 and Sean Morris [1] is standing at the nursery school gates waiting for his 4-year-old son Luke to come out at lunchtime. Sean stands in between the other mothers, talking to his younger son Oliver who sits in his pushchair, while he also periodically peers at the nursery door, looking for the line of children which will soon appear. Sean, who has been a full-time carer for his two young sons for a year and a half, notices again how, there in the front yard of the nursery school, there's 'a sort of *female agenda* that women very readily click into'. Later he describes to me what he perceives as one of the significant differences between the women and men whom he sees dropping off and collecting their children from the school. On the one hand, there are 'all the mothers who immediately sort of *relate* to one another' whereas the men 'don't even *talk* to each other'. He does note, however, that 'there's one man who talks to me'. Sean says:

> But we do *men's talk.* About work. We don't talk about childcare. It's so entrenched on the whole that you don't talk about the kids. We do it a little bit, you know, 'How's so and so and how's Luke? Oh all right. And how are you getting on with the book?' [laughs]. It doesn't happen *naturally.* I don't know.

With the exception of this one man with whom there is the occasional conversation, Sean says: 'Some people don't want to talk to me. I'm not always sure what I should be saying to them.' He feels that he, and other men, 'are slightly embarrassed' or 'we're operating in an agenda that we're not used to'. His overall feeling is that: 'I still think that the whole thing about being a male trying to make networks is difficult.'

Sean's experience, not atypical for men who are primary caregivers of

young children, takes place within a larger subject area that has come to be called 'gender divisions of domestic labour'. The story line within this subject area is now a fairly well known one. The story is told through more than two decades of international research findings on gender divisions of household labour which provides irrefutable evidence that women continue to take on most of the household's work and, more specifically, that they remain '*responsible*' for household life (e.g. Berardo, Shehan & Leslie, 1987; Berk, 1985; Borchorst, 1990; Brannen & Moss, 1991; Fox, 1997; Hochschild, 1989; Leira, 1990). In households, women take on domestic responsibility regardless of the number of hours worked, or whether they work less, more or equal amounts to their spouses/partners. While men have increased their contribution to a wide range of domestic tasks as well as the time expended on domestic labour, there has been little change in the gender division of domestic responsibility. That is, while men *do* more, they do not take on an equal or comparable share of the worrying, strategising, planning and juggling of the pressures and demands of young children's lives. Within this story there is thus a puzzle that has yet to be solved. *Why is there is a persistent link between women and domestic responsibility?*

In seeking to solve this puzzle most researchers have focused on explanations which highlight the links between material, ideological and discursive factors operating within, and between, families and work. For example, frequently cited factors include: 'gender ideologies' (e.g. Hochschild, 1989; Livingston & Luxton, 1989; Morris, 1988, 1990, 1995); ideologies of motherhood, fatherhood and 'traditional family life' (e.g. Brannen & Moss, 1991; Luxton, 1997); men's greater earnings (Brannen & Moss, 1991; Moen, 1989); little recognition by the state and employers of men's roles as fathers (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987; Lewis, Izraeli & Hootsmans, 1992); the construction of part-time jobs for women (Beechey & Perkins, 1987; Jenson, 1996); women's earnings and work viewed as secondary within households (Brannen & Moss, 1987a, 1991); and minimal childcare provision (Melhuish & Moss, 1991). While all of these factors are important in explaining the persistence of traditional gendered divisions of labour, they concentrate primarily on the interconnected sites and social institutions of work and family while according much less attention to how inter-household relations and community-based processes act as constraints on women's and men's efforts to balance or share the division of domestic labour (but see Morris, 1985). This paper argues that part of this puzzle linking women and domestic responsibility can be addressed by according greater emphasis to the community as an *institutional arena* (Goetz, 1997) within which households, inter-household relations, community-based social networks and a wide array of community activities occur. In particular the gendered norms and informal rules informing and structuring communities will be highlighted as important factors which help to account for the persistent link between women and domestic responsibility.

This paper develops three key arguments. First, after briefly detailing the theoretical and methodological approach employed in this research, I outline a wide conceptualisation of domestic responsibility which includes greater atten-

tion given to how this responsibility is located both within families/households as well as between families/households, between social institutions (work, families and the state) and within the community (see also Doucet, in press, 2001). Second, drawing on research from the field of gender and international development studies, I argue that the community is an institutional arena which is comprised of formal and informal rules and norms, some of which relate to issues of motherhood and fatherhood, masculinities and domestic responsibility. Finally, drawing on a qualitative research study carried out in Britain between 1992 and 1994, the paper highlights how gendered community norms and networks exert pressure on women and men who attempt to stray from more traditional gendered norms and rules in relation to the care of young children.

Theoretical and methodological approach

Theoretical approach

Theoretically, the research is located in, and informed by, several theoretical debates including: household studies with its emphasis on highlighting intra-household divisions of resources (Brannen & Wilson, 1987; Morris, 1988, 1990 Vogler & Pahl, 1994; Whitehead, 1981); research documenting the persistence of gender divisions of labour (e.g. Brannen & Moss, 1991; Morris, 1990; Pahl, 1984); feminist work on gender equality and gender differences (Bacchi, 1990; Bock & James, 1992; Doucet, 1995b; Meehan & Sevenhuijsen, 1991; Rhode, 1989, 1990; Scott, 1988) and research on caring work which focuses on the relationships that exist between households, kin and community (e.g. Collins, 1990; Di Leonardo, 1987; Finch & Mason, 1993; Hessing, 1993). Further, the work is informed by a symbolic interactionist approach, through which I accord significance to the meanings people attach to their actions and how they, in turn, interpret their actions in light of the observations and judgements of other people (Barker, 1994; Blumer, 1969; Finch, 1989; Finch & Mason, 1993).

Methods and methodologies

The qualitative research project which informs this paper was conducted with a 'critical case study' of 23 British heterosexual couples who lived and worked in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, in the south-east of England. They all had dependent children and they identified themselves as 'consciously attempting to *share* the work and responsibility for housework and childcare'. Three important points are worth highlighting in the choice of this type of sample. First, I was not looking for couples who claimed to be involved in '50/50 parenting' (Kimball, 1988) or 'co-parenting' (Ehrensaft, 1987) as I was interested in household *variation* in the *meaning* and *structure* of sharing with regard to household work. Second, the emphasis is on socially situated '*choice*' rather than necessity, such as in cases of male unemployment, since research suggests that the latter most often revert back to traditional divisions of labour once the man

is employed full-time once again (Morris, 1990; Radin, 1988; Russell, 1983, 1987; Wheelock, 1990). Finally, my initial interest in speaking to these couples was to investigate where gender differences were most resistant to change in households who were attempting to minimise strict gender divisions of labour. My view was that if these couples were unable to create new patterns of household labour, less defined and restricted by gender, then it would be apparent how deep rooted these processes were in the wider population.

The couples were found through a combination of snowball sampling and criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) through varied community, employment, and parenting organisations in the villages, towns and small cities of south-eastern England. The number of children in each household ranged from one to four and the ages of children were between 1 year and 25 years of age. The ages of the individuals in the sample ranged from 26 to 51 years of age with the average age being *38 years* of age. I sought couples whose first child was at least 1 year old as I was aware of difficulties experienced in the early 'transition to parenthood' period (Entwistle & Doering, 1980).

Although the individuals in the sample represented a broad range of occupations, they were largely 'middle class', with 87% ($n = 20$) of the sample having educational qualifications, technical or academic, beyond secondary school [2]. Average individual earnings were £16 800 (approximately 26 300 euros or US$27 600 per annum). With the exception of two men (both stay-at-home fathers with occasional pieces of work), all of the men worked full-time (with time ranging from 37.5 to 50 hours per week). Women were almost evenly divided between part-time work (11/23 worked between 12 and 30 hours a week) while 12/23 were full-time (between 37.5 and 50 hours per week). The overwhelming majority of jobs (28/46) were found in the public sector (schools, colleges and university, nursing, social services, health services) while the remaining 18 individuals were in jobs which were in the private sector (banking and financial, insurance, sales, law, publishing, engineering).

The sample was also predominantly white, with two persons from India, one Spanish, and four Welsh participating. While these factors represent limitations of the sample, the gendered findings on domestic responsibility do have relevance across class and ethnicity lines owing to the well-documented gender divisions of domestic labour that transcend distinctions based on class, race and ethnicity (Broman, 1991, 1988; Williams, 1990; Wilson, Tolson, Hinton & Kiernan, 1990).

At least three interviews were conducted in each household; one joint interview with the man and women together and at least one individual interview with each man and woman. The joint interview revolved around a creative participatory technique called the 'Household Portrait' (see Doucet, 1996, in press, 2001; Dunne, 1997) and the Individual Interviews explored personal and employment histories through the utilisation of the 'Life Line' technique (Doucet, 1995a) and 'Mapping Social Networks' (Ribbens, 1994). Data were analysed using an adapted version of the voice-centred relational method (see Doucet, 1998; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Literature review

Domestic responsibility and community-based responsibility

Drawing on a number of studies on domestic life, including my own research (Doucet, 1995a), I would argue that there are at least three interrelated forms of domestic responsibility in households with young children. First, it is import-ant to recognise a responsibility which women have increasingly come to contribute to or take exclusive responsibility for. This is the financial responsi-bility for domestic life (see Siltanen, 1994). This responsibility links the social institutions of families and work and, while both women and men may share this responsibility, most research on dual-earner couples point to how men's work is often viewed as primary and women's secondary (e.g. Bernard, 1981; Brannen & Moss, 1987a, 1991). As indicated earlier in the paper, all of the men in this particular study worked full-time, with the exception of two men who were temporarily full-time family caregivers (Sean and Adam). Women's employ-ment, on the other hand, was split almost evenly between full-time and part-time work (11/23 part-time and 12/23 full-time) [3].

A second kind of domestic responsibility within families/households is that of 'emotional responsibility' for young children. This entails the identification of children's needs and an *immediate* responding to these needs. It involves skills which include, among other things, '*knowledge* about others' needs' which the carer acquires through 'an *attentiveness* to the needs of others' (Tronto, 1989, pp. 176–178). A large body of literature on care (e.g. Graham, 1983, 1991), the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993, 1995); maternal practices (Ruddick, 1989) and the sociology of emotions (e.g. Duncombe & Marsden, 1995) have in varied ways contributed towards theoretical and empirical work on emotional responsibility (see Doucet, in press, 2000, in press, 2001). Emotional responsi-bility is captured, for example, in the words of three research respondents who describe this responsibility for children in the following ways: 'just being there' (Mark); 'being in tune with his rhythm' (Adam) and 'you just have to be there, chatting to him whenever he needs it' (Natalie). While women typically take on most of the emotional responsibility for children and significant others, my research on shared caregiving couples joins a large body of research produced over the last two decades, which argues that fathers can be just as nurturing, affectionate, responsive and active with their children (i.e. Lamb, 1981; Radin, 1988; Russell, 1983). It is now well documented that fathers who are actively involved in caring for their children can develop the appropriate skills which enable them to partake in the emotional responsibility for children.

Third, and most importantly for the purposes of this particular paper, domestic responsibility also comprises a community-based responsibility which includes inter-familial (inter-household) and inter-institutional responsibility. That is, the responsibility for domestic life and for children involves relation-ships between households as well as between the social institutions of families/ households, schools, the state, and the workplace. Within and between households, and other social institutions, parents share the responsibility for

their children with others who take on caring practices—caregivers, other parents, neighbours, kin, childcare experts, nurses and doctors, teachers, librarians, music teachers, soccer coaches and so on. According to one research respondent, Saxon, the taking on of community-based responsibility means that one 'is very good at saying that we should do this and getting it organised and making it happen and finding people to do this, that or the other'.

In concert with a multitude of recent international studies on domestic labour, my study demonstrated how, in spite of efforts to share most aspects of household life and labour, all 23 women interviewed still took on all, or the overwhelming bulk of, *community-based responsibility*. That is, they initiated, planned, organised, and managed the bulk of short-, medium- and long-range planning between households as well as between households and other social institutions. Even in three households where men were doing most of the daytime caring [4], women orchestrated the community-based contexts within which men cared. One example is the case of Jessie, a social worker and Sean, full-time caregiver of their two young boys. While he does more of the daily and weekly care of the children, *she* does the planning and organising of their lives and activities. On arranging Luke's nursery and school, she says: 'I did the arranging of nursery and I'm the one who contacted the school'. With regard to remembering to buy nappies and other baby supplies, she says (to Sean): 'I mean you're the one who's here all the time and I have to say, can you go to the shop and get some nappies.' She also takes Luke to the dentist 'because Sean won't go to the dentist' and she organises birthday parties because 'I think it's important for the child' and 'I thought Luke should have one.' As for the children's sporting activities, she says: 'I've rung Tumble Tots and Sean is going to take them.' In attempting to understand the persistence between women and domestic responsibility, I will build in the three points posited by Goetz in the preceding discussion.

Community-based responsibility, kin work and community as an institutional arena

The concept of community-based responsibility, as described above, appears in varied guises and with differing names in a wide body of research on families and households. Concepts such as 'kin work' (Di Leonardo, 1987; Stack, 1974), 'servicing work' (Balbo, 1987) 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. Micaela Di Leonardo provides a colourful and vivid description of this work when she writes that kin work refers to:

> the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents and cards to kin; the organisation of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties;

the mental work of reflection about all these activities … (Di Leonardo, 1987, pp. 442–443)

Two points are worth highlighting here about the links and similarities between kin work and community-based responsibility. First, a common thread which links kin work and community-based responsibility is that they both occur *between* households and within wide webs of community relationships. Patricia Hill Collins illuminates this point when she writes about the networks within which black motherwork occurs. She writes:

> The institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly negotiated relationships that African American women experience with one another, with black children and with the larger African-American community, and with self. These relationships occur in specific locations such as the individual households that make up the African-American extended family networks, as well as in Black community institutions. (1990, p. 180)

Collins' point is important because it draws attention to the intricate links between motherhood and community relationships, thus signifying how domestic labour and responsibility are located both *within* and *between* households as well as between households and the larger community setting. A second point worth highlighting is that community-based responsibility can thus be viewed both as family work and as community work, thus breaking down some of the fences between the two locations and concepts of families/households and communities (see also Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Kagan & Lewis, 1998).

Because of the intrinsically inter-household and inter-institutional quality and character of both kin work and community-based responsibility, this raises the issue of how separate or linked families/households are with communities. More specifically, linking childcare, domestic responsibility and community-based responsibility raises the question of how to theorise the relationships between families/households and communities. One useful theoretical way forward is to discuss and theorise not only social institutions but also institutional arenas within which social institutions are located and intricately linked. This is the argument made by Anne Marie Goetz in her edited book entitled *Getting institutions right for women in development* (Goetz, 1997; see also Goetz, 1995). She maintains that particular organisations as well as some social institutions (such as families/households) are formed within three main institutional arenas. These three institutional arenas are (i) *the state*—'the larger institutional environment of the public service administration'; (ii) *the market*—'the framework for organization such as firms, producers' cooperatives, and financial intermediaries'; and finally (iii), *the community:* 'the context for the organization of families or households, kin and lineage systems, local patron–client relationships, village tribunals or other organizations presiding over customary law' as well as 'NGO's, women's organizations and civic organizations' (Goetz, 1997, p. 8).

While Goetz's work is set in Third World communities, her analysis, in my view, can also be applied to Western settings. In Western settings such as Britain, the community as a social institutional arena could, for example, include all of the non-state and non-market institutions that contribute to the functioning of communities and to the raising of young children as well as caring relationships more generally (i.e. the elderly, the disabled). Included here would be playgroups, community-based parenting networks, parent and toddler groups, informal inter-household arrangements for childcare (as well as other kinds of care), the organising of events that bridge households—such as birthday parties, community youth groups (i.e. Brownies, Scouts and Girl Guides) baby-sitting, yard sales, and community fund-raising activities.

Goetz further draws on the work of sociologists R.W. Connell and Anthony Giddens as well as economist Douglas North, and makes three critical arguments about social institutions and institutional arenas. First, she argues that institutions and their institutional arenas are 'best understood as frameworks for socially constructed norms which function to limit choice' (Goetz, 1997, p. 6). Second, 'they provide structure to everyday life, making certain forms of behavior predictable and routine, *institutionalizing* them' (Goetz, 1997, p. 6). Third, she draws attention to both structure and agency involved in social institutions, pointing to how there is a 'human dimension in the construction of institutions' which 'alerts us to the fact that they are not immutable or "natural" approaches to organizing human relationships' (Goetz, 1997, p. 7). In thus arguing for social institutions and three institutional arenas which are 'historically constructed frameworks for behavioral rules and generators of experience', she argues that it is not difficult to understand the obstacles to changing institutional patterns.

Conceptualising the community as an institutional arena within which families/households are located provides for an appreciation of a more robust community dimension to domestic responsibility. The community as an institutional arena is thus posited as complex sets of relationships that influence the decisions and practices of women and men as they conduct their domestic and working lives. In the case of my research, even where households attempted to share the division of domestic labour and to achieve some symmetry between women's and men's lives in the social institutions of work and family/household, inter-household relations, gendered community norms and community-based social networks played a significant role in persistently linking women and domestic responsibility. In the following section, I draw on the three main points posited by Goetz in order to draw out the intricate links between families/households and communities and to develop an argument that the community is the larger institutional arena within which families/households are located. In developing this line of thought, one of my key points is that the persistence of gendered domestic responsibility lies not only in material and ideological factors in families and work settings but also that the wider understandings of domestic responsibility posited in this paper is best viewed within the larger community.

Findings

The community as an institutional arena: 'frameworks for socially constructed norms which function to limit choice' (Goetz, 1997, p. 6)

Many studies on gender divisions of labour, in family and work settings, have pointed to how there are socially constructed norms, or gender ideologies, which impact upon parenting and employment practices and identities (Brannen & Moss, 1987a, b; Crompton, 1986). While there are studies that accord attention to how social networks exert pressure on domestic decision making and practices of couples (e.g. Gregson & Lowe, 1993; Morris, 1985) there has been scant attention given to how socially constructed community norms exert pressure on the division of domestic *responsibility*.

One way of thinking about how these community norms impact upon the division of domestic responsibility is to draw on Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason's work (1993) on elder care responsibilities, particularly their discussion of the interwoven material and 'moral' dimensions of family responsibilities. Drawing on symbolic interactionist ideas (e.g. Mead, 1934; see also Finch, 1989, pp. 177–211), Finch and Mason argue that it is 'through human interaction that people develop a common understanding of what a particular course of action will *mean*: for example, if I offer financial help to my mother in her old age, will it seem generous, or demeaning, or whatever?' (1993, p. 61). In other words, who-does-what within household life is not only tied up with structural and ideological factors but is also 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' (Finch & Mason, 1993, p. 170). According to Finch and Mason any particular person 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 & Mason, 1993, p. 61). These insights are useful for a discussion of domestic responsibility in that they point to the importance of considering not only the wider social relations within which households are located, but also the *meanings* which people attach to domestic responsibility (see also Sanchez & Kane, 1996) as well as the ways in which they feel they are being observed and judged within their social world. To add a 'moral dimension' to the picture is to bring in an understanding of how socially constructed norms actually *work* in influencing people's decision making and practices.

One of the strongest community norms that emerged from my research project with 23 couples, who were attempting to share housework and childcare, was that of a binary distinction between motherhood and fatherhood. In spite of a strong commitment to gender equality or symmetry at home and at work, all 23 women and men unwittingly held on to the idea that within communities women 'should' be primary carers while men 'should' be the family's primary earners and workers (see also Brannen & Moss, 1991; Hochschild, 1989) [5]. These 'moral' and ideological ideas of women's and men's domestic and employment roles were passed on and reinforced within wide sets of com-

munity-level relationships, including neighbours, other parents, friends, family, and kin. Three points illustrate this argument. First, there were strong *guilt* feelings expressed by both women and men when they strayed from these predominant norms. Second, women often mentioned how they compared themselves to, felt observed by, or judged against, other mothers. Finally, men felt particularly inspected by other men, as well as by community norms on the disjuncture between men, masculinities and caring. Each of these point is illustrated in the following paragraphs.

A recurrent theme drawn from my 69 interviews was that of guilt which emerged as a response to dominant socially constructed norms. Many women felt '*guilty*' about combining full-time work with parenting whereas not one man felt this way. Men seemed to feel that it was necessary and important to be working full-time so as to be '*guilt-free*' in their aim to combine parenting with employment. For example, Joe and Lilly discuss how they combine their two full-time careers as nurses with caring for their 5-year-old daughter Mary. Lilly says that 'I do feel *guilty* sometimes … If Mary is having a problem, then I think, well, would she be having it if I was looking after her?' On the other hand, her partner Joe says that he doesn't feel guilty about working full-time because 'I suppose it's *expected* that the man goes out to work.' Later, when discussing how Lilly has always arranged childcare, including childcare for half-term and school holidays, Joe says: 'I think it is probably because I leave it all to you. I think I take that attitude.' A further example is that of Sean who feels embarrassed telling people that he has taken on the full-time job of caring for his two young boys. He says:

> I was actually slightly embarrassed as a bloke saying that I was going home to look after the children. I always had to qualify it with—'But I'm also going to write a book. Which is probably a *male* thing to do, isn't it?

Many women pointed out that feelings of 'guilt' were partly instilled in them by the role models provided by other women—their own mothers, childminders, other mothers at the school gates, female neighbours. When Philippa was working full-time as a physiotherapist and leaving her infant son at a childminder's house, she felt that the childminder 'added to my guilt problem'. She says:

> The only thing we did have, which I think added to my guilt problem about going back to work was, because she was new to childminding, she couldn't really understand how *anybody* could *leave* their child with somebody else … She really was *incredulous* that I could be actually contemplating leaving my child.

Mary, an astro-physicist who works 3/4 time, bases her feelings and views on her own mothering in specific relation to other mothers in her small village. In addition, she notes how these norms have been internalised by her own

daughters, particularly when they protest about her occasional trip away: 'They say 'well, *nobody* else's mother goes away, you know, why are *you* going away?'

When Jessie, a full-time social worker, speaks about trying to balance work and home life, she often mentions her mother and her sister who act as a measurement against which she feels judged and within which she judges herself:

> And there's *always* this bit about—I think your family patterns are important. It's been quite a struggle, quite a *struggle* for me *emotionally*, *not* staying at home with my children all the time. Which is what the *pattern* has been for the other members of my family. And I'm thinking about my mother and my sister.

Meanwhile for men, there were different and distinct pressures. Men felt noticed by other men as they took on increased caring and domestic roles. Sean, for examples, remarks that he feels like he is 'looked at oddly by other men', thus indicating that, at least in some way, he is concerned about how other men in the community regard him in his role as a full-time carer of two young boys. He says:

> I remember feeling—and this might have to do with my personal anxieties or it might have been real—that I was sort of looked at *oddly* by other men occasionally.

He also mentions how he thinks he is viewed as a 'sissy' and as a target for cynical jokes by other men who are employed in more traditionally male occupations, such as a postman and a builder. He says:

> 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 an 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'.

Joe says that his father 'thinks I'm letting a side down, doing the washing up' and he speaks about how his 'macho' neighbours seem to look at him with curiosity when he does domestic labour:

> There's a couple of blokes [in the village]. They're always doing building work. And farmers—they're very sort of macho. And there's *me* hanging out the washing and getting the washing in, and I sometimes wonder what they think. It doesn't really bother me, but it passes through my mind.

Finally, it is worth noting how men felt especially scrutinised when they attempted to take on caring roles in community settings. That is, when men

who were assuming greater caring roles in domestic life began to take on increased caring responsibilities in inter-household spaces and in the community, this was sometimes greeted with community discomfort. For example, baby-sitting was frequently mentioned as an area where men were put into a difficult position because of what 'people would think'. Men felt uneasy both about doing it themselves or having other men do it. Joshua, a social worker, says:

> Like when we used to be in the [baby-sitting] circle, we shared it—in which of us went to do it—and some families were clearly a bit *uneasy* if I was the one that went. I must admit once or twice I sort of felt the same unease the other way when a man came to baby-sit.

In a similar way, Faye, a secretary, highlights other people's perceptions as well as the fact that children are not used to seeing men in caring roles and thus don't like 'strange men'. She says:

> Alan doesn't like to go and sit for families where there are daughters. Purely because of, you know, you hear so much stuff. And one or two children *don't* like strange men … .They don't see him any other time except as a baby-sitter really.

In summary, all of the examples cited here centre around women's and men's thoughts and feelings of guilt and unease about women's and men's roles as parents, carers and workers in community settings. Gendered norms on parenting, caring, and earning exist in communities and have particular implications for men's involvement in community-based responsibility for children's lives. Furthermore, socially constructed norms about motherhood and fatherhood and the uneven fit between 'hegemonic masculinities' (Connell, 1995) and caring come to play a role in these processes.

It is also worth mentioning that these community-based norms about women's and men's caring work also extend to implicit assumptions about the propensity and potential for men to take on caring work in other settings within the community (Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999). That is, care work both within and between households and between institutions remains conceptualised as women's work and this acts as an impediment to men taking on more of this work in community institutions, such as childcare settings. With increasing emphasis on the institutionalisation of care, as occurring within community institutions such as day cares, childcare, paid and unpaid, it continues to be conceptualised, in practical and normative terms, as women's work, thus reinforcing a mutual dynamic whereby childcare in both domestic and community institutions reinforce one another [6].

The community 'provide(s) structure to everyday life, making certain forms of behavior predictable and routine, institutionalizing them' (Goetz, 1997, p. 6)

One clear structuring principle within the British communities where I carried

out my research was the strong, seemingly institutionalised female world of child rearing. In the early to mid-1990s in Britain the gender-differentiated world of early child rearing was especially prominent during the early child rearing years when there were numerous activities and events that parents were directly involved in attending or organising (see also Bell & Ribbens, 1994). The three most frequently cited examples were attending mother–toddler groups (for parents on maternity leave/parental leave or while working part-time), forming parenting social networks, organising children's birthday parties, and, once again, baby-sitting.

With regard to parent–toddler (or what were more commonly named 'mother–toddler' groups) many men emphasised the difficulties for men to become involved in such activities. Jake, an engineer, says that if he were to consider staying at home full-time, 'I don't think they'd allow me into the *mum's* groups.' His partner Eve, a tax consultant, agrees that 'Jake would be hopelessly lonely.'

The issue of creating fathering networks was an issue for the two fathers who were primary daytime caregivers of pre-school children. Adam was attempting to form his own group while Sean, after being a full-time carer for his two young sons for a year and a half, was still struggling with this issue. In his words: 'I still think that the whole thing about being a male trying to make networks is difficult.' He sometimes feels as if he is standing outside an immense '*kind of culture*' which is run by women and he feels 'there is this huge *gulf* between me as a male carer and women … who have a sort of ready made context that they're attuned to, that I *haven't* got'. The words that Sean uses give the distinct impression that he is standing outside the rather exclusionary world of women and children and staring in, wondering when and what to join. He says: 'I thought for a long time I needed to sort of *penetrate* that kind of culture, um for my own sanity and for Oliver.' He uses a variety of other words which confirm this image of standing as an outsider: '*slot into*'; '*starting to step back*'; '*click into*'; '*slot into that*'; '*drawn into*'; '*joining it*' or '*not joining it*'.

It is important to point out that the nature and composition of these parenting networks changes dramatically according to children's 'social ages' (Ribbens, 1994). When children are at school for most of the day, parents' roles are more to do with planning, organising and keeping tabs on children's activities and lives. Nevertheless, all of the women in my study still took on most of the arranging of these activities. Roger, a government scientist, says that his wife Mary is more likely to plan and organise the activities for their daughters, aged 9 and 12, because:

> That tends to be a more *social* thing, I think because other women are involved in it as well. Then it tends to be *easier* for you to do. You always *meet* with the other women when you see them down at the school … for whatever you're planning or doing.

Birthday parties also remained as predominantly women's work. Lilly and

Joe discuss the task of organising birthday parties for their daughter and point to how Lilly does more because of her relationships with the other mothers:

Joe: I think it's more you organising it than me, in the sense of sending out invitations and contacting people. I help on the day more. I think I don't know the other mums. I think they kind of relate more to you.

Lilly: Well, they're very stereotypical women around here, so I think they might find it odd that Joe was doing it.

Finally, the task of day-care arrangements and the occasional baby-sitting arrangements fell to women, again partly because of the gendered composition of networks set up around young children. Eve says that she tends to take on the task of finding baby-sitters:

> It's probably this business that it's, you know, maybe I just feel that if I'm asking the neighbour and it's—you tend to ask the *wife*, don't you in (this small village)? I mean they are funny about husbands baby-sitting, aren't they sometimes?

Child rearing takes place in a social world whose parameters are still highly gendered and this has implications for how the work and responsibility for child rearing will be organised within households and between households. Research on mothers' social networks (Bell & Ribbens, 1994; Hertz & Ferguson, 1998; Richards, 1990) and the difficulties for primary caregiving fathers to form networks (O'Brien, 1987; Radin, 1988; Russell, 1983, 1987) have highlighted the tremendous importance of social and kin networks to many households with young children. I am building on and extending this work by arguing that these predominately female networks or 'complex maternal worlds' (Bell & Ribbens, 1994) are critical links not only for the care of children but also that these networks are vital support systems for the person who takes on the work of community-based responsibility.

Conclusions

This paper set out to address a fundamental puzzle—the persistent link between women and domestic responsibility—that has preoccupied many researchers who study the division of domestic labour in Britain and elsewhere. In attempting to contribute to the solving of this complex puzzle, I have argued for a wider conceptualisation and location of the concept and work of domestic responsibility. While often conceived as family labour that occurs within families/households, domestic responsibility also has inter-household, inter-institutional and community dimensions. Conceiving of domestic responsibility within these wider sets of relationships calls for greater attention to the impact that these relations will have on the division of domestic responsibility in households. Drawing on research from the field of gender and international development studies (Goetz, 1997), I have argued that the community can be conceptualised

as an institutional area within which family/household, inter-household, and community processes can be theorised and understood.

Lydia Morris has recently called for greater research attention on 'the question of the permeability of household boundaries'. She writes:

> Extra-household linkages have, however, remained an unelaborated aspect of the household approach in UK research, although there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this may represent a worthwhile topic for investigation. (Morris, 1995, p. 3; see also Hessing, 1993, p. 46)

The research presented in this paper confirms and builds on this perspective. While much research has focused on the connections between paid work/employment and households/families, less emphasis has been given to the links between the social institution of the family and the wider 'institutional arena' of the community (Goetz, 1995, 1997; see also Bell & Ribbens, 1994). In addition much can be gleaned from research on black families in the USA and from research in Third World settings where inter-household, inter-institutional relations are more solidly explored and addressed (e.g. Collins, 1990; Moser, 1993).

In addition to these points on shifting research agendas on domestic divisions of labour to focus not only on intra-household *divisions* but also inter-household and intra-community *relations*, I want to make two concluding points that link together socially constructed norms and community-based networks. My research from a critical case study sample of couples trying to share housework and childcare in Britain in the early 1990s highlights how there were socially constructed norms that privileged women as primary carers and men as primary earners within the sites of family, work and communities. Furthermore, these socially constructed norms were contextualised within gendered community-based networks, which revolved very much around mothers and children [7]. Nevertheless, there were also some signs of resistance and change. As argued by Goetz in her discussion of social institutions and institutional arenas, there is a 'human dimension in the construction of institutions' which 'alerts us to the fact that they are not immutable or "natural" approaches to organizing human relationships' (1997, p. 7). Through conversation and reflection, the women and men I interviewed spoke about how men came to appreciate the benefits of sharing in the emotional responsibility for children. Nevertheless, it was community-based responsibility that continued to elude men. One key area of change was suggested from the research respondents themselves as well as from other research projects on men and masculinities. This is the link between socially constructed norms on masculinities, men's friendships and community-based responsibility.

Research on men's friendships (Nardi, 1992; Seidler, 1992; Walker, 1994) highlights how they are relatively sparse in comparison to women's friendships, how they are built largely around sports and work-related interests, often characterised by a lack of intimacy or a belief in the lack of intimacy (see

Walker, 1994), competition and homophobia. Sean's statement in the opening of this paper on himself and the other man he often sees at the nursery school is particularly telling when he says: 'But we do *men's* talk... It's so entrenched on the whole that you don't talk about the kids.' Yet taking on community-based responsibility *does* mean 'talking about the kids'. Community-based responsibility builds upon emotional responsibility with its '*knowledge* about others' needs' and 'an *attentiveness* to the needs of others' (Tronto, 1989, pp. 176–178) and it links this recognition of children's needs to the wider relationships within which caring work is planned and negotiated. It is very much akin to the description of caring as evinced by political theorist Selma Sevenhuijsen when she writes that it is much more than the meeting of children's needs but also the 'ability to "see" or "hear" needs, to take responsibility for them, negotiate if and how they should be met and by whom' (Sevenhuijsen, 1992, p. 15). If men are to take on, or share in, community-based responsibility, the ways in which they create and maintain relationships and friendships with other men and women become particularly significant.

By the end of my research project in 1994 Adam, a primary carer of one pre-school boy, was attempting to set up a men's childcare group in his community. Sean was beginning to form parenting networks, mainly with other mothers and he was also beginning to lose some of his 'discomfort' with being a male carer. In terms of men being socially accepted as primary carers within communities, Sean was optimistic, that 'maybe a couple of generations [of men being] at home will shift it'. He also pointed out how if men were more involved in the lives of children, this might positively alter men's friendship patterns, particularly the ability of men to relate emotionally to other men. He is cautious, however, that it will not happen quickly since 'you don't adjust quickly'.

These examples of Sean and Adam provide brief glimpses of men who were attempting to step outside of socially constructed community norms and attempting to change some of the social relations within which they fathered. Greater research is needed on long-term patterns of fathers as primary carers who may be relatively successful in their attempts to take on community-based responsibility, the losses and gains to women who encourage their male partners to do this, the links between hegemonic masculinities and caring (see Brandth & Kvande, 1998), and male friendship patterns and community-based responsibility.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] The social class composition of the sample should not, however, be surprising given that patterns for sharing housework and childcare were relatively rare in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Brannen & Moss, 1991; Gregson & Lowe, 1993, 1994; Morris, 1990).

[3]   It is worth noting that divisions of household labour were more symmetrical in the 10 households where women were comparable or greater earners relative to their partners and the three men who were the primary daytime caregivers of children earned less than their wives. While not a determining factor in household decisions around work and responsibility, earnings were a significant factor in negotiations and decision making in domestic matters.

[4]   In all of these couples, the women work full-time and earn more than their partners. These couples include (i) Sean (stay-at-home father who takes on part-time contract research from time to time (varied earnings) and Jessie, childcare planning manager (earnings = £20 000); (ii) Adam (former graphic designer, now full-time 'househusband', as he calls himself) and Suzanne, social services training organiser (earnings = £17 500); and finally (iii) Joshua, a social services manager (earnings = £25 000) and Monica, health services manager (earnings = £33 000). Educational qualifications are relatively symmetrical, but women have greater professional training in all three cases.

[5]   These ideas were not expressed in answers to direct questions but rather emerged out of lengthy interviews where women and men thought through in self-conscious and explicit way ideas and thoughts that challenged their more surface expressions and beliefs (see Doucet, 1996).

[6]   I am grateful to an anonymous referee and also to Claire Cameron for helping me to clarify this point. See Cameron *et al.* (1999).

[7]   It is important to emphasise here that norms and ideologies evolve and are constructed in relation to social, economic and political relations while 'social practices are necessarily norm-governed' (Fraser, 1989, p. 31). Thus, a dialectical relationship exists between norms on motherhood, fatherhood and appropriate masculinities and the social processes and practices within which these norms are constructed. Norms will only change within the context of simultaneous changes in social, economic and political relations and practices.

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