

‘Estrogen-filled worlds’: fathers as primary caregivers and embodiment

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Abstract

Within the wide body of scholarship on gender work and caring, sub-strands of research have grown tremendously in the past decade, including largely separate studies on fatherhood and embodiment. Drawing on a qualitative research project with Canadian fathers who self-identify as primary caregivers of their children, this article focuses on recovering largely invisible links between theoretical and empirical understandings of fatherhood, caring and embodiment. The article builds on the work of key sociologists of the body as well as the work of Goffman and Merleau-Ponty. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘body subjects’ and Goffman’s work on the ‘moral’ quality of bodily movements through public spaces are utilized as lenses for understanding fathers’ narratives of caring, particularly how men speak about their movements with children through what several fathers refer to as “estrogen-filled” worlds. As caring for others involves forming social networks and relations, embodiment *can* matter in the spaces *between* men, *between* male and female caregivers, and between men and the children of others. This article argues that through the changing stages of caring for children, male embodiment constantly shifts in the weight of its salience in the identities and practices of fathers and caregiving.

Introduction

It is now well established that the ‘human body has in recent years become a “hot” topic in sociology’ (Howson and Inglis, 2001). Yet while there is a ‘whole industry of research and scholarship on the body’ (Nettleton and Watson, 1998: 2; see also Shilling, 2003), this phenomenal growth has not found its way into research on fathering. Where empirical studies of embodied aspects of men’s lives *have* been conducted, they have focused mainly on hyper-masculine displays of bodies (Connell, 1995; Watson, 1998), male violence (Messerschmidt, 1999; Connell, 2000), body builders and boxing (Connell, 1995, 2000; Wacquant, 1995), men’s health (Watson, 1998) and boys’ embodiment in schools (Prendergast and Forrest, 1998). There is, however, scant attention given to issues of embodiment within men’s narratives of fathering and family life (but see Kvande, 2005). According to David Morgan, ‘despite

these new explorations and developments around the sociology of the body it may be argued that there has still been relatively little systematic treatment of family and family issues under the heading of the sociology of the body' (Morgan, 1996: 113). This is a surprising omission given that families are deeply imbued with embodied interactions and that practices of caring for others are so intrinsically embodied.

While the literature on embodiment deals only sparsely with how bodies matter in fathering, it is also the case that scholarship on fatherhood does not incorporate issues of embodiment. What the burgeoning multidisciplinary literature on fatherhood does do well is to point to the gender-differentiated experiences of parenting and the ways in which these processes inhibit active fathering involvement (Coltrane, 1996; Coltrane and Adams, 2001; Dienhart, 1998; Dowd, 2000; Hobson, 2002; Lamb and Day, 2004; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb, 2000). More specifically, this literature draws attention to how gender differences are present in several ways including: differing social expectations of men as primary earners and women as primary caregivers (Deutsch, 1999; Dowd, 2000; Pleck, 1985); distinct 'moral' identities for mothers and fathers (Doucet, 2006; McMahon, 1995; Mauthner, 2002); maternal gatekeeping from wives or female partners (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Parke, 1996; Pleck, 1985); co-constructed processes of 'doing gender' by both mothers and fathers (Berk, 1985; Coltrane, 1989, 1996; Risman, 1998; West and Zimmerman, 1987); gender ideologies (Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989), discourses of fatherhood and motherhood (Dienhart, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Mandell, 2002), and gender differences in the creation and maintaining of community parenting networks (Doucet, 2000, 2001; Morris, 1985, 1990). While recognizing that all of these aspects of gender differences can play a role in facilitating and inhibiting fathers' involvement with children, a critical missing link within our understandings of fathering, caring and community life is that of male embodiment in caregiving.

This article puts forth three arguments on how men draw attention, overtly and covertly, to issues of embodiment in their fathering narratives. First, fathers speak as embodied subjects in caregiving. Second the care of children is eminently social and occurs not only between carers and cared-for, but within larger sets of social relations within which caring gets done and within which it is perceived and judged by others; these social venues draw attention to how space and embodiment constantly intersect. Finally, I argue that embodiment is fluid, diverse, visible and invisible, and contingent on social contexts. These three arguments are grounded in an in-depth qualitative research project.

Methodology

This article draws from a four-year qualitative research project on changing fatherhood (Doucet, 2006). The study's location is Canada where, as in many other industrialized nations, demographic and social factors have translated into

the need to redistribute the caring work traditionally assumed by women. My central interest in undertaking this study was to gain a sense of how fathering and mothering were changing against shifting social and economic landscapes. This terrain includes a growing social institution of single fatherhood (either through joint or sole custody) combined with increased labour force participation by mothers and the increasing incidence of stay-at-home fathers. More specifically, I was interested in understanding men's lives and masculinities in the midst of changing ideologies and practices of mothering and fathering and to engage with David Morgan's compelling claim that 'one strategy of studying men and masculinities would be to study those situations where masculinity is, as it were, on the line' (Morgan, 1992: 99). My research thus adopted a central case study of men who self-define as primary caregivers since practices, identities and discourses of caring remain strongly linked with femininity and women's social lives (Finch and Mason, 1993; Fox, 2001; Graham, 1983; McMahon, 1995; Spitzer, Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes, and Stewart, 2003).

The sample for my study are 118 Canadian fathers who self-define as primary caregivers of their children (mainly single fathers and stay-at-home fathers). In addition, 14 couples (with a stay-at-home father and with some diversity along the lines of income, social class and ethnicity) were interviewed in order to include some mothers' (and couple) views in the study. The study includes a wide diversity of caregiving experiences: 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 are single and are/were at home; and four fathers on parental leave (including one father living in a same-sex partnership). In the later stages of the study, I broadened my categories to include eight shared caregiving fathers – in an effort to include participants who did not necessarily fit into the categories of stay-at-home fathers or single fathers. I was thus able to include gay fathers who did not have legal custody but were active caregivers in their children's lives and several immigrant fathers for whom stay-at-home fathering was not readily compatible with their cultural traditions.

Of the 118 fathers who participated in the study, nearly 2/3 of the fathers (62) were interviewed through in-depth face-to-face individual interviews, 27 through telephone interviews, 12 in three focus groups; and 17 through Internet correspondence; moreover, 28 fathers were interviewed two- three times using different methods. Fourteen couple (heterosexual) interviews were also conducted. Data were analyzed using group-based analysis, the Listening Guide (Lyn Mikel Brown, 1998; Lyn Mikel Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003; Tolman, 2002; Way, 1988) and the computer software AtlasTi (see Doucet, 2006).

Theory: embodiment

Drawing on Shilling's evocative three-fold mapping of theoretical positions on embodiment, my position is situated somewhere between a '*phenomenological*

and action-oriented studies of the lived body' and 'structuration theories of the body' (Shilling, 2003). In relation to the former, this perspective can be viewed as part of the growing movement away from a largely theoretical sociology of the body to one which accords attention to 'concrete incorporating practices and sometimes messy empirical realities of actual flesh and blood bodies' (Monaghan, 2002: 335). I am in agreement with Loïc Wacquant who writes that: '(o)ne of the paradoxical features of recent social studies of the body is how rarely one encounters in there actual living bodies of flesh and blood' (Wacquant, 1995: 65). While interested in how bodies are experienced, my research is also informed by the view that experience and subjectivities are not completely accessible to researchers and thus, rather than experiences *per se*, my focus is on how these embodied experiences or subjectivities are *narrated* within research processes (see Doucet, under review; Doucet and Mauthner, under review). In relation to my positioning within structuration approaches to embodiment, my view is that embodied subjects both 'create their social milieu' and 'are simultaneously shaped by the impact their social location exerts on their bodies' (Shilling, 2003: 206; see also Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1991). Drawing broadly on these two wide sets of theoretical assumptions, this article puts forth three arguments about how 'messy empirical realities' matter within family life. First, I draw attention to fathers as embodied subjects in caregiving; second, I highlight intersections between practical and 'moral' dimensions of care, community spaces and embodiment; finally, I argue that embodiment is fluid, diverse, visible and invisible, and contingent on social contexts.

My first point about embodied subjects is rooted in the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1968) and his concept of 'body subjects'; this has become one of the most well cited works on bodies and embodiment (see, for example, Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 1995a, 2001; Csordas, 1990; Howson and Inglis, 2001; Nettleton and Watson, 1998). The main tenor of his arguments includes the indivisibility of mind and body, the body subject as active and engaged with the world, 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).

Borrowing mainly from Goffman's work (Goffman, 1963, 1969, 1972, 1987), I also argue that inter-subjective embodied relations are both *practical* (i.e. how does one move through spaces in ways that are acceptable, normal, and in concert with public expectations) and '*moral*' (i.e. embodied agents not only interact together but make judgments about how people maintain or disrupt routine social and public interactions). 'The public order in which body techniques are exercised is not only a practical order . . . (but) Goffman is concerned to stress that it is equally a *moral* character (Crossley, 1995b: 139). As Goffman puts it: 'Bodily norms not only enable individuals to recognize and label others . . . but to grade them hierarchically, and stigmatizes them in a manner which facilitates discrimination' (Goffman, 1963: 168). Thus, one's

sense of self and their moral worth, and whether one can sustain a definition of themselves as 'normal' are at stake as one moves through public spaces and engage in public encounters (see Crossley, 1995b).

My third argument about embodiment is that bodies, and their effects, vary across particular spaces and sites over time. This is very much in line with the work of many sociological and feminist writers who argue that while the body does have a biological and material base, it is nevertheless modified and variably enacted within different social contexts. That is, 'the socially contingent nature of the body, and how it is experienced will vary according to how, where, and when it is located and the nature of the social situations which prevail' (Nettleton and Watson, 1998: 8). Moria Gatens has similarly argued there is no 'true nature of the body but rather it is a process and its meanings and capacities will vary according to its context' (Gatens, 1996: 57).

Theory and data

If it is the case that 'bodies do matter' (Messerschmidt, 1999), then how *do* they matter in fathering? Drawing on the three theoretical points developed above, I make three arguments about fathers as embodied subjects, intersections of embodiment and space, and the variable quality of embodiment.

(I) Embodied subjects, embodied agents

Fathers speaking about themselves as embodied subjects and agents is in evidence in several ways in my research, four of which will be mentioned here. First, embodiment appears through fathers' emphasis on physical play with infants and young children; second, most fathers highlight their outdoors and active approach to caregiving; third, men emphasize sports, and risk-taking; and finally, fathers point to how their experiences as fathers is fundamentally different from that of mothers due to perceived embodied differences. Each of these points is explored below.

1.1 Fathers and physical play: 'They are climbing all over me all day long'

The international literature on fatherhood has repeatedly emphasized that within and across cultures, fathers' caregiving with infants and young children is overwhelmingly characterized by play, a rough and tumble approach, and a high level of activity (Coltrane, 1996; Lamb, 1987; Parke, 1996; Pruett, 2000; Yogman, Cooley, and Kindlon, 1988). This finding, also confirmed in my study, has embodied dimensions to it in that the body is called into use as fathers make particular mention of themselves as strong, physical, and active beings. Cameron, a stay-at-home father of two daughters (an infant and a two-year-old), speaks about how he thinks fathers are different from mothers:

I find I am very playful with the girls. I become the play structure you know. I will have them sitting on me. We'll sing 'the people on the bus' and *I'm the bus!* I'm the slide. I don't think I've ever really seen my wife do that. I will do it for hours at a time throughout the day. They are climbing all over me all day long.

A second example of fathers' active approach to caregiving is provided by Bernard, a 42 year-old gay father who shares custody of his son with two lesbian mothers. He points to how the style of parenting that four-year-old Jake receives is different between the moms' house and dad's house. Like many heterosexual fathers, he places considerable emphasis on play and sports with his son; he draws on embodied metaphors when he makes the point that it's a 'testosterone world' at his house and an 'estrogen world' at the moms' house:

When Jake and I are at my house, it is a different pace. They do more domestic stuff at the moms' house. I say – 'to heck with all that stuff'. We are out there doing stuff, spending time together. Moms' place is domesticated. There are books, photos, a computer, a play room. He see that his moms work and that they spend time with female friends – some guys but mainly female friends. He doesn't see them do much outside of that. At my place he sees photos of himself and my family. He sees books. Sports trophies. My golf clubs, my bowling ball. He comes to my bowling group. He sees all this guy stuff. When I go out into the community, he sees a lot of males. It's a testosterone world here. An estrogen world there.

1.2 Outdoors approach: 'I saw it as an 18-month adventure'

Fathers' embodiment also comes into play in that the overwhelming majority of fathers in my study talk about how they make it a point to get their children outdoors as much as possible, to do lots of physical activities with them, and to be very involved with their children's sports (Brandth and Kvande, 1998; Doucet, 2004, 2005; Plantin, Sven-Axel, and Kearney, 2003). Robert, for example, a former sign maker who lives in rural Quebec and is home with two boys, talks about his typical daily routine:

I like to spend time outside with them. Spring, summer, winter, fall, if the weather is nice, we're gallivanting outside all over the countryside. I get them out as much as possible [. . .] To get them away from the routine in the house. It re-energizes me.

James, a gay divorced father who took a four-month paternity leave with his son, sums up his time at home with Lawrence in the following way:

We got out everyday. We'd be out of the house by 10. He had an afternoon nap so we would get back at about 1:30. [. . .] I saw it as an 18-month

adventure. People used to comment on how adventurous we were. I would put him on the back of the bike and we would bike to museums, to the Island, everywhere.

1.3 Physical risk-taking: 'I grew up as a guy'

A third way that fathers speak about themselves as embodied agents is in how they evoke images of themselves growing up as active and risk-taking boys in cultures that encourage sport, physical and emotional independence, and risk-taking (see Connell 1996, Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Seidler, 1997). They also speak about how they transfer this upbringing and background to their raising of both sons and daughters. Alistair, a writer who did not give much attention to athletics nor physicality in his interview, nevertheless found himself drawing on certain lessons that he learned, on the playing fields of boyhood. One such lesson is that the rules of sports take precedence over attention to somebody getting hurt, with the implicit message that bodies need to be tough in sports:

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

Devon, a technician and a sole-custody father of a seven-year-old son notes that physical danger is just part of 'what little boys do'. He says: 'I grew up as a guy. We did dangerous things. That's what little boys do. A father thing is – should I let him go up the tree? Yeah, but then a little skepticism is there'.

1.4 Embodied connections: 'A mother's attachment to her baby is beyond the universe'

A fourth and final dimension of how fathers narrate their embodied subjectivity is that the overwhelming majority of fathers (and mothers) express the profound belief in distinct differences between mothering and fathering as identities and as embodied experiences. In particular, fathers and mothers refer to embodied aspects of early parenting through reference to the physical, emotional, and symbolic experiences of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and post-recovery and how these have an impact on mothering and fathering identities. For example, Alistair, who stayed home for over a year with his first infant daughter, points to the physical connections associated with pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, and also to women's overall emotional involvement, especially with young children:

I think you are so physically involved as a mother, from the beginning. Nine months of pregnancy, such a commitment, and then into the breastfeeding. And then normally mothers are much more involved with taking care of very small babies. There is a tremendous bond right there. Even when I was taking care of Georgia at home, I didn't have the same physical bond as Claire did with this baby. I think women are more sensitive and more inclined to be emotionally involved.

Meanwhile Gary, a stay-at-home father succinctly captures many of the fathers' views on this matter when he speaks about how his wife gives a 'longer' and 'tighter' hug to the kids: 'Well, like I said, men do nurture. We do give them a hug, tell them it's okay, sit them on our knee. But I just find with the mother they do it more or longer. They give a tighter hug'.

The idea of the longer and tighter hug may be related to my second point about space and embodiment and more specifically about the 'moral' quality of embodied interactions.

(II) Embodiment and space

In thinking about fathers moving as embodied subjects in female-defined settings, Goffman's work on space and embodiment is helpful in reminding us that relations between people are both practical and 'moral'. The movements of fathers are practical in the sense that men learn how to move through spaces in ways that are acceptable, 'normal', and in concert with public expectations. Furthermore, these movements are 'moral' in that, as embodied subjects, fathers and mothers not only interact together but judgments are made about whether, and how, people maintain or disrupt routine social and public interactions. Goffman argues that one's sense of self and 'moral' worth, and whether one can sustain a definition of oneself as 'normal', are at stake as one moves through public spaces and engages in public encounters (see Crossley, 1995b). These theoretical points from Goffman illuminate the sites where fathers' movements can sometimes be viewed as disruptive. That is, the overwhelming majority of fathers interviewed for this study speak about having felt a watchful eye on them, at least once. Examples occur in fathers' interviews across different parenting sites; the most frequently mentioned, however, are: women-centered venues (playgroups, playgrounds and schools), women's homes, and girls' sleepovers. Each of these points is explored below.

2.1 Women-centered postnatal venues: 'I'm coming to check you out'

Nearly ten years ago, Archie left his job as a natural gas serviceman in Ottawa Canada to stay home with his infant son while his wife, Jean, worked long hours in a high-pressure job in the government. When Jordan was a few months old, Jean suggested that Archie take him to the 'well baby' clinic at

their local community centre. Archie still remembers the steely stares that came his way: 'The first day I go trotting in there, there are three women breastfeeding and they are staring daggers at me. Who is this pervert coming in, checking us out "cause he is going to catch sight of my breast?" It was so incredibly uncomfortable. I never went back, it was just that look'.

Four years later, Archie was still at home with their second child, a toddler, while Jordan was in half-day kindergarten at the local school. He distinctly remembers being dismayed that, after four years on the parenting scene, he was still regarded with suspicion as he stood in the schoolyard waiting for Jordan to appear:

This women comes up and introduces herself and says – 'I am a little embarrassed but I am coming to check you out'. She said – 'my daughter came home and told me about this man hanging around the school yard reading stories to the kids'. She said – 'I hope you are not offended'. At this point I am used to it. I said – 'isn't it interesting, if a kid came home and said a mom is reading to kids in the yard, you would say – isn't that nice? And wouldn't give it another thought'. She admitted that was true.

Many other fathers make comments that resonate with this view. Looking back about 15 years, Adam notes that it was very difficult for him being involved with his children's school:

I tried to get involved with the school from time to time but I didn't feel extremely welcome. I know I sound defensive. But I really did get that feeling. You're in amongst young children in the classroom. You're a male. There's a female teacher. As a volunteer I got that. Field trips were a bit better.

These awkward moments, of feeling like a 'pervert', one of 'the bad guys' or a threat to '*estrogen-filled worlds*' are commonplace across the 118 narratives of primary caregiving fathers that inform this article. What many fathers are eluding to is the difficulty of fitting into 'complex maternal worlds' (Bell and Ribbens, 1994); these are worlds populated mainly by mothers and mothering networks which sometimes cast suspicious scrutiny on male participants. Such scrutiny can be especially heavy for single fathers. Burt, a sole-custody father, reflects on how 12 years ago, his entry into a community playgroup stunned the room into silence: 'As soon as I walked in the door there was utter silence, nobody said a word'. He reasons that it could have been partly because he was 'grubby looking', but nevertheless it was because he was a grubby-looking *male* that he was judged as a potential 'child molester or kidnapper one step ahead of the law'.

After a couple of weeks, however, Burt became, as he puts it 'one of the girls'. Within the same breath, however, he also acknowledges that this was not *really* possible given his embodied differences as a heterosexual male in a group of women. In his words:

That went on for about two weeks or so, until everyone started to relax. The first couple of weeks nobody would talk to me. I'd walk by and they would sort of grab their kids protectively. After that I was just basically one of the girls, which was not necessarily a good thing because I was so completely one of the girls that when they wanted to breast feed they would just whip it out, stick junior on it, and keep talking. In the meantime, I'm sitting there, I hadn't even thought about dating a girl in about three years at this point, and going – 'oh my God!'.

While men often feel uncomfortable sitting as a solitary male among women, this discomfort is magnified when they attempt to participate in a common feature of parenting. This is the social visit in the home of one other parent, a female one, and the ordinary act of drinking a cup of coffee while the children played.

2.2 Men in women's homes: 'cross-gender friendships always have a complicated dimension'

Many stay-at-home fathers readily offer their own observations on the possible tensions involved with meeting up in other women's homes; they view this as a strain both for themselves and their mothering friends as well for the women's spouses. Aaron, a stay-at-home father of two boys, sees it as in an inevitable aspect of the fact that 'I work in a female world'. Owen, at home for ten years, says: 'I would go to other women's houses. But I was always conscious of how it would be read'. Alexander, who took two parental leaves and is now a joint-custody father, says: 'I am more connected with the mothers. But cross-gender friendships always have a complicated dimension'.

With women heavily out-numbering men on the social landscapes of parenting, many men express a sense of 'dis-ease' as they move and mingle on this female-dominated terrain, particularly in the years of parenting infants and toddlers. This issue has parallels with that of women entering into masculine-dominated venues, such as occupations like engineering (Hughes, 2000; Williams, 1989). Yet, it is more than this. Luke put it bluntly when he first filled out a brief background form for my study. In identifying key issues for him as a primary caregiver, he wrote just two sentences: '*Uneasiness of neighborhood women (when they don't know you well) to allow their children to play with those cared for by a man. Women are initially wary of male caregivers*'. This wariness of male caregivers is further explored below through community perceptions of men caring for children of different ages.

2.3 Fathers and girls' sleepovers: 'I'm really leery . . .'

Several fathers point to some of the challenges they face in raising girls. While many note the gender boundaries they cross as they learn to braid hair, tastefully clip on barrettes, and try to understand the intricacies of girls'

shopping, make up and nail polish, the dominant father-daughter narratives revolve around the hidden, unspoken sense of dis-ease that fathers face at one time or another, particularly as their daughters reach the pre-teen or teen years.

A first sentiment in this vein is expressed particularly by single fathers of pre-teen and teenage girls who point to how easily public displays of close physical affection can be misinterpreted. Henry, a sole custodial father of two, currently unemployed, reflects on how he is always 'nervous' and 'conscious' of what he does because his actions may be misconstrued:

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. For example, my daughter if she wants to go on a rant. One of her favorite rants is – 'you can't touch me, you can't hit me!' . . . I am very conscious of the fact that if she screamed that out in public. It's like 'whoa!' They could be taken away on a moment's notice. Just on suspicion. So I am very nervous about that kind of thing.

The event and spatial site that gets the most mention is that of girls' sleepovers. This is the window through which many men see the need to be very careful around their daughters and, more specifically, the female friends of teen daughters. As Ryan, a sole-custody father of a son and a 12-year-old girl puts 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.'

Dean, a single father, also points to the heavy silence on this issue: It was never said. But some parents, it was there. Some children, they would get invited three times and there was always some excuse. 'Oh she doesn't like sleep-overs', or 'it's not a good weekend' or whatever. Now parents who knew me, well there was no problem. Their kids would come. But some of them, I just knew.

For stay-at-home fathers whose partner is away on a particular evening, sleepovers can also be a carefully scrutinized issue, and fathers seem to willingly accept this state of affairs. Adam says:

But when Kara was away and I was the only one home, it was only the people that I was really comfortable with, that I would have their kids over. I read it as parents being cautious. I think I'd be a little cautious.

(III) Bodies as contingent and variable

As discussed in ample sociological and feminist scholarship, embodiment is a process whose meanings and capacities vary enormously depending upon

shifting social contexts. There are times when embodiment *can* come to matter a great deal, both for the men in these situations as well as for those who are observing them. The sites where body techniques matter in terms of movement or disruption include recent versions of the ‘moms and tots’ groups (community playgroups), school yards, classrooms, and other female-dominated venues. They also include instances where fathers are caring for the children of *others*, or where single fathers are hosting girls’ sleepover parties. Many fathers speak about how they must tread carefully because of ‘moral’ judgments, or suspicions, about the fit between male bodies and other embodied subjects. Yet there are also sites and times where gendered embodiment seems inconsequential. In some moments and spatial sites, bodies *do not* matter. When a father is attending to children – by cuddling, feeding, reading, bathing, or talking to them – gendered embodiment can be largely negligible. Moreover, with each passing year and with the increased presence of fathers on the social landscapes of parenting, this sense of disruptiveness has gradually eased and, at times, it seems to have completely dissipated. Nevertheless it can be ignited quickly. Several issues come to play a role in how and where embodiment matters. Some of factors that can minimize the visibility of embodiment include: ‘resources of masculinity’ such as earning and income; having a woman act as a ‘bridge’ for men; fathers connecting with mothers in extra-domestic spaces; being known in the community; and the passage of time.

3.1 Resources of masculinity- social class: ‘it might be different if I was a plumber’

To be placed in a position of primary caregiver without having achieved success as a breadwinner signals something out of sync with what many communities consider as a socially acceptable ‘moral’ identity for a male and for a father. Fathers without jobs or those in low-income jobs, particularly single fathers in such scenarios, can be viewed with particular suspicion within communities. This is the case for the single fathers in my study who are in low-income or low-status occupations, or between jobs. Stay-at-home fathers fare slightly better, although not working can still spark community alarm bells if it seems that the father may have lost his job and is not in his caring situation due to a family ‘choice’. Theo, for example, who left his job in the high tech sector to stay at home with four pre-school boys, says: ‘Everybody assumed I was laid off’. James, a gay and recently divorced father who took a four-month paternity leave, says:

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

Meanwhile, for Jacob, a physician in training (who used to be a carpenter), sleepovers have not been a problem at his house, either for his two sons or for

his 11-year-old daughter. He reflects on how this and his acceptance as a frequent helper in his children's schools may be rendered unproblematic, partly because his occupation is one of high status:

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

What is playing out here are the links between hegemonic masculinity and earning (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985; Coltrane, 1994; Connell, 1987, 1995, 2000; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1997). Indeed a key resource of hegemonic masculinity is that of social status acquired through being a family provider, especially in a high-income or high-status profession. This helps to increase fathers' ability to cross into socially acceptable 'moral' identities as caregivers, while also cushioning them from being viewed with suspicion. In effect, the economically unsuccessful male caring for children represents a form of double jeopardy because he is judged as being a 'failed male' (e.g. not a breadwinner) (Thorne, 1993: 161) and as a *deviant* man (e.g. a primary caregiver). On the other hand, a male who is visibly providing economically for his family, can feel more accepted in his community as a caregiver and issues of male embodiment thus recede in their salience.

3.2 A woman as a bridge: 'She'd say – this guy's okay'

In her work on boys and girls in school, American sociologist Barrie Thorne identifies the importance of a 'crossing partner in helping boys to cross into girls activities or vice versa' (Thorne, 1993, 133). While this can be a person of the same gender who accompanies the person crossing into the activities of the other gender, it can, as is the case in my work, be of the opposite gender. Thus, a second factor which diminishes male embodiment as present or disruptive in female-dominated community spaces is having a woman who acts as a 'bridge' for them. Such 'bridges' take the form of their own partner/wife, a female neighbor, a sister, the wife of a friend, or a caregiver. Martin's participation in the local playgroup, for example, was facilitated by the fact that his wife was previously a member. Indeed, Denise is still involved in the group in a different way. Martin says: 'They have a once-a-month "Girls Night Out". I don't want to be involved in that (laughs) so Denise goes to that. And so they all go out – just the women, the moms, they go out to dinner. So Denise keeps in touch with them'.

For Luke, there was one woman who kept him informed of the groups and eased his entry into community playgroups:

I met Bonnie at the library. She was the instrumental one. She was the liberal one of the group. She'd say – 'this guy's okay. You don't have to worry about him. You can trust him' She would call me up and let me know where the group was meeting.

3.3 Connecting in extra-domestic spaces: 'it just doesn't look good for me to be in private with one other mom'

In addition to drawing on women to assist them with crossing into female-dominated community sites, fathers also meet with women in particular sites where they feel more comfortable to be mingling with women. As discussed in the previous section on space and embodiment, many stay-at-home fathers readily offer their own observations on the possible tensions involved with meeting up in other women's homes. These tensions dissipate somewhat in more public setting, where tensions associated with cross-gender friendships are less obvious. Theo astutely points to the advantages for stay-at-home fathers in busy urban enclaves as opposed to mainly residential settings:

'We are very lucky in this community. Because it has a rich infrastructure, lots of public places you can go, with kid centered activities-parks, playgrounds, coffee shops. Where there isn't that infrastructure, you would have to go to people's houses more. And that's tough. . . . Because – unless I know them really well and their husband and it's all okay all around – it's just not worth the impression that it gives. So if I was in a community where I had less options, it would be a lot more difficult.

In referring to the tensions in cross-gender relations, fathers also stress that the spatial contexts of these friendships do matter. These fathers are also confirming one of Barrie Thorne's central points on how 'heterosexual meanings (act) as a barrier to (gender) crossing' (Thorne, 1993: 132). In this vein, she writes that a component of successfully crossing to the groups and activities of the other gender means that they have in effectively avoided binary gender meanings. 'Gender remains relatively low in salience . . . This can only be achieved if gender marking is minimized and heterosexual meanings are avoided' (Thorne, 1993: 132). Connecting with mothers in extra-domestic spaces (in coffee shops, in the schoolyard, in other public settings) thus minimizes 'gender marking' such as male embodiment and helps to decrease the 'complicated' and potentially 'threatening' quality of the heterosexual meanings attached to cross-gender mingling.

3.4 Being 'tightly embraced by the community'

Ray, a gay father of five-month-old Ruby, highlights how being known and 'tightly embraced by the community' is an asset in creating parenting connections and networks. He and his partner Carson are co-owners of a local shop

and their adoption of Ruby was embraced by many in their supportive network of friends, neighbors and community members. He says: 'Once the word was out that Ruby had arrived, everyday a gift arrived at the store or at the house. We are very connected in this community'.

Jack, who lives in the same community that he grew up in, offers a similar story. When his wife moved to another Canadian province and he was left to care for the three children, the adjustment issues were minimal for him. What especially assists Jack is that his mother, who lives in an apartment above his family home, was the school librarian for twenty-five years and has just recently retired. Meanwhile his sister is a teacher in the school that his children attend. Moreover, he says:

The kids have friends in the immediate neighborhood. And I have known many of the parents since I was a kid. I grew up in this community, about one mile away. There is a comfort level with these kids, I knew their parents when I was young. I know the parents and my mom knows the parents.

3.5 Changes within communities over time: 'Now I go to three playgroups a week plus the library'

The passing of time has also helped to ease the disruptive presence of male embodiment in female-dominated community settings. Indeed, there have been remarkable changes in how men's presence is experienced and perceived in many Canadian communities. The situation has progressed from Archie walking into a community center and feeling like women 'were staring daggers at me' to a situation one decade later where Theo and another father at *the same community center*, took on the coordination of a community playgroup. Theo notes that although the group is still composed mainly of mothers, there are now several men who drop in on a regular basis. Indeed, it was the mothers in the playgroup who urged Theo to take on the job. This signals something of a revolutionary change in fathering. In his words:

The more you're around, the more you start volunteering for things. Everybody was asking us. So I said I would do it. But I said I would do it with somebody I could work with. So Brian put his hand up. The last thing I expected was another guy!

Similarly, in spite of the feelings expressed earlier in this article about fathers feeling out of place in school settings, most fathers admitted that it is getting easier as more dads volunteer to help out in classroom and to go on field trips. Harry points out how men are also needed on field trips to help with particular gender-differentiated tasks, such as chaperoning the boys into the boys' washroom:

I work at the library with the grade one class. I go on all the field trips [. . .]
 They need a male to go on field trips. They need help with the washrooms.
 You know the school is half boys and half girls.

Several social changes have occurred in the past few years in Canada that will likely lead to a continued increase in the social ease around active fathering. First, there has been a dramatic increase by Canadian parenting resource centers in developing programs directed towards assisting fathers in making connections with other fathers (Bader and Doucet, 2005). Second, the recent extension of parental leave in Canada (from six months to one year) and the five-fold increase in the use of parental leave by fathers to care for infants in Canada (Marshall, 2003; Pérusse, 2003) is likely to increase fathers' presence in community settings with infants and toddlers which could, over the long-term, subsequently alter community suspicions around male embodiment and parenting. Aileen and Richard sum up the changes that have occurred in the two years that Richard has been at home with the children:

Aileen: When he first started going to playgroups, nobody would talk to him.

Richard: But now I go to three playgroups a week plus the library.

Conclusions

This article has argued that while sociological scholarship on bodies and embodiment has grown tremendously in the last decade, this prolific growth has not filtered into research on gender and families. While many studies on gender and domestic labour assume that men and women are interchangeable dis-embodied subjects within and between households, my work emphasizes how fathers and mothers are embodied subjects who move through domestic and community spaces with inter-subjective, relational, 'moral' and normative dimensions framing those movements. Embodiment matters in fathering practices in several ways. First, fathers speak as embodied subjects and agents in their parenting. This *weight* of embodiment figures in the ways in which men emphasize physical activities, being outdoors, playing, and doing sports with their children, all of which draw on a notion of masculine embodiment as strong, physical and muscle-bound (Burstyn, 1999). Embodiment also matters in that both fathers and mothers point to the influence of female embodiment – pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and post-birth recovery – as well as to the metaphoric example of *a mother's hug* ('longer', 'tighter', 'deeper') as having greater emotional weight in caring for young children.

Second, embodiment has 'moral' dimensions, with the concept of 'moral' being drawn from symbolic interactionist understandings around inter-subjective and relational conceptions of selves and others (see Barker, 1994; Daly, 1996, 2002; Finch and Mason, 1993; McMahan, 1995). The care of chil-

dren involves extensive networking around one's own children as well as the facilitating of relations between parents, between children, and, less visibly, between parents and the children of others. Most of the relational networks around children, especially pre-school children, are dominated by mothers, thus invoking the phrase and image of 'estrogen-filled worlds' as one which several fathers invoke. Moreover, many fathers speak about how they feel that they have to initially watch their footing because there can be something potentially disturbing about their presence as compared to mothers. This is most notably the case where fathers are caring for the children *of others*, where single fathers are hosting girls' sleepover parties, as well as in fathers' observations of unknown men lingering in sites where children gather (parks, playgrounds, schoolyards). It is in the first two sites that many fathers speak about the need to move cautiously because of 'moral' judgments, or suspicions, about the social fit between male embodiment and other embodied subjects and how time matters in that the relations between father and child is affected by the age-defined child; such observations point to the need to consider the relationship between space, time and gendered social relations (see Massey, 1994).

A third and final point about embodiment in these fathering narrative is the very simple observation that sometimes bodies matter and sometimes they don't. When a father is attending to children- by cuddling, feeding, reading, bathing, or talking to them- gendered embodiment can be largely negligible. But there are also times when embodiment *can* come to matter a great deal, both for the men in these situations as well as for those who are observing them. Furthermore, embodiment matters differentially depending on how fathers are socially situated in relation to income and social class; fathers of lower income, or fathers who are not demonstrated breadwinners feel especially observed as embodied agents interacting with other parents scenes. Embodiment also comes into play in situations where fathers are mingling with mothers while it is less salient in spaces and times where 'gender marking is minimized and heterosexual meanings are avoided' (Thorne, 1993, 132). The presence of male embodiment in parenting has, however, also lightened over time as greater father involvement has occurred across diverse sectors of Canadian communities and in the changing norms, social expectations and ideologies of mothering and fathering. Fathers' active and positive presence on the social landscapes of parenting lessens suspicions and wariness about male embodiment in relation to children.

While this impact of bodies waxes and wanes through the narratives and through the flow of parental time, embodiment can matter in fathering, and parenting more widely, because the care of others is, quite simply, deeply embodied. Caring is filled with interactive, relational and 'moral' dimensions and carers are watched by others who also care. One father, Luke, offered a simple sentence on the blend of emotional and embodied qualities in care when he said: '*We all leave marks on those we care for*'. Moreover, as fathers' narratives stretched across time to their own fathers and mothers, to grandmothers and grandfathers, and to the inner reaches of childhood memories, a

poignant concluding point from R.W. Connell is relevant here: '*Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are*' (Connell, 1995: 53).

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