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Dad and Baby in the First Year: Gendered Responsibilities and Embodiment

By
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This article addresses the question of why there are persistent gender differences in the responsibility for children. It argues that understanding continuing gender divisions of domestic responsibility, particularly in the first year of parenting, requires attending to issues of identity; commitment; embodiment; deeply rooted socialization or habitus; and normative community assumptions around gender, breadwinning, and caring. Rooted in three qualitative research studies conducted over the past eight years with more than two hundred Canadian fathers and forty mothers, the author argues for renewed thinking around issues of gender equality and gender differences and how these play out in domestic and community spaces in that first year of parenting. Bridging together time, space, and embodiment, the author also maintains that short-term potential differences in domestic responsibilities in parenting should not necessarily lead to long-term chronic inequities between women and men.

Keywords: embodiment; child care; parenting; fatherhood; parental leave; habitus

More than a decade ago, Scott Coltrane wrote, in his widely read *Family Man*, that “more fathers will become family men in

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the future . . . we will move closer to gender equality” (1996, 235). Since that time, the first part of Coltrane’s prediction has been continually borne out. With each passing year, researchers have documented how fathers are more involved in their children’s lives than fathers of previous generations (J. Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004; E. Pleck and Pleck 1997; O’Brien and Shemilt 2003). Notably, the time allotted to fathering has increased significantly (Gershuny 2001; Yeung et al. 2001), as has the gender balance of child care tasks (Coltrane and Adams 2001) across diverse groups of fathers in many Western countries. While these changes have been duly noted, the issue of what true gender equality is and how to achieve it has preoccupied and challenged family researchers across the globe. Scholars have, however, remained particularly puzzled by one thorny issue, identified by Sarah Ferstermaker Berk more than twenty years ago as the “outstanding stability” in mothers’ *responsibility* for children (Berk 1985). This pattern of gendered responsibilities has not shifted even where women have equal, or greater, participation in paid employment (Coltrane and Adams 2001; Robinson and Barret 1986; Coltrane 2000; Doucet 2001, 2006a; Silver 2000). Thus, the question that continues to elude researchers is, How can we account for men’s reluctance or inability to take on the responsibility for children? Conversely, why is there a seeming solidity in the primary bond between women and the responsibility for children?

Over the past few decades, a multitude of key obstacles as well as facilitators to greater fatherhood involvement have been identified, including processes, practices, ideologies, and discourses in families, workplaces, state policies, and community settings. In addition, a recent debate has been generated around the work of Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers (2003, forthcoming), who have argued that to obtain gender equality or “gender symmetry” in the allocation and performance of carework and paid employment, the gender division of labor, where men are primarily responsible for breadwinning and women are primarily responsible for caregiving, must be erased. To achieve such erasure in responsibilities, they advocate many measures focused on paid work and caring, the most notable of which is equity in caregiving time in the first year of parenting. Specifically, building on policy developments in countries such as Sweden and Denmark where there is a one- or two-month nontransferable right to parental leave for mothers and fathers, Gornick and Meyers argue for complete parity to allow six months’ nontransferable leave each for mothers and fathers.

Many other scholars have called for gender parity in caregiving time in the first year of parenting as a way of moving toward long-term gender equality in work and care responsibilities over the life course of women and men. This article will address two issues that emanate from such proposals. The first is the issue of distinguishing between men’s contributions to domestic life and the responsibility for children; that is, while we now know a great deal about what impedes or encourages fathers’ participation in domestic work and child care, the issue of what moves fathers to *feel responsible* and to *be responsible* for domestic life is an entirely different matter. It requires attending to issues of identity; commitment; embodiment; deeply rooted socialization or habitus; and normative community assumptions around gender, breadwinning, and caring. The second is the synonymous pairing of parity in time and commitment in the first year of

parenting with long-term gender equality. Could it be that there are gendered particularities in the first year for many heterosexual couples, which should be attended to rather than obscured? Furthermore, are these particularities rooted in a combination of social conditions and embodiment?

This article combines a wide-angle lens on fathering with a zoom-lens focus specifically on the first year of fathering and mothering. It draws from three qualitative research studies conducted over the past eight years with more than two hundred Canadian fathers and forty mothers. Specifically, I address the tenuous links between fatherhood and the responsibility for children with a focus on how embodiment can matter in the first year and what this might mean for policy and programs aimed at achieving fathering involvement or gender equality in parenting. The article is organized in four parts. First, I detail the Canadian context and the research studies that inform this article. Second, I briefly outline a wide approach to embodiment in fathering by drawing on diverse authors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alice Rossi, Irving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, and select feminist authors. Third, I highlight selected research findings, pointing to the intersections between embodiment and parental responsibilities in the first year of parenting. Fourth, I detail several implications that emerge from my arguments, specifically as they relate to parental leave policy and parenting programs. Overall, I argue for renewed thinking around issues of gender equality and gender differences, especially in relation to potential embodied differences in that first year as they play out in domestic and community settings.

Canadian Context and Research Studies

As with many other Western countries, the social terrain in Canada is characterized by rising labor force participation of mothers of young children and gradual increases in the numbers of stay-at-home fathers. In Canada, stay-at-home fathers (about 111,000 of them in 2002) increased 25 percent over a recent ten-year period while stay-at-home mothers have decreased by approximately the same figure (Statistics Canada 2002). Moreover, there has been a sixfold increase in the proportion of single-earner families with a stay-at-home father between 1976 (two out of every hundred single-earner families) and 2005 (twelve out of every hundred) (Statistics Canada 2008), and women are primary breadwinners in nearly one-third of Canadian two-earner families (Sussman and Bonnell 2006).

With the exception of the province of Québec, Canada, has no universal child care in its other nine provinces and three territories. It is widely acknowledged that for the vast majority of Canadians, child care demand exceeds supply and that the quality of Canada's child care is uneven and expensive. As a nation, Canada also invests less than half of what other developed nations devote to early childhood education and only has enough regulated child care spaces for less than 20 percent of children under six with working parents. This compares to the United Kingdom where 60 percent of young children are in regulated care, while in Denmark, the figure is nearly 80 percent. These figures help to account for the relatively high

numbers of stay-at-home parents in Canada. That is, the decision on the part of Canadian parents to have one parent stay at home with preschool children is part of a strategy to balance work and home for both parents in a country where day care has never been offered as a viable option for many families.

In contrast to its poor record in child care provision, one of Canada's greatest strengths in family policy is its Employment Insurance Act of 2001, which provides paid parental leave for almost a year. While fifteen weeks are reserved for mothers as maternity benefits, either fathers or mothers can take the latter thirty-five weeks. Policy is even more generous in the province of Québec, with Québec fathers, as of 2005, being entitled to a week's paternity leave with higher benefits than are provided under the federal program that serves the rest of Canada. Since the implementation of additional parental leave in Canada in 2001, mothers still take most of the leave time; they took an average of eleven months off in 2004. Meanwhile, 11 percent of fathers took part of the leave that year, increasing to 14.5 percent in 2005. With the introduction of three to five weeks of nontransferable leave for fathers in Québec, the take-up went from 22 percent of fathers to nearly 50 percent in 2006 (Doucet, McKay, and Tremblay forthcoming).¹

The findings in this article are drawn from three qualitative research studies carried out over the past eight years (2000-2008), which included in-depth interviews with more than two hundred fathers and forty mothers. The first was a study of fathers who are primary caregivers (single fathers and/or stay-at-home fathers) conducted mainly in Ontario but with some representation across Canada (see Doucet 2006a). It included in-depth interviews with more than one hundred fathers and with fourteen heterosexual couples.² The second study is a qualitative research study with twenty-six couples (sixteen from Ontario and ten from Québec) where the father has taken some parental leave. Finally, the third study is on transitions to new fatherhood for a diverse sample of fathers carried out mainly in Ontario but with some participation for fathers representing diverse regions of Canada; in this last study, focus groups were conducted with fifty fathers and in-depth interviews with twenty fathers.³

While the fathers as primary caregivers study examines fathering experiences over the course of raising children, all of the fathers looked back to the first year of fatherhood to describe challenges and difficulties; the latter two studies deal specifically with the first year of fathering. Studies will be referred to in the following way throughout this article: the first is the primary caregiving fathers study (interviews conducted 2000 to 2004); the second is the parental leave study (twenty five heterosexual couples and one gay couple interviewed between 2006 and 2008);⁴ and the third is the new fathers study (sixty eight fathers interviewed between 2003 and 2007).

Theories of Embodiment

My research on fathering has been informed by many wide areas of theoretical and empirical research, including studies on masculinities, feminist research on

families, research on the “ethic of care,” and recent theoretical developments in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (Doucet 2006a). With specific relation to themes of embodiment, my approach is informed by Chris Shilling’s evocative mapping of theoretical positions on embodiment, with my own position situated between *phenomenological and action-oriented studies of the lived body* and *structuration theories of the body* (Shilling 2003). In relation to the former, I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1964, 1965, 1968) well-cited concept of *body subjects*, especially his ideas on the indivisibility of mind and body, human beings as embodied social agents, and human perception as intrinsically embodied. In his words, “We are in the world through our body, and . . . we perceive that world within our body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 206).

While sociologists have increasingly taken up Merleau-Ponty (see, for example, Crossley 1995b, 2001; Howson and Inglis 2001; Nettleton and Watson 1998), a useful sociological connection to the work of Merleau-Ponty, specifically in relation to gendered embodiment in the family, is that of Alice Rossi (1977, 1984). Her work was initially considered very controversial for feminists and family sociologists (see Gross et al. 1979) for her early efforts to integrate biological and social constructs (Rossi 1984, 1), her critique of “the dismal neglect in family sociology of the basic fact that family roles are highly physical in nature,” and her argument that the “the body [is] central to . . . parenthood [and] yet neglected in sociological formulations” (Rossi 1977, 715). Today, some thirty years later, her work is very much in sync with the now widely accepted position within the social sciences that selfhood is not only social but also *embodied*. Her insights resonate with those of Merleau-Ponty when she writes that “the sociological units of analysis such as roles, groups, networks, and classes divert attention from the fact that the subjects of our work are male and female animals with genes, glands, bone and flesh occupying an ecological niche of a particular kind in a tiny fragment of time” (1984, 1). Specifically, Rossi’s thinking around embodiment and parenting as it pertains to parenting in the first year are of relevance for my article.

Explicating briefly my positioning within what Shilling terms “structuration theories of the body” is my view 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). In developing a position that connects social location with embodiment, my research has also been influenced by Goffman’s work on embodiment and space (1963, 1969, 1972, 1987); specifically, I draw on his conception of intersubjective embodied relations as 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 but also make judgments about how people maintain or disrupt routine social and public interactions). 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 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 1995a).

In addition to Goffman's work on embodiment and space as a way of thinking about the impact of social location on one's body, Bourdieu's concept of embodied habitus (1977, 1984, 1990) is also illuminating in thinking about gendered bodies, especially in the first year of parenthood. Bourdieu argues in the *The Logic of Practice* (1990, 53fn) that the "concept of the habitus designate(s) a system of acquired, permanent, generative dispositions" that structures the "fields" of social life.⁵ He further argues that the habitus as "a product of history produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history . . . [it] ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought, and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices . . . more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms" (1990, 54). Grappling with a way of theorizing structured agency, and wanting to go beyond the commonly used idea of socialization as determining or influencing one's path in life, Bourdieu argues, through the concept of habitus, that rather than being determined by the structures (including the family) in which we are born and raised, there is a commonsense, taken-for-granted way in which we feel inclined toward one set of behaviors rather than another. Metaphorically, the working of habitus is like a "fish in water . . . it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127).

While Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the everyday habituated activities of thinking, talking, gesturing, and moving, it also has embodied dimensions. That is, everyday actions and associated "practical beliefs" are "a state of the body" and "enacted belief [is] instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad" (1990, 68). He maintains that "the way people treat their bodies reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus" (1984, 190). Furthermore, since the generative schemas and dispositions of the habitus are acquired during the early years of life, they are durable, habitual, and largely unreflexive.⁶

Although Bourdieu is not a smooth fit for feminist work (see Silva 2005; Adkins and Skeggs 2004), it nevertheless remains worth noting how little Bourdieu, especially his concept of habitus, has been applied in the area of gender relations and the family (but see Reay 2004; Doucet 2006c). Similarly, it has been rather surprising how the "whole industry of research and scholarship on the body" (Nettleton and Watson 1998, 2; see also Shilling 2003) has not filtered into empirical or theoretical understandings of embodied mothering and fathering (but see Draper 2003; Doucet 2006b; Morgan 1996; Kvande 2005). 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.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied subjects, Rossi's call for more embodied understandings of early parenting, Goffman's intersections between embodiment and space, and Bourdieu's postulation of how embodied habitus continually shapes the ways in which we act in the world, I explore embodied gender differences that can be present in the articulation of parental responsibilities in the first year of parenting. I begin by briefly outlining a comprehensive understanding of domestic responsibility, followed by a discussion of how these responsibilities intersect with embodiment in that first year.

Findings: Domestic Responsibilities and Embodiment

My understanding of parental responsibilities builds on the work of leading fatherhood scholars who have argued that it is important to recognize a broad range of fathering practices, including meeting children's needs through *interaction* (direct engagement), *accessibility* (physical and psychological presence and availability), and *responsibility* (indirect childrearing tasks such as planning and scheduling) (Lamb et al. 1987). My own work widens this conceptualization of fathering involvement into three child care responsibilities, by recognizing that the first two tasks also have dimensions of responsibility woven into them, partly because they also require cognition and commitment (see Palkovitz 1997). These three childrearing responsibilities can be briefly summed up in the following way. First, *emotional responsibility* includes attentiveness and responsiveness (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1989, 1993, 1995) and is akin to Susan Walzer's discussion of "parental consciousness" and "thinking about the baby" (Walzer 1998). Second, *community responsibility* connects the domestic realm to the community and involves social networking, coordinating, balancing, negotiating, and orchestrating those others who are involved in children's lives. Finally, the *moral responsibilities* of parenting, rooted in a symbolic interactionist conception of the interactional relational sense (Daly 2002, 1996; Finch and Mason 1993; McMahon 1995) relates to people's identities as "moral" beings and how they feel they ought to and should act in society as parents.

Building from these three responsibilities, and drawing from three research studies conducted over the past decade, I explore six dimensions of gendered embodiment in the first year of parenting.

Connection to pregnancy and birth through body-mediated moments

Many researchers have documented how, as soon as pregnancy is confirmed, women enter into an embodied world of pregnancy and the social networks and institutional environments surrounding and regulating embodied pregnancy (Bailey 2001; Ivry 2007). Men's entry into this world is much more ambivalent and much less documented. We know that men in many countries have been increasingly involved in prenatal, birth, and postnatal processes and that, in spite of this involvement, men can nevertheless feel detached from prenatal and birth processes (Draper 2000, 2003; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Reed 2005). According to Jan Draper, this is "due in part to their detachment from the direct physiological experience of pregnancy and labor. During a period in which bodily change is privileged, men lack the biological markers of transition to parenthood. Men's 'disembodied' experience of pregnancy is therefore very different from women's embodied experience" (Draper 2003, 744). She further argues that fathers' embodiment at this stage are "body-mediated-moments," which she describes as "a 'proxy' embodiment, mediated by and through their partner's body" (Draper 2003, 765).

While Draper focuses specifically on body-mediated-moments such as "the pregnancy test, the annunciation, the ultrasound, quickening and birth attendance," my recent interviews with seventy new fathers indicate that new Canadian

fathers connect to the baby partly through caring for their female partners. Fathers describe feeling elated, exhausted, and fearful. One example is from Vincent, a social worker and a PhD student when his wife was expecting their first child; he answered the question, “What stood out for you during your wife’s pregnancy?” by pointing to his fear, his connection with his wife, and their differently embodied experiences:

My own fear, my own fear was really powerful on most days . . . I had to face up to my own bullshit . . . I had to really go holy god, do you think you can actually really do this now? . . . And the love that my wife and I felt so profoundly for each other grew as we held our hands and went through this experience. . . . When we became pregnant . . . the sense that I was publicly owned. My wife had more of a sense of this. Total strangers would walk up and put their hands on her belly.

Gay fathers can also connect through body-mediated moments with a surrogate mother. Jian, a Chinese gay father who was in constant touch with the surrogate mother, commented on how thrilled he was at each stage before the birth of his daughter Hannah. From the “pregnancy test which was very big news,” to “hearing the heartbeat in the doctor’s office . . . the ultrasound scan and then later seeing the pictures,” to being in the birthing room where “it’s such a tough thing to watch . . . and you see her in so much pain and so tired . . . and then when the baby came out, you just can’t imagine such a big thing coming out from such a tiny little place. And it’s amazing.”

Mothers and infants: “Nine months of pregnancy . . . such a commitment”

Many fathers interviewed in the new fathers study used the term “our pregnancy” and spoke at length about how they, as a couple, prepared for the birth of their child. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sense is that fathers give great weight to mothers’ primary connection with the newborn infant as rooted in the embodied connection with the fetus and baby. Draper describes this as follows: “Woman’s pregnant embodiment can therefore be understood as an anchor, firmly grounding the reality of the baby within their day-to-day existence. The men had no such anchor” (Draper 2003, 765). This metaphor of an anchor or, as it appears in my research, of a “bond” between mother and baby, is based on the embodied experience of pregnancy, birthing, and breastfeeding (or its possibility). This was one of the unexpected, and yet constant, findings in my research with heterosexual fathers over the past decade.

From my three studies on fathering, the 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 the first year of parenting through reference to the physical, emotional, and symbolic experiences of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and postrecovery and how these have an impact on mothering and fathering identities. From the fathers as primary caregivers study, Alistair, who stayed home for more than a year with his first infant daughter, points to the

physical connections associated with pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding and to how it creates “such a commitment”:

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.

From the same study, even where fathers had been stay-at-home dads for five to ten years, most of them, nevertheless, still looked back to the first year and claimed that the embodiment associated with prenatal, birth, and the early post-natal period, gave women a special bond. Tom, a stay-at-home father of three for seven years, speaks about his wife, Natasha, who is a pediatrician:

I think that mothers care for their children differently. When my son has something going wrong emotionally, Natasha has the emotional reaction that stems from the first moment that he was born. And I know that she has that connection with the physical act of childbirth that is connected, and it is kind of a continuum. And I think that is a very unique thing. I was there at the birth. I was there for all three of them. And I had a connection with them. But she had her body transformed. I don't think we can undermine the fact women are connected to their children in that very physical, that very primordial sense. Then every time he cries or she gets upset, and especially him, because it was a very difficult birth. And she'll think about that and I think that she's more inclined to go the extra mile to be emotionally connected to him.

More recently, Hareven, an unemployed father who is planning to be stay at home with his newborn daughter, says that while the mother-infant bond “both-ers me,” he nevertheless accepts it:

As a man I have to understand, and I think most men do. They really have to understand that the child really has to bond with the mother first . . . because they carry it for nine months. And if they're breastfeeding, that's just biological. You can't really disrupt it. You don't want to disrupt it. You can't, even though you feel a sense of abandonment or whatever. And you just have to accept it, really. And you just have to know that.

Fathers' embodiment through play

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). This finding, also confirmed in my three studies, has embodied dimensions in that the body is called into use as fathers make particular mention of themselves as strong, physical, and active beings.⁷ 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.

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 eighteen-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.

Part of this more physical approach to parenting allows fathers to distinguish their caregiving from that of mothering and to impart a form of masculine care, rooted in using physical embodiment, play, and adventure (see Brandth and Kvande 1998). In the first few months of parenting when a mother may be recovering from birth, this approach enables fathers to connect with their children in a different way. From my parental leave study, it was notable how, where there was an older child in the home, fathers would focus their leave time on caring for and playing with the older child, thus leaving the care and feeding of the newborn largely with the mother.

Community networks and embodiment

How does embodiment matter in community spaces and in the taking on of community responsibility? Regarding 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." That is, 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 social judgments are made about whether, and how, men maintain or disrupt routine social and public interactions involving parents and children.

For fathers with infants and toddlers, community parent-infant groups and playgroups are one of the main forums in which parents of young children make connections with other parents. Yet, from the study on fathers as primary caregivers, it was striking how many stay-at-home fathers faced difficulties gaining full acceptance in these playgroups. There was a persistent continuity in how men spoke about themselves as an embodied presence in what several fathers called "estrogen-filled worlds."

Looking back to the mid-1990s, Archie, a stay-at-home father for seven years, remembered the steely stares that came his way when he went to the well baby clinic in his community center: "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." In the year 2000, Martin and his wife Denise inadvertently caused a minor crisis in their local playgroup when Martin, a stay-at-home father of an eight-month-old boy, replaced Denise

in the mom-and-baby group. While that story had an ending wherein the group decided to allow Martin to remain as a member, the issue that surfaced was, in Goffman's terms, one where routine social interactions between breastfeeding mothers were disrupted by a male embodied presence. In 2002, Peter, a stay-at-home father of two young boys, highlighted how community networking has "gotten easier" over the course of being home for six years, although "to me as a man, that was a pretty alien environment and *it continues to be.*" More recently, in 2006, Patrick, a new father and an Internet consultant who sometimes takes his son to infant groups at a local community center, says,

I was the only guy there . . . so I felt like—not that I was unwelcome there—but like I wasn't making friends with all the mothers there. Because they have their own things and they would probably go with each other and be friends. But it's different if you're this man. It's just a whole different thing.

Embodied habitus: "I grew up as a guy"

In terms of gendered background, many fathers reflected on how some of their active parenting style, the play and adventure, is rooted in the fact that "I grew up as a guy." The tendency for many fathers to exhibit traditionally masculine qualities in their caring is not surprising given that most boys grow up in cultures that encourage sport, physical and emotional independence, and risk-taking (Messner 2002). As Patricia Yancey Martin has recently written, gendering processes are deeply ingrained so that they "become almost automatic": "Gendered practices are learned and enacted in childhood and in every major site of social behavior over the life course, including in school, intimate relationships, families, workplaces, houses of worship, and social movements. In time, like riding a bicycle, gendering practices become almost automatic" (Martin 2003, 352).

What Martin (2003) is referring to is closely aligned with Bourdieu's conception of habitus, which helps us to think about how people's everyday practical knowledge, practices, and strategies cannot be reduced only to rational decision making, to socialization, nor to structures of power and constraint. While all of these matter, they are also accounted for by habitus, in which we are embedded with its "generative schemas and dispositions" and which, "once acquired . . . underlies and conditions all subsequent learning and social experience" (Bourdieu 1977, 72; 1990, 52). Men and women are partly rooted in a habitus with deeply ingrained assumptions about women as primary caregivers and men as primary breadwinners. And while these practices are changing drastically (see Duncan and Edwards 1999), beneath the surfaces of everyday practices, there is still a constant pull back to those primary assumptions. This plays out in various ways across a diversity of class, ethnicity, age, and occupation (see Duncan and Edwards 1999). Nevertheless, it manifested itself in my recent study on parental leave in that women feel guilty about leaving their child to go back to work, and men feel guilty about leaving their work to care for their child. Put differently, mothers feel pulled toward care while fathers feel pulled toward paid work.

From the study of fathers as primary caregivers, it was striking how every stay-at-home father referred in some way to the moral responsibilities he feels weighing on him to be a family breadwinner or at least to earn some part of the family wages. As expressed by Andy, an Italian-Canadian stay-at-home father of two, “The only problem I have is finances, not pulling my weight financially because that was ingrained in me. The man goes out to work and brings in the money.” Jesse, a freelance artist and stay-at-home father of a preschool daughter, also points to how these perceptions are “so ingrained in us” through men’s upbringing, how it “can weigh on you,” and that “it’s a guy thing.”

In mentioning “a guy thing” these fathers are referring to the connections between hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2001) and paid work and the associated sense of vertigo they feel when they relinquish earning as a primary part of their identity (Waddington, Chritcher, and Dicks 1998). These findings reflect those of Scott Coltrane when he observed a decade ago that “the underlying equation of men with work and women with home has been surprisingly impervious to the labor market changes that have occurred over the past few decades” (Coltrane 1996, 26; see also Potuchek 1997; Townsend 2002). This “underlying equation” is even more pervasive for fathers of infants because of the interplay between gender, earning, and caregiving in the first year of parenting.

Fathers and infants: “. . . especially a really tiny baby”

Emerging from the research is the view that many women are embedded in a habitus with strong “generative schemas and dispositions” on how mothers should be primary caregivers of infants. Craig, for example, a stay-at-home dad who has one twin son with physical disabilities, reflects on a recurring issue for him as a father: “the incompetence thing comes into play,” and social onlookers “very much want to make sure that the babies are okay.” He remembers how he was often “approached with offers of help. It was very much like the incompetent father needing a woman’s help to get the job done.”

Peter points to how these sentiments of assumed incompetence are particularly strong with young or preverbal children because onlookers may worry about the baby’s care, while also assuming that the father is a secondary, and less competent, carer; he also highlights how this perception wanes as the children grow older:

When he was a tiny baby, there was always that sense that I was babysitting rather than taking care of my child like I do everyday—where I had to understand his wants and needs because he can’t speak. That’s where I felt it was very different from women. There was a bit of an assumption that I felt like I was just tiding things over until the *real mother* showed up, or the *person who really knew what they were doing* would show up.

At the end of his interview, Peter gives a frank assessment of the social acceptability of fathers as carers: “Even in a society where people believe that men and women are equal and can do just about everything, they don’t really believe that men can do this with a baby, especially a really tiny baby.”

These assumptions also filter into men's desire to take parental leave. While increasingly taking some parental leave, Canadian men, much like their Scandinavian counterparts, are taking up to just a few weeks while leaving the lion's share to their female partners. Current Canadian data suggest that two-thirds (67 percent) of Canadian men return to work less than one month after birth or adoption, compared to only 2 percent of women. Meanwhile, just over half of all mothers (51.5 percent) take twelve months or more of leave, compared to only 4 percent of fathers (Doucet, McKay, and Tremblay forthcoming). As for the reasons mothers take more leave than fathers, the limited Canadian statistical data that are available⁸ indicate that the most commonly cited reasons are, in order of prevalence: undisclosed "other reasons," "the mother wants to stay home," "more financially advantageous," and "spouse not eligible for benefits." A small number also replied that "it's easier for the mother to take time off" (Employment Insurance Coverage Survey, Statistics Canada 2004).

Discussion

Several policy, program, and theoretical implications arise from the above discussion.

Embodiment, time, and new parenting

One of the most controversial points made by Alice Rossi some thirty years ago was that "a biologically based potential for heightened maternal investment in the child . . . exceeds the potential for investment by men in fatherhood" (1977, 24). Rossi was pointing to "potential" and not "certainty" here; I concur with her on this potential differential investment, and ensuing commitment, by mother and fathers (see also Hollway 2006). As one stay-at-home father in my research, Alistair, named it, "nine months of pregnancy . . . such a commitment." One of the most surprising findings is the overwhelming belief by fathers as well as mothers in a gender-differentiated bond between mother and child, especially in the first months of parenting. There is no clear causal relationship, however, between parental perceptions of this bond and parenting relationships over time. That is, many contextual factors shape fathering involvement over time. Mothers and fathers move back and forth in a constant dance of connection that changes for each child and each parent over the course of each year (see Doucet 2006a; Dienhart 1998). Nevertheless, many stay-at-home fathers still conjure the symbolic weight of the mothering bond and draw on it as an explanation for their differing responses at particular points in time. As mentioned earlier by Tom, the stay-at-home father of three children for seven years, he believed that his wife has a unique connection to their children, that she is "more inclined to go the extra mile to be emotionally connected," and that women generally "are connected to their children in that very physical, that very primordial sense."

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty and the burgeoning literature on the sociology of embodiment, I have argued that when we conceptualize subjects as embodied, then we begin to hear in their narratives how embodiment can matter in the first year of parenting. While many studies on gender and domestic labor assume that men and women are interchangeable, disembodied subjects within and between households, my work, drawing on Goffman, emphasizes how fathers and mothers are embodied subjects who move through domestic and community spaces with intersubjective, relational, “moral,” and normative dimensions framing those movements. Drawing on Bourdieu, I have argued that embodied parenting is deeply rooted in habitus, which shapes the norms and assumptions of gendered parenting.

In spite of the points above, I am also cognizant of the critical insights from feminist understandings of the body, which remind us that embodiment is a process whose meanings and capacities vary enormously depending upon shifting 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). Moira 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; see also Nicholson 1994). Thus, while male and female embodiment can matter in the first year of parenting, there are also sites and times where gendered embodiment can seem unimportant and inconsequential. Moreover, while meanings of embodiment shift over time and in varied social contexts, this clearly unfolds differently for parents of adopted children, for couples who deeply challenge any gender differentiation in parenting, for fathers who take most or all of the family’s entitlement to parental leave, for gay fathers, as well as for single heterosexual fathers who are parenting without the steady presence of a mother (for discussion of the latter, see Doucet 2006a).

How do embodied differences matter in programs and policies directed at new fathers?

In terms of programs, most new fathers point to the need for information that will help them to support their partners as they move through the varied embodied phases of pregnancy toward birth. In focus groups with fifty fathers across Canada, men pointed to the challenges of being involved in the birth. A pervasive concern of fathers was summarized concisely in the following statement: “Put all the information in three languages: English, French, and Male.”

While some studies have highlighted the time of pregnancy as particularly stressful for fathers (see Condon, Boyce, and Corkindale 2004), my research with new fathers suggests that the postnatal period is a time when fathers want more information and guidance on not only how to care for the new baby but also how to care for their partners. As one father, in a focus group with new fathers, put it, “If my wife is okay, my baby is okay.” In contrast to Jan Draper, who argues that early fatherhood is largely disembodied, my own research confirms that fathers

do speak about paternal embodiment by pointing to issues such as extreme fatigue and the effects of not being able to exercise or engage in their physical activity routines. Indeed, several fathers who took a short parental leave did so partly to support their partners, partly to transition into new parenthood together, and partly to deal with their own fatigue in managing new fatherhood. While it is important to focus on programs that might assist fathers, it is also critical to recognize differences between fathers and the need for specialized attention to particular groups of fathers—including gay dads, teen dads, and fathers of ethnic minorities (see other articles in this volume).

The differentially embodied experiences of new parenthood for heterosexual couples, and the belief held by many mothers and fathers that early embodied differences can lead to different attachment to the infant, has implications for parental leave. Gornick and Meyers's (2003) proposal for six months of nontransferable leave to mothers and fathers to create gender symmetry in parental responsibilities is based on the assumption that parents are disembodied and completely interchangeable. In the long debate that followed their work, only two authors pointed to the need to consider differences between mothering and fathering experiences, relational negotiations between couples, and the possibility that embodiment might make a difference to how much leave time each saw as desirable (see Coltrane forthcoming; Orloff forthcoming).

In Canada, the province of Québec's five weeks of nontransferable leave to fathers has increased fathers' take-up of leave to nearly 50 percent. In the remainder of Canada, the extension of gender-neutral parental leave has increased fathers' take-up from 2 to 15 percent (Doucet, McKay, and Tremblay forthcoming). My qualitative research with new fathers taking leave points to how fathers' leave-taking is not necessarily done to produce equity with their partners. In contrast, I present four key considerations of a different sort (see McKay and Doucet 2008). First, when fathers take "daddy days" that are not transferable to the mother, they take them so that they can assist their partner with the baby and to be part of the transition toward their new family. Second, in households with older children, fathers take leave to focus on the older children and to allow the mother to care for the baby. Third, fathers privilege mothers' desires and choices to take as much of the leave as possible (see also Bergman and Hobson 2002). From the twenty-six fathers who took some parental leave in the first year, the overwhelming feeling was that their bond with the child was qualitatively different from that of the mother. Nevertheless, they still emphasized the importance of fathers having time to create their own bonds with their infants.

Gender equality and gender differences

While many family and feminist researchers have been striving toward understanding what measures would facilitate moves to gender equality, the issue of how to incorporate gender differences into this equation has received only sparse attention from researchers. Going back to earlier well-known studies on gender divisions of labor, an *egalitarian* household was defined as one where the

man and the woman within it do “share(d) housework *equally*” (Hochschild 1989) or “whose contributions are roughly equal to one another” (Brannen and Moss 1991) whether measured by minutes and hours, tasks, or overall responsibility. Whatever the terms used, the overwhelming consensus by many researchers has been, and remains, that a 50-50 or egalitarian division of domestic labor is the ideal or most successful pattern (Brannen and Moss 1991; Deutsch 1999; Ehrensaft 1984, 1987; Hochschild 1989; Kimball 1988). As Deutsch recently put it, “Equal sharers, of course, were the stars of this study” (Deutsch 1999, 7).

Such assumptions on equal sharing through all stages of parenting continues to inform policy discussions on how to achieve gender equality in work opportunities. Missing from such discussions are some of the excellent contributions made by feminists over the past few decades on the need to intertwine equality and difference. Well-articulated by feminist legal scholar Deborah Rhode, rather than simply focusing on “difference per se,” it is more useful to consider “the disadvantages that follow from it” (Rhode 1990, 204). She argues, “The difference dilemma cannot be resolved; it can only be recast. The critical issue should not be difference, *but the difference difference makes*” (Rhode 1989, 313). To get at the long-term consequences of such gender differences, longitudinal studies would help to assess changes over time in relation to the changing work–family balance for women and men.

Conclusion

New fathering and mothering recurs as a tremendously powerful, and yet incredibly short, period of the life course where gender magnification is in full play. Over the many momentous months after a pregnancy is confirmed, enormous family transitions are engendered and gendered. Indeed, the metaphor of birth, with all of its symbolic and real implications of entry, rupture, explosion, newness, and transformation, are also present in the birthing, not only of an infant but also of mothers and fathers. My argument is that, while each stage of parenting brings its own demands and gendered challenges, this early phase of parenting is one where the biological and social differences between women and men are magnified so that they can take on enormous dimensions. It is also the phase of parenting that can entrench women and men into long-standing gender differences in their parenting and employment opportunities. Researchers who reflect on how to create the conditions for long-lasting gender equality may have to consider how to support this early phase of potentially gender-differentiated parenting rather than pretend that gendered differences can be minimized through gender-neutral policy.

Drawing from my research on fathering over the past decade, including interviews with more than two hundred Canadian fathers and forty mothers, I have argued that policies and programs directed at new fathers should take into account these intertwined social and embodied differences between mothers and fathers. Discussions on how to achieve gender equality in work–family balances also

depend on more comprehensive understandings of what parental responsibilities are and how they are based within the realms of the domestic, the community, and the social identities tied up with what it means to be a mother or a father, a man or a woman, in contemporary society. Yet, while habitus variations are based on the particularities of one's family background, culture, class, education level, and occupation, the habitus can also change slowly across time (Silva 2005).

In speaking to fathers as primary caregivers, whose experiences of being at home stretched back over a decade, it was striking to note how much had changed over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. With each passing year in Canada, it seems that the community acceptance of highly involved fathers improves significantly. One couple, Aileen and Richard, parents of three young children, summed up the changes that have occurred in the two years that Richard has been at home with the children. Aileen noted, "When he first started going to playgroups, nobody would talk to him." Richard then added, "But now I go to three playgroups a week plus the library."

Aileen and Richard point to changes on the social landscapes of parenting that are partly engendered by increasing numbers of fathers moving through public spaces with children. Parental leave plays a large part in this as fathers having time at home with an infant, and walking through the community with that infant, gradually help to change social perceptions and norms around fathering and care in the first year. A second part of change in the habitus is the belief by fathers that they have a role to play with their newborn infant. While I have argued throughout this article that many heterosexual couples point to how embodiment gives women an advantage in forming a bond with their infant children, fathers also point to the importance of building such a bond with their children.

Fathers who have taken parental leave or unpaid leave to be at home with a young child highlight how critical parental leave is in helping fathers to establish a bond with their infant, as well as with their older children. Specifically, fathers speak about the importance of getting out of their regular paid work routine and focusing on their infant and family; while they are unclear as to how to measure its effects, they nevertheless speculate that it adds a valuable dimension to their relationships with their children and family. Ross, who took one month of parental leave, remarks that it was "such a gift to have that time. It was very valuable and I totally appreciate it and I'm sure it has had an impact on my parenting, the bonding, getting to know them from an early age." Indeed, many fathers comment on how they encourage other men in their workplaces to take at least some parental leave, thus signaling possible changes in the workplace cultures, and their associated gendered habitus (see also Hobson and Fehlen 2009).

Notes

1. The take-up of "daddy weeks" in Québec mainly accounted for an increase across Canada in fathers taking leave, rising to 20 percent in 2006. Data from the General Social Survey from Statistics Canada also indicate that, taking account of all forms of leave, fathers' absence from work for birth or adoption has increased from 67 to 80 percent in Québec from 2005 to 2006, and from 45 percent to 55 percent across the whole of Canada.

2. Of the 118 fathers who participated in the study, nearly two-thirds (62 men) were interviewed through in-depth face-to-face individual interviews, 27 through telephone interviews, 12 through three focus groups, and 17 through Internet correspondence. Moreover, a smaller case study of 28 fathers was interviewed two to three times (e.g., focus group, individual interview, and couple interview, or some other combination of three interviews). I personally conducted all of the focus groups, couple interviews, and all but 3 of the individual interviews. Most of the fathers (60 percent, or 70 of 118) were found in Canada's capital city, Ottawa; while the geographical locations of the other 48 are as follows: 14 from other Ontario cities; 13 from rural Ontario; 8 from Québec; and 13 from six other provinces. Data were analyzed using group-based analysis, the Listening Guide (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Mauthner and Doucet 1998, 2003), and the computer software AtlasTi.

3. The new fathers study used a broad range of social networks, community centers, and fathering programs across Canada; the study gained the participation of a diverse group of fathers including gay fathers, teen dads, and immigrant fathers (mainly Chinese-Canadian and Jamaican-Canadian). Interviews were conducted by a diverse team of academics and community-level practitioners. Data were analyzed in groups, using thematic analysis, a modified version of the Listening Guide approach, and Atlas.ti.

4. In the parental leave study, all of the interviews were conducted by me and/or PhD student/project collaborator Lindsey McKay. Data were analyzed using a modified version of the Listening Guide approach and Atlas.ti.

5. According to Elizabeth Silva, "field" can be understood as just a particular social setting where class dynamics take place (a classroom, a workplace), but it can also refer to more abstract and broader concerns like the field of politics or the legal field, for example. The family is variously understood as field, habitus, practice, or disposition (Silva 2005).

6. There is considerable debate around Bourdieu's work as to how deterministic, flexible, permeable, or durable the habitus is. My own view, given the tenor of Bourdieu's work on reflexivity and the fact that Bourdieu developed this concept partly to deal with the tension between structure and agency, is that there is always conceptual room for changing the social fields of which the habitus is part and for "breaking out of the habitus."

7. It is important to note that there were no disabled fathers in the study.

8. A weakness in this Canadian statistical data is that only mothers were interviewed.

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