

A “Choreography of Becoming”: Fathering, Embodied Care, and New Materialisms

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Cet article souligne l'absence du corps dans les études sur la division sexuelle des responsabilités parentales et soutient qu'on doit y intégrer le concept clé de *l'embodiment* masculin dans les soins prodigués aux enfants. Issue d'une recherche qualitative qui se penche depuis vingt ans sur les mères pourvoyeuses économiques et les pères pourvoyeurs des soins, je cite les penseurs fondateurs de ce concept (Dorothy E. Smith, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Goffman) et aboutis à une réflexion informée par de nouvelles approches matérialistes, en postulant l'indivisibilité ontologique du lien corps/social et l'interrelation entre donneurs et receveurs de soins. L'article se veut une invitation au débat, une réponse tentative à l'exhortation d'Anne Fausto-Sterling (2005) de “reformuler nos vieilles questions pour pouvoir arriver à une façon systématique d'aborder l'entrelacement corps-culture” (pp. 1516–1517).

This article points to the recurring invisibility of the body in studies of parental care giving and argues that one critical missing link within our understandings of gender differences in care work is that of male embodiment in care giving. Rooted in a two-decade-long qualitative and ethnographic research program on breadwinning mothers and care-giving fathers, I begin with several key thinkers on embodiment (Dorothy E. Smith, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Goffman) and I end the article with thinking-in-progress, informed by new materialist lenses, and argue for the ontological inseparability of body-social linkages and care-giving relations between carers and the cared-for. This article is an invitation to debate and a quiet taking up of Anne Fausto-Sterling's (2005) plea that “(w)e need to ask old questions in new ways so that we can think systematically about the interweaving of bodies and culture” (pp. 1516–1517).

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OVER THE PAST half-century, enormous changes have occurred in the gender division of care giving and breadwinning across many countries, including Canada, the United States, and Britain. This is evident in rising rates of breadwinning mothers,¹ but also in fathers' increasing commitment to care giving as demonstrated by rising numbers of stay-at-home dads, single dads, gay father households, and an overall increase in men's take-up of parental leave.² These large demographic and social shifts have engendered equally massive attention from social science researchers who have produced countless studies that have measured and analyzed domestic life and care work. Much of the focus of these studies has been on assessing issues of gender equality in care work and determining what institutional, community, policy, and legal measures might facilitate or impede that equality.

This is a long, deep, and rich conversation that spans a diverse array of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches; studies of the gender division of domestic labor have straddled traditional and long-standing sociological fields, such as the family, work, gender, and care. It is worth noting here, in the fiftieth anniversary issue of the *Canadian Review of Sociology*, that this expansive field has been enriched by the intellectual labor of many leading Canadian scholars whose contributions have appeared in this journal (Albanese 2006; Baker-Collins et al. 2010; Beaujot, Liu, and Ravanera 2009; Beaujot and Matthews 1997; Bezanson 2006; Fox 1997, 2001; Gazso 2012; Hessing 1993; Livingstone and Luxton 1989; McDaniel 2002; Miller 1990; Ranson 1998; Wallace and Young 2010). I have also been privileged to be part of this conversation and have benefited greatly from the writing in this journal and the enduring contributions of pioneering feminist work on gender, domestic labor, and care (e.g., Eichler 1997; Fox 2009; Luxton 1980). My foray into this field began 22 years ago with a doctoral research project on women and men trying to share parenting and housework. That project was the first stage of a two-decade-long qualitative and ethnographic research program, mainly in Canada, but also in the United States and Britain, that has focused on

¹ In both Canada and the United States, the figures for breadwinning women vary depending on how this is being measured and whether one includes all women or just mothers, as well as whether women/mothers are married, common-law, or single. In spite of variations in measurement, the numbers for this phenomenon have fluctuated between 20 and 66 percent. For example, according to the 2010 Pew Research Center Report, in 20 percent of American married couples, wives earn more than husbands; this represents a huge shift compared to 40 years ago when this was the case in just 4 percent of American marriages. Other data from the United States, such as the Shriver Report, which includes single mothers, reveals that "women are half of all U.S. workers and mothers are the primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners in nearly two-thirds of American families" (Boushey and O'Leary 2009:18). Statistics Canada has reported the Canadian numbers since 2006 as being somewhere between 25 and 30 percent (Statistics Canada 2009; Sussman and Bonnell 2006).

² For example, men now constitute about 13 percent of stay-at-home parents in Canada. It is important to add that, according to Statistics Canada, stay-at-home father households have increased 25 percent over the past decade, and they are particularly high in some parts of Canada (in Maritime provinces, they can be as high as 25 percent; Statistics Canada 2009).

addressing the puzzling and persistent link between women and domestic responsibilities while also reflecting on what impedes or facilitates active father involvement.³ My work has increasingly moved from questions of *what* we know about gender divisions of labor to intertwined questions of *what* we know and *how we come to know it*; that is, I have turned more and more of my focus toward scrutinizing the theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological underpinnings of this field, as well as the taken-for-granted concepts that guide research, constitute data, and produce findings. I have also moved toward understanding the invisible aspects of everyday life that could matter in our scholarly understandings of gender and care work. One such invisible aspect in care work has been that of the body.⁴

Several years ago, I began to argue that one critical missing link within our understandings of gender differences in the responsibility for care work was that of male embodiment in care giving (Doucet 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013). In attempting to make the body visible in the sociology of the family and the sociology of gender and care, I contended that dominant approaches within the field of gender divisions of domestic labor and care work were governed by assumptions that men and women are interchangeable disembodied subjects within and between households; I argued, in contrast, that fathers and mothers are embodied subjects who move through domestic and community spaces with intersubjective, relational, “moral,” and normative dimensions framing those movements. Today, I still maintain that “bodies matter” (Messerschmidt 1999) in our understandings of gender divisions of domestic labor and in making sense of persistent gender differences in the responsibilities for care. Yet, as I detail below, my view on how and why bodies matter, and, indeed, what bodies *are*, has shifted.

In this article, I revisit fathering and embodied care, a topic that I wrote about here in the *Canadian Review of Sociology* several years ago (Doucet 2006b). This article is written in three parts, and begins with a brief overview of embodiment in sociology, with a specific focus on its sparse place within Canadian sociology of the family and in research on gender

3. Here I draw on five separate but interconnected qualitative research projects carried out over the past 20 years with in-depth interviews and some group interviews with over 300 women and men, including a small group of heterosexual couples who have been followed across 10 years with multiple visits. All of my research has focused on women and men who challenge traditional gendered norms and practices around breadwinning and care giving and has included varied foci on primary care-giving fathers, primary breadwinning mothers, fathers on parental leave, new immigrant fathers, and gay fathers. For a detailed explication of my theoretical approach to the concept of gender and, more specifically, the interplay between gender equality and gender differences, structure and agency, and gender and intersectionality, see Doucet (2006a:19–45, 2013) and Siltanen and Doucet (2008).

4. I use “body” and “embodiment” interchangeably as I want to signal that I am not using social constructionist approaches that “have the effect of erasing the materiality of human bodies” (Shilling 2012:xvii). As I detail later in this article, bodies, including their physicality and materiality, are viewed as an entanglement of body-social; “embodiment” is “a descriptor of the multiple properties and capacities of the thoughtful body subject” (Shilling 2012:xvii).

divisions of labor. Second, I detail the theoretical lenses that illuminate embodied care and draw on Dorothy E. Smith and other feminist scholarship on embodiment, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman. Third, I describe new lenses, specifically new materialist and feminist materialist ones, that provide rich ways of thinking about the ontological inseparability of body-social linkages and care-giving relations between carers and the cared-for. This article is meant to be an invitation to dialogue, conversation, and debate; it is a quiet taking up of feminist biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling’s (2005) “call to arms” and her plea that “(w)e need to ask old questions in new ways so that we can think systematically about the interweaving of bodies and culture” (pp. 1516–1517).

INVISIBLE BODIES

A decade ago, the human body was deemed a “hot” topic in sociology (Howson and Inglis 2001:297). Since then, the sociology of the body has become a burgeoning field in the study of men’s and women’s lives (see Boulton and Malacrida 2012; Spencer 2011; Wacquant 1995). It is not that the body was completely absent from sociological theorizing. As Chris Shilling (2012) notes “the body has been something of an *absent presence* in sociology” (p. 12). He writes: “the discipline’s concern with the body has too frequently been implicit rather than explicit and has tended to focus selectively on aspects of human embodiment” (Shilling 2012:12). One area where there has been little explicit or implicit attention has been the issue of embodiment in family life and parental care. As British sociologist David Morgan (1992) noted a full two decades ago, “there has still been relatively little systematic treatment of family and family issues under the heading of the sociology of the body” (p. 113). This statement still rings true today; the body rarely appears in the sociology of the family or in studies of gender and parental care work (but see Kvande 2005; Lupton 2012; Malacrida 2007, 2009; Malacrida and Boulton 2012).

Where the body does appear in research and scholarship on parental care giving, it is largely in relation to women’s bodies through infertility, pregnancy, and breastfeeding (Avishai 2007; Clarke, Martin-Matthews, and Matthews 2006; Draper 2003; Hird 2007; Tapias 2006). In these studies, men enter the picture as people who “encounter” women’s bodies (Draper 2003) rather than as embodied beings themselves. While there is some attention to women’s embodied experiences as mothers (Bennett 2007; Lupton 2012) and to parenting and families in general (Blume and Blume 2003; Haines 2003; Hines 2006), the issue of fathering and embodiment rarely appears on the sociological research agenda.

It is understandable why the body has been at the margins of research on families or on gender and care work. Samantha Frost (2011) addresses this well when she writes that many feminists “are likely to be suspicious

of any 'biologizing' move that might, advertently or inadvertently, dress up power relations and disciplining norms as a force of nature or a biological imperative" (p. 74). That is, putting the body in full view means that one must "confront the suspicion" that is deeply engrained in the social sciences that we "might be suffering from a political amnesia and intellectual myopia through which the essentialisms of old might reassert themselves" (Frost 2011:74).

In the face of this "suspicion," my work on gender divisions of labor and on parental care did not set out to study the body; it has never appeared in the "aide memoires" that have guided my qualitative research interviews, and I certainly have never asked anybody to speak about it directly. Yet the *weight of embodiment* within fathers' narratives of care giving has emerged as one of the stronger themes in my research. Fathers have told me about how they have sat uncomfortably in infant-parent playgroups when women breastfed and recounted embodied dimensions and residues of pregnancy and birth; this situation recurs in subtle ways as men enter female-dominated childrearing venues or what one father termed "estrogen-filled worlds" (see Doucet 2006a, 2006b). Fathers allude to embodiment when they emphasize the masculine and physical quality of their care giving through physical play with infants and sports with older children. They mention embodiment directly when they justify why they take less parental leave than their female partners do (McKay and Doucet 2010). Some fathers, especially men who face structural disadvantages based on class, ethnicity, and/or sexuality, can feel surveilled and scrutinized by onlookers as they move through community settings, such as parks and schoolyards. In short, while there has been significant change in gender divisions of care work over the past decade, there remains a recurring thin thread of public suspicion about the proximity between male bodies and children, especially the children of others.

The narratives from male caregivers in my research studies have thus led me to think about how to theorize gender and embodied care. In the next section of this article, I briefly detail my theoretical and ontological positioning on care through specific theoretical resources, including Smith, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Goffman, and feminist theories on the body. I also point to how embodiment is an intrinsic part of care and how this was eloquently placed into sociological theory as far back as 40 years ago in the work of Smith.

Care as Embodied and Relational

As with all concepts, the way we define, constitute, and set "care" up as an object of investigation is deeply informed by the theoretical, ontological, methodological, and theoretical assumptions we bring to it (Law 2004). The concept of care is broad, deep, and difficult to define in a few paragraphs. Many Canadian sociologists have provided extremely important and useful

conceptualizations of care, with attention to its articulation in public and private settings, its place as both paid and unpaid work, its intersections with neoliberal programs, and its varied articulations across class, ethnicity, and sexuality (see Armstrong and Armstrong 2001; Braedley and Luxton 2010; Grant et al. 2004). As Armstrong and Armstrong (2001) articulated a decade ago, "Care work is . . . often invisible, usually accorded little value and only sometimes recognized as skilled" (p. 1).

Many sociologists and theorists of care have reconfirmed that care is produced and reproduced and governed and constituted simultaneously and relationally at both structural and everyday levels and between the experiences and the institutions of mothering and fathering (Rich 1986; Sevenhuijsen 1998). There is a broad array of sociocultural, legal, medical, economic, and educational practices, norms, discourses, and ideologies that structure and regulate everyday care practices and care-giving subjectivities. As Bonnie Fox (2009) argues, the "the work involved in meeting the daily needs of loves ones . . . is grounded in material conditions and social organization" as well as "issues of conflict, power, and control" (p. 33). It is also important to note, as Susan Braedley (2009) does so well, that care can include, for example, "health care, long term care, home care, child care, and education," as well as "public care' services . . . that support the daily and intergenerational work required to ensure there is a labour force" (p. 130).

My current unit of analysis, with regard to care, is unpaid family care of dependent children and parental responsibilities for that care. This form of care encompasses skills, feelings, dispositions, activities, and practices that are deeply rooted in social relationships of interdependence which change constantly across time and space. It is both labor and love (Graham 1983), oppressive and joyful, burdensome, and life enhancing. It implies knowing what needs doing based upon identified needs and acting to fill, or find others to fill, these needs (Sevenhuijsen 1992; Tronto 1993). It is eminently interactional, ontologically relational, and—in the case of parents and children—located in the social world of relationships between one or more parents and child/children and between parents and other caregivers. Furthermore, care is not only done, but also judged and observed by others; as Joan Williams (2010:149) observes, women and men face "hydraulic social pressure to conform to societal expectations surrounding gender," and these expectations intertwine gender, paid work, and care giving. In terms of the everyday practices of parental care, I have theorized these not as a set of tasks but as sets of at least three⁵ overlapping *responsibilities* (emotional, community/social, and "moral") that are relational, intersubjective, structurally located, and embodied (Doucet 2006a).

⁵. I am currently expanding these responsibilities to include a broader configuration of responsibilities.

Theorizing Embodied Care

In order to make sense of embodied practices of care, one has to step outside of the field of gender divisions of labor to find a cross-disciplinary set of theoretical resources. As described below, I have found several authors to be useful theoretical guides. One of the earliest and most eloquent descriptions of embodiment and care work in Canadian sociology is that of Dorothy Smith who, as far back as the 1970s, wrote about the need for a “sociology for women” (1987) and a “sociology for people” (2005) that emerges within everyday embodied lives. In her earlier work, especially in her classic text, *The Everyday World as Problematic*,⁶ Smith was writing about the body and gender differences between work and home, two distinct “modes of being,” and the “bifurcated consciousness” that emerges between these worlds, especially for women. She drew directly on the disconnection between the two worlds that she inhabited as an academic and as a mother of two small children, with home being “a local and particular world” (Smith 1987:6) while her work life in the university was “a world of activity independent of the local and particular” (1987:6). She noted that the “two subjectivities, home and university,” could not be blended, for “they ran on separate tracks with distinct phenomenal organization” (Smith 2005:11). On the one hand, “(h)ome was organized around the particularities of my children’s bodies, faces, movements, the sound of their voices, the smell of their hair . . . and the multitudes of the everyday that cannot be enumerated,” while the “practice of subjectivity in the university excluded the local and bodily from its field” (Smith 2005:12).

Smith’s early work did not closely examine male embodiment. This is understandable; her reflections are located within a historical time frame where most men were rarely involved in domestic labor and care work. Thus, she wrote about “the alienation of man from his body and local existence” and how women “mediate” for men the relation between their work and “the actual material conditions upon which it depends” (Smith 1974:10); it is “a woman who keeps house for him, bears and cares for his children, washes his clothes, looks after him when he is sick, and generally provides for the logistics of his bodily existence” (Smith 1974:10).

Smith’s work is resonant with other theoretical resources on embodiment. Her later work (2005) has some direct overlaps with feminist work on the varied meanings of embodiment in social practices and social contexts and of the recursive links between biology, culture, discourses, and the social (e.g., Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994; Young 2005). Furthermore, it is informed by phenomenological understandings of subjectivity and experience and has explicit resonance with the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1964, 1965, 1968) “body subjects” and his

⁶ Smith’s book was awarded the John Porter Tradition of Excellence Award in 1990 from the Canadian Sociological Association.

understanding of how "(w)e are in the world through our body, and . . . perceive that world within our body" (1962:206). Smith and Merleau-Ponty have helped me to think about embodiment between parents and children and have led me to highlight sites and moments where embodied differences are gendered and moments where they are not. That is, I have argued that gender differences in mothering and fathering are embodied, relational, and fluid identities and practices that shift and change over time and within complex webs of social and institutional relationships; embodied gender differences can appear suddenly in particular contexts while being irrelevant, mute, and inconsequential in other contexts (see Doucet 2006a, 2013; Thorne 1993).

Insights from Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman are also helpful in understanding fathers' embodiment. From Bourdieu, I borrow his concept of embodied *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990) to make sense of many fathers' emphasis on their physically active and play-centered parenting style as well as their oft-repeated statements that this was partly rooted in how "I grew up as a guy." I have noted that the tendency for many fathers to "display" (Doucet 2011) masculinity 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). Bourdieu (1990) goes further by writing of the everyday habituated activities of thinking, talking, gesturing, and moving that constitute "a state of the body" and "practical belief," which is "instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad" (p. 68). *Habitus*, Bourdieu writes, as a set of "generative schemas and dispositions" (1977:72), is partly what "underlies and conditions all subsequent learning and social experience" (1990:52), and "the way people treat their bodies reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus" (1984:190). Thus, men who engage physically with their children through rough-and-tumble play are responding to the disposition of their habitus; yet, research has also demonstrated that fathers, through the daily practices of care giving, can also develop a broader range of embodied care-giving responses (Doucet 2005, 2006a; Ranson 2010).

While Bourdieu's work helps to theorize how embodied parenting is deeply rooted in habitus, the work of Erving Goffman (1972) can assist in underlining how fathers and mothers are embodied subjects who move through domestic and community spaces with intersubjective, relational, "moral," and normative dimensions framing those movements. That is, 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, but they are also *moral* in that fathers and mothers not only interact together but make judgments about whether and how to maintain or disrupt routine social and public interactions. The most oft-repeated site of potential social disruption in parenting venues comes in the form of the "dad-in-the-playgroup" example. My research on men who were primary caregivers in the 1990s and early 2000s reveals

many awkward moments where men felt like misfits or threats in these “estrogen-filled worlds” (Doucet 2006b). In fact, with few exceptions, every stay-at-home father I have interviewed across 20 years has narrated at least one uncomfortable or downright painful experience in playgroups. As one single father, Bruno, put it, “It’s like a high school dance all over again; girls on one side, boys on the other.”

While Smith and other feminist work, as well as Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and Goffman provide theoretical tools for analyzing embodiment in care work, my recent immersion in a burgeoning field of feminist and critical transdisciplinary scholarship has furthered my thinking on this issue. This body of work, contained within the term “new materialisms” or “feminist materialisms,” has led me to radically reconfigure my conceptualization of embodiment.

NEW MATERIALISMS

New materialisms represent a small but growing field of scholarship. Often viewed as part of the “material turn,” the “postconstructionist turn,” the “posthumanist turn,” as well as “practice,” “ontological,” and “performative” turns, varied names include “the new materialism(s),” “new feminist materialisms,” and “material feminisms.”⁷ Many commentators point to how this diverse field arises partly from the discomfort of critics (social and natural scientists) about the relative loss of matter and materiality in the postmodern and poststructuralist “linguistic turn” (see Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2003, 2007; Coole and Frost 2010; Grosz 2011; Haraway 2008a, 2008b; Hekman 2010; see also Latour 2004). Theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad (2003), whom many consider a leading architect of new materialist thinking, provides a provocative and blunt description of this turn:

*Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. The ubiquitous puns on “matter” do not, alas, mark a rethinking of the key concepts (materiality and signification) and the relationship between them. . . . Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which *the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.* (P. 801, emphasis added)*

In making a case that “matter matters,” new materialist thinkers offer conceptual language that builds on social constructionist approaches as well as Marxist and poststructuralist theories of materialism (see Barad 2007) and posits deeply “entangled” material-discursive understandings

⁷ Some credit the term to Rosi Braidotti (2002) and Manuel DeLanda (1997) and their use of the term in the late 1990s (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2009).

of materiality, matter, and “phenomena,” as well as corporeality and bodies. Contesting a series of Cartesian binaries, such as body/social, nature/culture, material/discursive, and subject/object, its breadth is wide and deep as it stretches across theory, methodology, epistemology, ontology, and ethics, while its roots are transdisciplinary and reach across a terrain that includes the social sciences and humanities, the philosophy of science, feminist science studies, and the natural sciences. It is also a deeply political set of perspectives. As Coole and Frost (2010) note, the re-visioning of materialism in the humanities and social sciences is rooted in the “recognition that textual approaches associated with the cultural turn and social constructionism are inadequate for understanding key issues in the contemporary world” (p. 6).

While the tenets and approaches of new materialism(s) and feminist materialism(s) are too large to detail in this short article,⁸ what I wish to emphasize here is how they assist in theorizing embodiment.

Entanglement of Meaning and Matter, Bodies, and Culture

Samantha Frost (2011) notes that new materialisms call for theoretical and epistemological approaches that “can account for the complex interactions through which the social, the biological, and the physical emerge, persist, and transform” (p. 69). Here, Barad’s oft-repeated word “entanglement” as well as “intra-action” rather than “inter-action” are paramount. Caught up in this entanglement are material and discursive processes so that “matter and meaning are not separate elements” (Barad 2007:1). This point about entanglement may seem like a straightforward sociological one. That is, the “hardy perennial” (Healy 1998) of structure and agency that lies at the core of sociological work is often envisioned as a set of two largely separate,

⁸ In response to the anticipated question of what is “new” about new materialisms, Alaimo and Hekman (2008) do note that there are overlaps between “new materialism” and “feminist materialism” (for latter, see Hennessy and Ingraham 1997). On the one hand, the term “material feminism” as first used in 1975 (Delphy 1997) has its initial rooting in socialist and Marxist feminism, and, as described by Rosemary Hennessey and Chrys Ingraham (1997), is the “conjunction of several discourses—historical materialism, Marxist and radical feminism, as well as postmodernist and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity” (p. 7). Feminist materialism(s) and new materialism(s) are, on the other hand, “renewed materialisms” (Coole and Frost 2010:4) caught up in broad processes of development and redevelopment across disciplines, and not to be captured in any one “settlement” (see Latour 2004). As Coole and Frost note (2010), they “draw inspiration from materialist traditions,” and thus this approach could be “characterised as *renewed* materialism” as well as a plurality of materialisms: “If we pluralize these new materialisms, this is indicative of our appreciation that despite some important linkages between different strands of contemporary work and a more general materialist turn, there are currently a number of distinctive initiatives that resist any simple conflation, not least because they reflect on various levels of materialization” (p. 4). Some of these distinctive initiatives include posthumanist theorization of agential matter in the natural sciences and social sciences (Mauthner, 2012), biopolitics and bioethics, new thinking, as discussed in this article on embodiment and “the significance of corporeality” (Coole and Frost 2010:2), and how “humans, including theorists themselves, be recognized as thoroughly immersed within materiality’s productive contingencies” (Coole and Frost 2010:7).

albeit connected, entities. Entanglement, on the other hand, refers to the ontological inseparability of the body-social.

One can see multiple articulations of entanglement in scholarship that is included in the “material turn.” This includes, for example, Donna Haraway’s (2008b:10) point that nature and nurture are always already “naturecultures,” Evelyn Fox Keller’s (2010) reference to “the mirage of space between nature and nurture,” and Vicki Kirby’s (2008) question, “What if culture was really nature all along?” What this points to is something much stronger than interaction in the body-social link. It is an *intra-action*; that is, we cannot think about bodies as ontologically separate from the social and vice versa. As Noella Davis (2009) notes, this is a “particular conceptualization of what an engagement with the biological means. They theorize an entanglement and non-separability of the biological with/in sociality, and what they criticize in much feminism is the conventional assumption that the biological and the social are two separate and discrete systems that then somehow interact” (p. 67)

My immersion in new materialist scholarship has altered my conceptualization of embodiment. When I look back at how I made sense of embodiment in my earlier work, I realize that I was thinking theoretically about *inter-actions* rather than *intra-actions* between the body and the social and between embodied subjects; that is, I was inadvertently holding onto an “ontological separation” that is “conceptually intolerable” within the lenses of new materialisms (Wilson 2004:7). This shift has translated into my research in a few ways. It has meant that I have returned to Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty, Goffman, Smith, and the feminist work I have been drawn to, but that I now read them and interpret them differently. As Gayle Rubin (2011:1) recently wrote, “Durable texts gain new meanings in new historical contexts and evolving preoccupations,” and as Lorraine Code (2006) notes, we are constantly engaged in “negotiative practices of epistemic responsibility, approaches to knowing meticulous in their attention to evidence, yet cognizant of the extent to which evidence is multiply interpretable” (p. 62 see also Code 1987).

Returning to Bourdieu with the view that his writing is “multiply interpreted,” I would maintain that his concept of habitus has some resonance with new materialisms in that he describes habitus as

a product of history [that] produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history . . . [it] ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices . . . more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (Bourdieu 1990:54)

In short, he argues that, “the body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body” (Bourdieu 1990:190). Notably, much of the

earlier feminist work on embodiment has been embraced by or developed into a growing body of work that comprises new materialist approaches (see Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2005, 2012; Grosz 1994), and in Dorothy Smith’s (2005) later work, one can discern some visible resonances with new materialist thinking on “bodily being” and a “theorization of the body that breaks with the Cartesian dichotomy” (p. 23).

New materialist lenses have not only impacted the way I read texts, but also my interpretation of my research interviews. If I return to the example of “dad-in-the-playgroup,” I would view this experience as an entanglement of both meaning and matter while also noting that the body’s meanings have changed in tandem with sociocultural changes. The meanings of fathers and infant care have also been gradually changing, partly through the constitutive intertwining of sociocultural practices, ideologies, and embodied subjects (via workplace policies and cultures, state policies, popular culture, media, and social media, including the burgeoning of daddy blogs), but also through women’s rising employment, men’s slow take-up of parental leave, and the social acceptance of that leave. I can also point to increasingly positive depictions of fathers as revealed in new television programs and advertising where male bodies are not depicted as yet another version of the bumbling and incompetent Homer Simpson stereotype, but rather as competent, responsive, and caring.⁹ The body is indeed entangled within these depictions; it is part of this “mangle” (Pickering 1995).

“Intra-Active Becoming”

A second point that I glean from new materialisms is that bodies are not fixed in space and time but are imbricated in processes of intra-active dynamism or what Barad (2007:151) calls “intra-active becoming” or what Jane Bennett (2010) terms “generative becoming” (p. 3). I would conceptualize the embodied relations of parents and children as issues of “matter,” not as “an inherent fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects,” but rather as a “phenomenon in their ongoing materialization” (Barad 2007:151). People—mothers, fathers, babies, children, others—are in a perpetual state of becoming, and this “becoming” posits the fundamental units of analysis not as things or words, or subjects or objects, but dynamic phenomena that are constituted by and through entangled and shifting forms of agency.

⁹ A recent example of this change is seen in a very public revolt by fathering groups to a Huggies diaper ad that depicted fathers who were “babysitting” their kids as they watched sports and looking hapless in the face of needy babies. As I wrote in a *New York Times* contribution, “Complaints flooded in through social media (from both mothers and fathers). Not only was the ad pulled, Huggies went to great lengths to apologize (even showing up at a conference for daddy bloggers). The new ad still features dads, but they are confident and competent, lined up in a row of easy chairs, settling their babies to sleep, fist pumping when they finally do” (Doucet 2012).

An example of embodiment and “intra-active becoming” emerges from my 10 years of longitudinal research with a small group of Canadian heterosexual couples. When I first visited Tom and Natasha over a decade ago when they had three young children (ages 4, 6, and 7). Tom was a stay-at-home father of seven years and Natasha was a pediatrician in a small Quebec town. Tom told me how his wife’s stronger “emotional reaction” to their children was rooted in the “physical” and “primordial” connection that she had with them through pregnancy, birthing, and breastfeeding:

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 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*, whereas my response, in contrast, is to look at it for what it is.

When I returned to visit them recently, nine years later, and asked them about this belief that they both formerly shared, they were surprised that they had expressed such views. Natasha admitted, “I mean I see that the nine months that you are carrying them as different. But I mean the dad is caught up with that by the time that the kid is, you know, nine months old.”

An interesting addition to this unfolding story came from the insights of one of their teen children (Taylor, their 16-year-old daughter) who floated in and out of the kitchen where we sat chatting. She was clearly keen to join our conversation, so I asked her a few questions. When I asked her what she turned to each of her parents for, she replied: “If I need to go shopping, I go to my mom. Since I’m like a teenager now, I kind of get my own stuff. But when I really need something—it’s usually like money or clothes or, yeah—it’s mostly my mom. But my dad is more of the emotional support in stressful situations and stuff.” Both parents agreed with their daughter and confirmed that Tom was always the “emotional support” and was “more in tune.” He then added, “I’m a mother hen,” invoking the strong feminine meanings that are still discursively attached to emotional connection.

This interview, nine years after three earlier interviews with this couple, points to the entanglement of the matter of bodies and the changing meanings given to them across time. In the case of Tom and Natasha, they both initially believed that her embodied connection gave her a stronger attachment to the children, and Tom especially believed it was an

embodied fact that would endure. Yet time passed, and Tom settled in as the long-term stay-at-home parent; even when he returned to work after 12 years at home, he was still the one who juggled work around the children and cut his hours to part-time when their two sons were going through social, developmental, and adolescent hormonal changes and he felt strongly that he needed to “be there for them.” Meanwhile, the eldest, Taylor, also implicated a subtle sense of embodiment in how she needed each parent. She turned to her mother for money because her mother was the family breadwinner, but she also turned to her for help with shopping, an example that recurs in my ongoing research on gender divisions of care work; that is, mothers often help their daughters with shopping for clothes, make up, and underwear because these are issues that bring together care, bodies, and consumption. In contrast, some of the single fathers and stay-at-home fathers I have interviewed made it clear that shopping for clothes and underwear for pre-teen or teen daughters was something they did with discomfort, resignation, humor, or that they asked a female partner or relative to do (see Doucet 2006a). Meanwhile, the emotional connection that Taylor has with her father is also embodied, as “emotional support” is both rational and embodied.¹⁰ This example points to how the “matter” and meanings of bodies shift constantly across time in the multiple relations between changing embodied subjects and within the structured relations in which embodied subjects intra-act.

It is also clear that infants and children of all ages demand emotional and embodied responses from the women and men who are in close and constant proximity to those bodies. A key finding from my work across the past decade, and one that I articulate in slightly different terms through new materialist lenses, is how caring for children has radical transformative and generative changes for men and that these changes are deeply emotional and embodied. One of the strongest examples that I interpret anew in this theme of “intra-active becoming” between father and infant is in the case of a gay father, Ray, whom I interviewed twice over five years. He and his partner had adopted an infant girl, and he was home with her for one year. At first he was worried that, “I wouldn’t be able to give her that enchanted attention that I saw mothers have with children.” Thus, he was truly shocked by his profound connection with his daughter: “There is just no precedent for my behaviour. I am just *overwhelmed* by her. I am just crazy about her. There is no precedent for my behaviour. I am completely

10. Hochschild’s work on emotions is useful here in that she theorizes the management of emotions and also points to the social contexts within which emotions are located. I do agree with Alan Hunt’s critique of Hochschild and would argue that his comments have some resonance with new materialist thinking. He writes, “There is, however, an inherent limitation to any such “social context” approach to emotions in that it sets up two domains—one of emotions and the other of the social environment in which they exist . . . What is needed is a social theory of emotion that starts out from the proposition that emotions are an integral component not only of relations but also of the structures within which those relations are located” (Hunt 2012:148). I am making a similar point about the entanglement of bodies and social context.

surprised by it.” Ray’s example underlines Bourdieu’s (1990) point on how in spite of how one’s embodied and gendered habitus is “set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production,” it nevertheless has “an infinite capacity for generating . . . thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions” (pp. 53, 56). I suggest that this capacity is rooted, in turn, in policies, practices, and structural and ideological conditions that encourage and enable men to be actively involved in care giving.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have argued that it is understandable but also surprising that the body is still so marginalized in sociological and feminist scholarship on families and care. On the one hand, it is surprising because care is intrinsically embodied. That is, when one conceptualizes care, as I do, not as an object or thing to be measured and counted, but rather as an ontologically relational set of practices between two or more embodied people, it makes sense to bring the body into full view. On the other hand, it is equally understandable why the body has been ignored in most of the feminist theoretical frameworks that investigate care work and gender divisions of domestic labor. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) noted 20 years ago, for many feminists, “women’s bodies are regarded as an inherent limitation on women’s capacity for equality” (p. 15); that is, to give the body attention and weight in our analyses could inadvertently suggest an argument that equality is not possible because of gendered biological differences. Here I agree with Frost (2011) who writes,

In seeking to re-introduce biological and material agency into feminist analysis, new materialists do not advocate that feminists renounce insights into the ways in which power infuses bodies and matter to make them into socially and politically intelligible subjects and objects. Quite to the contrary, they are alert to the awful political uses to which biological essentialism has been put historically. What they ask is that feminists leaven our analyses of the discursive constitution of embodiment and material objects with an acknowledgment of the forces, processes, capacities, and resiliencies with which bodies, organisms, and material objects act both independently of and in response to discursive provocations and constraints. (P. 70)

Thus, one has to introduce the body and theorize the body carefully, maintaining in full view the political and social consequences of interpreting these arguments in simple or politically conservative ways. As Fausto-Sterling (2005) notes, the issue here is not only to introduce it, but to “find a way to talk about the body without ceding it to those who would fix it as a naturally determined object existing outside politics, culture, and social change” (p. 1495). But how does one introduce this carefully? There are several ways to do this, two of which I will discuss here.

First, we recognize that embodiment is socially and historically constituted so that the matter of bodies is entangled with the meanings inscribed within them and the meanings that are brought to bear by those who observe and study those bodies. If we begin with a view of care as intrinsically embodied, subjects as embodied subjects, and the body as "neither brute nor passive" (Grosz 1994:18) but as "agential intra-activity in its becoming" (Barad 2003:818) then bodies do insert themselves into our theorizing. However, the issue is not the body per se but the shifting material-discursive intra-actions of bodies across time and space. Parental embodiment is in a constant state of flux; yet, given the entanglement of bodies with gendered parenting institutions, ideologies, discourses, and social norms, this can lead to instances where the intertwined materiality/meanings of bodies are experienced and viewed as gendered in particular sites and times. For example, there may be moments and social spaces where men's bodies matter in ways that exclude them from care, as we see in the "dad-in-the-playgroup" example across time. To notice this as an embodied set of intra-actions is also to notice how fathers have sought to invert these processes of exclusion and create their own avenues for masculine care, such as male playgroups or children's athletic activities where fathers find a social setting where masculinities and care coalesce rather easily. As Braidotti (2002) notes, "'becoming' is a question of undoing the structures of domination by careful, patient re-visitations, re-adjustments, micro-changes" (p. 116).¹¹ Microchanges can be seen across time, and although they may not completely eliminate gendered embodied differences, they may change the weight they are given. And they may help to institute practices that reduce rather than reify gender differences.

Second, I would argue that to think carefully about embodiment means that we need to look more closely at the materiality and agency of children and their bodies. New materialist arguments about agential realism and the agency of matter can and should be applied to infants and children, who often appear as amorphous blobs of matter within research on care (but see Ashbourne, Daly, and Brown 2011; Daly, Ashbourne, and Brown 2009; Lupton 2012; Thorne 1987). They are seen to create care work for parents, but they rarely appear as actors within these relational processes. However, I argue that parent-child relations constitute processes of "intra-active becoming" (Barad 2007:146) or "generative becoming" (Bennett 2010:3) or intersubjective "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1968). The embodied relations of parents and children are issues of "matter," not as "an inherent fixed property of abstract, independently existing," but rather as "phenomenon in their ongoing materialization"

¹¹ While Braidotti is pointing to microchanges, she sees these as part of a larger set of macrolevel changes that unfold gradually. She writes: "A long apprenticeship to minute transformations, through endless repetition, will replace the illusion of a royal road to the revolution or one single point of resistance, and assert instead the constant flows of met(r)amorphoses" (Braidotti 2002:116).

(Barad 2007:151). As the example of Tom and Natasha and their three children demonstrates, children and parents are involved in what Coole and Frost (2010) call “a choreography of becoming” where the issue is “that ‘matter becomes’ rather than that ‘matter is’” (p. 10).

What I am arguing here is that we recover anew Smith’s (2005) exquisite insights on what it means “to think sociologically from the place where I was in-body, living with my children in my home and with those cares and consciousness that are integral to that work” (p. 11; see also Ruddick 1995). This also means that we “ask old questions in new ways” that incorporate “the interweaving of bodies and culture” (Fausto-Sterling 2005:1516–1517). Family and feminist scholars have been asking “old questions” about gender divisions of care and, specifically, unequal divisions for over half a century; to make embodiment visible would mean thinking in “new ways” about how bodies are part of this old and still critically important story of gender and care work. Asking these questions anew would also mean recognizing that care involves temporal, spatial, and fluctuating embodied entanglements—mind, muscle, flesh, breasts, lungs, hormones, hugs, physical play, arms, hands, face, neck, touching, holding on, letting go—and emotions of unbridled joy and unexpected grief. As beautifully voiced by Deborah Lupton (2012) in her work on mothers and infants, this means exploring the inseparability of bodies that are “touching-being touched, moving-being moved, feeling-being felt, hearing-being heard” (p. 4). We cannot pull bodies—those of fathers, mothers, infants, children, teenagers—out of the larger “mangle” of sociocultural, discursive, ideological, and structural contexts that shape, reshape, and constitute both the materiality and the meanings of embodied intra-actions across time and in different social spaces. I am arguing that we need to rethink how we conceptualize care and the constantly changing material-discursive embodied relations between parents and children as well as the critical importance of longitudinal qualitative research that can chart this “choreography of becoming” across time.

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