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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER: FATHERHOOD AND MASCULINITY IN NEW FAMILY FORMS

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The many shifts and changes that the family form has gone through in the course of the 20th century have led to a situation where the normative family, consisting of a married heterosexual man and woman and their biological children, sharing a household, is disassembling into different types of families (Dowd, 2000). This division creates diversity of options for postmodern new family forms (Fogel-Bejawui, 1999). The family is one of the most important parts of society due to its central role in the socialization of individuals. The traditional family form, and the gendered roles division embedded in it, constitutes a central issue in feminist theory, due to the fact that it is one of society’s cornerstones in the conservation of patriarchy (Okin, 1989). Thus, changes in family forms can lead to social and cultural change.

In this paper I will present some of my findings which concern cultural models of fatherhood in Israel, drawing from fatherhood experiences of fathers in new family forms. The fathers in the current study translate the existing parental and paternal models in order to create a model for themselves which will reflect their parenthood, in a society lacking these models. In order to do so, they take apart the existing constructs of family, parenthood and fatherhood. I will examine the way in which they translate the existing parental models, focusing on both change and continuity.

I wish to explore the phenomenon of fatherhood through a folk model which I refer to as "fatherhood engineering" – meaning, what definitions do the men, as fathers, formulate and act upon? What are the existing models of fatherhood that fathers use, and how do they produce a fatherly model for themselves? In addition, how do they understand, construct and interpret their role when facing society and themselves?
Whilst the connection between femininity and motherhood is perceived as obvious, and almost undetachable, a similar connection between masculinity and fatherhood is almost absent (Miller, 2011; Rich, 1979). Masculinity research literature rarely deals with the phenomenon of fatherhood, and the little research that does, examines the father role as provider, and not the father as the main caregiver for the child.

Since women have started to participate in paid work outside the domestic sphere, we have witnessed changes in the perception of fatherhood and in the father role. The "new" involved father has become a normative phenomenon: fathers are becoming more involved in their children's lives not only as providers, but also as caregivers (Coltrane, 2004). As such, fathers are trying to share the caring with the mothers, and take on themselves tasks that are traditionally considered motherly or feminine (Dowd, 2000; Doucet, 2006; Fogel-Bejawui, 1999; Miller, 2011). Nevertheless, these changes and their motivations remain unclear (Messner, 1993).

However, research still assumes that the mother is the best primary caregiver for the child. Fatherhood as a male act by itself is still missing from the research. Accordingly, my research assumes that the fatherhood phenomenon cannot be taken for granted.

In light of these changes in the family form, a new focal point for research in the fatherhood field studies fathers as main caregivers (stay at home dads) (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011). Divorced fathers, joint custody fathers and homosexual fatherhood (Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005). While this research offers us a lot of important data about the fathers' experiences, it does not necessarily provide us with an insight about the parenting models that parents, especially fathers, act upon. As Ramaekers and Suissa mention (2011), nowadays the word 'parent', and specifically 'mother' or 'father' relates to a practice or 'job' and not only to an ascribed relationship. Therefore, the way in which men "do" fatherhood, follows the existing models of fatherhood. Fathers in new family forms can help us understand these models.

Even today, the answer to the question "is fatherhood changing"? is neither "yes" nor "no" but rather "it depends" (Williams, 2008). While research gives us extensive data on the experiences of fathers, it lacks an explanation of the parenting models that fathers act upon. We do not know enough about the ways in which men understand fatherhood in general and their own fatherhood in particular; that is to say, how do fathers engineer fatherhood?

My theoretical and methodological starting point is that parenthood and fatherhood are social constructions, meaning that all fathers engineer fatherhood in one way or another. However, in hetero-normative families the engineered fatherhood seems to be part of the cultural convention. The marginal position of the informants in the field of fatherhood provides them with a unique point of view, which exposes hidden components of fatherhood perception. Through their experiences, we can study the parenthood models and fatherhood components as they are reflected in the hetero-normative family form. The fathers' complex planning of new family forms makes them ask questions and perform internal investigation and self-reflection. This position offers us a new view on fatherhood: the informants provide testimony from the field as fathers, as well as an outside perspective, as "researchers" of the fatherhood phenomenon as a whole.

In my work I have interviewed 31 Israeli fathers from new and diverse family forms, using Narrative Analysis.

My guideline is fatherhood engineering, a complex planning of children upbringing and family engineering in its wider sense, which introduces the fatherly choice into new family forms. By fatherhood engineering I refer not only to the new options of bringing a child into the world from the technological aspects (i.e. new fertility treatments, surrogacy or adoption) but also and mainly to the complex planning ahead of a new family form, encapsulating numerous options of treating and raising children.

The positioning of the new family in the wider context of Israeli society is particularly interesting; on the one hand the Israeli society encourages birth, while on the other hand it perceives fatherhood
in new family forms as a threat to the social order. In my research I explore fatherhood in Israel through the fatherhood experiences of fathers in new family forms, as they are manifested in Israel today: single fathers, same-sex couples, co-parenting and divorce.

In this paper, I will demonstrate initial findings from my research that examine the way in which these fathers establish and define the new family forms whilst negotiating with existing social perceptions and boundaries of family. I will discuss the changes that they create and accept as well as the boundaries they wish to preserve. On the one hand, they are trying to create a new hybrid parental model of a "father who is also a mother" due to the following factors. They are not mothers, although they are the main caregivers of their children. They are also not just traditional or "new" fathers – since these definitions are too narrow for them. As the main caregivers, they assume full responsibility for raising their children. In the new model suggested by fathers in new family forms, they not only undermine the centrality of the mother, but also dispute accepted perceptions of fatherhood. Therefore, they wish to change basic perceptions of fatherhood, parenthood and family. On the other hand, alongside the changes, certain aspects remain untouched. One of the main questions in the study of fatherhood is how much has fatherhood changed? Although there are some considerable changes in fatherly perceptions and roles, we should also consider that which has not changed.

By Observing fatherhood as a male act we can recognize which boundaries can be broken and which ones must be kept. I suggest that in the meeting points between fatherhood and masculinity, the boundaries that will be kept are those in which masculinity is most preserved. By shedding light on the untouched boundaries we can understand the phenomena of fatherhood not only as a parental role but also as an act of masculinity.

The uniqueness of my research stems from the fact that it deals not only with fathers in new family forms, but also with fatherhood perception and the cultural models. The study of fatherhood in new family forms provides an opportunity to explore the existing parental and paternal models and their transformation through time.

The current study seeks to trace the cultural models of parenting, motherhood and fatherhood. Fathers that are primary caregivers are a relatively new social phenomenon, of a first-rate theoretical importance. Fathers in new family forms implement a separation between gender and parenting, and as such are pioneers at the forefront of social change. Therefore, such a research would shed light on the processes involved in the separation of fatherhood from gender. Its findings are expected to have innovative implications on both parenthood and family research, promote gender equality and influence the field both theoretically and practically.

This paper is based on my PhD thesis, which should be submitted during December 2014.

References


