ABSTRACT

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FARMING FATHERS AND THEIR FATHERS: CHANGING MEANINGS OF THE CO-LOCATION OF HOME AND WORK

Introduction and hypothesis

This paper deals with Norwegian farmers and their practices as fathers. Focus is on how their care practices have changed over the last generation, and whether they have been part of the general change in fatherhood and fathering. There is an abundance of literature on fathers and a growing international research interest in men’s combination of work and family, but there has been little research on how rurality and agricultural work influence men’s fathering practices. Co-location of work and family is an important characteristic of family farming and the point of departure of this paper. As a result it is a common perception that farmers are present and available to their children during the working day. I am interested in exploring how this affects fathering practices in two generations. The hypothesis is that the effect of such work/family integration will have different meanings in the 1960s/70s, when the first generation of fathers had small children, and today when the second generation are active fathers. The reason for this anticipation is the general change in family and childhood coupled with industrial change in agriculture.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, the paper will draw on literature on individualization, fathering and childhood. The changing nature of fatherhood and fathering has been the subject of much research during the last few decades (Hobson, 2002; Brandth and Kvande, 2003, 2013; Doucet, 2006; Aarseth, 2008; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). This research has shown that the transformation of the traditional gender division of labour has provided opportunities for more nurturing relationships between fathers and children – a positive potential that has brought the term ‘new’ fathers. In addition to caring about their children through economic provision, fathers are now also expected to care for their children.
The paper regards fathering as open and dynamic. Brandt and Kvande (2003) describe contemporary fathers as ‘the flexible fathers’ and stress that there is no standard model of fatherhood that is generally adopted and practiced. Fathering is done in various ways, and there are many practices that are considered acceptable depending on the context or situation (Marsiglio et al., 2005). In their study of British parents over three generations, Brannen, Moss and Mooney (2004) find that the change in fathering practices is not linear. There are considerable variations within generations. Fathers may be work-oriented or care-oriented regardless of whether they belong to the current or earlier generations of fathers of small children. One change that Mosegaard (2007) finds in her study of three generations is that ‘presence’ has entered the debate as a norm for the father-child relationship. To be ‘present’ fathers has become a primary aim for fathers today, while older generations rarely use ‘presence’ to describe their relationship with their children.

Processes of individualization have been claimed to result in fragile family relations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). An increased likelihood for divorce makes it difficult to take it for granted that marriage will last. Consequently, the relationships between parents and children, and particularly fathers and children, have assumed greater importance as stable relationships (Aarseth, 2008). The relationships between fathers and their children may have become more central when fathers are no longer guaranteed access to their children through the marriage relationship. Fathers, being in a different position to their children than the mothers, need to invest in the relationship in terms of time and care, not only breadwinning. Generally speaking, children may have assumed a new value for parents, more emotional than economic value.

The ways in which adults construe the meaning of children and childhood are also variable and different. Several authors (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Hays, 1996) describe how children have turned into an important project for parents, and to follow up on their children has assumed the character of a contemporary imperative. The term ‘intensive parenting’ describes a high degree of parental involvement and child-centeredness today. The expectation is that the parents should give of themselves and their resources unconditionally, including, but not limited to, time, money, emotional support and love, in order to optimize their child’s future life chances. This intensive approach to childrearing – that children’s life prospects can always be improved by better parenting - is an international ideology. Both mothers and fathers are influenced by the dynamics of children and childhood (Brannen et al., 2004). Moreover, parenting changes concurrently with the demands for competence in a society where children have to learn new skills in order to be fit for later life.

Data and research methods

The study is based on interviews with two generations of farming fathers in two agricultural districts in mid-Norway. The oldest generation in our study was born in the 1940s and the youngest (their sons) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Seven fathers in each generation were interviewed about their farm, their work, their family and their experiences as fathers. Men who had one or several children 10 years old or younger, who were active farmers on a full- or part-time basis, and who had fathers who had also been active farmers on the same farm, were sought out for interviewing. The sample was strategically constructed to capture how farming fathers formed their fathering project at two different time contexts, with our interest being in the relationship between farm work and child care for farmers. Their particular work situation, working hours, home/work interface, as well as the participation of family members in farm work, are all important aspects of the context.

Because of the small sample size, the two generations are compared with each other in this study, and the most central issue in the analysis is the ways in which the practices of the two generations differ and/or are similar. Both generations of fathers in this study are comparing themselves to the other generation, and sometimes to fathers in general. This co-construction of narratives resembles ‘othering’ in identity research, in that it sees identities, including masculinities, as constructed processually around senses of similarity and difference. In this analysis of fathering, their making reference to the other generation has been a useful methodological tool.
Most important findings

For the older generation of fathers the gendered segregation of work between the indoors (house and childcare) and outdoors (farm work) kept fathers from being involved in childcare the first years. Childcare was defined as indoor work, and indoor work was women’s work on the farm. Despite the co-location of work and home, gendered norms were a primary factor in defining fathering practices. When children became somewhat older, the closeness between the two areas facilitated their joining fathers at work. Children were also expected to participate in work on the fields and in the barn. This has been termed “apprenticeship fathering”. Father-child interaction happened on father’s activity area.

There is a distinct difference between how the fathers in the two generations practised childcare in the first few years. The younger generation involved themselves more directly in the daily care of the small children. They felt it was expected of them, something that is an indication that fathering among farmers has changed in content and meaning over the generations due to new moralities. This new track for farming fathers is linked to the changes for women in agriculture, who, since the 1970s, have increasingly taken employment off the farm. Despite the closeness between work and home, the children no longer join their fathers at work, nor do they participate in farm work. The co-location of work and home is, however, important in that it facilitates fathers’ looking after their children, for instance before and after school or kindergarten. A clear difference from their fathers’ generation is that today there is another moral obligation where fathers are expected to be together with their children, not vice versa. The children do not ‘go out’ to their fathers whose main focus is on work, as it was with the older generation. Rather, it is the fathers who ‘go out’ to their children and their activities. Contemporary fathers join their children in the home and in other areas of activity (ski-, football, music practices). This has strong resemblances to ‘intensive fathering’.

Conclusion

The co-location of work and home is a constant characteristic of the farm setting, but it influences father practices in different ways in the two generations.

References

Mosegaard, M. la Cour (2007): ’Han var en hård mand den gamle.’ Far-sønrelationen set over tre generationer. Dansk sosiologi, 18(3):47-68