What is Fatherhood?: Searching for the Reflexive Father
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ABSTRACT
This article examines fatherhood as a contemporary sociological phenomenon. Drawing on interviews with 40 fathers, it considers perceptions and experiences of how the concept and practice of fatherhood are undergoing important changes. Specifically, it argues that fatherhood is affected by (after Giddens) a process of detraditionalization, whereby fathering is increasingly a response to personal biography and circumstances rather than being modelled on traditional ideal types of what it means to be a father. Theoretically, the discussion uses some of the ideas developed in debates on reflexive modernization to suggest that fatherhood is becoming progressively individualized. It uses these theoretical interpretations as a tool in understanding the way that societal change in all its complexity impacts on the role of the late modern reflexive father.

KEY WORDS
detraditionalization / fatherhood / individualization / reflexive modernization / tradition

Introduction
Social theorists routinely describe contemporary society as being in a state of flux, a condition some cast as reflexive modernization (Bauman, 1999; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990). Attention has, more recently, turned to consider the implications of the theory of reflexive modernization for specific social institutions such as the family. In what follows, I look more particularly at the concept and performance of fatherhood in the light of wider discussions of social change, drawing on the notions of reflexivity and reflexive modernization to make sense of the ways

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fatherhood is, in turn, evolving. At the heart of the discussion is how fathers, generally speaking, have to adapt to a variety of social changes that impact on their role as fathers and make them question the meaning of this role. Specifically, the analysis considers whether, from the perspective of fathers themselves, it is possible to discern any key differences between how they perceive their role as fathers and how they view the performance of their own fathers. It is this issue, in particular, that is central to the recent work on fatherhood (Lupton and Barclay, 1997; O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003; Williams, 2002). To put the question plainly: are fathers changing?

As research in this field shows, there are certainly a good number of fathering ‘ideal types’, from the traditional ‘breadwinner’ to the much celebrated father as ‘new man’. How do fathers view these models of fatherhood and to what extent do they inform their understanding of their own role? The argument here is that fatherhood is becoming increasingly individualized, as fathers are forced to confront change within the family and within society more broadly and as traditional models of fatherhood are progressively called into question by partners and by a range of social institutions including the media and government. For fathers today, where once fatherhood seemed to be marked by a good degree of certainty, now, among other things, changes in the labour market make the performance of traditional fathering roles less likely. While research shows that fathers often retain an attachment to the breadwinner ideal type (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003; O’Sullivan, 2004; Warin et al., 1999), a finding confirmed to some extent below, the emphasis now, from policy-makers as much as partners, is on a more involved role for fathers. Fathers have to make sense of their role, and in doing so reflect on and adapt to their own circumstances and to the variety of different models with which they are now presented (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

**Fatherhood and Social Change**

A good deal of the literature on fathering over recent decades is concerned with different ‘epochs’ of fathering (Lamb, 1987, 1995; LaRossa, 1988, 1997; Pleck, 1987). Lamb (1987), for example, argues that research in the US on fatherhood has uncovered various historical periods in which the expected norm of fathering behaviour was dominated by one particular paradigm. These different epochs can be translated into four specific periods for fathering: the moral teacher, breadwinner, sex-role model, and, most recently, the nurturing father. According to Lamb, in each of these stages in the development of American fatherhood there were definite cultural guidelines for fathers on what was expected in performing the role of a father. In the first period, which Lamb suggests existed before the industrial revolution, fathers were, first and foremost, responsible for the moral and educational needs of their children, with the latter centred on reading the scriptures and being instilled with Christian values. The second period is characterized by the breadwinning role, which came to the fore with the onset of the industrial revolution as this period emphasized a gendered
division of labour around, respectively, ‘nurturing’ and ‘providing’ roles. The next period is typified by the emergence of what Lamb terms the ‘sex role model’, where the father was seen as necessary for the (re)production of easily definable sex roles. Here, the primary function of the male parent was to show young men how the male fitted into family life in a positive fashion. The most recent period sees what Lamb identifies as a significant evolution in the fathering role. Now, ‘good’ fathers are judged on their involvement with children as well as in their performance of the other tasks performed in earlier epochs. Lamb nevertheless notes that the issue of whether or not this epoch is a sociological reality is a subject of much debate.

Pleck (1987) similarly organizes the history of American fathering into developmental stages, though the epochs found in Lamb’s work take a slightly different form. Pleck maintains that from the early 19th century until the present day there have been three distinct stages in the development of American fathering. These stages, as in the work of Lamb, manipulated the expectations of the greater part of American society as to the expected ‘norms’ involved in good fathering. The fathering types identified by Lamb are nonetheless also evident in Pleck’s analysis: father as distant breadwinner, sex role model and the ‘involved’ father. As with Lamb, a fault with Pleck’s study is that it furnishes us with little sense of how fathers move between these stages over time, especially into what is, for many, the most controversial and recent type of fathering. A more particular criticism expressed in the discussion below is that thinking of contemporary fatherhood as shadowed by one, dominant paradigm – the so-called ‘involved father’ – does not accurately capture the complexity of fathering in a period in which social change is contributing to a revision of the boundaries between femininity and masculinity and, in turn, motherhood and fatherhood.

Central to discussions of the current condition of fatherhood has been the involvement of fathers in family life, and especially whether fathers are making greater contributions in areas from which they had previously been relatively removed. This discussion could also be found in earlier critiques of ‘involved fathering’, found in Lamb and Pleck and in Rotundo’s description (1985, cited in LaRossa, 1997) of androgynous fathers who incorporate ‘feminine attributes’ into their own ‘style’ of fathering. For LaRossa the concept of ‘new man’ has more to do with hope than reality. Although LaRossa does not reject out of hand the idea that a new, more involved form of fatherhood may be on the way, he argues that currently ‘new man’ exists more in the minds of the middle-class professional males who write about the topic than he does in concrete social experience. LaRossa suggests that theoretical formulation runs ahead of conduct, since data on male involvement indicate that contemporary fathers may not be significantly different from previous generations. LaRossa rounds, for example, on Lamb’s (1987) model of calculating male involvement in the new nurturing period of fathering as an indication of just how little male involvement in parenting has changed. Lamb separates involvement into three principal areas: engagement, accessibility and responsibility. In each area, he concludes, mothers are still far more involved with their children than are fathers.
The matter of whether it is possible to discern greater levels of male involvement in parenting, especially in domains in which women have conventionally undertaken tasks, is subject to ongoing consideration. Some maintain that there has been very little change in the input of fathers into family life, and deny the idea of a changing fathering role (Demos and Acock, 1993; Jamieson, 1999; Jarvis, 1999; Speakman and Marchington, 1999) However, Dermott (2003), O’Brien and Shemilt (2003) and Warin et al. (1999), among others, suggest that in the United Kingdom men are becoming more involved in family life. In dual-income households in particular, there is growing evidence to show that men are taking increased responsibility for childcare even if both men and women tend to identify the mother as the primary carer. Among the most interesting conclusions from this research is that a more complex understanding of modern family life needs to give greater attention to the variety of tasks performed by fathers, such as watching children take part in sports events, shopping, or assisting with the playing of computer games, in order to more accurately assess the degree and type of involvement by fathers.

Nevertheless, Warin et al. (1999) argue that cultural stereotypes like the breadwinning role continue to hold men back from playing more active roles, notably in what are regarded as traditional ‘mothering’ activities. Interpreted in a different way, it might be said that fathers are squeezed between the ‘new man’ models on the one hand, and, on the other, the traditional cultural models of fathering. That is to say, squeezed between wishing to play a more involved role and the more removed father who simply ‘provides for’ his family.

It is possible to go further, although Warin et al. (1999) and others argue that the role of the ‘breadwinner’ continues to be the aspect of fathering to which fathers themselves most readily turn in describing their responsibilities within the family. In practice, the fathering role, I want to suggest, is in large part determined by the particular circumstances of family life. Fathers are aware of the existence of ideal types of fatherhood that inform them what they should do but what they actually do is the result of circumstances that, in many ways, they do not choose. Thus, fatherhood is increasingly individualized and, to the extent that fathers are forced to respond to situational circumstances, it is highly reflexive. The life ‘certainties’, such as the guarantee of (continuous, long-term) employment, and the traditional gendered division of labour within the family, which hitherto informed the father’s relationship with other members of the family, have gradually been called into question. To a large extent, for many of the men interviewed in this study the nature of their role as fathers was not a matter of choice – that is, to be a ‘breadwinner’ or an ‘involved’ father – but was, instead, broadly shaped by circumstances which they saw as beyond their control. At the same time, there appears to remain a good degree of personal investment in the breadwinner role as an idealized form of fathering, bound up as it is with certain conceptions of masculinity. Broadly, however, it is possible to discern evidence of an ongoing revision of their conceptions of what it is to be a father, a process sponsored by changes within the wider social milieu. More particularly, it is evident that these changes had, in turn, led these
men also to engage in some element of reflection on their relationship with their own fathers and, subsequently, in thinking about their own role as fathers.

Theories of reflexive modernization are helpful in putting these changes within a wider sociological framework. For example, changing experiences and perceptions of fathering may be seen as part of a substantive evolution in the structuring of familial relations. In this way, Giddens argues that we are entering a new stage of family life, which he describes as the emergence of the ‘democratic’ family. As he sees it, the ‘family is becoming democratized, in ways which track processes of public democracy; and such democracy suggests how family life might combine individual choice and social solidarity’ (1998: 93). For Giddens, and for others such as Beck (1992, 1994) and Williams and Williams (2005), the family is reshaped by forces as diverse as globalization, life politics and changes in work. This means that the ways in which individuals within the family make sense of their social position and their relations with others is progressively less informed by traditional actions and, instead, is increasingly subject to active negotiation between individuals. The cumulative effect of these developments is that we are witnessing a contestation and transformation of social categories once deemed biologically determined such as gender and sexuality. Where the discussion below departs from generic reflexive modernization theory is in the emphasis on ‘decision’, rather than ‘choice’.

Though Giddens (1990) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) understand people as increasingly compelled to think of themselves as individuals, there is in their work a tendency to conceptualize social action as the product of choice. Thus, in the case of Giddens, the detraditionalization of gender and of the family means that heterosexual couples, for example, are free to negotiate the terms of their relationship relatively independently of the baggage of traditional gendered guides to action. While this tendency is arguably more evident in Giddens’ work, such as in his concept of the ‘pure relationship’ (Jamieson, 1999), it is nonetheless also a characteristic of the works of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. The findings of this study do illustrate that these men feel they are more open to negotiation over household tasks than, for example, were their fathers, but their actions are perhaps more accurately described as the outcome of ‘decisions’ they are forced to make.

So, when men become reflexive in their role as a parent this is not entirely reliant on egalitarian personal attitudes or choices. The unconscious effects of reflexive modernity and its unforeseen consequential side can also direct individuals to specific ‘limited options’. In the decisions fathers make about their role there is an evident element of personal choice, but these really are ‘choices’ driven by household necessity. One of the major unintended consequences of modernity is a result of women going back to employment or even deciding not to work at all. In this light, fathers have to respond to this situation, either positively or negatively, and the decisions they make have not only implications for their own role but also consequences for their relationships with their partner and children. Consequently, to understand the state of fatherhood today we must consider the decisions with which fathers are increasingly faced. These
decisions are conflict driven as partners ‘fight’ over who works, childcare arrangements, who will have children after divorce or separation, and even who does what with regard to domestic responsibilities.

The issues involving individual choice and necessity can directly be connected to the wider theoretical debates concerning the type of society we are currently passing through, e.g. late modernity. It is this distinction between the more fluid individual choices presented by Bauman (1999), and the combination of structure and agency in the reflexive thesis of Beck and Giddens, which is central to my argument. Reflexive modernization appears to be the most suitable analytical tool but can also, as seen above, drift into mere reflection. This article places emphasis on a combination of unintended structural and individual change, rather than over-emphasizing the individual choice aspect.

**Methods**

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were selected as it was felt this would be the best way to elucidate quality information from fathers. The sample was made up of 40 fathers divided roughly into four socioeconomic groupings. These divisions were as follows:

1. Professional fathers: categorized as working in a recognizable profession.
2. Employed fathers: these included all fathers working but not in a profession.
3. Unemployed fathers: these were all fathers who had been unemployed and on benefits for more than six months.
4. Student fathers: these were men who had left full-time employment and enrolled as a full-time student.

There were other divisions within the sample. For example, approximately one quarter of the fathers were divorced, although many were now living in new ‘reconstituted family’ units. Three fathers declared themselves to be ‘gay’ and four fathers were lone parents. These extra divisions were not structured into the sample frame but were nevertheless useful in the analysis of the data. These fathers were accessed in various ways in several locations across South Wales between 2001 and 2003. They were obtained through parenting classes, unemployed ‘restart’ programmes, educational establishments and family centres. Although specific generalizations to the overall fathering population would be difficult to justify, the sample was stratified to represent a wide range of fathers, and therefore gives insight into changing trends amongst fathers.

**What is Fathering?**

At one level, there was little common ground among the interviewees about how they understood what fatherhood means. In each case, the responses drew
on references to personal circumstances rather than to generic statements about fathering. If this highlights the phenomenon of individualization, what illustrated the relevance of the concept of detraditionalization were the efforts of all the fathers to distance themselves from their own fathers and what they saw as the outdated breadwinning role but also the emotionally distant father. It could be argued by other social scientists that much of this reflexivity is a result of the interview society and being asked to reflect on their own position (Silverman, 2001). However, it was much more complex than just being influenced by the mass media; these men, as demonstrated below, show a great amount of individual thought when creating their family role, and in parts are very conscious of their decisions.

Lewis, a student, is a father to two children, living with his daughter but seeing his son only on the weekends. In his mid thirties, and prior to coming to university a sergeant in the army, Lewis is presently struggling to come to terms with his new life outside the military. It was clear that his life changes were the subject of considerable self-reflection, and part of this was his assessment of the relationship with his children. As Lewis states:

What does being a dad mean to me? It is not such an easy question really. It is something you either take to or you don’t … It’s one of those things that comes naturally … Years ago, and there are some blokes who still think like it, that providing they are putting a roof over their heads and the grub on the table, that’s enough, their duties are done. No, fatherhood is all about being a parent.

Leon further developed the notion that fatherhood is about being a parent, and ‘doing your best’ in this role, combining financial responsibilities with nurturing duties. Leon is a steelworker with two daughters, living in a middle-class suburb of Cardiff. To maintain his lifestyle both his partner and he need to work. In the course of the interview he frequently returned to the subject of the difficulties of juggling work and family life, but insisted that he is very ‘involved’ as a father. This was illustrated at the time of the interview, because he had just ‘dropped off’ his daughters at school and was preparing for his shift later that day. When asked what it means to be a father he said: ‘I would say to put it … to one thing, I would say just do the best for your children. Give them a stable background and look after them.’

Simon also expressed the view that to be an ‘involved’ father meant more than being a ‘breadwinner’. Simon is a deputy head teacher of a primary school, and has two boys in their early teens. His partner is also a teacher, but she worked part-time when the children were young. In many respects Simon and his partner are a classic ‘middle-class’ professional couple where the woman has put her career ‘on hold’ while the children grew up and her partner gained promotion. That said, Simon was enthusiastic to be portrayed as a ‘new father’: that is, a father who ‘works very closely’ with the mother. As he comments:

An ideal father is somebody who works very closely with the mother to bring up the child in a caring open relationship seeing two parents … I think it’s true what they say about a parent, that you would do anything for your kids.
These men declared that societal circumstances had changed such that fatherhood today is markedly different to that found, they believed, in previous generations. Ivor has one daughter and is employed as a motor fitter. He is in his late thirties and lives on an estate on the outskirts of Cardiff. Although he did not explicitly declare himself to be a ‘new man’ he did feel that all ‘good fathers’ need to be involved as much as possible with their children. Throughout his interview he refused to recognize any gendered differences in domestic and nurturing duties. His wife also worked, but this was part-time and they had Ivor’s mother as childcare support. Ivor believed that all ‘good’ fathers did similar duties to those performed by him. As he explained, ‘in this time a father has to get involved otherwise he will become distant and he won’t get the love and all that.’ Ivor felt that he needed to become involved with his daughter if he was to be a good father. Later he explained how he did as much as he could, including preparing feeding bottles, nappies and helping out around the house, behaviour he did not see as unusual.

Fatherhood is increasingly becoming a site of complex structural and personal responsibilities. A combination of the two has arguably always happened in the fathering role, but due to the nature of contemporary social life this phenomenon is increasing. ‘Bad fathering’, images of which are reinforced by media portrayals of ‘absent’ or ‘deadbeat’ fathers, and experiences of traditional ‘sexist’ fathering motivated these fathers to be different. Some of the fathers were conscious of the negative stereotypes of fathers in some quarters, and reacted against them. Graham is a father of two, a girl and a boy, and is self-employed. In his interview he drew on references to what might be seen as traditional and post-traditional notions of fatherhood to interpret his own experiences and explain his own family relationships. More personally, it was evident that Graham’s views were informed by a strong desire not to be like his own father, who was divorced from his mother when Graham was a teenager. Graham felt that he and his friends were different from the ‘bad’ fathers of today and from the more traditional fathers of the past:

You just have those slackers who just don’t bother, who ... just see [partners] as a cooking utensil, someone to do their tea, and then they just play with the kids ... So my view of fatherhood is loving parents. They love to have time with them ... they involve them.

Graham’s comments, in common with some of the views already highlighted, illustrate that not only are the men aware of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ models of fathering, and that they make normative judgements about particular types of behaviour, but also that they are keen to ensure that their own parenting can be distinguished from those whom they judge negatively as ‘deadbeat’ or ‘distant’ fathers. The drawing of such distinctions, often through references to individuals whom they knew, helped them to make sense of their own role and responsibilities as fathers. In this respect, changing societal expectations of fathers were also influential in informing how they should act. It should be noted that traces of older fathering norms were nonetheless still evident. Though all the men interviewed were of the
view that fathering was about much more than providing for one’s family, some continued to see this as an essential contribution to fathering.

**The Breadwinner Ideology**

The concept of the male breadwinner is also alive within policy discourse. In the case of the New Labour government in the UK, fatherhood is presented as being in need of reconstruction, with the role of the provider a key part of the rhetoric and policy. In particular, Labour has pressed the principle that ‘responsible’ fathers should have an economic role. Such a message is characteristic of Labour’s emphasis on ‘rights and responsibilities’. In the context of the family, it can be seen in their policies aimed at engaging fathers into family responsibilities (Field, 1996; Green, 1998). In New Labour philosophy, fathers must be responsible for the financial provision for their family and themselves. This type of thinking can be seen in New Labour’s New Deal, Working Family Tax Credit, and improvements to the Child Support Agency (CSA) which was introduced by the Conservatives. The provider for the family is the central tenet behind an old-style fathering identity, and although slowly altering it is still very strong amongst this group, leaving men with a confused understanding of the new role (Chadwick and Heffernan, 2003; Segal, 1990; Williams, 2001).

We can detect this type of ideology within this group of fathers. The majority accept that fatherhood is concerned with making ends meet within a family context and it is the father that is mainly responsible for making sure of that. However, they also recognize that women make significant contributions in this area, and some admit that the financial contribution from women to the family finances is no less important than their own. These fathers are slowly altering their ideas and actions concerning who should be the breadwinner within the family, and therefore are also recognizing that the male privileged position as sole breadwinner has changed. Though these men still have a good deal invested in the ideal of the male breadwinner, this outlook is altering as family circumstance drives forward individual reflexivity. This leaves men with more choices to be more than just a breadwinner and indeed forces men into making changes (both small and large) to their public and private roles.

Dave is a train driver with three children, two girls and a boy. Both he and his wife attend church regularly and it is this religious faith that directs most of their ideas about the family. In the case of Dave the importance of being the principal provider for the family was evident throughout the interview. Thus, when asked whether he could accept his wife taking over as main breadwinner he remarked:

I would feel that my role as the main breadwinner, the person who provides the security for the family financially … my hands would no longer be on the steering wheel. The steering wheel would be handed over to someone else although it’s my wife … it’s still not me and I am a nervous passenger.
Others, too, appear to have difficulty in giving up the ‘driving seat’, to borrow Dave’s metaphor, not least because this conception of fatherhood is tightly bound up with a particular notion of masculinity. According to Warin et al. (1999), fathers still see the providing role as central to fatherhood, even though their participants also spoke of their roles as playmates and entertainers for their children. Among the fathers interviewed in this study, the attachment to the role of provider lingers on but this is slowly being challenged by other duties that are changing practices, which, in turn, change gendered ideals.

The unemployed fathers tended to be strongly in favour of the economic duties of fathering. These fathers still maintained that the providing role was central to their idea of fathering. Eddie is 29, unemployed, father of four children and has had three different partners, and his new partner was pregnant at the time of the interview. Eddie is from Northern Ireland and rarely sees any of his children; and has seen two of his children only once in three years. He could, then, be described as the classic ‘absent father’, but even here he still saw fatherhood as defined in the main by a providing role, by his own logic portraying himself as a bad father. When asked how he understands fatherhood Eddie remarked that it means ‘bringing money in ….that’s what really matters. You need … the kid needs food, the kid needs shoes and clothes.’

Even so, for a number of reasons, the men are fully aware of changes occurring within wider society. John, for example, still perceives a clear divide in the domestic division of labour, but acknowledges that circumstances are evolving:

If anything it should be the woman who stays home and looks after the kids at the end of the day. They want equal rights. You can’t stop it, but … I want to get involved with the kids … I want them to know me … I am their dad. Okay, I’m not with [ex-partner] now. I’m out of work, like. I can see a lot of her [his daughter] and to be honest, I love it … the father should be an influence on the child’s life … It’s two parents.

Like John, many other fathers expressed the view that although they see it as their responsibility to provide for their families, they also understood the notion of the sole, male breadwinner to be progressively out of step with the realities of changes in the labour market and with circumstances in other families. Most of the men wish to keep the provider role as a part of fathering, but do not, by and large, view it as the essence of fathering. Ivor remarked that he understood this to be a wider social pattern, with fathers today keener to take their share of duties in the home and in striving to move away from more traditional roles:

That was the old opinion, I think a lot of dads are helping out now … It’s not always left to the mother any more, the father does help.

Indeed, over half of the men explicitly expressed the theme of the changing male who has added responsibilities, while others used similar ideas to describe their own personal situation. Thus, in Malcolm’s case:

Before I would have said, yes, that it was up to the man to bring the money in, but as I say my little one now is seven months and obviously I haven’t been working in that period. And I do find that, looking at my son now, that I missed out on so much with my daughters.
In line with the theory of reflexive modernization, the driving force behind this change in attitude is the increasing number of women entering the workforce. As Clive explains:

Years ago it was always the man’s responsibility to put the bread on the table. I think work has changed that much that now it’s ... if you have got a partner or a wife that earns a damn sight more than you, then that has to be shared the same as bringing up the children. I think it’s just common sense, isn’t it? Oh you know all of this, 'I am the man and I have to earn the bread', and you know it’s a load of rubbish.

The argument about the providing role has been a pivotal point for some feminists who see the control of the ‘family’ finances as the dominating factor in patriarchal power (Morris, 1990; Pahl, 1989). As can be seen from the men’s comments, for the majority of fathers this appears to be waning; however, it is still very central to some fathers’ sense of masculinity. Even these fathers were adapting to what they felt was what fathering is meant to be today, but were holding on to some vestiges of a more traditional ideal of fatherhood. In general, the men are developing or trying out differing forms of parenting and are well-versed on the new expectations of fathers.

**Perceptions of Change**

Morgan illustrates how change can occur when he argues that the ‘family-based household may also be a site for innovation in gendered practices’ (1999: 32). ‘Innovations’ in household practices are evident among these men as they attempt to mix the providing role with other fathering roles. Ivor, the motor mechanic, illustrates this best when, answering when he had become more involved as a father, made reference to the old comic model of a father standing outside a waiting room expecting the birth of his child. His main point here was that fathers increasingly want to and do become involved in all aspects of parenting:

It’s the coming of age thing you know, fathers becoming more involved. It’s like the old times when they were kicked out and everything, kept waiting and smoking and all that. I think they want to be involved. It’s the times!!

Duke, a father of two older teenagers and a deputy head of a comprehensive school, similarly commented that changing social relations between men and women are having an impact on parenting. Though his comments partly point to an ongoing gendered division of labour in his household, nonetheless he invoked the notion of equal opportunities to describe the context of changing relations between parents:

Men and women have got equal opportunities, equal rights in theory anyway. If a woman is involved in work then you’ve got to share all the jobs. You have got to try and share it out somehow. I mean it may not be that I do the ironing, but then she doesn’t do the gardening, and she is pretty quick to criticize if the grass is too long... So I think in our house we try and even it out.
Similarly, Dennis explained that he had given up his job as a carpenter because his boys were missing him, and now he enjoys his new relationship with his two sons, something that he did not have with his own father. He expresses the more non-traditional side of fathering by arguing that men are responding to the exigencies brought about by wider social change:

Rather than work away and make lots of money I preferred to stay here because I know my two boys are really close to me now and they respect what I have to say. Well, I always respected my own father, but it’s a different respect. They will come and cuddle me … they’re 14 years old.

Building a relationship with children that moved beyond the traditional model of fathering was expressed in virtually all the interviews, as, too, was the matter of the difference fatherhood had on the individual (see also Dollahite and Hawkins, 1997). Both Graham and Phil, who is a police officer, compare their lives pre-fatherhood with their experiences since becoming fathers:

Graham: Yeah. I didn’t go out for a long time, and I didn’t want to. I don’t know it definitely changed it for … not just for the better, absolutely completely.

Phil: My father was the role model for me as I was growing up … So I look upon that and try to create a lot of what he had done in what I do at the moment … but temper it with a bit of modern tinkering.

The notion of ‘tinkering’ with the more traditional model of fathering does not, however, adequately capture the degree of change in the sphere of emotion that most of the men have experienced and, importantly, that they believe serves to underscore the differences between their own parenting and that of their fathers. Roman, a lone parent, was one among many of the men who spoke frankly about this perceived generational development. Reflexivity and the corresponding opening up of masculinity (into masculinities) has helped men to overcome the stigma of emotional expression, thus enabling fathers to better articulate love and emotional support for their children. As Roman explains:

I would say it is probably a lot more open now than it was twenty odd years ago. Because I think in those days people looked at a man having emotions as being a sign of weakness.

The idea that, in this area in particular, there has been a qualitative change over time was a general finding. They see differences in their relationship with partners and children, and believe, in most cases anyway, that this change is a positive aspect in the creation of what might be seen as a new mode of individualized fathering.

**Reflection and Reflexivity**

The majority of fathers rejected their own father’s style of fathering, largely because it was viewed as no longer relevant to the circumstances in which they
find themselves today; as a number of men remarked, their fathers’ ways of doing things were now ‘old fashioned’. Fathers, they believe, are now expected to be more connected with the family process. Part of how the men are responding to this transformation is by creating their own fathering biographies, driven by individualization. Circumstances rather than choices are at the forefront of this alteration, as the fathers respond to the structural as well as the agency elements involved in the family process. Phil, as I have already noted, explains his style of fathering as a ‘modernized’ version of his own father’s approach. Yet Phil acknowledges that there are differences in the sociological contexts in which fathering takes place, principally the fact that his partner works full-time and how being a ‘modern’ father is also ‘tempered’ by situational family need. As he explains:

Me and my father basically have similar sorts of circumstances. We both are shift workers, and we both work different shifts. So, looking at it I would turn round and say that I very much look on my father in the way that he fathered that I am fathering now really. But I’ve tempered that as a model for how modern day thinking and personal circumstance.

Nevertheless, most fathers complained about the inadequacies of their own fathers, notably how much time they spent in work and, correspondingly, how little time they gave to their children. Many of the men interviewed made a conscious decision not to be like their fathers in their relationships with partners and children. In Dave’s case this had been a matter of discussion between himself and his father:

He worked in North Wales for one period on one particular job for five years, and he came home every weekend. But every weekend he came home it would be straight down the pub with the mates ... very little time spent with me ... So we’ve got a distant relationship.

The ‘absent father’ due to work commitments was raised throughout the interviews, and although they appreciated how their fathers had supported the family financially most wanted to be different and wished to be closer to their own children. Graham was open in his criticisms of his parents, but especially of his father. His father worked away and when he was home argued with his mother, circumstances that led eventually to divorce when Graham was a teenager. For Graham, his own approach to parenting has developed in reaction to that:

My father was always working away, and then they got divorced when I was 13 or 14. When he was home I think there just seemed to be tension in the house. So they were always having a pop at each other, or just little goading remarks ... So as a father I don’t think my father is a role model for me.

Likewise, James completely rejected his father’s approach, even going so far as to say that his father was ‘definitely an anti-role model ... What I can see with my father’s involvement with me ... he took me fishing three times and that was the sum total of our relationship.’ Aside from the providing role their fathers performed, most of the men have relatively little to say positively about their
fathers as fathers. In response, most look to their mothers to provide a positive parenting role model. As Ant explains:

I know it’s not from my father. I mean partly because I wouldn’t want to be like him, partly because he didn’t have that much involvement … So I mean I’d like to think that I can treat [my son] the way my mother treated me, and that’s the only sort of model I’ve got for parenting, is my mother really.

The discussion in the preceding sections draws attention to how fathers are responding to circumstances largely beyond their control, what writers such as Beck and Giddens understand as central to the concept of reflexivity. Moreover, central to my own argument is the suggestion that the changes in fathering the men in this study describe are the product of decisions they are compelled to make rather than choices they pursue of, as they see it, their own volition. The continuation, in an unmodified form, of the traditional model of fathering becomes progressively less of an option, whether because of the need for additional household income generated by the mother or because the men are left with little doubt that to be comparatively detached from household responsibilities aside from financial ones is not acceptable in today’s late modern family. Thus, some degree of change will, in many cases, be necessary. This said, the circumstances that have ushered in this development have also encouraged a degree of self-conscious reflection on what it means to be a father, principally via comparison with their memories of their own fathers. While talking about notions such as ‘modern’ or ‘involved’ fathering the men make reference to what they believe through personal knowledge is occurring in other families today, as well as what they pick up on in the media, but their chief point of comparison is with their own fathers. Though, as Dermott (2003) suggests, fathers are not especially clear about what it means to be ‘involved’, nonetheless they do have a sharper sense of what it means to be relatively ‘uninvolved’. Though the men retain a degree of attachment to the breadwinner role, some more than others, they describe fathering as involving working more closely with the mother in raising the children and playing a more active role in their children’s lives.

Conclusion

It is significant that none of the men refers to their approach to fathering as being ‘new’. Any reference to a contrast between ‘old’ and ‘new’ modes of fathering has to be qualified by highlighting the degree to which work, and particularly the importance of providing for one’s family, remains central to the men’s sense of masculinity and their perception of what it is to be a father. Largely, the interviewees spoke of ‘differences’ between previous generations, and specifically between their outlooks and actions as fathers and those of their own fathers. Even where they were openly critical of their own fathers, they did not indulge in seeing their own approach as wholly ‘new’. The concept of detraditionalization, as deployed by Giddens to describe how traditional dispositions
are increasingly called into question, goes some way to capturing how these men are aware that a particular type of behaviour as a father is increasingly less acceptable and also, for many, less possible. As fathers, their behaviour in practice is neither the same as that of their own fathers, nor is it completely different. They provide accounts of how their behaviour does differ in practice, notably in how they interact with their children and in how they participate more broadly in the day-to-day performance of shared parenting duties. Yet how they behave as fathers is dependent on their own family circumstances, by what they are compelled to do by situational circumstances. Though many of the men talk about wanting to be different to their own fathers in terms of many key aspects of their relationships with partners and children, they acknowledge that they also have to be different if they are to maintain a relationship with their partners. Changes in domestic arrangements are not without conflict, but the men recognize the problems of a failure to adapt as well as the benefits of adapting.

References


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