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Fatherhood: Comparative Western Perspectives (2005)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

According to Hobson and Morgan (2002) the term "father" can be attributed to the biological or the social/household father (men who are partnered to women with children from a previous relationship) and is attributed to an individual in different ways by different societies. Fathers are seen in relation to mothers and children and form part of the social structure of society. The term “fatherhood” (see also entry on Fathers) can be seen as the “cultural coding of men as fathers”, which includes the rights, duties, responsibilities and statuses that are attached to fathers, as well as the discourse around “good” and “bad” fathers (Hobson and Morgan, 2002:11; Lupton and Barclay, 1997:16). “Fathering” is the set of practices carried out by a father (equivalent to “mothering” and “parenting”) but which may not require the co-presence of a child, such as the application for paternity leave (Morgan, 2003). However, in much of the contemporary research literature, the terms “fatherhood” and “fathering” are used interchangeably to include all the childrearing roles, activities, duties and responsibilities that fathers are expected to fulfill (Tanfer and Mott, 1997).

The three elements “fathers”, “fatherhood” and “fathering” are seen as being closely related, in what Hobson and Morgan (2002) call "the fatherhood triangle", which is itself linked to the institutional regime (market, state and family) and domestic organization (between wife, partner/husband and child). Fatherhood is configured as such through the institutional framework and notably via civil laws around marriage, divorce and custody and its welfare state policies directed at workers and parents (Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Hobson and Morgan, 2002). By contrast, “fathering” practices are shaped primarily by the relations within individual families.

Another related concept, which is under development in the European literature in particular, is that of the “fatherhood regime”, in order to help us to understand why fatherhood is configured in different ways cross-nationally. While many attempts have been made to define nations’ “gender regimes”, these conceptualisations have tended to be used to focus on the position of women in relation to caring responsibilities and their position in the labour market (see the ground-breaking work by Lewis, 1992, 1997 and Pfau-Effinger, 2002). Others have developed typologies enabling caring responsibilities to be
more fully taken into account: Siaroff (1999) compares Britain, France, Belgium and Canada on the basis of the importance and direction of family policy (spending on social and family policy and measures to reconcile work and family life, the degree to which benefits are individualised and the attractiveness of women’s paid work (level of women’s employment, gender pay differential). Schulze et al (Künzler, 2002) attempt to classify OECD countries on the basis of attitudinal norms and comparative statistics on the domestic division of labour in the family. Hobson and Martin (2002), however, have explicitly sought to extend the concept of “gender regime” to fathers by conceptualising the “fatherhood regime” as the fatherhood obligations (notably to support children financially after divorce) and rights (concerning the work-family balance and access to children after divorce) provided within a nation’s institutional framework and have attempted to relate them to Esping-Andersen’s well-known welfare regime typology (Esping-Andersen, 1996). The explanatory power of the welfare regime typology was not born out by this analysis, leading the authors to attribute national differences in fatherhood regimes to “multifarious social, political, economic and cultural sources”. More recently, Gregory and Milner (2004) have conceptualised the “fatherhood regime” along three vectors: the specific rights and obligations placed on fathers by the state, state family and employment policy and the national working time regime.

**Importance of topic to work-family studies**

Changing parental roles are central to work-family studies. The overwhelming majority of fathers work full-time. However, Clarke and Roberts note (2002) that research on fatherhood developed slowly, due to lack of interest on the part of research funders until the emergence of welfare policy concerns about lone parenthood. Calls for greater paternal involvement in childcare have become increasingly insistent since the early 1970s (Pleck, 1987). Such calls are linked with the perceived decline of the male breadwinner model, notably as a result of changes in employment patterns (including male unemployment and downward pressure on wages) and growing labour market participation of women, as well as socio-demographic change (particularly rising divorce rates and family restructuring). It has been argued that a growing convergence has occurred between the lives of women and men in relation to the workplace and the family (Collier, 1999; McDowell, 1997).

Lewis and O’Brien noted in 1987 that public policy discourse (in the UK) already assumed a shift towards “involved fatherhood”. In Western Europe, the USA and Australia, the “ideology of change” (Hearn, 2002: 260) set the policy agenda to varying degrees from the 1970s, and particularly in the 1990s. Researchers and policy-makers have been interested in exploring shifts in men’s and women’s commitment to paid employment and domestic responsibilities, particularly in dual-earner couples where the tensions between work and family life are seen as especially acute. Dual earner couples now represent well over half of households with children in the USA (see entry on Dual-Earner Couples).
Within dual earner couples, there has been extensive research on the relative balance of fathers’ and mothers’ participation in childcare and other domestic responsibilities, which are the subject of negotiation. Since the experience of the previous generation can no longer provide a model for negotiating shifting gender roles, it has been suggested that fathers in dual-earner couples find themselves in a “state of transition” (Jump and Haas, 1987). Studies of men have indicated a strong demand for more flexible working hours which would enable them to spend more time with families and friends, be involved in community activities, study and follow leisure interests (e.g., New Ways to Work, 1995). The workplace can, however, constrain fathers’ ability to be available to their children.

Lamb’s influential framework for the discussion of fathers’ involvement in children’s lives (see next section) sees the workplace as a significant determinant of paternal involvement, alongside other institutional practices such as welfare policies and provision, personal biography and family dynamics, and cultural influences (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine, 1987; Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Work organizations have their own “cultures” that can facilitate or hinder work-life balance for parents (Haas, Hwang and Russell, 2000). Research indicates that father involvement is negatively affected by workplace pressures (Haas, 1992; La Valle, Arthur, Millward, Scott and Claydon, 2002). Cooper’s work in Silicon Valley (Cooper, 2002) found that a “macho” organizational culture seriously interfered with men’s ability to lead a full life with their families. Organizational cultures tend to reinforce the traditional separation of gender roles (Clarke and Popay 1998; Collinson and Hearn, 2001; Haas, Hwang and Russell, 2000; Levine, Murphy and Wilson, 1993). Family-friendly policies such as parental leave and flexible working hours can help to overcome such constraints (Pleck, 1986; Crompton, Dennett and Wigfield, 2003), but research shows that family-friendly arrangements tend to be available only to a small group of workers, usually the high-skilled (Gray and Tudball, 2003). There is also evidence that family-friendly policies can provoke a backlash against workers with dependents, leading to a “glass ceiling” based less on gender than on caring responsibilities (Coyne, Coyne and Lee, 2003; Glass and Finley, 2002).

The USA, Britain and Australia have pioneered research on fatherhood (see Marsiglio et al, 2000). These are also countries where family policy has been implicit and fragmentary in comparison with continental Europe. Family-related rights have tended to be delivered through employment rather than state policies. Labour market flexibility is also relatively high. As a result, public discourse on fatherhood has been closely associated with the work-life balance agenda (see O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003; Reeves, 2002). The UK government has commissioned two major surveys of work-life balance arrangements for men and women working in private companies (Hogarth et al, 2001; Lissenburgh et al, 1996). In continental Europe by contrast, relatively little research has been carried out on men and the work-family interface; rather, the work-life balance agenda has focused on women’s ability to juggle paid employment and family responsibilities, partly through state-backed maternity rights, partly through extensive provision for collective childcare. However, in Scandinavian countries there has also been a strong push for fatherhood
rights in the name of gender equality; here research has focused on the impact of statutory paternity leave on fathers’ ability to bargain with employers and with their wives (Bergman and Hobson, 2002; Brandth and Kvande, 2002). Other European countries, particularly the Netherlands, have recently seen moves in the same direction; the European Union itself has sponsored work-family studies related to changing gender roles (see Hantrais 2003; Leaman 2003).

State of the body of knowledge

- The growth of research on fathering

Psychologists began to concentrate on fathers’ interactions with children in the 1970s, but sociologists were slower to become interested in fatherhood. While the early 1980s saw the appearance of the “new man” across the world (Lansky, 2000) this was followed, in the 1990s, by a massive growth in academic research relating to changing men and masculinity which began in the US, Canada and Australia and spread to the UK and Europe. It has, however, been much more voluminous in the UK compared with other EU countries, and particularly Southern European countries, a feature which may be explained by the relatively high incidence of family breakdown in Northern Europe (Clarke and Roberts, 2002). Fatherhood research has been stimulated by socio-demographic changes, by an increasing focus on child-centred approaches, and by changes in family policy.

Historical accounts outline the changing role of fathers in western societies, particularly in the twentieth century (Demos, 1982; Pleck, 1987; LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993). Industrialisation removed fathers from the home and accentuated gender-specific roles. The image of the father as a good provider remained intact until the post-Second World War period. Since then it has been eroded by socio-economic change, but remains culturally significant (Townsend, 2002). The new conceptualization of fathers as nurturers dates from the mid-1970s, but overlaps with, rather than replaces, the earlier breadwinner and sex role models (Lamb, 1987).

Socio-demographic changes include significant shifts in employment structures, undermining the traditional breadwinner model prevalent in many Western countries, and in family practices. Although marriage remains popular as an institution, it is increasingly likely to end in divorce (particularly in the US), leaving many parents to care alone or share parenting in new ways. Census data indicate that fathers are less likely to live in the same home as their children, compared to a generation ago, due to higher divorce rates and increased numbers of nevermarried mothers (Long, 1997). Research has focused on how fathers relate to nonresident children, or how stepfathers parent in ways which are similar or different to those of resident biological fathers. Couples are waiting longer to marry and have children, which is also seen to have a positive impact on fathers’ attitudes to parenthood and interactions with children (Coltrane, 1996). The impact of demographic change is as yet unclear: the decreasing frequency of fatherhood in
western societies may mean a declining societal commitment to fatherhood, or it may herald a deepened commitment based on choice (Eggebeen, 2002).

Probably the biggest single factor influencing fathers’ role in the household has been the post-war increase in female full-time paid employment, observed across Western countries. Research on the household division of labour, discussed below, shows that when wives work full-time outside the home fathers respond by increasing the time spent on household duties, including childcare, and often report changed attitudes to childcare and their parental role as a result.

Gender roles have undergone substantial change in recent decades, under the impact of feminism and of more individualised social relations. Here too the erosion of the ‘breadwinner’ model and the ideology of separate spheres may be observed in surveys of men and women’s attitudes towards parenting and the division of childcare responsibilities. In particular, attitudinal surveys show a strong desire among men and women to move away from the parenting practices of their parents and to promote a more involved fatherhood role in opposition to the perceived absence, distance or aloofness of their own fathers. For example, a European survey of 13,000 fathers in the mid-1990s found that 75% of them thought they should participate in raising their children from an early age (Hester and Harne, 1999).

Family policy has attempted to keep pace with socio-economic change. Although they have sought mainly to support working mothers, policy-makers have also turned their attention to fathers. Above all, social policy has become more child-centred and policy-makers have not hesitated to attribute problems to perceived failures of parenting (see debates on fatherhood below). On one hand, fatherhood has been problematised (see Marsiglio et al, 2000 and Pringle, 2001), as studies have shown the negative effects of fathers’ absence on children’s (particularly boys’) social integration and educational attainment; in the USA and elsewhere, discourse on ‘deadbeat’, “problem” or “delinquent” fathers has been linked to disapproval of single motherhood. On the other hand, involved fatherhood has been celebrated as a means of breaking cycles of deprivation and anti-social behaviour, as well as a support for working mothers. Meanwhile, newly-formed fathers’ movements, particularly separated fathers wishing to maintain contact with their children after divorce, have during the 1990s attempted to force judges and policy-makers to change assumptions on policy and law that the mother is always the primary carer.

The growing awareness that men have a right to be involved in the raising of their children has led to a reconfiguration of family law such that now most Western states allow joint custody of children and the term “parental responsibility” is increasingly being used in formal texts on custody cases (Collier, 1995; Hobson and Martin, 2002). In addition, in the wake of measures to promote fathering and a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work in the Nordic states, and particularly Sweden (Bergman and Hobson, 2002), European legislation and recommendations since the early 1990s have been in the same direction. Hence the Council of Ministers’ Recommendation on childcare in 1992 sought “increased
participation by men [in the care and upbringing of children] in order to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities between men and women and to enable women to have a more effective role in the labour market (in O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003:32). This was followed by the 1996 Directive on parental leave and the Resolution of the Council of Ministers for Employment and Social Policy of 29 June 2000 which specifically calls on member states to, among other things, provide men with a right to paternity leave and to give them additional rights to enable them to take a greater role in family life and in caring. This second recommendation has been applied to varying extents across the EU but has improved men’s access to paternity leave, albeit often on an unpaid basis. EU states also work within the provisions of the European Working Time Directive (2000) which regulates hours worked. While this legislation was not specifically introduced to facilitate parental contribution in family life, it is potentially an important measure for countries such as Britain, where men work very long hours, as the latter have often been cited as a key factor limiting fathers’ involvement with their children (Clark and Roberts, 2002). In the United States, legal encouragement for more shared parenting has been limited (notably the 1993 US care leave law giving individuals who work for large employers the right to take unpaid leave), but initiatives to raise the profile of research on fathers and to support fathers’ increased involvement in their families were taken under the Clinton administration (Marsiglio et al, 2000).

Academic literature on fatherhood has drawn heavily on masculinity studies in sociology. ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ defines men according to their formal paid jobs (Connell, 1987, 1995). Shifts in employment structures and family structures and practices thus raise problems for male identities, and it is still uncertain to what extent involved fatherhood can provide new components of male identity (Morgan, 2001). Studies of male discourse in the UK (e.g. Riley, 2003) suggest that the breadwinner model has not been replaced by new identities for the professional men interviewed. Similarly, it has been observed that in many countries media images of fatherhood have not kept pace with socio-demographic change, with many TV comedies propagating the image of inept fathers. Whilst it may be that popular culture is simply lagging behind actual practice, media images also suggest the absence of readily available alternative models for fathers. Hence, the current situation may be characterised as one of flux and uncertainty, with ad-hoc arrangements influencing real practice more than ideological norms. In this context, academic studies themselves contribute to the emergence of a new space for knowledge, ideas and mental constructions of fatherhood.

Studies of fatherhood and its relationship to masculine identities draw on the major theoretical schools of thought within sociology: symbolic interactionism, ecological or family systems theory, life course dynamics and power exchange or conflict theory (Glass, 2003). Symbolic interactionism, probably the most influential of these theories, is based on the idea that individuals routinely enact constellations of behavior known as social roles relating to gender, marriage and parenthood. Constellations of behavior are determined culturally and learned through childhood socialization. Hence, within an interactionist perspective, fatherhood is studied as a gendered activity (Brod, 1987; Hearn, 1987; Kimmel, 1987;
Townsend’s study shows the importance of cultural norms in shaping men’s individual beliefs and behaviour before and during their experience of fatherhood. Fatherhood is seen by the men interviewed (Townsend, 2002) as a component of a culturally-determined “package deal” in which getting married, having children, holding a steady job and owning a home were four interconnected elements. The new norm of the participant father is undermined by institutional arrangements (particularly the all-consuming nature of paid work) as well as by the cultural link between marriage and fatherhood, which leaves men bereft after divorce or separation. Similarly, Arendell’s feminist-interactionist perspective sees families as arenas of struggle, where identities are rooted and claimed. The “masculine” role of provider was seen by men as a master identity determining relationships with mothers and children (Arendell, 1995). Studies concur on the complex and contingent nature of fathering identities (see also: Delaisi and Hurstel, 1987; Jackson, 1987).

What fathering activities do men do?

FATHER INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILDREN

Following Lamb (1987), four modes of paternal influence and involvement are seen to exist: breadwinning; emotional support; child-related housework; and interaction with children, especially in play. Father involvement, defined as “the amount of time spent in activities involving the child” (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov and Levine, 1987), tends to be studied directly by focusing on interaction, availability (or accessibility) and responsibility (see also Coltrane’s entry: Fathers). Swedish research suggests that these facets of involvement are interrelated: that is, that fathers who are more available also interact more with their children (Lamb, Chuang and Hwang, 2003). In addition a distinction is often made a) distinguishing the amount from the quality of father involvement and b) constructing absolute as well as relative (in relation to partner) indices of involvement.

Measuring fathers’ involvement with their children and comparing these findings cross-nationally and over time is plagued with methodological problems (Pleck and Stueve, 2001). There are considerable differences in approaches used in terms of the dates of surveys, the ages of children involved and in the methodology employed in accounting for paternal involvement, resulting in a wide disparity in the reported results (Yeung et al, 2001). In France, for example, De Singly (1996) suggests that time budget surveys seriously underestimate the time men are engaged with their children as they exclude all shared parenting activities from their calculations of paternal involvement. However, there is a widespread assumption, based on discrepancies between male and female reporting, that men over-report time spent on domestic and childcare tasks. In the US literature there has also been considerable debate over measurement of father involvement (see Yeung et al, 2001). European and international surveys do exist (such as the European Community Household Panel survey data, Eurobarometer studies in 1993 and
1994 and the 1994 International Social Survey program) but their usefulness is often limited by the absence of data for specific countries and specific years.

Most surveys indicate an increase in father involvement in absolute terms since the end of the 1970s (see for example, Gershuny, 2001 and Yeung et al, 2001). Gershuny’s analysis of international time budget diaries (2001) • generally considered the most accurate way of measuring fathers’ interaction and availability - has shown, in parallel with trends in the US, an increase in childcare time spent by fathers in the UK since the mid-1970s, and particularly since 1985 and for men with children aged under 5 years. There appears to have been a similar absolute increase in maternal involvement in childcare, although to a lesser extent than for fathers. However, in terms of absolute levels of paternal involvement there is evidence of considerable behavioural variation: behaviour is clearly polarised between those fathers spending more time caring for their children and those fathers who, because of divorce and separation, are reducing contact (Furstenberg, 1988; O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003).

In terms of relative measures of father involvement Gershuny finds a continued growth in British fathers’ proportion of overall childcare for younger and older children alike. However, the proportion of time spent by these fathers in childcare is only one third of total parental childcare time, very similar to the proportion in the US (Yeung et al, 2001). Recent figures taken from the European Community Household Panel survey in 1998, relating to the time spent by men and women aged 20-49 in childcare, found that for the 15 EU member countries double the time was spent on childcare by women than men (about 45 hours per week for women compared with 22 hours for men). The highest absolute contribution by men was in Denmark where men spent 32 hours a week in childcare; the lowest was in Greece with 18 hours (Eurostat, 2002). The higher contribution of Scandinavian fathers was confirmed in Eurostat’s first ten-country study of time use (Eurostat, 2004). However, research carried out primarily in the US (Daly, 2001; Darling-Fisher and Tiedje, 1990; Pleck, 1985) and the UK (Brannen, 2000) shows that, while there is an increase in fathers’ accessibility and interaction with their children, there seems to be relatively little change in fathers’ responsibility for their children, which remains limited. A number of explanations have been preferred for this situation as we outline below.

US research provides more detailed information than is available in Europe regarding factors influencing father involvement, measured in terms of accessibility and interaction. For example, Yeung et al, 2001 have found that in two-parent intact families fathers are more engaged with their children during weekends than weekdays, leading to the conclusion that existing models of the division of labour in the home are faulty and need to make a clearer distinction between times of parental involvement. According to this survey American children under 13 spent 1 hour and 13 minutes on a weekday interacting directly with their father compared with 3.3 hours on a weekend day. The figures increased to 2.5 and 6.5 hours respectively if times during which fathers were accessible to their children were included.
Much of the research to date in the US and the UK measuring paternal involvement per se relates to white, resident fathers and has tended to neglect non-resident fathers and those in ethnic minority groups. Divorce is often followed by a reduction in the quality and quantity of contact between fathers and children. US research on non-resident fathers suggests that they can continue to play an important role in their children’s lives if they provide authoritative parenting (encouraging children and talking over problems), especially if this occurs within a cooperative relationship between the parents (Marsiglio et al, 2000), a situation which is relatively rare. Manning et al (2003) drawing on the US National Survey of Families and Households (1987 and 1988) find that in fact many non-resident fathers are involved in complex parenting responsibilities - three-quarters remarry and 40% live with new children. US studies relating to race/ethnicity produce mixed findings, with some studies reporting black fathers being more involved with their children than white, while others showing black fathers to be less accessible than white fathers (Marsiglio et al, 2000). There is relatively little work on Hispanic fathers in the US. Yeung et al (2001), using data from the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, found that ethnicity was an important predictor of paternal involvement at the weekends, with black fathers spending 70 minutes less and Latino fathers about an hour more with a child at weekends than white fathers. Hofferth’s most recent survey, based on Panel Study of Income Dynamics data in the US revealed that Hispanic fathers tend to take more responsibility than white fathers and have more permissive parenting styles (Hofferth, 2003). However, Coltrane (1996) suggested that at least some of the differences between Latino and white fathers could be related to other social and demographic factors (later parenting among white households, and looser kinship networks).

A more extensive literature in the US, reflecting the complexity and fluidity in fathers’ parenting role and its cultural diversity, profiles and studies fathers in a wide-range of settings: divorced fathers, non-resident or “absent” fathers, resident single-father families, step-fathers, young fathers of children born to teenage mothers, fathers in violent and neglectful families, African American and gay fathers (see overview in Lamb, 2001).

Determinants of father involvement with their children

Lamb (1987, 2004) and Pleck (1997) identify four main determinants of father involvement: motivation; skills and self-confidence; support, especially from mothers; and institutional practices, in particular the workplace. Subcultural contexts (biographical, environmental) are important for the first two of these factors. Women’s gatekeeping role significantly affects father involvement (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Backett, 1982; Townsend, 2002). Fathers’ parental identities are more co-parental than those of mothers — that is, dependent on and balanced with the mother’s input — particularly in the domain of responsibility (arranging and planning activities) (Daly, 2001; Pleck and Stueve, 2003).
From a review of the paternal involvement literature in the US, Yeung et al (2001) highlight a wide range of factors which would seem to influence fathers’ involvement with their children: children’s characteristics (age and gender), constraints on the father (such as working hours, number of children in the family or the child’s physical/mental limitations), power relations between spouses (relative earnings), resources such as human capital and their availability to care for children. We will focus here on two factors which have been the subject of considerable debate in both the US and UK: maternal employment and fathers’ work.

US, European and international studies (Algava, 2002; Ferri and Smith, 1996; Gershuny, 2001; Sandberg and Hofferth, 2001; Yeung et al, 2001), suggest that maternal employment is conducive to increased paternal responsibility for childcare, bearing out the “lagged adaptation” theorisation outlined below. Assessments of levels of father involvement in relation to mothers’ hours of work have produced mixed results. In Britain and France significant increases in paternal responsibility tend to occur in households where both partners are in full-time employment (Gregory and Milner, 2004) and part-time working seems to lead to mothers carrying a disproportionate burden of unpaid work (domestic work and child-care). On the other hand, some American studies (Coltrane and Adams, 2001; Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2001) have found mothers’ income to have a greater impact on fathers’ involvement in childcare and housework than mothers’ working hours, leading to the theory that the power relation between spouses affects the household division of labour. This literature assumes that domestic labour is undesirable and will be formed by the spouse with the least power. Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn’s nationally representative study of parenting in couple-households with a child under three showed that fathers spend more time with children during weekdays when the mother’s income is higher provided that the mother actually earns more than their partners. A relative increase in maternal to paternal wage did not have the same effect. Coltrane and Adams (2001) also found that there was a significant correlation between “child-centred parenting” (defined as helping with homework, engaging in private talks and driving children to activities) and sharing in more routine household tasks and argued that the two should not be researched separately.

In relation to fathers’ work, disparate studies show that fathers’ working hours are a key factor in the time spent with their children. In the US it has been found that the impact of increases in father’s work hours and earnings would seem to have have a negative effect on involvement levels on weekdays (Yeung et al, 2001). Ferri and Smith’s (1996) survey in the UK showed very long working hours (over 50 hours) led to reduced participation in childcare and housework. Fagnani and Letablier (2003) in France have also found a correlation between higher paid work, commitment to work, long working hours and reduced time spent with children. There are mixed views concerning the impact of fathers’ working patterns on involvement with their children: the recent US study by La Valle et al (2002) found that fathers’ atypical working limited family activities with children and partners, while Deutsch’s research (Deutsch, 2001) found that in families, particularly in lower income groups, where the couples worked shifts, there was a
fairer division of household tasks including childcare. A similar effect was found in lower income families in France (Fagnani and Letablier, 2003). Australian research suggests a link between fathers’ satisfaction with their working hours and wider satisfaction with their jobs and their relationships with their partner and children (Weston, Gray, Qu and Stanton, 2004). Overall, fathers who worked between 35 and 40 hours reported highest levels of well-being.

In addition, the nature of the work environment would also seem to have a bearing on fathers’ involvement with their children: a more family-friendly environment leads to greater involvement with children (Hatten et al, 2002; Levine and Pittinsky, 1997) and take-up of paternity leave of two weeks duration (Chaffaut et al, 2002). French research on men taking paternal leave (1-3 years) has found that men are more likely to take this leave if working conditions are poor in their sector and if they are feminised sectors where measures to balance work and family are widespread and have been internalised by the fathers. The risks to job security in taking the leave was also found to be a factor. For more on the work-family interface see elsewhere.

- Debates on fathering

One of the key debates in fathering is whether perceived shifts in fathering roles is a good thing. A considerable body of American literature (see reviews by Marsiglio et al, 2000 and Yeung et al, 2001) suggests that a father’s presence in childhood is beneficial. This research provides evidence that a father’s presence leads to better academic performance and less antisocial behaviour such as drug taking and truancy and can even overcome income effects. It also suggests that more active fathering roles are also good for men themselves, relationships with men’s partners and productivity at work. The evidence from US research seems more convincing for resident fathers than non-resident ones. In the UK the research examining the impact of fathers in families has been primarily concerned with the impact of father absence or divorce and there is considerable confusion as to the contribution that men make to contemporary family life (Lewis, 2000). Debate is on-going over whether fatherless families are at a high risk of crime and delinquent behaviour because of the absence of an adequate male role model or dispenser of discipline or because of poverty (Clarke and Roberts, 2002:171). Pringle’s review of the UK literature (2001) shows that while on the one hand some research suggest that a father’s presence is vital for children, men’s partners and themselves (eg. Burgess and Ruxton, 1996), others question this by drawing on research into parenting in lesbian families, and noting too that the impact of fathers on children in families is often mediated by and dependent on their partner’s efforts. Critics of the position that a father’s involvement with their children is always a good thing, tend to frame men’s greater childcare participation within wider concerns about a reassertion of fatherhood rights and responsibilities in the UK which is seen by them as patriarchal in nature: they question whether “men’s greater (though limited) involvement in parenting may sometimes represent a re-configuration of patriarchal relations rather than a challenge to them” (Pringle, 2001:5). In addition a number of these commentators maintain
that the assumption that fathers in families is always beneficial is simplistic because of the amount of child abuse carried out by some men in heterosexual families, particularly in the case of "social fathering" (Pringle, 1995) and notably because of recent evidence of the connections between men’s violence to their female partner and children (Hester and Harne, 1999).

Another key debate is about the slow process of change in fathering roles and men’s general contribution to domestic work and how this can this be explained. A number of theories have been evoked specifically in relation to this theme, perhaps the best-known of these being that of the “stalled revolution”, an expression coined by Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild (1995) argues that the shift towards more egalitarian attitudes and blurring of gender divisions has reached limits entrenched by structures of male power. On the basis of cross-national data, Crompton (2003) argues that where the shift to involved fatherhood is stalled, this can be explained by structural constraints hindering career progression of mothers or fathers (such as low pay and rewards for male would-be managers in low-pay sectors such as retail, or a long-hours culture in private-sector professions), or lack of adequate public childcare. In some cases gender ideologies are deeply entrenched in national cultures and continue to shape individual expectations, as Gregory and Milner’s (2004) work in Britain and France has shown.

Another important theory is that of "lagged adaptation" proposed by Gershuny et al (1994). This hypothesises that a more egalitarian division of domestic work and child care between men and women will flow from women’s increased full-time participation in the labour market. For them this process of change will come about slowly and possibly over a number of generations. They suggest that during this long period of change, ideas about gender roles and parenting form part of the process of change itself (1994:188). The direct correlation between paternal contribution in childcare and mothers’ full-time participation in the labour market has been born out by two nationally representative longitudinal American studies but has been called into question by some cross-national comparative research (Gregory and Windebank, 2000; Künzler, 2002). But, drawing on the sociological explanatory frameworks outlined above, various authors suggest that the process of change is more complex than that proposed by Gershuny et al. For example, Daly’s analysis of responsibility for family time within dual-earner couples (Daly, 2001) emphasises that changes in the taken-for-granted patterns regarding the responsibility for family time cannot be altered simply by a change in men’s behaviour but requires an adjustment within the couple together such that women relinquish some of their control over this area. Benjamin and Sullivan (1999) suggest that a woman’s “relational resources” (notably inter-personal skills, negotiating and conflict management skills and resources) allied to gender consciousness” can help challenge traditional boundaries in the division of labour more generally. Townsend (2002), by contrast, places the emphasis on the need for changes to take place in the structure of employment and cultural definitions of masculinity for significant changes in parental roles to take place. For him (Townsend, 2002:195) “Men’s identification of masculinity and successful fatherhood with employment and provision helps explain why the revolution in family life has stalled".
Finally, a set of general theories incorporating the notion of “patriarchy” have also addressed the question of men’s resistance to change in relation to the domestic division of labour. Key among these Delphy and Leonard’s (1992) radical feminist theory that patriarchy has an enduring nature that adapts to change, rather than capitulates to it. For them the fact that capitalism’s need for women in the labour force has not undermined patriarchal relations in the home can be seen as evidence of this. Walby’s dual systems theory (1990,1997) explains the slow degree of change in the private domain by reference to various structures of patriarchy, which are partly independent of each other: the patriarchal mode of production by which women’s labour is expropriated by their husbands within the marriage and household relationships; patriarchal relations in paid work and the patriarchal state. Walby argues that patriarchy can take on different forms and can be present to different degrees. Hence, the elimination of any one patriarchal structure (such as inequalities in paid work) does not automatically lead to the demise of the system as a whole. Connell’s well-known dual system theorization of gender relations, including the concepts of “gender order” and “gender regime”, also provides an explanatory framework for shifts in gender relations (Connell, 1987). Connell’s notion of “gender order” has three components: a division of labour (paid and unpaid); power, expressed in the connection of authority with masculinity (patriarchy), and “cathexis”, which refers to the emotionally charged relations with people, particularly sexual relations. These three components have independent effects and may come into conflict with one another, interacting to produce a unity which changes over time. The “gender regime” is the interaction of these three components at the level of institutions such as labour market regulation, customs, workplace practices, family relations and behaviour in the street.

A THIRD AREA OF DEBATE RELATES TO HOW THE STATE CAN INTERVENE TO INCREASE FATHERS’ INVOLVEMENT WITH THEIR CHILDREN. HOBSON AND MARTIN (2002), MAPPING CROSS-NATIONAL CASE STUDIES AGAINST A MATRIX OF STATE POLICIES, CONCLUDE THAT THERE IS NO NEAT CORRELATION BETWEEN CONVENTIONAL POLICY TYPOLOGIES AND WHAT THEY TERM THE “FATHERHOOD REGIME”, THE BUNDLE OF LEGAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES RELATING SPECIFICALLY TO FATHERHOOD. NEVERTHELESS THEY IDENTIFY A STRONG LINK BETWEEN THE DOMESTIC AND INSTITUTIONAL TRIANGLES INFORMING INDIVIDUAL CHOICES AND PRACTICES. EUROSTAT’S (2004) COMPARATIVE STUDY ALSO INDICATES AN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN FATHERHOOD CONTRIBUTION TO CHILDCARE AND DIFFERENCES IN THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE SERVICES, AS WELL AS DIFFERENCES IN EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS. THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY OF NATIONAL POLICIES ON FATHERHOOD MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO DISENTANGLE THE IMPACT OF POLICY ON PRACTICE. HEARN (2002: 255) LISTS NO FEWER THAN SIX AREAS WHERE THE CONTEMPORARY STATE IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN SHAPING FATHERHOOD AND INFLUENCING FATHERING PRACTICES: BIRTH REGISTRATION; PROPERTY RIGHTS; INTERVENTION AGAINST FATHERS’ VIOLENCE; RULES GOVERNING ADOPTION, FOSTERING AND STEPFATHERING AS RECOGNITION OF “SOCIAL” PARENTING; CHANGING
The model of “active” or “involved” fatherhood is based on the assumption, enshrined in law, that fathers should be active in joint parenting during marriage or partnership and after divorce or separation (Smart and Neale, 1999). This suggests two main areas where the state can intervene: promotion of paternal caring during marriage (for example, through rights to paternity leave or to reduced working hours); and obligations regarding cash or care responsibilities following parental separation. The notion of “co-parenting” (joint responsibility of both parents) gained ground in the 1970s, mainly in response to a feminist critique of patriarchal property rights. In practice, Western states have varied widely in terms of the area of intervention. The USA and the UK have strongly promoted cash responsibilities of nonresident fathers. Other European countries, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, have shifted attention from cash to care, with the introduction of laws imposing compulsory joint custody of children after divorce or separation, unless one party can demonstrate that this would harm the child. However, Bergman and Hobson (2002) note that the Swedish law is about “compulsory fatherhood” rather than “compulsory fathering”, that is, the principle is the child’s access to the father rather than the length of time spent with him (which can sometimes be tokenistic) or the quality of the care. They contrast the Swedish situation with recent Dutch law (since 1998), under which judges, in awarding custody, take into consideration the father’s degree of involvement with children before separation.

Regarding promotion of active fathering during marriage or partnership, policies have mainly taken the form of advertising campaigns; promotion of workplace flexibility and rights to reduced working hours; and paternity leave rights. There is little evidence that advertising campaigns, in the absence of supporting measures, have any impact at all on practice; indeed, unless prevailing public opinion is already supportive, they are likely to be counter-productive. (The same has been noted of coercive cash responsibilities: see Knijn and Selten, 2002). Modak and Palazzo (2002), on the basis of their interviews with Swiss fathers, express scepticism about fathers’ real willingness to reduce their working hours even where such arrangements are possible. Hatten et al (2002) found a range of obstacles to British fathers’ take-up of “family-friendly” measures in the workplace: organizational (failure to promote policies, where they existed); structural (the gender pay gap, which reinforces traditional breadwinner roles); and individual or attitudinal (a wide acceptance of breadwinner values).

Similarly, take-up of paternity leave depends directly on the length of leave, the replacement value of benefits received, the degree of promotion by government and employers, and the availability of supporting measures such as rights to reduced working time following leave. Coltrane (1996) argued that the 1993 law on parental leave in the USA would not change fathers’ behaviour because it was unpaid, and also because of the lack of supporting policies. Levine and Pittinsky (1998) observed that fathers’
take-up of workplace rights to reduced working hours or paternity leave requires extensive information and promotion by the company. In France, the UK and other European countries, where minimal existing provision has been boosted by the 1996 European directive on parental leave, take-up of the new rights has been impressive (e.g. around 40%-50% of eligible fathers in France); however, studies have suggested that once they return to work, men revert to specialised gender roles (see Ruault et al, 2003). The Swedish and Norwegian cases, on the other hand, demonstrate that paternity leave can significantly alter men’s perceptions of their family role. Bergman and Hobson (2002) argue that successive improvement of paternity leave provision (a total of twelve months leave, paid at 80% of salary, to be taken in total by either partner, with each partner taking at least one of these months), coupled with extensive publicity, and a supportive legal and policy framework, has led to a radical shift in Swedish fathering practices: attitudinal surveys show that only a small minority of men (9%) identify primarily with work, whereas the majority (over 50%) say that family shapes their identity more than work.

Case studies of family-friendly policies (see Haas, Hwang and Russell, 2000) suggest strongly that these work best when they target men as well as women. Conversely, it has been recognised that where policies are aimed mainly at supporting women at work (promotion of female part-time work, and maternity leave), women’s careers are negatively affected and men retain the breadwinner role (Oláh et al, 2002; see also Moss and Deven, 1999).

Implications for practice and research

Early fatherhood research sought to shift the focus onto the father as an antidote to what was perceived as an excessive concern with maternal parenting (Clarke and Roberts, 2002). Already in 1982, McKee and O’Brien argued for a more sophisticated approach re-placing fathers into a broader context of interactions within the family and within the wider community (see also Burgess, 1987). Today, more research is needed both into the emotional and practical process of fathering for individual fathers, and the broader context of fathering (the domestic triangle).

Further research is also required in order to make explicit the relationships between the domestic and institutional triangles. This may help to explain the often-noted mismatch between perceptions of shifts in fathering practices, and actually observed practices which may be less different from those of previous generations than is assumed.

As “fatherhood regimes” shift with increasing rapidity, particularly in Western Europe, researchers need to track such changes and their impact on fathering practices. This research should also take account of the response of social movements (fathers’ rights movements) to changes in the legal and policy environment. In particular, it would be useful to analyse through cross-national comparison the
consequences of shifts towards compulsory joint parenting (comparing, for example, the relative impact of cash versus care responsibilities on fatherhood involvement post-separation).

Policies designed to promote active joint parenting during marriage or partnership are particularly relevant to work-family studies. The introduction or extension of rights to paternity leave in Western Europe provides an opportunity for researchers to investigate the importance of policy design as well as organizational factors encouraging or inhibiting fathers’ take-up of leave. Research on work-life balance initiatives in the workplace will also help to inform policy by providing information on whether temporal flexibility can help fathers to devote more time to their family, or whether alternative solutions are needed in order to combat a “long hours culture” in some companies or sectors.

Measuring paternal involvement (usually through very small-scale qualitative studies whose results are difficult to generalise) has long been a preoccupation of psychologists rather than sociologists or policy specialists. Within sociology and social policy, debates have arisen over the value of large-scale time-use surveys, sometimes backed up by smaller-scale time diary records. Further research is needed into ways in which time-use surveys might be designed to be more responsive to gender differences in parenting practices.

Finally, research needs to be able to measure, and policy needs to be able to take better account of cross-cultural differences in fathering experiences and practices. Although the debate on the “future of fatherhood” is far from closed, most scholars agree that fatherhood is becoming more rather than less diverse.

References


