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Involved fatherhood

– an analysis of gendered and classed
fathering practices in Sweden

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Author: Malin Wiberg

Supervisor: Helena Johansson

Abstract

Title Involved fatherhood – an analysis of gendered and classed fathering practices in Sweden

Author Malin Wiberg

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Sweden is one of the countries where an ideal of a more “involved fatherhood” dominates both on the political level and on the level of individual attitudes, but where despite this, fathers largely continue to assume a secondary role as parents in relation to mothers. The aim of this study was to explore and analyze how fathers construct their fatherhood and enact their fathering in this area of tension between the involved fatherhood ideal and its practice, and to do this in a way that better reflected the diversity of fathering experiences in contemporary Sweden than has been done in previous studies so far. The research questions focused on how these fathers describe their fathering practices in relation to their ideals of “good fatherhood”; how they discuss their parental involvement in relation to the involvement of their children’s mother; and how their accounts can be interpreted as expressions of gender and class. The theoretical point of departure included the notion that fatherhood is constructed through “fathering” practices, and that these practices blend with other practices such as those of gender and class. Moreover, all these practices can serve the purpose of positioning oneself in the hierarchies of fatherhoods, masculinities and social groups. The empirical data of the study was collected via twelve semi-structured interviews with fathers whose demographic characteristics partly lived up to the study’s intention of reflecting diversity. Although the sample ended up slightly biased towards fathers in intact families who identified themselves as part of the middle-class, the study contributes to the field of fatherhood research in that it moves away from the ideas that involved fathering practices should be studied as a middle-class phenomenon and that its implications for gender equality need to be studied in nuclear families.

The findings of the study confirm that the discourses of gender equality and involved fatherhood dominate the way contemporary fathers in Sweden talk about and enact their fathering, which has been pointed out in previous research on fatherhood. However, the findings indicate that the gap between involved fatherhood ideals and practice was smaller in this sample of fathers than has been suggested in most previous studies. These fathers reported taking an active role in all aspects of childcare and not only “the fun parts”, and most of them also made an effort to present their fathering as ungendered by emphasizing their interchangeability and their equivalence as parents in relation to the mother of their children. Moreover, the study shows that the fathers, by presenting the organizational structure and attitudes in their workplace as obstacles for their involvement in childcare, could in fact strengthen their image as truly involved fathers, because these were obstacles that they had overcome. This also meant that the involved fathering of fathers who had a less privileged position in the labor market, and therefore either *couldn’t* or *didn’t have to* make the choice between family and career, was not as highly valued. Finally, it is suggested that the involved fathering practices described in this study represent fathers’ child-centeredness rather than their commitment to gender equality but that even so it may contribute to a more gender equal division of labor in the domestic sphere in the long run.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

In a range of Western countries, the aim of achieving gender equality has increasingly become an explicit political priority due to its benefits in terms of engaging a larger proportion of the adult population in the labor market. Governments are becoming more and more aware that this is required if their respective capitalist welfare systems are to survive in a globalized world and in spite of demographic challenges like ageing populations and low birth rates (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Eydal and Rostgaard, 2015). Measures designed to increase women's labor market participation such as, parental leave- and child care arrangements reflect this awareness, but as Esping-Andersen (2009) asserts, women's integration in the labor market is also dependent on men's willingness and ability to assume a fairer share of the responsibility for the unpaid domestic work, including childcare and household chores. This is also a matter of the children's welfare since women have tended to decrease the amount of time they dedicate to unpaid care work much more than men have increased the time they spend on this work. This has given way to discussions on what measures are needed to increase men's part in the domestic work and in particular, how a more active and involved fatherhood can be encouraged (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Hobson, 2002).

Research on fatherhood have found that a complex set of factors on different levels are involved in fathers' decisions on how to enact their parenthood. For example, societal structures in terms of family benefits and -laws that encourage or obstruct certain ways of organizing family life; the conditions and attitudes in men's workplaces; mothers' education, income and attitudes toward sharing care responsibilities; fathers' individual attitudes towards fathering, gender roles and gender equality and their belief in their own capacities as parents; and class, are all factors that seem to have an impact on father's participation in childcare (Doucet, 2004; Hobson, 2002; Johansson and Klinth, 2007). All these factors are connected to the norms and discourses surrounding fatherhood that happen to be dominating in a certain time and place. In the Western world these ideas about what constitutes "good fatherhood" have been undergoing a transformation since the end of the 20th century. A transformation which seems to benefit the idea of a more equally shared parenting between mothers and fathers, and gradually abolish the idea of an emotionally absent father whose main role is to provide for his family's material needs.

These new ideals and the increased expectations of fathers' practical and emotional engagement in their children's care and the culture of fatherhood that they have given rise to, are often commonly referred to as the "new fatherhood" or "involved fatherhood". The involved fatherhood norm entails that a growing number of men are becoming more and more committed to the idea that being a "good father" requires the establishment of emotional closeness to the child, which in turn requires some sort of engagement in the child's everyday life. The role of fathers as the family breadwinner is challenged by this ideal of fatherhood, just as it has been challenged by women's increased participation in the labor market (Miller, 2011).

In Sweden the idea of fathers as involved parents, not only in terms of contributing to their children's material welfare, but also regarding the engagement in the care and everyday life of their children, has been on the political agenda since the 1960's. Men's participatory fatherhood was seen as a tool for achieving gender equality, but also as a way of guaranteeing children's right to fathers' special parenting contribution (Bergman and Hobson, 2002; Klinth and Johansson, 2010). As a consequence of the long-lasting political consensus regarding participatory fatherhood, Sweden has been one of the countries in the world where policies have been the most interventionist and regulatory towards fathers. These policies have contributed to a more dramatic shift of fathers' roles in Sweden than elsewhere, the engaged and caring father has become the norm of "Swedish" fatherhood and both the ideal of paternal involvement and the ideal of a gender equal parenthood are rarely questioned in the public debate. This is reflected in how fathers increasingly make use of their parental benefits, how they take on more responsibility for childcare activities and how their involvement in their children's everyday life is more and more taken for granted by the legal system, the societal institutions and the fathers themselves (Bergman and Hobson, 2002). Moreover, the active and involved fatherhood is mostly portrayed in positive terms and as something enjoyable for both father and child (Morgan, 2002). Fathers in Sweden who live up to the full range of expectations for an involved fatherhood, including sharing parental leave equally with their partners, describe their active parenting as a source of joy, as a way to strengthen their bonds with the child, and as a way to gain new experiences and thereby develop as persons (Klinth and Johansson, 2010).

However, even though these new ideals have allegedly resulted in some rise in fathers' engagement in the direct care of their children, repeated studies reveal that fathers generally continue to assume a secondary role in childcare and that even among those fathers who embrace the norms of a "new" involved fatherhood the most, there is a clear discrepancy in what fathers say they do and what fathers actually do when it comes to care responsibilities (Klinth and Johansson, 2010; Miller, 2011). Several studies have also pointed out that the way and the extent to which fathers do get involved in childcare may vary between different social groups (Björk, 2013; Plantin, 2007).

In contemporary research on fatherhood there seems to be a tension between the aim to describe broad patterns and tendencies such as the spreading of involved fatherhood ideals, and the fact that one of those tendencies concern the increased diversification of family life and thus also of fatherhoods. The challenge is to capture how those broad tendencies may affect everyone but at the same time show how they do so in many different ways, with different outcomes (Dermott, 2008; Morgan, 2002). Diversification of family life in late modern societies, multiculturalism, and individualism, means more fatherhoods, but still the main bulk of research is focused on married fathers in middleclass households, who are often in the initial phase of their fatherhood and who are part of the ethnic majority in the country where the research is carried out. It is often pointed out how these fathers cannot be seen as representative for all fathers and how they may do both fatherhood and gender in a way that is specific for their social group. This reservation may be needed but when fathers of this limited category of men are portrayed as avant-garde in representing the new involved fatherhood there is a risk that fathers behind the stories that remain untold are implicitly constructed as different, less engaged, traditional, or even bad, in relation to the norm. Therefore there is a need for studies which better reflect the diversity of conditions under which contemporary fathers construct their fatherhood and exercise their fathering

practices, and how these conditions *can* but don't necessarily *do* affect their experiences as fathers.

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore and analyze how – with what ideals in mind and through what kinds of fathering practices – fathers construct their fatherhood. Furthermore, the study aims to reflect part of the diversity of fathering experiences in the contemporary Swedish context, and to analyze how the fathers' accounts can be understood as expressions of class and gender. This way this study can hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between cultures of fatherhood and fathers' conduct in a context where an involved fatherhood ideal is dominating from the political level to the level of individual attitudes, but where fathers still often assume a secondary role in their fathering practices.

Research questions

How do the fathers account for their fathering practices and how do these relate to their ideas of what constitutes a “good father”?

How do the fathers discuss regarding their involvement in caring for their children in relation to the involvement of their children's mother? Are there differences, and if so how can these be understood?

How can the fathers' accounts of their fatherhood and fathering practices be understood as expressions of gender and class?

2. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly interest in fathers and fatherhood has been rising since the 1970's and the contributions to the knowledge in the field come from several different academic disciplines, and have been produced through the use of many different approaches (Marsiglio et al., 2000). To limit the literature review for the purposes of this study, the theoretical concepts and previous research that are overviewed and presented in this chapter, are restricted to that which has the point of departure that fatherhood and fathering practices cannot be understood as biologically determined, but rather as social constructions, affected by and responsive to their specific social, cultural and historical contexts.

The chapter outline includes the sections of “Key concepts and theoretical framework” and “Literature review”, and together these will provide a basis for analyzing and understanding the results of this study and answering the research questions.

Key concepts and theoretical framework

Introduction

In this section some of the important theoretical concepts and approaches that this study relies on, will be introduced and their relevance for this study will be clarified.

Fatherhood – discourses, norms and ideals

The term fatherhood refers to the historical, social, cultural, and political context in which fathering practices take place. This context affects fathering practices in that it involves the dominating discourses regarding what it means to be a father, and the norms connected with being a “good father” or a “bad father”. The normative power of discourses implies that fathers will in one way or the other have to position themselves in relation to the discourses surrounding fatherhood and even if this is not always a conscious process, fathers’ subjective perceptions of the truths about fatherhood will have influence on how they construct their own identities as fathers (Hobson and Morgan, 2002; Miller, 2011).

In the discourses surrounding fatherhood there are also assumptions of who is to be regarded as a father and on what grounds paternity can and should be established (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). In this study the focus will be on fathers that are the legal fathers of their children through biological bonds or adoption. However, in a world where family patterns are becoming increasingly complex and diverse this means that many men and fathers who engage in fathering practices on other grounds than legal paternity will not be included here.

Gender – fathers as men

That views and experiences of fatherhood and fathering practices are intrinsically intertwined with conceptions of gender and gender identity is something that few contemporary scholars would deny (Cabrera et al., 2000; Doucet and Lee, 2014; Hobson, 2002; Magaraggia, 2013; Roy and Dyson, 2010). This is also the point of departure in this study. Fathering is interpreted as a gendered practice associated with the assumed category of men. Although fathering practices and mothering practices are sometimes jointly referred to as “parenting”, thereby attempting to reduce the perceived differences in men and women’s possible contributions to child care, research has

repeatedly shown that in practice men and women continue to practice parenting in different ways and that the term parenting actually often refers to the parenting practices that are viewed as women's responsibility. Although some of the discourses that regulate fatherhood are similar to those which surround motherhood, there are thus also gendered discourses of parenting which imply that the types of parental engagement that are expected from fathers and mothers are different (Miller, 2011). To understand fathering it is therefore important to understand how the constructions of gender plays a significant role in people's lives.

The concept of gender refers to the qualities that in a certain time and place are associated with being feminine or masculine. In contrast to "sex" which is seen as a biological/natural categorization, gender concerns the ways in which the categories of men and women are socially constructed and how behaviors that are viewed as typically feminine or masculine are learned. Since the 1970's, as a result of the women's movement and the increased academic interest in women studies, gender has been an important component in explaining and understanding differences between women and men, and how these differences contribute to maintaining a social order where women are subordinated in relation to men (Miller, 2011).

However, studies of gender relations have been criticized for reinforcing the dichotomization of men and women, and for not taking into account other important sources of inequalities such as class, ethnicity and sexual orientation that overlap with gender in affecting power relations between individuals and groups. Gender studies have also been criticized for being too deterministic and thereby ignoring how individual agency both conforms to and challenges the gendered stereotypes. Out of these critiques rose the notion that gender should be seen as something we *do* rather than something we *are*. "Doing gender" implies that individuals through their actions and practices gender themselves in relation to others and the perceived expectations of the specific social, cultural and historical context (Messerschmidt, 2009; Miller, 2011). Fathers' practices may be interpreted as doing masculinity for example when they describe most aspects of their paternal involvement as a matter of choice or when those things that just have to be done are not mentioned. By stressing agency and self-control, which in many contexts are associated with masculinity, fathers can emphasize the male character of their parenting.

Masculinities and hegemonic masculinity

The critique against viewing gender and sex as dichotomous categories and the call for more nuanced theorizations of gender which acknowledge the diversity of gendered practices, has led to a shift in how these practices are labelled. The concepts of masculinity and femininity in singular have increasingly been replaced by the plural forms of the words, something that apart from enabling theorists to paint a more complex, diverse and including picture of male and female realities, also means increased possibilities to examine the power relations between different ways of doing masculinity and femininity (Miller, 2011).

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) the concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the patterns of masculine practices that serve to maintain the subordination of women in relation to men and that forms an internal hierarchy among different masculinities. The expressions of masculinity that are hegemonic in a specific time and place are not necessarily the most common masculine practices but it is rather their normative power that entails that all men will have to position their ways of doing masculinity in relation to the hegemonic ways. In relation to my study hegemonic masculinity can be a useful concept in the sense that different narratives about fathering practices can possibly be understood as ways of positioning oneself in relation to other

men, which are perceived as higher or lower in the hierarchy of masculinities, and in relation to women and feminine practices. For example, the discourse of involved fatherhood is claimed to have reached hegemonic status for men in Sweden (Johansson and Klinth, 2007), which would mean that fathers in describing their involvement in their children's everyday life do not only position themselves as "good" parents but also as "real" men.

Family practices - fathering

Like in gender studies, the emphasis on *doing* rather than *being* is also increasingly present in recent examples of family studies and constitutes the basis of the *family practices* approach of the British sociologist David H. J. Morgan. Morgan (2011) claims that using the term "the family" in studies of family life risks to reduce the multitude of experiences, practices and types of families into an oversimplified stereotype of what constitutes a family. Creating this image of "the family" and its characteristics also implies reinforcing the family norms that are involved in disadvantaging some families such as lone parent families or gay parent families.

According to Morgan (2011), the view of family as a static structure where family actors play more or less predefined roles, ought to be replaced by a focus on the *activities* that actors perform in the name of family. Family practices, or *doing family*, thus implies seeing family as a process which is constructed through the actions and interactions of individuals, as well as the meaning that these actions and interactions are given. The family practices coexist and blend with many other kinds of practices, for example gender practices or work practices, and the way these different kinds of practices move into each other's areas and mix is described as a *sense of fluidity* (Morgan, 1999). The fluidity of family practices implies that the extent to which certain practices are related to family, depends on whether a person is perceived as a family actor or not, which in turn depends on who is doing this labelling. It also means that depending on what persons and relationships are counted as family, the same set of practices, for example working part time, can be interpreted as either highly related to family life or completely unrelated to it (Morgan, 2011).

Applied to the studies of fatherhood, the family practices approach entails that *fathering* rather than fatherhood is the main object of study, although these concepts' mutual interdependence makes it difficult to talk about them separately. *Fathering* or *fathering practices* refers to the actions that fathers take in their capacity as fathers, or in other words how they put their fatherhood into practice. It includes both actions within the family in direct relation to those defined as part of the family, and practices that men carry out in other contexts and which confirm their identity as fathers (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). The sense of fluidity in fathering means that fathering practices blend with for example masculinity practices and class practices and that fathers' actions can be interpreted and labelled as any of these types of practices separately, or all at the same time.

In this study the family practices approach implies that the focus is not only on how the participants describe their fatherhood and how they *are* as fathers, but also what they claim they *do* in relation to their children and in the parental relationship.

Fatherhood and class

To include class as an analytical tool to understand fatherhood and fathering is not self-evident and indeed, since the late 20th century many theorists have claimed that class has lost its importance in explaining and understanding the social dynamics of late modern societies. Put simply, these claims derive from the fact that globalization and individualization have led to an increased pluralization of people's life courses that makes social stratification more complex than the classical class theories of Marx and Weber have suggested. However, even though class identity and class consciousness seem to have lost most of its former influence in how people in postmodern societies define themselves and the social group they identify with, inequalities between people and groups continue to be produced and reproduced (Scott, 2002). But instead of explaining these inequalities as a collective and structural problem, the reasons of differences nowadays are to a greater extent searched for in the individual level (Furlong, 2007).

Providing an extensive review of the modern theories of social stratification and class is neither possible nor necessary for the purpose of this study. However the use of the concept needs to be clarified. Class in this study refers to social categories, between which people's access to resources, opportunities and privileges differ (Skeggs, 1997). The income, type of employment and level of education are two important aspects in this categorization, for example people who work in low paid jobs and lack higher education are often categorized as working class, but there are also other aspects related to cultural capital such as ideals and traditions which may be categorized as class specific. Research findings that indicate connections between certain class aspects and parenting ideals and behavior imply that the concept of class is an important factor to have in mind when the aim is to understand fathering and fathers' constructions of fatherhood (Forsberg, 2009). However, even if class can be useful in finding and understanding patterns of fathering practices, it is also possible that the categorization leads to further stigmatization of those practices that are not perceived to comply with middleclass ideals. According to Skeggs (1997) the term middleclass has historically been used to ensure that the power differences between different types of workers are maintained. Labelling something as "middle class" entails emphasizing its higher status in relation to what is labelled "working class". For example, family practices of the middle class have generally been portrayed as modern and rational, regardless of whether these ideals have prescribed a male breadwinner model or a dual carer/dual earner model, while the practices more prevalent among the working class thereby have been constructed as outdated and unconsidered. In this study, my aim is therefore to retain a critical approach to the concept of class and avoid the type of labelling that risks establishing one class practice as good and the other one as bad. Instead I will try to focus on the way class practices are performed to demonstrate status and distinguish oneself from "the other".

Literature review - research on fatherhood and fathering

Introduction

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of how contemporary fatherhood tendencies, ideals and practices in Sweden and other Western countries, are accounted for in previous research. *Firstly*, the sometimes conflicting ideals and tendencies that have been identified as distinctive for contemporary fatherhood will be presented. *Secondly*, it will be described how new fatherhood ideals are linked to ideas of gender equality, especially in the context of Sweden,

and how the persistent differences between fathers' and mothers' involvement in childcare can be understood. *Thirdly*, research which focus on the fathering practices of contemporary fathers will be presented. And *last but not least*, I will present some research that brings forward the influence of class on fathers' constructions of fatherhood.

Contemporary fatherhood(s)

In a range of studies, whether based on qualitative accounts of fathers' experiences, or on quantitative analyses describing family patterns, fatherhood scholars have reached the conclusion that contemporary fathers seem to be dealing with, and positioning themselves in relation to, competing and partly contradictory norms that prescribe how they should act and be as fathers and men. The most commonly described tension is that between cash responsibilities and care responsibilities, and the ongoing shift towards emphasizing the latter as distinctive of a modern fatherhood (Björk, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2000; Forsberg, 2007; Hobson and Morgan, 2002).

The tension between cash and care refers to the "male breadwinner/female caregiver" model that became the dominant family ideal in industrialized countries during the first half of the 20th century. According to this model fathers were expected to ensure the family's material welfare through paid work in the public sphere, while mothers were assigned the unpaid work in the domestic sphere (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). The attributes associated with the breadwinner father's role in the education and caregiving of his children, were mainly restricted to teaching them discipline and being authoritarian (Henwood and Procter, 2003).

When women increasingly came to (re)enter the labor market in the late 20th century this gave way to new ideas of how paid and unpaid work in the family could and should be divided between men and women in heterosexual families, and policy makers started to look for ways to promote a dual earner/dual carer model as a family ideal. Included in the concept of the dual earner/dual carer model was the assumption that while women assumed a greater role in contributing to the family earnings, fathers would enter the domestic sphere and assume a greater part of the responsibilities there. Although these new orientations of mothers' and fathers' roles in family life generally turned out to be a much slower process of adjustment for the fathers, they have successively led to a transformation in views of fatherhood into gradually emphasizing increased paternal involvement in childcare activities (Hobson and Morgan, 2002).

Involved fatherhood

Along with changing societal and cultural expectations on fathers' roles, something has also changed in the way many fathers view their role for their families' and their children's welfare. Different societies have adapted to the decline of the male breadwinner norm in different ways but across the Western world an ideal of a more emotionally involved and hands-on caring fatherhood has become more and more synonymous with the notion of "good fatherhood" (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). Even where breadwinning ideals are still dominant there are signs of resistance to this norm, like fathers who despite perceiving social pressure to fulfil a breadwinner role acknowledge and enact their desire to prioritize the unpaid work in the household in front of the paid work in the labor market (Doucet, 2004).

The discourse of involved fatherhood includes a set of positive expectations on father's caring capabilities and an expanded role for fathers. The increased dominance of this fatherhood ideal has been confirmed in several studies. For example in their research on contemporary notion of

“good fatherhood”, Henwood and Procter (2003) found that the heterogeneous sample of British fathers they had interviewed all expressed that good fathers nowadays “are expected: to be present in the home and involved in their children’s lives, to keep contact with and be sensitive to their child’s needs (including being able to put the child’s needs before their own), to value family time (e.g. above work and leisure) and generally be part of family life” (p. 343).

Involved fatherhood and gender equality – the Swedish context

The involved fatherhood ideal is particularly strong in Sweden, where it has been actively encouraged in the media, in family policies and in governmental campaigns since the 1960’s. Sweden has been at the leading edge of designing policies for gender equality in the division of paid and unpaid work within families, among other things by implementing family policies such as automatic joint custody for divorced parents, gender neutral parental leave arrangements, generous child care provision, and individual taxation. The role of fathers as caregivers has been promoted implicitly and explicitly through these policies (Hobson and Bergman, 2002; Klinth and Johansson, 2010).

However, despite the wide acceptance of an ideology of gender equality, and although a majority of contemporary fathers in Sweden fully support the ideal of a more involved fatherhood this has not led to the equality in the division of care responsibilities that many, in particular women, have hoped for. Mothering and fathering practices continue to be different in many respects and in many families fathering is still considered as secondary, optional and complementary compared to mothering.

There are different theories as to why the new fatherhood ideal, and thus the changing societal and cultural expectations on fathers, is not having a greater effect on the traditional gender roles that persist between mothers and fathers.

First of all, several authors assert that aiming to be an involved father for your children does not automatically mean that you share the feminist analysis of power differences between men and women which is implied in the gender equality ideology. This means that fathers may be willing to take on more childcare responsibilities without considering an ideal of gender equality (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). Bekkengen (2003) distinguishes between two different, although not mutually exclusive, orientations among the “new fathers” in Sweden who embrace the ideals of an active and involved fatherhood. Besides engaging in fatherhood for the sake of their own personal development and growth, *child oriented* fathers emphasize their importance for meeting their children’s or the family’s needs, while the relatively few *equality oriented* fathers also take into account their opportunity to influence the power relations between the genders by practicing an involved fatherhood. This exemplifies the discretionary character of male parenthood – that fathers as opposed to mothers can choose a level of parental engagement that suits them – which has been noted by a range of other researchers in the field (Cabrera et al., 2000; Dermott, 2008; Forsberg, 2009; Miller, 2011). However, from a more optimistic perspective, fathers’ increased involvement in childcare and its implications in terms of diversifying the available expressions of masculinity, could be interpreted as an important step in the direction towards a gender equal parenthood (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Magaraggia, 2013). In line with this latter view is also the theory that the process of adaptation of fathers’ conduct to the new expectations on fathers’ roles in the family is progressing, the new attitudes will eventually lead to more gender equal parenting, we just have to remain patient as it will need some more time (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011).

Another reason for the limited progress regarding achieving a fairer division of unpaid labor in families has to do with the strong connection between paid work and male identity. This is a continuity that persists in contemporary fatherhood research despite the findings that strongly indicate a transformation of fathers' attitudes towards care responsibilities (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). Even among fathers who define themselves as the primary caregivers of their children, paid work as a source of identity stands out as essential (Doucet, 2004). It is in this context that policies that enable fathers to combine paid and unpaid work, and laws that establish fathers' rights towards their employers regarding possibilities for part-time work, parental leave and flexible work hours, become important as part of the pursuit for gender equality in parenthood. This also explains why Swedish parents compared to parents of countries with less generous work-family provisions appear to have come closer to the ideal of fair sharing of cash and care responsibilities (Hobson and Bergman, 2002). Moreover, several studies have called attention to the significance of positive attitudes among father's co-workers and bosses towards their involvement in unpaid work, since the organizational culture of the workplace is often mentioned by fathers as a reason for prioritizing work demands over involvement in childcare activities (Björk, 2013; Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Miller, 2011). But the relationship between paid employment and paternal involvement is not without complexity. On the one hand, perceived expectations of breadwinning responsibility, loyalty to employers and coworkers, and the significance of having a career (and giving men's career priority over women's), are often presented as impediments for involvement. On the other, under- or unemployment and the alienation and economic vulnerability this usually entails is also understood as an obstacle for fathers to assume a more prominent position in the domestic sphere (Johansson and Klinth, 2008), despite the avoidance of a work-family conflict that this situation would appear to imply.

A last set of explanations for fathers to desist from living up fully to their own and society's ideals of "good fathering" is related to women's traditional power and dominance in the domestic sphere; theirs and the society's low expectations of fathers' caregiving capacities and; as a result, men's lack of confidence regarding some of the child care activities (Dermott, 2008; Hobson and Bergman, 2002; Miller, 2011). Fathers are given a secondary role in parenting due to essentialist notions of mothers' natural inclination towards parenting and their special biological bonds to the child. Involved fathering in this context means that fathers are expected to "help out" and be there to relieve the mothers from their burdens when needed, but are not expected to take own initiatives for caring (Miller, 2011). Women's potential gate-keeping role which implies that mothers may refuse to let go of the control over care responsibilities and thus limit fathers' access to their children is also mentioned by many authors as a real or perceived obstacle for fathers' involvement (Dermott, 2008; Hobson and Bergman, 2002; Miller, 2011) and as a source of frustration for fathers who wish to be part of the everyday parenting practices in relation to their children (Henwood and Procter, 2003). However, when mothers' attitudes and expectations are positive towards fathers' involvement, or are perceived that way by the fathers, this has also shown to be influential in encouraging them to exercise an active and engaged parental role. This indicates the importance of the parental relationship in bringing about change regarding fathers' secondary role in parenting practices (Lewis and Welsh, 2005; Maurer and Pleck, 2006). All in all, together with the previous examples of factors that influence fathers' involvement in childcare activities and responsibilities, this also shows how fathering is more sensitive to contextual factors than mothering (Lewis and Welsh, 2005).

Involved fathering – fathering practices

So what happens when these involved fatherhood ideals are put into practice? What do the involved fathers do? A number of authors have made attempts to label and categorize the practices through which fathers position themselves as involved fathers. For example in Lamb's (1986; in Lewis and Welsh, 2005) famous work from the 1980's father's involvement was claimed to be carried out within the following three main areas: *engagement*, which referred to direct interaction between child and father; *accessibility* to the child; and *responsibility* for the care of the child. In more recent works on this topic, more concrete and detailed ways of capturing fathering practices have been sought, out of which two are presented here.

When fathering practices are studied they are often presented in relation to mothering with an ensuing focus on what fathers *don't do*. With the aim to avoid this emphasis on paternal insufficiency, Lewis and Welsh (2005) attempted a different approach in their study of fathering practices in twenty-six families with adolescent children, by instead focusing on what fathers *do*. They further tried to create a fuller and more truthful image of fathering practices by accompanying each of the interviews with fathers, with interviews of their respective wives and children. Interesting though, they found that fathers' accounts of their fathering were surprisingly consistent with the other family members' views, indicating that what those fathers *said* was also what they *did*.

The authors searched for commonly mentioned themes in the fathers' narratives of their fathering and identified four main areas or *dimensions* of fathering: activities; macro responsibilities; micro responsibilities; and cognitive and emotional involvement. The fathers who described their engagement in more than two of these dimensions were defined as highly involved, although it was mentioned that the involvement within each of the dimensions could vary a lot. An additional theme of "being there" was also mentioned by all fathers, but due to the vagueness and the very diverse meanings the different fathers put into this expression, the authors chose not to assign it a category of its own. However it was stressed that by this they did not mean that this fathering aspect does not deserve attention and recognition.

The practices included in the category of *activities* involved doing things with the child, things which could be either based on the child's interests meaning the father would join his child, or they could be initiated by the father's interest which he was trying to involve the child in. The *macro- or overarching responsibilities* included providing for material needs and, by guiding and steering the child, keeping him or her away from trouble and giving him or her a solid base of values and a sense of what is right and wrong. *Micro- or day-to-day responsibilities* on the other hand related to fathering in the smaller family context, assuming responsibility for planning and getting the regular things of daily life done. It also included monitoring children's friends and helping out with homework. In this dimension most fathers were not very involved and reported that they would do what they are told (by the wives) but usually don't take the initiative or plan the tasks of daily life. Instead they were generally more inclined to the aspect of monitoring the child's friends which in some instances were more related to the guiding fathering practices among the macro-responsibilities. Finally, the fathering categorized as *cognitive and emotional involvement* encompassed an emotional closeness to the child, being able to understand the child and knowing when something is not right. This category also included communicating with the child but the authors noticed that this could be done in different ways, and that most fathers

engaged in rather shallow interaction referred to as *chatting*, rather than talking and listening to their children (Lewis and Welsh, 2005).

Dermott (2008) has made a slightly different distinction of fathering practices based on the 25 interviews she conducted with fathers to children of primary school age.

She found that the fathering activities that the fathers described could be grouped into five different categories: routine caring, involving the type of child care that is performed on a regular basis; housework, referring to tasks that belong to the running of the household such as cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping; family time, which implies doing things together as a nuclear family; being there, that is being present and available where the child is but not directly engaging with the child; and intensive time, defined as the time that a father is directly engaged with the child, either doing some activity, playing together or just being involved in one-to-one communication with the child. Dermott points out that the category referred to as housework usually stood out as something distinct from fathering practices in the fathers' accounts. Most of them described this as something that their wives were mostly in charge of but even when fathers did participate in housework they did not refer to this work as related to their fatherhood.

The typologies of fathering practices of Dermott (2008) and Lewis and Welsh (2005) have some common traits but also some important differences. What Dermott calls *intensive time* seem to refer to the same kind of fathering involved in the categories of *activities* and *emotional-/cognitive involvement* in Lewis and Welsh's study. Moreover, both studies acknowledge the importance that the fathers attribute to *being there* and that fathers have a tendency to get less involved in housework or in the day-to-day responsibilities. But the choice of having only one category of *micro responsibilities* instead of making a distinction between *housework* and *routine caring* like Dermott did, makes fathers possible contributions to routine care work less visible in Lewis and Welsh's categorization. However, this is also likely to be a result of the age range of the children in each of the studies, as it is probable that the adolescents in Lewis and Welsh's study had reached a level of independency that didn't require any of the parents to involve themselves in the type of routine care work referred to in Dermott's study. Another difference between the studies, which also could be understood as a result of the age of the fathers' children, was the *over-arching responsibilities* that were emphasized in Lewis and Welsh's study but not mentioned among the fathering practices in Dermott's typology. Perhaps this could be the result of the centrality of guidance and boundary setting when dealing with adolescents who are often challenging the parents' authority in a more radical way than children of primary school age usually do. Finally, it is also worth noting that the results of the two studies differ in how they correspond to Lamb's (1986) three dimensions of fathering. While Dermott focuses mainly on activities that correspond to the dimensions of engagement and accessibility, Lewis and Welsh emphasize engagement and responsibility.

In my study the fathers have children in an age range that may make Dermott's typology more applicable. However, since responsibility is an important aspect of fathering that refers to more than doing practical care work, Lewis and Welsh's categories of macro- and micro responsibilities are also relevant in descriptions and analysis of the fathering practices accounted for in this study.

Involved fatherhood and class

Norms and ideals for parenting and the way these are put into practice do not only vary in relation to gender but may also vary in relation to other dimensions of social categorization, such as class. Despite the widespread notion that involved fathering is mainly a middle-class practice, some scholars who have considered power differences between men in their research on fatherhood, claim that class has no clear connection with the level of involvement that fathers report (Johansson and Klinth, 2007; Magaraggia, 2013; Plantin, 2007). Being involved can even be interpreted as a more achievable goal than breadwinning by fathers who lack economic opportunities (Roy and Dyson, 2010). However, in other circumstances economic hardship can also motivate the opposite, by forcing parents to divide paid work and unpaid domestic work in the way that allows the parent who earns the most (usually the father) to prioritize paid work (Plantin, 2007).

In contemporary research on fatherhood and fathering it is often pointed out that the “involved fatherhood” ideal is mainly associated with middleclass fathers. This class based image is further accentuated by the fact that most studies that offer a closer and deeper analysis on involved fatherhood and its practices are based almost exclusively on selections of research participants within this social group (Dermott, 2008; Forsberg, 2009; Miller, 2011). In the Swedish context the argument is also backed up with statistical data of the extent to which fathers of different social groups use their parental leave entitlements and whether they have reduced their time in paid work in order to become more involved in childcare or not (Björk, 2013; Klinth and Johansson, 2010; Plantin, 2007). It is also stated that class specific fathering practices are likely to grow increasingly polarized due to the tendency of within class partnering and the influence that mothers’ educational background has on fathers’ behavior (Björk, 2013; Esping-Andersen, 2009). However, in studies where fathers of different social groups feature, it has also been shown that the discourses of involved fatherhood and gender equal parenthood are uncontroversial and widely accepted by most Swedish fathers, regardless of their class (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Plantin, 2007). It seems though that the way these discourses are interpreted and how norms are put into practice is to some extent related to class specific ideals (Björk, 2013; Plantin, 2007), and that the type of involvement and equality considerations that is valued and given most attention in fatherhood research is more prominent among well-educated middleclass fathers.

Research focused explicitly on fathering and class have found that apart from the practical and economic obstacles for involvement that fathers of a less privileged class position may encounter, like less flexible working conditions and a higher probability of working in a male dominated workplace where care responsibilities are discouraged, the way fatherhood is given meaning also tends to differ according to income and social class (Plantin, 2007). In his study of how economic conditions and social class influence fathering in Sweden, Plantin (2007) finds that fathers in working-class households generally describe their fatherhood as something natural and predictable which gives meaning to their lives, while middleclass fathers see fatherhood as a reflexive project that changes them and transforms their identity. According to Plantin this, in combination with economic and practical reasons, translates into different fathering practices regarding how they use their parental leave. Fathers in working class households tend to take out less paternal leave than middleclass fathers which results in a more traditional labor division of paid and unpaid work in their families. However, Plantin (2007) emphasizes that these findings should by no means be seen as fixed boundaries between different social groups which can be

used to predict fathers based on class, rather the study shows that in both middleclass and working-class households, there are fathers whose fathering practices break the classed patterns, since class is just one aspect that influence individual fathers' choices.

Another Swedish study of middleclass fathers who work part time and their motivations for this choice, shows how these fathers do both fatherhood and gender in a way that positions them as part of the well-educated middleclass (Björk, 2013). The author found that the fathers apart from conforming to hegemonic masculinity ideals by for example showing decisiveness and self-control, also displayed *reflexive masculinity* in their fathering accounts, which mainly is associated with middle-class masculinity ideals. This was done by emphasizing their active choices, explicit parental ideals, and their willingness for discussion and agreement with their partners. Similarly, class was present in how they represented parenthood as a project rather than something natural and in how they held self-reflexivity as an ideal in the father role. Björk (2013) concluded that discourses of gender equality, involved fatherhood and reflexive masculinity were helpful for these fathers to justify their choice to spend less time in paid labor but that access to these justifications can be limited by class background and if fathers work in male dominated or career oriented jobs.

These different conclusions regarding the impact of class on fathering practices suggest that class position continues to influence people's life chances and shape their lives, but that it does so in complex and diverse ways. Class is clearly a factor that affects fathering, but fathers' involvement or not in childcare cannot be understood simply as the effect of their class position in the society (Hobson, 2002; Miller, 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

Epistemological and ontological approach

The main aim of this study is to explore how fathers construct fatherhood and what practices and ideals are involved in this construction, and to find ways to interpret their accounts that can be helpful in understanding contemporary fathering practices and perceptions of fatherhood in Sweden. This emphasis on understanding social phenomena rather than describing and explaining them, calls for a qualitative approach in the choice of methods for data collection and analysis in this study. The view of how to produce knowledge, the epistemology, that is applicable here is in line with the hermeneutic and symbolic interactionist traditions and entails a recognition of the human characteristic of giving meaning to the social reality and its components and the importance that people's interpretations of their reality have for their actions. Highly related to this view of knowledge is also the underlying social constructionist assumption about the nature of social reality, which implies that social phenomena are not viewed as fixed units, structures or facts that can be objectively observed and described from outside but rather as variable constructs that are subjectively created and recreated in the interaction with and between social actors (Bryman, 2008). Thus fatherhood in this study is seen as a product of what individuals, groups and societies perceive as fatherhood and accordingly what it means to be a father and what practices that are labelled fathering can vary depending on context, time in history and whose perceptions of fatherhood are accounted for (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). This perspective also implies that the observer, in this case me, is highly involved in the construction of fatherhood and fathering as he or she attempts to define and categorize some aspects as part of the social phenomena of fatherhood and others as unrelated .

Induction – deduction

In qualitative research, there is often a desire to let the empirical findings lead the way in the research and serve as a basis for building new theory or alter old theories. This inductive use of theory can be seen as a way to acknowledge the variable nature of social reality and to avoid reconstructing it according to old patterns and conventions. This contrasts with the deductive approach which is dominant in quantitative research and which establishes the already existing theory as the point of departure in the production of knowledge, meaning that empirical findings should always be presented as either confirming or contradicting what is known so far (Bryman, 2008).

However, deduction and induction do not necessarily have to be seen as irreconcilable opposites, but can also be viewed as located on different ends of a continuum where qualitative studies tend to be inclined towards the inductive end while quantitative ones generally can be placed on the deductive side. Even if it is often possible to see which part of this continuum that a study adheres to the most, many studies move back and forth between induction and deduction along the research process (Bryman, 2008). This is true also for this study. Despite the clearly qualitative nature of this piece of research, the process has been characterized by a pragmatic relation to theory. Even though I have tried to be open to new patterns and previously unknown perspectives on fatherhood in conducting and analyzing the interviews, it would have been impossible not to be influenced by the theoretical perspectives and concepts I have come across in my readings of previous research on the topic and in my studies within the field of social work.

This theoretical knowledge has inevitably affected how I have formulated the questions in my interview guide, how I have followed up the answers during the interviews, and how I have managed the data throughout the analysis. It would therefore be misleading to call the study entirely inductive although the way it is designed mainly pulls it in that direction.

Literature review

Finding relevant literature within a research area like fatherhood can be challenging due to the vast amount of research available on the topic and the fact that it is possible to approach it from very different angles. Studies on fatherhood have been conducted on part of several different disciplines and from different perspectives within each discipline. This means that any of my more general literature searches on the topic of fatherhood got too many search results for me to be able to go through them all in a systematic way. Even when trying to confine the search with different limitations there were thousands of hits and consequently I started with some more specific searches with several search terms combined in order to get a more manageable amount of search results.

I started by doing a thorough search in two online search engines that cover research publications in the field of social sciences. The first one, Proquest, which among other databases covers Social Services Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts, I used to search for international publications about fatherhood. I tested different combinations of search terms to get relevant hits and ended up with two different combinations of search terms. The first one included family roles, fathers, masculinities and expectations and the second one included the already mentioned search terms and fathering practices. The results were listed by year of publication and I selected eight seemingly relevant publications that had been published in the year 2000 or later. In each of these I also checked and made notes of references to other publications, mainly journal articles that were related to the topic, using the same limitations of period of publication.

The other search engine I used, Swepub, lists Swedish publications in a number of different research fields. In Swepub I used the search terms fatherhood, dad, father, expectations, and family practices, and their corresponding Swedish terms, in different combinations. From these searches I got another seven relevant results, which after reading them all gave way to more relevant literature on the topic. Additionally, my supervisor gave me some recommendations of literature, mainly books, relevant to the topic of this study.

Having gotten a better idea of the research field I went back to doing more general searches on the search term *fatherhood* in the university library catalogue. Limiting the search results to books and dissertations I was able to select another five books about contemporary fatherhood and fathering practices. In my selection I gave priority to relevance, indicated by book title and table of content, and year of publication, choosing the most recently published books.

My search for relevant literature continued throughout the whole study but most of the additional literature was found through the articles and books I had started to read to begin with. However, due to the limitations regarding the time and scope of this study my ambition was not to go to the bottom of every single argument found in the literature. Rather I had to be selective and choose to read only those articles or other publications which seemed to be the most necessary in order to understand the main arguments in the research field concerning contemporary fatherhood and fathering practices, and classed and gendered fathering.

Research design and data collection

This study combines an exploratory and a descriptive research design and the empirical data for the study has been collected through qualitative, in-depth interviews with twelve fathers who all live in and around Gothenburg. In this section I will describe the research design and the choice of method. I will also describe how the interviews were conducted, who were interviewed and how they were recruited. The challenges and limitations concerning each of the different phases of the data collection will be discussed in its respective subsection.

Research design

Apart from being qualitative, this study can be described as both exploratory and descriptive in its design. Descriptive studies have the purpose of providing a more complete picture of certain phenomena, describing what occurs and how (Gray, 2009). The partial focus of this study to find out what fathering practices the interviewed fathers report to engage in and how these relate to their ideas of “good fatherhood” can thus be categorized as descriptive. Exploratory studies on the other hand, are focused on either new, unexplored research topics, or on developing existing knowledge on a topic by for example using a different perspective (Yin, 2003). This corresponds to this study’s aim of representing a greater diversity of fathers than most previous studies and using the concepts of class and gender to enhance the understanding of fatherhood.

Qualitative interviews

The choice of in-depth interviewing as method of collecting data for this study is motivated by its ability to reflect the perspective of the fathers on the topics of fathering and fatherhood and collect detailed and nuanced accounts that can be interpreted and analyzed to answer the research questions (Bryman, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, this choice could be questioned in relation to the partial focus in this study on fathering practices, i.e. what fathers do. There is a risk that the way fathers speak about what they do does not really correspond with what they actually do, which means that the authenticity of the collected data could be questioned (Morgan, 2011). An alternative way of finding out what fathering practices these fathers really engage in could be to conduct some kind of observations. However, that would most probably make it even more difficult to recruit participants and could also be ethically problematic as it involves a more significant intrusion in people’s private lives and would require consent not only from the fathers themselves but also from other family members. Moreover, this critique against interviewing as a method for studying practices could be presented about interviews in general, because even when the interviews concern experiences one cannot be sure that they are describing people’s actual experiences, but only what they say about them. Furthermore, the focus of this study is not to find out “the truth” about fathering practices or experiences but to understand how these are constructed by the social actors that the fathers themselves constitute. The constructivist approach of this study entails that interview talk about fathering and fatherhood may itself be viewed as a way of doing fatherhood (Morgan, 2011), a process which both the fathers and me as an interviewer take part in (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Through the topics I bring up, how they respond to these, and in their descriptions of what they experience and do as fathers, me and these fathers are constructing fatherhood. We are explicitly and implicitly letting each other know what in our own opinions counts as a fathering practices and what does not, and are thereby also contributing to the general image of fatherhood which is conveyed in this report.

When choosing qualitative interviews as the method for data collection it is also important to be aware of the effect that the researcher has on the development and results of the interviews. The way questions are posed, which words are used, and the way the researcher responds to or follows up answers, are all things that affect the knowledge produced through the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). One example of this in my interviews was revealed when one of the fathers pointed out after the interview that he found it strange that he was mainly referred to as a father in the interview. He said that he usually referred to himself as a parent. In using the word father instead of parent I may have risked the interpretation that there is or should be a difference between mothering and fathering, and this may have affected how the fathers responded. On the other hand, using the term parent consistently would instead imply the risk to make possible differences invisible and thus make it difficult to make any analysis of gendered practices.

Another aspect of the researcher's role in interviews concern the personal characteristics of the researcher. In this case, the fact that I am a woman may have had an impact on what the fathers responded. For example, it is not likely that the fathers would express male-chauvinist opinions about a woman's role in the family to me, since they probably would expect a woman to question such opinions. This may have implied some self-censorship in their accounts. On the other hand the accounts would not necessarily become more "authentic" if I were a male researcher since this could have led to other types of adaptations of the respondents' stories. Also the fact that I am not a parent may have affected our interaction in the interviews, although this probably impacted in a more positive way. This perhaps allowed me to have a more curious and open approach to their answers and thereby facilitated "the conscious naivety"¹ that according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) should be employed in qualitative interviewing.

Recruitment of participants

One of the main challenges in this study has been to find respondents for the interviews. Initially, I had a more narrow approach in my study but the difficulties I encountered in the recruitment eventually forced me to reconsider my focus and change the aim of targeting a specific group of fathers into targeting fathers in general. With this new focus one of my concerns was to try to find participants with varying life conditions and family situations. In order to facilitate the recruitment I also changed the age range of the children of the participants to be more including, however this did not have any consequences for my aim and research questions. The age range that the study ended up with was children of 3-12 years old. This age range was chosen to capture a period where children are still depending a lot on their parents, but at the same time avoid focusing on the initial phase of fatherhood and the issues of parental leave, as this was something that I found had already been covered in a lot of qualitative research on fatherhood (Klinth and Johansson, 2010; Miller, 2011). In both my initial study and the one with a broader approach I have attempted to do a purposive sampling of participants by explicitly defining what criteria the respondents should fulfil in order to be able contribute with accounts suitable for answering my research questions (Bryman, 2008). These criteria have guided my efforts in recruiting participants which are more thoroughly described below. However, since I encountered a lot of difficulties in finding respondents who were interested in participating at all, and since it was not

¹ Freely translated by the author

possible to predict who the next father willing to participate would be (one that added to the diversity or not), I could not “afford” to be too selective regarding the choice of respondents from those who reported to be interested. In this sense my sampling method, rather than purposive, ended up being more based on convenience (Bryman, 2008), i.e. my sampling was based on what fathers I could access rather than their correspondence with every aspect of my aim.

Before I had given up on finding participants for my initial version of the study, my aim was to target fathers with a less privileged class position. Since “working-class” is a label that not many in the Swedish context identify with nowadays, and given that employment in occupations traditionally associated with the working-class often entails economic resources to lead a middle class life, I decided to focus on income as an indicator of class in my search for respondents. This focus was certainly not covering all aspects of class, but low income is generally either connected to jobs that have low education or skill requirements, or is the result of unemployment, part-time employment, sick leave or other limitations for participation in the labor market. Low income also has consequences for access to resources such as housing, status markers and higher education.

I was aware of the risk that finding respondents who had a low income could be difficult due to the stigma this might involve and the difficulty in general to recruit respondents to qualitative studies. However, I thought that by starting early and using different strategies I would still be able to find at least close to ten participants. I started by posting ads where information about the study, requirements for participation (including maximum income and age range of children), and my contact information, could be read (appendix 1). The ads were posted on notice boards in public places in an area of Gothenburg where average incomes and levels of education are lower than the city average and where I consequently thought the chance would be greater for fathers within my target group to see the notes. Some examples of public places where I posted my ads were the local public libraries, the citizen service offices, family service centers, and outside of supermarkets or gyms. When I realized that this first effort did not lead to the response I had hoped for, resulting in only one respondent in the first week, I intensified my efforts by posting ads with less narrow requirements both regarding the maximum income level and the age range of the children, in other parts of the city. I also tried the strategy of sending information (by e-mail or Facebook) about the study to eleven of my personal acquaintances who are parents and whose social network I did not know of, asking them if they could forward the information to anyone who could be interested. Simultaneously, I also joined an internet platform for parents (Familjeliv.se) and posted the information about my study there. However, these intensified efforts only resulted in one more respondent who met the requirements.

After one month of active recruitment strategies and still only two respondents, I saw no option but to change my focus to be more including and to let go of the low income requirement for the respondents. I posted new ads in some of the public places where I had previously posted, now with the only requirement to be a father to children in the ages 3-12 years old. I put my ad in the Gothenburg section of the internet platform Reddit.com, and once again I asked personal contacts for help with finding respondents. This way, and by one case of snowball sampling I got in touch with another ten respondents.

The participants

Out of the twelve participants that were finally recruited for this study, four had responded to ads about the study which were posted in public places in different parts of the city. Six had been

recruited through personal acquaintances who, after I had asked them to share information about the study to their friends, gave me the contact information of those who had reported to be interested in participating. Another of the interviewees was found through one of the fathers who had completed his interview, and the last one was recruited through a post in the Gothenburg section of the internet platform Reddit.com.

My aim to interview a variety of fathers with possibly different experiences and perspectives on fathering and fatherhood was partly fulfilled in the selection of participants I ended up with. Included among the participants were fathers with experiences of separation with the mother of their children, fathers in nuclear families, fathers born in Sweden and born elsewhere, fathers with and without university degrees, fathers with and without a current employment, fathers who own their housing and who rent it. All except one of the fathers lived in the city of Gothenburg or its closest surrounding and they represented parts of the city which are associated with different socioeconomic standards. The fact that the respondents were all recruited in and around Gothenburg, which is the second biggest city in Sweden, means that the sample is not representative for Sweden as a whole, since many people also live in more rural communities or smaller towns. However, considering the modest size of this study it would not have been realistic to cover all aspects of demographic diversity in the sample. A more important limitation with the sample is that although I wanted to avoid a focus on middle-class fathers, the sample did end up biased towards this group of fathers. Only four of the interviewed fathers lacked a university degree, and two of those fathers could be classified as middle-class based on their occupation and the economic stability they enjoyed. On the other hand there are many aspects of class and for example one of the other fathers who did have a university degree was unemployed since several years and thus not in a privileged position in that sense. Anyhow, a more diverse sample in terms of class might have contributed to less homogeneous interview accounts.

Moreover, it would not be accurate to state that the selection of fathers, regardless of their demographic characteristics, is representative in relation to the topic of fatherhood. Since all of these fathers have made an active choice to join a study about their role as fathers, they are not likely to be fathers who have never reflected about their role as fathers, neither are they likely to be fathers who choose to work rather than being with their children. With other methods of recruitment, if for example a group of fathers had been targeted on other grounds than being fathers, this would maybe have resulted in more varied accounts about fathering and fatherhood. However, since the recruitment of participants already had delayed my plan for this study by several weeks, I could not have this as my top priority for the selection of participants. Nevertheless it is important to have in mind that rather than bringing forward different perspectives on fatherhood, this study can be claimed to give voice to different fathers' experiences of being *involved* fathers.

The interviews

The interviews in this study all lasted 35-70 minutes, the majority of them around 60 minutes, and a semi-structured interview guide was used (appendix 2). Apart from the basic questions about family and living conditions, the interview guide contained three main areas: fatherhood norms and ideals; your own fatherhood and fathering practices; and fathering in relation to the mother of the child. These areas were in most cases presented to the fathers in the beginning of the interview. All three areas had suggestions of open-ended questions to ask, however, these were not posed in a specific order and most of them were mainly used as a reminder in case some

subjects were initially disregarded in the interview. My aim regarding my own role in the interviews was to be relatively passive in terms of steering the interview; listen carefully to the accounts; and intervene or interrupt only when the accounts ended up too far off topic or when a follow-up question could enrich the account further. However, in some of the interviews I was required to take on a more active role by asking more direct questions and explaining what I meant by certain questions. The main idea of having a not too structured interview guide and maintaining a discrete role as interviewer was to enable unexpected themes and topics to emerge and to get full and exhaustive answers that were suitable for an ensuing narrative approach in the analysis. However, this choice of using a nondirective interview strategy and interview guide also implied that each of the interviews had its own structure and main focus. Even if I led the interviews into the topics of concern for the study, the open character of the questions and the flexibility in the order they were posed meant that some of the topics were not thoroughly treated in all of the interviews.

All the interviews were held in Swedish, except one in which a mix of Swedish and English was used according to the preference of the respondent. Conducting the interview in Swedish was mostly an advantage regarding the participants' ability to express themselves freely, since ten of them spoke Swedish more fluently than English. In the remaining two interviews the language barrier may have affected the depth of the participants' arguments but not to the extent that their interviews could not be used.

The interviews were digitally recorded and were mainly held in public places, but most of the times in a corner of the room or someplace quiet, like a group study room at the library. Two of the interviews were held in the participants' homes and in one of those cases the three-year-old son was present and occasionally interacting with his father. Something that at times had some influence on both me and the father's ability to focus and concentrate on the interview.

Analysis process

Transcription.

The transcription of the interviews was done word by word, making only some minor changes in order to increase the understandability of the narratives. Pauses and other types of non-verbal communication were generally left out since my intention was not to analyze the material on such a detailed linguistic level. However, when I found that for example a laughter made a difference for the interpretation of the text – that a statement perhaps shouldn't be interpreted literally – I did indicate this laughter in the transcript within brackets. The interviews were transcribed at their whole length unless there was some section that clearly went off topic, for example detailed descriptions of someone's work, in which case this section was skipped. This was a way to increase the efficiency of the time consuming task of transcribing twelve one hour interviews. All in all the transcription resulted in 104 pages of text material, including simple spacing in the dialogue.

Translation

Translations of the transcripts were only done regarding the interview quotes that were used in the presentations of the findings. I kept the quotes in Swedish throughout the analysis process in order to avoid losing any important messages in the translation before this process was over. When translating the quotes I tried to keep the personal tone in each quote intact although this

was a challenging task as my English skills do not compare with my knowledge in Swedish, i.e. my native language. This is another limitation of this study, however it may be compensated by the advantage of interviewing people in the language they feel most comfortable in using. The top priority in the translation was to make its message as close to the meaning of the original quote as possible.

Working and organizing the findings - thematic narrative analysis

One of the central points of departure in the analysis of this study is that people's stories about themselves and their actions constitute an important representation of their reality and how they understand the world and themselves. To understand how fatherhood is constructed and enacted by fathers themselves it is thereby useful to focus on analyzing and interpreting their stories about the topic. In this sense my analysis is in line with a narrative approach (Bryman, 2008). Moreover, the focus is mainly on *what* the fathers say, not *how* they say it; and the narratives rather than smaller units of meaning are in focus in the structuring, coding and analyzing of the material, which more specifically corresponds to what Riessman (2008) calls *thematic narrative analysis*. In the analysis, the approach regarding the relationship between theory and the empirical data is actualized and my approach has entailed to move back and forth between the theoretical ideas and the data, so that I used the theory to help me make sense of the data and used the data to either confirm or change the theoretical ideas (Hammersley, 2007).

After transcribing all the interviews I started to go through the material carefully, underlining what I found were the main topics in different colors. These topics included equality, gender, class, parental cooperation, fathering practices, expectations, rights, ideals, "bad fatherhood", and obstacles for involvement. Some of these were clearly related to my theoretical framework while others surged from my impression of what the interviews had ended up being about. Often the topics overlapped so that one narrative ended up marked with several colors. While underlining the narratives related to these different topics I also made some notes about what struck me as connections and patterns between and within the topics. This first work with the material mainly had the purpose of getting to know the data better and being a tool for structuring the data further on in the analysis process.

After this first procedure of acquainting myself with the material I started to go through the most prevalent topics one by one in order to reflect about possible themes within each topic. For example, I looked more closely at "expectations" and found that this topic included talk about low expectations of involvement, high expectations of involvement, and breadwinning expectations. And I looked at "fathering practices" and found that these were mainly presented in relation to the children, the household, the labor market or the partner. A challenge in this work was the amount of text to digest and that the topics I had started working with turned out to be interconnected and difficult to separate. However, what I had found at this stage of the analysis were some ideas of main themes, or clusters of topics that I wanted to have a closer and separate look at: *parenthood, cooperation and equality; fathering practices as childcare; work, economy and providing; low expectations of fathers' involvement and capacity; and competent fathering*. Consequently, I decided to organize the material in these main areas by copying and pasting the relevant text for each area from the transcripts into different documents. Then I proceeded to reading through each document separately while making brief and summarizing notes of what was being said in the margin. This made it possible for me to find themes and subthemes in each area which I finally compiled in a chart in order to get an overview of the findings all together.

This chart guided me in structuring the presentation of the analysis and also made me realize that I needed to reorganize the findings a bit, in order to be able to present the findings in a coherent way.

Reliability and validity

How to assess the quality of qualitative research is a contested issue and researchers disagree on whether the concepts of reliability and validity from the quantitative research field, can and should be applied also to qualitative studies. Some researchers have come up with alternative concepts while others adapt the original meaning of the concepts to become more suitable for qualitative research (Bryman, 2008). Since many aspects of the study's methodological strengths and weaknesses, and thus the quality of its results, have already been brought up in this chapter's previous sections, only a few more examples of the considerations regarding the concepts of reliability and validity will be given in this section.

Kvale (2007) suggests that reliability in qualitative interview research refers to whether a study produces consistent and reproducible results, and more concretely whether the respondents stick to their arguments during an interview and if they would give the same answers to another interviewer. Regarding the interviews of this study it is hard to know whether the respondents would answer differently to another researcher, however by posing open-ended questions, letting the participants answer the questions in their own pace, and asking them to clarify or develop their statements if needed, the consistency of their answers was promoted. On the other hand inconsistencies in accounts are not necessarily bad in this type of study, since it might signal some kind of tension between some of the topics that are brought up which might be interesting to analyze. Further on in the study, when transcriptions, interpretation and analysis of data were carried out, the fact that I worked alone and therefore had no one to control and verify for example the correctness of the transcripts, might have had a weakening effect on the reliability. On the other hand, the high quality of the interview recordings and the choice I made to transcribe the interviews word by word may have increased it.

The validity of a qualitative study refers to whether “a method is investigating what it intends to investigate” (Kvale, 2007, p. 122) and just like the issue of reliability, the study's validity needs to be promoted throughout the different parts of the research process. Among other things, this entails to depart from the research aim and questions when choosing method, using theory throughout the research process, and retaining a critical approach to one's findings and the way they have been produced (Kvale, 2007). In this study, my continuous use of theoretical ideas – when the problem area was defined, when the interview guide was created, during the interviews, and when I managed and analyzed the data – may thus have had a strengthening effect on its validity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are important throughout the research process in order to avoid harm to or deception of the participants and to ensure that their participation is voluntary, informed and does not involve invasion of their right to privacy (Bryman, 2008). In my study the ethical considerations changed slightly when a broad variety of fathers were targeted instead of a specific group with low incomes. The first approach was more ethically problematic, which perhaps the difficulty of finding respondents was a sign of.

To target a group of fathers with low income can be interpreted as an expression of the idea that there are problems in this social group's fathering. Even if this wasn't my intention and my motives were rather to advocate for these fathers' rights to have their experiences reflected in the public debate, there is always a risk that studying members of a stigmatized group objectifies them and perpetuates their stigma or marginalization (Barron, 1999). In the discipline of social work this is a common dilemma that researchers face and it's important to consider the possible implications of one's research to avoid doing harm and make sure that the research has an empowering effect on disadvantaged groups rather than constructing them as deviant. My decision to go on with my plan of targeting low-income fathers was motivated by the lack of representation of this group in previous research; the fact that my qualitative approach is not concerned with presenting simplified explanations of behaviors but rather a deeper understanding of the phenomena; and that my intention was to be clear with the participants about the aim of the research and the right to withdraw one's participation. I thereby concluded that the risks of exposing the participants to harm or deception were not significant.

However, since the lack of interest to participate forced me to change my intentions to target a specific group into recruiting an as varied selection of participants as possible, I faced other ethical issues. First of all I had to consider if it would be acceptable to use the interviews that I had already conducted within the scope of the first topic. To make sure that the participants didn't disapprove of this I contacted them both, explained the new topic and asked if I could still use their interviews. They both gave their permission. Apart from this I also made sure that all the participants received both oral and written information about the study, the possibility to withdraw participation and the principles of confidentiality before the interviews were carried out. To confirm that they had understood this information they all signed an informed consent form (Appendix 3). I also made an effort to be transparent in my description of how the material would be transcribed, analyzed and presented so that they could predict the consequences of their involvement in the study. To make sure that the fathers did not feel deceived to talk about subjects they had not expected and that they did not perceive the interview to be too intrusive (Bryman, 2008), I asked each father after the interview how he had experienced it and encouraged him to contact me in case he would come up with any questions or complaints.

In the next chapter, where results and analysis are presented, the excerpts from the fathers' interviews are labelled with pseudonyms in order to ensure the fathers' anonymity. Since two of the fathers know each other and several of the fathers were recruited through personal acquaintances I have also chosen not to present a detailed table of the demographics of each respondent together with their pseudonym. This choice is mainly motivated by the ethical principle of ensuring confidentiality, because connecting each pseudonym with some personal characteristics would make it easy for the person who helped recruiting him to identify his contributions among the results. Moreover providing an extensive overview of the personal characteristics of each participant is not necessary for the aim of the study, because the focus is not on comparing and analyzing individual differences between the fathers. However, in order to add to the study's transparency regarding the selection of respondents, a table of the respondents' basic characteristics without pseudonym is available in Appendix 4. When some contextual information is needed to understand and interpret a certain quotation, this information is also mentioned in the presentation of the quote.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter the findings of the study – i.e. how fatherhood and fathering practices were constructed in the fathers’ interviews – are presented and analyzed. The narratives that are used have mostly been selected with regards to their ability to exemplify tendencies in the interview accounts, except in a few cases where they are selected to show how a certain account contrasts with the general tendency in the material. In the analysis the results will be contrasted and related to the theoretical concepts and the previous fatherhood research presented in Chapter 2, with a specific focus on gender and class. The chapter is divided in four sections and each section reflects a significant theme or an aspect that stood out in the interview material. The overarching theme that run through all these sections, and which is in line with the general findings of previous research in the Swedish context (Forsberg, 2007; Johansson and Klinth, 2008), is that these fathers construct their fathering and fatherhood in relation to the dominant discourses of *involved fatherhood* and *gender equality*.

Firstly, the fathering practices which constitute the fathers’ everyday involvement in their children’s lives, are presented. Secondly, the fathers’ representation of themselves as independent and equivalent parents, are in focus. The third section concerns fathering as being part of a parental team – co-parenting. And finally, the fourth section presents fathering practices in relation to the labor market and the family economy. The interconnectedness between these different aspects of fatherhood and fathering implies that there may be some overlapping between the sections.

Involved fathering in relation to the children

Introduction

The practices presented in this section will be limited to how the fathers describe their participation in the everyday lives of their children and include the categories of: *being there*; *routine caring*; *housework*; *making the children cooperate*; *child rearing responsibilities*; and *quality time*. The categories that are brought forward here are inspired by and compared to the categories of fathering in the studies of Lewis and Welsh (2005) and Dermott (2008) which were briefly presented in Chapter 2. As we will see, ideals of how to be a “good father” are constantly present and either implicitly or explicitly related to in the fathers’ narratives about their fathering, which illustrates the continuous interplay and sometimes tension between fathers’ culture and conduct (Dermott, 2008).

Being there

In almost all of the interviews “being there”, or being present and available, is something that is mentioned as central for being a “good father” and something that the fathers view as a top priority in their own fatherhood. Many make examples of what it means to be available for your children by pointing to their own fathers’ absence in their childhood and claiming that “being there” means to do the opposite. That is, not to work too much, not to ignore your children’s

opinions, and not to avoid taking initiative and assuming responsibility in the home. When asked about what it means to be a “good father” Edvin answers as follows:

Yeah that’s a difficult question, but being present, both physically and mentally. I find that for me that’s difficult, the physical part is relatively easy, or like that’s easy, but it’s more difficult to be present mentally, like not do like this (takes out his cell phone), and he (the son) has become really sensitive to that, really he says “not speak in the phone” when I take the phone out. I feel that’s the most important thing, to be present physically and mentally. (Edvin)

Just like Edvin, several of the fathers describe that there are different aspects of “being there” that are all important. It can be in the physical sense, i.e. prioritizing the family over work and career and participating in your children’s everyday life; in a psychological sense, i.e. being focused on your child when you spend time together; and in an emotional sense, i.e. being able to read your children and sense what they need and are trying to express. As it appears here, the practice of “being there” for your children can include almost everything that fathers do in relation to their children or with their children in mind. It also serves different purposes such as establishing a close relationship with the child, creating a sense of safety, making sure that the child’s needs are satisfied and shaping the child to become a well-behaved individual. This means that the way “being there” is described in the interviews includes more than it was made to include in Dermott’s (2008) categorization of fathering practices, where she restricts the definition of this category to mean being available and present where the child is but without engaging directly with it. Just as Lewis and Welsh (2005) noted in their attempt to categorize fathering, “being there” may be a concept that is too vague and all-encompassing to describe what fathers do more concretely in their everyday lives, although it is central to the fathers in their descriptions of their fathering. On the other hand, creating consistent and well-defined categories of human behavior should not become an aim in itself in research, especially if it involves ignoring a dimension of fathering that stands out this significantly in the empirical data. Instead it can be useful to think of it as a distinct dimension of fathering, one which is on another level than the other practices described in this section. Because “being there”, or being available in either the physical sense or the psychological and emotional sense, or all at once, is a precondition for being able to take part in or carrying out most of the other fathering practices that these fathers describe.

Routine caring

The most prevalent theme in the fathers’ accounts regarding what they do more concretely as fathers concern the everyday routines with the children. Just like Dermott’s (2008) category with the same name, it involves taking the children to and picking them up from school or preschool, preparing their breakfast and dinner, assisting them in brushing their teeth or taking a bath, getting them dressed, making sure they do homework, and putting them to sleep at night. Since the fathers have children of different ages the extent to which they need to practically help children in these different activities varies, and if the children are older the fathering will be likely to consist in reminding them and supervising that the children follow the routine, rather than giving them practical support.

Diyar, who is the sole custodian of his son, describes his involvement in his son’s everyday life like this:

[...] so I still help him most of the times. I want that he, yeah that's the way I experienced it, I started from scratch with him. Like with a young child, I cook for him, serve his food, change his clothes, give him the time he needs. To wake him up, to prepare his clothes, serve breakfast, serve dinner. But it's that I have been doing this for one year soon, I have started to teach him much more. That he should take care of himself and be active in his life, and do what he should do. Now he's eight and a half years old, when I was his age I could do a lot by myself, even work if had needed to. But now, he can probably manage, but at home I help him a lot. And that he should learn to do right. He had some shortcomings when he moved in with me. (Diyar)

From Diyar's description it is clear that he is well aware of his son's needs and that he assumes full responsibility over making sure that they are met. This is also true for most of the other interviewed fathers. By giving detailed examples of how they take care of their children they show that they are in fact available and present in the everyday lives of their children and that they value being able to dedicate themselves to this type of practical caring tasks. Dermott (2008) points out that the fathers in her study placed little emphasis on this type of childcare tasks related to the maintenance of the everyday routine while other aspects of caring which included a more intense contact with the children were highlighted as representative of good fathering. This is assumed to be related to the significance that is given to the ideal of establishing an emotional bond between themselves and the children. But here, the results seem to point partly in a different direction. Just like in Dermott's study, the fathers here are very concerned with establishing a close relationship with their children – which will be further described in the category “Quality time” – but the difference lies in that several of these fathers stress the importance of engaging in all aspects of childcare in order to establish such a relationship.

This category of routine caring also corresponds to the fathering practices that Lewis and Welsh (2005) refer to as “micro-responsibilities”, except that their category also includes household chores. However, the results of their study that fathers typically were not involved in carrying out childcare and household tasks unless they were asked to by their partners, contrast quite sharply with the accounts of these fathers. The significance given to routine caring by the fathers of this study indicated both a high practical involvement in this type of activities, and in several of the cases also a sense of responsibility for knowing what, when and why things should be done. The following statement from Gustav exemplifies this.

I'm probably quite kind, but you always discover what works to make things function. So I'm pretty pushy when it comes to hygiene and that sort of things, the teeth should be brushed and the hair should be washed, and now that the oldest one starts to enter puberty, then your hair gets greasy quite fast and she hasn't really figured that out yet so you kind of imagine this scenario where she may get bullied if she doesn't...so I'm persistent with that kind of things. (Gustav)

Gustav's statement suggests that his involvement in routine caring activities is more than practical. He describes how he thinks about the risk that his daughter might be bullied if her hair is not neat enough and how he assumes responsibility for preventing that from happening. Nevertheless there are still some responsibilities in relation to the practical care of the children that seem to follow traditionally gendered patterns for most of the fathers, such as monitoring the children's need of clothes and buying new ones if needed. In Peter's case, his wife also takes the main responsibility for keeping an overview of other tasks related to the children's everyday life.

Do both of you take part in planning the everyday life? For example when you plan what food to buy or if the children need a packed lunch for school?

I guess we do, but as usual I guess it's my wife who takes more initiative in that and who keeps track of those things that concern the children, it has ended up that way, and like buys new clothes and things like that. It's mainly she who does that. And then I'll fix the heat pump, the car and...yeah you know. (Peter)

Peter is clearly aware of the fact that the responsibilities of planning for grocery shopping, the children's outings and buying clothes for them are traditionally assigned to women and here he reinforces the image of a gendered labor division between him and his partner by adding that he takes care of some household chores related to house maintenance and the car that are traditionally assigned to men. Perhaps as a way to insinuate that although things have "ended up" in a way that places more routine care responsibilities on Peter's partner, this does not necessarily mean that the division is unfair. The fact that Peter adds the information about which responsibilities that he assume, without having been asked about it, can be interpreted as a confirmation of the hegemonic status of the gender equality discourse in Sweden – a status which entails that representations of what men and women do is constantly related to whether it is or is not in line with the ideal of gender equality (Johansson and Klinth, 2007).

Housework

The daily routine also includes housework of different kinds and while cooking is often presented as part of the fathering activities at home, and therefore blends into the descriptions of routine caring activities, other housework tasks are mostly not mentioned unless they are explicitly asked for. In this sense, the following excerpt from Simon's interview is an exception in the material.

[...] but earlier this week I have taken him (to pre-school) and picked him up every day, I think, and then you get home, you cook and it's the ordinary, the ordinary, the ordinary.

Yes, what is "the ordinary"?

Well, it's to make sure things work in the household, like making sure there is food around dinner time at half past five, and make sure that there isn't a chaos everywhere, tidying up all the time and... (Simon)

Simon does not distinguish between housework and child care in the daily routine, they are both presented as fathering practices of the everyday life that Simon engages in. Even if most of the other fathers do not mention housework as directly related to their fatherhood, when explicitly asked about their involvement in housework most of them say that they do participate in cleaning the house, going grocery shopping and washing dishes. This is a tendency that also Dermott (2008) finds in her interviews, that fathers' engagement in household chores is mostly described as something outside the category of fathering. The housework is also where some of the fathers of this study describe a gendered division of the chores that need to be taken care of in the household, a division that is referred to as traditional in that it's common for fathers to take on responsibility over tasks concerning the car and the maintenance of the house, just like Peter in the previous quote, while their partners are usually in charge of the laundry.

The way the fathers and their partners divide what needs to be done in relation to the children and the household is further analyzed in the section of this chapter that concerns fathers' co-parenting.

Making the children cooperate – stress, patience and conflicts

The fathering activities referred to as routine caring here and some of the practical housework tasks surrounding it, such as grocery shopping and cooking, all have in common that they are perceived as musts to satisfy the child's basic needs and to sustain the family's everyday routine. Managing this is sometimes challenging and a topic that is brought up by a majority of the fathers is how time pressure and stress in combination with the children's unwillingness to cooperate in what needs to be done, often leads to conflicts. The practices dedicated to prevent or handle those conflicts have not been brought up as significant in neither Dermott's (2008) nor Lewis and Welsh's (2005) study of fathering practices, but they are dedicated a separate category here as most of the fathers relate to them as a challenging but inevitable aspect of their involvement in their children's lives.

In the morning, we get up at half past six and wake up around maybe quarter to seven, make breakfast and those things, and then it's taking them to pre-school and that can also be quite stressful and like, they feel that I'm stressed and then they refuse, or they don't want to wear those clothes and I have to go and change the clothes or something like that, and it's like "no we don't have time". So the start of the day is no good and then you leave them at pre-school and the children have maybe cried or been angry, and you sort of bring that with you the rest of the day although you don't see them [...]
(Elias)

Dealing with situations as the one described by Elias here, is part of the everyday interaction with the children and the fathers describe different ways of dealing with these challenges. The most desired scenario is where the possible conflict is prevented.

I try to talk with my children, I try to be pedagogical especially in the morning when we have our routine. I usually look at the clock and, "now it's this and that, and when the finger is there we need to go to the bathroom to brush our teeth, and there we have to go and put our shoes on because if not we won't make it on time". And give them responsibilities, children love responsibilities, they think it's fantastic, they can make anything fun as long as you give them responsibilities. (Fredrik)

Promoting cooperativeness through this type of pedagogical approach or using a distraction strategy is described by several of the fathers, however some situations may eventually require a stricter and more boundary setting approach in order to give the child the message that "enough is enough". Remaining calm, patient and in control despite the frustration such situations entail, is the ideal way of handling them but seems to be the aspect of fathering in which the interviewed fathers are the most prone to express self-criticism.

Well, if I'm going to mention a role model, I think those who never raise their voices or need to be harsh towards their children. That's a role model. I fail in that sometimes, with my oldest son I feel that sometimes "oops, now I got too angry", and I can also see that he gets scared, because when I get angry and raise my voice, he gets scared and he doesn't when my partner gets angry, the same way he gets scared of me, because my voice is darker and, and then I feel that this was not okay. And that usually happens when you're stressed or tired or something like that. (Edvin)

Well, it's this thing about patience, that's important. And it happens sometimes that you lose your temper, like get angry, because you know children can be, like they only think about themselves, and then you can feel like you're not respected as a person. And sometimes when you have to leave in the morning and it's not working and you feel stressed, it gets late, and then you lose your temper and shout sometimes. And that's something you need to try to handle and I think I'm improving in that. And then that you like talk to the children when things have ended up that way and say you're sorry and that it was wrong of me to shout like that, that I shouldn't have done that. (Peter)

That several of the fathers are open about their “flaws” or weaknesses as parents when it comes to being patient and controlling their aggression, is to some extent surprising as it goes against the general tendency in the material to present one's fathering as coherent with the ideal or at least close to it. On the other hand, these stories strengthen the image of the fathers as truly engaged in all aspects of the daily routine and the self-criticism can be interpreted as a way of conforming to other ideals of middle class masculinity, where self-reflexivity is highly valued (Björk, 2013).

Childrearing responsibilities

Another aspect of fathering practices that was found in the material has to do with the role of the father as a link between the child and the society. It includes being a role model, sustain rules and boundaries, and teaching the child how to behave and become a good future citizen. These practices are incorporated in the “over-arching responsibilities” of Lewis and Welsh's fathering typology, but they have also included the fathering practices of earning a living and providing for the family's material needs (Lewis and Welsh, 2005). Since I have chosen to dedicate a separate section of the analysis for the fathering that takes place in relation to the labor market, I have chosen a different name of the category here.

With the youngest children this category overlaps with the boundary setting described as part of the routine caring and seem to give way to similar conflicts and challenges for the fathers. However, the difference lies in the focus on a more distant future in this set of boundary setting practices as opposed to the short term focus of the routine caring. Here the setting of boundaries is about correcting socially unacceptable behavior and teaching the child that the children's will should be subordinated to adults' rules. This is an area of practices that some of the fathers think they are better at handling than their partners.

[...] we are all kind you know, but rules have to be rules too you know. If you don't have rules sometimes it's gonna be difficult for yourself. Sometimes when I'm not home, like now, right now, sometimes I have to solve thing over the phone. She (the mother) has to call, “talk to them, calm them down”. First you have to talk to them very nice tell them something they wanna hear in a civilized way, so you come to that topic you know, so make them feel guilty you know. (Abdou)

As can be read from Abdou's statement the important thing here is to be clear and consistent, to make the child understand that some rules are not a subject of negotiation. However, just as in the previous category the ideal here is clearly to remain in control over one's feelings, which is often challenging.

[...] my ideal image is to be strict but not angry. I find it very hard to control my anger, my aggression, so I can become very physical, I lift the children up, violently, and I shout at them, and those tools are not good. In my ideal I'm very strict and

consistent just like my family but with other tools. So that I correct them and that if they don't listen, there will be a consequence, but that's where I'm left in the dark. How can I be strict without being angry and, I know it is possible but I, it's difficult. (Jasper)

Just like the fathers who find trouble to stay calm in the daily routine conflicts, Jasper expresses a desire to stay calm but consistent when he tells his children how to behave. However, his lack of control of his anger makes him behave in a way that is associated with a more traditional father role where the father represents discipline and authority (Henwood and Procter, 2003). Jasper's and some of the other father's experiences of failing their own ideals of fathering practices when it comes to being strict enough but not too harsh with their children, can be viewed as a clash between the fathering ideals of being a "backstop" in matters of discipline (Lewis and Welsh, 2005) and the ideals of establishing a close and warm father-child relationship. Perhaps losing one's temper is not such a big deal if the ideal of being the family authority is seen as the most important role for fathers, but as the ideal of establishing an emotional bond is growing stronger, behaving in a way that risks intimidating the child is increasingly constructed as a problem.

The other aspects of childrearing are not as explicitly expressed by the interviewed fathers but Edvin for example says that his main occupation as a father is childrearing, which for him means to be a role model, give the children a good basis in life and transmit values to them. Also Diyar expresses how he hopes that his way of bringing up his son and teaching him things, will result in his son becoming someone that others look up to.

Hopefully, this way, what I think, the way I educate him, what I teach him, that's what he will be. Because I want to experience, when I get older I want to see that people have a lot of respect for him, that he will be a unique boy, that people will point at him and "oh, look, that's Diyar's child, look at him, how good and nice he is, what a good father he is", that's what I want to hear later when he gets older. (Diyar)

Diyar clearly thinks of himself as a role model for his son, and becoming a good father is one of Diyar's aims for his son's future self. In Diyar's statement there is also a focus on having the responsibility for ensuring his son's future success, something that runs through many of the other interviews. The fathers express a sense of responsibility towards this task of making their children become decent members of the society. This corresponds with Lewis and Welsh's (2005) findings about fathers' over-arching responsibilities, however in their interviews the fathering practices related to childrearing were more emphasized and stood out as something that even fathers who were not very present and engaged in their children's lives, were devoted to. In my sample almost all of the fathers would be viewed as "highly involved" according to Lewis and Welsh's definition and even though the childrearing responsibilities were always mentioned, they were an aspect of fathering that received much less attention than the talk about the everyday routine and the establishment of a close relationship with the children.

Quality time

The last significant dimension of fathering that stand out in the material has to do with spending time with the children, in a way that involves a sense of intense emotional and/or communicative contact. This communicative contact is not necessarily verbal but can also refer to physical contact, or a feeling of sharing emotions and experiences. This category corresponds with the one Dermott (2008) labelled "intensive time", or with the two categories that Lewis and Welsh (2005) call "activities" and "cognitive/emotional involvement". This qualitative interaction with the

child often involves “being there” in all the senses – physically, psychologically and emotionally – at the same time. These are also the moments that the fathers appreciate the most with their children.

Several fathers mention the procedure of putting their children to sleep at night as a moment in which they experience a particular closeness in the interaction.

Yes, when I’m putting her to sleep she is like extra cuddly, she doesn’t want to let go of me, and she smiles and beams, and then I get really happy and I like laugh with her because she really, she says she is a cat and she meows and then, it’s so unreal and then it’s hard to let go of her too, she holds on to me, “I’ll never let go” she says. So then you become really happy and moved and touched, and then you like hug her and hold her for a while, and then you notice that she relaxes and then you can hold her hand, and then you say “daddy’s going to wash some dishes” or “I’m going to work on the computer” [...] (Miika)

As described by Miika here, this is a moment without time pressure, where he and his daughter have a moment to just enjoy each other’s company and express their mutual affection. Fathers’ ability to engage emotionally in childcare, which Miika’s statement is an example of, is according to Dermott (2008) a component of fathering which is seen as central for being a “good father” nowadays. The aim is emotional closeness and openness in the father-child relationship and to be able to express one’s feelings both verbally and physically (Dermott, 2008).

Having the time to engage in a mutual conversation, a dialogue, where the father feels he pays full attention to what the child says and responds to the child’s opinions in a respectful way, is another type of quality time brought up in many of the interviews. But many fathers speak even more warmly of the moments when they feel they are able to show their children the world and having the opportunity to teach them something based on the questions they make. This is by some of the fathers described as a moment where they feel particularly close to their children and where they are especially pleased with their fathering.

[...] with the bigger one, he’s six, so a lot of thoughts and questions about the world are coming up, and then when you feel like you can explain something so that he understands it and he asks follow-up questions and you can explain, then I feel that we have a good contact. (Edvin)

The moments that are really charming and warming are those moments when they are gazing and listening and are completely open for things, and that’s a moment with a lot of contrast because then you are someone that teaches and someone that learns. But, yeah there are also many occasions when, well we talk about world phenomena and they come with their theories [...] (Jasper)

Almost all of the interviewed fathers share stories about this type of intense contact with their children and these stories seem to be important both to show their success in establishing a close relationship to their children, and to show that they are not afraid of recognizing their “softer” caregiving qualities. It is clear that these fathers do not want to give the impression of only being able to engage in conversations with their children at a shallow level, i.e. chatting rather than talking and listening, like the fathers of Lewis and Welsh’s (2005) study did.

However a few fathers make reflections about how the type of fathering they are expected to, and also *want* to perform does not harmonize with what they feel is expected of them as men.

But at the same time, you might feel that, there is still a part that you experience, that I think many other fathers experience, that on the one hand you should be the feminist and have sound values, which I think, and on the other hand you should be the one that stands up for himself, who is the hero, and not scared, and if there's a fire I'm the one who should put it out. So from the society you get dual signals, partly to be the extreme alpha-male in the herd, and simultaneously to be a careful and caring...and the mothers don't have that conflict, there you have the same old stereotype thoughts about the mother role. But the difficult thing is when you have two different identity roles and sometimes in different communities or different rooms, one of those roles may be stronger than the other that you are supposed to demonstrate. (Elias)

Elias describes that there is a conflict between being affectionate, caring and have sound values, while at the same time living up to an ideal of being strong, brave and prominent among other men. This illustrates how different ideals of masculinity compete and that depending on the context, living up to one or the other ideal may have different consequences for your position in relation other men. Even if Elias is one of the few that expresses this opinion, several of the other fathers also give examples of how their involved fathering is not appreciated and valued in some groups, especially among male friends or colleagues. This gives support to the idea that masculinities and their hierarchical relationship to each other are contextual constructions and thus that the dominance, or hegemony, of one set of masculinity practices in one context does not guarantee its position in another context (Björk, 2013; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Conclusion

In this first section of the analysis, the interviewed fathers' accounts of their fathering in relation to their children have been categorized and analyzed. The fathers generally present their fathering as coherent with the ideal of "involved fathering" which has reached a dominant position in many Western countries during the last two decades and encompasses a set of positive expectations on fathers' caregiving capabilities (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). The picture that emerges from the fathers' accounts is that their way of doing involved fathering entails more than spending time with their children and helping out when their partners tell them to. Rather these fathers want to give the impression that they are engaged in all the aspects of parenting that ensuring the children's well-being requires. What stands out in relation to previous international studies is above all that these fathers seem to engage to a greater extent in the routine caring of the children and that they can speak about both the joys and challenges that this engagement implies. The challenges involve being able to control their anger when they run out of patience, and avoid using strategies for boundary setting which are based on a traditional paternal authority, established through intimidation. However, all in all, the fathers describe their involvement in positive terms and describe themselves as fully capable of meeting their children's needs. The fathers' emphasis on being autonomous and competent parents who are not limited by gendered assumptions about parental involvement, will be the focus of the next section of the analysis.

Fathers as equivalent and autonomous parents

Introduction

In this section the fathers' representation of themselves as autonomous and equivalent parents is in focus. This is a theme that emerges in the material in three different ways: pointing to the

natural character of fathers' caregiving involvement; emphasizing mothers' and fathers' interchangeability; and giving examples of skilled and competent fathering.

Natural fathering

Many of the fathers comment on the low expectations that seem to dominate the general ideas of fathers' involvement in their children's lives compared to mothers', and stress that these are ideas that they don't identify with. One of the strategies of stressing your equal dedication to parenthood and worth as a parent, which appears in several of the interviews, is to talk about the choices to share parental responsibilities as natural and obvious. When asked about the decision to share the parental leave with his partner, Simon responds as follows:

No, for me it's about, (laughs) I like our child, yes, and I think it's fun to be home. So for me there hasn't been any discussion about it, and then it also matched quite well with my work at that time, it's some years ago now. But at that time it matched with my work and with everything. (Simon)

Simon's statement can be viewed as a type of protest against the fact that fatherhood is often regarded as optional while motherhood is assumed to be based on unquestionable maternal instincts (Miller, 2011). No one asks a mother about reasons for taking an active role in caring for her own child, it is taken for granted, but when fathers do the same thing it is assumed to be some kind of statement, an adaptation to their partners expectations or the result of practical circumstances in the family. By stressing that wanting to be involved is a natural thing for him as a father, Simon therefore challenges the idea that fathering is inherently different from mothering, and does so by applying the same biologicistic discourse that surrounds motherhood (Miller, 2011) on his own fatherhood. Also Tommy expresses his dissatisfaction with these gender based prejudice regarding fathers' involvement.

So I don't know. In one sense I can be...I have lived with a father who was at home with us quite a lot and that worked well. Fathers can do anything that a mother can do, that's something I experienced already at that time in a way, so it's not like I'm in some kind of protest or marching for something, concerning gender or so, in what fatherhood should be like. It's pretty natural. (Tommy)

Tommy's account also challenges the image that fathers need some specific reason to engage in their parental role – "it's pretty natural" and in no sense remarkable. However, his statement can also be interpreted as a critique towards other men and the middle-class ideal of fathering as a project where your awareness of gender equality constantly has to be brought forward and displayed. In the light of Tommy's statement, his own and many of the other fathers' ways of describing aspects of their fathering that challenge the conventional masculinity norms, can be viewed as an expression of middle-class ideals of reflexive masculinity. By constructing their choices as active, and emphasizing that they are not restricted by gender norms, the fathers are thus still doing masculinity, but they do so in a way that distances them from "other men" assumed to be less capable of avoiding traditionally gendered patterns (Björk, 2013). In other words, in the context of fatherhood, "traditional" masculinities that are hegemonic in other contexts are challenged by alternative masculinity ideals which imply high status in terms of class, and this way middle-class fathers can choose to break some masculinity norms without risking losing status as men.

Tommy is also one of the fathers who describe that they have felt questioned in their desire to be involved parents for their children after separating from their children's mothers. They share the experience that they, due to lower expectations on fathers' dedication to parenthood compared to mothers', have had to struggle to have their parental rights acknowledged after the separation. Eventually all these fathers have gotten either sole or joint residential custody of their children, through court decisions or cooperation agreements backed up by family authorities, but only as a result of a long and strenuous process. The following quote from Miika describes how he felt he had to explain his willingness to be an available parent for his child in front of the authorities.

That's how I experienced it, in these conversations at the family authorities, one of the case workers there, when I talked to him during one year, he sometimes said that, "well, isn't it pretty nice that you have quite a lot of freedom?", but to have freedom from my daughter is not what I'm looking for, I want to, I'm not out partying or chasing women, so that's not what I'm looking for. It was almost like a prejudice that because you are a man you should want some extra freedom and not the extra responsibilities. That's something I noticed, that I almost had to explain that "no, that's not the way it is". I think, those are things one should try to change. (Miika)

For Miika and the other two fathers who had similar experiences, to be viewed as parents equivalent to the mothers, they need to show not only that they are engaged and capable of assuming full responsibility, they also have to motivate *why* they want to be involved like that. Miika's statement highlights how the essentialist ideas of differences between men and women's desire to take care of their children prevail on the societal level and are crucial in making men's parenthood a matter of choice, even if they don't think about their engagement as a choice themselves. This is especially visible when the relationship between the parents ends. The four fathers of this study who had separated from the mothers of their children all stressed that they had to *make a choice* to be there as active and involved parents for their children, while at the same time they emphasized that "taking the fight" or "not taking the easy way out" was a self-evident option and in that sense "natural".

Parental interchangeability

The idea of equivalent parenthood is also shown in that many of the interviewed fathers refer to themselves as *parents* rather than *fathers* when they talk about their roles and functions in their families. This can be seen as a way of avoiding to distinguish their parental identity based on gender and insinuating that there isn't or at least shouldn't be any difference between what fathers and mothers do.

The ideal scenario is that they will feel a basic sense of safety at home with the family, that they can feel that they can always come to me whatever it is about, like there are no questions that should be asked to their mother and some that should be asked to me, because you are a *parent*. So that they feel safe and that they feel that it's stable and doesn't move too much. (Fredrik)

The ideal, as Fredrik states here, is for fathers and mothers to be interchangeable, especially when it comes to the relationship they establish with their children. Except when the accounts concern the very first period of children's lives, Fredrik and a majority of these fathers resist ranking their own fathering as secondary in relation to mothering, a ranking which has been pointed out as one of the reasons why fathers in general remain less involved in caregiving activities than mothers despite new ideals of fathering (Dermott, 2008; Hobson and Bergman, 2002; Miller, 2011). On

the other hand, the fact that these fathers use mothering as a reference, in relation to which fathering is constructed as equivalent, confirms the essentialist notion of mothering that the ranking of fathers' role as secondary is based upon (Miller, 2011). In other words, although these fathers make an effort to represent themselves as equivalent parents and to change ideas about gendered parental capabilities, the ideas of mothers' natural inclination toward competent and complete caregiving are reproduced, and fathering continues to be produced as a shadow practice which at its best can be "just as good".

Competent fathering

While fathers who separate from the mother of their children face prejudice about their willingness to be involved, a disbelief from both partners and other people regarding fathers' engagement and competence as parents, is experienced also by many of the other interviewed fathers, regardless of their relationship status.

Is that something you experience? That it's hard to be autonomous as a parent?

Yes, sometimes I feel that you kind of need to be clear about that. There's something like, that fathers and men, they are automatically more irresponsible parents and that they do things that you perhaps shouldn't do. (Peter)

As Peter expresses it, as a father in these cases you may need to point out that you are competent enough to be independent in your parenthood. Even if there is general trust between the parents, small comments from the mother may insinuate a certain disbelief in fathers' ability to choose what in her view is best for the child. This is also clear in Edvin's description of his partner's unnecessary precautions when he stays home from work to care for their three-year-old child.

I feel that she doesn't trust me completely, like today, I was instructed about when he should sleep and things like that, then I get a bit annoyed because I can do this, but she doesn't really trust, she has higher standards about the time for things, she thinks it's very important that they go to bed early and sleep and that they eat at specific hours, while I'm a bit more flexible, so because of that I think she tries to control me when it comes to the timing of things. She trusts me really but she wants me to keep the time plan, that's what she thinks is important. (Edvin)

That Edvin brings forward this example and claims that it's about a clash of parenting styles rather than different levels of parenting skills, could be interpreted as a protest against an order where the mother is automatically the one in charge of deciding what the child needs.

Perhaps as a reaction to this perceived disbelief, there is a clear tendency in all except two of the interviews that the fathers in different ways stress their competences as fathers. This is interesting given the contradiction it implies with the previously mentioned tendency of stressing the natural and self-evident nature of fathers' commitment to parenting. Because contrary to the idea of innate parental qualities, presenting parenting as a task that requires competence and skills suggests that good parenting is something you learn. Moreover, by pointing to the knowledge required to do parenting the fathers are acknowledging that this is actually hard work, work that consequently ought to be valued. In this sense fathers' increased involvement in childcare can perhaps have a role in the continued struggle against the undervaluing of unpaid domestic work which has been on the feminist agenda for ages (Doucet, 2004).

The interviewed fathers display that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to be equivalent parents by giving vivid examples of how they use their parenting skills in the interaction with the children, for example when it comes to avoiding or dealing with conflicts. In the following sequence Elias describes how he in a very pedagogical way deals with the afternoon routine when his partner is not present and how he makes the children cooperate in his plan.

[...] then there's only one adult who decides and then I can set the agenda when I pick them up from pre-school. I can tell them that now we'll walk back home, and when we get home we'll take the clothes off and what do we do then? Yes, we wash our hands, good! And then I'll prepare the dinner, and I'm thinking we can eat, or we *will* eat, because you don't want to give them too many options you just want to say like "today we're having tacos" for example. And sometimes when we don't have everything we need at home we need to go grocery shopping and then what should we have inside the tacos? Is there something you want E? "yes, corn", okay then you remember to buy corn, and what do you want T? "I want pepper and cucumber", okay then you remember that, and I'll remember the rest. That way they know what's going to happen in the grocery store and they can join and you can give them tasks so that they feel able and seen, and then you feel that today I'm a good father. (Elias)

Even if Elias stresses that this is how it can be done on a good day and that there are certainly days when nothing goes as smoothly as here, by giving this example he is showing that he knows a great deal about how children's minds work, and what kind of strategies a competent father or parent should use. In other accounts knowledge of children, developmental psychology, and parental strategies are made even more explicit. While some of the fathers' point to strategies and knowledge that can be acquired by experience, several also point to the importance of searching for and applying expert knowledge in their parenthood.

[...]We read Jesper Juul's "Your competent child" and have taken a lot from there. What lingered in my mind the most was the insight that the attitude about children needing a firm hand, has as a point of departure that children like to do bad things, they are evil, but with discipline they might become something. [...] And I thought that was a real eye-opener. Because what he says is that children either cooperate or they cooperate in the opposite direction and communicate that "I need something, notice me because this is not working, I'm resisting in order for you to wake up". (Jasper)

Jasper refers to a book about child upbringing by a famous Danish author, and how this book has inspired him in his parenting. While this kind of demonstrations of competence regarding parenthood and child upbringing could be interpreted as a reaction against a perceived disbelief concerning fathers' parenting skills, and as a way of re-evaluating the unpaid work that used to be assigned to mothers but that fathers are increasingly involved in, the tendency to refer to formal knowledge could also be interpreted as an expression of class.

According to previous studies on parenthood and class, middle-class ideals in parenting encompass viewing the parenthood as a project. This means that parenting should be planned, reflected and invested in (Björk, 2013; Forsberg, 2009; Plantin, 2007). Attaining the knowledge needed to optimize the project of parenthood is consistent with this line of thought, and by being explicit about what sources of knowledge you have been influenced by and how you apply them in your parenthood, these fathers, just like the Swedish fathers in Björk's (2013) study, thus

position themselves as middle-class parents. By doing this the fathers also distance themselves from what is perceived to be a working class approach to parenthood. As Peter expressed it:

Do you think there are any differences in your way of being a father and what you perceive that other fathers are like?

Yes I think so, as I said earlier about the intellectual middle-class, or like, I think that I reflect more, and I don't think that everyone reads Jesper Juul or tries to get involved in and reflect about their parenthood, I guess some people just *are*. (Peter)

But “just being”, or engaging in parenthood as if it is a natural process can also be the result of a planned and reflected choice, in which case it becomes more complicated to classify according to class attributes. Tommy for example, who refers to himself as being part of the middle-class but with a working class background, expresses skepticism towards the ideal of optimizing the fatherhood project through attending parental classes and worrying about how to act.

Well, they (middle-class fathers) maybe attend those parental courses more or what they are offered, they are more into this, like how it *should be*. Or like, I don't know if it's expected that you take some course but, I feel that there are some tendencies like that, they participate more in that kind of things.

And the ones you identify more with, how do they relate to their fatherhood?

They are in some sense calmer, they are confident in themselves and they don't look outwards. I don't think that looking outwards is necessarily bad but there can be some kind of stress about it that I feel that these fathers that have a similar background don't have, they just do what they know. (Tommy)

In Tommy's view, the middle-class ideal, where becoming and showing that you are “aware” are central ingredients, is not necessarily something worth striving for. Instead it can imply stress and become an obstacle for doing what you already know.

Conclusion

The fathers' desire to present themselves as equivalent parents, who are capable of doing everything that mothers do, and who can act autonomously as competent parents, have been the focus of this section. It turns out that the fathers use different and sometimes contradicting strategies to undo the gendered nature of their parenting and demonstrate their equal worth as parents. On the one hand their fathering involvement is constructed as self-evident and natural, something that can be interpreted as an attempt to match the ideas of mothers' inherent mothering qualities. On the other, their knowledge and competence regarding children and parenting are emphasized, which insinuates both that parenting is something you can learn and that it is a difficult “job”. Things are further complicated by ideas of classed fathering or parenting practices, as for example representations of “natural” fathering in one context may be interpreted as an expression of a working class approach to fathering, and in another is made to represent a challenge of essentialist notions of mothering, and thus conforms to a middle-class reflexivity ideal.

Fathers as partners and co-parents

Introduction

Apart from referring to themselves as “parents” rather than “fathers” as a way of equalizing their parenthood to the parenthood of mothers, the interviewed fathers also refer to themselves as parents in the sense that they form a parental team together with the mother of their children. This is in accordance with the ideal of co-parenting which increasingly has come to replace a pattern where fathers are simply viewed as helpers to mothers (Cabrera et al., 2000). In this section the fathers’ representations of this teamwork are in focus, with regards to the specific subthemes of *sharing and dividing parenting tasks*; and *dialogue and cooperation*.

Sharing and dividing parenting tasks

When the fathers are asked about how tasks and responsibilities are divided between themselves and their partners it is clear that their accounts reflect the public discourse in Sweden that fathers’ involvement is expected to be both child-centered and gender-equal (Forsberg, 2007). In their accounts they make sure that their own sympathies with the idea that child care and housework responsibilities should be shared or divided equally, are known. This is done by emphasizing that they for example take turns in leaving and picking up from preschool, or that if one parent takes on one specific responsibility the other compensates by taking on another one. A few of them are even explicit with their view that a gender equal relationship with their partner is an essential part of being a good father.

There are many ways of viewing that, like it can be a good father to my children or a good father in relation to my wife. My children might think I’m a lot of fun while my wife might think I’m useless because I don’t do anything. No, I think a gender equal relationship, like where you help each other out. I don’t want to be the father who comes home from work to be the funny and jokey guy. I want to play my part and I think that it’s important to challenge, and I also have three girls at home which means that I think it’s even more important to show them that a guy should do his fair share of the work, so that hopefully they can bring that with them when they meet partners, if they meet a guy, that they can make those demands that I think are completely reasonable. (Fredrik)

From this statement it is clear that Fredrik thinks of his fathering as something he does not only in relation to his children but also in relation to his partner, and that by contributing his fair share in the household he is stating an example for his children that they should expect relationships to be equal. Some of the fathers also express that it is important to avoid getting stuck in roles which may limit their ability to share the pleasures and challenges of parenthood equally. Elias for example describes the strategy he and his partner uses when the children have periods of favoring one of the parents in front of the other.

Yes, but we also try to break that, because if it has been like that in some periods, then I have for example gone out with our son and done some activity just the two of us, or A (partner) has been away with our daughter to have some time for themselves, and then things have improved after that. Because the risk is if you get stuck that way, because then you will be fulfilling that scenario in a way. (Elias)

Elias is not the only father who views a too rigid parental role division as problematic, others share their experiences of having become "the bad cop" in matters of childrearing which may restrict their ability to also be the parent to whom the children can come when they need comfort and emotional closeness. However, these patterns may be difficult to break once they have been established, especially if different approaches to childrearing lay behind these role divisions.

By many of the fathers, dividing parenting tasks and assuming different parental roles is also constructed as an absolute necessity to manage the often stressful family life where both parents, as a consequence of the increased child focus in the society (Bekkengen, 2003), face expectations of being with their children as much as possible and always showing a wholehearted engagement in their children's lives. The important thing here is to work together for your children's well-being and make the everyday routine practically viable, and whether the labor division the parents end up with is equal or not is secondary in this sense. Simon who describes that he often ends up doing more of the practical tasks than the tasks that involve spending time with his son describes it like this:

[...] another thing that happens a lot in this home is that L (son) decides that "no mom should brush my teeth, mom should put me to sleep", mom should do this and that, and I would rather have that than dealing with the laundry, but on the other hand, the laundry needs to be taken care of anyway, so I don't really think it's a matter of fairness, because things that need to be done regardless of who does it, it's not like K (wife) sits in the sofa while I'm running around vacuum cleaning, doing laundry and doing the dishes. And then, K also cooks a lot more than me, yeah she gets more hungry than me, so at some point I don't think it's a matter of fairness when everyone contributes to the best of their abilities. (Simon)

Paradoxically, Simon's way of distancing himself from the ideal of gender equality while pointing to the need for both parents to get themselves busy with whatever the running of the daily routine requires, can be interpreted as an even stronger commitment to the gender equality ideal. The way Simon describes it, the parenting tasks that need to be done are clearly ungendered, and if "everyone contributes to the best of their abilities" it's not relevant to talk about fairness or equality. Simon has a point here, because when gender equality is discussed it is often not made explicit what an accomplishment of the gender equality ideal regarding parental responsibilities actually would look like and how it would be measured (Doucet, 2015). In that sense, would fairness and equality between the parents perhaps be better assessed by asking if their respective contributions are really to the best of their abilities?

However, such an approach would naturally also be problematic since it would leave it up to each individual to define the limit of one's abilities, and once again one could expect that fathers would enjoy a greater discretion in defining the limits for their involvement and that mothers would have to deal with the rest (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). Such limits could for example be based on essentialist ideas about what women and men can and cannot do. This can be traced in some of the other fathers' accounts when they explain the way the division of parental tasks and responsibilities have ended up between them and their partners.

But at the same time there are some things that have become more of her responsibility because she takes the initiative, she has, the purchasing of clothes is something she mostly takes care of. She notices when something is missing and in that case she is the one who buys it. And I think that's a pity, but that's the way it is, I don't have the awareness for that. (Jasper)

Jasper explains his wife's initiative to buy clothes for their children as a consequence of her capacity of noticing that kind of things, a capacity that he thinks he lacks and "that's the way it is". However, by expressing his dissatisfaction with this fact Jasper insinuates that his ideal is that both parents should be equally skilled to perform all kinds of tasks related to the parenting, but he also gives expression to the idea that this is not a skill that can be learned.

However, just like in Dermott's (2008) study the interview accounts of these fathers show that the division is not only done according to perceived skills and abilities, i.e. that each parent does what he or she is good at. As it turns out, also personal interests and preferences matter. This is often described as an asset for parenting, since it allows the parents to complement each other and at the same time dedicate themselves to the parts of parenting they enjoy the most.

Yes, we appreciate different things with our children, she's a librarian and reads a lot and reads a lot to the children as well, and that's something she thinks is fun and important. And I think, I'm more physical and I like to play around, in that sense we are very different, that I'm more physical with the children and enjoy throwing them into the air and playing with them in that way. So, yes, that's quite different. (Edvin)

The scenario that Edvin describes here is clearly a win-win situation which apart from being satisfactory for him and the mother also enriches the care they are able to give their children. The way Edvin and many of the other fathers frame the division and sharing of parenting responsibilities, implies that they distance themselves from explanations related to gender patterns and instead convey that differences between the parents should be understood on the individual level, at least in their own case (Dermott, 2008). While this means that the gendered patterns of their own division are made invisible, it can also be interpreted as an expression of the fathers' unwillingness to accept essentialist explanations of what men and women can and should do, which corresponds well with their tendency to construct themselves as gender equality oriented men.

Dialogue and cooperation

A general tendency in the material is also to stress the element of dialogue and cooperation in the parental relationship as a key feature for making everything work in the family.

The most important thing is to think about the family, to be able to create a good relationship and communication with your partner. That's really important, because if two adults don't understand each other or don't have a good relationship I think it will be a disaster at home [...]. (Arash)

This emphasis that Arash and several of the other fathers place on communication and mutual understanding between themselves and their partners is in accordance with Björk's (2013) findings in her study of part-time working middle-class fathers. Björk found that the fathers expressed their identity as middle-class men and involved fathers by adhering to ideals of reflexivity in relation to their partners, and emphasizing their willingness to discuss and reach agreement with them. Additionally the fathers in Björk's study confirmed this involved fatherhood identity by being explicit about the parental ideals they share with their partner, something that is perhaps more evident in the following statement by Elias.

[...] there may be things that either she thinks that, well we have to deal with this it's too much, or it can be things that I think that this is not working we have to find

another way of solving it. So partly it's in the division of labor but also how you are with the children, and then you have to think that it's like a circle everything has consequences. So if you have an unequal situation at home and then you come to child rearing or doing homework and then if you have built up a frustration about that and there's a conflict with the children, then it will be difficult to solve that conflict in a very good parenting manner. Like "I want us to solve this situation in another way when you speak with the children", yes but then we need to solve these other things first because this makes me angry. So that you find the source of the problem. (Elias)

In Elias's statement the dialogue and negotiation about the ordinary, and agreeing on something that feels fair for both parents, is emphasized as necessary to avoid any frustration between the partners, and he stresses that the reason why this is important is that otherwise it might affect the children negatively. By pointing out the consequences that inequality based conflicts between him and his partner could have for the children Elias displays that his concern is not mainly with himself, or with his partner and their relationship, but with their children. In this sense Elias's statement is also an example of how child-oriented and equality-oriented fathering practices are blending together in many of the interviews of this study. All the fathers talk about their fathering in a way that clearly positions them as child-oriented in that they emphasize that they put their children first and that their engagement as co-parents mainly has the aim of meeting their children's needs. But this does not mean that their involvement is restricted to the "fun parts" of parenthood which Bekkengen (2003) points out as a problem of the child-orientation in men's way of being involved as parents. According to Bekkengen, the dominance of the discourse of child-centered fathering is mistaken for a step forward in the quest for gender equality, which it is not since it ignores the relationship between fathers and mothers. However, since most of these fathers seem to include all aspects of parenting, combined with a good communication with their partners, in the concept of "putting the children's needs first", it is hard to imagine how this would not have an impact on the relationship between fathers and mothers. It might be that that they do not always practice what they preach but the importance of ideals should not be underestimated. In this sense the findings of this study gives some support to the idea that men's increased involvement in childcare activities, and the consequent changes in their expressions of masculinity, will eventually lead to a change in the relationship between men and women towards greater equality (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Magaraggia, 2013).

Conclusion

That fathering takes place both in relation to the children and in relation to the other parent has been the focus of this section. When this topic is brought up in the interviews the fathers present themselves as part of a parental team where dialogue and a fair division of the parental tasks are essential to make the family routine work. The fathers' positioning in relation to an ideal of gender equality is implicit or explicit in their accounts, and when they identify patterns in their own division of parenting tasks these are explained by referring to mainly individual differences in abilities, preferences and interests. Although child-centeredness rather than gender equality seem to be the main aim of these fathers' involvement in a cooperative and shared parenthood with their partners, it is suggested that this might also have some effect on the gender relations between men and women in the long run.

Fathering and the labor market

Introduction

The idea that there is a tension between fathers' cash and care responsibilities, which is pointed out by numerous contemporary fatherhood scholars (Forsberg, 2007; Hobson and Morgan, 2002), is also a theme that emerges in this study. In this section the focus is on the fathers' desire to prioritize their children over their career; the constraints to do so; the opportunities of "getting away" with prioritizing work; and the sense of responsibility for the family's economic situation.

Choosing children over career

A lot of fathering practices described in the interviews take place in relation to the labor market and concern the choice between career and family. Almost all of the fathers convey that being "a good father" entails to in one way or the other sacrifice your position in the labor market and it is clear that making this sacrifice is viewed as proof of your dedication as an involved father. One way of showing your dedication can be to choose a job that can be easily combined with the family life.

But situations that I find important as a father, that are important to me at least, it is to have the time to see your children, to be present and be able to, then in combination with work it's about choosing a job where you can combine, so that you put your children first. In other words that you can participate during the first period in pre-school, or take your children to school or pre-school and pick them up, to be able to take time off work during holidays and things like that. All of that is really difficult when you have a freelance work because then you may be depending on taking on a job, but I opted out of that, I worked like that before we became parents and then I tried to find a permanent job, yeah just because of that. (Elias)

As Elias describes it he dropped his previous job to be able to be more present in his children's everyday life, which for him is a way of putting the children's needs first. It is thus in relation to work that the fathers can emphasize the level of their involvement as fathers and that they can show that they value the time with their children and family more than they value living up to a breadwinner role (Björk, 2013). There are also other ways of showing this priority such as taking time off work for parental leave during the child's first years, working part time, or staying home with sick children when needed.

[...] like I said earlier I try to be present both physically and mentally, and I'm planning to work 80% some more time, because I think you invest that in your relationship to your children, and I have seen that with my oldest son, he is six now and I stayed home with him one and a half year when he was little and then I've been working 80 %, and I feel that there's a really good relationship with him now, it feels like that investment led to that, then I don't really know what I'm like as a father. (Edvin)

Taking time off work to be with your children is a way of investing in that relationship and this way a choice that may have negative consequences for your career, is constructed as an opportunity rather than a risk. This also goes the other way around so that not taking that opportunity is a choice you might regret in the future.

Something that also strikes you is that in that situation when you stand there and plan how your time forward should be, it might be that you have to say no to a career, but to prioritize family and children above everything. Then you can see that there are some people you meet who afterwards regret a lot that they were absent or had to travel or maybe worked on a boat, or missed a lot of those important years that they then miss and can't recover. And there I guess I made a choice earlier that I didn't want to end up in that scenario, then there are other things you might do wrong on your way but some things can be planned. (Elias)

Prioritizing time with your children is indeed an opportunity, and as can be read from Elias's statement this is something that has not always been possible for fathers. And as is clear from the following quote, it is also an opportunity that might not be available for fathers in other national contexts.

Compared to my friends in Holland, my opportunities, my rights to be a father are very great, and then I'm mostly referring to VAB really, because that you can stay home and take care of your child, that you can do that to begin with and then that you also get paid for it, that's an extremely important thing that has such a big impact on so many other things. It's very strange that the income differences are still as big as they are in Sweden. But that you can stay home and that it's completely accepted and nothing anybody cares about, that's a quite big difference with Holland [...] (Jasper)

As Jasper points out, family policies that enable parents regardless of their gender to take care of their children, are important as well as perceiving a general acceptance towards this type of paternal involvement. In Sweden, thanks to a policy system of gender neutral parental rights and benefits in relation to the parents' ability to combine work and family life, and a long tradition of promoting fathers' use of their share of the benefits (Hobson and Bergman, 2002; Klinth and Johansson, 2010), both these requirements that Jasper mentions are fulfilled. Jasper's statement makes this privileged position of fathers in Sweden visible by comparing his experiences here with his experience from another national context, while most of the other interviewed fathers seem to take these privileges for granted. In research from other countries where there is less state support for family/work balance it seems that there is a more visible clash between the involved fatherhood ideal and fathers' work practices. Fathers in studies from for example the United Kingdom and Ireland, pronounce the same wishes to prioritize time with their children over work demands, but their practices reflect that for many this is not a viable option (Bailey, 2015; Henwood and Procter, 2003).

However, the acceptance that exists towards fathers' prioritization of time with the children in the Swedish context, is not necessarily universal in terms of being present in all social groups. Tommy makes an example of this as he describes a class based difference concerning the expectations fathers face of reducing their work hours.

[...] I think they (working-class fathers) are available when they are at home, but I think that they work more and that they don't reduce their work hours, like they don't have those expectations, maybe the mothers do that instead and maybe they don't share the same way that people do in the middle-class. (Tommy)

Then something that I come to think of that is like an expectation, that you want to be part of, it's to show that you can reduce your work hours, it's like when you hang out in certain environments, and it's sort of expected in a way and I also want to be someone who reduces his work hours, and it is necessary. [...] But then I'm also quite

practical so it has been, I mean I do it to make things work as well, not only because it's expected. (Tommy)

What Tommy suggests is that the involvement of fathers in the working class is not as tied to showing a willingness to work part time, as it is in his own middle-class social sphere. That this expectation is strong in the middle-class is clear also in many of the other interviews, and not prioritizing your children over your work, is not well seen among most of these fathers. However it is also acknowledged by some that not all fathers have the economic opportunity to opt out of work, which of course is a valid excuse for not doing so. Edvin clarified this in an e-mail after his interview.

I probably sounded quite judgmental towards fathers who work more than they are with their children. The fathers I had in mind were the fathers who CHOOSE to work more, not because they have to due to economic reasons. It's a great privilege and a luxury that I can afford and have the opportunity to work less, and I'm fully aware of that there are people who have to work (a lot more than 100%) due to economic reasons. They were not the ones I referred to in my critique. (excerpt from Edvin's e-mail)

Edvin's e-mail correspondence point to a fact that has also been shown in previous research on fathering and class, that among fathers with less secure and decent working conditions and lower salaries the alternative of spending more time with their children might not be feasible (Plantin, 2007).

Overcoming workplace constraints

While most fathers in this study seem to connect their level of paternal involvement with how willing they are to sacrifice their career for the children, most of them also describe contexts where they are expected to do the opposite.

This is a problem in some workplaces that are described as male dominated and where there are more traditional attitudes regarding men's role in the household. Two of the fathers also make the reflection that men more often than women are self-employed or employed in small enterprises which makes their absence from work more difficult to cover and compensate. In this sense the practical circumstances and the lack of support from the colleagues and the employer can be perceived as an obstacle for some fathers to take on more responsibilities in the domestic sphere which has also been pointed out in previous studies (Björk, 2013; Johansson and Klinth, 2008).

As an engineer I feel that you, it's not in that culture that you use your parental leave as a father to the same extent as a mother, and there is less acceptance if you want to, like I have been working 80 % since our first child was born really, and I was forced to work 100% during one period although I really wanted to work 80 %, so it has always been a problem there, it's often brought up as a problem by my employer. So there I think it's very obsolete [...] just because it's often assumed that the mother does more and engages more in different things and spends more time with the children, like has the main responsibility for them. (Edvin)

However, just like Edvin here, none of the interviewed fathers claim that this obstacle at work has been conclusive for their own decision to work part time or using parental leave benefits, rather it is used as an explanation for other, perhaps less "good" fathers' lack of parental involvement. In that sense these fathers' talk about their own need to stand up for their parental

rights in front of unenthusiastic colleagues and employers may be understood as a way of reinforcing the image of themselves as involved fathers who don't give in to the social pressure they perceive.

Choosing career over children as an acceptable option

Attitudes at the workplace or elsewhere which promote fathers' investment in their career can be viewed as an obstacle for involved fathering. However, an alternative approach to the same fact is that there is still a wide *acceptance* in the society towards fathers who choose career over time with their family.

Then the society as a whole, there is still this thing I think, that it's accepted that the guy goes for his career while she stays at home. It's really evident I think. (Fredrik)

With this approach the optional character of fatherhood, pointed out by several fatherhood researchers (Cabrera et al., 2000; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011), becomes more visible. Choosing their career in front of engaging in responsibilities at home is something fathers can still do without being questioned as fathers. At the same time, the discourse of involved fatherhood, and in the Swedish context also the state support to combine work and care responsibilities, give men the opportunity to choose to invest in their fatherhood instead, if they prefer that. A few of the interviewed fathers point to this privilege they enjoy as men as compared to women. Women are often criticized if they for example choose to go back to work when the child is still in early infancy, while they are also expected to protect their economic independency by making sure that the family life does not have too much impact on their career.

Somehow I think that mothers face even higher demands, partly because of some kind of, that you should both be a present parent and at the same time you should be, in some way make a career and be prominent and enterprising and skilled when you are away from home too. So that in some sense I think that women, or mothers face a greater pressure than men do. I think. (Simon)

In other words, while mothers' are questioned for whatever work/family priorities they make, fathers' priorities, whether they are more in accordance with a breadwinning ideal or an involved father ideal, are likely to be well-received.

Breadwinning responsibilities

More than half of the fathers mention that there are still expectations regarding a father's duty to provide for the family's material needs, and that it is not well seen if the father earns less than the mother.

No but there's also this kind of expectations, dogmas and gender roles, and it's this thing that men and husbands are somehow automatically regarded as having the highest burden of providing. And that's something you see, like if a man earns poorly or loses his job or something, then there are more often separations, like you have these demands that you should be the one who brings the most money to the household, that's the way it should be. (Peter)

Some of the fathers, like Peter, claim that these expectations come from the mothers and that failing to live up to them increases the risk of divorce or tension between the parents. Others state that it's rather among men that these ideals persist.

[...] on some occasion I have had comments about how little a teacher earns. And that has been from men. And they have been unable to understand how you can choose a job like that, because according to them it probably isn't enough to make ends meet, but then it's more about what you're interested in and things like that. And how much money, well it could be that these men have it in them that it's up to them to make ends meet in the family, like that they have to earn as much as possible so that then the wife can take the other responsibility. (Gustav)

While Gustav's choice of career has been questioned by other men for its low salary, he legitimizes his choice by emphasizing that he has chosen out of interest, and by pointing to these other men's traditional attitudes towards fathers' role in the household. This indicates the contextual nature of hegemonic masculinities, and how the growing acceptance and appreciation of alternative expressions of masculinity tied to fatherhood, but also tied to the resistance against "traditional" masculinity norms, enable men to safeguard their position in relation to other men (Björk, 2013; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Gustav resists positioning himself as inferior to these "other men", because what he loses in one hierarchy of masculinities where one's earnings define how "manly" one is, he compensates by climbing in another hierarchy where one's involvement as a father defines one's status as a "real man".

However, being able to provide economically for your family is still an important aspect of fathering, and indeed of parenting in general, and as Dermott (2008) asserts, just because other aspects of fathering have come to be more emphasized, fathers' financial responsibilities as parents can't be expected to disappear. Among the interviewed fathers it is clear that the importance of the financial aspect of "good fathering" is mostly downplayed to stress the importance of other types of involvement, but the exceptions appear in the interviews with the two fathers who are explicit about their economic hardship – like Abdou in the following statement.

[...] it's a bit hard, because I'm a father and I can't do like a father, you know. Because I need to do things for my children. And then after that, I started to understand the system with the social services and stuff like that.

What do you mean that you need to do for your children, that you can't do?

Yeah I'm a father, so a father, you know. If the children say they want a phone, I can't even fix a phone, like for example. So that kind of things you know. So I was very annoyed in different ways. (Abdou)

For Abdou, the challenge he finds in being able to provide financially for his children makes this aspect of fathering important. As for most of the other fathers, even though they agree that the economic pressure placed on fathers persists, they still stress that they themselves are more concerned with living up to the ideal of being an available father than earning a lot of money. This is in line with the previously mentioned tendency to do involved fathering by stressing that you prioritize your children over your career. But as Abdou's statement shows, it is easier to state that money is not important from a position of economic stability, and similarly, to be able to demonstrate that you gladly sacrifice your career for the sake of spending more time with your children you need to have a job to start with. In the following quote Arash shares his experience of being unemployed and taking care of his daughter and the household.

But my wife thinks that I'm not fighting, that I'm lazy maybe. And I know many families, when the father has a bad economy everybody focus on the father, when the mother doesn't have a job they say that, yeah she works at home. But I also work at home, I'm a "house-husband", I clean, I do laundry, I wash dishes, I babysit, but I don't know why the society and the family and other people do not think about that. [...] I clean and yes I'm really good at housework but they say "he's unemployed".

Who are "they"?

Everyone, almost everyone, friends, my partner, families, in school, the teachers, yes you are unemployed. I feel it, they don't say anything, but you can feel it. (Arash)

According to Arash's experience the norm of being the family breadwinner is stronger than the involved fatherhood ideals about being as available to your children as possible. He does not think that his very high involvement in his daughter's life receives fair attention compared to the fact that he is unemployed. Apart from illustrating the strong connection between male identity and paid work (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2004; Miller, 2011), Arash's experience could indicate that being available to your children as a father is only desirable if this is the result of an active choice where your priorities between career and involved fathering are demonstrated. When a father is unemployed, taking the responsibility for the care of his children and being available to them, does not reveal his position regarding these priorities and thus his fathering is not equally acknowledged.

Conclusion

The connection between male identity and paid work and expectations of fathers' career orientation are often brought forward as reasons for the fact that fathers' in general continue to spend less time carrying out childcare and housework than mothers do, despite the involved fathering ideal that has been gaining ground. However, the findings of this study suggest that work should not only be viewed as an obstacle for involvement, but also as a precondition for the construction of one's paternal identity as being "involved". It turns out that almost all of the interviewed fathers have been able to choose their level of participation both in the labor market and in the family. In this context, the construction of breadwinning expectations and demands from the work place as obstacles that have been overcome, helps the fathers to emphasize their true commitment to fathering. This way their involvement gets a higher status than the involvement of those fathers who lack an established position in the labor market and therefore either *can't* or *don't have to* make the choice between family and career. And similarly, it may be perceived as more admirable than the involvement of mothers, who by most of the fathers are assumed to face less pressure to provide for the family and less work place constraints.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study took its departure in the discussion about how a more equal sharing of unpaid domestic work in families is more and more seen as a precondition for ensuring both the families' and the society's welfare in many Western countries. Mothers' increased integration in the labor market has so far not been accompanied by an equivalent rise in fathers' disposition to take on a fair share of the responsibilities for childcare and household chores, which is assumed to have the negative consequences of both lowering birth rates and holding women's potential as workers back (Esping-Andersen, 2009). As a result the promotion of a more involved and active fatherhood has ended up on the political agenda, and as it seems this has been accompanied by a shift in the dominant discourses surrounding fatherhood, from focusing on breadwinning responsibilities to gradually emphasizing availability and emotional closeness as necessary ingredients for being a "good father" (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). Sweden is one of the countries where this ideal of a more "involved fatherhood" over the last three decades has come to dominate both on the political level and on the level of individual attitudes, but where despite this, fathers largely continue to assume a secondary role as parents in relation to mothers. The fathers who *do* live up to the ideal are often defined as part of the intellectual middle-class and research focused almost exclusively on describing the paternal involvement of this limited group of fathers have contributed to strengthening this image of middle-class fathers as highly involved parents, leaving the image of other fathers parental involvement to our imagination.

In this study I intended to explore and analyze how fathers construct their fatherhood and enact their fathering in this area of tension between the involved fatherhood ideal and its practice, and to do this in a way that included fathers in different family situations and life conditions and thus better reflected the diversity of fathering experiences in contemporary Sweden than most of the previous fatherhood research has done. The research questions focused on how these fathers describe their fathering practices in relation to their ideals of "good fatherhood"; how they discuss their parental involvement in relation to the involvement of their children's mother; and how their accounts can be interpreted as expressions of gender and class. The theoretical point of departure included the notion that fatherhood is constructed through practices that are labelled "fathering". These practices blend with other practices such as those of gender and class, and apart from confirming one's identity as a father, a man or a member of a social class, all these practices can serve the purpose of positioning oneself in the hierarchies of fatherhoods, masculinities and social groups. The empirical data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews with fathers whose demographic characteristics partly lived up to the study's intension of reflecting diversity. Nevertheless, fathers who identified themselves as part of the middle-class were overrepresented in the sample.

Altogether the findings of this study give an idea of the complex interaction of factors, on the personal and relational, as well as the societal and normative level, that shapes fathering practices and thus the cultures of fatherhood in the contemporary Swedish context. They also offer concrete examples of what kind of fathering practices these fathers engage in and how these practices work to both confirm and challenge norms and ideals regarding fatherhood, masculinity and class.

Not surprisingly, the fathering practices accounted for in this study confirm the findings of several previous studies, which point to the dominance of the discourses of gender equality and involved fatherhood in the Swedish context (Forsberg, 2007; Johansson and Klinth, 2008). This

dominance implies that it is difficult for the fathers to talk about their fathering without implicitly or explicitly using these discourses and the ideals they involve as a reference. The fathering practices that the fathers highlight to demonstrate alignment with ideals of being involved fathers and being aware of gender equality, are presented in relation to their children's everyday life, the parental relationship, and the fathers' participation in the labor market. These different "arenas" that fathering takes place in illustrates the fluid character of fathering and how it blends with practices that confirm other aspects of a father's identity, such as that of being a good partner or a worker (Morgan, 2011).

One of the findings of this study that stands out in relation to previous studies is that the interviewed fathers report that they engage to a greater extent in the routine caring of the children and that they can speak about both the joys and the challenges that this engagement implies. Both internationally and in Swedish studies father's involvement has previously been described as mainly focused on the "fun parts" of parenthood (Bekkengen, 2003), or on the aspects of childcare which include a more intense contact with the children and thus are assumed to imply a strengthening of the father-child relationship (Dermott, 2008). This way it is suggested that fathers' involvement in childcare can increase without it having any greater effect on the relationship between fathers and mothers, and thus on gender equality (Bekkengen, 2003). However, in this study most of the fathers report that their idea of "good fathering" means more than that. They do show a strong concern with establishing a close relationship with their children, but several of them stress the importance of engaging in *all* aspects of childcare in order to fulfil this concern and that their own paternal involvement reflects this. Furthermore, most of the fathers do not present any conflict between their identity as caring and involved fathers and their identity as men, which gives support to the idea that doing masculinity by showing engagement in all aspects of childcare and presenting oneself as child-oriented and gender equal, has reached a hegemonic status for men in Sweden (Johansson and Klinth, 2008, 2007). When both fathering practices and alternative ways of doing masculinity are promoted through the dominance of the discourses of involved fatherhood and gender equality, it is hard to imagine how this would *not* have an impact on the relationship between fathers and mothers. It might be that that fathers are more child-oriented than committed to ideals of equality, but this does not necessarily mean that their changed practices lack impact on gender equality. In this sense the findings of this study gives some support to the idea that men's increased involvement in childcare activities, and the consequent changes in their expressions of masculinity, may eventually lead to a change in the relationship between men and women towards greater equality (Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Magaraggia, 2013).

Another important part of the findings concerns the way many of the interviewed fathers seem to try to downplay the importance of gender in their fatherhood. This is done by choosing to talk about parenting rather than fathering, by referring to the teamwork their fathering is part of, and by pointing to fathers' and mothers' interchangeability as parents. On the one hand, these efforts to reduce the significance of gender in parenting may be seen as a way of expressing agreement with ideals of gender equality – that fathers are parents, just like mothers are, and that since they can do everything mothers can do there is no reason why they should not. However, on the other hand, the same efforts risk shifting the focus of the gender equality debate, away from being about fairness in the division of unpaid domestic work, towards being about acknowledging fathers abilities and competences a parents and stressing their equal worth to mothers. Nevertheless, these two possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The strategies the fathers use to emphasize the equivalence of their parenting compared to mothers', are sometimes contradictory. For example, perhaps as an attempt to match the essentialist ideas of mothers' inherent mothering qualities, some of the fathers stress the self-evident and natural nature of their involvement in all aspects of parenting. At the same time, almost all the fathers give explicit examples of their acquired parental competences, and of how they use expert knowledge to improve their parenting. This insinuates that natural parental instincts need to be accompanied by a willingness to learn the hard work of parenting through experience and external input, if you are to be considered a "good father". There are also possible contradictions in how representations of "natural" fathering in one context may be interpreted as an expression of a working class approach to fathering, and in another is made to represent a challenge of essentialist notions of mothering, and thus conforms to a middle-class reflexivity ideal.

That the fathers avoid to gender their fathering practices is further apparent in their accounts of how tasks are divided between themselves and their partners. When the fathers (those who are married or cohabitating) describe patterns in the division of parenting tasks, most of them explain these patterns by referring to mainly individual differences in abilities, preferences and interests. Differences in what parenting tasks or roles each parent engage in are also described as complementary and necessary to make the family routine work smoothly. This way it is not only the gendering of parenting practices that is avoided, the fathers also avoid presenting the current labor division as unfair or an area where there are conflicts of interests between the parents. The discourse of gender equality is thus something that they relate to, but in a way that presents their own situation as one where the ideal of a gender equal relationship is already accomplished, and where dialogue, agreement and cooperation characterizes the parental relationship. Whether this image of their situation is shared by their partners unfortunately remains unknown, since achieving their perspective was beyond the scope of this study.

The findings further indicate that fathering practices in relation to the labor market, such as working part-time and adapting career choices to family life, are important components of a good fatherhood according to most of the interviewed fathers. In line with the findings of previous studies (Björk, 2013; Miller, 2011) almost all of them also point out that this is where fathers often face obstacles to dedicate themselves to taking care of their children, due to expectations of their career orientation from bosses and colleagues and practical circumstances at the workplace. However, what's worth noting in the findings of this study is that almost all of the interviewed fathers have actually been able to choose a level of participation in both the labor market and the family which they seem rather content with. In this sense, the construction of breadwinning expectations and demands from the work place as obstacles, helps the fathers to emphasize their true commitment to fathering. This way their involvement gets a higher status than the involvement of those fathers who lack an established position in the labor market and therefore either *can't* or *don't have to* make the choice between family and career. It is therefore not surprising that those fathers in the sample who place the most emphasis on having a job and a good economy as aspects of good fathering are those fathers who are unemployed. Similarly, it is not surprising that choosing time with your children over career symbolizes alignment with middle-class ideals (Björk, 2013), but it should perhaps rather be viewed as a demonstration of middle-class privileges.

It is also in relation to the labor market that the optional character of fatherhood, pointed out by several fatherhood researchers (Cabrera et al., 2000; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011), becomes

visible in this study. Choosing their career ahead of engaging in care responsibilities at home is something fathers can still do without being questioned as fathers. At the same time, the discourse of involved fatherhood, and in the Swedish context also the state support to combine work and care responsibilities, give men the opportunity to choose to invest in their fatherhood instead, if they prefer that. A few of the fathers point this out and contrast it to the way women often face the opposite situation where they are questioned regardless of whether they prioritize their family life or their career. Thanks to the ideal of involved fatherhood and the growing acceptance and appreciation of alternative expressions of masculinity that this ideal entails, fathers can also choose not to prioritize work without risking to be viewed as less “manly” than other men. Because what a father loses in one hierarchy of masculinities, where his identity as a man relies on his identity as a worker, he can compensate by climbing in another hierarchy where his involvement as a father defines his status as a “real man”. In this sense, the conflicting masculinity ideals that a few of the fathers experienced, can also be viewed as increased opportunities for men to “do masculinity” in a way that suits them. However, while both this study and the findings of previous fatherhood studies point to the discretionary character of fatherhood, several authors also identify representations of active choices and agency as ways of doing masculinity (Björk, 2013; Forsberg, 2007). Perhaps then, fathering practices are not as “optional” as they are presented, maybe the discretionary character of fathering is also upheld in father’s accounts to stress their masculine identity by pointing to their agency, rather than portraying themselves as passive victims of social structures.

Apart from these findings – which, although they bring some new insights and possible interpretations to the fore, largely confirm the findings of previous research on fatherhood – this study contributes to the field of knowledge in that it moves away from the idea that involved fathering practices should be studied as a middle-class phenomenon and that its implications for gender equality need to be studied in nuclear families. Although the sample is biased towards fathers who identify themselves as part of the middle-class and who live with the mother of their children, the fact that it also includes fathers of less privileged social groups and fathers who do not live with the mother of their children, implies that this study better reflect what the discourse of involved fathering entail in different contexts. However, it would not be accurate to state the accounts of this sample represent the whole diversity of fatherhoods in the contemporary Swedish context. The difficulty of recruiting respondents and the relatively homogenous accounts of the fathers that participated in the study indicate that fathers who agree to take part in a study like this are not the fathers who prefer spending time with friends over spending time with their children, or who think of their parental role as peripheral compared to the central role of mothers. Rather they are likely to be fathers who feel that their way of fathering is in tune with the dominant discourses surrounding fatherhood, which now stress involvement in childcare and awareness of gender equality as essential for good fathering. Finding ways of accessing the accounts of fathers whose practices do not correspond to these discourses, whether they are part of privileged or underprivileged groups in the society, remains a challenge for further studies in this field of research.

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INTERVJUDELTAGARE SÖKES!

ÄR DU PAPPA OCH VILL DELA MED DIG AV DINA ERFARENHETER?

Jag heter Malin och är student vid Göteborgs Universitet. Jag håller under vårterminen på med en intervju-studie för min D-uppsats om pappor och de förväntningar och krav de upplever från omgivningen.

Jag söker dig som:

- Är pappa till ett eller flera barn i åldern 6-12 år (räcker att ett av barnen är i denna ålder)
- Har en inkomst per månad som är 18 000 kr eller mindre före skatt
- Har möjlighet att ställa upp på en intervju som tar ca en timma

Deltagandet i studien är frivilligt, man kan när som helst ångra sig om man inte längre vill vara med. Deltagandet är även anonymt, vilket betyder att ditt namn inte kommer att nämnas när jag använder delar av intervjun i min uppsats.

Vill du delta i studien eller ha mer detaljerad information? Hör av dig till mig per telefon, sms

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS!

ENGLISH SUMMARY: I'm Malin, a master degree student at the University of Göteborg. I'm in need of respondents for an interview study about fatherhood and expectations and I'm looking for fathers with children aged 6-12, who have a monthly income of 18 000 SEK or less. The interviews will form part of my degree report and your participation would be highly appreciated. Participation is voluntary and anonymous and the interview lasts approximately one hour. The interview can be held in English or Swedish, according to your preference.

To participate in the study, or to receive more detailed information, please contact me by phone, text message or e-mail. Thank you!

eller e-post! Stort tack på förhand!

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS!

ARE YOU A FATHER AND WANT TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES?

My name is Malin and I'm a student at the University of Gothenburg. During the spring semester I'm working on an interview study for my master thesis about fathers and the expectations and demands they experience from their surroundings.

I'm looking for you who:

- Are a father of one or more children in the ages of 6-12 (it's enough if one of the children is in this age)
- Have an income per month of 18 000 SEK or less before taxes
- Are able to participate in an interview which lasts approximately one hour.

Participation in the study is voluntary, you can always change your mind if you no longer want to participate. Participation is also anonymous, which means that your name will not be mentioned when I use parts of the interview in the thesis report.

Do you want to participate in the study or receive more detailed information? Please, contact me via telephone, sms or e-mail! Thank you!

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS!

ENGLISH SUMMARY: I'm Malin, a master degree student at the University of Göteborg. I'm in need of respondents for an interview study about fatherhood and expectations and I'm looking for fathers with children aged 6-12, who have a monthly income of 18 000 SEK or less. The interviews will form part of my degree report and your participation would be highly appreciated. Participation is voluntary and anonymous and the interview lasts approximately one hour. The interview can be held in English or Swedish, according to your preference.

To participate in the study, or to receive more detailed information, please contact me by phone, text message or e-mail. Thank you!

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Intervjuguide

Information om studien och samtycke

Hur fick du veta om studien?

Basuppgifter

Familjestatus: boendeförälder på heltid/deltid, antal barn, vilka åldrar, partner.

Socioekonomisk status: ekonomisk situation, boende, utbildning/sysselsättning

Normer

Vad innebär det att vara pappa? Hur tycker du att en ”bra pappa” ska vara? Vad är viktigast? Förebilder? Hur tycker du att ”samhället” ser på faderskap, pappors rättigheter och skyldigheter? Är det samma för alla föräldrar eller är det speciella krav på pappor? Hur märks det? Är det till exempel större krav på pappor att kunna försörja familjen?

Den egna rollen

Hur är du som pappa? På vilket sätt är du en del i barnets vardag? Hur får du reda på hur ditt barn mår? Finns det några skillnader i ditt sätt att vara pappa och andra pappors sätt? Vilka utmaningar möter du i rollen som pappa? Hur hanterar du dessa utmaningar?

Samarbete, jämställdhet, ansvar och självständighet

Hur har du och din partner delat upp ansvaret för det som måste göras i familjen? Känns det rättvist? Vem gör vad? Hur fungerar det? Litar ni på varandras förmåga att ta hand om barnen när den andra föräldern inte är där? Är det annorlunda när du är med barnet själv, mot när du är med barnet tillsammans med den andra föräldern? Hur? Vad förväntar sig ditt/dina barn av dig? Vad förväntar sig din partner av dig som förälder? Makt, vem bestämmer?

Appendix 2: Interview guide, English translation

Interview guide

Information about the study and informed consent

How did you know about the study?

Basic information

Family Status: residential custody of children, number of children, their ages, partner.

Socio-economic status: financial situation, housing, education/employment

Norms

What does being a dad mean? What do you think a "good father" should be like? What is the most important aspect? Role models? How do you think that "society" looks at fatherhood, fathers' rights and obligations? Is it the same for all parents or are there special demands placed on dads? How do you notice that? Are there, for example, greater demands placed on fathers to be able to provide for the family?

The own father role

What are you like as a dad? In what way are you a part of the child's everyday life? How do you find out how your child is doing? Are there any differences in your way of being father and other fathers' ways? What challenges do you face in your role as a father? How do you handle these challenges?

Cooperation, equality, responsibility and autonomy

How do you and your partner divide the responsibility for what has to be done in the family? Does that seem fair to you? Who does what? How does it work? Do you trust in each other's ability to take care of the children when the other parent is not there? Is it different when you're with the child yourself, compared to when you are with child together with the other parent? How? What does your child expect from you? What does your partner expect from you as a parent? Power, who make decisions?

Appendix 3: Informed consent

Informerat samtycke

Detta är en presentation av hur den information som samlas in genom intervjun kommer att användas.

Denna studie är en del av min utbildning på ett internationellt masterprogram i socialt arbete med barn och familjer, vid Göteborgs universitet. Studiens syfte är att ta reda på hur pappor resonerar om sitt faderskap och hur de upplever att förväntningar eller krav från omgivningen påverkar dem. Syftet är även att lyfta fram erfarenheter från pappor med skilda livsvillkor och analysera hur dessa skillnader kan påverka faderskapet.

För att säkerställa att denna studie sker enligt de etiska riktlinjer som finns för god forskning lovar jag härmed att följa dessa principer:

- Deltagaren har rätt att bestämma om han vill delta i studien och kan välja att inte vara en del av studien, även efter att intervjun avslutats.
- Deltagaren har rätt att vägra svara på frågor eller välja att avbryta intervjun utan att behöva ge någon förklaring.
- När materialet bearbetas och presenteras i uppsatsen kommer uppgifter om deltagaren som kan leda till att han känns igen att tas bort eller ändras för att säkerställa hans anonymitet.
- Det insamlade materialet kommer att hanteras konfidentiellt och förvaras på ett sätt så att ingen obehörig kan få tillgång till det.
- Materialet från intervjun kommer endast att användas i denna studie och när uppsatsen är färdig kommer materialet att förstöras.

För att innehållet i intervjun ska kunna återges på ett så korrekt sätt som möjligt kommer intervjun, om deltagaren godkänner det, att spelas in.

Välkommen att kontakta mig eller min handledare Helena Johansson (helena.johansson@socwork.gu.se) om du har några frågor.

.....

Malin Wiberg, student E-post: guswibma@student.gu.se

Jag har tagit del av och förstått informationen ovan.

Ort: Göteborg Datum:

.....

Underskrift, intervjudeltagare

Appendix 3: Informed consent, English translation

Informed consent

This is a presentation of how the information gathered through the interview will be used.

This study is part of my education at an international master's program in social work with children and families, at the University of Gothenburg. The study aims to find out how fathers talk about their fatherhood and how they experience that expectations or demands from their surroundings affect them. It also seeks to highlight the experiences of fathers with different life conditions and to analyze how these differences might affect fatherhood.

To ensure that this study takes place according to the ethical guidelines for good research, I hereby promise to follow these principles:

- The participant has the right to decide whether to participate in the study and may choose not to be part of the study, even after the interview ended.
- The participant is entitled to refuse to answer questions or choose to stop the interview without giving any explanation.
- When the material is processed and presented in the report, information about the participant that may lead to that he is recognized will be deleted or amended to ensure his anonymity.
- The material collected will be treated confidentially and stored in a manner so that no unauthorized person can gain access to it.
- The material from the interview will only be used in this study and when the study is completed, the material will be destroyed.

In order to be able to reproduce the contents of the interview as accurately as possible, the interview will be recorded, if the participant agrees,

Welcome to contact me or my supervisor Helena Johansson (helena.johansson@socwork.gu.se) if you have any questions.

.....

Malin Wiberg, student E-post: guswibma@student.gu.se

I have read and understood the information above.

City: Göteborg

Date:

.....

Signature, participant

Appendix 4: Respondent characteristics

Respondent	Age	Relationship status	Children	Custody and residential custody (if separated)	Housing	Occupation	College/university degree
R1	31	Divorced	Son, 8 years old	Sole custody, sole residential custody	Rental apartment	Student, adult education	No
R2	42	Cohabiting	Daughters, 4 and 12 years old, son 10 years old	Joint custody	Rental apartment,	Unemployed musician	No
R3	45	Married	Sons, 3 and 7 years old	Joint custody	Detached house	IT-consultant	Yes
R4	42	Married	Daughters, 12, 10 and 6 years old	Joint custody	Detached house	Student, University	Yes
R5	31	Married	Son, 4 years old	Joint custody	Detached house	Social worker in youth residential care	Yes
R6	40	Separated, cohabiting with new partner	Daughter, 3 years old	Joint custody, shared residential custody	Rental apartment	Out-reach worker	Yes
R7	40	Married	Sons, 5 and 7 years old	Joint custody	Rental apartment	Architect	Yes
R8	38	Single	Daughter, 5 years old	Joint custody, shared residential custody	Rental apartment	Inspector in the correctional system	Yes
R9	36	Cohabiting	Sons, 3 and 6 years old.	Joint custody	Rental apartment	Engineer	Yes
R10	36	Cohabiting	Daughter, 4 years old and son, 7 years old	Joint custody	Rental apartment	Course coordinator, cultural sector	No
R11	43	Married	Daughter, 3 years old	Joint custody	Rental apartment	Student, adult education, unemployed journalist	Yes
R12	44	Married, divorced from mother of the oldest child.	Daughters, 6, 8 and 13 years old	Joint custody. shared residential custody regarding the 13-year-old	Semi-detached house	Youth worker, coordinator	No