

Identity Implications of Being a Housefather in Belgium

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Paper prepared for the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics 17th Annual Meeting, Central European University and Budapest University of Economic Sciences, Budapest, June 30-July 2, 2005

Abstract

Even though much progress has been made in terms of equality between men and women in the last decades we can still observe that when it comes to the theme of sexual division of labour within families, women are still the ones who put their careers into brackets to take care of children. It is thus interesting to see that some men engage into practices that reverse that norm, by becoming househusbands. The paper will present a part of the results of a qualitative study of househusbands living in Belgium, focusing on the one hand on the factors that played a role in decision-making and on the other hand on the identity implications of being a househusband. We will try to show how these men give sense to their practices and how they deal with the lack of legitimacy and social valorisation they are confronted to.

1. Introduction

In Belgium, as well as in other European Countries, the increase of women's participation to the labour market has not been followed by a significant rise in men's involvement in the domestic and family lives.¹ The articulation of work and family often relies on women's retrieval from the labour market, be it for a short or longer period at full or part time.² In a certain number of couples anyway, the reconciliation of work and family lives is not based on women's, but men's retrieval from work, be it voluntary or not. In the context of our doctoral research we met and interviewed 22 men living in couple with a woman, and who declared they've stayed at home to take care of a child for at least 6 months, while their partner continued to be professionally active. Through the analysis of the discourses they produce about themselves and their practices, our aim is to understand how these men cope with their engagement into unconventional practices with regards to the sexual division of labour. In this article we will concentrate on three dimensions of our investigation: the self-reported processes that led these men to become housefathers; the costs related to challenging gender-norms ; and the strategies to cope with a lack of legitimacy.

2. Why these men became housefathers

2.1. A multiplicity of inter-related factors

It is striking to see in the interviews that it is not one, but a multiplicity of factors that contributed to these men's disengagement from the professional live in favour of the family. They combine in various ways in each situation and are not all mentioned in every case. The main factors are related to values, time and quality of life; the professional sphere; childcare services; the partner; a calculation of benefits and costs; and the relationship to the former generation.

The first set of factors relates to educational conceptions, and in particular the accent on the fact that it is the parents who should take care of their child, rather than professionals or the

¹ In Belgium, the 1999 National Institute of Statistics' Time Survey showed that women spend more time than men to family and domestic tasks (23h58 for 14h36 a week) and to childcare and childrearing (3h18 for 1h57 a week).

² For example, in 2000, in Belgium, 39.3% of women worked part time, and almost 50% of them identified family and/or childcare as the main reason for this. Among men, only 5,4% worked part time, and 18% of them identified the same reasons as women. 86% of people in parental leave are women. This leave allows each parent to stop working during 3 months, or to work half-time during 6 months, or to work four days a week during 15 months. (Fusulier, Merla, 2003 ; Deven, Merla, 2005).

grand-parents. It also relates to a series of discourses putting into questions the dominant values of capitalism, such as consumerism, concurrence and competition, or materialism, in favour of alternate values privileging human relations, social justice, empathy, the environment's respect, non-conformism... Many men put forward their desire to give priority to the quality of life and of the relationships within the family, both requiring the capacity to take the time to live together. It is a question of struggling against the daily stress caused by the difficulty to combine work and family lives and the pressure of incompatible time schedules or mental charge. These men want to take time to see their kids grow and create the basis for a rich and solid relationship.

Being in a poor-rewarding, low-valorised, sometimes precarious job ; having low or inexistent career prospects ; working in a stressing or conflicting environment ; and/or working in a demanding or tiring profession may encourage some men to seek in the family sphere the satisfaction and recognition they can't find at work. Their retrieval from the labour market sometimes also allows them to take time to think about themselves and their conception of what their life should be, while taking care of the kids. The incompatibility of working time schedules with family life, or the invasion of the latter by a professional activity which can prevent them from being physically or mentally available for the kids can nourish the feeling that they are missing something they will never be able to get back. Losing a job and having few chances to find another convenient one (or any one at all), or becoming an elderly worker, may also lead to a reconsideration of one's investment in the family, provided that the job loss is combined with other factors such as values. In many cases, the partner is strongly engaged into a professional activity where she feels appreciated and professionally and/or financially recognised, with good career prospects and job security. This can also play an important role in the decision to stay at home, especially when the men's situation is different. In some cases the parents could not find someone to take care of their kids during the day, the evening, holidays or in case of illness of the child, because of a lack of places in a crèche or other day-care services, of their financial cost (especially in the case of large families), or because they couldn't rely on a network of friends and relatives in case of emergency.

In almost every case, the partner contributed to the decision-taking. This contribution could go from a simple acceptance of the idea that the men might stay at home to become the primary caretaker, to explicit demands in this sense.

Several men put in balance, alone or with their partner, the benefits and costs of their retrieval from work. They compared on the one hand the loss of salary (sometimes slightly compensated by time-credit, parental leave or unemployment benefits) and on the other hand

all the costs related to the externalisation of childcare and domestic work when it was the case, to travels from home to work, to income taxes, to the purchase of prepared meals etc., that is to say of all the costs related to their professional activity and the lack of temporal availability for childcare, domestic work, cooking, renovating the house and so on. In many cases the financial loss seemed minimal compared to the improvement of the quality of life, despite the change of lifestyle. Some fathers even said they were in fact gaining money. Finally, feelings about the relationship with their own parents were sometimes crucial. Many men had positive memories of their mother, who often was a housewife or the primary caretaker. On the other hand, some of the men we met never knew their own father, hadn't seen him a lot, or were disappointed by the quality of their relationship. Staying at home to take care of their children is then a way for them to become more implied in the father-child relationship and to avoid reproducing the behaviour of their own fathers.

2.2. Inscription in the history of life: from an old desire to a sudden change

The factors we presented above do not explain by themselves why those men became housefathers at a certain time of their existence. It is possible to locate the stories on a continuum ranking from the description of the break as the realization of an old desire, sometimes already expressed during the teenage years, to take care of children and give the priority to family over work, to the happening of a sometimes sudden event (the loss of a job, a illness, an accident, an unexpected pregnancy) which disrupts habits and invites the person to consider the investment in family life in a new perspective. In the first case, the realization becomes possible when the right conditions are finally met, such as the access to a secure job offering generous entitlement to a career break or time-credit, the promotion of the partner providing a satisfying level of earnings to the family, or the end of a short-term contract. Between these two extreme situations we can find a series of stories testifying a progressive evolution of conceptions, sometimes as the family slowly grows. These three modalities are illustrated by the following pieces of interviews :

Serge : « But pff, already since I was a teenager, I had told myself that if I founded a family and we could afford it, someone would have to stay at home to raise the kids. It would be better than seeing them in a crèche and never seeing their parents. (...) even before I got married, I told her, I said : « listen, if we have several kids, it would be better that one of us stays at home », and I immediately saw it would be me.»

Armand : « We had the idea, we told each other that from the moment we wanted a third child, well it was whether the crèches... (...) Well I'm born in a large family, my wife is born in a large family, we have the habit and not the disgust of family so it was a bit normal to stop working. »

Hervé: « From my point of view, if I am an housefather today, it is a bit by facility, it is because I have, I had an interim job which lasted 7-8 months and then one day the company stopped, ceased its activities and so I told myself, what am I going to do, start again searching a job? I had a little boy and we had to pay for the crèche... so I told myself, oh never mind, I'll stay at home and take care of him... »

3. Confrontation to gender norms

Today, it is not always easy for a man as well as for a woman to be a houseparent. We will concentrate here on the difficulties the fathers of ours ample reported, and in particular on those they think to be linked to the fact that they are men. For the “sake” of the analysis we have separated them into three distinct clusters, but in reality they overlap each other and are closely connected. These clusters are the following : calls-to-order in day-to-day interactions ; consequences of gendered public spaces ; and gendered social networks.

3.1. Calls-to-order in day-to-day interactions

The men in our sample reported to be regularly confronted to remarks and negative reactions from people, irrespective of their gender, degree of intimacy, age or social class, reminding them that a man ought to be professionally active and provide for his family. Grégoire reported us the following reaction: « With my mother-in-law for instance it's really been a total emptiness. From the moment I stopped working, it's... And still now anyway, she doesn't consider me at all. (...) still it's from times to times remarks with the kids « your mam has no choice but to work to feed you » and stuff like that (...) what bothers her is that it is my wife who earns the money. » Beyond the function of breadwinner, men's “assignation” to salaried work influences the relations some of these fathers develop with other men. It seems that professional work plays a central role in the identity construction and relationships of many men. As Grégoire outlines: « Between men it's difficult not to, how could I say ?, not to create a positive image through work. You can do anything, from the moment that you do a job, even if it's a stupid manual job or something, it is rewarding anyway. From the moment that you stay at home well it's... ». The very fact that a man can stay at home and feel happy

is sometimes experienced as a threat. As Philippe notices: « I think that people from my generation who are friends and stuff like that, they know me well and so they don't worry but somehow they are a bit upset themselves. The fact that I do not work and that I feel good (...) it's more a concern, a bit as if you see a person in a wheelchair, you fear a bit to find yourself in a wheelchair too. (...) I think that when you find yourself being a man and saying « I'm not working and I am happy not to work », it is the same as to say « I am a man but not only because I work » so, I have friends, I think many of my friends are journalists, that's what makes them men in the first place, they are journalists. So figuring out that they could lose their job, hum, it's a great loss of identity for them. » It should be noted that several fathers insist on the fact that today's norm involves men as well as women's primary investment in a professional activity. For Brice, « The situation in Belgium is not good, for women as well as for men. Our model of society is that both parents have to work. (...) We are focused on a « work » mentality here. » Anyway, even though women's work is not put in question anymore, in cases where a family is opposed to the externalisation of childcare, it is the mother who is expected to take a break to take care of the kids. The fathers in our sample often ear remarks insisting on the fact that it is their partner who should have stopped working rather than them. Their skills are also put into question : they must prove their capacity to take care of a child properly. They must also cope with the idea that they don't really use their time for this and for domestic work, but for leisure or just for doing nothing. The reactions Serge is confronted to provide a good example: « I became the slacker of the street for instance. Maybe not for the young, those of my age or who are younger, but there's quite a lot of retired persons, I know well that I have echoes, I have feedbacks, pff saying that "it's a scandal, he stays at home, doing nothing, it's not normal at his age...»». Childcare remains women's prerogative, and it's sometimes difficult just to imagine that a man can effectively take it in charge. In the sector of early childhood, for some professionals (nurses, teachers, childminders and nannies, paediatricians) the mother remains the parent of reference, even when she's not present. Samuel experienced this kind of situation in a maternity hospital : « I met and was less welcomed by less-experienced people or, how could I say? More conservative, who could not imagine this situation a single moment (...) and with a tendency to talk to the mother rather than to both parents or only to the father in some cases. And so, to see a little bit..., to be staggered, surprised, and even to see a certain reluctance to the presence of a man in a hospital room. It's happened once at the maternity hospital. » A certain number of childhood professionals, but also parents, friends and others think that mothers only are able to take care of a child, and refuse to make some room for the father. Yvan's

mother-in-law's reaction exemplifies this resistance to change : « I think she remains more in, in, what ? A very classic framework where it is the mother who knows or stuff like that. I can't be asked anything, if my opinion is required on something for the kids she says « hé ! » ».

3.2. Gendered public spaces

As several researchers showed, public spaces are not neutral in terms of gender. Some places are predominantly occupied or allocated to women or men, be it permanently or at different times of the day. In some districts the spaces attributed to children and their care (playgrounds, spaces in front of school doors at noon or 3 p.m, daycentres for parents and their children...) are almost exclusively occupied by women, as well as commercial centres or shops, depending on the products they sell or the time of the day. The presence of a man in these locations, alone or with his kids, may seem strange. This is explained by Laurent in the following passage: « Hum, it is true that, and especially in V., well, you may not know it very well but V. is very much, hum, a kind of meeting-place for the old bourgeoisie, with its huge principles and so on. So househusbands, I never investigated that but I think there must not be dozens of them (...) And it is true that if feel even more alien in this microcosm when I am walking around or... I remember one of the first times I went out with the kids, we went to a playground which is nearby (...) it's true that I really felt like an alien when I arrived in this playground, where they were all staring at me etc. » This enhanced visibility and the reactions it provokes reminds these men that they are investing a place and a role which is not devoted to their gender. The same applies to them when they go with their children in male spaces. As Serge says: « For instance, when I go to the « Brico »³ or if I order materials, or... it's exceptional to see a man with a small, a small child in his arms ». The configuration of public spaces, and in the inscription of spaces reserved for children in female places in particular, such as the presence of spaces to change diapers in ladies toilets, is another reminder of gender norms.

3.3. Gendered social networks

The last set of difficulties fathers report concerns the feeling of loneliness that comes out of many stories. This feeling of isolation is rooted in particular features : on the one hand they may encounter difficulties to integrate into networks and groups of housemothers organised

³ Brico is the name of a famous chain of do-it-yourself stores.

around the school or in a specific neighbourhood, and on the other hand they sometimes feel a distance with other men and hardly maintain their presence in male groups constituted around a sporting activity or a hobby. Several elements can explain those problems. In the first case, it can be the resistance of some women to men's presence in their groups, the fear of men that their attempts would be interpreted as seduction strategies, or the difficulty to adapt to subjects of conversation they are not used to and comfortable with. Laurent sums here what we can find in several interviews : « And it's true that you are very lonely. Especially as a househusband. A housewife, hum, well, (...) be it just to do some activities with other mothers, well, it's more automatic in a way. To do between mothers with children. Hum I don't know, I have a friend there in P., (...) for example every Wednesday she's alone with her kids. (...) But immediately, well, the question would not be raised, but here, I am a man, she is a woman, and you see she's married, well she has children ... (...) well I can't call a woman to invite her to go to an exhibition with her and her kids. (...) Whereas it's different for a woman, yes. And somehow she will enjoy more these different activities because she knows she's with a friend, and that if the children are there well she can talk with her girlfriend, etc. » In the second case, it's the discrepancy between the life they live – which is highly centred on childcare – and the life of other men – which is highly centred on their professional activity – which can hinder the relationships, for instance through conversations. It is the case of Grégoire : « Even sometimes it's easier for me to talk with women rather than men. (...) The other daddies, well pff, except from talking of work, which I'm totally out, I'm not interested at all in talking about soccer, so you see what I mean ? So sometimes I feel a bit dropped out. (...) I do need to have sportive relationships for instance with man anyway, to have a social contact with men. But then at that time the, the dialogue often remains 100% centred on sports, so it's still something I know quite well and I don't have problems with that. From the moment we start talking about something else it's... how can I say ? I feel less ...concerned, yes, I feel less concerned, I feel less involved in the discussion and maybe put aside. »

4. How housefathers cope with the lack of legitimacy they are confronted to

The fathers we met do not passively take the lack of legitimacy they are confronted to. They engage into discourses and practices that limit its impact on their self-images and self-esteem. Their relationship with the etiquette of “housefather” is a first illustration of such self-

protective processes, along with other discursive strategies and practices we will present in the following section.

4.1. “Housefather”: from identification to rejection

The relationship of many men to the etiquette of “housefather” is ambiguous and sometimes problematic. In some cases, fathers do identify with this term and use it to name their situation, stating they feel and assume being housefathers. This identification for themselves and in their relationships with others sometimes takes the form of a claim, as in the case of Brice who deliberately calls himself a housefather especially when he feels the person in front of him might be shocked. As he says: « (...) now when people ask me what I do for a living, I say I’m a housefather. And I think I do it on purpose to shock people (laughter)”. But in the majority of cases, fathers had a more ambiguous relation with the term. Some do identify with it, but are reluctant to use it in front of others. This leads them to modulate their discourses in function of the way they think the person in front of them will react. John describes this process: “It does depend on the person you speak to, and the other person maybe has a point. You know you sense the openness of the person who you are speaking to. And if the subject turns that way you can talk about it, but you know... (...) So in answer to your question, if somebody asked me, I probably would still not say that I’m a housefather. I would avoid the expression anyhow. But I would still tend to refer to my primary profession. And, but I would say that it’s in you know, it’s a pretty low level of activity at the moment. I would explain that you know I keep it, it’s on a part-time basis at the moment. ”. There are several ways to avoid saying the truth: refer to another status or a past situation; avoid the subject... The manipulation of information is sometimes facilitated by the separation of spheres of activity, as Grégoire explains: “(...) when I participated to cycling training courses or things like that, and when I met new people at that time, and I knew I would never see them in my family life, I didn’t say it ». The expected openness of interlocutors is not the only criteria used by fathers. The possible interference of the role of “housefather” with another role currently assumed in the interaction also influences the presentation of self. In the case of Joseph: “for instance well I don’t know, with a building contractor who’d come to work here, and I know that for him hum a housefather is not conceivable, well I won’t tell him. Well because he might set his face against it and see me differently and so the relationship I’d have with him as let’s say a project manager with him who is my employee, might be distorted or might become problematic. So then there’s no need to talk about it and that’s all you know.”

The fathers who do not identify with the etiquette of “housefather” are confronted to the problem of finding an alternative term to describe themselves. Their rejection of the term comes from the negative image which is associated with it. This is the case for John: “Hum well I don’t know whether I consider myself really... The housefather is a sort of awkward construction, term. And I don’t know what alternatives there are to it. I don’t know. I don’t know if there are alternatives in the literature. But when, I remember my father-in-law saying something about housefather and my immediate reaction was “I don’t like the sound of that”. But I don’t know whether it’s just the expression, the aesthetic reaction I had to the expression itself or whether it’s partly to the whole notion of being somebody who is simply there hum you know who stays at home and who is there for the children. I don’t know. I don’t know.” Accepting to name oneself a housefather would involve the reduction of one’s identity to this activity, which is something difficult to accept for some, like Yvan ; « Me, I am at home with the kids, I don’t identify, it’s not hum, it’s one of my aspects but I consider that I do other things.” Finally, a small group of fathers totally reject the term of housefather and identify to another status, related to their official status or which corresponds to the image they want to project. One will define himself as “a man in sabbatical leave”, another will say he’s a “mechanic on career break”.

4.2. Discursive Strategies to cope with a lack of legitimacy

All the fathers of our sample, irrespective of their relation with the etiquette of housefather, do develop discourses and attitudes that help them face and reduce the impact of criticism. In this presentation we will concentrate on five of them.

A first strategy we already mentioned above consists in the control of information. This control can be extended to the very physical presentation of the self in the course of interactions, even though it is hard to evaluate if it is consciously assumed or not. For example, during the interview, Colin described himself as a talkative person who knows all the mothers and teachers at school. But when he was asked what these people thought about the fact that he was a housefather he surprisingly answered that they didn’t know because he doesn’t talk about it and “as I like to do manual work I’m often wearing overalls. There’s often a little something to do at home or on my old cars, so I’m often wearing overalls I should say.”

A second strategy consists in the minimisation of the level of engagement in the “role” of housefather. As Berger and Luckmann showed in the case of radical, but temporary transformations, the coherence between the former reality and identity of people engaged in

new practices can be established from the very beginning by the affirmation of the final return to this reality and this identity⁴. Some fathers of our sample did engage in a similar process, be it in front of others or for themselves, by insisting on the limited duration of their engagement in time due to the type of leave they benefit from or the age of children. As Samuel says, “people that I know, I explain them if necessary that, well, honestly, let’s be objective. And objectively, people realise that it’s a totally exceptional situation due to small children, to young children, and not... and that’s it.”

A third strategy, which was identified in almost every interview, is to try to understand why negative reactions are expressed and find excuses to the detractors. These are sometimes presented as the unconscious victims of the dominant values and discourses, or as prisoners of their past education or of their social class. Detractors from older generations are often excused in discourses by the fact that, as John says about his mother, they: “come(s) from a different world, a different time and different set of assumptions”.

Self-criticism, a fourth strategy, may help prevent negative reactions or reduce their impact by expressing them in advance. When they outline negative aspects, fathers have the opportunity to develop arguments counter-balancing these critics and reducing their importance. Christophe is very much aware of this process. When he related the way people reacted to decision to stay at home, he outlined that “the first thing I said, and it’s a very clever way to avoid direct interpellations, is that I had doubts. In fact I said the truth. I said I doubted about my capacity to take care of a child, which is something I had never done before. But the circumstances were so that it was an occasion to do it.”

Finally, the last strategy consists in putting the focus on the advantages of the situation. The quality of the father-child relationship; the positive effects on the couple; the facilitation of the partner’s investment in her career; the diminution of stress; the improved quality of life; the sense of living an adventure, of being a pioneer, or of living in total accordance with one’s values etc. all contribute to make negative aspects appear minimal. For Joseph, the following experience justifies on its own all the sacrifices: “Yesterday one of my daughters sang me a song she had learned at school. So she sang it, and the last sentence said something like “and the children picked flowers in a prairie” and she said “picked flowers for their dad”. And then I said “but are you sure that’s what you sang at school?” And she said “oh no at school flowers were for the mam”. So that’s it.”

⁴ BERGER P., LUCKMANN T., « La construction sociale de la réalité », Armand Collin, Paris, 1996, 288 p.

4.3 Engaging in “appropriate” practices

Many fathers do engage in practices that help them keep a “normal” image of themselves, as men. It is especially the case when these activities are considered as masculine, such as driving the school bus. These practices also support the idea that these men can’t be reduced to the role of housefathers, but rather that they have multiple identities. Several fathers of our sample are involved in a hobby (photography, painting, massages, old cars, coaching etc.) they often present and regard as a kind of professional activity, even though it may not be remunerated or regular. These hobbies help them preserving a link with the “world of work” and keep in touch with the professional dimension of their identity. For Christophe: “Staying at home meant being professionally active without pay. But still to be in a work project. (...) I was not remunerated or nothing, but that didn’t mean that you could not have projects. Just to keep something related to the professional identity. Myself as a worker”.

Some activities play an essential role in projects of reinsertion into the labour market. It is the case with photography in Yvan’s projects: “What I’m trying to do for the moment is to prepare things so that at a certain time, when she will go to school, well I’ll already be on my way. I’ll already have a diploma, an access to the profession. Hum the exhibitions and “reportages” we already sold well are first steps. I’m trying to manage hum slowly not a real career but to be able to do something after.” Finally, hobbies provide them with sources of self-esteem, social valorisation and social contacts.

5. Conclusion

Despite different cultural, social and political contexts, our results are consistent with other studies on housefathers or involved fatherhood conducted in countries like Australia, the United States or Scandinavia.⁵ They all show that today, men who take distances with the sphere of salaried work in favour of the sphere of family still have to cope with strong barriers. The situation of housefather is an extreme case, and its location at the margin of

⁵ See for instance GERSON K.: *No Man’s Land. Men’s Changing Commitments to Family and Work*, Basic Books, New York, 1993, 366 p., GRBICH C.F., « Male primary caregivers in Australia : the process of becoming and being », *Acta Sociologica*, Vol 40, 1997, pp. 335-355; SMITH C.D., « « Men don’t do this sort of thing”. A case study of the social isolation of househusbands”, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol 1, N°2, October 1998, pp. 138-172, BRANDTH B. and KVANDE E.: “Reflexive fathers: negotiating parental leave and working life”, *Gender, Work & Organization* 9(2), 2002, pp.186-203; BRANDTH B. and KVANDE E. : “Father presence in child care”, in JENSEN I.A.M and MCKEE L.(ed): *Children and the Changing Family: Between transformation and negotiation*, Routledge Falmer, London, 2003.

society helps bring to the surface hidden and informal social representations and norms about women's and men's role in the spheres of work and family. These may contribute to the understanding of the gap between discourses encouraging and enhancing men's participation to childcare and gender equality, and the reality of practices.

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