

Background paper for FIRA Keynote Address

Men and Mothering¹

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I have had a longstanding interest in men and mothering. It began over fifteen years ago when I first read *Maternal Thinking* by feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick. Pregnant with my first child and in my first year of my doctoral studies at Cambridge University, I was intrigued by how Ruddick wrote about men and mothering in the form of a noun (men *are* mothers) and as a verb (men can, *and do, mother*). In invoking mothering as both identity and as practice, she writes: “Briefly, a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I *mean* ‘her or his’” (1995, 40). This conceptualization of mothers as a group of gender-less persons and the practice of mothering as one that could be equally embraced by women or men was one that stayed with me as a constant question, preoccupation, and intellectual obsession through a period of five years, wherein I wrote my doctoral dissertation and gave birth to three children. There were, however, three particular incidents that heightened this obsession.

My interest in men and mothering was heightened in my first year of motherhood as I engaged in, and observed, sharing the care of my daughter with my husband. I was especially intrigued by the reaction he received when he took her to a local moms and tots playgroup. While he was assured that all parents were invited, the welcome he received was a cold one at best; each time he walked into the church basement with our daughter he felt like he was entering a club reserved for mothers only and was viewed with a strange combination of suspicion, disdain, and at times congratulatory amazement. After a few weeks he gave up, deciding that it was easier to care on his own without this added stress of constant peer judgment. As I watched him trying to blend into this mothering venue, I was intrigued by how gender seemed to matter, at least in some community sites, when it comes to just who is doing the mothering.

I also actively pondered the issue of men and mothering when, about three years later, I settled into a full-term twin pregnancy. Waiting impatiently through the last weeks of a long and large phase of carrying two infants within me, I watched my husband care for our daughter who was then four years old. They played constantly while I sat in our living room window, full belly weighing me down, reading tomes of feminist theory on gender equality and gender differences. I watched him teach her to ride a bike, swing on the simple swing set he had made for her on our cheery tree, and constantly play together in our front yard. He cooked her meals, bathed her, comforted her, read to her, and lovingly tucked her into bed at night. I asked myself: Was this father mothering this child?

¹ Please note that my keynote lecture on maternal gatekeeping is being revised for submission. If you are interested in a copy of that paper, please e-mail Andrea at andreadoucet@sympatico.ca

Finally, Ruddick's assertions on men and mothering returned once again as I recovered slowly from an emergency caesarean, breastfed twin babies for 10 months, and grieved each stage as they physically let go of me and the centrality of my maternal body in their little lives. In the years that followed, during the many walks with my children in Cambridge, England, and then later in Halifax and Ottawa in Canada, I noticed how there were more and more fathers standing in schoolyards and walking with children in parks in the early morning hours. Who were these fathers? How did they come to be here? Why were there suddenly so many of them? Were they being warmly welcomed into the local versions of the moms and tots group that had coldly excluded my husband a decade earlier? I constantly wondered: were these men mothering?

In order to grapple with this issue of whether men could be mothers and whether men could engage in mothering, I first turned to social scientists and novelists to make sense of what mothering is. I found that there is a fair bit of consensus in on how mothering is linked to the responsibility for children. Ruddick, for example, defines a mother as "a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives" (1995, 40). This deeply knotted bond between mothering and responsibilities has been constantly commented upon in fiction as well as in classic works on mothering. Writers such as Tillie Olsen (1961), Toni Morrison (1987), Doris Lessing (1988), and Carol Shields (2002) have captured how mothers, individually or collectively, take on the burdens, anguish, joy, and weight of children's lives. Adrienne Rich has written about how the "physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens" and that whatever her social location, "it is she, finally who is held accountable for her children's health, the clothes they wear, their behavior at school, their intelligence and general development" (Rich 1986, 52-53). Jane Lazarre also depicts the weight of "this motherhood and its hold on us" (1976, 211). Researchers across the social sciences have made similar claims on the basis of empirical studies in diverse historical, socio-cultural contexts, arguing that, in spite of increases in fathering involvement in many countries, the persistent connection between women and domestic responsibility remains. That is, across time, ethnicities, social class, and culture, it is overwhelmingly mothers who organize, plan, orchestrate, and worry about children¹. While I was in agreement with writers and researchers in their claim that mothering is the responsibility for children and with the argument that domestic responsibility remains chronically gendered, I also wanted to know more about what these responsibilities looked like in practice. Moreover, I wanted to know if and how men took on such responsibilities.

In order to explore this issue of men, mothering and domestic responsibilities, I conducted an ethnography of primary caregiving fathers at the beginning of this new millennium. At the center of my project on men and mothering was an in-depth qualitative interview project conducted with 118 Canadian fathers (stay-at-home dads and single fathers) and 14 heterosexual couples. As an ethnography, it drew on multiple sources from which I have constructed knowledge about fathers: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, couple interviews, Internet surveys, as well as a wide intellectual, academic and personal immersion in mothering and fathering. Over the

course of four years (2000-2004), 101 fathers were interviewed one to three times (62 in person, 27 by telephone, 12 in focus groups) while a further 17 participated through Internet correspondence. With the exception of only three interviews, I met and conducted *all* of the interviews with fathers. The study gained the participation of forty single fathers (25 sole-custody, 12 joint-custody, and 3 widowers); fifty-three stay-at-home fathers (at home for at least one year); thirteen fathers who are both single and stay-at-home fathers; four fathers on parental leave (including one father living in a same-sex partnership); and eight shared caregiving fathers (mainly gay fathers and visible minority fathers who are recent immigrants to Canada). Fathers came from a wide range of occupations, social classes, and education levels and included fifteen fathers from visible ethnic minorities, four First Nations fathers, and nine gay fathers. In addition to fathers, fourteen women were interviewed through couple interviews with their stay-at-home male partners.ⁱⁱ

The location of the study is Canada at the beginning of this century (see Doucet 2006a). As with many other Western industrialized countries, the Canadian social and economic terrain is characterized by the rising labor force participation of mothers of young children, a growing social institution of single fatherhood (either through joint or sole custody), and gradual increases in the numbers of stay-at-home fathers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Researching men and mothering

My research on men and mothering builds on the work of many other scholars who have researched fathering, most notably on the work of a small but growing group of researchers who have studied shared caregiving fathers and fathers who are primary caregivers.^{iv}

All of these studies take the position that these fathers are mothering.^v The most frequently cited proponent of the men and mothering position is Sara Ruddick who writes that: "A man or woman is a mother in my sense of the term, only if he or she acts upon a social commitment to nurture, protect and train children" (229-30).

In the second edition of her book, Ruddick does acknowledge that there is a slight discomfiture between men and mothering, both for men "who insist that they are not mothers" (1995, xiii) and for women, for whom "a genderless mother trivializes both the distinctive costs of mothering to women as well as the effects, for worse or for better, of femininity on maternal practice and thought" (xiii). Nevertheless, in rethinking her position six years after the first publication of her acclaimed book, Ruddick maintains that men "*really can and often do in engage in mothering work*" (xiii).

In drawing on Ruddick's work on men and mothering, it is important to locate her claims in the larger moral, epistemological, philosophical, and political aims that inform her eloquent and persuasive writing about mothering. One of her goals is to demonstrate that the moral and epistemological perspectives developed through maternal practices can form the basis for a peace politics and a broad social critique. As she puts it, "maternal thinking is a 'revolutionary discourse' that has been marginal and peripheral but that, as a central discourse, could transform dominant, so-called normal ways of thinking" (1995,

268) and lead to a possible “world organised by the values of caring labour” (135). Ruddick’s larger project resonates with earlier work by Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977), who share similar concerns about the fundamental imbalances that occur in a society when one gender does the metaphoric “rocking of the cradle” while the other gender is engaged in “the ruling of the world” (Dinnerstein, 1977, 27).

Ruddick’s second aim is to challenge and disrupt the binary distinction between mothers and fathers and the taken-for-granted ideological and discursive lapse between mother/carer/homemaker and father/provider/breadwinner. In her words: “The question I want to address is whether there is anything in the ‘nature’ of children, women, or men that requires a sexual division of parental labor even in postpatriarchal societies” (1997, 206). This is a point that has been raised by many scholars, although from very divergent theoretical and political positions. The position that gender should not matter in parenting is grounded in the basic tenets of equality feminism and liberal feminism that underpin most research on gender divisions of labor and on primary caregiving fathers (see Doucet 1995). That is, most of these studies are informed by the view that gender differences are to be avoided and that gender equality is the gold standard to which couples should strive.vi As Francine Deutsch recently put it in her work on parenting, “*Equal sharers, of course, were the stars of this study*” (1999, 7). Meanwhile, from the opposite end of the theoretical and political spectrum, a gender equality argument is also made by some fathers’ rights groups that have taken up discourses of equality and gender-neutral parenting to reinforce their claims in child custody cases for greater access to children (see Boyd 2003 Mandell 2002).

Theoretical moves to separate mothering from the gender of the person who does the work of mothering is, furthermore, consistent with longstanding postmodern and poststructural critiques of concepts such as woman/man and mother/father as homogeneous or internally consistent terms, identities, or experiences (e.g. Butler 1990). While, theoretically speaking, it is useful to deconstruct mothering and fathering as distinct practices and identities, my argument in this paper is that they nevertheless recur at the level of community and interhousehold practices as embodied identities, and within social relations and discourses. Moreover, as captured in Rich’s (1986) oft-repeated observation, there is a distinction between the experience and the institution of mothering. As well detailed by Selma Sevenhuijsen, motherhood as an institution is expressed differently from fatherhood in “cultural representations, ideals of child-rearing, legal discourses, medical-technological inventions, the regulation of labour and care, norms of professionalism and the possibility of being able to combine these with care, a new canon of novels about the relation between mothers and daughters (and daughters and fathers) and, last but not least, the way in which care is valued as an aspect of the human condition” (Sevenhuijsen 1998, 26; see also DiQuinzio 1999). While the social institutions of motherhood and fatherhood are changing in many countries through social policy measures and rising employment rates of mothers, experiences of mothering – as embodied, relational, and moral– remain distinct for women and men. Moreover, as highlighted in the conclusion of my paper, there is too much at stake in the men and mothering position to pretend, or hope, that these differences can be easily resolved.

Men and maternal thinking

At the center of Ruddick's work is her argument that mothers "are committed to meeting three demands that define maternal work" (1995, 17-25, 65, 123). These demands are "preservation, growth and social acceptability" and Ruddick also states that "to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance and training" (17). As explored below, each of these maternal demands can also be framed as responsibilities.

Preservation (emotional responsibility)

Ruddick defines preservation as protective care: "it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care, rather than abuse, indifference, or flight" (1995, 19). Protective care has strong resonance with the vast body of feminist work on the ethic of care in which care is defined partly as "knowledge about others' needs," which the carer acquires through "attentiveness to the needs of others" (Tronto 1989, 176-78; see also Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2003). Ruddick's assertion that men can mother is indeed confirmed by a large body of research attesting to how fathers can be nurturing, affectionate, and responsive to their children (Coltrane 1996; Dienhart 1998; Dowd 2000). While these findings about fathers' capable nurturing also appear in my study, my research also highlights how fathers draw attention to several alternative kinds of nurturing. Four kinds of paternal nurturing will be mentioned here.

First, many cross-cultural longitudinal studies have demonstrated that fathers use play as a way of connecting with their children (Coltrane 1996; Lamb 2000); this finding is very evident in fathers' narratives of caring and represents a dominant pattern in fathers' relating to infants and young children. Second, the overwhelming majority of fathers in my study referred to how they, in the words of Aaron, "made a point of going out every day" with their children, doing a lot of physical activities, and being very involved with their children's sports (see Brandth and Kvande 1998; Plantin, Sven-Axel, and Kearney 2003; Doucet 2005).

A third dominant form of fatherly nurturing is found in the encouragement of risk-taking. Whether their children are exploring on the play structure in the park or learning through physically falling or intellectually failing, most fathers express that they are more likely to encourage children trying things out on their own. Bernard, for example, a gay father who shares custody of his son with two lesbian mothers, talks about his approach to his son's outdoor play: "If he were climbing a tree, the mothers would be sitting back and watching him and then yelling out 'that's far enough' (whereas) I would be close by him helping him to make the decision about how far he can go."

Fourth and finally, a widening of this issue of risk-taking is found in how fathers actively promote children's independence. Recurring, everyday examples in fathers' accounts include strongly encouraging their kids to be involved in housework, make their own lunches, engage in independent play, tie their own laces (shoes or skates), and carry

their own backpacks to school. As expressed by Alistair, who stayed at home for a year with his first daughter: “I might be less likely to go out of my way to help the kids if it's something they can do themselves.”

Growth (community responsibility)

The second characteristic of mothering, according to Ruddick is growth. She writes: “The demand to preserve a child's life is quickly supplemented by the second demand, to nurture its emotional and intellectual growth. Children grow in complex ways, undergoing radical qualitative as well as quantitative changes from childhood to adulthood” (1995, 19). She also recognizes that others are interested in these growth processes: fathers, lovers, teachers, doctors, therapists, coaches. Nevertheless, as she points out, “typically a mother assumes the primary task of maintaining conditions of growth; it is a mother who considers herself and is considered by others to be primarily responsible for arrested or defective growth” (1995, 20).

Although Ruddick recognizes that others are interested in children's growth, I would go further to emphasize that others actually partake in ensuring children's growth, partly through coordinating, balancing, negotiating, and orchestrating those others who are involved in children's lives. Mothering thus involves not only a domestically based set of tasks and responsibilities but also a responsibility that is community-based, interhousehold, and interinstitutional (Doucet 2000, 2001). This labor of mothers and others appears in varied guises in a wide body of feminist research that highlights kin work (di Leonardo 1987), motherwork (Collins 1994), household service work (Sharma 1986), and the work of love and ritual (Smith-Rosenberg 1975).

Do fathers take on community responsibility for children? Do they meet this maternal demand of facilitating children's social growth? One avenue for exploring these questions is to look to fathers' creation and maintenance of community networks, as these networks often establish relations that tie into all other aspects of community responsibility. More specifically, with infants and preschool children, community playgroups are one of the main forums in which parents of young children make connections with other parents. Yet many stay-at-home fathers face difficulties gaining full acceptance in these playgroups.vii Peter, a stay-at-home father of two young boys, highlights how community networking has “gotten easier” over the course of being home for six years, although “to me as a man, that was a pretty alien environment and *it continues to be.*”

Thus, how do fathers network around children, and how do they facilitate or promote children's growth and social development? While fathers are beginning to form networks as they stand in sites where children cluster – schoolyards, playgrounds, and at the doors of music or karate lessons – there are several other ways that fathers form networks, two of which are mentioned here.

First, fathers connect with mothers in extra-domestic spaces. If many fathers find it difficult, at least initially, to attend mother-dominated community playgroups, other fathers readily offer their own observations on the possible tensions involved with

meeting up in other women's homes. Many stay-at-home fathers invariably mention this as an issue for themselves, for their mothering friends, and for the spouses involved. Aaron points to the challenges involved in the fact that "I work in a female world," while Owen, at home for ten years, says: "I would go to other women's houses. But I was always conscious of how it would be read." Claus, a computer engineer who left work with a high-tech company to stay at home with four preschool sons, astutely points to the advantages for stay-at-home fathers in busy urban settings or enclaves rather than those living in mainly residential suburbs: "We are very lucky in this community because it has a rich infrastructure, lots of public places you can go, with kid-centered activities—parks, playgrounds, coffee shops. Where there isn't that infrastructure, you would have to go to people's houses more. And that's tough... because it just doesn't look good to be in private with one other mom."

Building on traditional areas of male connection such as sports (Messner 1990) second avenue for fathers networking is around their children's sports. While typically not included in studies that look at parents and networking around children, this is a venue through which fathers comfortably connect with other fathers and link dominant masculine interests such as sports with that of networking and facilitating children's social, developmental, and physical growth. While fathers are increasingly becoming involved in children's sports activities, many fathers nevertheless point to how the "alien environment" of mother-dominated social settings, particularly with young children, still leaves them feeling either excluded or marginalized. Some of these sentiments relate, in turn, to the moral responsibilities of parenting.

Social acceptability (moral responsibility)

Ruddick writes that the "third demand on which maternal practice is based is made not by children's needs but by the social groups of which a mother is a member. Social groups require that mothers shape their children's growth in acceptable ways" (1995, 21). These expectations for mothering bring into play "the criteria of acceptability [that] consists of the group values that a mother has internalized as well of the values of group members whom she feels she must please" (21). Who are these group members, and how will a mother please them? First, the majority are women. Second, the social acceptability of fathers as mothers relates to how they act in concurrence with deeply engrained moral responsibilities and with wider societal expectations of them as women and men, as mothers and fathers, as earners and carers.viii

Each and every stay-at-home father interviewed in my study refers in some way to the moral responsibilities he feels weighing on him to be a family breadwinner or at least to earn some part of the family wages. As expressed by Andy, an Italian-Canadian stay-at-home father of two: "The only problem I have is finances, not pulling my weight financially because that was ingrained in me. The man goes out to work and brings in the money". Jesse, a freelance artist and stay-at-home father of a preschool daughter, also points to how these perceptions are "so ingrained in us" through men's upbringing, how it "can weigh on you," and that "it's a guy thing."

In mentioning “a guy thing” these fathers are referring to the connections between dominant or hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 2001 Messner 1997) and paid work, and the associated sense of vertigo they feel when they relinquish earning as a primary part of their identity (Waddington, Chritcher, and Dicks 1998). More specifically, stay-at-home fathers visibly struggle with the disruption, or the readjustment, of their connection to paid work partly because of the strong link between caring and providing for men. As one father, Kyle, puts it: “There's a certain male imperative to be bringing in money, to feel like you are actually caring for your family, a sense of providing”.

In addition to fathers being judged on their earning capacity within families, they are also sometimes judged negatively as carers. Within communities, there is a covert level of surveillance as men are scrutinized as carers of children. While many examples within fathers’ interviews occur across different parenting sites, the most frequently mentioned were women-centered postnatal venues (e.g. community centers and schoolyards) and girls’ sleepovers. With regard to the latter, single fathers of teenage girls feel particularly scrutinized. Girls’ sleepovers are the window through which many men express their awareness of the fact that they have to be very careful around preteen and teenage girls. As Ryan, a military general and sole-custody father of two, puts it: “I have purposefully not had anybody to sleep over, especially girls, because I’m really leery of the possibility that somebody might think something bad.”

Despite many good intentions, men and women’s lives as carers and earners are cut with deeply felt moral and social scripts about what women and men should do within and outside of household life.^{ix} Although there has been movement around these moral dilemmas (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Gerson 2002), they nevertheless exist as strong structural backdrops and ideological scripts to mothering and fathering.

Summary: Fathers and Mothering Responsibilities

This paper, thus far, has unpacked and explored the question of whether men take on mothering through three maternal demands, or responsibilities, that are central to mothering. With regard to emotional responsibility, my study of men as primary caregivers provides a partially affirmative answer to the question of men and mothering by highlighting how men care and nurture in ways that very much resemble what are considered maternal ways of responding. Nevertheless, at the edges of these sometimes symmetrical practices, gender differences play out in mothers’ and fathers’ overall style of nurturing, with fathers emphasizing fun, playfulness, physical activities, sports, an outdoors approach, and the promotion of independence and risk taking with older children. With regard to community responsibility, mothers, in both joint-custody and stay-at-home-father families, still take on most of the organizing, networking, and orchestration around children’s lives. Yet some fathers take on this responsibility through connecting with mothers in extra-domestic settings and through being involved in children’s sports. The third and final responsibility, that of moral responsibility for children, is very much tied up with the “shoulds” and “oughts” of what it currently means to be a good or proper mother and a good or responsible father. In spite of dramatic changes in the past few decades in women’s and men’s lives as workers and as carers,

these changes have not been fully felt at the level of ideology nor in gendered normative assumptions around earning and caring.

Discussion

Within the narratives of 118 fathers (and fourteen mothers), at least five key reasons emerge for gender divisions in parental responsibilities or, in Ruddick's terms, the taking on of maternal tasks of preservation, growth, and social acceptability. These are explored below (see also Doucet, 2006a).

Growing up male: "I grew up as a guy"

The tendency for fathers to exhibit traditionally masculine qualities in their caring is not surprising given that most boys grow up in cultures that encourage sport, physical and emotional independence, and risk-taking (Messner 2002). Alistair, a writer and father of two daughters, points to lessons in masculinity learned on the playing fields of boyhood: "We were out playing ball hockey, and Vanessa got hurt. It is the kind of accident that happens in ball hockey, and someone gets hurt, you kind of stand around like a bunch of male apes and you kick them gently and say 'well can you play or not?' We're not a great nurturing bunch.... There was my daughter and she was hurt in the face, and you know I was concerned. But also this is ball hockey and you are learning certain things when you do that."

Devon, a technician and a sole-custody father of a seven-year-old son, comments that he promotes risk-taking because he "grew up as a guy. We did dangerous things. That's what little boys do." In contrast to Devon, as well as to her own husband Peter, Linda takes a more cautious parenting approach, rooted partly in having "grown up as a girl": "I don't know if boys take more physical risks than girls. I suspect that they do. Having grown up as a girl, you know you see the boys on the highest bars at the park, or riding their bikes on one wheel. I think that has some bearing on it."

Most sociologists view such statements as evidence of socialization. Yet, it is more than this. As Patricia Yancey Martin has recently written, gendering processes are deeply ingrained so that they "become almost automatic": "Gendered practices are learned and enacted in childhood and in every major site of social behavior over the life course, including in school, intimate relationships, families, workplaces, houses of worship, and social movements. In time, like riding a bicycle, gendering practices become almost automatic" (Martin 2003, 352). Within such automatic gendering processes, there remains the question of how active fathering affects daughters. That is, will daughters who "are learning certain things when...playing ball hockey" also grow up to exhibit these traditional masculine qualities?

Men's friendships "It's just not so easy for a guy"

A second factor promoting gender differences in parenting is found in gendered approaches to friendships. As argued within some of the research on men's friendships, they have traditionally been relatively sparse in comparison to those of women and are often formed around work-related interests, characterized by competition and

homophobia, and fueled by a lack of intimacy or a belief in the lack of intimacy (Seidler 1992, 1997; Walker 1994). In my sample of 118 fathers, across class, ethnicity, and rural and urban areas, the overwhelming majority of fathers comment on the fact that the patterns of friendships and connection necessitated by the daily work of care are often beyond the scope of their own experiences of friendships with men. For example, Roger, a stay-at-home father of a preschool son, points to the residues of male friendship patterns: “I’ve been out to the library and I’ve seen a guy pushing a baby carriage, and it’s just not so easy for a guy to go up to another guy and say, ‘Hey, how old is she? Do you want to be friends?’”

Fathering and embodiment: “I am very nervous about that kind of thing”

Fathers’ narratives reveal that there are different social perceptions of fathers’ and mothers’ acceptable physicality with children. While the early years of fathering infants and preschool children provide fathers with ample opportunity to freely hug and hold their children, many fathers of preteen and teenage boys and girls note that they are more closely scrutinized. In relation to boys, Brendan, a sole-custodial father of four, draws the link between hegemonic masculinity and homophobia (Connell 1995, 2001). He says: “I mean I hug and kiss them, but it’s not the same. And frankly I’m not as comfortable hugging the big guys as the little guys. Like the older guys go ‘hey man!’ ... I mean we’re not homophobic, but it’s something you’re raised with.”

Similarly, most of the single fathers of preteen and teenage girls point to how public displays of close physical affection can be misinterpreted. Henry, a sole-custodial father, reflects on how he is always “nervous” and “conscious” of what he does around his thirteen-year old daughter because his actions may be misinterpreted: “As a single dad, all I have to do is breathe at the wrong time, or say the wrong thing in front of the wrong person. I am very conscious of that.”

The underlying theoretical explanations for such statements can be found in a growing feminist and sociological literature on embodiment and how in particular contexts and in particular times, embodiment can matter greatly (see Doucet, 2006b). When a father is attending to children – by cuddling, feeding, reading, bathing, or talking to them – gendered embodiment can be largely negligible. But at other times the social gaze of men’s movements with children is made all the more penetrating because it is tinged with suspicion and surveillance as they move in female-dominated community spaces. The sites where embodiment of fathers matters include recent versions of the moms and tots groups (community playgroups), schoolyards, classrooms, and other female-dominated venues as well as instances when single fathers host girls’ sleepover parties. Yet bodies should also be viewed as contingent objects whose effects vary across particular spaces, sites and over time. As argued by many feminist scholars, there is no “‘true’ nature [of the body] since it is a process and its meanings and capacities will vary according to its context” (Gatens 1996, 57; see also Nicholson 1994).

Maternal gatekeeping: “more inclined to go that extra mile”

A fourth reason for arguing for deeply rooted gender differences in parental responsibilities lies in the dominant role of mothers in influencing the ways in which fathers take on the care of children. Indeed, the mother-led quality of fathering is a key

finding in my study.^x Some theorists within the sociology of the family have called this maternal gatekeeping (Allen and Hawkins 1999), pointing to how women may exclude men and may face considerable ambivalence over giving up this area of power and expertise. My research also suggests that many fathers also expect and rely on mothers to take on the emotional and community responsibilities for children.

Fathers rely on mothers partly because, as their narratives reveal, they believe that mothers have a greater propensity toward emotional connection. Tom, for example, says that his wife is “more inclined to go the extra mile to be emotionally connected” with their children. Mitchell observes that the mother-child tie “may be a spiritual connection,” and Sampson says: “That is what men do not have – that extra, extra special bond with the children.” In spite of such deep-seated beliefs, what emerges in the daily practices of caregiving is not so stark. Gender differences in parenting are confounded by how, within each fathering narrative, as well as in the couple interviews, individuals and couples move back and forth in their views as to who is more nurturing and responsible, in which contexts, and at which times. That is, shifts in emotional and community responsibilities are deeply rooted in the changing ages of the children, specific spatial and time-bound contexts, cultural contexts, and what is occurring within these complex balancing acts between working and caring at particular points in time. Metaphorically, these back and forth movements resemble something of a dance (see also Dienhart 1998), or the ebb and flow of moving water. As one mother, Claire, expresses it: “Looking back over all these years, there is movement and flow.”

This movement and flow of practices and identities point to how fathering and mothering are fluid identities that shift and change within the complex webs of relationships within which they are sustained. What is particularly striking in my study is how when women move aside they create spaces for men to enter; that is, when mothers are not available or when they let go of caring for brief or long periods, fathers do come to take on the emotional and community responsibility for children. Ryan, a sole-custody father of two children, reflects on these processes: “This has been an incredible growing experience for me because I have been very male-orientated my whole life and now I have had to broaden the way I approach life. Whereas if I had stayed married, I probably would have kept going on my own little track. I’ve been become much more in tune.”

Differences between fathers: “not some riff raff off the street”

While I am arguing for broad differences between mothers and fathers’ enactments of maternal responsibilities, it is also important to point out that the ways in which fathers experience or enact emotional, community, and moral responsibilities vary between class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Nevertheless, the ways in which multiple differences interact, and indeed matter, are hardly straightforward. In this vein, my work draws on recent feminist scholarship that highlights the challenges of studying and analyzing intersectionality (McCall 2005) and the need to recognize that “not all differences are created equally” and that at times “counting and ranking inequalities may be a sound political strategy” (Ward 2004, 83). While ethnic minority fathers, particularly recently arrived immigrant fathers, often face linguistic, financial, and cultural challenges in their fathering, the greatest difficulties in gaining social acceptance as caregivers are faced by gay fathers. This latter group often faced what theorists have termed ‘multiple

jeopardy' because both gender and sexuality and, in some cases, social class were working against their acceptance within communities (see King 990 quoted in Ward 2004, 82). One example is that of Jean Marc, a French-Canadian 43-year-old gay and divorced father of seven-year-old twin boys. Living in a small town he has remained wary of the community's perceptions of him as a gay father:

"I have not met any of their teachers yet (long sigh)... I am perhaps somewhat timid. I don't know. I just didn't know what to expect. It's a situation where their teacher is married to a police officer in the town. Everybody knows me... I want them to know that- 'hey I am a good father. I am involved. And you may have heard that I am gay and that is absolutely correct. But I am not some riff raff off the street'".

While there are particular barriers faced by particular groups of fathers, it is also the case that many fathers point to the subtle fears that persist in community settings about close relations between men and children, particularly between men and the children of others. Jesse, for example, pointing to how he does not babysit the children of other parents, says: "It's kind of bad for men to be interested in other children." Such suspicions differ between rural and urban areas, and seem to be more pervasive around low-income fathers and gay fathers. Nevertheless, in spite of differences between men, the gendered quality of such scrutiny cuts across class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Mothering and masculinities: "we're still men, aren't we?"

A final issue that confounds the issue of men and mothering is that of the shadow of hegemonic masculinities underlying these narratives. Despite ongoing discussions of the meanings of hegemonic masculinities (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), one of its most consistent qualities is that it recurs "as the opposite of femininity" (Connell, 2001 31). This devaluation of the feminine can be heard especially in how fathers continually attempt to carve out their own paternal and masculine identities within practices and spaces traditionally considered maternal and feminine.^{xi} It also recurs in how fathers are adamant to distinguish themselves as men, as heterosexual, as fathers and not as mothers. For example, in a focus group with stay-at-home fathers, Sam interjected several times, half jokingly, "well we're still *men*, aren't we?" while Mitchell made several pointed references to how he often worked out at a gym and enjoyed "seeing the women in Lycra." Such words add support to what theorists of work have underlined about men working in nontraditional or female-dominated occupations (such as nursing or elementary school teaching) and how they must actively work to expel the idea that they might be gay, unmasculine, or not men (Williams 1992; Sargent 2000). This leads to men finding ways of reinforcing their masculinity such as engaging in sports or physical labor (e.g., household renovation) so as to exhibit public displays of masculinity.

While hegemonic masculinity intersects to create a disconnection between men and mothering, it is also the case that a slow revisioning of masculinity can be picked up in these fathers' narratives. One notable way this occurs is that many fathers admit that they had become a different kind of father as a result of being highly involved with their children. Roy reflects that he has become a "soft father," while Golin finds that he has lost the boundaries of autonomy and independence and that he "get[s] lost in the

nurturing”. Thus, while primary caregiving fathers seek to distance themselves from what are considered traditionally feminine practices and identities, they are also, in practice, radically reconstructing masculine care to include perspectives that are more aligned with women’s social positioning (Gilligan, 1982) and feminist vantage points.^{xii} In effect, their narratives speak to the ways in which they are involved in the creation of emergent masculinities that join together varied configurations of dominant masculinities and femininities (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). While the fathering stories reported here are not representative of most men’s lives in most contemporary societies, they can nevertheless be viewed as positive examples of how men are involved in the “remak[ing] of masculinities to sustain gender equality” (Connell, 2005, 1817).

Conclusions

This paper has argued that listening to, and theorizing from, fathers’ narratives through the lens of maternal demands implies that we are looking at fathers’ experiences of emotional, community, and moral responsibilities through a maternal lens. Other ways of nurturing are thus ignored or obscured (see also Lupton and Barclay 1997; Stueve and Pleck 2003). With regard to the issue of emotional responsibility, a maternal lens misses the ways in which fathers promote children’s independence and risk-taking, while their fun and playfulness, physicality, and outdoor approach to caring of young children are viewed only as second-best, or invisible, ways of caring. While physical and outdoor activities are not usually viewed within a framework of nurturing, I would argue that fathers’ encouragement of physical play, exercise, and recreational sports with and for children leads to positive physical and mental developmental outcomes and represents, in turn, a unique way of responding to children’s needs. Fathers’ caring thus widens the lens theoretically and empirically in terms of what we can look for when we study parental caring more widely. Their words represent good empirical evidence for what theorists of care have been pointing to in the last few years, such as the intricate connections between autonomy and connection, independence and dependence, justice and care, individual rights and relational responsibilities.^{xiii} These qualities are part of the care of children, particularly as they develop and mature. It is not that mothers don’t engage in activities that exemplify autonomy and independence. But we are reminded to look for these qualities in mothering as well. Studying fathering thus has the potential to widen dominant popular and academic understandings of mothering.

In terms of growth or community responsibility, the use of a maternal lens means that we miss the creative ways that fathers are beginning to form parallel networks to those that have traditionally existed among and for mothers. In Canada, the situation for fathers has changed gradually with each passing year so that the initial discomfort of joining the complex maternal worlds (Bell and Ribbens 1994) of early childrearing has given way to a slow increase in the visibility of fathers in these settings. Specifically, two social changes have occurred in the past few years in Canada that will likely lead to a continued increase in the comfort level of fathers on the social landscapes of parenting. First, there has been a dramatic increase from Canadian parenting resource centers in programs directed toward assisting fathers in making connections with other fathers (Bader and Doucet 2005). Second, the recent extension of Canadian parental leave (from six months to one year) and the subsequent fivefold increase in the uptake of parental

leave by fathers (Marshall 2003, Pérusse 2003) are likely to increase fathers' creation of community networks.

In addition to the problem of using a maternal lens to study fathering, the naming of fathers' practices of caregiving as "mothering" is also problematic for at least three other reasons. First, this may leave invisible other mothers and female caregivers who may be part of particular children's lives. Mothers, even absent ones, are palpably present in these fathers' narratives. For sole-custody fathers, where the mother has left or plays a secondary role, men often look for another woman or mother figure to share the care of their children, particularly when they have daughters. Also, in the nine gay father households in this study, the biological mother as well as other female caregivers are actively involved in children's lives (but see Stacey 2005). As revealed in the fourteen couple interviews with stay-at-home fathers and their female partners, women do not give up their mothering, and most of them comment on the conflicts embedded in their decision to be at work while their male partner stays at home. Denise, for example, feeling torn about returning to work after maternity leave, is reassured when her son calls her name in the middle of the night: "I am still the one Nathan calls for at night. *I am still the mother.*" Nina comments, "I'm perfectly comfortable with saying he's their primary caregiver...but don't say that he's their mother. *I'm their mother!*"

Second, linking men and mothering can inadvertently imply that there is an ideal kind of mother, thus holding women firmly to a particular mother-child model (see Dietz 1985), to an ideology of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), and to a motherhood mandate (see Russo 1976). Ruddick does write against this assumption in her second edition of *Maternal Thinking*, recognizing that "This conception of mothering as a kind of caring labor undermines the myth that mothers are 'naturally; loving. There is nothing foreordained about maternal response'" (1995, xi). Nevertheless, her decision to call this work "mothering," and not "caring" or "parenting" does underestimate the complexity and diversity of mothering in practice. As well demonstrated in international research on sole motherhood and low-income mothers, "motherhood is a culturally formed structure with various meanings and subtexts" (Segura 1994, 226) and women mother in ways that combine what would be considered maternal and paternal qualities (Clarke 1957; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Collins 1994).

Third, to call men's caregiving "mothering" or the more gender-neutral word "parenting" can unwittingly reinforce gendered power relations. That is, the view that men can mother is increasingly promulgated by fathers' rights groups that have taken up discourses of equality and gender-neutral parenting to reinforce their claims in child custody cases for greater access to children (see Boyd 2003 Mandell 2002). Such claims can further translate into men demanding equal rights to their children while ignoring the concrete questions of unequal gendered work and responsibility. It is also the case, however, that the opposite position can also lead to political tensions for feminists. Specifically, the argument that mothering and fathering are distinct practices and identities underpins some fathers' rights movements, especially those asserting a more masculine kind of fathering such as the Promise Keepers and some sections of the Fatherhood Responsibility Movement. Arguing from the political and religious right,

these groups insist on innate differences between women and men as they emphasize and promote ideals of fathers as family breadwinners and heads of the household and mothers as natural primary caregivers and supplementary earners or nonearners.^{xiv} Support for a gender-differentiated approach to men's involvement in the family can thus unwittingly turn into completely different sets of arguments, either about essential differences between women and men or about the moral superiority of particular family forms. My work, however, is located in a different political and theoretical location and draws on feminist writers and policy advocates who focus on upholding gender differences in cases of divorce and child custody. This is an approach that "is not based on essential differences between men and men, but rather on social patterns of caring" (Boyd 2003, 4) and ultimately on the need to reaffirm that differing social locations of women and men have led to clear gender differences in parenting.

Studying men as primary caregivers cuts to the heart of issues of gender equalities and gender differences in contemporary society. With Ruddick, "I remain unconvinced by arguments that there not only are but should be distinct paternal and maternal 'roles' and 'tasks'" (1997, 206). Similarly with Barbara Risman, I agree that "men *can* mother" (1998, 46), and with Scott Coltrane and Ruddick, I would accept that "maternal thinking" is something fathers can develop (Coltrane 1989, 489; see also Ruddick 1995). Yet while they can develop ways of being and thinking that emulate what we consider stereotypical mothering behavior, fathers do not mother in practice and they do not call their daily work and identities of parenting mothering. This is partly because mothering is a richly varied experience and institution (Rich 1986) but also because the everyday social worlds, the embodied experiences of women and men, the larger gender order (Connell 1995, 2001), and the historical and political contexts of gender and care do not permit the lapsing of these two institutions and moral identities. Moreover, linking men and mothering can inadvertently result in the diminishing of the historical and current value of mothers' caregiving. One of the main conclusions emanating from this research is that rather than using a maternal lens and comparing fathers to mothers, what is required are novel ways of listening to, and theorizing about, fathers' approaches to parental responsibilities and how they are radically reinventing what it means to be a man and a father in the twenty-first century.

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ⁱ See Doucet 2001; Lazarre 1976; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Ribbens 1994; McMahon 1995; Fox 2001; Miller 2005.

ⁱⁱ Of the 118 fathers who participated in the study, nearly two-thirds of the fathers (62 men) were interviewed through in-depth face-to-face individual interviews, 27 through telephone interviews, 12 through three focus groups, and 17 through Internet correspondence. Moreover, a smaller case study of 28 fathers were interviewed two to three times (e.g. focus group, individual interview and couple interview, or some other combination of three interviews). . I personally conducted all of the focus groups, couple interviews, and all but three of the individual interviews. Interviews were conducted between 2000-2004. Most of the fathers (60 percent or 70/118) were found in Canada's capital city, Ottawa, while the geographical locations of the other 48 are as follows: 13 from other Ontario cities; 13 from rural Ontario; 8 from Quebec; and 13 from 6 other provinces. Data were analyzed using group-based analysis, the Listening Guide (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Mauthner and Doucet 1998, 2003) and the computer software AtlasTi. In using and further developing the Listening Guide over the past decade, my approach to analyzing fathers' and couples' interviews was one that emphasized the central role of

reflexivity; relationships between researcher, the researched, and one's epistemological communities; an emphasis on narrated subjectivities, rather than subjectivities per se; and the social and ideological location of narratives' as well as the moral dimensions of storytelling (Presser 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2001, one-fifth of single parents in Canada were male (Statistics Canada 2002) while in the United States, one in six (15.6 percent) of custodial parents are men (Fathers Direct 2004). In Canada, stay-at-home fathers (about 111,000 of them in 2002) increased 25 percent over a recent ten-year period while stay-at-home mothers have decreased by approximately the same figure (Statistics Canada 2002). In the United States stay-at-home fathers make up nearly 18 percent of all stay-at-home parents (98,000 of 5.5 million stay-at-home parents) (U.S. Census Bureau 2004).

^{iv} Such scholarship on caregiving fathers includes Ehrensaft (1987), Coltrane (1996), Dienhart (1998), Risman (1998) and Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998). That on primary caregivers includes Russell (1983 and 1987), O'Brien (1987), Wheelock (1990), Barker (1994), and Smith (1998).

^v See also Robinson and Barret 1986; Jackson 1995; Ruddick 1995; Crittendon 2001.

^{vi} See Ehrensaft 1984, 1987; Kimball 1988; Hochschild 1989; Brannen and Moss 1991; Deutsch 1999.

^{vii} See Smith 1998; Doucet 2000, 2000, and 2006a.

^{viii} See Finch and Mason 1993; McMahon 1995; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Gerson 2002.

^{ix} See Berk 1985; Coltrane 1989; Hochschild 1989; McMahon 1995; Mauthner 2002.

^x See also Lewis 1986; Gerson 1993; Deutsch 1999; Cowan and Cowan 2000; Daly 2002; Stueve and Pleck 2003.

^{xi} See Chodorow 1978; Thorne 1993; Connell 1995, 2000; Bird 1996.

^{xii} See Tronto 1989, 1993, 1995; Friedman 1993, 2000; Stoljar 2000.

^{xiii} See Gilligan 1988; Benhabib 1992; Tronto 1993, 1995; Minow and Shanley 1996; Sevenhuijsen 1998, 2000; Kittay 1999.

^{xiv} See Coltrane 1997, 2001; Messner 1997; Gavanas 2002.