

HANA MAŘÍKOVÁ  
Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

## Caring Fathers and Gender (In)Equality?\*

*Abstract:* The involvement of fathers in nurturing and raising children is regarded as one way of eroding cultural and social inequalities between genders. The aim of this paper is to determine whether there is genuinely an erosion of gender inequalities in those families where fathers contribute to child nurture in the early phases of a child's life, or whether the status quo is merely modified. It examines when gender equality is (or can be) achieved in families and what the relationship is between gender equality in the family and gender inequality in society. The paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in 2006, in which semi-structured interviews were used to capture the ways in which parents construct their parenting and non-parenting roles, and how they form and perceive their parenting and gender identity. To analyse this issue, the paper also goes beyond this one study and looks at findings from other research and studies related to this issue.

*Keywords:* fathering, shared parenting, gender in/equality, hegemonic masculinity, Czech Republic.

Although in the past fatherhood remained on the margins of public interest, in the 1990s the inclusion of fathers in child nurture and upbringing became a point of concern for various segments of the population, including academia. However, because this discussion is still very new in the Czech Republic, there are still issues to be raised, and it will take quite some time to seek answers to all the relevant questions, such as what changes in families where the father (also) nurtures a child or children; how does this affect the relationship between the father and the child and the partnership; to what extent do men and women (fathers and mothers) in this type of (heterosexual) family approximate one another; to what extent are they able to act and perceive one another as interchangeable and in this sense equal; and whether it is possible to achieve gender equality in a couple on an individual basis in an otherwise gender unequal environment, and so on.

In the text below I look at families where the involvement of fathers in caring for small children is greater than the typical involvement of fathers in the average Czech family<sup>1</sup> (i.e. they provide care on a full-time daily basis for a certain period of time) and I examine how parents-respondents reflect on this experience. I ask whether direct

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that men in the family and domestic sphere do not contribute at all to child care, but that their contribution in terms of time spent (see, e.g., Maříková 1999; Chaloupková 2005) or in terms of activities performed is still different and gender specific (ibid.), which can hardly be considered

and full-time daily child care provided by a man helps eliminate gender inequality in the family. My basic assumption is that the existing unequal double burden that is related to and derives from family duties is more balanced in families with caring fathers (cf. Russell 1987; Hochschild 1990; Coltrane 1996; Dowd 2002 and others).

### Theoretical Starting Points

According to some theorists, the spheres of work and family are contradictory, incompatible, or barely compatible (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Hakim 2000). While the labour market wants individuals who are unburdened by outside commitments and are able to organise their life (life biography) around the needs of the employer and not their private duties (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), women are (often) required to accommodate their lives to the needs of others, to the interests of their family and partner.

In modern society the different demands placed on men and women in the spheres of production and reproduction form a structural basis for the social differentiation of men and women and for the structural division of society into public and private spheres, and these two spheres operate in a hierarchical arrangement. Owing to the very nature of this arrangement, the model of man as breadwinner and woman as nurturer and housewife is a model of inequality. The breadwinner-nurturer arrangement is based on an assumed complementarity of activities (and, by extension, of gender roles), wherein the component parts of this complementarity are not in a relationship of equality but are hierarchically organised.

The inequality of men and women is thus an innate feature of the way in which industrial societies function. The person who provides for the family financially by gainful employment, even though they may be dependent to some extent on support at home (because the private sphere represents both an intimate space and a safe-haven from the impersonal world of work, essential to the regeneration of the labour force), is freer and more independent (they can acquire all sorts of things with the money they earn and are able to satisfy many of their needs and demands in this way) than the person who performs the unpaid work essential to the everyday functioning of the family and household (i.e. the needs and demands of other family members), who is at the very least financially dependent on the breadwinner. That women have been localised to the domestic sphere means that the work they perform for others (and for society) has remained invisible and devalued.<sup>2</sup> The traditional breadwinner-nurturer model means that men and women have different opportunities for self-fulfilment in life, experience unequal degrees of autonomy, and the symbolic and real appreciation of their work is also unequal. In the end, this model implies the subordinate position of women in the family and in wider society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). The

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as a “balanced state,” not to mention the fact that differences also persist in the status of (house) work performed in the domestic sphere by women and men (e.g., Oakley 1974; Křížková 1999; Maříková 2007).

<sup>2</sup> This is based on the principle that what cannot be seen and quantified in ‘neutral’ money, which in modern societies is becoming the measure of all things, is as though it were non-existent.

breadwinner-nurturer model is a dependency model that is very frail and problematic as has been shown in historical analyses (Mies 2002; Malínská 2005) and studies of contemporary societies alike (Friedan 1963; Giddens 2000).

This model is not always necessarily to the advantage for men and the disadvantage of women. It can be a heavy burden (and sometimes a big disadvantage) for men to be in the position of sole breadwinner in the family, a fact attested to in many literary works (cf. Kafka 1915) and specialised studies (cf. Farrell 1994). But the viability and functionality of this model is founded on the (barely realistic) presumption of the givenness of a two-parent heterosexual family.

Women's emancipatory and often purely pragmatic and existential needs and demands to be able to engage in paid employment in the labour market and their mass entry to this sphere resulted in the modification of the 'traditional' breadwinner-nurturer model into a model labelled the double-income model or modified breadwinner model. This model spreads the responsibility for the financial wellbeing of the family over two subjects—the man and the woman—while preserving other inequalities: inequality in the distribution of labour at home and in the family, as well as in the sphere of paid labour (cf. Čermáková 2000). Although this model enables women to be fully or partly financially independent, its disadvantage is the extra burden that women tend to be under from the 'second shift', a phenomenon well-known to and experienced by women in the state socialist period, and even women to the west of the former Eastern bloc borders (Hochschild 1990). The physical, mental, and emotional burden and time constraints put on women trying to manage two spheres of commitments simultaneously is a problem that is closely related to women's lack of leisure time.<sup>3</sup>

The logical question arises of what can be done about this? Is there any solution to this kind of inequality? Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), her seminal work on this topic, reached the conclusion that it is necessary to disrupt the reproduction of motherhood, which, in her view, is a central and constitutive element in the asymmetrical social organisation and reproduction of gender and society as a whole, and to do so by including men in the process of the primary socialisation of children. According to Chodorow, involving men in primary care for children should eliminate the sharp differences in the self-identification of the two sexes and erode the status quo of the unequal gender arrangement in society.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that many researchers have challenged Chodorow's concept of the production and reproduction of gender differences between men and women with the argument that these differences are not rooted just in early socialisation<sup>5</sup>, the issue of a father's involvement in the family vis-à-vis the child has become a closely watched issue in the social sciences. Various forms of fatherhood, father practices, and cultures of fatherhood have been studied from various perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> For more, see the issue of the 'leisure gap', for example, in Perrons 2000.

<sup>4</sup> According to Coltrane's analyses (1992) non-industrial societies where fathers actively contribute to the socialisation of their children exclude women less from activities performed in the public arena. In other words, this means that men's contribution to the socialisation of children results in the equalisation of opportunities for men's and women's public employ in these societies.

<sup>5</sup> For more see, for example Lorber 1994; Connell 1995; Risman 1998.

The phenomenon of the greater involvement of the father in the family (i.e. in nurturing and raising their children) has been conceptualised as ‘new fatherhood’ and such men have come to be referred to as ‘new fathers’, as opposed to the traditional form of fatherhood and conception of the father’s role, where it is assumed that the main source of a father’s identity is his work (cf. Morgan 1992). In the concept of new fatherhood, the image of the new father contrasts with that of the father as breadwinner or economic provider.

Many Western studies on the issue of a father’s participation in the family have shown that even though men are starting to participate more than before in the organisation of the family, changes in the family in this respect are first of all occurring only slowly (Segal 1990) and second to an insufficient and incomplete extent (Hochschild 1990; Coltrane 1996). While some studies on fatherhood (e.g., Lamb 1986; Dowd 2002) and parenting (e.g., Geiger 1996; Silverstein 1996) have refuted a number of well-established opinions, myths and stereotypes widely shared to date among the lay and expert population (for example, that men are not ‘capable’ of caring for a child, that the care they provide is inherently ‘different’), other studies have highlighted the continuing discrepancy between how men and women participate in nurturing children and performing housework, or in what is referred to as the emotional, mental, and managerial work in the family (cf. Brandth and Kvande 1998; Craig 2006; Wall and Arnold 2007).

From what has been said so far, it is clear that a father’s participation in the family should not just refer to his participation or co-participation in what is termed parental work (Brandth and Kvande 1998), but, more widely, must also encompass family work. This can be defined (cf. Dowd 2002) as the equal (comparable) participation of both partners in all spheres of family life, that is, in the financial and material wellbeing of the family, the basic care and emotional investment connected with caring for and nurturing others, in running and managing a household and family, and maintaining family and friendship networks—to cite just some of the main areas and dimensions of family life—, whereas performing these activities should have an equal impact (in terms of ‘sacrifices’, restrictions, and ‘benefits’ etc.) on the life of each of the parents.

### **Defining the Background Situation, Sample and Methodological Approach**

What is the situation like in Czech families, which, for working purposes (and with some degree of simplification), I call ‘families with caring fathers’? A study conducted in 2003<sup>6</sup> on a sample of twenty nurturing fathers revealed that when a man is actively involved in taking care of an infant child, this may, but need not necessarily, lead him to identify himself with the role of the primary caregiver. There are fathers who play an active and interested role, have a close relationship with their child, are perceptive to the child’s needs, do not mind taking care of their children, and at the given moment are quite content doing it (fathers with all the attributes of the ‘new

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<sup>6</sup> The research project ‘Support for the Uptake of Parental Leave by Men’ was funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic (GK MPSV-01-93/03).

father' (cf. Lamb 1986)). There are also fathers who, although they do care for their children, perform only the most essential tasks of a caregiver. Their interaction with their children is not very intensive, their communication with them is limited and tends to be more 'technical' than emotional, their relationship with their children is not very warm. These fathers do not perceive their situation as satisfying or even desirable,<sup>7</sup> something Badinter (1995) refers to as 'forced parenting'.

Clearly not all men must perceive the situation of 'being at home with a child' as personally satisfying (or even desirable). Direct and frequent interaction between a father and a child then need not have any effect towards redefining the man's relationship to the child, unless the man is willing and able to redefine his role as a father or to reconstruct his identity. A basic and therefore essential precondition for identification with the role of caregiver proved to be the absence of the external reasons<sup>8</sup> that put the father in the position of caregiver, primarily connected with some kind of strong outside pressure, as in the case of 'forced parenting' or in situations where the man's involvement in care has not been negotiated and agreed upon by the parents and subsequently (at least partially) internalized by the man. Below, I focus on only those situations where an agreement has been reached between the partners to the effect that it will be mostly or predominantly the man who will be involved in caring for the (small) child during a certain period. These cases stem from the (more or less) free decision of two partners in a heterosexual relationship. Nevertheless, as will be made clear further on, even here the intervention of external circumstances was sometimes strong.

In order to answer the questions mentioned above relating to the potential achievement of gender equality in families with a nurturing father, I made an analysis of a qualitative study conducted in 2006. The study was based on twenty semi-structured interviews, in which only the main areas of questioning were defined.<sup>9</sup> The specific questions in each of these areas were formulated freely and asked in a random order. It was left to the participants to decide the time and place of the interview, so the interviews were held in environments selected by the respondents (in their homes, in cafes or restaurants, or at the place of their work). The interview was managed to resemble a normal conversation as much as possible. The interviews were conducted with both parents<sup>10</sup> in families:

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<sup>7</sup> Basically, they persist in the traditional approach to the performance of their parenting role.

<sup>8</sup> This is especially though not necessarily typical of situations where a child's mother is absent, the reasons for which may vary, but most frequently it is because the mother has died or has some form of health, psychological or other disability leaving her unable to care for her child(ren) (cf. Maříková and Radimská 2003: 90–99).

<sup>9</sup> Only the basic outline of the interview (the main subject areas) was defined such as: identification of the starting situation (reasons, motives, perceptions), organisation of family activities (who does/does not do what and why), the perception of their lives (pluses and minuses), the reaction of the environment, the influence on the relationships in the family, situation after the return to the labour market (what has changed compared to the starting point) etc.

<sup>10</sup> A total of 20 interviews with married couples were conducted: the age of the participants ranged from 31 to 47. Most of the couples (12) lived in Prague at the time of the interview, 5 couples came from Moravia and 3 from other regions of the Czech Republic. With the exception of one couple (where the man had university and the woman a higher professional education), the couples were educationally

- where the man voluntarily and on a full-time daily basis was caring for a child for at least half a year during the period of entitlement to parental leave (until a child is 3 years of age) or during the period of entitlement to parental allowance (until a child is 4 years of age)
- where the man was not working at all at the time or only a part of the week so that he was able to alternate with his partner in childcare
- where the man's partner/wife had full- or part-time gainful employment and was at that time the main breadwinner or co-breadwinner in the family.

The interviews included cases where the usual scheme of parents' gender roles was reversed (cf. Russell 1987) (these cases predominated in the sample) and cases where the gender arrangement was more balanced and the responsibilities of parenting and breadwinning were shared by both parents (cf. Coltrane 1996). The goal of the interviews was to identify whether the opportunities of both partners become more equal or not when men enter the space defined as a 'woman's sphere' and participate in it by providing childcare, and to determine whether when they do so gender stereotypes are broken (or eroded), or rather conversely maintained and reproduced, and what this means for gender equality. The statements parents made in the interviews are the source of information on how these people organize and perceive their everyday family lives and how they interpret their newly acquired life experience.

The interviews are analyzed using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), based on an inductive and a deductive approach (where the results of the given research are compared with the results of other relevant research studies). The use of inductive-deductive approaches makes it possible to combine 'new' experience with 'old' knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

### **Caring Fathers and Gender Arrangements in the Family**

In many families the birth of the first child signifies a turning point. This is not 'just' because the number of family members changes but because the configuration of the family in terms of how paid and unpaid work is allocated also changes,<sup>11</sup> and the life paths of men and women begin to differ significantly. The model that has taken hold in this phase of the family (and life) cycle over the past decade in the Czech Republic is a neo-traditional model (cf. Crittenden 1999),<sup>12</sup> wherein the man is the main breadwinner and the woman the sole caregiver. In this model the man's

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homogenous. Only in three cases both the partners had secondary education; all the others completed university education.

<sup>11</sup> Quantitative analyses of the time people spend on housework have shown (Křížková 1999; Hašková 2003; Chaloupková 2005) that up until the birth of the first child both partners in a household make a relatively equal contribution to housework (regardless of the family status), but after the birth of the first child that changes in most couples and women-mothers do more.

<sup>12</sup> In later phases of the family cycle, when a woman returns from maternity leave to the labour market, the model alters somewhat and becomes 'the modified breadwinner model' (cf. Gerson 2002), or, as Čermáková (2000) termed it in view of women's chances in the labour market, the 'model of a working woman-mother without any career aspirations'. This model is very successful in terms of the complementarity of men's

employment trajectory progresses uninterrupted while the woman's is interrupted for reasons of 'maternal obligations'. Even though this model continues to be the usual family arrangement during the early years of a child's life<sup>13</sup>, the biographies of men-fathers and women-mothers, which until recently were relatively unified, are starting to differentiate and become more individualised. New, less conventional, and even entirely unconventional arrangements of parents' roles and activities are beginning to appear in families with small children, and there are various reasons for this, as Czech (for example, Maříková and Radimská 2003; Nešporová 2005; Šmídová 2007) and foreign research and studies on the topic have shown (cf. Russell 1987; Hochschild 1990; Coltrane 1996; Tereškinas and Reingardienė 2005). New solutions become constituted in various life and family situations and attest to the fact that the conventional arrangement does not have to be the only possible or even the only suitable one in terms of the needs of family members.

Nevertheless, the entry of men into a social space that historically has been defined as the sphere of women, and which continues to be conventionally perceived as the primary sphere of women's activity in Czech society<sup>14</sup> and of their social competences, presumably could generate uncertainty and new problems. At the same time, it may also offer new opportunities and possibilities, derived from the change in the conventional arrangement of family roles at the given phase in the family cycle, and affecting both members of the married couple (cf. Hochschild 1990; Segal 1990; Coltrane 1996; Šmídová 2004).

The analysis below aims to answer basic questions about the entry of men into the domestic sphere: How do the actors themselves perceive this change? What does it mean in their lives? How is it reflected in gender relations in the family and wider society?

### **What Was at the Beginning? A Choice or Necessity?**

In the narratives of most of the parent-interviewees an important point they were required to address was their wish to appropriately and conveniently reconcile work and family duties, and even to harmonise those duties with their own individual desires and needs (not to mention what they perceived to be the needs of their child/children). The solution that parents chose to adopt depended on the specific situation of each family. The research sample was predominated by families in which the basic scheme

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and women's roles in the family. It distributes the responsibility for the financial wellbeing of the family between two people—the man and the woman—while preserving other inequalities—inequalities in the division of labour in the household and family and in the sphere of paid labour.

<sup>13</sup> Statistical data indicate that the number of fathers on parental leave tends to fluctuate, and therefore it is impossible to identify a trend that would suggest fathers are increasingly contributing to child nurture. Between 1993 and 2006 the number of fathers on parental leave fluctuated between 3,300 and 700 men, reaching a high in 1993 and a low in 2004 (see *Tih práce* 2006).

<sup>14</sup> The attitudes of the Czech population toward the gender roles of men and women in the family (and beyond) are gender conservative compared to countries that have never experienced a state-socialist period (see Hašková 2003). Although according to the ISSP surveys (1994 and 2002) the strength of the conviction that 'it is not right for the man to stay at home with the children and the woman to go to work' is waning, more people still approve than disapprove of such a situation.

of one breadwinner and one nurturer was retained, but the customary family arrangement was reversed, so it was only the person performing the traditional role that changed. In some cases this solution was adopted immediately after the birth of the first child, but after the birth of subsequent children sometime it was and sometimes it was not repeated. In other cases this model surfaced after the birth of the second child. Parents responded to each particular situation based on the opportunities available to them and on their thoughts about the situation at the time, weighing the advantages and disadvantages and how realistic the given solution was. The reversed model erodes the sharp contours of the roles of the breadwinner and nurturer as the activities linked to the performance of one or the other role are mixed. This model is probably more difficult to implement than the conventional model in which gender roles are preserved and which corresponds better to the demands of the labour market, the functioning of which requires a single breadwinner and a single nurturer/caregiver (Beck 1992) and the idea of the ideal worker (Williams 1999).<sup>15</sup>

In the narratives of parents who implemented the reverse model the decision that the father would take parental leave and the mother would work was mostly viewed as a pragmatic one. Although the circumstances under which this occurred varied, in the absolute majority of cases the family's economic situation was a factor. In cases where the woman was earning more than the man or had better prospects of advancing at work (and thus also prospects of better earnings in the future), this solution was seen as an advantage or more of an advantage economically. In these cases the decision was significantly influenced by economic calculations,<sup>16</sup> but an important role was also played by other reasons and motives—such as health, plans for personal self-fulfilment (study, work, and career) or the man's desire to have something other than just the 'typical male' experience (or not only 'to have a child' but also 'to be with a child').

The second distinct model of unconventional parenting arrangements can be called participatory. Although the partners perceive themselves as more or less equal in terms of their contribution to the family's financial wellbeing, their involvement in the family, and their opportunities for work self-fulfilment, the reason that moves to the forefront here is nonetheless the woman's demand for self-fulfilment and the right to self-fulfilment outside the family and household. To be thorough it must be added that in the reverse model this demand was also mentioned relatively often. For some of the women, work was of strong and irreplaceable significance in their lives, an important sphere of self-fulfilment and freedom ('where she can do what she wants to', 'what she enjoys' and not what she has to).

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<sup>15</sup> The difficulty of implementing the reversed model stems from the fact that it requires a certain constellation of external and internal (family) circumstances, in particular the kind of employment that allows part-time work or, more precisely, the kind of employer that is willing to accept this demand; also, both parents have to have relatively equal and usually high incomes (in relation to average income) so that there is no reason to work overtime in order to increase income; flexible working hours of both the partners; and a willingness to contribute flexibly to childcare and housework.

<sup>16</sup> Other researchers have also confirmed that the woman's income in relation to the man's income is a strong predictor of how involved man is in sharing childcare and housework (Hochschild 1990), and according to a Swedish study even of the amount of time a man will spend on parental leave (Haas 1993).

Although both models where the father (also) nurtures a child are based on the presumption of an agreement between partners, the two partners are not perceived as being in an equal position of power to make this decision. A man has greater manoeuvring space for his choice—he can but does not have to provide care (stay at home with a child), whereas a woman has to and only when the man agrees to share the burden of nurturing is it an option for her, too—as one of the male research participants noted. The conventional arrangement has a strong foundation: at the structural level, in the way the labour market is organised; at the culture level, in the ‘traditional’ arrangement of gender roles in the family; at the level of discourse concerning the ‘naturalness’ of maternal behaviour and in the conservative discourses of fatherhood; and in the pressure that emanates from the parents’ immediate social environment and their fear or insecurity about themselves when they enter a different life situation.

### **Barriers Inside Us, Barriers Outside Us—How Inequality Gets Reproduced**

When applying an unconventional solution or model, both partners must be capable of dealing with numerous restrictions, including the effects of gender stereotypes and prejudices. In practice this was not always easy for the parents. For example, employers were not willing to let men take parental leave, female and male co-workers condemned them for their lack of loyalty to the employer or could not understand their willingness to ‘give up’ work and breadwinning to stay at home with a child, because in ‘normal parlance’ such behaviour is associated with surrendering one’s ‘manhood’. In the case of women, people (mostly female co-workers) condemned them for balking at ‘fulfilling their maternal duties’ to such a young child. The stories of some couples from Prague and other cities revealed that very often officials in the state departments responsible for paying social benefits were also unable to understand this new solution (even though they are required to know about this legal option as part of their professional duties).

Fathers and mothers often mentioned negative reactions more than any other kind of reaction from those around them, even from extended family members. Men tended to encounter positive reactions more than women, who were more often socially ignored. The stories some women related showed that through indirect innuendos their colleagues contrasted the motherhood of these working mothers of small infants with ‘the proper’ form of maternal care, which is associated with the idea of a mother’s ‘self-sacrifice’ on behalf of the needs of ‘such a small’ child. Some of the women participants in the interviews were thus indirectly stigmatised as a ‘neglectful mother’<sup>17</sup> (c.f. also Janoušková and Sedláček 2005).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, one man also found it

<sup>17</sup> The Czech phrase is a ‘grey-crow mother’.

<sup>18</sup> In this connection, Arendell (1999) mentions the hegemonic discourse of motherhood, where intense mothering and the image of a ‘good mother’ is juxtaposed with alternative, socially illegitimate (or not sufficiently legitimate) forms of motherhood—the maternal practices and images of the ‘improper’ mother or the ‘inadequate’ mother. The introduction of the ideology of intense mothering into the hegemonic discourse of motherhood leads to the formation of a discourse of maternal deviancy and stigmatises anything other than the traditional form of mothering as deviant.

difficult to ‘reveal’ this personal experience outside the intimate space of the private sphere and make an external demonstration of it in the public space, precisely because he was concerned about maintaining his masculine identity and about being labelled un-manly or a milksop.<sup>19</sup>

For example she would call me: ‘Take Vit’a in the pram and come meet me at the bus stop’. And I’d say: ‘Yeah right. With a ribbon in my hair I’ll wait at the bus stop. Kiss my wife coming from work, with an apron on’. And it took me a while [before I accepted it].’ (Hynek, 31 years old, employee in a privately owned company)

In connection with active fathering, researchers (most recently see, for example, *Modern Men 2001–2005*) assume that fathers who decide to take up such a parenting role will see their manhood called into question (Højgaard 1997). However, because these research studies generally focus only on men, they miss out the fact that women’s gender identities are also questioned (and their ability to face such questioning is ‘tested’). In a study of active fathering in Sweden Haas (1995) concluded that the way the labour market is organised reinforces gender-based expectations of men’s and women’s roles and makes it difficult for men to become more active in child care. This conclusion must also apply to women given the interaction that exists between the spheres of family and work. The structure of the labour market, the arrangement of the heterosexual family, and the gender expectations associated with how both these spheres function make it more difficult for both men and women to adopt behaviour that is not based on gender-conservative expectations.

As noted above, men more than women received a positive reaction from their friends, women acquaintances and strangers, and, exceptionally, from their male colleagues. In the case of couples positive reactions again tended to come from women and be addressed towards men rather than the other way around. While men can be appreciated for being caring fathers, and they appreciate themselves for this (as is evident in statements they made like ‘Aren’t I great?’, ‘Well, I’m a great guy!’), women are not usually shown appreciation for being breadwinners. Even their partners often ignore their ability to do so, and take it for granted. This is an example of the reproduction of ‘the unlike appreciation of the like’ (behaviour), wherein unequal importance is assigned to the same type of performance in direct relationship to gender (cf. Lorber 1993).

Nevertheless, the ability to achieve an unconventional and innovative solution, which both the reverse and sharing model represent, does not just call the thus far well-established solutions (fixed models of behaviour) into question, it raises the question how important and ‘proper’ they are at all.

My colleagues at work, mostly it’s guys around the age of fifty. And he [one of them] was used to doing overtime. He does about thirty hours overtime a month. And his wife was at home with their child, so he was never actually seeing his kids. But when I asked him: ‘Would you do it differently now?’ He said: ‘I would do it differently; I wouldn’t work as much. I’d rather spend time with the kids.’ (Hynek, 31 years old, employee in a privately owned company)

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<sup>19</sup> This occurs especially in locations or environments that are more (gender) conservative (such as, for example, some regions of Moravia or some masculine labour environments).

Although some people disapprove of the innovative alternative discussed above, others are led to re-assess and re-define their experience in life as an individual and their collectively shared social experiences. The innovative parenting arrangement is not just about new practices but about the new potential importance that could be attributed to it. Caring fathering and modern mothering abandon the existing ('old') values and meanings and thus create room for a deeper cultural change in the way gender is viewed.

### **Who did/didn't do What and Who was Who?**

In Czech society the prevailing opinion long used to be (and still is in conservative sections of the population) that a man is incapable of taking care of a small child (Gjuričová 1996). This opinion also long persisted in expert circles before it began to subside (cf. Matějček 1994).

In the adaptation phase, when the interviewed couples were still getting used to the new role arrangement, though it occurred rarely, several of the women did nonetheless experience doubts about whether a man could manage to care for a small infant and how he would manage. The mother's assumption about the incompetence or lack of competence of the father in this area could be regarded as an example of maternal gate-keeping (see, for example, Allen and Hawkins 1999; McBride et al. 2005). However, the fact that these couples managed to cope with the doubts means that the father was not expelled from the sphere of family work. The behaviour of the partners of voluntarily nurturing fathers does not conform to the pattern of gate-keeping—they do not exclude 'others' *a priori* or *a posteriori* from the possibility of participating in a sphere that is socially defined and perceived as 'theirs'. If they did, their partners would probably not have stayed at home with the children. On the contrary, these women show the ability to perceive their own and their partner's role in the family and in society differently, and to shape and play these roles differently. They do not perceive them as a set of necessarily given and rigidly defined expectations that form the basis for the one and only possible manner of behaviour. They are able to construct their identities differently, and the basis of the identity they construct is not necessarily just mothering or, more broadly, caring for others (close to them) but it also includes work outside the family. Some of these women perceive work and family as absolutely equal and complementary parts of their lives, and this is reflected in their understanding of themselves as working mothers.

For me, both are important. I can't really imagine just staying at home with the children because I think that somehow that just doesn't fulfil a person fully... But then I wouldn't want to be without children, either... (Karolína, 43 years old, doctor)

It was not just women who were able to look at family in a different way and to redefine it; men who entered the domestic sphere were also capable of this. They, too, have to define their role in the social world in some way, in a way different from the established (conventional, traditional) definition, and that is reflected in their self-perceptions. Some men in the research sample explicitly stated that they were

not career-oriented, that the family was the priority in their lives. How do these men, who are referred to as ‘family men’ (Coltrane 1996; Hochschild 2003),<sup>20</sup> ‘settle down’ in the domestic sphere, and what does that mean for them and others?

### The Father as Carer

Even though most of the men felt that they were capable of caring for a child (and their partners usually shared this opinion), they eventually realised that they had much to learn (and the women felt the same with regard to themselves). Their view of childcare was not as something given and natural (although this type of argument also appeared), but as something that a person—man or woman—has to learn (even if they were not primarily socialised for it). Some of the men’s initial ideas about what it means to look after a child and what childcare entails, and especially how many activities and how often are performed, did not always correspond to the reality they experienced later, which caused them to change their ideas.

I remember telling myself back then, ‘why does the child have to eat five times a day? Three times would be enough, right?’ (Dan, 37 years old, employee of a private company)

The need to nurture a child made some of the men more sensitive. One of the fathers noted that he did not perceive his surroundings ‘technically’, as non-caring men do, he is capable of certain experiences and manifestations of intimacy.

And they (colleagues) never had a dog or even a fish in their whole lives. They just have cars and things like that. You park the car in the garage, change the oil, or whatever. In that sense, there are more problems with a child than with a car, and also more joy... (George, 38 years old, artistic profession)

Some fathers started to show fear for their child (for example, that they might get injured), expressed their concern for the child, tried to ensure that the child did not suffer and that the child did well (was not sick, was not cold, etc.). The practice of caring for children socialised some of the men into being more respectful of others, responding adequately to the needs and demands of the child, which (often) must take priority over the needs and demands of the carer. Staying at home with a child led fathers towards being able ‘to be’ with a child (and not just ‘to have’ a child), to experience the child’s life together with the child.

The intensive care fathers devoted to their children was reflected in their relationship with the child. Experts have noted (Možný 1990; Gjuríčová 1996) that the relationship between father and child is usually looser than the relationship between mother and child, and this usual scheme corresponds to the conventional arrangement of family gender roles (a distant male-breadwinner and the intimacy of the mother-nurturer). When the father cares for the child, a change occurs in the relationship

<sup>20</sup> The concept of the ‘family man’ is somewhat ambiguous. While in the traditional interpretation, as Hochschild states (2003: 132), a ‘family man’ meant a good provider, one who demonstrated his love for his wife and children by toiling hard at the workplace, in the modern workplace ‘family man’ has taken on negative overtones, designating a worker who isn’t a serious player. However, if a ‘family man’ is viewed through the lens of gender from the perspective of his functioning in the contemporary (American) family, as Coltrane (1996) does, then the concept bears positive connotations. The pluses and benefits of the father’s participation in the family are stressed in terms of equalising relations in the family.

between the father and the child. The man is able to form a closer relationship with the child and vice versa. This is clear in the families where the father nurtured only one child in a family with more children (usually two). He found that the one he nurtured was closer to him. In the case of the child, parents noted that the child cared for (also) by the man was able to approach and go to both parents or was drawn more to the parent with whom the child (most recently) spent most time.

Although parents often perceive themselves as being unlike or different, the perception of their abilities and characteristics connected with the performance of parenting actually derives from the real practice of parenting rather than gender stereotypes. Sometimes the father was seen as the more patient and caring parent and the mother as the sterner, more rational and eruptive one. In other instances the father was perceived and perceived himself as the authority figure; he was the one who disciplined or punished the child, even if, at the same time, he was also seen as being more patient. This proves that men and women are capable of overcoming gender stereotypes in the perceptions they develop of their own specific characteristics and abilities. This suggests that the difference between a father and mother in a heterosexual couple may stem more from the fact that they are two separate and non-identical individuals, and is not necessarily just a result of the fact that they are of different sex, as is usually assumed.

#### As the Saying Goes: When Two People do the Same Thing, It's not the Same Thing

Although in many families the parents agreed that men and women have the same ability to nurture a child, sometimes the women opined that the father was able to provide the child or children with better care—that he paid more attention to the children than she had to that point or than she potentially would. Their life experience and their reflections on managing a certain life situation undermine convictions about the better preconditions and abilities of the mother to tend to children (and from this perspective it brings the two genders closer together). On the other hand, when women rate men's care as 'better' than their own, they assign men's care a higher status than their own maternal (parental) care, and in this way they reproduce gender inequality (cf. Brandth and Kvande 1998). The tendency to praise men is related to the tendency to show gratefulness to them (for staying at home with a child). In some cases men obtained certain advantages from women,<sup>21</sup> which in the same situation women do not obtain. So, even when a father is caring for a small child, as a man he can have certain advantages or 'privileges', such as:

- he does not care for the child for the whole day—the child's mother takes over when she returns from work (and the father disappears, vanishes),

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<sup>21</sup> In this connection Hochschild talks about the economy of gratitude (1990). The economy of gratitude is based on the principle of comparison, which is not, however, applied within couples. The comparison is made within gender groups: a woman-mother measures the father's engagement at home against the engagement of other men, as she does in her case. From this comparison she concludes that her partner does 'a lot' compared to other men, while she does 'less' than other women. In this sense gender inequalities at the level of the couple are legitimated.

- he manages to preserve a certain amount of leisure time for his hobbies, unlike his partner and unlike many women on parental leave (cf. the issue of the leisure gap),
- he keeps his distance from performing domestic work, and does only the most necessary tasks or what he likes doing, while the woman finishes up most of the domestic chores after completing her shift at work (cf. the issue of the double burden).

The consequence of granting advantages or obtaining privileges (within the economy of gratitude) is the fact that gender inequalities are reproduced on a new basis, in a new social context.

However, a caring father is not only prized in the environment of home. He is prized for his caring beyond it as well. In certain situations and contexts he is seen as a ‘star’ (on a playground by other mothers), as ‘sexy’ (by female acquaintances and other women), as ‘champion’ (by his mates) and sometimes the men even prize themselves highly (cf. sentences such as ‘a guy can do it better’). The reflection and self-reflection of a caring father attests to the fact that childcare can be another potential area of success for some men:<sup>22</sup>

- either as an alternative to work success if the men are not too successful or if they do not strive too hard to be successful in this sphere,
- or it can even represent the expansion of his success into this sphere, into the sphere of caring for others—if the man has a relatively high socio-professional status, high work ambitions or career aspirations, and when childcare represents ‘a break’, ‘to catch one’s breath’, before they start fully devoting themselves to work again, before they carry out their other career plans.

From this perspective child care can be seen as part of the new life style of a certain social class of men, as a challenge to ‘conquer’ a new territory, as an extension of the masculine sphere (cf. Brod 1987).

Success and advantages are among the attributes of hegemonic masculinity. If men are successful at child care, if they also manage to preserve the old or obtain new advantages during child care, then hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily weakened when men devote themselves to child care; on the contrary, it can even be reinforced in new ways.

To be thorough, it must be added that some women and men are able to realistically assess the situation of fathering. Some of the interviewees were well aware that men were able to provide more or better care because they did not do everything at home that a mother must usually do. Consequently, there is no reason to value the father’s work more or differently than the mother’s.

Based on the above findings it can be argued that, although a change is occurring in the real behaviour of caring fathers, and although this change is undoubtedly important, it is not important in and of itself. It must be assessed in the context of how this behaviour is reflected upon in society and what social esteem it commands.

<sup>22</sup> Some men can use the nurturing situation to their ‘benefit’—to demonstrate their success not only in the private sphere, but sometimes also when going back to the sphere of paid work (if they work in a foreign company, where this behavior is appreciated).

The tendency for men's privileges to remain intact, their potential focus on success in a new sphere, and the greater appreciation they are accorded by others all help to conserve a certain type of masculine identity, and consequently also the higher social status of men. But then, after all, the changes in behaviour that caring fathers exhibit have to be assessed as insufficient and incomplete, as they mostly remain within the limits of the conventional perception and construction of male gender identity.

### Conclusion

From what has been stated it is clear that, in terms of the impact on gender equality, the entry of men as caring fathers into the domestic sphere is an ambivalent process; ambivalent not just at the level of everyday reality, but also at the macro-social level. Caring fathers erode the notion that a man is not capable of child care, the notion of masculinity as hardness, insensitivity, remaining aloof from others etc. This in turn helps to wear away the image of the remote father-breadwinner and the image of the mother as the only appropriate caregiver. While it is gradually becoming acceptable for men to care for children, the view of women as working mothers with small children is still less favourable. Both parents are confronted with evaluations of what one or the other does or does not do, and these evaluations run the whole gamut of possible reactions. While in the families studied both men and women encountered negative reactions, caring fathers met positive reactions more often than women did. This confirms the fact that the tendency to overestimate men and underestimate women for their actions is still stronger than the tendency to perceive them as equal in identical situations.

Recent studies (Maříková and Radimská 2003; Nešporová 2005; Šmídová 2007; Tereškinas and Reingardienė 2005) dealing with the topic of caring fathers have shown that even though childcare weakens the dominant position of men in the family and the man is able to form a closer and more intimate relationship with a child, this does not necessarily mean that his dominant position in relation to the woman is weakened as he still has more freedom and leisure to pursue and achieve his ideas and plans and continues to have more room in which to exercise individual choice. The term used to describe this situation is 'child orientated masculinity' (Reinicke et al. 2005). In terms of gender equality in the family, the sphere of domestic work and the sphere of leisure time appear to be crucial, as the caring father continues to enjoy more freedom and advantages than his partner.

The basic question that arises in connection with gender equality in the family is to what degree it is possible to achieve, at an individual level, equality in a couple amidst socially unequal gender relations? Even if (in very exceptional cases) this equality is achieved within the couple (with regard to the volume, frequency, difficulty, etc., of all the activities and actions that can be included under family work),<sup>23</sup> and even if the man and woman appreciate one another equally (i.e. not primarily according to gender

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<sup>23</sup> This means not just basic care but also mental work related to caring for others and managing a household and the performance of various domestic chores.

ascriptions but according to their actual qualities and abilities), this still does not mean that a significant shift from inequality to equality has occurred, because appreciation outside the family continues to be unequal. Even though each individual case may help to erode certain stereotypical ideas related to fatherhood, motherhood, and one or the other gender, a crucial 'breakthrough' at the level of society will occur only at the moment when the legitimacy of the conventional type of perception and reflection of social reality will be disputed. Thus, if the space of the family and household is perceived (and functions) as another sphere that men can conquer, where they can obtain (new) advantages, nothing important will change, and inequalities in the family and in society will persist.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the realisation of a new model or models of organising individual habitualised activities in a (heterosexual) family itself erodes the idea of 'the only possible' family arrangement in this type of family and also serves to potentially question the 'appropriateness' of such a single and uniform possibility. In this sense, important shifts toward equality, though at a different level, have already begun to occur.

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*Biographical Note:* Hana Maříková is a researcher in the Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences in Prague. She joined the Gender & Sociology department in 1995, specialising in sociology of gender and gender issues in the family with a focus on the position and role of men in the family. She is the editor and co-author of *Changes in the Contemporary Czech Family* (2000).

*Address:* e-mail: hana.marikova@soc.cas.cz