

STAY-AT-HOME FATHERING

A strategy for balancing work and home in Canadian and Belgian families

Rooted in two qualitative research studies of stay-at-home fathers (70 Canadian and 21 Belgian) at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this article explores the innovative ways that families seek to create work–family balance in two countries where relevant social policies are still focused on the encouraging of private family-based solutions to balancing paid and unpaid work. At the level of work–family policy, we note that both Canada and Belgium remain relatively weak in the provision of childcare, especially for children under the age of three, as well as in flexible working options that would allow families to effectively balance work and home. In light of these limited options, some fathers who have a weaker employment position than their female partners, or who are reconsidering their current careers, may opt out of the labor market for months or years in order to provide a private solution to an issue which still has little policy support. Nevertheless, while fathers are at home, they only partially ‘trade cash for care’; that is, they also remain connected to traditionally masculine sources of identity such as part-time paid work, unpaid masculine self-provisioning work, and community work that builds on traditional male interests.

Ancré dans deux recherches qualitatives portant sur les pères au foyer (70 installés au Canada et 21 en Belgique) au début du 21^{ème} siècle, cet article explore les stratégies innovantes adoptées par les pères pour équilibrer vie professionnelle et vie familiale dans deux pays où les politiques sociales sont encore largement centrés à cet égard sur l’encouragement de solutions privées. Certains pères ayant une position professionnelle moins avantageuse que leur partenaire, ou qui souhaitent revoir leur implication professionnelle se retirent du marché du travail pour quelques mois ou quelques années afin de fournir une solution privée à une question qui reste peu prise en compte par les pouvoirs publics. Au niveau familial, ces pères ne renoncent que partiellement au travail professionnel au profit du soin des enfants ; autrement dit, alors qu’ils sont au foyer, ils entretiennent un lien avec les ressources identitaires traditionnellement masculines comme le travail à temps partiel, le bricolage à la maison, et le travail communautaire fondé sur des intérêts masculins.

Keywords stay-at-home fathering; Canada; Belgium; work-family balance

Introduction

This article is informed by a transatlantic conversation about the experiences of stay-at-home fathering in two countries – Canada and Belgium – as gleaned from two

recent qualitative research studies of stay-at-home fathers. We explore one innovative way that families create work–family balance in two countries where relevant social policies are still focused on the encouraging of private family-based solutions to coordinating paid and unpaid work. One such solution is for fathers to give up, or reduce, their commitment to paid work and to take on the role of a stay-at-home, or home-based, parent within Canadian and Belgian households. Our article explores stay-at-home fathering through the narratives of over 90 fathers from both countries. We begin with an outline of some of the work–family policies in Canada and Belgium, followed by a description of the two qualitative research projects that inform this article, and some of our key findings, and the implications of these findings. The key question we will address is how Belgian and Canadian stay-at-home fathers deal with the tension between their role as primary caregivers and their own sense of masculinity, in different fathering contexts. This will be done through the description of these men’s struggle for social legitimacy, and the analysis of their relationship with unpaid work and care.

A tale of two countries and two studies

Both Canada and Belgium are countries that govern through complex configurations of federal and more localized governments. They are also both officially multilingual countries, with French as the language both countries have in common. In Canada, the other language is English, whereas in Belgium it is Dutch and German. Belgium is a small country with 10.4 million people, while Canada is an immense country geographically with a relatively sparse population of approximately 31.6 million. Both countries are quite similar on the gender-related development index, with Belgium ranked 9th and Canada 10th (out of 177 countries). Maternal employment is higher in Canada with female economic activity rate at 83% of the male rate, while in Belgium it is only 67% (Doucet & Tremblay, 2006; Merla & Deven, 2006). General characteristics of work family policy are explored briefly below.

Canada

As with many other countries, the social terrain in Canada is characterized by rising labor force participation of mothers of young children and gradual increases in the numbers of stay-at-home fathers. The most recent statistics from Canada’s main statistical agency, Statistics Canada, suggest that stay-at-home fathers (approximately 110,000 of them in 2002) have increased 25% in the past ten years, while stay-at-home mothers have decreased by approximately the same figure (Statistics Canada, 2002). Currently, Canadian fathers account for 10% of all stay-at-home parents. Statistics unveiled in the summer of 2006 also reveal that in Canadian two-earner families, women are the primary breadwinners in nearly one-third of those families (Sussman & Bonnell, 2006). As we describe below, it is the case that some of the stay-at-home-father families in Canada are part of these households where women are the primary earners and fathers are secondary earners, or where fathers have taken time off from earning to focus on childcare, as well as possibly retraining for a new career.

With the exception of the province of Quebec, Canada has no universal childcare in its remaining nine provinces and three territories. It is widely acknowledged by feminist and family scholars, and policy activists, that, for the vast majority of Canadians, childcare supply exceeds demand, and that the quality of Canada's childcare is uneven and expensive. According to a study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Canada's approach to childcare is one that provides 'basic babysitting, but not much else' for working parents, and disregards the importance of early education (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange & Tougas, 2000; OECD, 2004). As a nation, Canada also invests less than half of what other developed nations devote to early-childhood education, and has enough regulated childcare spaces for less than 20% of children under six with working parents. This compares to the UK, where 60% of young children are in regulated care, while in Denmark the figure is nearly 80%. The decision on the part of Canadian parents to have one parent stay at home with preschool children is part of a strategy to balance work and home for both parents, in a country where daycare has never been seen as a viable option for many parents.

While academics and policy makers have heavily critiqued Canada's approach to childcare, there has been much praise for its approach to fathers and parental leave. In contrast to its poor record in childcare provision, one of Canada's greatest strengths in family policy is its *Employment Insurance Act 2001*, which provides paid parental leave for almost a year. While 15 weeks are reserved for mothers as maternity benefits, either fathers or mothers can take the latter 35 weeks. The province of Quebec's policy is even more generous, with an additional five weeks devoted exclusively to fathers (Doucet & Tremblay, 2006).

Canada does not have a strong record of flexible working options available to parents. There are provisions in government jobs although, in practice, the flexibility in these positions varies within different parts of the government, and whether or not there is a family-friendly work culture in particular government offices. These arrangements apply both to flexible working options as well as to the uptake of parental leave by Canadian fathers (see McKay & Doucet, 2007).

Belgium

Belgium has a rather uneven approach to the issue of work and care in families. Over the past decade, the Federal State of Belgium has developed policies based on a paradoxical compromise between two distinct, at times contradictory, models of work-family balance. The first model is egalitarian. It promotes equality between women and men through women's equal participation in the labour market and the generous provision of childcare, mainly for children aged two-and-a-half years and older. The second model is neo-familialist, marked by a gradual move from a traditionalist view of women's role in childcare to the advocacy of the 'freedom of choice' of 'parents' to work or take care of children. As a result of this compromise, Belgium's supply of state-sponsored childcare services for children is relatively high, especially for children from the ages of two-and-a-half years to six years of age. Employed parents are entitled to a statutory right for paid maternity, paternity and parental leave (Marques-Pereira & Paye, 1997; Merla & Deven, 2006). Thus, compared to Canada, Belgium's formal provision of childcare is relatively high,

especially for preschool children (coverage rate approximates 100%), but is much weaker for children under the age of two-and-a-half years of age (coverage rate approximates 30%). This latter figure is, however, high compared to the majority of EU countries.

As opposed to Canada, Belgium has been paying very limited attention to the issue of at-home parenthood. There are currently no statistics available on at-home parents. These parents are hidden in the statistics on inactivity, unemployment, self-employment or workers on leave, according to their official status. In addition, the available statistics do not provide information on the family situation of these categories of people, or on the proportion of entitled parents on paternity and parental leave (Julémont, 2004). It is worth mentioning, however, that men's use of paternity leave is progressively rising. In 2004, it was taken by nearly 53,000 fathers.¹ Nevertheless, even though men's uptake is rising, fathers only represented 17% of all users in 2005. Also in that same year, time-credit, career-break and parental leave systems were predominantly used to reduce working time rather than to stop working (Onem, 2006). Thus, the issue in Belgium is that while there are options for flexible working, these are limited in time and access, and are mainly used by women. The relatively low proportion of men using the parental leave option can also be attributed to gender segregation in employment, combined with women's taking on the bulk of childrearing responsibilities.

Belgium and Canada thus share quite similar childcare regimes, and the male breadwinner/female caretaker model is no longer dominant in these two countries. In both countries, popular and scholarly discourses have challenged traditional definitions of fatherhood, and encouraged men's increased participation to childcare and nurturing. Nevertheless, the divergent levels of attention paid to stay-at-home fatherhood, and of community support to fathers, suggest that Canadian society might be more open and supportive of men's uptake of a primary caretaker role. In starting this discussion, we would thus expect that stay-at-home fathers benefit from a higher level of legitimacy in Canada than in Belgium.

Set against this backdrop of similar and different approaches to families and work, we introduce the two studies that underpin this article and then move to discuss some key shared findings. Our two studies were carried out in roughly the same timeframe at the beginning of this new millennium. Doucet's (2006a) study was undertaken with a major research grant from Canadian funding and was part of larger project on fathers as primary caregivers which interviewed over 100 Canadian fathers, 70 of whom were stay-at-home fathers. The study was conducted from 2000–2004 and produced a book-length manuscript. Merla's (2006a) study was part of a doctoral dissertation project and was the first of its kind to be carried out in Belgium; this study was carried out from 2002–2006 and focused on a core sample of 21 fathers. Both studies were informed by attempts to understand how fathering and mothering were changing against shifting social and economic landscapes. More specifically, we were both interested in understanding men's lives and masculinities in the midst of dramatic changes in family life, and to engage with David Morgan's compelling claim that 'one strategy of studying men and masculinities would be to study those situations where masculinity is, as it were, on the line' (Morgan, 1992: 99). Thus, both studies adopted a central case study of men who self-define as primary caregivers (stay-at-home fathers in Belgium, and stay-at-home fathers and single fathers in Canada), since

practices, identities and discourses of caring remain strongly linked with femininity and women's social lives. We were also interested in the personal, couple, community, and institutional processes involved for men and women who challenge dominant gender norms and practices.

Canadian case study

The Canadian study that informs this article is a qualitative study of over 100 fathers who self-identified as primary caregivers; included here were 70 stay-at-home fathers (66 fathers who were at home for at least one year, and four fathers who were on parental leave). The broad majority of these fathers (53/70 or 76%) were at home with their children at the time of the interviews, whereas 13/70 (19%) fathers reflected back to when they were stay-at-home fathers; this latter group was included in the study so as to gain a sense of the differing experiences and social supports over time for stay-at-home fathers. A wide sampling strategy was used; fathers were recruited through schools and varied community centers (i.e. health-related, community, and ethnic minority groups), in parks and playgrounds; through ads in mainstream Canadian newspapers and in many small community papers, and several fathers were found through snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the 70 stay-at-home fathers whose narratives inform this article, geographical location is as follows: 46 fathers from Ottawa, the capital city of Canada; a further 12 from other parts of Ontario (two from Ontario cities and ten from small towns and rural communities) and 12 fathers from six other Canadian provinces. The sample of 70 stay-at-home fathers was very diverse in terms of occupations, social class and education levels. The sample also included participation from ten fathers from visible ethnic minorities, two Native fathers, and two gay fathers.

The interviewing of the 70 stay-at-home fathers occurred from 2000–2003 in the following ways: 48 in person (46 face-to-face interviews and two fathers through focus groups), 12 by telephone, and ten through an Internet open-ended survey. Some fathers were interviewed several times using different methods. Fourteen couples (with a stay-at-home father, and with some diversity along the lines of income, social class and ethnicity) were interviewed in order to include some mothers' (and couple's) views in the study. Analysis of the data was comprised of several components. First, research assistants carried out in-depth readings of verbatim interview transcripts on their own and then, in conjunction with Doucet, utilizing the 'Listening Guide' (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, 2003). A layered theoretical approach, moving heuristically from individuals to social relationships to wider social structures, was reflected in the multiple readings employed within this analytic strategy. Group discussions of common themes and issues were then conducted, thus producing divergent or shared interpretations of particular transcripts and the subsequent development of 25 case studies. A final stage of analysis entailed a lengthy process of coding using the data analysis computer programme, AtlasTi.

Belgian case study

The Belgian study that informs this article is based on a four-year doctoral research project on stay-at-home fathers (2002–2006). This research was focused on a sample

of 21 fathers who lived with a professionally active partner, and who had stayed at home for at least six months with the explicit aim of taking care of their children. The broad majority of these fathers (16/21 or 76%) were at home with their children at the time of the interviews, whereas 24% of fathers (5/21) reflected back to when they were stay-at-home fathers. Those fathers were recruited through newspaper and Internet advertisements, through snowball sampling and through approaching fathers in public spaces. There were also newspaper ads that were alternatively addressed to 'at-home dads' or 'fathers who stopped working to take care of their child(ren)', in order to reach those who did not identify with the first term. Even though Merla tried to reach as large a public as possible by selecting newspapers and magazines with various readerships, the sample was mainly of middle- and upper-middle-class, well-educated, white families, with ten wives having a high income.

All the Belgian fathers were interviewed, generally at home, between 2003 and 2005. The in-depth interviews lasted two to four hours. The partner was not included in the interview, except if she was present at that time, which happened twice. These interviews were semi-directive, and were designed to give the interviewee the freedom to develop his own narrative. The interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method of interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which led to the progressive development and enrichment of analytical categories and theoretical contributions. The first 14 interviews were initially analysed separately, using the NVivo data analysis computer programme; the utilization of this programme also contributed to the emergence of transversal categories of analysis. The remaining interviews were analysed separately and transversally, providing new relevant information for the construction and stabilization of hypotheses and interpretation models.

Theoretical framework and research questions

The two studies that inform this article are rooted in principles of symbolic interactionism and are influenced by a rich tradition of family research that employs such principles (Barker, 1994; Daly, 1996, 2002; de Singly, 2005; Finch & Mason, 1993; McMahon, 1995). They are also largely influenced by theoretical literature on men and masculinities. Particular emphasis is placed on attempts to gain people's accounts of their own understandings and actions, as well as how they, in turn, interpret these understandings and actions in light of the observations and judgments of other people. One of the major contributions of men and masculinities studies has been the demonstration of the plurality of definitions of masculinities across and within settings (Brittan, 1989; Hearn & Morgan, 1990), and of the various kinds of relations between different types of masculinities at the level of practices (Connell, 2000). The (much discussed) term of hegemonic masculinity refers not only to power relations between men and women, but also between men (see Connell 1987, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1997). Connell (1999) develops the idea that masculinities that are present at a given time and space form a hierarchy of positions including subordination (gay masculinity being located at the lowest end of the hierarchy for its assimilation to femininity), marginalization (as it is the case for

ethnic minorities' masculinities) and/or complicity with hegemonic masculinity (namely, those who take advantage of the benefits of patriarchy). However, empirical studies of the relationship between caring fathers' masculinities and hegemonic masculinity show that empirical reality is not as uniform as Connell's analysis suggests (see Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Dryden, 1999; Plantin, Sven-Axel & Kearney, 2003), something which he has indeed recently come to acknowledge (Connell, 2000).

The key question of our empirical studies of stay-at-home fathers' lives is how their everyday caring practices confirm or challenge current theoretical understandings of masculinities. We will examine if, and to what extent, Belgian and Canadian stay-at-home fathers disrupt the smooth surfaces of hegemonic masculinity. We will see how these individuals deal with the tension between two dominant norms – the first affirming men's assignation to paid work, and the second the feminine character of childcare – and their own sense of masculinity. This will be done through the description of these men's struggle for social legitimacy, and of their relationship with unpaid work and care. During the past three decades, research dedicated to stay-at-home fathers has largely focused on the determinants of men's involvement in primary care giving (see, for instance, Grbich, 1997; Haas, Allard & Hwang, 2002; Radin, 1982, 1988), showing how a multiplicity of inter-related factors came into play, including between mothers' and fathers' employment situations, as well as attitudes towards one's own parents' behaviour and values in terms of childrearing. While confirming the relevance of those factors in Belgian and Canadian men's decision to give up, or reduce, their commitment to paid work, our research further explores the personal and interpersonal consequences of stay-at-home fatherhood. In doing so, we draw on the results of research conducted by authors like Harper, Russell or Smith, which underlined the importance of paid work in men's identities and the difficulties stay-at-home fathers struggle with, such as a lack of legitimacy, social isolation, and challenges to their masculine identities (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Harper, 1980; Russell 1982, 1983, 1987; Smith, 1998).

Findings

Patterns of relations between paid work and home

The label 'stay-at-home father' does not refer to a homogenous group of fathers who are at home taking on all of the care-giving responsibilities. Indeed, our research projects suggest that the term itself may need to be revived in order to recognize the complex configurations of work–family balances. To describe the varied patterns of stay-at-home fathering in Canada and Belgium, we draw on Barbara Hobson and David Morgan's discussion of family-based care as involving how parents make decision on how to 'trade cash for care' (Hobson & Morgan, 2002: 1). In both studies, fathers' relation to paid work can be summarized by describing three groupings. The first was a group who did indeed 'trade cash for care'; fathers were placed into this category where they had full given up paid work for at least one year and had no expressed intention of going back to work at any time in the future. The second was a group of men who took a temporary leave from cash towards care; these were fathers who had taken a leave from their jobs, but planned to go back after a year

or several years at home, as well as fathers who were combining retraining for a new career with childrearing. Finally, a third pattern which we both identified in our fathering studies was one of fathers straddling both cash and care; included here were fathers who were working part-time (i.e. on weekends or evenings), as well as men who were working flexible part-time hours in a home-based business.

In the first group of fathers who traded cash for care were 12/70 (17%) Canadian fathers and 9/21 (43%) Belgian fathers. These were fathers who had achieved financial and professional success, and who made the decision, in conjunction with their partners, to take a break from paid work. The overarching commonality within this group of fathers was that they seemed to have achieved their career goals and were looking for other forms of fulfillment, one of which was caring for their children, as well as alternative work or leisure interests (e.g. travel, sports, writing). The higher percentage of Belgian fathers in this group may have to do with sampling strategies used in each study rather than national differences per se. What we wish to highlight here is the identification of the pattern as one instance of stay-at-home fathering without making any determination of what percentages of the stay-at-home fathering population this may refer to.

A second group of fathers (28/70 (40%) Canadian fathers and 10/21 (48%) Belgian fathers) were taking a break from working (through extended parental leave or a career break). Some of these fathers were also planning to go back to school or were taking evening courses for further education or training; some were in a clear transition between two jobs, or had unsuccessfully been seeking employment for several years. Finally, some of these men had a negative relation to their previous employment or, more generally, to their employment history, characterized by poor working conditions and career prospects.

Third, there was a group of fathers who were working part-time or flexibly outside the home or from a home office, or as an employee in their wife/partner's business. These were fathers who were the household's supplementary earners, and put their earning capacity as a secondary priority while they gave more attention to the household's caring responsibilities. Most of the Canadian fathers fit into this study (30/70 (43%)) while only 2/21 (9%) Belgian fathers² were in this category. Again, the authors view this as a result of sampling strategies rather than national differences.

Across these three groups, several factors emerge as important in facilitating the decision where the father would be the one to put his career as secondary and care-giving responsibilities as primary. For all fathers studied, the decision to stay at home was a result of a multiplicity of inter-related factors. The reasons that were cited with the most frequency were: the wife/partner's financially and/or professionally rewarding employment position; women's role in encouraging men towards the sharing of domestic work and, more generally, towards general ideals of gender equality; values privileging home care over daycare; difficulties with combining paid work and childcare; lack of affordable childcare facilities and/or negative impressions about the quality of childcare facilities; in some cases, a child with particular mental, physical or health needs; and the father and/or mother's willingness not to reproduce their own father's involvement in childcare. In Canada, the lack of universal childcare in all but one province, as well as the general perception that childcare in that country is expensive and/or of low quality, was a large factor in fathers' (and mothers') decision-making. In Belgium, the lack of availability of childcare for young children in

large cities, and the perception that childcare is expensive and/or of low quality, was also an important factor. In both countries, most of the parents commented on how, regardless of their children's age, there was an incompatibility between parents' working time and childcare, and school opening hours.

Stay-at-home fatherhood and public legitimacy

Most of the fathers in both studies struggled at times for social legitimacy in the role of stay-at-home father. Recurring sentiments of feeling like 'a failed man' were present in the narratives of the overwhelming majority of stay-at-home fathers. That is, most fathers referred in some way to the weight of social scrutiny and the pressure to be earning. At the same time, they were also confronted by the general social sense that childcare is still largely considered as a female domain — as indicated by reactions and remarks from relatives, friends, other mothers, or professionals such as nurses, nannies or paediatricians (Doucet 2006a,b; Merla, 2006a,b). As well-argued in much scholarship on families and work, investment in paid work is still considered an essential component of masculine conceptions of identity (Coltrane, 1996; Townsend, 2002). While some fathers claimed that they were unaffected by this pressure, the overwhelming majority nevertheless admitted that they felt this social gaze upon them. Several examples of this struggle for public legitimacy are described below.

Marc, a Canadian father who began staying at home 15 years ago with his two young sons, spoke about how important it was to be able to say that he was working, since it gave him a 'sense of worth'. He pointed to how different social expectations weigh on women and men, and that he and his wife felt the pressure to fulfill their traditional gendered roles with him 'providing more money for the family' and his wife 'filling her traditional role'. He reported his feeling of not 'being a good man, by not providing more money for the family' and that he 'wasn't doing something more masculine'. In a similar way, Philip, a Belgian youth worker who was at home for one year, insists on the importance of paid work in men's identity and socialization, 'Men are programmed to work, as a part of their masculine identity'. He added that, 'A lot of friends of mine are journalists; this is what makes them "men". They are journalists first. I imagine that if they might lose their job, it would be a big loss of identity for them'.

Drawing connections between our two case study countries, fathers shared their perception that there remains a climate of public judgement of men at home. Archie, a Canadian stay-at-home father of seven years, said: 'For the most part, there is a sense that if a man stays home there is something wrong with him'. Armand, a stay-at-home Belgian father of nine years added that he 'always had that feeling that, that I was a sissy or a strange person'.

Redefining unpaid work

A shared finding between our Canadian and Belgian studies is how the overwhelming majority of fathers took on several kinds of unpaid work with masculine connotations. Partly to deal with the public scrutiny of their non-traditional role of being a stay-at-home father, men strove to combine this non-traditional work with more traditional masculine characteristics. Thus, they took on unpaid self-provisioning work (Pahl,

1984; Wallace & Pahl, 1985), and specifically 'male self-provisioning activities' (Mingione, 1988: 560) which include 'building, renovation . . . carpentry, electrical repairs and plumbing, furniture making, decorating, constructing doors and window frames, agricultural cultivation for own use, repairing vehicles' (Mingione, 1988: 560–561). Second, they took on household renovation work, as well as particular kinds of community work that drew on traditional masculine pursuits such as physical labour, athletic activities, renovation and construction, or leadership positions.

In the Canadian study, many of the stay-at-home fathers commented on how part of their domestic labor included work they were doing on the house, landscaping, carpentry, woodworking or repairing cars. Richard, for example, a 39-year-old French–Canadian father, deliberately mentioned such work as part of his domestic routine. In his joint interview with his wife, this former electronic technician who gave up his paid work two years earlier to be at home with three preschool children, took out a photo album and pointed to the before-and-after pictures of his household renovation, saying: 'Now you can see how much I've done'. While Richard was a father who also crossed into traditional feminine-defined domestic work such as baking, jam-making, cooking and cleaning, he also saw traditional masculine activities as part of his experience and part of his stay-at-home father identity. With regard to his long-term plans, Richard's reply was:

I am not going back to work . . . I'll be doing work on the house. Renovations. Cooking, cleaning. They're only gone for six hours a day. I'll probably be more involved in the school. I'll do these things I've wanted to do for years. Simple things like organizing my recipes. Organizing my tapes and music . . . I have a lot of projects that I want to do in woodworking . . .

Similar findings emerge from the Belgian study. Colin, also a stay-at-home father of three preschool children, not only entirely renovated his house, but also commented on how he enjoyed repairing cars in his garage, an activity he liked to share with his children: 'On Sundays, Kevin puts his overall and says "Daddy, I want to work on old cars with you" because I like old cars and so he works with me. And Raphaël starts to do it too. He says: "Daddy, I want to work with you"'. Philippe, a Belgian father of two daughters, who did electrical repairs in the home and renovated the kitchen during his time at home, further underlined the link between self-provisioning work and masculinity. He justified his renovation activities by saying: 'Men like to fix things. They can't remain at home without doing anything'.

For many men in both studies, the impulse to take on self-provisioning was partly a way of contributing to the household economy, but it was also part of an effort to justify their being at home through emphasizing more 'masculine' work and hobbies that involve traditional male qualities, such as building, construction, and physical strength. This very much carried over into the community work that both the Canadian and Belgian men took on. While some of these could be viewed as part of a collection of masculine hobbies, passed on from their own fathers or male peers, these are also activities which displayed or justified men's masculinity, and which seemed to alleviate some of the discomfort men feel with giving up breadwinning. Building on traditional male interests such as sports (Messner, 1990) and physical labour, men translated these skills into assets in their care giving and became involved in

recreational sports as organizers and coaches, and taking on tasks involving physical labour in the classroom. Some fathers also took on leadership positions in school councils and community organizations. Canadian father Archie, for example, highlighted how his position as president of the parent–teacher council became ‘a full-time job’.

Generative fathering: Personal and political changes

As a result of spending time at home with their children, it is notable that both Canadian and Belgian fathers pointed to how they had undergone significant personal, ‘generative’ (Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent & Hill, 1993; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1996), and even political changes as they made the shift from worker to carer. Such changes were expressed in abundance across both studies. Aaron, for example, who used to be lawyer in a ‘cut-throat’ environment ‘where you have to be strong’, said that ‘my hard edges have softened’ and how he had a steep learning curve ‘about sharing, feelings, and spending time with them, sort of mellowing out a little’. Colin, a Belgian father of three small children, who used to work as a truck driver, remarked: ‘I learned that I can be soft. I’m a very surly, narrow-minded person and I must confess that I’m getting softer thanks to my kids’.

Fathers also used their ‘at-home’ period as an occasion to develop or maintain skills that they thought would be useful for a future return to paid work. That is, caring for their children helped develop a capacity to develop emotional literacy, management skills, and a sense of organization as they learned to cope with a multiplicity of tasks. Frank, a Canadian stay-at-home father of two children for four years, used his experiences at home as a launching pad to rethink a new career. Formerly an accountant, he began to consider the profession of social work during his time at home. This arose partly from being involved in community organizations and partly through finding new skills that he never knew he had. Specifically, he joined the board of a community association focused on programming for preschool children. He was the ‘only male on staff’ but noted that his presence was important, as the association ‘found that there was a need for some kind of program for dads’. Second, he pointed to how he had ‘changed from being at home ... it’s brought out some nurturing side of me. I mean I knew it was *there* but I don’t know to *what* extent’. His realization that he enjoyed working with community programmes and that he had a ‘nurturing side’ led him to take night courses in social work, and to put in place plans to return full-time to school to complete his training once his children were both in school.

An example of this similar tendency to work on employment-related skills while at home was found in several of the Belgian stay-at-home fathers. John, who used to be an English teacher, viewed his time at home as an occasion to maintain skills that he had developed in his former job. He explained how important and interesting it was for him to help his children succeed at school. For example, he attempted to find innovative solutions to encourage his youngest son to read books: ‘As a teacher, it’s very interesting to see this and try to find how to tackle this.’

Fathers’ political perceptions that evolved as a result of being at home were twofold. First, fathers started to question the lack of fit between work time and children’s school time. Fathers at home thus began to redefine what they considered

to be an ideal balance between work and home. Many fathers insisted they would remain very involved with their children if and when they went back to full-time employment. Indeed, many men commented on how their ideal home–work arrangements were ones where both parents worked part-time, or where one parent worked from home so as to adapt their working time to children’s school-time hours. In Canada, Craig, a stay-at-home father of twins, noted that he would take on Internet-based work so as to be the home-based parent while his wife continued to work long days as a psychiatric nurse. In Belgium, Serge, a 45-year-old father of two preschool boys, said: ‘I think I’ll wait until my youngest child enters primary school . . . But I don’t think I’ll work full-time. I’d rather be self-employed. If I start working again, it’s definitely not to pick them up at school or daycare at six p.m., that’s for sure.’

A second political change in men is how they bring attention to the valuing of unpaid work. Specifically, the difference between these two forms of work, paid and unpaid, is called into question via the reference to common features, all revolving around the idea that domestic work is a ‘real’ and ‘full-time’ job. From the Canadian study, many fathers mentioned how parenting is the ‘hardest’ or ‘most difficult’ job they have ever done. In the words of Archie, at home for seven years, ‘it’s the hardest work I have ever done in my whole life’. Meanwhile, Rory saw caring for his son Tristan as a ‘job’, and more specifically *his* job: ‘I know what my job is here . . . I will make sure that everything is going right in Tristan’s life, because that is my job’. From the Belgian study, Colin, a former truck driver and car mechanic who took a five-year career break to care for his three young children, highlighted how he began to recognize the value in caring work. He said:

I remained unemployed during eight to ten months. At that time I felt diminished, useless. But here, in spite of the fact that I’m not working, I don’t have that feeling at all . . . I feel very useful now.

Men thus add their voices to a large chorus of generations of women who have argued for the valuing of unpaid work (Crittenden, 2001; Luxton & Vosko, 1998). As Joe, a Cree stay-at-home father of two, said: ‘This Mr. Mom business – here I am complaining about it and women have been putting up with for a hundred years now’. A related point is how fathers also recognize the importance of gender equality in the workplace. Belgian father, Daniel, a financial analyst who stopped working for one year to care for his seven-year-old son, said: ‘I just said to my wife – “listen, it’s not complicated, our country has been ruled by men for years, and what’s the result? A huge mess!”’ Joseph, a 49-year-old Belgian father of four children, commented: ‘I wish there were more women in politics. It’s just a feeling, it’s hard to explain but I have the feeling the planet would be better’.

Fatherhood as distinct from motherhood

It was striking to us how, in both countries, fathers sought to distinguish their fathering from the work and identities of mothering. While there were slight variations in how this unfolded, and while there were times when, in practice, the two sets of activities looked and sounded indistinguishable, what remained

particularly salient was how fathers saw fathering and mothering as distinct sets of identities and practices. This was confirmed in two ways. First, fathers sought to emphasize more traditional masculine traits in their fathering, such as autonomy, promoting risk-taking and encouraging independence. Second, fathers in both countries played a strong role in their children's sporting and athletic activities; some fathers saw this as a good fit between their own traditional interests, and others saw it as a key role for fathers.

In the Canadian study, most fathers highlighted how they played a dominant role in promoting the children's physical, emotional and intellectual independence (see Doucet 2005, 2006a). Recurring examples in fathers' accounts included: encouraging the kids to be involved in housework, to 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 Canadian father, Alistair, 'I might be less likely to go out of my way to help the kids if it's something they can do themselves'.

Part of this process of encouraging independence is the issue of facilitating risk-taking in children. Fathers in both countries insisted on their particular 'masculine' contribution to childcare through promoting risk-taking and independence. In Belgium, Bruno, a father of two girls, encouraged his six-year-old daughter to climb, and stated that this was a sport that she would not have practiced with her mother. Karl, a Swedish father of two young daughters living in Belgium, pointed to how his children learned 'all the dangerous things ... with me. That's with their father'.

A second way in which fathers distinguished their fathering from mothering was in their dominant emphasis on physical activities and sport. This finding in both countries confirms previous cross-cultural longitudinal studies that have demonstrated that fathers use play as a way of connecting with their children (Coltrane, 1996; Lamb, 2000; Parke, 1996). Our shared work extends this finding out into the realm of sports with children. In the Canadian study, the overwhelming majority of fathers referred to how they, in the words of one father, Aaron, 'made a point of going out everyday' with their children, to do lots of physical activities, and be very involved with their sports (see also Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Plantin et al., 2003). In the Belgian study, fathers also emphasized their role in this domain. For example, Joseph, a Belgian father of four children said: 'I teach the boys how to ride a bike, how to swim, I've always done that and I think that it's a man's role. That's the role of the father.'

What remains striking across both groups of fathers is how keen they were to distinguish what they were doing from what it is that mothers do, and how fathers should not expect to be a mother, or to replace the children's mother. From the Canadian study, Maurice, a black father of two, said: 'I like to cook. But I wouldn't want to call this *women's work*'. Luke, a stay-at-home father of two girls for 12 years, remarked: 'You have to recognize that as a stay-at-home father you can never replace the mother. Don't even think about it'. In Belgium, Yvan, a 23-year-old father of two, summed up the sentiment of the majority of Belgian, as well as Canadian, fathers on this issue: 'I don't do things like a mother. Even the way I talk to my kids is different. I don't speak like a mother. I'm not the mother ... I don't feel like their mother and that's very clear.'

Conclusions

In concluding this article, it is imperative to note that our discussion of stay-at-home fatherhood in two different societal contexts — Canada and Belgium — is limited methodologically in that the two studies were not designed from their inception for the purposes of comparison. It was through conversation with each other at international meetings discussing comparative family policies that we began to see the usefulness of drawing comparisons between fathering in these two countries. While this exercise proved useful, particularly because there is sparse comparative work on experiences of stay-at-home fathering in different cultures, our work also recognizes the importance of conducting international comparative research projects on fathering.

In spite of these limitations, we nevertheless offer several shared findings that have emerged through our cross-cultural conversation about stay-at-home fathering in Canada and Belgium. In this concluding section of the article, we return to the research question at the centre of this article and draw together the larger implications of our arguments.

The key aim of this article was to explore if and how Belgian and Canadian stay-at-home fathers disrupt the smooth surface of hegemonic masculinity. Drawing on the results of our investigation of how these men deal with the tension between two dominant norms (men ought to work and provide for their families, and childcare is a female prerogative) and their own sense of masculinity, we would argue that these men engage in innovative forms of masculinities that are neither complicit, nor subordinated, nor hegemonic, but reflect far more complex dynamic processes of self-definition and self-presentation combining complicit and transgressive discourses and practices. Some aspects of the discourses and practices of stay-at-home fathers are complicit with hegemonic masculinity, such as their maintenance of a link with paid work, their engagement in male self-provisioning work and activities and their emphasis on traditional masculine traits in fathering. But this article also demonstrates that these combine in sometimes contradictory ways with transgressive discourses that put into question key components of hegemonic masculinity. Belgian and Canadian stay-at-home fathers not only assume traditionally feminine aspects of domestic work and childcare, they also add their voices to a large chorus of generations of women who have argued for the valuing of unpaid work. The majority of fathers also come to define themselves as masculine individuals who have successfully integrated traditionally feminine psychological traits and skills, such as softness and emotional literacy. These men's practices and identities of care giving go beyond current conceptions of masculinities and femininities, and call for greater exploration of the dynamics of changing and evolving masculinities.

While our article points to some similar patterns in both countries, we also note a significant difference in the social experiences of fathers, thus partly confirming our initial expectation that the divergent levels of attention paid to stay-at-home fatherhood and of community support to fathers in Belgium and Canada would translate in different levels of social legitimacy. Stay-at-home fathers seem to be more visible in Canada, both through the increasing numbers of them (through their visibility in government statistics), as well as in public attention drawn to the issue of

men's care giving in the mainstream media. There has also been a dramatic increase by Canadian parenting resource centers and health centers on programmes directed towards assisting fathers in making connections with other fathers, as well as in community groups focused on stay-at-home fathers. Meanwhile, in Belgium, stay-at-home fathers remain largely invisible. That is, they are absent from official statistics and do not have the any noticeable social support to assist with the social and normative legitimating of their situation. This translates into strong feelings of social isolation, reinforced by their difficulty to integrate into mothering networks. While Canadian fathers also point to issues of social isolation and exclusion, such experiences are becoming less blatant due to a gradual increase in social support to varied groups of involved fathers (Bader & Doucet, 2005; Doucet, 2006b).

Finally, we wish to underline that both studies argue for the importance of women's influence, both in terms of earning power as well as their ideas about gender equality, as important ones in the decision for fathers to become actively involved in caring for children. Both mothers and fathers' positive views on high paternal involvement emerge as important ones to consider in the decision for fathers to give up a primary investment in paid work and to invest heavily in care giving. We thus confirm recent findings on the importance of examining father involvement in the context of practices and attitudes of both parents (Bulanda, 2004; Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). As demonstrated in our research projects, fathers who take on care giving come to appreciate the generative and political consequences, or dimensions, of this investment of time and identities. In our view, studying stay-at-home fathering transforms current thinking on what a stay-at-home father *is* or *does*, and suggests that rather than conventional understandings of stay-at-home parenting, fathers at home are actually still tied to the labor market, but in a way that sees them joining mothers in the struggle to balance work and family. Further cross-cultural qualitative and quantitative research on stay-at-home father households, as well as on households where women are primary breadwinners, would allow researchers to engage in critical commentary on the changes in ideologies and practices on gender, work and care, as well as on the policy supports that might support families taking on innovative approaches to balancing paid and unpaid work.

Notes

- 1 Since 1998, all employed parents who have completed one year of employment with their present employer (during the last 15 months) can benefit from a paid (flat rate) full-time parental leave of three months, a part-time parental leave of six months or one-fifth parental leave of fifteen months, until the child's eighth birthday. In addition, employees, regardless of their family status, have a basic right to a paid (flat-rate) career-break (public sector) or a paid (flat-rate) time-credit (private sector), allowing them to stop working or work part-time for a year. This period can be extended up to five years by collective agreement negotiated at sector or company level. The number of workers using these flexible working options is constantly rising (+ 10% between 2004 and 2005). This is largely due to men's increasing uptake (+ 19%). However, this success is due, in part, to the increasing usage of these systems by people aged 50 and over (mainly men) to retire progressively from the labour market.

- 2 The Belgian study was explicitly dedicated to fathers who stopped working to take care of their children. Two of them engaged from time to time into part-time work for short periods.

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Andrea Doucet Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6. Tel: +1 613 520 2600 (x2663). E-mail: andreadoucet@sympatico.ca

Laura Merla Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social and Cultural Studies M255, The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia. Mobile: +61 4 2462 5873. E-mail: lmerla@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

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