

Determinants, Costs, and Meanings of Belgian Stay-at-Home Fathers: An International Comparison

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Data gathered from 21 at-home fathers living in Belgium were analyzed and compared to results from research conducted in Australia, Sweden and the USA on fathers taking primary responsibility for childcare. The dynamic process of managing the tension between assigned norms and personal identity was studied through a comparative overview of how at-home fathers come to assume the primary responsibility of childcare, the norms they are confronted with in their daily interactions and the strategies used by these fathers to (re)construct a positive self-image. The fathers' increased involvement in childcare challenged masculine self-definitions and self-presentations in normative contexts where men's predominant involvement in paid work is privileged and childcare is largely defined as feminine. In response, Belgian fathers developed strategies and discourses that drew on a multiplicity of masculinities that appear in many cases to be both transgressive and yet complicit with hegemonic definitions of masculinity.

Keywords: fatherhood, childcare, identity, gender, at-home dads, norms

In industrialised countries, professional and family life balance has long been considered a "women only" issue (Barrère-Maurisson, 1992; Hochschild, 2003). Women's growing presence in the labour market and the challenge posed by women's movements to the traditional male breadwinner/female caretaker model has made the articulation of paid work and family more acute. Concerns about paid work/family balance are heightened by ageing populations and decreasing birth rates, both of which affect social security systems in most Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) countries. In the Nordic countries, where gender equality policies date

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back to the early 1960s, governments stressed the importance of combining actions targeted at both women and men. These policies start by acknowledging that women's position in the labour market and society will not be improved unless men take on traditionally female activities, both in the public and the private sphere (Bruning & Plantenga, 1999; Hernes, 1988; Leira, 2002; Moss & Deven, 1999). Following the Nordic example, several EU Member States have recently started to develop schemes and policies promoting men's involvement in the family, with a special focus on childcare and active fatherhood (Deven & Moss, 2002). Fathers are expected to be an active or 'hand on' sharer of child caring responsibilities (O'Brien, 2005). But although discourses indicate an evolution of men's attitudes, practices are only changing slowly. Still, in different OECD countries, some men do engage in active and involved fatherhood and reduce their investment in paid work to take on the primary responsibility of childcare.

Data from doctoral research of at-home fathers conducted in Belgium between 2002 and 2006 were analysed to add to our understanding of how "deviant" fathers deal with the tension between dominant gender norms and their practices and to compare with findings from similar research in other western countries. The experiences of at-home fathers in Belgium are reported with a focus on the factors contributing to their involvement in active fatherhood and the costs and barriers they have to deal with. The significance of these factors are supported by the results from research conducted in Australia, Sweden, and the United States. Some of the strategies at-home fathers living in Belgium develop to maintain a positive self-image are briefly presented.

Theoretical Perspective

My Belgian investigation of at-home fathers is grounded in a constructivist and phenomenological approach of the social world. This approach considers the perception of the every day life world as a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1996; Schütz, 1987; Williame, 1973). In this sense, socially constructed sex differences are considered to be one of the guiding principles of our perception of the world (Delphy, 2001). Gender is not considered an essence or a property, but an element of self-definition and self-presentation that is constantly (re)produced and challenged in the course of interactions. Gender is a product of our interactions with others (Kimmel, 2000). As a key component of identity, it contributes to the construction of meaning and the agency of significant experiences that form the background of personal identity. In other words, gender plays a role both in the assignation and the appropriation of identity at a personal level. Identity is defined as the result of a dynamic negotiation process of the tension between assignation and appropriation. Assignation refers to interpersonal as well as institutional relations, and appropriation refers to self-narratives and reflexivity (Dubar, 2002). This view sees individuals as actors who can, in a reflexive process, distance themselves from the inherited and statutory dimensions of their identity and eventually put them into question.

The possibility of distancing oneself is connected to the passage from first to second modernity, characterized by the multiplication of social roles. According to Kaufmann, this shift makes the individual more autonomous and provides him or her with the possibility of developing his or her own subjectivity (Kaufmann, 2004). Society's diversification is manifested in many ways including the multiplication of definitions for masculinities and femininities. At the global level, dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity together form a historically constructed structure defined by Connell (1999) as the gender order. But dominant (or hegemonic) masculinity is much more of an ideal than a largely embodied configuration of practices and meanings. The much discussed term of hegemonic masculinity refers not only to power relations between men and women, but also between men (for a detailed discussion of the concept, see for instance Coltrane, 1994; Connell 1987, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1997). Connell (1999) developed the idea that masculinities that are present at a given time and space form a hierarchy of positions including subordination (e.g., gay masculinity being located at the lowest end of the hierarchy for its assimilation to femininity), marginalization (e.g., ethnic minorities' masculinities) and/or complicity with hegemonic masculinity (i.e., those who take advantage of the benefits of patriarchy). However, empirical studies of the relationship between caring fathers' masculinities and hegemonic masculinity showed that empirical reality is not as uniform as Connell's analysis suggested (Doucet, 2004), something which Connell (2000) has recently come to acknowledge. In contemporary western societies, the reference to a "crisis of masculinity" points towards the difficulty of clearly identifying a single and clear-cut hegemonic definition of masculinity.

Such a difficulty does not mean that individuals are no longer exposed to gender norms, but, rather, that several norms coexist in the social world. Institutions, as well as individuals, play a major role in the reproduction of these norms through a dynamic process that cannot be assimilated to an automatic determination of the self (Becker, 1985; Goffman, 1993; Kimmel, 2000). In an attempt to grasp gender in personal life, Connell (2002, p. 81) underlined the dynamics of gender "learning." First, Connell showed how the consequences of one's behaviour are shaped by institutions (through recognition, access to networks, etc.). Second, Connell demonstrated how individuals develop the capacity both to adopt a certain gender identity and produce a gender performance, and to distance themselves from a given gender identity). This view is consistent with the definition of gender identity and, more specifically, of gendered self-definition and self-presentation proposed and developed in more detail elsewhere (Merla, 2006). Masculine and/or feminine self-definition and self-presentation are considered the dynamic result of a tension between two aspects. On the one hand are the norms assigned in the social stock of knowledge to males (for masculinities) and females (for femininities) contributing to a typified comprehension of the world and orienting practices. On the other hand are the personal elements of identity through which individuals give meaning to their practices and can, in a reflexive process, question the link between masculinities/femininities, assigned norms and biological sex.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the dynamic process involved in the management of the tension between dominant gender norms and the practices of "deviant"

fathers. This is done through a comparative overview of how at-home fathers come to assume the primary responsibility of childcare, of the norms they are confronted with in their daily interactions and of the strategies they use to (re)construct a positive self-image. The first result section provides a comparative review of men's narratives of the determinants of their decision to engage in stay-at-home fatherhood. This review gives us a preliminary understanding of stay-at-home fathers' views on dominant norms and on the inherited and statutory dimensions of their identity, and how these contribute, together with other factors, to their engagement in active fatherhood. The second result section examines the reactions stay-at-home fathers are confronted with in daily interactions. This section provides us a view of the first element of the tension located at the centre of gender identity – assigned norms these men are supposed to perform. The last result section focuses on the second element of the tension – personal elements of identity- and on the management process of the tension between assigned norms and personal identity. Next, a preliminary typology is presented of the ways in which Belgian at-home fathers cope with their transgression of two norms: “men ought to work” and “childcare is a female prerogative.” The strategies they adopt to cope with their transgression define and present themselves as individuals endorsing a particular gender.

Method

The core of this paper is based on my doctoral research on at-home fathers in Belgium. The study attempted to understand the dynamic process of self-definition and self-presentation. This approach was consistent with the view that a focus on situations where masculinities are problematic is one of the key strategies to studying men and masculinities (Coleman, 1990; Morgan, 1992).

Data were gathered from a sample of 21 fathers living with a professionally active female partner and who declared they had stayed at home for at least six months with the explicit aim of taking care of their child(ren). The fathers were recruited through newspaper and internet advertisements. Two were identified through snow-balling techniques and one by chance (at a train station). The advertisements were alternatively addressed to “at-home dads” or “fathers who stopped working to take care of their child(ren)”. This was done in order to reach those who did not identify with the first term. Even though I tried to reach as large a public as possible by selecting newspapers and magazines with various readerships, the sample is made up of a majority of middle-upper class, well-educated families, with 10 wives having a high income. Five fathers were in their 20s, nine in their 30s, five in their 40s, and two were older than 50 at the time of the interview. Only one father had one child, 11 had two children, and nine had three or more children. In the majority of cases, the youngest child was younger than one year of age when the father decided to stay at home. The majority of fathers had stayed at home for several years. Four were back in employment at the time of the study.

All the fathers were interviewed at home. The in-depth interviews lasted two to four hours. The partner was not included in the interview, except in two cases where

the interviewer had no option but to include her, as she repeatedly intervened in the conversation. All the interviews were semi-directive, and designed to give the interviewee the freedom to develop his own narrative. All of the interviews started with the following question: "Could you explain how you became an at-home dad?" The major themes of the interviews were the following: early socialization of self and partner (parents' values, division of domestic tasks at home, participation in domestic tasks, relationship with mother and father, personal opinion on early socialization); decision-taking process (factors, role of the partner, role of the children); transition from paid work to at-home fatherhood (difficulties, changes in the participation in domestic tasks, role of the partner); practices (participation in domestic tasks when employed, participation in domestic tasks while at-home); reactions (of significant others such as relatives and friends, of other people, evolution of reactions); reactions management (personal opinion on reactions, self-presentation in interactions, consequences of negative reactions on relationships); conceptions and values (paternity, maternity, masculinity, femininity, paid work, family, central values, models); self-definition (as father, as man, as partner, as at-home dad); and, evaluation of at-home fatherhood (advantages, disadvantages, evolution of the situation in the future).

The interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method aims at creating grounded theory, through the systematic comparison of interviews leading to the progressive development and enrichment of analysis categories, which are then translated into theory. The first 14 interviews were analysed separately, using the NVivo data analysis computer program, to shed light on the internal logic of each discourse. This contributed to the emergence of transversal categories of analysis. The first transversal analysis was conducted on these 14 individual analyses, in order to assess and enrich the analysis structure. The remaining interviews were analysed separately and transversally, providing new relevant information for the construction and stabilisation of hypotheses and interpretation models.

The results were compared with the findings from an extensive selection of research on at-home fathers and/or primary caregiving fathers conducted in Australia, the U.S., and Sweden, using the Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (formerly Sociological Abstracts) data bank. However, most of the populations studied in the above research projects do not correspond to the definition of at-home fatherhood adopted in the Belgian case. A number of studies focused on employed and unemployed fathers who spend a certain amount of time with their children while their partners were at work (Grbich, 1997; Russell 1982, 1983, 1987). Another group of studies focused on self-reported househusbands or at-home fathers who do not work at all and/or who work outside the home, but on a part-time basis (Harper, 1980; Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985; Smith, 1998. In her study of American fathers' involvement in childcare, Radin (1988, p. 130) identified a group of male primary caretakers according to their scores on a scale designed to measure the amount of father involvement in childcare. And finally, Haas and colleagues have, together or separately, concentrated their research on Swedish fathers' lack of use of parental leave (Haas, 1990; Haas, 1992; Haas, Allard

& Hwang, 2002). The striking consistency of results suggests that men who assume the primary responsibility of childcare, be it on a full time or part time basis, share similar experiences. The convergence of results may be explained in part by the fact that fathers in all the studies are predominantly white, middle-class, highly educated men taking care of preschool children.

Results

Determinants of Fathers' Decision to Become Primary Caregivers

A multiplicity of factors contributed to the Belgian men's engagement in their parental role. Multiple factors were also evidenced in most of the other research reviewed. Consistent with Russell's (1983) findings, some factors have a greater impact than others on the parental role. These factors are, first, values in terms of child rearing, gender roles, time and quality of life; second, work-related factors; third, work-family balance-related factors; fourth, benefits and costs calculation; fifth, the role of the partner; and finally, childhood socialization and attitude towards one's own parents' investment in childcare.

Values in terms of childrearing, gender roles, time, and quality of life. Educational values, and more specifically the idea that parents should take care of their children rather than subcontracting or relying on an informal network of relatives and friends, were reported by Belgian, Australian (Harper, 1980; Russell, 1982) and American fathers (Radin, 1982, 1988). Almost all the fathers from the Belgian sample stated their desire to give priority to the quality of life and relationships within the family. These men wanted to take time to "see their kids grow" and create a rich and solid relationship. In addition, fifteen men expressed strong criticism of the market economy and the values of competition, consumerism, and materialism, in favour of alternative values privileging human relationships, social justice, ecology, and/or non-conformism. Rejection of dominant values was one of the points fathers in Harper's (1980, p. 31) study had in common with Belgian fathers. The other is the combination of what she called a "conservative" approach to childcare where parents should be the primary caregivers with an egalitarian approach to gender roles (p. 187).

The question of men's (and women's) attitudes towards gender roles has been the subject of scrutiny in many studies. However, researchers were often confronted with the same problem: as interviews and surveys were addressed to fathers who had already engaged in their caretaking role, it is difficult to assess whether the attitudes expressed were a cause or a consequence of this engagement. This point was made by Russell (1983, pp. 88, 202-203) when it comes to beliefs about men's ability to take care of a child. In the Belgian sample of at-home fathers' subjective accounts, beliefs in gender equality and/or gender roles were cited only in one case as having played a role in decision taking. This does not mean that none of these fathers held egalitarian and non-traditional beliefs about gender roles. These beliefs were probably, as one of the

fathers in Harper's (1980, p. 11) study mentioned, "somewhere behind it too," but they did not come to the surface in self-accounts of the decision process.

Work-related factors. Most published studies stressed the impact of men and women's employment situation and working conditions on men's decision to take the primary responsibility for childcare. Men's attitude towards paid work and men's working conditions played a role in two directions. When these were negative, because of low career prospects, poor or disappointing working conditions, and job instability, men may have distanced themselves from paid work and sought other sources of self-fulfilment. Men in highly rewarding and satisfying employment positions may also have distanced themselves from the work sphere when felt they had achieved a good career and could now take time to invest in other activities. They may also have felt that their jobs, even if highly satisfying and rewarding, did not allow them to live in accordance with their values, such as rejecting competition, materialism, etc.; or that their time investment in paid work prevented them from being the fathers they dreamed of being. The Belgian sample of fathers can be split in two groups of equal importance corresponding to these two profiles, as was the case in Harper's (1980) study. Russell (1987) also mentioned the impact of long-term unemployment on the decision to invest in childcare. The difficulty of finding a satisfying job was mentioned by the three Belgian fathers who were unemployed as one of the determinants in their decision to become an at-home father, in combination with educational values and other variables.

Haas, Allard, and Hwang (2002) found that organizational culture variables had a strong independent effect on men's use of parental leave. These cultural variables were the extent to which the company values were based on an ethic of caring, the extent to which the company's policies and practices had been father friendly in the past, the company's stand on equal employment opportunity for women, and the father's perception of his work group as being flexible and adaptive in responding to his desire to take time off for childcare. Haas, Allard, and Hwang also concluded that the amount and variance explained by these variables was low in comparison to that explained by individual and family-level attitudes, a fact they linked to the Swedish social context.

Previously, Haas (1992) reported that mothers, who were more likely to share parental leave with their partner, had a higher income both absolutely and relative to their mates', were in managerial or professional positions, and/or working in non traditional female jobs. These factors also played a role in the Belgian sample, together with women's attitude towards paid work. Fourteen fathers mentioned their partner's strong engagement in rewarding professional activity with good career prospects and job security. The impact of the mother's employment situation and her attitude to paid work was twofold: it limited the financial impact of men's withdrawal from the labour market and it encouraged men who believed at least one of the parents should be at home for the children to reconsider their own engagement in paid work and childcare. Studies conducted in the 1980s in the United States and Australia had already pointed to the impact of the mother's employment or willingness to work on fathers, but the context was different, as mother's participation in the labour market was not the norm at that time (Radin, 1982, 1988; Russell, 1982, 1987).

Work-family balance-related factors. The incompatibility of working time schedules with family life or the interference of the latter by a professional activity preventing fathers from being physically or mentally available for their children was an important source of stress. This stress pushed seven Belgian fathers to reconsider their lives, as it had for a number of Australian fathers (Harper, 1980). Stress not only affected their relationships with children, but also with their partners. The impossibility of external childcare because of the lack of day-care centres or prohibitive costs and the difficulty of finding alternative solutions when children were sick or when schools or childcare centres were closed, all reinforced the pressure on parents. The father's decision to stay at home seemed the most practical solution to these problems in 10 cases. The 20 fathers with more than one child also reported that another child's birth (a third or even a fourth one in nine cases) was also decisive – as the stress and difficulties of combining paid work and family arose. This contradicts Russell's (1982) hypothesis that having many children and/or young children might have a negative effect on men's primary investment in childcare. His hypothesis was based on the assumption that taking care of a limited number of children and/or older children is less demanding and conflicts less with cultural values. The Belgian sample was, on the contrary, composed of a majority of fathers with two or more children, the younger being a toddler at the time of the transition from paid work to at-home fatherhood. Haas (1992, p. 116) also reported that having at least two children at home needing care increased Swedish fathers' likelihood to take a larger share of parental leave.

Calculation of benefits and costs. The analysis of Belgian at-home fathers' narratives showed that their decision to stay at home was calculated, either done alone or with their partners, on the basis of the benefits and costs of their withdrawal from paid work. The elements considered were both material and qualitative. The first included the financial cost. The loss of income even when sometimes slightly compensated for by time-credit, parental leave, or unemployment benefits was balanced out with the costs of childcare and domestic work externalisation, travel from home to work, income taxes, the purchase of prepared meals, contracting out house renovation, etc. The second element referred to the quality of life both at work (e.g., working conditions, career prospects) and at home (e.g., reduction of the stress level). In 17 cases the financial loss seemed minimal compared to the quality of life improvement. In families where both parents were ready to stay at home, this calculation was decisive in choosing which one of them would do so. Salaries, distance from home to work, career prospects, attitude towards paid work, etc. were compared. When the mother's employment situation appeared more satisfying, secure, and/or rewarding, the partners agreed the father would stay at home. This calculation illustrates the multiplicity of factors coming into play and how they interact. Several Australian fathers (Harper, 1980) also explicitly reported this kind of process. One father explained he wrote out a list of the 13 items considered during the decision process, which included, among others, the location of each parent's workplace, educational values, salaries, professional involvement, and job quality.

The role of the partner. The female partner often plays a decisive role in a father's decision to become the primary caregiver. As already mentioned in the description of work-related factors, the mother's willingness to work can be decisive. Two Belgian fathers explained that it was their at-home wives' willingness to start working that pushed them to reconsider their own investment in paid work and childcare. These two men held a strong view that at least one parent must be present full-time for the children.

But the mother's role can be more direct. Five Belgian fathers reported that their partner had insisted on them being more involved in childcare. This insistence was often linked to these women's feeling that their own father had not been involved enough – something they didn't want their partner to reproduce. Women's attitude towards their own fathers' involvement in childcare is often cited by psychologists as a significant determinant of father's involvement, be it positive where women report a positive relationship with their fathers or negative such as when the father is viewed as nurturing but not available enough (Radin, 1988). Women's exposure to non-traditional gender roles in childhood was also mentioned by Haas (1992, p. 97) as a characteristic significantly correlated to Swedish men's use of parental leave. In addition, Haas reported cases in which the mother explicitly pressured the father to take a larger share of parental leave.

Childhood socialization and attitude toward one's own parents' investment in childcare. Men's attitudes towards their own parents' investment in childcare can also play a significant role in their decision to be more involved at home. All the fathers of the Belgian study were exposed to traditional models of gender division of paid work and care in their childhood. Thirteen explicitly mentioned their willingness not to reproduce their own fathers' behaviour or to give their children the care and attention their own mothers, who were often housewives, provided them. Haas (1992, p. 86) mentioned that Swedish men who had uninvolved fathers were somewhat more inclined to take a larger share of parental leave, but she added that the impact of the mother's employment or the fathers' participation in childhood was not significant. In her American study, Radin (1982, p. 197) could not find any significant correlation between primary caregiver men's feeling that their fathers had not been loving or available and their own investment in care. What may be significant here is the subjective weight men give to those feelings and their combination with other factors such as values, work-related factors, or partners' attitudes.

Harper (1980) and Russell (1987, p. 165) have questioned the role played by early and adult socialization to childcare. Russell argued that his research partly confirmed Lamb's hypothesis that only highly motivated and self-confident fathers will give a positive response to political changes. The high level of motivation of the involved fathers he met was attested to by their presence at birth, completing antenatal classes, and interest in educational books. But many of these primary caregiving fathers did not have a high level of knowledge or care or domestic work experience. Previous socialization did not appear as a determinant of fathers' involvement in role reversal. Harper (1980, p. 171), like Haas (1992, p. 86), suggested that it is from becoming caring beings that fathers learn about caring.

Additional factors. Haas (1992, p. 107) found that knowing another man who had taken parental leave was positively related to the sampled Swedish fathers tendency to take leave. This finding did not apply to the Belgian or several other samples (cf., Harper, 1980, p. 185; Smith, 1998), as the at-home and/or primary caregiving fathers rarely knew other men in the same situation. The relatively high level of Swedish fathers' use of parental leave helps explain the likelihood of fathers knowing others who do the same (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2005, p. 152).

The Belgian at-home fathers' narratives show that the sexual division of labour in their homes is not only influenced by their partner and by policies and infrastructures supporting work-family balance, but also by elements of their identity. These include their own values and their relationship to statutory dimensions of identity, such as their professional situation, and inherited dimensions of identity, such as the models transmitted by their parents. Fathers not only used these elements to explain their "decision" to stay at home but also to construct strategies to deal with the transgression of dominant gender norms and question the link between masculinities/femininities, assigned norms and biological sex.

Costs of Gender Norms' Transgressions

Men who take childcare primary responsibility are exposed to a series of costs that can make their situation difficult to assume. As Harper (1980, p. 173) notes, "the informal mechanisms of social control, such as gossip, teasing and jibes or just plain silences, are ... frequently used to bring other people 'back into the line.'" Three sets of interrelated costs emerged according to the context of interaction in which they took place. These are the calls-to-order men are confronted with in daily interactions, the costs that emerge from gendered public spaces, and the costs associated with gendered social networks. An analysis of these costs sheds light on the gender norms that emerge in daily interactions.

Calls-to-order in daily interactions. In their daily encounters with others, be they significant or not, all the Belgian fathers were confronted with remarks and negative reactions, reminding them they were not engaged in an appropriate role. These reactions were primarily the result of others making one or more of the following three assumptions: childcare is a female prerogative, man's primary role is to be professionally active and/or the main provider for his family, and at-home fathers are not masculine.

The Belgian fathers reported being regularly confronted with remarks reminding them that childcare is a woman's job and that mothers "know it better." People such as relatives, friends, anonymous people the fathers met outside the home and even professionals such as nurses, teachers, nannies, or paediatricians, often suggested or implied that mothers should have the primary responsibility for childcare or expressed doubts about the fathers really being involvement in childcare. At-home fathers were often considered to be slackers both inside and outside the home. Even if the mother's employment is not questioned, when a family decides that a parent should stay at home, the mother is usually the one expected to stop working, take parental leave, or reduce

working hours. Similar reactions were reported in other studies. For example, teachers or paediatricians reminding fathers that they consider the mother as being primarily responsible for children's education and health (Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985), people questioning men's capacity to take care of a child (Harper, 1980; Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985; Smith, 1998), or asking why the mother was absent (Russell, 1983, pp. 134-136). Smith (1998) noted that at-home fathers were regularly required to pass a series of tests, like preparing cakes for an event at school, before other people, like mothers, accepted the idea that they are competent and effective carers. Smith also mentioned a tendency of interlocutors to forget, deliberately or not, about fathers' status of at-home dads, a tendency which persisted even when others were reminded in the conversation.

Reminders of the "female nature" of childcare often went hand in hand with remarks on men's assignation to paid work. Belgian fathers reported negative comments about their financial dependence on their wives' salaries, sometimes accompanied by the suggestion that they were exploiting their spouses. Other remarks suggested, on the contrary, that these men were the "poor victims" of "abusing" wives. Withdrawing from the labour market was sometimes perceived by these men's parents as a betrayal, especially when low educated parents had invested a lot in their child's education. Because paid work plays a central role in men's identity construction and relationships, it is often difficult for at-home fathers to maintain satisfying relationships with other men. The very fact that a man can stay at home and feel happy was sometimes perceived as a threat by male peers. As Harper (1980, p. 182) noted, men feel threatened by the rejection of the breadwinner role. Exposure to someone who rejects this role not only threatens the power associated with that role, but also questions one's own beliefs in it.

By distancing themselves from men's assignation to paid work and assuming tasks considered as "feminine", at-home fathers expose themselves to reactions challenging their masculinity. In the Belgian case, fathers did not report a lot of explicit comments, apart from those related to childcare and paid work. Rather, they reported diffuse feelings that others sometimes considered them as effeminate or weak, or put into question their sexual orientation. Russell (1983, pp. 127-128) noted that the fathers he met were also reluctant to talk about masculinity issues. He wondered if this reluctance could be interpreted as a sign of those fathers' refusal or difficulty to consider this issue. In other studies, though, Australian and American fathers referred to more explicit comments on their masculinity (Harper, 1980; Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985; Smith, 1998). The absence of explicit references to masculinity issues in the Belgian study may indicate that explicit references to gender norms are becoming less legitimate in their cultural context.

Most of the researchers, including Russell, made a distinction between women and men's reactions, the first focusing on men's ability to care for children and the second, on the fathers' conformity to hegemonic masculinity. Women tended to be presented as more supportive of male primary caregivers than men, but this distinction is not always convincing. As Russell (1982, pp. 160-161) noted, fathers describing women as more supportive were often sceptical about how deep these reactions were as some mothers did not treat them equally or were reluctant to let them look after their own children. In the Belgian sample, comments on childcare and conformity to hegemonic

masculinity were expressed by a variety of people, irrespective of their gender, age, or degree of intimacy. Some fathers tried to link negative reactions with their interlocutor's gender, age, or social class, but this categorization did not stand up to reality, as counter examples rapidly came to the surface.

Gendered public spaces. Public spaces are not gender-neutral (McDowell, 1999). Some places are predominantly occupied or allocated to women or men, be it permanently or at different times of the day. In some districts the spaces dedicated to children and their care like playgrounds, spaces in front of school doors, and day-care centres for parents and their children are almost exclusively occupied by women, as are commercial centres or shops, depending on the products they sell or the time of the day. The presence of a man in these locations, alone or with his kids, may seem "strange." Fathers' visibility and the reactions it provokes remind men they are inhabiting a place and taking on a role that is not gender-appropriate. The configuration of public spaces and the location of spaces reserved for children in "female" places in particular, such as spaces to change diapers in ladies toilets, is another reminder of gender norms. These situations were reported by fathers in the Belgian study, and were also pointed out by Smith (1998, pp. 153-155) for the U.S. Belgian fathers also reported similar reactions and perceptions in "male" spaces, such as sporting clubs or do-it-yourself shops, where a father with small children seemed alien.

Gendered social networks. All the studies referring to men's experiences at home mentioned feelings of loneliness as one of the negative aspects of at-home fatherhood (Haas, 1992; Harper, 1980; Lutwin & Siperstein, 1985; Russell, 1983; Smith, 1998). The Belgian case shows these feelings of isolation are rooted in particular features. Fifteen at-home fathers encountered difficulties integrating into local or school-based networks and housewives' groups. Eighteen fathers felt being distant from other men and found it difficult to maintain their presence in male groups constituted around a sporting activity or a hobby.

Fathers cited three factors as preventing them from integrating into female groups: women's resistance to men joining "their groups," their fear that their attempts to join would be interpreted as seduction strategies, or the difficulty of adapting to subjects of conversation they were not used to and comfortable. These difficulties and barriers were also reported by Australian, American, and Swedish fathers. Harper (1980) noted that some fathers face difficulties breaking the taboo that surrounds interaction between the sexes—a difficulty that women may also experience. Smith (1998) underlined the active role women play in the reproduction of the gender order by ignoring or denigrating at-home fathers. Some men in Haas' (1992) study reported discomfort with developing relationships with women that could be interpreted by neighbours or friends as sexual relationships.

The discrepancy between the life at-home fathers live, which is highly centered on childcare, and the life other men live, which is highly centered on their professional activity, can hinder relationships. Men who stopped working to take care of their children

often faced difficulty finding subjects to talk about with other men. It was also difficult for them to engage in a conversation with men on their experiences at home. The feeling of a growing distance from other men, who did not understand what it “really” means to be at home, was also mentioned by some of the fathers in Harper’s (1980, p. 48) study.

In summary, primary caregiving fathers are exposed to a series of reactions and reminders of the “lack of legitimacy” of their investment in fatherhood. The investigation into the lack of recognition of extreme cases of transgression sheds light on norms and social control processes that remain largely hidden in other contexts. The costs that came to the surface give an overview of barriers to men’s increased engagement in involved fatherhood. The costs show that social control not only acts through institutions but also through both daily interactions with others, be they significant or not, and through the spatial-temporal organisation of public spaces. Hence, we have an overview of the first element of the tension at the centre of at-home fathers’ gender identity: assigned norms. The second element—the personal aspects of identity—refers to the production of meaning and the reflexive process through which individuals may question the link between masculinities/femininities, assigned norms, and biological sex. Next some of the many ways by which Belgian at-home fathers cope with a “lack of legitimacy” and maintain and develop a positive self-image are presented.

Belgian Fathers’ Strategies to Maintain a Positive Self-Image

The “lack of legitimacy” at-home fathers are confronted with makes self-presentation in interactions and subjective self-definition problematic. There are many ways that these fathers cope with the transgression of the two main norms: men ought to work and childcare is a female prerogative. In doing so, they engage in a process of managing the tension between assigned norms and personal identity that leads them to define and present themselves as individuals endorsing a particular gender identity.

Dealing with the transgression of men’s assignment to paid work. In order to cope with the transgression of doing none or little paid work, Belgian at-home fathers developed strategies at the intersection of what Kaufmann (2004, p. 188) calls the “small personal cinema,” where actors develop discourses and project self-images “for themselves” and face to face interactions. Three ideal-typical systems of identity management were distinguished, where the transgression of gender norms is assumed, limited or mediated.

This first ideal-typical identity management system—*assumed transgression*—is grounded in a strong criticism of contemporary society, its values, its dominant lifestyles, and people’s conformity. The at-home fathers using this system concentrated on the centrality of paid work and professional ambition in people’s lives (especially in men’s) and a lack of attention and dedication to the family. They presented themselves as individuals having developed a capacity to distance themselves from others’ negative reactions, thanks to their sometimes long-term engagement in non-conformity and alternative values. Paid work was no longer central to their identity. Becoming at-

home fathers meant they achieved their main life goal: living in conformity with their own values. Their values centered on empathy and a quality of life based on deep and strong relations with ones' partners and children rather than materialism. Their discourses about others and mankind in general reinforced these views and set the bases for a self-presentation as men who are freer and more modern and who enjoy, together with their partners and children, a better quality of life. These men identify with the term "at-home dad" at a personal and interpersonal level, that is, they define themselves first and foremost as "at-home dads" and present themselves as "at-home dads" in daily interactions.

The second identity management system—*limited transgression*—refers to a strategy that consists of reducing the gender norm transgression through the maintenance of an attachment to paid work. Their personal discourses were grounded, on one hand, by critics of the distinction between paid and domestic work and, on the other, by participation in extra domestic activities—paid or unpaid. These activities are interpreted and presented by the fathers as semi-professional, such as, photography, therapeutic massages, old cars repair, community work, etc. The activities helped at-home fathers define and present themselves as having multi-faceted identities with paid work remaining a more or less important element of their self-definitions. They also provided them with opportunities to demonstrate their conformity to other elements of hegemonic masculinity when these activities require "masculine" qualities or are considered as "masculine." Many demonstrated their attachment to professional work through presenting themselves as being between two jobs, allowing them to reorient themselves and/or develop qualifications that will be useful when they return to paid work. The men's attitudes toward the term "at-home dad" was ambiguous. They stressed the absence of an alternative term that reflects their "real" situation more adequately and refused to allow one facet of their identity to subsume the others. The term was also rejected in favour of a term explicitly maintaining a link with paid work, such as "on sabbatical leave," both at a personal and interpersonal level.

The last identity management system—*mediated transgression*—is located somewhere between the first two. These at home fathers mediated the transgression through a self-conscious strategic management of self-presentation in interactions according to the anticipated reactions of interlocutors. In the course of interactions, these fathers adapted the way they presented themselves to others according to the effect they thought self-presentation as "at-home dads" would have on the interaction and, more broadly, on themselves. If the evaluation results were negative, these men made explicit or implicit references to their engagement in work-related activities or referred to an alternative status, such as "temporarily unemployed" or "retired," which still relates to paid work. If the evaluations were positive, they put forward their involvement at home. This strategic game of identity management can go hand in hand with a strong personal identification with at-home fatherhood or with a more ambiguous relationship with the term.

In addition to these three systems of identity management, it is interesting to note that many fathers stressed situational advantages to promote positive image of them-

selves. Some of these advantages were already presented in the first system of identity management: quality of life, reduction of stress levels, opportunity to put one's values into practice, etc. Two additional advantages include the positive effects of their presence at home on children and on their partner. The at-home fathers defined themselves as "good fathers" and "good partners/husbands." The "good father" makes sure his children are happy, well-developed, well-educated, and successful at school. The "good partner/husband" contributes to his partner/wife's investment in her career as his presence at home relieves her from the stress of trying to achieve work-family balance.

Dealing with the investment in childcare. During the interviews, participants engaged in reflexive discourses to resolve the tension between their investment in childcare and their own sense of masculinity. The integration of childcare with men's gender identity opens the way towards alternative definitions of masculinity, but this does not automatically translate into a self-definition as a person endorsing an alternative form of gender identity. At-home fathers' self-proclaimed gender identities can be defined in four ways as *alternative*, *conventional*, *androgynous*, and *feminine*.

Five fathers interpreted their investment in childcare as an essential element of their engagement in *alternative* masculinity. Alternative masculinity took two different forms: *gender equality* and *feminine polarity*. The four fathers who emphasized the first form stressed that men's involvement in childcare is a necessary step to achieve equality between women and men and is also a sign of the positive evolution of contemporary society, where it is now possible for men and women to reverse roles. The traditional division of gender roles is strongly rejected in the name of non-conformity, equality, and modernity. This alternative discourse combined with an identity-management system based on the assumed transgression of men's assignation to paid work. The remaining father endorsed an alternative masculinity, which stressed the development within men of a feminine polarity. He considered the harmonious development of both a masculine and a feminine polarity essential to men and women's balance, provided that the masculine polarity remains dominant for men and subordinate for women. Men's investment in childcare assists in the development of their feminine polarity, while the masculine polarity is maintained through the endorsement of traditional elements of fatherhood such as authority and the maintenance of a link with paid work. Unlike the other four, his system of identity management took the form of limited transgression.

Thirteen fathers strongly rejected the idea that their investment in childcare was incompatible with their own sense of being masculine. The incorporation of childcare into a self-proclaimed *conventional* form of masculinity relied on three different discourses. In the first two discourses, women were presented as "natural carers". The fathers justified men's involvement in childcare in two different ways. In the first discourse, the central argument was that some men can have a "maternal instinct" that makes them competent carers without putting into question their own masculinity. A parallel was drawn with the animal kingdom where some males participate in caring without being "less masculine". The second discourse pointed to the collapse of the male breadwinner- female caretaker model as forcing men and women to engage in

“new” roles. As men are no longer able to be the sole providers for their families, women and men have to find new ways to share the burden of work-family balance. In the third discourse, childcare was presented as a set of technical acts that can be accomplished by anyone, irrespective of his or her gender. Gender difference is maintained as men and women do not carry out these technical acts in the “same” way. Fathers in the conventional group exhibited all three identity management systems. Three exhibited the assumed transgression strategy and the 10 remaining were equally split between the limiting and mediating strategies.

The three remaining fathers rejected either of these masculine definitions. One defined himself as androgynous and the other as feminine. Much of the androgynous father’s discourse was very similar to the discourse by the father who grounded his masculinity in the development of both a masculine and a feminine polarity. The difference was that the androgynous father saw himself as achieving a perfect balance between these two poles. For him his femininity was developed and maintained through his investment in childcare and his development of empathy. He balanced his feminine pole by involvement in masculine activities such as house renovation, sporadic paid work, and the endorsement of traditional elements of the father role, such as authority and sports coaching. He exhibited a limited transgression management strategy. The father who defined himself as a feminine being expressed difficulty in maintaining a sense of masculinity. He felt rejected by his male peers, who he perceived as not considering him as a “real” man. This made it hard for him to identify with men. On the other side, he feels fully integrated into the network of mothers who live in his area. Taking on the primary responsibility of childcare led him into this new territory or integrated network. He expressed the belief that the other mothers saw him as a mother too. He exhibited a mediated management strategy. The remaining father rejected gender as a relevant category for his own self-definition, hence his case is not relevant to this discussion. However, for a detailed discussion of his very unique case and more details on the relationships between the three ideal-typical systems of identity management and the four self-proclaimed gender identities see Merla (2006).

Discussion and Conclusion

The dynamic process of managing the tension between assigned norms and personal identity located at the centre of gender identity was explored through a comparative overview of at-home fathers in Belgian to studies of fathers taking primary responsibility for childcare in Australia, Sweden, and the U.S. on men. The focus was on how men come to assume the primary responsibility of childcare, the norms they are confronted with in their daily interactions, and the strategies they use to (re)construct a positive self-image. The narrative review and the presentation of the results reveal the complex dynamics of gender identity.

Gender identity is defined as the dynamic result of a tension between norms and personal elements. Norms are assigned from the social stock of knowledge to males on how to be masculine and to females on how to be feminine. These contribute to a typified comprehension of the world and orients practices. Personal elements of identity

give meaning to men's practices and can, in a reflexive process, question the link between masculinities/femininities, assigned norms and biological sex. The Belgian study of at-home fatherhood makes this tension particularly visible. Men's increased involvement in childcare challenges masculine self-definition and self-presentation in a normative context where men's predominant involvement in paid work is privileged and childcare largely defined as feminine. These norms are supported by many individuals and institutions, and they are embedded in the spatial temporal configuration of public spaces. Investing in what is still largely defined as a feminine role is not an obvious choice for many men in Western societies, particularly as it exposes them to a series of negative consequences. These include lack of recognition, social isolation based on the difficulty of accessing networks, and challenges to their gender identity.

In response to the tension between gender norms and personal identity, Belgian fathers developed strategies and discourses that drew on a multiplicity of masculinities that appeared in many cases to be both transgressive and complicit with hegemonic definitions of masculinity. For some, a strong rejection of the centrality of paid work coupled with the integration of childcare into a masculine self-definition often went hand in hand with conformity to conventional masculinity norms, especially when these related to the traditional role of the father. In contrast, adherence by others to an alternative form of masculinity based either on having both a feminine and a masculine polarity or the rejection of masculinity in favour of "androgyny" combined with an affirmation of the limited centrality of paid work.

The multiplicity of gender identities that came to the surface in the Belgian study mirrors the multiplicity of references available in contemporary society. The reflexive management of self-image appeared to be a highly individualized process for these isolated at-home fathers. In fact, it largely relied on a repertoire of socially constructed references, thus reaffirming the social dimension of reflexivity. The active construction of a plausibility structure (Schütz, 1987; Willame, 1973) underlines the dynamic character of gender self-definition and self-presentation. This is also evident in the "mediated" identity management system where individuals consciously adapted self-presentation to their interaction context.

The samples used in this analysis have several major limitations. The first is due to the small size of samples in the Australian, Belgian, and North American studies that ranged from 11 fathers in Smith's (1998) study to 56 in Lutwin and Siperstein's (1985). The second is due to the lack of randomly drawn samples resulting in the over representation of white, middle-upper class, well-educated fathers and families. Together these raise the question of the transferability of results to larger and other social groups. Because of these restrictions the influence of class and ethnicity on fathers' involvement and identity management could not be investigated. The third limitation concerns only collecting data from fathers or the stay at home fathers in the Belgian case. Interviews with their partners would have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of their specific roles and allowed for reliability checks. Participant observation techniques would have provided significant additional information on the reactions at-home fathers and their partners are confronted with in every day life and

on the influence of the couple's interaction context on men's self-presentation and self-definition.

This explorative study raises important questions for subsequent research. What influences father's adoption of specific identity management strategies? How do self-proclaimed gender identities combine with those strategies? What roles do significant others, and partners in particular, play in at-home fathers' legitimating discourses? How do alternative allocations of childcare tasks within a nuclear family relate to men's and women's view of their partnership/marriage? Does the availability of a network of men in similar positions lead to the adoption of common self-definition and self-presentation strategies and, if so, what are the processes involved? More generally, this study points to the need for researchers working on the relationships between fatherhood and gender identity to develop an understanding of the dynamics of self-presentation and self-definition as "father" and "man" in the context of social interactions. This should be undertaken through the development of a body of empirical research on transgressive as well as dominant forms of fatherhood in a variety of family configurations, especially across ethnic and social groups.

The Belgian at-home fathers' narratives show how elements such as values, professional situations for both parents, policies and infrastructures supporting work-family balance and socialisation interacted to influence the sexual division of labour in their homes. Besides larger, representative, and multiple family respondent samples, subsequent research should be designed to explore how measures such as an improvement in women's working conditions and position in the labour market contribute to the emergence and legitimacy of new definitions of masculinity and femininity. Other possible contributions that should be explored include parental leave policies that strongly encourage or require fathers to take extended leaves from paid work; educational programs on parents sharing childcare that are aimed at children, future parents, employers and trade unionists; and systematic efforts to design more gender neutral public spaces.

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