FATHERS

THE MEANING OF BEING A FATHER IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

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FATHERHOOD IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Evidence of the Clash between Tradition and Modernity

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Mama never loved her much and/ Daddy never keeps in touch/ That's why she shies away from human affection."[1] These lyrics from a 90s pop hit are an unintended insight to the psyche of what one might call "the attachment[2] generation". That is, the generation believing that all their adult underachievements draw on a faulty early relationship with their parents. Fathers are very often the target of adults' complaints when it comes to their parents' lack of emotional involvement. But could this commonplace grievance mask a much broader and diverse social reality?

Long decades of study were to pass before Western social scientists reached the conclusion that "the roles a father plays in a family's culture are socially constructed and thus will vary as cultures do."[3] Yet walking the same path that Western scientists walked on their journey to uncover the – often discrete – social mechanisms that prescribe what it means to be a father may prove beneficial not only to our intellectual cravings, but also to our day to day family life. I therefore invite you on a tour around the globe, guided by the very best experts in the field of social science, to analyze the interactions of families along five continents. Hopefully, by the end of this trip, we will have discovered that, in a sense, there are

many other places like home and that the mere realization of this fact breeds self-respect and freedom.

THE SHY BEGINNINGS

Mothers were, historically, the prime focal point in the research on families and parenting. Only recently has fatherhood begun to be of interest to scientists investigating parental attitudes and behaviors. First Western studies on being a father that were ever reported were undertook by Pearl Gardner and Ruth Tash in 1943[4] and 1952[5]. The two were pioneers questioning the pervasive assumption that child rearing is synonymous to mothering.[6] By 1968, it was already obvious that social sciences lacked the literature specifically addressing the attitudes and activities of fathers.[7]

In fact, even as late as 1983, when LeMasters and DeFrain were reviewing the then current scientific literature on parenting, it was motherhood, not fatherhood, that captivated the researchers' attention.[8] During the three decades that had passed from the first scientific studies on parenting – published in the 1950s – literature on fathers was the exception rather than the rule. Michael Lamb's book, *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, is one such exception. Lamb heads the Division of Social and Developmental Psychology at the University of Cambridge and the scientific volume he edited expanded over the decades, growing by the 2000's into a monumental collection of scientific articles reviewing everything that Western (Anglo-Saxon) social academics had discussed about fatherhood up until then.

The anthology he curated began as a scientific synthesis and refutation of the mainline sociological view according to which fathers do not significantly shape the experiences and development of their

children (because mothers were seen as salient in the child's life). Lamb and his colleagues argued that fathers do play a role in child development and that this role had the capacity to influence the child's development both positively, as well as negatively. Lamb's work on the topic has set the fundamentals in Western research and was re-edited multiple times, each new edition reflecting an exponential growth in the scientific interest concerning fathers and fatherhood.

THE BREADWINNER

During the 1950s, the Western father was seen primarily as an economic provider who had to financially secure his whole family and also instill in his children gender appropriate stereotypes, transmitting masculinity to his boy-children and femininity to his girl-children.[9] Somewhat paradoxically though, as Lamb observed, despite the fact that their family operated on gender-enforced differences, "fathers and mothers seemed to influence their children in similar rather than dissimilar ways." Moreover, "contrary to the expectations of many developmental psychologists, the differences between mothers and fathers appear to be much less important than the similarities," he writes.

It would become Lamb's purpose – and achievement – to establish that the portrait of a father should not be confined to the unilateral breadwinning dimension, nor the dichotomous presence versus absence dimension. When it comes to influencing a child, he noted, not even the individual characteristics – such as masculinity, intellect, and even their warmth – matter as much as the characteristics of the relationships that the parents have established with their children. "Children who have secure, supportive,

reciprocal, and sensitive relationships with their parents are much more likely to be well adjusted psychologically than are individuals whose relationships with their parents (mothers or fathers) are less satisfying," wrote Lamb. Having been stated that fathers spend disproportionately less time with their children than mothers, even in families where both parents are employed,[10] Lamb went further against the current and posited that "the amount of time that fathers and children spend together is probably much less important than what they do with that time and how fathers, mothers, children, and other important people in their lives perceive and evaluate the father-child relationship."[11] Securing an emotionally protective attachment with the children seemed therefore paramount for the success of a father-child relationship. This, of course, was by no means a novel inference for the social sciences field.

EMOTIONAL SECURITY FIRST

The idea that constant feelings of emotional disconnection from their parents are the root cause of almost every adult nonaccomplishment goes back almost 75 years ago, when researchers first started investigating how parenting practices in general might influence child development.[12] One of the groundbreaking works on the subject, that was to acquire a highly influential role in later research, was the scientific investigation of Diana Baumrind on "parenting styles."[13]

According to Baumrind, two aspects are fundamental to parenting. One is parental responsiveness – the degree in which a parent caters to his child's needs, and the other is parental "demandingness" – the set of expectations a parent expresses towards his child. The combination of these two dimensions results in three parenting

styles, each with its own, different outcome. The authoritarian parent has high demands from his child, but shows low responsiveness to the child's needs. They are rigid and harsh, even abusive. The permissive parent is one swift to respond to the child's needs, but slow to enforce consistent rules, often spoiling the child. Baumrind suggests that the desirable parenting style is not authoritarian, nor permissive, but authoritative. An authoritative parent balances both high demandingness and high responsiveness. They are firm but not rigid; responsive but not indulgent.

In the 1980's, 20 years from Baumrind's first take on the subject, Maccoby and Martin expanded the researcher's three parenting styles to four: authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful.[14] And another forty years later, researchers still rely on the parenting styles that Baumrind identified. Along with the later elaboration by Maccoby and Martin, these are considered the only parenting styles with a strong empirical basis, despite the fact that the empirical work on these styles was entirely based on subjective (self- or adolescent-) reports of parenting.[15]

PARENTING STYLES AND MULTIPLE CULTURES

However, a very powerful objection to the generalization of those parenting styles recently surfaced when social scientists tried to relate these styles to non-Western cultures. While studying families all across the globe, they discovered that the various types of emotional climate non-Western parents build for their children are unable to fit the Baumrind pattern, which was actually designed using study cohorts of middle class white American families.[16] Father roles had to be studied using instruments from the same ecosystem

that created those roles; not by applying an outside matrix to a cultural environment to see if it clicked, but by discovering the particular geography of the environment itself. This very approach is key to seminal research like "Fathers in Cultural Context,"[17] coordinated by well-reputed psychology professor David Shwalb, his wife Barbara, also a psychology professor, and Dr. Michael Lamb. Their work was deemed "the most comprehensive presentation of extant research on the cultural contexts for fathers worldwide" since its representation of cultures from every continent amounted to "over half of the world's population."[18] But before diving into the fascinating world of fatherhood that Shwalb and his researcher colleagues described, we need to first establish our premises.

SOCIAL ARCHITECTURES

A "socially constructed role" means that every culture assigns its father-members with distinct roles. The definition a culture gives to a successful father therefore varies according to the social prescriptions of that culture. In other words, a good father is one who follows the path that was already ascribed to him by the cultural context he lives in, or by the family he helped form.[19] The two may sometimes work in different directions, as is the case for subcultural or ethnic families that may abide to a different set of social rules than the broader society. The family acts like a micro-environment, with rules of its own, sometimes in accord with society's general prescriptions, other times renegotiating customized roles completely.

The responsibility frame to which a father's role is subscribed is transcultural. That is to say, families in all societies assume the same responsibility: to teach, interpret and pass on to the newer generation their society's cultural expectations, even if those expectations

YOUNG CHILDREN
NEED THEIR FATHERS TO A
COUNTERINTUITIVE DEGREE.

differ from one culture to another. As Whiting and Edwards point out, "major subgroups like social class and ethnic groups often have somewhat different cultural expectations." All the same, it is generally considered a parent's job to be the primary teacher, interpreter and enforcer of culture for young children. In short, according to the two sociologists, parents act both as "organizers" and as "providers" of culture for their children.[20] Culture, in this sense, is to be understood as the values, beliefs and attitudes package that a generation inherits from a previous one.

In the past, most cultures converged on viewing a father's main role as that of an economic provider. This was not solely the result of patriarchal tradition, but also a consequence of the fact that even the scientific community excluded fathers from their visual field and obsessed over the mother-child relationship to the extent that it failed to appreciate the ability of very young children to relate to other caregivers (including grandparents, etc). It was long held that children could not successfully deal with other members of the family prior to the age of three.[21] Recent multicultural research not only contradicted this erroneous presupposition, but it also proved that young children need their fathers to a counterintuitive degree. A meta-analysis of 68 studies centered on the Acceptance-Rejection Theory,[22] led by Abdul Khaleque and Robert Rohner, unexpectedly found that children scored far better on a psychological adjustment scale when perceiving they are accepted by their fathers than they did when they felt accepted by their mothers.[23]

In the midst of this scientific oblivion, some non-Western cultures have historically differed. For instance, many African small-scale societies are – and have long been – matrilineal, not patrilineal, as first scientifically exposed by anthropologist David Schneider in 1961.[24] In a matrilineal system, the children belong to their mother's

lineage, not their father's. The father does not have guardianship over his biological children, but will be able to exercise such rights over his sisters' children. Matrilineal societies will exist in the midst of broader traditional cultures built on different presuppositions regarding a father's role. Curiously, their presence and continuity could be a consequence of socioeconomic disparities within that culture. Poorer communities will tend to construct parallel social systems to help them survive. It is well documented that poorer fathers generally comply less with the ideology of the broader culture than richer fathers.[25] What is more, a stable personal budget, as well as a stable or prosperous national economy promotes men's opportunities to be involved in their children's lives.

Still, when it comes to a father's involvement, which is generally considered to be inversely proportional to the physical and/or emotional distance from his children, non-cultural elements can also play a significant role on the scene. Divorce, illegitimacy, immigration, media, urbanization and globalization are all influential forces that inflict themselves upon fatherhood today. These are some of the most prominent cultural hotspots in most industrialized societies today.

Yet, despite the cultural turmoil that characterizes currently developing and developed societies alike, there exists a fatherhood ideology that aspires to global dominance. According to sociologists, it is a fatherhood philosophy that emphasizes "more individual choice and freedom" and grants men the cultural permission of greater initiative in molding their own style of fathering.[26]

WHICH WAY DOES THE WIND BLOW?

The starting point of this ideological perspective seems to be the Western world, where modern fatherhood ideals currently revolve

around the notion of involvement and follow a more democratic approach to childrearing, by promoting more and more gender role equality within the family. But transitioning from a traditional view of the breadwinning father to a more egalitarian perspective of an involved father is not an untouchable trend. Like any other cultural shift, this transformation too is also repeatedly challenged by "historical events and the evolution of cultures over generations, centuries, and even millennia," as Shwalb posited. The wind of change is definitely blowing, but its pace has been slow and uneven across societies.

By way of illustration, in Asian cultural traditions that were heavily influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, the father appears as hard working, but emotionally distant from his children. The Confucian ideology deeply engrained in the Japanese society places importance on the innate moral rectitude of the child. A Confucian father's role would therefore be to nurture the purity of his child and to protect him from corrupting influences.

Yet current research in East Asia has shown that despite their Confucian beliefs, Japanese fathers, for instance, have departed from the traditional family model where they played the part of the strict parent, opposite to the affectionate mother. Chinese and Korean fathers are set on the same trend, but in these countries it seems slower to install. Psychologists Ruby Seward and Leslie Stanley[27] agree that "decades of pro-fathering government policies have probably contributed to the present generation of fathers in Japan being the first where fathering has changed dramatically."

China has a larger and a more diverse population, as well as a significant lifestyle gap between rural and urban areas, which make it difficult to generalize about Chinese fathers. Nevertheless, Li Xuan and Michael Lamb[28] noted a trend towards the nuclear family in

China, as well as an interesting trend of a "floating population" comprising over 100 million men who never marry or abandon their families in order to pursue work in major cities. The nuclearization of the Chinese family describes a restructuring from a collectivist model, in which family treasured ties extend to multiple generations, to a rather individualistic model, in which the family limits itself to the conjugal partners and their child/ren. The trend towards the nuclear family showcases the clash between tradition and modernization, but it is in no way an exclusive type of interaction between the two. The rise of the "floating population" goes against both the traditional collectivist model and the nuclear model, on to describing a cohort unwilling to sacrifice their hard-earned economic security in order to form or, sometimes, even maintain a family. The floating population is mostly made up of rural men moving to the cities in search of work and a better life. Unfortunately, that better life seems incompatible with having a spouse, not to mention children.

South Korean middle- and working-class fathers "had to negotiate among three contradictory sets of cultural expectations, including traditional Confucian fatherhood, paid work success as an indicator of good fathering, and the new view of fatherhood embracing caregiver roles."[29] Their solutions included delaying fatherhood, lowering expectations, and segregating roles. Impossibly long hours of work have brought South Koreans the title for the least involved parents, on an international level, given that children in South Korea spend an average of six minutes a day with their father.[30] Still, cultural pressure towards a more caring fatherhood translates in transparent measures, like the emergence of Dad Schools, where men raised in traditional Korean families with distant and emotionally uninvolved fathers can learn to express feelings for their children by words and by physical contact.[31]

India, which is a collectivist culture that believes in interdependence and family relationships, is also witnessing an ongoing competition between tradition and modernization, and parents often find it hard to transmit their beliefs to the newer generation. Most parents follow a parenting style with close regulation and strict enforcement of family rules with clear emphasis on consequences of behaviors. "Indian fathers distance themselves and are awkward with their children, avoiding open expressions of emotion in order to maintain their authority as family patriarchs," write Ruby Seward and Leslie Stanley while adding that, "ironically, fathers that are usually aloof and unemotional toward their children typically become openly loving and affectionate as grandfathers."[32]

Similarly to the way it impacts the Indian society, the combined influence of culture, strong extended families, patriarchy over thousands of years and religion also impacts family roles in Bangladesh and Malaysia, even if their majority religion differs. According to University of New Mexico Family Studies professor Ziarat Hossain,[33] Islamic tradition manifested in numerous Quranic verses and religious rituals is calling for fathers' greater involvement. The academic claims that in this specific niche, Islamic tradition and Westernization send out the same message: the need for an active fatherhood. Sociologist Ramadam Ahmed[34] reached the same conclusion after a meta-analysis on 22 different Arab societies. His data suggested that Arab fathers value the same aspects of child development as Western fathers. That is they prize adjustment, cognition and tackling behavior problems, despite the fact that they sometimes express antagonistic religious views. (Often times, for a religious Arab, the West is synonymous to apostasy, while to a religious Westerner, the Arab world is synonymous with extreme fundamentalism.)

That is not to say that religion has little to no influence on fatherhood roles. In fact, in Southern Africa, it is religion that is thought to have contributed to what social researchers call "multiple fathering."[35] Psychology professor Bame Nsameneng reported that "Black Southern African men, in addition to the biological fathers, are often assumed, even required, to be significant figures in the lives of children. Several men share aspects of what is considered by Westerners to be the father's role. (...) At the same time, these men are not considered as possible alternatives to biological fathers."[36] Although childbearing outside the marriage is quite frequent in South Africa, the majority of biological fathers assume paternity and keep contact with their child, irrespective of the fact that they do not share household with the child's mother, or that their relationship has dissolved. African men perceive it as a sacred duty to bear offspring and some say they would rather die poor than childless. Having a child is seen as a form of immortality.[37] For these reasons, among others, African men agree to play the role of a father in the lives of non-biological children in their proximity. Some other factors that may contribute to the extent of their involvement include "cultural practices that emphasize collective responsibility of the extended family in child-rearing, high levels of long-term migration, relationship dissolution and re-partnering, and the high level of rate of paternal orphaning due to the severe HIV epidemic and other causes of premature male mortality."[38]

Likewise, among the African communities in the Caribbean Islands, social fatherhood is a common practice. Especially in communities with lower economic status, fathers do not marry the mother of their children. As a consequence, being a good father is not seen as synonymous to having a committed relationship with a woman.[39]

Brazil has a cultural context comparable with the Caribbean one. Due to a long history of colonization, slavery and patriarchy, "Brazilian fatherhood is associated with masculinity beliefs, which include a connotation of power and control over wives and children," note Bastos and colleagues. And even though contemporary fathers in Brazil experience to some degree the cultural pressure for a new father identity, the researcher and his colleagues appreciate that a change is far from near and that even current socialization practices of boys stand in the way of the ideal of a more involved father. [40]

DESTINATION: FUTURE

A common theme should have become apparent by now: global fatherhood trends are rendering the historical mother centric approach to childrearing obsolete. The alternative, that has already started to manifest at different paces around the globe, is shifting from a profoundly gendered segregation of family responsibilities to a much more egalitarian formulation thereof.

A greater involvement of the fathers translated into longer qualitative time in the presence of the child is now a worldwide trend that confronts older traditionalist views of the father as (sole) economic provider. This does not warrant a complete westernization of non-Western cultures, as we have already seen that the varied historical, economic, religious or otherwise ideological particularities of societies do not always interact smoothly with this higher involvement trend.

Nonetheless, since encouraging fathers to engage more frequently and in a more emotionally profound manner with their children has proven to bring about positive change in the family ecosystem,

OUR FATHER...

Field evidence regarding the intricate meanings societies assign to fatherhood place an intriguing burden on the most ubiquitous ancient prayer referring to God as a "Father". Why would Jesus risk addressing God in such a culturally charged manner? Could it be to show that God's way of loving us is able to transcend cultures and to model fatherhood roles that go beyond cultural relativism? Having witnessed that, two thousand years later, believers belonging to sometimes radically different paths of life still use the same words Jesus used when praying is a strong indicator that this hypothesis might hold true. Had the wording been otherwise, controversy surrounding the choice would have probably still been unavoidable.

Were we to mentally rewind everything we learned about God and look at what we now know about fatherhood through the lenses of social research what would we be able to state? The God of the Bible is an authoritative Father: his law demands our full-hearted compliance while at the same time his abundant love is listening to our deepest most vulnerable needs and promises to bring them to everlasting fulfillment. To the best of our senses, He is physically distant, but through Jesus He bridged the protective gap He placed between us sinners and Him. Emotionally, He assures us that He is constantly with us, even when we have no feeling to prove it.

Is God an involved Father? Some would argue that the suffering we face on this Earth is enough proof that He abandoned our feeble human family in the hands of fate. Others would look at Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross and realize the logical non-sense of a "self-sacrificing uninvolved God".

If we endeavor to know God and use the Bible towards this goal we will discover that it abounds in images of Fathers, but when it comes to seeing God as a Father we might be better off transcending our cultural projections and our tempting inclination to read our own perception into Scripture. Seeing God the Father running to welcome the prodigal son back home is a most refreshing and rewarding mental exercise one could make in this direction. It is also a lesson on forgiveness, one that the attachment generation might need to learn prior to learning any psychological theories.

by fulfilling objective (not cultural) needs, we are entitled to expect such a change would generate equally positive outcomes for societies as a whole.

Certainly, cultural shifts do no happen overnight. Neither do personal behavior changes. Yet, witnessing the labor process which a good idea must go through before turning into a coherent action should reinvigorate our patience towards our own inconsistencies or the inconsistencies of our loved ones, yes, even those of our own parents. It might just be that the father who "never kept in touch" is not the emotionally close-fisted person his teenage daughter imagines him to be, but a human being bearing on his shoulders the weight of his own culture and upbringing. Let the most culturally enlightened one be the first to pick up the phone and call!

Alina Kartman has always had a keen interest in the study of human interaction, starting from the time when she was a socially awkward teen, through her college years at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, to the present day; now she likes to think she explores the same topic, but under the guise of "news", for *Signs of the Times* Romania. She hopes never to lose her sense of wonder that made her dare to believe in God under complicated circumstances.

Notes

1. Savage Garden, "To The Moon And Back," Roadshow Music, Warner Music Distribution, 100813-2, 1997, compact disc.

2. Attachment theory has become the dominant theory used today in the study of infant and toddler behavior and in the fields of infant mental health, treatment of children, and related fields.

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12. Alfred L. Baldwin, "Socialization and the parent-child relationship," *Child Development* 19, no. 3 (1948): 127-136.

13. Diana Baumrind, "Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior," *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 75, no. 1 (1967): 43-88.

14. Eleanor Maccoby, J. A. Martin, "Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 4: *Socialization, Personality and Social Development*, ed. E. Mavis Hetherington (Chilchester: Wiley, 1983).

15. Thomas G. Power, "Parenting Dimensions and Styles: A Brief History and Recommendations for Future Research," *Child Obesity*, 2013, no. 9 (Suppl. 1): s14-s21.

16. Helaine Selin, ed., *Parenting Across Cultures: Childrearing, Motherhood and Fatherhood in Non-Western Cultures* (Springer Science, 2014).

17. David Shwalb et. al., "Final thoughts, comparisons, and conclusions," in *Fathers in cultural context*, eds. David Shwalb, Barbara J. Shwalb, Michael E. Lamb (New York: Routledge Academic, 2013).

18. Ruby Seward and Leslie Stanley-Stevens, "Fathers, Fathering, and Fatherhood Across Cultures," in *Parenting Across Cultures: Childrearing, Motherhood and Fatherhood in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin, 460.

19. Lamb, *ed.*, *The Role of the Father in Child Development*.

20. Beatrice Whiting and Carolyn Edwards, *Children of Different Worlds: The Formation of Social Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

21. Seward and Stanley-Stevens, "Fathers, Fathering, and Fatherhood Across Cultures," in *Parenting Across Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin.

22. Acceptance-Rejection Theory is an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development that attempts to predict and explain major causes, consequences, and other correlates of interpersonal—especially parental—acceptance and rejection within the United States and worldwide.

23. Abdul Khaleque, Ronald P. Rohner, "Transnational Relations Between Perceived Parental Acceptance and Personality Dispositions of Children and Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, no. 2 (2012): 103-115.

24. David Schneider, "The distinctive features of matrilineal descent groups. Introduction," in *Matrilineal kinship*, eds. David Schneider & K. Gough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 1-29.

25. David Shwalb, Barbara J. Shwalb, Michael E. Lamb., eds., *Fathers in Cultural Context* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 387.

26. Seward and Stanley-Stevens, "Fathers, Fathering, and Fatherhood Across Cultures," in: *Parenting Across Cultures:*, ed. Selin, 460.

27. Ibid.

28. Li Xuan and Michael E. Lamb, "Fathers in Chinese culture: From Stern Disciplinarians to Involved Parents," in *Fathers in Cultural Context*, eds. Shwalb et. al.

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32. Ibid.

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36. Seward and Stanley, "Fathers, Fathering, and Fatherhood Across Cultures," in *Parenting Across Cultures*, ed. Selin, 467.

37. A. Bame Nsamenang, "Fathers, Families, and Children's Well-Becoming in Africa," in *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, ed. Lamb.

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