

Contemporary Fatherhood and New Family Trajectories

Agnès Martial

DANS **ETHNOLOGIE FRANÇAISE 2012/1 Vol. 42** , PAGES 105 À 116

ÉDITIONS **PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE FRANCE**

ISSN 0046-2616

ISBN 9782130593508

DOI 10.3917/ethn.121.0105

Date de mise en ligne : 20/12/2011

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-ethnologie-francaise-2012-1-page-105?lang=en>



Découvrir le sommaire de ce numéro, suivre la revue par email, s'abonner...
Scannez ce QR Code pour accéder à la page de ce numéro sur Cairn.info.



Distribution électronique Cairn.info pour Presses Universitaires de France.

Vous avez l'autorisation de reproduire cet article dans les limites des conditions d'utilisation de Cairn.info ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Détails et conditions sur [Cairn.info/copyright](http:// Cairn.info/copyright).

Sauf dispositions légales contraires, les usages numériques à des fins pédagogiques des présentes ressources sont soumises à l'autorisation de l'Éditeur ou, le cas échéant, de l'organisme de gestion collective habilité à cet effet. Il en est ainsi notamment en France avec le CFC qui est l'organisme agréé en la matière.

Contemporary Fatherhood and New Family Trajectories

Agnès Martial
Centre Norbert Elias

ABSTRACT

Based on research about separated and divorced men raising their children in different circumstances (non-resident fathers, shared residence, lone resident fathers), this article interrogates the social and gender divisions that beset “lone” fatherhood, in the context of various temporalities (everyday life, biographical and generational).

Keywords: fatherhood, motherhood, divorce, lone-parent family, shared custody

Agnès Martial
CNRS
Centre Norbert Elias
Centre de la Vieille Charité
2, rue de la Charité
13002 Marseille
agnes.martial@univmed.fr

Presses Universitaires de France Téléchargé le 04/06/2026 sur https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.217.142)

In the majority of Western countries, contemporary family transitions have led to the development and the normalization of situations where men are encouraged to exercise their fatherhood when they have never lived with or no longer live with the mother of their children. Expressed in this way, this finding appears to be self-evident. It is nevertheless inseparable from a set of social, economic, and political questions which surround fatherhood, a field of investigation favored by psychology, but a theme which has not been explored in much depth by the social sciences.

The socioanthropological study of norms, practices, and examples which allow us to trace the development of the role and status of fathers in our societies in fact remains relatively limited in France. The existing research mainly sheds light on the study of roles and the statuses occupied in the intimate and familial sphere and its interrelations with the world of work. The new types of family life, however, offer a fertile ground for the study of transitions in action within fatherhood. The changes occurring fall within a broad process that stems simultaneously from the redefinition of gender

relations and the development of the legal and social content of relationships between fathers and children.

■ A New Context: The Principle of Gender Equality and the “Pluralization” of the Basis of Paternal Relations

• *From Hierarchy to Equality within the Couple and Family*

The history of fatherhood, from the late nineteenth century, traces the slow erosion of a legal model that combines hierarchical equality and inequality of status related to parentage, in favor of an ideal dominated by the principle of equality between men and women and fathers and mothers, as well as between their children. The redefinition of fatherhood therefore falls within the passage of deeply asymmetrical gender relations within marriage and family towards that of an “equal partnership” based on the principle of equality

(Théry 2007) in the context of an evolution marked by the abolition of paternal and marital power, the dualization of the concept of head of household, and ultimately the emergence of the contemporary notion of coparenting. In France, the law of March 4, 2002, has completed a long process of evolution by assigning joint parental authority to two married parents or two parents that have recognized a child, whether they live together or not. This does not affect separations, allowing for a shared custody that makes it possible for the child cohabit with both parents on a daily basis (Neyrand 2009). Today, both mother and father, regardless of whether they are married, cohabiting, or separated, have the same rights and responsibilities from the point of view of parentage and exercising parental responsibility¹. Fatherhood must find its place in this new organization of relationships and laws, both in terms of the division of rights and parental obligations, and the management of tasks regarding the education of children.

In a society where more than half of children are born to unmarried parents (52.9 percent in 2009²), the progressive unification of rights attached to parentage has moreover deeply transformed paternal relations. First and foremost, this development signals the end of asymmetry between fatherhood and motherhood in terms of the “truth” about paternity, since now a father can be recognized as the biological father. This development also contributes to giving a new meaning to paternity that is not based on “a purely institutional model” acting as guarantor of a child’s legitimacy, and refers to an “identity” model in which each party can seek recognition of their “true” parentage (Brunet 2011).

• *A Plural Fatherhood in Terms of its Legal Foundations . . .*

In this new context, different interpretations of what constitutes a paternal relationship contend with each other. Free will, which expresses itself as the recognition of a child or as consent to marriage? The facts of life, now that the father can be identified as the biological father? The social, emotional, and educational reality, the bond forged between a man and a child? Recent legal developments have led to the fragmentation of these different elements, once united—or so it was thought—in marriage. If today we observe a growing recourse to hematological and genetic expertise in cases of conflict over paternal parentage,

various limits have been attached to the strength of biological fact (time constraints regarding the possibility of contesting a parentage and changes in the French legal system regarding the notion of possession of status) which demonstrates the importance placed in the voluntary, emotional, and social aspects of the father-child relationship (Martial 2008; Salazar 2009; Brunet, forthcoming). Therefore we simultaneously see a greater tendency to refer back to “nature,” and the onset of trepidation in the social reality of the relationship between the father and child. Somewhere between these two poles lies a shaky definition of the paternal bond.

• . . . *And in Terms of New Forms of Family Life*

This severance of the legal elements which constitute fatherhood is mirrored in the evolution of the various ways individuals approach parenthood and arrange access to their children. Under the auspices of “de-marriage,” the redefinition of conjugal trajectories (a decline in number of marriages, an increase in divorce and breakups, the constant growth of single-parent and reconstructed families) has led to a dissociation between marriage and family ties, married life, and parent-child relationships (Théry 1993). Stepfamilies, adoptive families, or those born by medically assisted conception to heterosexual or homosexual parents have all led to the proliferation of the relationships and statuses resulting from the conception and education of a child. Empirical studies carried out on representations of parenting in various family configurations have observed the coexistence of two broad metaphorical and symbolic categories within them. One refers to the material circumstances of conception (sperm, gametes, genes, shared blood), while the other rests on will, the emotional and educational reality, the lived experiences of a parental relationship. (Fine and Martial 2010). This second aspect takes on a new importance across various paternal figures: that of the adoptive father, and intended father in an assisted conception with a donor, or that of a stepfather in restructured families, who will share in the daily existence and education of his partner’s child or children. Certain studies focus on the construction and development of these relationships, “social” parental connections woven into a shared daily existence, sometimes from early childhood (Théry and Dhavernas 1991; Blöss 1996; Cadolle 2000; Martial 2003; Weber 2005). In the absence of legal recognition

of “stepparenthood,” some paths taken by families lead to the straightforward adoption of a child by his or her stepfather, a move often motivated by inheritance-related wishes (Martial 2000, 2009a).

In contrast with stepparenthood, there are fewer studies which examine the relationship between a father and child when they are reunited after a relationship breakdown. At the core of uncertainty surrounding the social, cultural, and legal definition of paternal filiation in its present state, the biographical and familial paths of fathers who have been through divorce or separation offers a fertile ground for analysis.

The team assembled for the research program “Paternities”³ to this end formulated its questions around a singular figure: the “solo” father, whose ties to his children rely on the mother’s mediation and exist within a time and space that has been redefined by the relationship breakdown and the readjustment in parental relations. Formulated in this way, “solo” fatherhood covers a wide variety of situations, from that of “absent” fathers, where there has been a breakdown in the relationships with their children, and those—very few—who take on the daily upbringing of their children after a separation or divorce. Between these two extremes, men reinvent their fatherhood within a new space and frame of time, based on the principal of access rights and overnight visits or shared custody. Across these different situations, it is the social, educational, and emotional reality of fatherhood in “practice” that this current research is most interested in. Based on the first results from a field survey currently being undertaken, we will attempt to draw up a clear structure in order to understand these paternal experiences, around three main themes: their allotted space and time, the relationships on which they are based, and the social variability of the customs and representations that convey them.

■ Fathers and Children after Divorce or Separation: A Testing Relationship

In 2009, 44.7 percent of marriages in France ended in divorce, a figure to which the breakdown of civil partnerships and unmarried couples can be added. A total of 57 percent of these divorces involved children

(Prioux, Mazuy, and Barbieri 2010, 438, 440). Paternal relations are brought into question and put to the test in family situations which arise from these separations. Indeed, studies since the end of the 1980s demonstrate a weakening or even the complete breakdown of the father-child relationship in certain situations and the increase in the number of children “without” a father or with an “absent” father, even when/if the latter has a legal status. There is very little existing new data in France to demonstrate the state of relations between fathers and their children after a relationship breakdown. In 1994, 15 percent of children in France did not live with their father, and one in three of those children never saw their father (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1999). The most recent research carried out on parent-child relationships in adulthood demonstrates that parental divorce or separation exerts greater strain on relationships with the father (Régner-Loilier 2006; Vivas 2007).

During the 1990s and 2000s, a host of North American studies examined the themes of fathers’ “disengagement” after a divorce and the effects on the well-being, proper development, and social integration of children, showing the social and political concerns that the “weakening” of fatherhood has brought about (Blankenhorn 1995). This appeared to be characterized not only by infrequent visits from the father, but also by inadequate maintenance contributions for the child, and by the inadequate upbringing environment of relationships in which men seem to abandon their parental role (among the numerous English-language studies addressing this question see, for example, Kruk 1993; Arrendel 1995; Marsiglio, Amato, and Day 2000; Leite and McKenry 2002; Freeman 2002).

The status and the role of separated or divorced fathers have therefore most often been analyzed in reference to notions of distance, absence, and minimal investment in the relationship with the children, provoking various attempts to strengthen father-child relationships from a legislative and political perspective (Hobson 2002). This has not prevented the appearance of various militant movements defending fathers’ rights, in Europe as well as in North America, which demand that legal systems enforce an absolutely equal parental equality after a relationship breakdown, even if various works have underlined several discrepancies between militant discourse and parenting in practice (Arrendel 1995; Bertoia and Drakich 1993; Collier and Sheldon 2006).

■ Separated Fathers and “New Fathers:” Asymmetry of Gender Roles and Becoming Fatherly after a Marriage Breakdown

The fragility of the role taken up by men in the lives of their children after a divorce or separation seems all the more acute due to it going against the recent trends described by psychology and family sociology, which deem father-child relationships to be close. The traditional figure of a father exercising a distant authority towards his offspring while assuming the role of head of household has made room for an image of a different kind of fatherhood, characterized by men who share this former right to the roles of head of the household and provider with the mother of their children (Neyrand 2000; Dermott 2008). From the fact of this more equal division of parental roles, new customs characterize contemporary fatherhood, carried by a set of gestures and words demonstrating the father's investment in the upbringing and care of the child (Castelain-Meunier 2002; 2006). Redefined as an intersubjective relationship, and characterized by a particular kind of exchange between a father and child, a new kind of intimacy that is a product of physical proximity, emotional attachment, and bond, fatherhood plays an increasingly central role in the development of modern masculine identity (Dermott 2008).

However, it is necessary to qualify the impact of the equality movement and the lack of distinction in parental status that has apparently brought about the appearance of “modern dads.” Research singles out forms of paternal investment in comparison with motherhood, as being based on different time frames that are more occasional and more geared towards recreational and enjoyable activities. The responsibility for domestic and family tasks remains largely the woman's domain (see for example Fagnani and Letablier 2003; Bessin and Gaudart 2009; Dermott 2008; Doucet 2006). Despite widespread access to paid employment for women, fathers remain confronted with “a hegemonic definition of masculinity which still rests largely on men's confinement to the professional work role” (Connell 1999; Merla 2007, 23),⁴ with the provider figure preserving an important place in contemporary definitions of fatherhood. This is evidenced by the difficulty that men have in taking up the rare measures in family policy which are supposed to promote their involvement in family life (paternity leave, time

off for parental reasons, or flexible working hours). Fatherhood ultimately presents a paradox, with the model of a “committed” father clashing with the little social recognition of experiences that involve fathers playing a role in the upbringing of their children. In this space between the prescriptive model and practical reality lies a “fatherhood of intention” which is confronted by the difficult challenge of the “traditional modes of masculine and feminine places and identities” (Boyer and Cérroux 2010, 57).

Marriage breakdowns are a powerful indicator of this. After the separation, the division of gender roles in caring for children seems to be maintained and even exacerbated, leaving the mother the greatest share of rights and obligations of parenthood, to the extent that the first French studies carried out on gender relations within restructured families suggested a form of “single-parent upbringing” that was the product of a strong tendency towards “matricentrality” (Blöss 1996; Cadolle 2000). It is in less privileged environments that fathers seem to answer less often to contemporary norms of “good” fatherhood. Gender-related identities make it the object of a “social overcoding,” creating a distinction of more traditional gender-related roles, in private life as well as in the public arena (Neyrand 2000, 250; Schwartz 1990). Attributes associated with fatherhood (authority and dominance), forms of socialization linked to the father-child relationship (linked to the transmission of professional competence rather than to the domestic world), and the (behaved) expression of values and the emotions that are attached to them would not seem to be particularly compatible with a “good” paternal relationship according to today's norms (Jamouille 2005). In the context of an employment crisis, the loss of working status contributes in other respects to destabilizing men who are no longer able to provide economic security to their families. The state acts as a substitute for these fathers, and in so doing it becomes a more secure provider through social insurance and minimum income benefits (Jamouille 2005). After a marital breakup, it is in poor environments that alimony is least frequently paid, and it is here also that the progressive erasing of ties between children and their father is most frequently observed (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1994; Martin 1997). We must therefore question the relevance of a norm of coparenting held up by the principal of equality and indistinction between genders to this environment. (Jamouille 2005).

The question of gender relations thus proves to be fundamental to understanding father-child relationships

and their development. As we have just seen, it has led a number of studies to bring closer attention to couples that are together and then separate, to the question of gender division in “parental work,” understood as a set of tasks dedicated to the upbringing of the children within the domestic and social arenas which are associated with them, and as a mental burden resting notably on women (Verjus and Vogel 2009; Martial 2009b). Yet the study of “solo” fatherhood situations shows men experiencing new forms of relationships with the child, with these varying according to the type of living arrangements that follow on from the separation.

■ The Investigation: Profiles of a Different Kind of Father

The present investigation in progress (fifteen interviews have been carried out, with eighteen more to come) attempts to understand the trajectories of fatherhood described by men themselves through interviews recounting their personal history. Conducted in part, using the classic “snowball” method, with men who have experienced various forms of living arrangements (visitation and accommodation rights and shared custody), it has also allowed us, thanks to the help of the Bouches-du-Rhône Social Welfare Family Allowance, to meet men who declare themselves to be separated or divorced fathers bringing up their children either half the time (shared custody) or on a daily basis (main residence of children at the father’s home). This particular course of action has allowed us to meet men from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (born in Marseilles, from other French regions, and immigrants) who belong to various socioprofessional categories (on tax credits, employed or in management positions in the public and private sectors, or in self-employment).

Furthermore, postseparation residential arrangements which are *a priori* uncommon are well represented in the study. According to Laure Chaussebourg and Dominique Baux’s report, based on the study of 2300 divorce rulings and 1402 rulings concerning children of separated parents made in 2003, the “main residence” at the mother’s home is still ruled in the majority of cases (79 percent of divorces, 84 percent of separations). Although only making up a minority of cases (11.5 percent of divorces, 6 percent of separations) shared custody has become an established custom. A small number of men end up having the

day-to-day responsibility of raising their children after the relationship breakdown (7 percent of divorces, 8 percent of separations) (Chaussebourg and Baux 2007, 4, 7). Among the fathers who we met, six had experience of visiting rights and overnight stays, four have been or still are involved in shared custody, and nine live alone with their children on a day-to-day basis.⁵ These last two situations are certainly unrepresentative of the overall postdivorce or separation situations, and they are also not very well understood, with the majority of studies generally addressing the more classic trajectories associated with regular visiting rights and overnight stays with the father. This investigation is therefore an opportunity to explore and compare the very different types of fatherhood, which one can consider as “mode types,” not by the fact of their number, but because they prompt a reexamination of the divisions that cut across gender relations and social differences in the practical application of parental statuses. The aim of this initial exploration is to highlight this diversity, and to bring to light little-studied dimensions of paternity within new family trajectories.

• “Interim Fathers”

As we suggest with Agnès Fine in another article in this issue, the organization of rights to visits and overnight stays with the father establishes a fragmented parental relationship that takes the form of an absence of coresidence and time spent together every day. The widespread assignment of the main residence to the maternal home has triggered various analyses with regard to the role played by the legal system at the moment at which divorces or separations take place. Although it does happen, cases in which the courts grants a willing father the responsibility of taking on the daily upbringing of the child are rare, especially if the child is still young; the choice of living with the mother as the child’s main residence remains dominant in cases of divorce by mutual consent, in which the judge ratifies the parents’ decisions (Bertaux and Delcroix 1991; Théry 1993; Bessière et al. 2010).

The separation introduces a phase in which time and space cease to be shared on a daily basis:

When you break up, you don’t immediately twig that it is the last time that you’ll be at home and that you’ll see your children all of the time. You don’t understand that immediately, and then it suddenly hits you. There is an impact, a time of heartbreak. . . . A kind of exile. (Bernard, forty-one, IT technician, two children.)

Visitation rights and overnight stays mark the end of a relationship which was rooted in daily cohabitation. Considered to be the “normal” setting for parental relationships, cohabitation is a fundamental element in the makeup and driving force of parental relationships.

What was tragic about the separation was losing touch with my children’s daily routines. That was hard, because when I saw them on Wednesdays, I didn’t see them over the weekend, and then I only saw them again on the following Wednesday. Very often I’d only see them once a week. . . . I was totally happy when they were with me. (Jean, fifty-nine, university lecturer, two children).

In her study of modern paternity, Esther Dermott (2008) points out that fathers in a relationship and fathers who have become “nonresident” view the time factor in different ways. While fathers who live with their partner do not consider time as a central part of their relationship with their child—which implies that they are less available than their partner—nonresident fathers emphasize the significance of limited time availability, expressing a feeling of deprivation and loss of control over their relationship with their children (Dulac 1995; Bradshaw et al. 1999; Trinder et al. 2002). Moreover, the absence of shared daily routines renders paternal relationships less obvious, less spontaneous, and less intimate since they have to be limited to visitation times, which must be successful at all costs.

Patrick (fifty-three, consultant, two children) also emphasizes the greater value he now places on the time spent with his children as part of a textbook visitation-and-overnight-stay agreement (every other weekend and half of the school holidays), which was increased to two overnight stays per week. “I realized that the time I had with the children, well, it was really precious, compared to the time I had before, which seemed normal. So as a result you value the time you spend together differently, you feel differently about it.” Patrick is still very involved in looking after his children, that is to say he shares leisure activities and special moments with them, just as before, over the weekend or some evenings during the week. But it is the children’s mother who, as before, it would seem, manages the children’s daily lives (schooling, healthcare, clothes, practicalities). While he is often there, often, Patrick holds a secondary status in their life. Some fathers therefore become “second-class parents,” limited to the part of “visiting uncle” or “distant relative” (Arrendel 1995; Quéniart 1999), with the mother having the primary

role. They sometimes think of themselves as being reduced to the status of mere provider, since they now have to pay child maintenance without being able to see their children on a daily basis.

Keeping these facts in mind, many studies have highlighted the precariousness of the relationship between father and child, which is accentuated by the difficulty men have in separating fatherhood from their old marital relationship. The links with the children can, just as with the relationship with the ex-partner, become transitory (Arrendel 1995; Cadolle 2000). Furthermore, conflict and tension brought about by the breakup or the mother’s potential hesitation to pursue a paternal relationship tend sometimes to discourage men, who gradually lose touch (Quéniart 1999). The complex interlacing of lovers’ and parents’ emotions runs through many fathers’ tales. This is how Franck (forty-seven, self-employed, three children including one from a previous relationship) describes the two years following the separation from the mother of his son: “I was afraid of confusing the distress I was in with the love I felt for my son, that both would interact and that the energy I put into maintaining a relationship with my son would be marred with the distress of the separation.”

Although these moments are frequently felt as a confused and painful stage in a father’s life, they are also described as a form of testing and self-reconstruction. This is the way Franck describes the often very difficult relationship he had with the mother of his son, who left him for another man while the family was living abroad. He recalls two chaotic years where the pain of the breakup and the fear of losing contact with his very young child were tangled up together, in a very precarious social, material, and legal context (he did not hold parental authority) at a time when he was far from his homeland. He then recounts his ex-partner’s return to France with his son, his own return two months later, the negotiations that eventually led to an agreement regarding joint parental authority, and the organization of some kind of shared custody. He then returned to education, became an architect and opened a practice, and met a new partner with whom he went on to have two children. In Franck’s story, his ability to remain a father despite the breakup of his relationship was a major challenge which dictated his life choices, his professional trajectory, and the rest of his family life.

Although it is essential to examine the separation and the lack of daily shared time and space which are typical of postbreakup fatherhood, it is also important

not to reduce it to those “missing parts,” and to look at the strategies are displayed by men in reinventing their relationship with their children. This reinvention can happen in a place other than within the home and still happen on a day-to-day basis if the father and his children live near to one another. One example is Bertrand (IT specialist, two children) who, although he no longer lives with the mother of his children and does not have them for overnight stays because his apartment is too small, still spends time with them on Wednesday afternoons, and when he picks them up from their mother’s house every morning to walk them to school.

Furthermore, once the children grow up, other experiences relating to areas such as learning and introductions to new things emerge. Jean (fifty-nine, university lecturer) took his two teenagers on overseas voyages to different countries, with it always just being him and the children in spite of him being in a new cohabiting conjugal relationship. He underlines, not without pride, the adventurous nature of these journeys around the world, which the three of them always experienced together, and from which he holds precious memories. More prosaically, Franck (forty-seven, self-employed) recently helped his son Yann, twenty-one, to renovate an apartment, an activity which he himself had long been involved in, and which allowed Yann to earn some money for his studies: “We went through a kind of initiation. . . . He took on the building site and I came in as back up.” Franck describes this with pleasure, this shared time around the transmission of skills and knowledge associated with masculinity in our society, a physical, hard activity:

It puts you in touch with reality. It is no longer about the theory of a father’s relationship with his son, it’s sharing reality together. It all works out if you’re conscientious, but you have to fight for it, it’s hard. And we did it the two of us together, I couldn’t be happier.

Finally, the presence of a family environment around the father and his children, particularly during visits and the holidays, tends to reinstate paternity within a reassuring collective framework, which can break any possible feeling of isolation the father might feel in relation to his children. Jean (university lecturer, two children) would bring his parents and siblings together with his children every Sunday that they visited.

You know, we Armenians are very family oriented. . . . My father, my mother, a family house, and so we see my

sister and her children, who are the same age as mine. They were all very close. We also often came together as a family with my brother on Sundays. . . . Emilie and Fabien are very close to their cousins of the same age.

■ Full-Time Fathers

At the other end of the spectrum, a postbreakup can provide a view into fathers bringing up their children as single parents. In most cases the mothers of these children have kept in touch with them, sometimes very regularly, by virtue of visitation rights and overnight stays being negotiated by the parents or decided by the judge, and in other cases less frequently or predictably. In certain cases the mother was awarded principal or joint custody during the breakup, but this arrangement did not last.

Whatever the reasons, residence at the father’s home was never fully settled, as can be the case in a number of separations and divorces in which visitation rights and overnight stays with the father are established without the competence of the other parent being brought into question. Whatever their background, the theme of the mother’s failings is constantly present in the lone fathers’ discourse. A volatile romantic or sex life, psychological instability, economic and material difficulties, a lack of interest in motherhood: the motives varied, but there was a consensus among these fathers that the mothers of their children were not “good” mothers. This negative discourse strongly attests to the norms which define maternity and the behaviors that are associated with it in today’s society. It can also be clearly heard in the worries that these fathers frequently express about the well-being of their children, fearing that they cannot compensate for the remoteness of their mother. These day-to-day fathers therefore do not really challenge the “maternal fact” that justifies in the majority of cases residence at the mother’s home (Bessière et al. 2010). They compensate for her absence more or less out of necessity. But those daily and lonely forms of fatherhood do not leave fathers and relationships with their children unaffected.

The time and space of fatherhood are effectively transformed by the relationship breakdown: they are suddenly encumbered with children, domestic chores, and child-raising tasks, which have to be reconciled with the upkeep of a steady job and income, and for which they must sometimes give up a social life which

dwindles or disappears. For some—they are rare—this situation was in place from before the separation. Yvan (forty-seven, stage manager, two children) presents himself in this way having always taken on the daily management of the household. The relationship breakdown in the end made little difference to his family life, except perhaps to alleviate strained relations and daily marital conflict. Medhi (Algerian, thirty-eight, employed as a temporary worker in a cleaning company, lived in France for the past ten years) recounts how he had always been close to his son, for example during the first few months when he stayed up with the baby. His situation as a single father was a fairly smooth transmission. For others, the relationship breakdown leads to great upheaval. For example, Mario, Brazilian, was working as a carpenter in French Guyana at the time when his relationship broke down and found himself alone with four young children. He describes this period as the most difficult, but also the strongest and richest of his life: Daily fatherhood has become a central, valued aspect of his social identity.

Other less positive aspects of single fatherhood include dealing with domestic chores and the accompanying parental responsibilities which can feel like a heavy burden, loaded with anxiety and educational, financial, and material worries. Socioeconomic inequalities are all too present here. Reconciling work with young children living in the paternal home is effectively even more difficult for less qualified men. Almost all have had to adapt their professional lives to these new limitations, which seems to be easier for executives and engineers than for regular employees and men in temporary work where working hours are nonnegotiable. Some, like Mario, have given up work and are collecting state welfare until the children grow up. These inequalities also include a lack of space which is not conducive to fraternal relations. Many fathers do not have a bedroom of their own and suffer the discomfort of family life, but also a total absence of privacy. Even when economic conditions and means afford single fathers comfortable accommodation, the responsibility of the children becomes oppressive, to the point that they are relieved to be away. Ivan recounts how he snuck out at night to see his friends and relax . . . after having alerted his neighbor of his absence.

The absence of new romantic attachments seems to occupy a large space in these kinds of fatherhood. The investigation may lead to skewed results since the fathers interviewed are single out of necessity—since they had declared this status to the child-benefit office

at the time of the interview. As a single, celibate man with few opportunities to experience life outside of family life, “single fatherhood” much resembles the feminine experience of single motherhood.

Feelings of isolation linked to the marginal nature of their experience were reported by all of the men in the study, whatever their social background. Various authors note how fathers who are involved in the daily upbringing of their children are subject to questions about their conformity to the norms defining masculinity (virility, physical strength, heterosexuality) from their immediate family circle and those in their surrounding social environment. Terry Arrendel (1995) labels divorced men who are committed to their parental role as “androgynous” because they report having to adopt parental behaviors and attitudes that are considered feminine, emphasizing in particular the importance of catering to children’s nutritional needs, and referring to feminine models in their immediate environment (mother, ex-partner, sister). These fathers encounter major “intergender” struggles and contend with knee-jerk reactions to the ways in which they bring up their children, particularly from male family members. This lack of recognition can lead to feelings of exclusion and isolation in terms of social connections with both sexes, something that is linked with both the difficulty of accessing women’s networks structured around raising children and the absence of peer groups specifically for single fathers who share the same experiences (Merla 2007).

The presence of a helpful wider family circle around these men also determines the way in which they experience fatherhood (Allard et al. 2005). This varies according to each individual case. The paternal family can bring substantial practical help on a daily or occasional basis, giving childcare relief, and also assuaging the social isolation that migrant fathers often experience, for whom rare visits to their homeland provide the only shared moments of childcare. Beyond practical help, the presence of a wider family circle reestablishes “single” fatherhood within a collective where a child can find his identity and sense of belonging along with the father’s.

■ Shared Custody: Fatherhood Tied to Sharing Parental Responsibilities

Cases of shared custody are the least common at this stage of the research. Although this arrangement is

certainly the most recent, it is probably also the one that seems to least alter the way men approach their fatherhood. Firstly, it ensures that men who say they could not conceive life without their children to carry on sharing their time and space with them on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, the choice of a shared-custody arrangement is encountered in every social background, and some fathers with very low professional qualifications also very clearly expressed a wish to look after their children on a part-time day-to-day basis following a separation. Among those who raise their children while awaiting a higher level of involvement from the mother in the children's lives, shared custody is frequently mentioned as the desired solution; few "full-time" fathers are willing to give up on having any form of daily life with their children. However, if recent studies on the subject are to be trusted, the mother often continues to play a leading role in this type of arrangement. Recent research has indeed noted differing interpretations of and investments in childcare responsibilities among these parents sharing joint custody, which sometimes represent a renewal of the asymmetries that existed prior to separation (Brunet, Kertudo, and Malsan 2008; Cadolle 2008). Furthermore, shared custody allows for parental "time off" which allows men to devote time to other areas of their lives. Accordingly, it seems more frequent for fathers in a shared-custody arrangement to begin a new cohabitating relationship. Among research into postdivorce arrangements, which is dominated by the system of visitation rights and overnight stays, many studies highlight that a father's involvement in a new relationship correlates with less frequent contact with the children from the first relationship and also decreased financial support, factors that can be seen in conflicts relating to providing maintenance for the child and at the time when the children reach adulthood (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1994; Martial 2005; Cadolle 2005). Our first interviews suggest that, in the case of shared custody, the appearance of a new partner, and sometimes the birth of a new child, can also reassure men in their role as a father to the child born from their previous relationship. François (forty-four, artist, one child) describes in a very positive way the relationship between his new partner and his daughter, aged eleven, who he has been looking after as part of a shared-custody arrangement since he separated from her mother. The arrival of Louise changed the situation:

She often takes care of Lola. She mainly works from home, she feels better working from home with her laptop, that

way she can manage her own time. So she's made some changes. . . . To start with, she's had to try to find her place, it wasn't that easy because she was coming into a couple: a little girl and her daddy.

Being involved in the domestic arrangements, the school run, and checking up on schoolwork, but also bonds of trust and small gifts (clothes, books): Louise is very much there, and François's fatherhood works together with this new stepmotherly figure in a new family unit. Baptiste (thirty-two, self-employed, two children), who became a father to a little boy when he was twenty-five, left his first partner three years later, opting for shared custody of the child. This arrangement is still in place, although he has met a new partner and now has a little girl. He describes the positive role played by his second partner in helping him to balance his relationship with his son, and constantly brings her in to the conversation, each time he mentions the upbringing of the child.

Shared custody therefore seems to encourage a kind of fatherhood which shares the responsibilities and skills involved in the upbringing of the children, as much with the mother as with a new partner. The "single" nature of postdivorce fatherhood then needs to be reviewed. It might be that in encouraging the sharing of a day-to-day life with the father's new partner and his children, shared custody allows the development of a more gratifying and enhanced relationship between the child and the step mother, than within the framework of visitations and overnight stays.

Following this initial exploration, we can still only draw a few guidelines for analyzing forms of "solo" fatherhood. From the founding questions of this research, an observation was made: after marital breakdown, fatherhood appears to become uncoupled from motherhood and thereafter has to exist outside of the couple and the family unit. The fundamental importance of this form of fatherhood's relationship with time appears evident: confronted with the lack of daily time together, or with the overloaded time of single parenthood, it is tested through the distinction from, equivalence to, and inequality with motherhood. The diversity of the accounts and perceptions of fathers from very different social backgrounds invites a qualification of the presumption from within the social divide of a "rigidity" in gender relations among the lower classes. Filled with tensions and changes, gender relations are neither monolithic nor unchangeable. Here and elsewhere, ways of being and creativity that reveal new

forms of fatherhood can be observed. The accounts collected also show that the relationship between father and child (just as the mother-child relationship) are not limited to taking care of the upbringing and the material comfort of the children within the home environment. Parental relationships based on the processes of learning and introductions to new things offer other bases for investigation and validation. Future studies will also need to take into account the intersection of the challenges of social reproduction with fatherhood, with the guarantee of a child's access to independence coming through a status and a social identity that is nowadays based on one's employment. For example, Céline Bessière shows how the young wine-grower fathers in the Cognac region, driven by the desire to pass down their land and the job that comes with it, sometimes ask for custody when separating from their partner—because for the vocation to be allowed to burgeon, it is necessary for the child to grow up on the land (Bessière 2007). Studying the experience of some members of the organization SOS Papa, Aurélie Fillod-Chabaud (2009) also analyzes how imperatives

of social reproduction can lead some fathers who live apart from their children to invest very heavily in their academic education. Finally, fatherhood exists within a multitude of emotional, legal, and symbolic relationships that research, which is based mainly on the study of sharing chores and the father-child relationship within the couple, neglects to explore. Although it is important to take into account the development of the relationship with the mother and the effects of a possible remarriage, it is also essential to remember that fatherhood is established in a relational range that can be seen as much in the social functions of parenthood, which allow it to be placed into the context of a wider family circle, as it can from the point of view of the transmission of a family identity (Attias-Donfut and Segalen 1998; Weber 2005). Through these various dimensions, the idea is to consider “solo” parenthood as an indicator of the changes occurring within gender relationships, and also as a form of kinship that is governed by various laws and falls within a wider set of relationships that give it meaning, and which is constructed through a daily, biographical, and generational time frame. ■

Notes

1. Article 272 of the Civil Code indicates that “fathers and mothers exert shared parental responsibility” and article 373-2 specifies that “the separation of parents has no bearing on the rules of devolution and parental responsibility in practice.” See law no 2002-305 March 4, relating to parental authority.

2. http://www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/france/naissances_fecondite/naissances_hors_mariage/

3. anr-08-jcjc-0057-01-paternites. *Pères en solitaires: paternités contemporaines et nouvelles trajectoires familiales* (France, Spain).

4. Translator's note: Quotation back-translated from the original French-language version of this article.

5. Various types of living arrangement can follow on from the same trajectory. Some fathers were granted the right to visitation and overnight stays or had decided with the mother to take on shared custody, before the children go to live with them full time. This is why we encounter more types of living arrangement than fathers.

Bibliography

- ALLARD, Francine L., Amélie BOURRET, Gilles TREMBLAY, Marc BERGERON, and Isabelle ROY. 2005. “Maintien de l'engagement paternel après une rupture conjugale: point de vue de pères vivant en contexte de pauvreté.” *Revue Enfances, Familles, Générations* 3 (Fall). Accessed August 24, 2011 from <http://www.erudit.org/revue/efg/2005/v/n3/012537ar.html?vue=resume>.
- ARENDELL, Terry. 1995. *Fathers and Divorce*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- ATTIAS-DONFUT, Claudine, and Martine SEGALEN. 2007. *Grands-parents: la famille à travers les générations*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- BERTAUX, Daniel, and Catherine DELCROIX. 1991. “Des pères face au divorce : la fragilisation des liens paternels” *Collection Espace et famille* 17. Paris: CNAF.
- BERTOIA, Carl E., and Janice DRAKICH. 1993. “The Fathers' Rights Movement. Contradictions in Rhetoric and Practice.” *Journal of Family Issues* 14, 4: 592–615.
- BESSIÈRE, Celine. 2007. “Se marier pour aller jusqu'au bout ensemble? Ruptures conjugales et transmission des exploitations agricoles dans la lignée.” *Revue d'études en Agriculture et Environnement* 88, 3: 44–70.
- BESSIÈRE, Céline, and Sibylle GOLLAC. 2010. “Au tribunal des couples. Situations professionnelles des conjoints et procédure judiciaires de séparation conjugale.” *Rapport de recherche pour la Mission Droit et Justice*. Paris.
- BESSIN, Marc, and Corinne GAUDART. 2009. “Les Temps sexuels de l'activité: la temporalité au principe du genre?” *Temporalités* 9. Accessed February 25 2011 from, <http://temporalites.revues.org/index979.html>.
- BLANKENHORN, David. *Fatherless America. Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

- BLÖSS, Thierry. 1996. *Éducation familiale et beau-parenté: l'empreinte des trajectoires biographiques*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- BOYER, Danielle, and Benoit CÉROUX. 2010. "Les Limites des politiques publiques de soutien à la paternité." *Travail genre et sociétés* 24: 47–62.
- BRADSHAW, Jonathan, Christine SKINNER, Carol STIMSON, and Julie WILLIAMS. 2002. *Absent Fathers?* London: Routledge.
- BRUNET, Florence, Pauline KERTUDO, and Sylvie MALSAN. 2008. "Étude sociologique de la résidence en alternance de parents séparés." Research File, CAF 109: 1–114.
- BRUNET, Florence. 2011. "Des usages protéiformes de la nature: essai de relecture du droit français de la filiation." *L'argument de la filiation aux fondements des sociétés européennes et méditerranéennes*, edited by P. Bonte, E. Porquieres, and J. Wilgau, 285–323. Paris: Éditions de la MSH.
- CADOLLE, Sylvie. 2000. *Être parent, être beau-parent: La recomposition de la famille*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- CADOLLE, Sylvie. 2005. "C'est quand même mon père! La solidarité entre père divorcé, famille paternelle et enfants adultes." *Terrain* 45: 83–96.
- CADOLLE, Sylvie. "La Résidence alternée: ce qu'en disent les mères." *Informations Sociales* 149: 68–81.
- CASTELAIN-MEUNIER, Christine. 2002. *La Place des hommes et les métamorphoses de la famille*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- CASTELAIN-MEUNIER, Christine. 2005. *Les Métamorphoses du masculin*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- CHAUSSEBOURG, Laure, and Dominique BAUX. 2007. "L'exercice de l'autorité parentale après le divorce ou la séparation des parents non mariés." *Ministère de la Justice*.
- COLLIER, Richard, and Sally SHELDON, eds. 2006. *Fathers' Rights: Fatherhood and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford/Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2006.
- CONNELL, Raewyn W. 1995/1999. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- DERMOTT, Esther. 2008. *Intimate Fatherhood: A Sociological Analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- DHAVERNAS, Marie-José, and Irène THÉRY. 1991. "Le Beau-Parent dans les familles recomposées." *Rôle familial, statut social, statut juridique. Rapport de recherche pour la CNAF*. Vaucresson, France: CRIV.
- DOUCET, Andrea. 2006. *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care, and Responsibility*. University of Toronto Press.
- DULAC, Germain. 1995. "Rupture d'union et Déconstruction du lien Père-enfant." *Prisme* 5, 2–3: 300–312.
- FAGNANI, Jeanne, and Marie-Thérèse LETABLIER. 2003. « S'occuper des enfants au quotidien: mais que font les pères? » *Droit Social*, 3: 251–259.
- FILLOD-CHABAUD, Aurelie. 2009. "L'Expérience judiciaire des pères et l'accès au droit en matière de droit de garde." Masters thesis under the supervision of Florence Weber, ENS, EHESS.
- FINE, Agnes, and Agnès MARTIAL. 2010. "Vers une naturalisation de la filiation?" *Genèses* 1, 78: 121–134.
- FREEMAN, Tabitha. 2002. "Loving Fathers or Deadbeat Dads." In *Gender, Identity, and Reproduction: Social Perspectives*, edited by Sarah Earle and Gayle Letherby, 33–49. London: Palgrave.
- HOBSON, Barbara, ed. 2002. *Making Men into Fathers. Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- JAMOULLE, Pascale. 2006. *Des hommes sur le fil. La Construction de l'Identité Masculine en Milieux Précaires*. Paris: La Découverte.
- KRUK, Edward. 1993. *Divorce and Disengagement-Patterns of Fatherhood within and beyond Marriage*. Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- LEITE, Randall W., and Patrick C. MCKENRY. 2002. "Aspects of Father Status and Postdivorce Father Involvement with Children." *Journal of Family Issues* 23, 5: 601–623.
- MARSIGLIO, William, Paul AMATO, and Randal D. DAY. 2000. "Scholarships on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, 4: 1173–1191.
- MARTIAL, Agnès. 2003. *S'apparenter. Ethnologie des Liens de Familles Recomposées*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
- MARTIAL, Agnès. 2005. "Comment rester liés? Les comptes des familles recomposées." *Terrain* 45: 67–82.
- MARTIAL, Agnès. 2008. "Changements de nom, changement de filiation." In *État Civils en Questions*, edited by Agnès Fines, 115–138. Paris: Éditions du CTHS.
- MARTIAL, Agnès. 2009a. "Choisir ses héritiers. Recompositions Familiales et Successions Patrimoniales en France et au Québec." *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 33, 1: 193–209.
- MARTIAL, Agnès. "Le Travail parental: du côté des pères séparés et divorcés." *Informations Sociales* 4: 96–104.
- MARTIN, Claude. 1997. *L'après-divorce. Lien Familial et Vulnérabilité*. Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- MERLA, Laura. 2007. "Père au foyer: une expérience hors-normes." *Recherches et Prévisions*: 17–27.
- NEYRAND, Gérard. 2000. *L'Enfant, la mère et la question du père*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- NEYRAND, Gérard. 1994/2009. *L'Enfant face à la séparation des parents. Une solution, la résidence alternée*. Paris: Syros.
- PRIOUX, France, Magali MAZUY, and Magali BARBIERI. 2010. "L'Évolution démographique récente en France: les adultes vivent moins souvent en couple." *Population* 65, 3: 421–474.
- QUÉNIART, Anne. 1999. "Émancipation ou désancrage social: deux représentations de la rupture parentale chez des pères n'ayant plus de contact avec leur enfant." *Déviance et Société* 23, 1: 91–104.
- RÉGNIER-LOILLIER, Arnaud. 2006. "A quelle fréquence voit-on ses parents?" *Population et Sociétés* 427: 1–4.
- SALAZAR, Carles. 2009. "Vérité biologique et fiction sociale dans l'histoire du droit paternel. Essai d'anthropologie juridique." In *Défis Contemporains de la Parenté*, edited by Enric Porquieres I Génè, 58–80. Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS.
- SCHWARTZ, Olivier. 1990. *Le Monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

THÉRY, Irene. 1993. *Le Démariage*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

THÉRY, Irene. 2007. *La Distinction de sexe, une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

THÉRY, Irène, and Marie-Josèphe DHAVERNAS. 1991. *Le Beau-Parent dans les familles recomposées. Rôle familial, statut social, statut juridique*. Paris: Research report for CNAF.

TRINDER, Liz, Mary BEEK, and Jo CONNOLLY. 2002. *Making Contact: How Parents and Children Negotiate and Experience Contact after Divorce*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

VERJUS, Anne, and Marie VOGEL. 2009. "Le travail parental: un travail comme un autre?" *Informations Sociales* 152: 4–6.

VILLENEUVE-GOKALP, Catherine. 1994. "Situations et biographies familiales des enfants." In *Constances et inconstances de la famille, biographies familiales des couples et des enfants, Travaux et Documents*, edited by Henry Léridon and Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp, 197–231. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

VILLENEUVE-GOKALP, Catherine. 1999. "La Double Famille des enfants de parents séparés." *Population* 1: 9–36.

VIVAS, Emilie. 2007. "La Séparation des parents ou le décès de la mère distend les relations avec le père." *Insee Première* 1157: 7–14.

WEBER, Florence. 2005. *Le Sang, le nom, le quotidien: une analyse de la parenté pratique*. Paris: Aux lieux d'être.