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ABSTRACT

The belief that fathers are becoming more involved in family life has filtered into psychological accounts of child and adult development. The "emergent" view recognizes the social changes which men are undergoing and claims that men are becoming more involved domestically. Yesterday's absentee father is being replaced by a man involved both practically and emotionally. The paper looks at this perspective and assesses whether any real increase in paternal involvement in domestic life can be measured. Two methods are used: (1) asking men to compare their own parenting roles with those of their fathers and (2) comparing data collected in studies on fathers in previous generations with that obtained in recent studies. Both methods involve methodological problems. Also a gap appears between fathers' descriptions of change and evidence to support their claims. Narrations of actual interviews with fathers are given, as well as tables summarizing the results. It is concluded that the emergent view of fathering is only supported by incidental evidence and that the key issue is not how involved men become in fatherhood, but rather which parent takes responsibility for the child. It can only be inferred that parenthood is different these days and that any comparisons between generations must take into account both the social context in which parenting takes place and the possible variations in paternal involvement over the life-span. (DST)

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Men's Involvement in Fatherhood: Historical and Gender Issues

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In recent years the belief that fathers are becoming more involved in family life has filtered into psychological accounts of child and adult development. For example, on the first page of their book (published two days ago) on children's conversations with their mothers and nursery school teachers, Tizard and Hughes (1984) write: "fathers are more involved than previously in their children's upbringing". Much literature specifically on men contains what Robert Fein describes as the "emergent" view of fatherhood. This recognises the social changes which we are undergoing and claims that men are seeking more involvement in matters domestic. Yesterday's absentee father, is being replaced by a more involved man in both practical and emotional terms. The following three quotations are not atypical: all assume that great things are happening to men. Winn even goes so far as to suggest that greater father involvement will have far reaching political effects (- a masculinist claim not unique by any means).

"We find ourselves in the late 1970's, in the midst of a series of reconsiderations. Previously accepted models of womanhood, of work, of family life, of the relationship between work and family life are being scrutinised, examined, remade. Many women, assigned in the past to roles of caring for children, keeping the home, supporting their menfolk, are exploring the world of paid employment, taking on and sharing the breadwinning responsibilities previously held mainly by men. Many men, feeling burdened by too-restrictive definitions of masculinity and manliness, are seeking to blend work life and family life, making efforts to become and stay involved in the daily responsibilities of child care, learning more about the frustrations and the joys of deep and regular participation in the lives of their children". (Fein, 1978, page 327).

Father is changing as never before. He is still inside the economic prison, often encased in attitudes of the past, and still largely ignored. Old inequalities tenaciously persist. But there is something restless about the modern father. In the past we might have said he was flexing his muscles. But perhaps what he is doing is looking into his heart." (Jackson, 1984, page 27)

"Future generations of children will derive greater comfort from their contact with fathers who are competent both inside and outside the family. Such a change in male behaviour will generate a more caring society and eventually promote greater understanding between nations" (Winn, 1979 page 35).

In this paper I will look more closely at this emergent perspective, and assess whether we can measure any real increase in paternal involvement in domestic life. Social and technological changes within the past generation have inevitably altered the nature of parenting roles, but the key question is

how? There are two obvious ways of measuring change in paternal involvement.

On the one hand we can ask men to compare their own parenting roles with those of their own fathers. On the other hand, we can compare data collected in studies on fathers in previous generations with that obtained in recent studies. As I shall suggest, both methods involve inevitable methodological problems.

I will examine both these types of data. Firstly, I will consider the accounts of 100 fathers with one-year-olds, whom I interviewed recently (and those of 30 of their wives interviewed by a female colleague).

These fathers were selected from the Nottingham Birth records. The sample con

Table 1 here

tained men from across the social spectrum; first and second time fathers were selected and all of them were married. I will examine here only their attitudes towards role changes in recent years and a few details of their participation in child care.

I will contrast the accounts of contemporary fathers with data collected by the Newsons in their longitudinal study of 700 children. At each stage they asked mothers questions about the involvement of their husbands. I shall focus my attentions upon mothers' accounts when their children were one, but will look briefly at their data from later ages.

If we start by examining contemporary fathers' views about changes in patterns of child rearing, it is clear that they often perceive their own parenting in the context of a number of social changes and that a large number concur with the emergent view of fatherhood.

Table 2 here

I asked fathers a general question about whether parenthood is the same now as it was for their parents. Only four felt that it is harder now. All these were young working class men. While a further 30 considered that little or no change has taken place, nearly two thirds claimed that life is much easier for today's parents - this view is supported in much social and economic research:

"It's different now ... a lot easier now. You've got more things to buy now from what you used to buy ... Well a few years ago there wasn't

any nappy pads, no sterilizing equipment. You didn't have a choice of babies' clothes in those days 'cos we wasn't so well off as we are now. Nowadays you can buy what you want. Well I can ... a lot of people can't. If she wants something now she gets it" (Warp Knitter).

"It's a lot easier for... I would have said, women nowadays to bring up children now with all the amenities such as automatic washing machines and ... and stuff like that, than it was then ... um ... I would've said so ... I mean when I was a child it was a mangle and...um, a brush rather than a Hoover (Prompt: So apart from the equipment are there any other differences?) Um, that er again depends very much on the parents ... I suppose, on how good they could or how bad they could cope. Beside that I wouldn't have said there was a tremendous amount of difference in that" (Unemployed Sales Representative).

I include these data as such material advances are often suggested as a cause of increased father participation.

Table 3 here

I asked the fathers (and their wives) to compare their attitudes towards bringing children up with those of their parents. More often than not fathers stressed change. 36 men saw no change between generations. This group contained significantly more skilled manual workers (52% vs 32% of men from the other social class groups). In contrast, 54 men felt there were differences and all of these claimed in some way to be more child-centred than their parents. As these quotations suggest these men suggest a lack of affection, interest and involvement in their parents and their own efforts to provide opportunities for their

children:

"I know it sounds awful, but I try to base the way I bring my children up the opposite to the way I (was) brought up. I don't think I (was) brought up very well ... I don't think they had much thought for either myself or my brother. I don't think they had much consideration, nor much ... what shall I say ... affection. The course of actions during their lives ... didn't have a very good effect on me. I didn't have a very happy home life. It had its good moments, but it had a lot of bad moments. I don't think, from a discipline point of view, I hardly had any discipline. I could have turned out to be the typical 'bad home' juvenile delinquent or what you want to call it, but I didn't take advantage of the situation ... Well they never ... from a schooling point of view, there was no interest. With my kids I'm not going to say I'm going to shove schooling down their throats but I shall give them encouragement, let's put it that way" (Sales Engineer).

"Very, very different ... (Prompt: In which respect?) Um I think that their idea of a good upbringing was to provide a warm place to sleep, adequate clothes and plenty to eat and that, um ... if you'd managed to do all three things while your child was growing up, then you'd succeeded. That was what parenthood was about, that, um, generally ... The concept of what parents can do for their children nowadays has expanded greatly beyond that ... um, partly because it's now easier to provide the physical comforts and partly because of the realisation of what parents can do with their children (Prompt: So is it just the realisation or is it something more than that ... that's caused this shift?) Well, I think that work has been done to show parents what they

can do for their children, you know ... at all levels really um ... that you know ... I think that you will find very few people who don't realise that a parent can influence the ... you know, their young children and that er ... how well they do and how happy they are, and how well they get on at school ... a lot of them, you know, haven't got any idea of what they should do in order to do it but um they realise it should be done" (Primary Teacher 2).

"Everybody's ... especially on this estate ... everybody's trying to get a little bit more forward, than what the actual parents did" (Mobile Grocer).

The thirty wives in the recent study were significantly more likely to stress similarities between themselves and their parents, when answering the same question as their husbands (54% of wives vs. 24% of husbands). This may suggest that men feel more than women that they are at the vanguard of change.

Table 4 here

When asked specifically to describe their own fathers' involvements with them, these men gave more clear support for the emergent image of fatherhood. To set this table in context, when they discussed their own involvement in child care 73 men reported that they were involved on a daily basis in one activity or more, - this included putting the child to bed, nappy changing or feeding, for example. Only one father admitted that he did not do any child care over the space of a week. In contrast, as this table shows, only 14 men remembered their fathers doing any care giving at any age in their development or even felt that it was

likely that they became involved. The largest group of fathers (42) remembered their own fathers as playmates, and 35 felt that they showed absolutely no interest or only became involved on special occasions, like family outings. Typical comparisons are:

"My father?... My father virtually had nothing to do with my brothers and sisters at all.... This was because he was an old type miner... you know, he went out to work, he did a good days work for a bad day's pay and he came home and he went to the nearest pub. (Prompt: What about in the home, did he help at all?) Very very seldom (Prompt: So what sort of things did he do with you?) What did he do with us?... er I can't remember going back... I can't actually remember my father ever playing a game with us as children, apart from when we started going on holidays... when I would be about 9, 10 years old" (Finance Company Representative)

"Well I think there's differences certainly. I think I take more part in the bringing up of my children than my dad ever took up in bringing me up, you know... but that's possibly a matter of opinion. I mean I was always very close to my mother at home and if ever I wanted to talk over anything I always felt more comfortable talking to me mum than me dad. That's possibly... I don't know... maybe in those early days it was mainly me mum that was lumbered with me as it were." (Computer Clerk)

So the overall impression given by fathers is in keeping with the emergent ideal. But is there definite evidence to support the emergent view, which does not rely solely upon fathers' remembrances of things past? I think the strict answer has

to be no. Accounts collected only twenty years ago are different from those gathered today. The obvious differences in past assessments of paternal involvement are their lack of specificity and their reliance upon maternal reports. More recent work attempts to get a much more precise breakdown of paternal involvement. Such differences may affect the data collected. More important are the possible shifts in ideological emphasis over time. For example, recent interest in fathers has not been confined to academic studies and men may well be under pressure to appear to be more participant than their fathers. In the past there may well have been more pressure on men to appear less involved than they were (certainly fewer men pushed prams about twenty years ago).

With these cautions in mind I shall turn to make some comparisons between the data from the fathers study and that obtained by the Newsons. A cursory glance at "Patterns of Infant Care" suggests that if change has taken place it is only in certain areas of paternal involvement.

Table 5 here

Certainly in the period around delivery men are far more involved than they used to be. This table, which compares today's fathers with a matched sample of mothers from the Newsons' study, shows that unlike 25 years ago the vast majority of married men now attend delivery and help in the care of their wives in the immediate post partum period. In fifty (that is exactly half) of the families in the recent study father was the only attendant to the new mother.

However, this difference between 1960 and 1980 does not necessarily indicate a shift in men's commitment to child rearing. We have to understand such changes in the context of increased hospital deliveries (which both encourage paternal

involvement and reduce the importance of the mother's attendants during this period), the unavailability of traditional sources of support for mothers - their female kin who are now far more likely to be at work - and other such factors (e.g. men now have longer paid holidays).

Table 6 here

Data concerning child care tasks when the child is one year of age suggest that the differences between the fathers in the two studies are less obvious. A key feature of data on paternal involvement over the years is the great variation between fathers. Such variation makes comparisons difficult, but these figures appear to show few differences over time. Indeed the proportion of men who never bath or change their children's nappies (diapers) seems to have remained constant over the years. (More fathers seem to avoid putting their one-year-olds to bed these days.)

The past twenty years has witnessed a reduction in men's working hours, a slight but significant increase in the numbers of men who "babysit" as a result of their wives working part time and a larger unemployment rate. Given these factors it may even be that the relative involvement of most fathers, as a proportion of their total available time at home, has decreased.

Further examination of the Newsons' transcript material sets the optimism expressed by today's fathers in a more complex light. Discussion about their own parents led the Newsons' sample of mothers to describe changes between generations in ways which are very similar to those of contemporary fathers. Typical accounts from the final chapter of Patterns of Infant Care show that the mothers

were keen to underline their own striving to give their children a better chance (as we see in the first three quotations) and a greater child-centredness in their relationships with their children:

"Well you try to do a bit more for them, don't you? I always think you try to do a bit more than you think was done for yourself" (Miner's Wife, quoted in Newson and Newson, 1963, p.222).

"I try to give these what I didn't have, you see - not just for that reason alone, but I like them to have it if I can afford it" (Postman's Wife)

"So long as my husband can give the children more than he had he's satisfied" (Window Cleaner's Wife)

I never had what you'd call - any love - from my mother. Now with ours I think that's the main thing, because even with our Patricia(five) - I'll put her on my knee and nurse her, and she comes to me and asks for it; well I never remember having any of that. I could never hold a conversation with my mother, well even now I can't. Seems as though we're distant somehow, funny isn't it" (Machine Operator's Wife)

Such similarities of outlook between the parents of this generation and the last warn us that we should be careful when assessing the backward glances of contemporary fathers. While the Newsons did not obtain mothers' accounts of their own fathers' involvements to compare with their husbands, it is still fair to assert that parents of one-year-olds tend to describe their own efforts in more favourable ways.

So, what might explain the apparent contradiction between fathers' 'emer-

gent' recollections and the evidence which suggests little or no change in the past twenty years?

I would like to suggest two possible reasons for the disparity. The first lies in the nature and origins of parents' recollections. It is always possible that after infancy the role of the father changes in such a way as to diminish the strength of his relationship with the child. So, the parts of their childhoods which are accessible to their memories may have made their own fathers seem less involved than they had been. This suggestion has to be speculative as there is so little literature on father-child, as opposed to father-infant, relationships except in atypical families where the father is absent, homosexual or a single parent.

However the Newsoms' longitudinal data supports this view. Two years ago we examined mothers' descriptions of their husbands when the children were four, seven, eleven and sixteen. While the types of family described were many, a clear pattern of father - child relationship was apparent in a large majority of cases. This suggests that in middle childhood fathers do take on the playmate role, particularly with their sons. But the transcripts also show how many mothers feel that their husbands are somehow distanced at these ages.

"(Question: Apart from school, what sorts of question does he ask you and his Daddy - what interests him?) Oh I don't know - very little. I mean, by the time his Dad comes home at night and he's had his dinner and sits down to watch the telly, he (son) doesn't ask him anything - He (father) doesn't sort of give them a chance"
(Labourer's Wife, herself not working, of her 7-year-old son)

"Well I think he's probably closer to me, because I'm here I suppose. When they come in from school they tell me, the first person, don't they? And when it's got to be repeated it's different" (Representative's Wife, herself not working, of her 11-year old son)

"(Question: Does your husband like doing things with him?) Not a great deal Whether he would give him a lot more time and attention if I didn't give him so much; I'm not quite sure about that. Ted hasn't quite got the patience that he used to have, although he is a very, very patient person; but I sort of see the difference. But I think a lot of it is that I have time to be with him, and perhaps Ted thinks he isn't needed" (Teacher's Wife, herself a Part Time Researcher, with a 7-seven-year-old son)

This view is supported by other evidence. For example, Brian Jackson examining the data from a national study of 16,000 5-year-olds in 1975, found that 40% of men usually arrived home after their children's bedtime. Likewise in my study of fathers, many men sensed that there would come a time when they would no longer be so involved in the lives of their children. 66% of them felt that some time during the first ten years would be the time when their relationship would be closest, and 40% selected a time in the first five years.

(Interviewer: Looking ahead, what stage of childhood do you think you're going to enjoy the most?) "Well, before he was born, I would have said about ten or eleven. But now, having grown up with him since he was born ... I would think a lot earlier than

that. I would think when he's about three, even two-and-a-half upward. You know, when he can converse ... you know, quite reasonably. I would think about three upwards, or something (Prompt: till when?) Six ... so he can go to school and get his own friends and own ideas and be influenced by everybody else ... and come back and tell me what a right idiot I am" (Factory Manager 1).

"Enjoy him now ... I think that as he starts to communicate and er takes an interest, then that is going to be stimulating, in that one is going to be able to teach him things (Prompt: Which sort of age range would you think that would be?) I, I, ... I must admit I, I like the sort of ... probably in the nought to five bracket. I think then they're nice at that age ... I'm not saying he's not nice at any other age but you know, at the stage when you can get hold of them and cuddle them if you like, you know" (Factory Manager 2).

A second reason why there appears to be a disparity between fathers' descriptions of change and the lack of evidence to support their claims, lies in traditional perceptions of marriage, family life and social change. A more general look at the evidence gathered over the years suggests that the idea that gender roles are becoming egalitarian has been with us for a long time. In the 1930's Pearl Gardner interviewed fathers about their involvement and found that large numbers claimed to be more participant than their own fathers. For example, 25% described their fathers as "too cold". Studies of marriage throughout this century, as Christopher Lasch's (1976) history shows, that as far back as Mowrer's account of "companionate marriage" in 1930 (and perhaps even the work of Westermarck in the 1890's)

social scientists have been acting under the assumption that the home is just about to become a scene of blissful harmony. Perhaps this is more wishful thinking on the part of researchers than is actually the case.

I would like to make two points in conclusion. Firstly, the emergent view of fathering is supported by some incidental evidence, but not much of it. We can only infer that parenthood is different these days and that any comparisons between generations must take into account both the social context in which parenting takes place and the possible variations in paternal involvement over the life-span. Secondly, I would like to reiterate the point which Anne Oakley (1974) made in her early work on house wives. She pointed out that the question of how much men become involved in fatherhood is not as important as the key issue of which parent takes responsibility for the child. It is still mothers who tend to organize their children's routines and to be preoccupied with details about the need to buy more sterilising fluid, what the child should eat that day, which toys to take on a family outing and thousands of other such bits of information. As long as such a difference between each parent's responsibility continues, parenting will remain a key, if not the gender issue.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE
OCCUPATIONAL/SOCIAL CLASS BACKGROUND
 (UK REGISTRAR GENERAL'S CLASSIFICATION 1970)

	MIDDLE CLASS		WORKING CLASS	
	I & II (PROFESSIONAL/ MANAGERIAL)	IIIn (WHITE COLLAR EG CLERICAL)	IIIm (SKILLED MANUAL, EG TRADES)	V (UNSKILLED LABOURERS)
NUMBERS OF FIRST BORN CHILDREN	15	15	15	15
NUMBERS OF SECOND BORN CHILDREN	10	10	10	10
TOTAL (N = 100)	25	25	25	25

DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF THE SAMPLE

APPROACHED	124
INTERVIEWED	100
REFUSED	6
NOT KNOWN AT ADDRESS/NO REPLY	12
IN PRISON (2), SEPARATED (2), AWAY "WORKING" (2)	6

TABLE 2

"DO YOU THINK IT'S MUCH THE SAME BRINGING UP CHILDREN
AS IT WAS FOR YOUR PARENTS OR
DO YOU FEEL THERE ARE BIG DIFFERENCES?"

<u>RESPONSE CATEGORY</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>
1. IT IS EASIER FOR US	62
2. THERE ARE NO DIFFERENCES	11
3. THE DIFFERENCES ARE MIXED	19
4. PARENTHOOD IS HARDER THESE DAYS	4

(UNCODED = 4)

TOTAL = 100

TABLE 3

"WHAT ABOUT YOUR IDEAS AND ATTITUDES COMPARED TO YOUR PARENTS -
DO YOU THINK YOUR IDEAS ON BRINGING UP CHILDREN
ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEIRS?"

	<u>RESPONSE CATEGORY</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>
1.	OUR IDEAS ARE SIMILAR	36
2.	A FEW "MINOR" DIFFERENCES MENTIONED	8
3.	I AM MORE CHILD CENTRED	54
4.	I AM MORE STRICT	1
	TOTAL =	99

TABLE 4
FATHERS' RECOLLECTIONS OF THEIR OWN FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT
WITH THEM AS CHILDREN

<u>RESPONSE CATEGORY</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>
1. NO FATHER (HE DIED OR SEPARATED FROM MY MOTHER)	8
2. NO INVOLVEMENT	12
3. INVOLVED LESS THAN WEEKLY (I.E. ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS)	23
4. A "PLAYMATE" (I.E. PLAYED MORE THAN WEEKLY)	42
5. REGULAR INVOLVEMENT AND SOME CARE-GIVING (I.E. PUT TO BED WEEKLY)	8
6. REGULAR INVOLVEMENT AND (DAILY) CARE-GIVING	6
TOTAL = 99	

TABLE 5

PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT DURING THE PERINATAL PERIOD:
1960 AND 1980 COMPARED

ACTIVITY:	ATTENDANCE AT DELIVERY		"HELPED" IN HOME	
	1960 * %	1980 %	1960 ** %	1980 %
<u>INVOLVEMENT</u>				
NO	92	33	70	23
YES	8	67	30	77

* 1960 : RANDOM SAMPLE

** 1960 : SUB SAMPLE OF FIRST AND SECOND TIME FATHERS WITH SAME
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AS 1980 SAMPLE

TABLE 6

LEVEL OF FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT WITH THEIR ONE-YEAR-OLDS
IN CARETAKING TASKS: 1960 AND 1980 COMPARED

ACTIVITY:	PUTTING TO BED		BATHING		NAPPY CHANGING	
	1960 * %	1980 %	1960 * %	1980 %	1960 * %	1980 %
<u>INVOLVEMENT</u>						
LITTLE OR NONE	20	26	61	62	43	40
SOME INVOLVEMENT	49	24	24	9	32	37
A LOT	31	48	15	24	20	28

* 1960 : RANDOM SAMPLE