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# Caring Fathers

## The Ideology of Gender Equality and Masculine Positions

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In this article, we explore Swedish men's relations to fatherhood in general and in particular to the new ideal of the caring and present father. We argue that the image of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is gradually changing. Reforms and informational strategies are used to enhance and create the "new father." In this article, we explore and analyze how four different groups of Swedish men—Christian men, psychotherapists, a male network, and immigrant men—relate to and discuss issues concerning new gender ideals, the modern father, and fathers as important caretakers. These issues are explored through four focus group interviews. The results from the study point toward the influences of factors such as age, social background, and religion. We also see that the ideology of gender equality has a strong general influence on men's ways of relating to and phrasing these issues.

**Keywords:** *fatherhood; gender equality; new parental ideals; hegemonic masculinity; focus groups*

The image of a muscular man holding an infant in his arms has forever engraved itself in the collective Swedish memory as the symbol of paternity leave. With his tousled red hair, his bulging biceps, and his blue and yellow shirt—the color of the Swedish flag—weightlifter Leif "Hoa Hoa" Dahlgren integrates conceptions of masculinity, caring, and national identity—he's a family-oriented version of a Swedish welfare-state Viking. The message is crystal clear: There are no conflicts between parental leave and masculinity. A real man takes paternity leave!

This now classic picture was part of the first paternity leave campaign carried out by the national social insurance office. It began in 1976 and was launched under the heading "Daddy on Paternity Leave." The campaign has had a number of successors. From the 1970s to the present, the Swedish Government Offices, other national authorities, trade unions, and special interest organizations have

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used advertisements, films, brochures, TV spots, photo exhibits, radio jingles, and personal letters in an attempt to convince men of the value of paternity leave. This material is a rich source of information for understanding paternity leave as a political project in Sweden. Present in the campaigns are normative images of how men should feel, think, and act—normative images to which men must relate in some way.

Attitude surveys conducted since the beginning of the 1980s have shown that Swedish men have positive attitudes toward parental leave. However, the statistics on the use of parental leave tell another story. At the beginning of the 1980s, men's proportion of the total leave taken had risen to a modest 5 percent. This figure has gradually increased, and in 2004, men took 18.7 percent of the total leave time (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2005, 73).

The discrepancy between what men say and what they do raises a number of questions. How do men understand and relate to the various messages concerning paternity leave? Do attempts to shape public opinion have their intended effects, or do they miss the mark? These and similar questions have been addressed in research and other types of inquiries, but in this article, we go a step further by bringing together the normative images of these campaigns and the men they were intended to influence. In a number of focus group interviews, we have asked groups of men to discuss several campaign images taken from the paternity leave campaigns of the past thirty years or so. Our overall interest is in how men construct fatherhood in the field of tension between societal visions and their own lived reality.<sup>1</sup>

## **The New Man: Historical and Political Background**

The various paternity leave campaigns should be understood in relation to the wider societal and political context. In Sweden, as in many other countries, the questioning of traditional gender relations has its roots in the 1960s. In 1968, the Swedish government backed the following declaration of principles:

A policy which attempts to give women an equal place with men in economic life while at the same time confirming woman's traditional responsibility for the care of home and children has no prospect of fulfilling the first of these aims. This can be realised only if the man is also educated and encouraged to take an active part in parenthood and is given the same rights and duties as the woman in his parental capacity (Sandlund 1968, 4).

The idea content was largely taken from the gender equality debate of the 1960s and its questioning of women's as well as men's social roles. The concept of the new man came to epitomize the vision of a new care-oriented masculinity (Beckman 1965; Klinth 2003). This new man concept was discussed in terms of liberation, but

acquired a strong moral charge through its ties to conceptions of modernity, enlightenment, democracy, and health (Klinth 2002). Already in 1970, then Prime Minister Olof Palme gave words to the political charge that had been established with regard to this issue. He stressed that if any of today's politicians were to declare that women should have a role different from the man's "and that it is natural that she devotes more time to the children, he would be regarded to be of the Stone Age" (Palme 1972, 242-43).

The political vision formulated at the end of the 1960s may be described as a struggle on two fronts. One was intended to strengthen women's position in working life and society, while the other was intended to increase men's responsibility and involvement in child care and housework (Nyberg 2004). In the mid-1970s, one young, liberal member of the Riksdag (the Parliament of Sweden) summarized the motto of Swedish gender equality politics in the following way: Our policies should "get jobs for moms and get dads pregnant" (Klinth 2002, 243).

Thus, the ambition to get dads pregnant was principally expressed politically in the new parental leave insurance policy that took effect in 1974. The policy gave men the right to paid parental leave. This reform was historical as well as unique in an international comparison. Men had never before been offered such an opportunity. In contrast to the taxation system as well as the systems for health insurance and social security insurance, parental leave insurance was designed to be a collective right. The parents themselves were to determine which of them would use the leave.

The question of paternity leave has been shown to contain a number of political complications. It has often been the cause of hot debate both within and between political parties. It has not, in any simple or clear way, constituted an issue in bloc politics. Instead, the initiative has shifted between the nonsocialist and socialist parties. It is primarily the issue of compulsory division, imposition of quotas, and individualization with regard to parental leave insurance that has given rise to contention. Already in 1975, a government report challenged the collective idea on which parental leave insurance rested by proposing an "earmarked" month for fathers (Klinth 2002; Karlsson 1996). It took an additional twenty years, however, before such a proposal was met with political sympathy. The "daddy month" was first introduced into parental leave insurance in 1995.<sup>2</sup>

The question of imposing quotas is interesting in many ways. The political management of this question in particular has helped to make visible a number of fundamental principles in the thinking about family politics—principles that have formed the latent conditions for work with political reform. As long as reform work has been in line with these principles, they have remained invisible, but when demands for basic change have been formulated, they have become apparent. From a gender perspective, these principles may be understood as forming the inner core of the gender order—its discursive foundation. Compromises and reinterpretations have only been possible as long as they have not fundamentally threatened the leading principles of the gender order.

One example of such a principle is that concerning the family's freedom of choice. Those wishing to bring about a sharpening of men's individual responsibility have been forced to question or radically redefine this principle. This has not been possible as a rule (Klinth 2004, 2005). Moreover, most public opinion surveys have shown broad support for the family's right to choose (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2005, 73).

Another important principle has been that concerning men's scope of action. In contrast to the freedom of choice principle, this principle has not been expressed explicitly. Instead, it has been discernable as an implicit condition of political action. The principle of men's scope of action has strongly marked the information and public opinion building carried out to persuade men to take more parental leave. This shaping of public opinion has been generally characterized by a "rhetoric of the gift" as opposed to an emphasis on shared responsibility. The fact that men have used their right to parental leave only to a limited extent has been defined as a problem of attitudes rather than one of power. Based on such logic, the problem is located in men's brains, and the role of the state thus becomes to set men straight, to inform them of the social, psychological, and labor-market-related gains they can make through active fatherhood (Klinth 2005). What this rhetoric of the gift has concealed, however, is the risk entailed in men not choosing to accept the gift, namely diminished chances for women to have influence in society, to have a career, and to achieve wage equality (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2005, 73; Åström 1992; Widerberg 1993).

It is difficult to determine the extent to which opinion-building campaigns of the kind discussed above have led to the desired result. There are some indications that local campaigns, in certain cases, have actively helped to increase men's propensity to use their right to parental leave. On the national level, however, it is difficult to attribute statistical changes to particular efforts to shape public opinion (Bekkengen 1996, 2002, 2003; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2005, 73; Klinth 2005).

Although it has taken more than thirty years for Swedish men to reach a level of utilization of about 20 percent of the total parental leave allowance, it is clear that the new, gender-equal man lives on as an idea and moral guiding principle. The government-initiated campaigns to promote paternity leave have been one of the most important producers of the image of this man and of what he should look like, what he should think, and how he should act. Through constant repetition, the discourse on gender equality and its implications for masculinity and fatherhood have been embodied and become a central part of social and professional practices of various kinds.

According to Marie Nordberg (2005), the discourse on gender equality often exists "as a 'third presence' that individuals measure themselves in relation to and present themselves through and are careful to articulate in their politically correct self-presentations" (p. 80). The discourse on the new man has attained a hegemonic status. In most situations, it is nearly impossible to avoid relating to it or to openly

criticize it. This is not to say, however, that it has not been or is not threatened or that it is similarly interpreted in all contexts (Magnusson 2001). As we established above, there are clear differences in the attitudes and values men express and in how they then choose to act.

There are a number of qualitative studies of how individual men who have taken longer periods of parental leave relate to their own fatherhood, to the family, and to the reactions of others (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Dienhart 1998; Deutch 1999; Chronholm 2004). Most studies deal with middle-class men who have positive attitudes about taking care of their infant children. These studies focus on a carefully selected group of men who are united by their interest in standing out as gender equal and modern. We know little, however, about what men in different social and cultural groups think and how they relate to these questions.

What are men's opinions on sharing parental leave? What resistance to the idea might exist? What factors could have a negative impact on men's readiness to stay home with their children? Based on Connell's (1995) model of multiple masculine positions, it is conceivable that there are a number of different viewpoints on these issues and thereby also different ways of constructing the gender-equal man.

## Method

This study is based on the material from four focus groups, each with its own constellation of men. This is the first of several similar studies in which other groups will be contacted. Selection of participants in the present study has been based on our desire to include the following: (1) men who are directly involved in issues of justice and who run various types of men's projects and (2) men who, in contrast, may conceivably have given somewhat less thought to these issues. Thus, we have chosen to try to identify four relatively dissimilar masculine positions. These groups are briefly described as follows:

1. Men's crisis center (three men). All men in this group work actively with men in crisis. They meet with men for both therapeutic and guidance talks of varying duration.
2. Male network (six men). This is an association working with different types of men's issues. For example, members participate in campaigns against violence toward women and arrange lectures and informational evenings.
3. The Equal Project (seven men). This particular group works to create social security in poor neighborhoods in Gothenburg. Most of them are immigrants from Iran, Kurdistan, and Chile. These men have different educational backgrounds, but they all live in a rather poor suburb in Gothenburg.
4. Christian men (three men). These men are members of congregations belonging to the evangelical free churches, which embrace a pietistic tradition, including, among other things, an emphasis on personal conversion, emotional experiences,

and the importance of the Bible. The Baptist church and the Pentecostal movement are other representatives of this tradition.

The four focus groups represent different parts of the Swedish middle class with the exception of the third group. These men have different educational backgrounds, but they all live and work in the same suburb. In many ways, they are quite representative of a broader Swedish population of refugees and immigrants. These groups are characterized by various degrees of cultural capital and education, but what they often have in common is a low degree of economic capital.

The use of focus groups has been shown to be a successful method for studying how different groups relate to well-delimited questions (Krueger 1994; Hylander 1998; Morgan and Krueger 1998; Wibeck 2000). We are not primarily interested in what individual men have to say, but instead we view the group as our object of study. Our ambition was to allow the men to consider the campaign material we had collected and to react to the various ways in which the state and other important actors in society have tried to encourage men to become more gender equal. The groups were shown a selection of pictures that reflected the spirit of the times as well as various strategies to encourage men to take more daddy leave. By allowing them to think about and discuss the material, we hoped to capture some of the attitudes and conceptions that may be associated with a given social position or a certain involvement in these issues. In this way, the historical and contemporary sociological parts of our study meet in the same situation.

In the analysis, we have chosen not to use and comment on exactly the same pictures. For this reason, the order in which we presented the pictures varies, and in the analysis we have even chosen to use different examples and pictures in the different groups. Our aim has not been to compare the same pictures point for point to see how the groups react to the same stimuli but instead to let each group emerge in terms of its own distinctive character. The pictures have been used more to capture certain central arguments, mechanisms, and the dynamics characterizing the group.

The pictures were taken from nine different daddy leave campaigns carried out during the period from 1976 to 2005. Eight of these were developed by the Swedish Social Insurance Administration (central or local offices). One of the campaigns, "The Men's Trap," was directed by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. Two pictures were provided with some type of brief caption.

In most cases, we began with the picture from the 1970s and moved gradually forward in time. But this order was varied in some cases, mostly considering the specific experiences and structures of the groups. The pictures used are briefly described below. Given the space limitation, we describe only the pictures specifically mentioned in the article.

Picture 1 was taken from the Swedish Social Insurance Administration's campaign "Daddy on Paternity Leave" from the end of the 1970s. It shows three fathers, each



pushing a baby carriage. Their gaze is directed toward a child in one of the carriages, and they seem to be engaged in a cheerful conversation. Two of the fathers are well known in the media: weightlifter Leif “Hoa Hoa” Dahlgren and actor Janne “Loffe” Carlsson. The third father is unknown to us. They are dressed simply (jean jackets, red-checked work shirts), suggesting working-class or lower-middle-class affiliation.

Pictures 2 and 3 were taken from the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs’ campaign “The Men’s Trap” (early 1990s). Picture 2 shows a naked man standing with his arms and legs outstretched on a large cogwheel. The man is in his thirties and remarkably well muscled. The picture is reminiscent of the famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man* (a naked man in a circle). Picture 3 shows the same man. Here he is naked from the waist up. The only item of clothing he has on is a tie wrapped around his neck and up over his eyes—the tie is blindfolding him. Both pictures are dramatic and artistic in nature.

Pictures 4 and 5 come from the Swedish Social Insurance Administration’s campaign, “Both Is Best.” This campaign was carried out at the beginning of this century. Picture 4 is captioned “No repeats of childhood.” A two- to three-year-old girl is pushing a baby carriage and looking with a smile at the observer. It is a black and white picture. Picture 5 shows a child (of indeterminable sex) with a muddy face and wearing muddy rainwear. The child is laughing and holding up an earthworm. The caption states, “An investment with immediate dividends.” This picture is also in black and white.

## Case 1: Therapeutic Interventions into Fatherhood

The first group consisted of men who had long worked with men in crisis—men who have lost custody of their children, who have alcohol problems, or who have difficulty handling their own aggression. The three men we interviewed have undergraduate degrees in social work or psychology as well as training as therapists. This background characterized many of their reactions to the campaign pictures presented. The interviewed men considered primarily how the men they encounter would react and respond to the pictures’ messages. Thus, they interpreted the pictures from a therapeutic perspective and with a therapeutic gaze. This led to thoughts about emotional reactions to the messages and the difficulties entailed in going forward too quickly with this type of campaign and message. Here, thoughts were based on theories of maturity, development, and psychological gender. We wish to highlight a few examples to illustrate the principles guiding how this group reacted and reflected on fatherhood.

The second picture (picture 2) presented shows a man suspended on a cogwheel. The idea is to illustrate how men tend to become prisoners of the fast pace of working life, thereby losing contact with their children. The message concerns the importance

of breaking loose from the treadmill of working life and instead spending more time with one's children. This picture evoked a number of reactions. The following are excerpts from discussions in this focus group:

- M1: This is so typical of the times, Guillou's Hamilton books, his male ideal. The closest you can get to the male genitals. You've used your sex, and now we're gonna nail you up. It contains a lot of aggression toward men. It's a stereotype that a man is his role and that he hides in it; deep-going prejudices, a narrow register.
- M3: . . . an identification thing too. How many wear a tie to work? How many are hunters? . . . Not very pleasant, a target, darts.
- M1: It's much more fun to joke about men. Should have been one with smaller biceps, a little snuff under his lip and unshaven and so on.

This group of men was marked by their work situation and their basic ambition to improve conditions for men—to make it easier for men to talk about their feelings and live a better life. It is natural, then, that they tended to perceive as stereotypical pictures and messages that play on a certain male image. Here we see associations to notions that the man is burdened by guilt, that he is vulnerable and a victim of prejudices. Moreover, the group members took exception to the fact that it is a seemingly physically fit man of high status who is portrayed. They thought that this draws attention away from “the regular man” and helps to strengthen the notion that men should work out at the gym and attain a high position in society. Instead, they wished to work toward creating a more nuanced image of masculinity that stresses complexity, depth, and the multifaceted nature of fatherhood.

This focus group constantly stressed the importance of trusting men and of understanding how they reason about things and of not disparaging them. They looked critically on the type of feminist thought that solely emphasizes men's complete superordination and women's subordination. Reality is more complex. One of the men stated that the Swedish government would like to paint Swedish men either black or white. Another considered that there seems to be a political aim in presenting men in such a superficial manner.

In general, this group thought there is too much focus on structures and societal views and that such a focus tends to lose sight of the individual. Instead of constantly presenting men as either black or white or taking the perspective that men do not want to take paternity leave, we should trust men and assume that they actually wish to participate in family life and spend a great deal of time with their children. Such positive treatment would also help to strengthen men in their role as fathers.

The therapists took exception to the state always trying to control and influence families. They focused more on the individual and the subjective level. Their interpretations of the material seem to have been guided by their therapeutic perspective. The reasoning here is not so much at the political level. Instead, the issues thought

to be important were more likely to concern men's experiences, reactions, and subjective resistance.

M2: It's important to get people thinking, like in therapy. To get them thinking, processing, taking a stand. When the state uses regulations, lecturing, overexplicitness, then it's putting itself at another level, seeing this person as someone who can be told what to do. The greatest benefits come when people think. . . . I don't believe in the model of standing there and telling people what to think, like a superego, but when the superego disappears, you need to be able to think. I wish the state would step back and give more room to the inner life, go in for change, so people can think and ponder. This isn't such a society unfortunately.

The campaign pictures presented were experienced as either guilt imposing or as if they minimize men's experiences and active will to bring about change. The picture considered to be most positive is the one from the 1970s, showing three middle-age men, each in front of a baby carriage (picture 1). The reason for this is that it is apparent that the men are being portrayed in a positive manner. The picture is a manifestation of the fact that something has happened, that men now take their share of the responsibility. Another factor judged to be important is that it is possible to identify with the men in the picture; they are of middle age, have a normal appearance, and do not connote the upper middle class. The following excerpts concern one of the most successful Swedish campaigns to date, which included a picture of a Swedish weightlifter, dressed in a short-sleeved T-shirt and holding a naked infant in his muscular arms.

M3: . . . Hoa Hoa helped us men strengthen our inner musculature. That's why I think it was powerful. A message that speaks to me as an individual who can develop causes a discussion to happen inside me. Men talk about developing their caring side. Most men have experienced being cared for, but maybe don't believe they can produce that side in relation to their own children.

Toward the end of the focus group interview, the men talked about the risks associated with the state, feminists, and researchers wishing to hurry development, perhaps too quickly. They thought that if development was too rapid, men would not be able to catch up, which would only result in a backlash. One participant told about a father he had seen who had considerable trouble controlling his child. He gave this as an example of how parents can lose control. Thus, this is primarily a question of maturity and of a process that must come from within and be well grounded in the individual (cf. Seidler 1994a, 1994b). According to these men, all attempts to force development through political or social measures are doomed to failure. So altogether, this is a quite individualistically oriented group, and the power perspective is more or less absent.

## Case 2: The Male Network

Male networks consist of men who work actively to counteract unequal relations between men and women and to attain a more gender-equal society. Thus, these men are greatly involved, in different ways, in issues concerning a changing masculinity. The group we met consisted of five men of different ages and backgrounds. Most of them, however, were in their thirties and had children of preschool age. All members of the group expressed rather radical ideas about gender issues. Here, we do not find similarly negative reactions to campaign material from the 1990s and to the pictures the previous group thought created feelings of guilt and shame in men. These men worked either as teachers, as social workers, or in other types of middle-class occupations. Rather than reacting solely to the most explicit content of the pictures, they tried to bring together the message, text, and picture. Several of the men in this group expressed their appreciation for the aesthetic content and design of the campaigns. In contrast to the previous group, which largely discussed the level of the individual, this discussion moved to a political or aesthetic level. At the same time, there was constant criticism of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Johansson 2000).

This group consisted of men of different ages; thus, in some cases, there arose a clear generational difference in how they perceived the pictures and messages. The first pictures we showed were captioned “No repeats of childhood” and “An investment with immediate dividends” (pictures 4 and 5). The pictures stress the importance of fathers taking their paternity leave, because this is their only chance to spend time with their young children. If they don’t, they may regret it later on in life. There is only one chance. This focus group expressed both positive and negative opinions in relation to these pictures.

M1: I think the caption is good—an investment. That’s pretty much how we try to talk about becoming a father—right away when you’ve done your part. If you miss several years in the beginning, you can never make them up; that time never returns. . . . No repeats of childhood.

M2: At the same time though, throwing in words like *investment*, *repeats*, *no repeats*. It’s nothing you sell off cheap or so. You check the situation and see, yeah, now’s a good time for kids or staying at home. It’s not like you plan when the mother will take her maternity leave; instead she takes hers and then we plan ours in so it suits us during the year . . . there are good possibilities to plan your paternity leave in a flexible way. It sounds like they’re trying to sell insurance or something. The language is very masculine.

These participants’ reactions to the expression *investment* were unusually strong. They reacted primarily not to how the men were presented, but to the fact that there are many men who think this rationally and who use this type of language. Thus, this is not only a question of defending masculinity but of criticizing the actual situation at the same time as they took exception to this type of masculinity. The men in the

focus group joked a bit about men who plan their parental leave, write the days in their calendars, and check off every changed diaper or house cleaning. Everything should simply work, and the will should simply be there. The basic outlook here is that gender equality is something natural and that men want to stay at home with their children. Most men in this group did not think they required this kind of pressure or campaign, but they thought many men did need to be exposed to such messages and pressures. Their attitudes toward the campaigns and the political pressure were basically positive. In relation to picture 2, the man on the cogwheel, the participants had the following comments:

- M1: You're stuck in the machinery, crushed by the cogwheel. Daddy leave isn't so much fun if it's like that.
- M5: I think it's better. . . . It could be due to interfering bosses, colleagues; everything's consistent in a way. It brings up the usual problems, work, many have problems, good to discuss them. . . .
- M3: The men's trap. Great! Don't focus directly on the individual but on larger structures; that's how I feel. You understand the picture better when you've read the text.

Although these men thought such campaigns are necessary, they also thought that many men today do not need to be pushed to spend time with their children. Reactions to the picture from the 1970s (picture 1) were somewhat different in this group. Even though the oldest participant liked the picture, the others' reactions were marked by a more joking tone. They related that at that time, it was new and bold for a man to push a baby carriage and that it raised your status a bit and, in that way, you became more of a man. It marked the very onset of attempts to elaborate a new male image: the gender-equal and successful man. The hegemonic conceptual world was displaced and changed, and gradually emerging are new images of masculinity. The image of our age is divided. On one hand, the men thought there was a need for campaigns and measures by the state, but they also saw risks for negative reactions on the part of men who already understood. The following excerpt deals with this:

- M3: I think things have progressed pretty far now so when you talk to people who've had a baby there's never any discussion; the guys stay home a lot, maybe not half the time but not just the first two weeks; longer. No discussion. The mother stays home first; then it's my turn. . . .
- M5: That's the basic attitude from the start. I'm not sure I even thought about it; it was clear I'd stay home. I don't like it when they play on masculinity. It's not ridiculing but limiting. They can stop it.

The point of departure for this discussion is that masculinity as a category should be uninteresting in this context. Responsible and involved parenting should be

a matter of course for men as well as women. In accordance with this, the group expressed positive attitudes toward imposing quotas on parental leave, that is, carrying through compulsory division of paid leave between the two parents. While the participants saw the possibilities and development toward a more gender-equal society, their discussion also dealt with the obstacles that exist and that can lead to problems for men in realizing a gender-equal family situation. One such problem is the private economy—the fact that men earn more—though this was viewed not as an absolute but as a possible obstacle. The question of how women think and relate to this also came up. Several in the group thought that women sometimes create obstacles to men's presence and that they help to create weak self-esteem in men by criticizing men for changing diapers incorrectly, for bathing the child too seldom, or for other deficiencies.

This group provided a partially different picture of fatherhood and men's way of looking at gender equality. These men have a basically positive attitude toward feminism and to the state's trying to encourage men to stay home with their children (cf. Kimmel and Messner 1995; Dienhart 1998). Most of them were in their thirties and working toward gender equality and justice in society. Thus, they read the campaign pictures in a slightly different manner. They did not see themselves as the intended recipients of the messages; that is, they talked primarily about "other men" and thought that pressure must be put on them. At the same time, they thought that many men today embrace the idea of equality in the family in a natural way. Here, we see hopefulness. They saw the obstacles and identified them in a rather neutral way, but they also saw great possibilities in their work with men and for gender equality. Although these men discussed different obstacles, such as economy and other material conditions, they tended quite strongly to put forward motivational and psychological factors. If men really want to, they also can contribute to change and a more gender-equal society.

### **Case 3: Immigrant Men**

This group consisted of seven men with quite varied backgrounds. Two were ethnic Swedes, and the others came from a number of different countries. All except one spoke Swedish well. The idea behind including a group of men who live in poor neighborhoods in Gothenburg was to see how nationality and the specific life conditions created in multiethnic neighborhoods may affect views on fatherhood and on the issues we are interested in. The men who participated were all, in one way or another, active and involved in trying to influence their own life situations and in creating better living conditions and improving safety in their neighborhoods. The men selected were all involved, and some were politically active refugees.

In this group, we began with the picture from the 1970s showing the men with their baby carriages (picture 1). One of the men, a Kurdish refugee from Iran, reacted as follows:

M1: This picture—when was it?

Roger Klinth: The 1970s.

M1: The 1970s . . . it wasn't normal in my country in Asia. But after the 1990s or so . . . when I came to Sweden and sent a picture to my parents in Iran of their grandchildren . . . yeah completely normal. They didn't say anything. . . . They say we've seen our grandchildren and you with the baby carriage and . . . I go out with my children; is that strange? No totally normal, but society doesn't accept this. It depends on the situation. But who has the power in Iran, the mullahs [Islamic clerics]!

It is apparent that this group was dominated by political refugees. They had all worked to bring about justice in their homelands and then had to flee to Sweden. They expressed clearly their desire that men and women should live under conditions of gender equality. In this group, those who were more doubtful concerning this goal were the Swedish men, who were either openly doubtful about parents sharing household responsibilities or who had a more somber picture of the actual situation in society.

One Chilean man held long expositions on a just society, the importance of creating better economic conditions, and of fathers staying home with their young children. Most of the others agreed. Participants in this group had a clear political interest and a will to influence society. Reactions in this group were more mixed in many ways, and it also became clear how closely interwoven gender issues are with issues of economy and class. We began to understand this when we presented picture 4 (little girl pushing a baby carriage).

M4: It's about putting the blame on fathers.

M7: In my case, I've been at home with my son, but in recent years I've had work and worked a lot day and night. . . . But now that he's a teenager I spend more time with him.

Roger Klinth: No repeats of childhood!

M7: Guilt! In many cases when men work, but I'm the only one working in our family, my wife has arthritis and can't work. I have to work.

Thomas Johansson: Are dads still not very good at this?

M7: No, I don't think so, but I think it's difficult among immigrants, less common [that men take care of babies].

The subtext here deals largely with the notion that one must earn a living and that this often overrides all other issues. The neighborhoods these men live in are marked by clear patterns of poverty: high unemployment, public assistance, and a high degree of social exclusion. Many families find themselves outside the labor market.

Thus, in many cases, the issue is more about surviving and creating a tolerable existence. The question of sharing or not sharing parental leave is not considered, since it may be the case that both parents are unemployed and at home.

We approached these issues when we asked the men about how they perceived the pictures, pointing out that the only men portrayed in the campaigns are ethnic Swedes.

Roger Klinth: The pictures we've seen so far are dominated by ethnic Swedes. Are other role models missing?

M7: I've never thought so, but then I came to Sweden when I was little.

M5: If you look at the statistics then many immigrant men are unemployed. Then there is no daddy leave, that's important.

M1: Immigrant women get jobs sooner and the men are unemployed . . . immigrant fathers and some mothers never enter Swedish society. In 1987, when we came to Sweden, we got a book on Sweden written in different languages. We learned a lot about this society. Now, in the 1990s, all that information is gone, difficult for immigrant parents, especially fathers to adjust to this society.

Roger Klinth: Should there be campaigns aimed at immigrant men?

M5: We have good relations with other immigrants in the area, the biggest family problem is unemployment, dads and moms are sitting at home. They look at each other and conflicts develop, they can't control their teenagers. All this parental leave doesn't mean a thing if you don't have a job!

This group is markedly different from the others in one way. Here, the focus is on how economic and social conditions impact the whole issue of shared parenting. It's not about who earns the most or if the family will lose money if, for example, the father stays home more than two months, but instead it's about what happens in poor families when they are placed outside society. Just as in the other groups, these men have basically positive attitudes toward the image of the gender-equal man, but their work toward gender equality is made difficult by the social exclusion created in multiethnic neighborhoods (Sernhede 2002).

### **Case 4: Evangelical Men**

This group consisted of three middle-age men who were active members of an evangelical church. Two had middle-class occupations, one as a computer consultant and the other as a company president. The third worked as a bus driver. Each was married and had three children. The men in this group had as their starting point the conceptions that exist about men in Christian movements, that they are conservative and not particularly interested in gender equality. This group presented a picture that is different in many ways. They took clear exception to the stereotypical image of



the conservative Christian man. They spoke warmly about dividing parental leave and considered that spending time with one's children is of the utmost importance. The first picture presented deals with childhood and how important it is that fathers take advantage of this time (picture 5, child with earthworm).

Roger Klinth: An investment with immediate dividends. What do you think?

M1: I react to the part about investment, that I should do this for my own sake.

Roger Klinth: What are your thoughts, then?

M1: Well, it just reflects what society, the buttons you have to push to get people to do something, of course I've taken paternity leave and I want to be with my children and take that time. It's not just for my sake. I react to the method, that they have to prompt men and play on their own interests.

M2: It's almost like you feel it becomes a burden instead. I've lost the opportunity to make contact with my children. . . . There's more you need to think about in your role as a parent. This leads to guilt feelings.

Roger Klinth: Isn't it guilt feelings they're trying to arouse?

M1: To me it feels more like an offer, take the chance in order to get the dividend.

This picture gave rise to various reactions. One man thought it created guilt feelings and caused fathers to feel uneasy. The most negative reaction, however, concerned the appeals made to men's own interests. Taking care of children should not be about self-fulfillment and the individual, but more about the will to create a positive family life. On the whole, it is just this line of thought that recurred in this group. The greatest emphasis is placed on creating a balance in life, being able to work and support the family, but at the same time safeguarding it. This is not primarily a question of gender equality as a political value but of another, deeper value base, in which the family and unity are valued most highly.

In this group, the general attitude toward the gender-equal family was positive, but some statements did concern weighing paternity leave against other things. What seemed to be most important was maintaining certain fundamental values and cultivating a certain lifestyle. A parental presence guarantees that children will develop the same values as their parents. What is prioritized is family life and its continuity; work is always secondary. We might say at this point that these men, as compared to those in the previous group, had relatively stable and perhaps even well-paid jobs.

M2: It's about other things. Sometimes the focus is on the first months when the child is an infant and you should share it, and then I don't understand how that's supposed to work when you work full time. We've never done that, we have young children now so we're at home, but even at other times we haven't both worked full time. There has to be time for other activities you're involved in. Life is more than being on daddy leave.

M3: There's too much emphasis on the first year . . . it's important to talk about their entire period of growing up. . . .

M2: It's a matter of reflecting on things, how you conduct your life. . . .

Much of the discussion concerned how one could develop working life conditions that are fit for human beings and that take into account the whole person. One of the men talked extensively about his workplace. He worked as a consultant, and when he began his job, he was informed that the company's policy was that employees should not work overtime too often but instead have time left over for family and free time. The philosophy of this company was to promote a comprehensive vision of life. What's more, this company lived up to its principles. In relation to picture 2, the man on the cogwheel, the men had the following comments:

M1: I haven't seen this either, but there's something here I agree with, because I feel pretty alone in being home so much with my kids.

Roger Klinth: How long?

M1: . . . About half a year. I don't understand why this should be so controlled, that mothers should be home as much as fathers, I think it's natural that the family deals with this. I've worked for a company that supports fathers who're at home, no problem, perfectly natural. No obstacles and I've been very willing to take the chance. There are so many opportunities in Sweden and so I don't understand why there aren't more men who want to. . . .

M3: It's nice when employers have a clearly positive attitude toward creating good opportunities for families. . . . Much easier to make a good plan for the family if your employer is with you.

These men's attitudes toward fatherhood, family life, and parenthood were in good accord with the ideal of gender equality found in Swedish society (Plantin 2001, 2003). They also related that some evangelical churches try to keep up with societal ideals in many respects. They did not see any direct conflict between how they view the family and the general values in society. What primarily differentiates this group from the other focus groups is perhaps their strong emphasis on the family and on the importance of passing on their values and creating continuity across the generations.

## Conclusions

Ever since the 1970s, a great deal of effort has gone into constructing the gender-equal man and father. At first, this dealt with getting men to take their share of the responsibility for children and the household, but the focus has shifted and today's discussions concern the possibility of dividing parental leave equally between the parents. The model has also changed from one that encourages men to support the mother in caring for the children to one that stresses the importance of shared responsibility. Both parents should have equal opportunities to work and care for their children. The state has also carried through a large number of campaigns aimed at achieving and constructing this new type of father. In spite of these efforts, we see

from statistical and sociological studies that women still have primary responsibility for the children and the home. Men do take a greater proportion of parental leave today but not at all as great a proportion as one might have expected following the various campaigns.

The aim of the present study has been to analyze how men with different social and cultural backgrounds relate to these daddy campaigns as well as to the issue of men's increased presence in the home and increased involvement in their children's lives. The four groups we chose to study showed variation regarding a number of factors, including, among others, the importance of class, religion, nationality, living conditions, involvement in men's issues, and occupational position. We will comment on some of our results here.

It is striking how all the focus groups clearly related to the ideal of gender equality (Nordberg 2005). Today, the notion that fathers should get involved with their children, stay at home, and help care for infants seems to be met with complete acceptance and is almost the predominant figure of thought. Regardless of what one thinks about it, it is necessary to relate to the notion of a gender-equal fatherhood. Most of the men we interviewed also had a positive view and showed relatively great involvement in these issues. Thus, the hegemonic structure is changing. To qualify for hegemonic masculinity, it is no longer enough to be rational, goal-means oriented, career oriented, and disciplined. Today, men must also show their readiness to engage in child care, their child orientation, and their willingness to live up to the ideal of gender equality (Johansson and Kuosmanen 2003).

Even if the men in the different focus groups were consensual as to the importance of fathers taking care of their children, there was variation in the meanings, language, and thoughts revealed in relation to these issues. Several of these differences concern how social position or convictions affect how men speak about fatherhood. Other differences concern what is in focus in the discussion. We will discuss below some of the analytical shifts that are observable in our interview material.

*The individual or society?* When we discuss questions concerning fatherhood, the focus is either on the individual or at a more political level. This becomes clear when we touch on how the various campaigns affect men. For example, the issue of blame was predominant in certain groups. The therapists thought men could react negatively to all the campaigns, and that men could become stressed and feel inadequate. These participants used psychological terms and considered that men are perhaps not ready to accept everything but instead need time to reflect if they are to change. Several of the other groups dealt with issues at a more political level, talking about the importance of making an impact and getting men to take responsibility. Here, the state is not viewed as the enemy or as intrusive but as a helper. The men's views on the state were also highly variable, from those who thought that men and families react negatively to state intrusion into the private sphere to those who thought the state creates possibilities for a better family life.

*Fathers, children, or the family?* It is noticeable, in some cases, that we have concentrated particularly on men's issues. This is clearest in the group of therapists but also in other groups; for example, the male network and the predominantly immigrant group spoke primarily about the situation for men and the importance of getting men involved in these issues. In this regard, the Christian group constituted a sharp contrast. Here, the concern was with the family and values connected to the family as a unit. The discussion on fatherhood was never detached from the family. These men thought that fatherhood and family should always be treated in unison and with a focus on common values. Child issues, on the other hand, seemed to fall into the background in all the groups.

*Possibilities or limitations?* Another factor differentiating the groups involves how the present situation was viewed. In several groups, for example, the male network and the Christians, participants expressed a realistic but still hopeful outlook on change and men's ability to change. This is in sharp contrast to men in the predominantly immigrant group, who embraced the same basic goal of creating the gender-equal father but who also saw many obstacles. They primarily mentioned material obstacles but also social exclusion. When families find themselves outside society, there are no chances and no reasons to consider who should stay home with the children. Most of the men interviewed were aware that there are a number of obstacles to gender equality but that these are manifested in different ways.

All in all, we can see that there is a great deal uniting the focus groups. At the same time, however, we see a number of interesting dividing lines. For example, the men's analyses shifted between the individual and the societal level, and in one group—the Christian men—the focus was placed on the family. The obstacles to change were also varyingly marked and clear in the predominantly immigrant group, where the discussion not only dealt with which decision the family can make or wants to make but also with the family's overall situation in society.

Recent studies of how Scandinavian men relate to family and parenthood have shown a strong family orientation. The demands of being the breadwinner were toned down, and work was not as highly valued as previously. At the same time, a number of investigations have indicated the emergence of a partially new fatherhood (Holter and Aarseth 1993; Hagström 1998; Plantin 2001). Statistics, on the other hand, gave a somewhat different picture. Fathers earned two-thirds of the family's income. Moreover, men were more likely than women to work full time.

What is the situation today? Researchers agree that the greatest obstacle to development of gender equality and more present fathers may be found in the organization of working life (Johansson and Kuosmanen 2003). Many parents are forced to choose between work and family life. In their study of the family strategies of Swedish businesses, Hwang, Haas, and Rissell (2000) show that only 3 percent of businesses had developed active approaches and support to families with children. A

Norwegian study by Brandth and Kvande (2003) shows that even if fathers wish to become involved and take responsibility, this ambition is often limited by what is sanctioned by employers.

Today, Scandinavian men participate more and more in housework. But it is still women who take primary responsibility for the children and the home (Plantin 2001, 2003). There is a tendency for men to participate in the “fun” aspects of parenthood, while women are in charge of the rest. The division of labor is still such that men are responsible for play, sports, and outdoor activities, while women’s area of responsibility is the home. A political ambition to change this division of labor entails encouraging new parental identities.

Bekkengen (2002, 2003) differentiates between child-oriented masculinity and gender-equal men. According to her, what we see today is a strong tendency toward men wanting to be at home with their children and that men have developed a more caring attitude, but this does not necessarily mean men are more gender equal. Bekkengen considers that these phenomena must be held apart. Men’s child orientation is more a question of their “picking out the good bits” than of a radical transformation of masculinity.

Maybe men’s possibility to pick and choose a suitable parental role is the most significant expression of their power position. Today men are expected to be good and present fathers, but there are still clear and important gender differences in the construction of parenthood. Even though the Swedish debate has been under heavy impact of political ideals and “the gender equality paradigm,” the conception of “good enough parenthood” is still gendered and polarized. It is more legitimate and normal for a man to use economic or career arguments in discussions concerning parenthood. Men’s power positions are to a great extent formed around their abilities and possibilities to choose—and to form their parenthood in any way they wish. As we have already pointed out, this scenario has a great impact on the political discussion about parental leave insurance. The distinction made by Bekkengen between child-oriented and gender-equal masculinity contributes to making this visible, but it is also important to emphasize and put forward the potential to change in the child-oriented masculinity. Perhaps we should see men’s increased interest in caring for their children as an important step on the way toward a changed and more gender-equal parenthood (Plantin 2003).

## Notes

1. The study reported on in this article is part of a larger research project aimed at studying how the gender-equal and caring man is constructed in the meeting between a political macro-perspective on gender equality and men’s own reflections and everyday experiences of gender equality. The project is funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research.

2. Today, parental leave insurance consists of a total of 480 days. Formally, half of these belong to the father, but all days except the two earmarked “daddy months” (an additional month was introduced in 2002) may be transferred to the mother.

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