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Paternity: social responsibility of man's role as provider

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To analyze meanings attributed to paternity by men who are fathers.

STUDY DESIGN: Study with a qualitative approach and gender-theory focus, performed in the city of João Pessoa, Northeastern Brazil, in 2003. A total of ten men, whose children had been cared for in the pediatric outpatient clinic of a university hospital, participated in the study. Information analyzed was obtained with semi-structured interviews. Critical discourse analysis technique was employed to analyze participants' speech.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: Participants in the study viewed paternity as a new social role, more closely associated with material support for the family than the dimension of affective involvement with the child. However, participants experienced a transition process where the traditional father lived with those whose affective dimension of paternity was found to be the main concern of being a father.

CONCLUSIONS: The meaning and concrete exercise of paternity were found in an area of responsibilities that predominantly reproduces the traditional father, but also recreates the father's role, including the affective dimension.

DESCRIPTORS: Paternity. Father-Child Relations. Gender Identity. Social Responsibility. Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Women and men enter family life according to gender references, which are learned throughout life and determine legitimate social functions. "Man, male and father are qualifications that define one way individuals can enter the culture of which they are a part of [...] together, they define a standard of behavior to be followed by men".¹⁴

In contrast, mothering⁶ is at the basis of the social reproduction of male and female models, whose cultural value has an ideological meaning in the creation of inequalities between sexes. Mothering and fathering represent maternal and paternal care, respectively.⁶ Women, as mothers, are decisive agents in the sphere of social reproduction, once they are the ones who most participate in education, passing on to their children society's current ideologies.⁶ The patriarchal model has granted man the power to establish dialogue with the family, in the domestic sphere, when this is convenient for him. Thus, it is women's responsibility to keep the harmony of parental relationships in the private sphere.

However, the social changes taking place in public and private spheres, especially from the 1960's on, have influenced the way gender identity is lived and constructed. In the work place, the achievements of the feminist movement are easily observed when women perform activities that used to be recognized as

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exclusively male, and also when men share care for their children and home with women. In this sense, "partners' acceptance of female participation in the paid job market represents a profound change in the traditional male identity as provider."⁹

These changes have not been limited to the feminine universe, but have also influenced paternity, as it is uncommon to find family models organized by rigid patriarchy. The inflexible view of paternity that prevented men from participating in domestic life is now seen within a social context that has created distinct ways of being a father, in addition to its indicating the decline of patriarchy and the changes in paternal relationships. This, as a result, constitutes a research focus.^{8, 17, 18}

Such changes are influenced by women's entering the public sphere, whose freedom of thought, action and financial power acquisition have enabled them the right to decide about their own life and choose their partners. In the domestic sphere, the number of homes led by women has increased, revealing a social position which is becoming more and more common in living arrangements.¹⁶ Thus, "before fully grasping the new family arrangement, modeled by the process that caused women to enter the job market, men are surprised by the disruption of domestic hierarchy and constant questioning of their authority."¹¹

Beginning in the 1970's, the crisis in masculinity has caused a number of men to reflect on their own experience of patriarchy¹⁰ and their role in the domestic sphere and family relationships. However, a set of beliefs and values concerning the masculine and feminine, socially and culturally constructed from gender differences, determines the formation of a symbolic system that guides and sustains men's and women's lives, in the public and private spheres.

In this aspect, representations of women and the treatment society gives them come from family functions related to personal and emotional bonds, whereas representations of men predominantly come from relationships associated with the organization of production.⁶

There is a chance that changes related to increased male participation in the family will become greater. However, distribution of responsibilities is still far from being equal. Thus, women and men need to rethink their social attributes for men to experience paternity in an equal, and not just more participatory, way, however complex this may be. In addition, men and women need to acknowledge the fact that paternity constitutes an opportunity for men to increase their inner dimensions and renew their relationship with life. In this sense, the social responsibilities imposed to the father provider also harm them in the field of subjectivity, once the actions established are performed under strict socio-cultural parameters.¹⁸

Research findings, empirical observations and the current context of change in gender relations, where paternity is included, have led to this investigation. Thus, this study aimed to analyze the meanings attributed to paternity by men who are fathers.

STUDY DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a focus on gender theory. A total of ten men, whose children had been cared for in the pediatric outpatient clinic of a university hospital, in the city of João Pessoa, Northeastern Brazil, participated in the study. Interviews were conducted between May and April 2003. The following were adopted as inclusion criteria: resident of the city of João Pessoa; having more than one child with their partner to enable broader fathering experience; and living with their children and partner. The number of participants in the study was defined by the events, repetitions, and redundancy identified in the texts resulting from interviews, thus enabling social positions, required by the technique used in the qualitative analysis, to be revealed.

For two months, interviews were performed during home visits and then recorded. A semi-structured questionnaire was used, including two key questions: the father's experience and the meaning of paternity given to man in the family sphere.

Participants' speech was analyzed with the critical discourse analysis technique,⁷ where the text is an organization that has internal and external coherence mechanisms, and discourse participants' world views were identified.⁷

According to the stages of the technique adopted,⁷ after texts (transcribed speech) were produced, the following were performed: identification of recurring themes, organization of sets of meanings, characterization of narrative phases, confrontation with the analysis' theoretical reference and design of the corresponding empirical category.

The study was approved by the Lauro Wanderley University Hospital Research Ethics Committee at the Paraíba Federal University Health Sciences Center. Participants' names were replaced in the study by fictional names.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The majority of participants were aged between 20 and 33 years. Length of relationships ranged between two and seven years, and cohabitating couples predominated. Parents had between two and three children. Of all ten participants, four were unemployed. Monthly income varied between one and six minimum wages, and one minimum wage was worth R\$ 200.00 at the time this study was performed. As part of the research,

men reported they were providers, except for one. All participants were literate, and the majority had elementary school level or incomplete high school level.

The analytical technique used enabled contradictions and the dynamics of the traditional father/new father transition to be identified, thus constituting the empirical category that was presented and discussed.

Social responsibility that legitimizes men as provider

Positions assumed by participants as regards paternity indicated they experienced it as a social attribute. The term “responsibility” represented the main theme, showing paternity more as an acquisition of a new social role than as a dimension of emotional involvement with the child. This role is associated with the concern for the children’s well-being, in the sense of guaranteeing their survival and protection.

“The best word to define this is responsibility. It’s the weight. You’ll never be the same. You’ll always be responsible for him [...] Responsibility to always be there for him, to be in charge. [...] Any decision I make, it’s not just me anymore.” (João, 22 years of age, unemployed)

Men who restricted paternity to the responsibility reported they were the family guardians and material providers, under the traditional father model. The father identity is, in this sense, based upon the male identity, and the father’s role is constructed according to gender patterns that associate the male image with the hegemonic model of masculinity, thus equating men to a strong and capable provider.⁸

The responsibility revealed by participants’ speech reflects the patriarchal ideology as a social pressure on man, originated from the imposition of roles that, if not fulfilled, pose a risk to their masculinity. Even though such representation involves the reference of the father who is supportive, not allowing his child to suffer, it is internally experienced by men in a paradoxical way, once it is almost always distant from the emotional father-son dimension. This reveals that, for these men, the subjective aspects related to love, care and affection are not a priori associated with the meaning of a father. From this perspective, the father provider model is the good father model, an image that is socially expected by man.^{1,12}

Another aspect observed regards the reduction of freedom to make decisions and manage one’s own life, when the participant stated, “You will never be the same [...] Any decision I make, it’s not just me anymore”. In this sense, paternity is conceived as a role, once man has to reduce or change the meaning of his freedom¹² and control over his will to be a father. These self-control aspects regulate masculinity in a society where being a man is associated with being culturally domineering and controlling.

Thus, the discourse on paternity as a social role predominated in speech, legitimizing man as a provider and also the model of father as head of the family. Such model was incorporated during childhood, when boys learn that it is their responsibility to make decisions without showing weaknesses. The expression “It’s the weight”, referring to the responsibility, has the sense of the natural mission of paternity: the father becomes in charge of the material support for the family, while the mother is in charge of care, so that the ideological mechanism to reproduce the status quo conservatism is observed.^{5,8}

To become a father is also viewed as a turning point between childhood and adulthood. In this aspect, the child transforms the father’s life in a way that makes him realize that, as a father, he is less son and more adult, resulting in his becoming his child’s object of identification.^{4,15} The child’s birth is the landmark of this change, when the son figure reminds man of the need to “look at life from a different perspective, with new tasks, responsibilities, and feelings”.¹³ In this sense, “what seems to represent the passage from adolescence to adulthood is the incorporation of responsibilities that, in the case of men, is practically associated with sexual and reproductive behavior”.²

Thus, paternity is part of the male adult identity and represents the certainty of conclusion of one more life stage and the beginning of another one, with new experiences and social commitments, and material support as the key element. To be a father is, in addition to guaranteeing the child’s survival, to build knowledge that stays alive in his grandchildren, as well as to ensure his own survival in old age:

“I’m the one who has to give them everything, to eat and to live. To do all I can so they won’t suffer or lack anything. Also, so they can see what I’ve done for them, when they grow up and get to know who they are. Then, they can do the same for their children and take care of me. They’ll see I did all I could for them”. (Francisco, 33 years, truck driver)

In this sense, the individual inscribes his image in the son to continue living through them, subjectively constructing the symbolic model of a good father in his descendants. This is one way to reproduce the past father-son relationship in the current father-son relationship,^{14,15} guaranteeing its future as well. Thus, to be a father is a socially-produced and reproduced role, focused on by the dominant paternalism to this day.¹⁵ Paternalism is a social category, which considers the father provider to be the male model to be followed, through social roles that he must fulfill. In this way, it values his masculinity, in addition to promoting this to construct his men-sons’ gender identity.³

For the individual who also promotes the father provider discourse, paternity is also associated with a relation of exchange of favors to make the son feel gratitude.^{4,15} It is a way of relating based on emotionally

distant, authoritarian and indifferent relationships that predominated in family relationships in the 1950's, when the father had a majestic character, whose "bonds of gratitude were a demand from someone who wanted affection and, for this reason, gave them to the children through his material responsibilities".¹⁴

Speech analyzed by this study reveals a view of paternity associated with concern for the future, with a focus on material support, restricting children's needs. Even though provision is not the only conception of paternity, it is the most valued and most commonly reported by studies on this issue.^{1,4,11,12} In this study, the majority of participants depicted the father as following a patriarchal culture that hinders the body and mind experience between father and son, as this is essentially dependent on emotional exchanges.

Given the fact that this study was developed with men who are involved with families, their performance in the family routine was investigated, based on their accounts of concrete actions. Speech about this issue revealed power relations, according to the following account:

"To give a good education [...] good teaching, and show who the good friends are. Don't let my daughter hang out on the streets with boys only, for instance. That's pretty much it". (Henrique, 31 years, police officer)

Concern to separate boys and girls in order to protect the female sex is based on a sexist education. In this type of education, conceptions are masked by the dominant ideology in the social concepts incorporated as morally right or wrong. By imposing more feminine behavior, the differences between sexes turn into inequalities. These inequalities become natural in the daughter's socialization process, shaping her identity from the beginning with restrictions of freedom and equality between sexes that are reflected in actions in the public sphere.⁶

The second aspect of responsibility with education concerns the children's formal religious education. In the following account, the father reproduces his values in his children's education and considered formal religious education equally essential for personal development. The interviewee valued the father who is present, sensitive to his children's needs and open to dialogue:

"It's... to be always present by my son's side, trying to talk to him at all times. Also, to try to guide him with his studies [...] To guide him towards a Christian life... Since the beginning, it's to try to show him this way. I think this is what matters most". (José, 33 years, broadcaster)

In the discourse under analysis, the father-son relationship represents a qualitative leap because relationships are broadened beyond the material relationship, in that the father is involved in activities usually associated with the mother, such as following the child's school progress and teaching them religious precepts. For this father, education and faith combined are the social basis of the individual's upbringing.

In contrast, concern for the Christian education, as mentioned in the previous account, is supported by the idea of Christian morality and duty, so that "virtue is the obligation to fulfill what is ordained by divine law".⁵ In this account, religious education represents a mirror which must reflect values that have been reproduced from father to son since the 12th century, when the Catholic Church strongly intervened in child education and family morals. Nine centuries later, the son remains the "divine receptacle", while his father is responsible for maintaining this educational process. The idea of being a good Christian is based on the father-son hierarchy, whose paternal reference is the Almighty God which is in Heaven, and the son is the earthly lamb that owes unconditional obedience to the loving Father.

The social positions on paternity adopted by individuals in this study are not limited to the financial aspect of paternal provision. There were those who mentioned their responsibilities as a father in a broader sense, expanding the universe of social responsibilities as a provider:

"I worry about my son in all situations... How my son's doing, if he's feeling something, if he's sick, if there's something missing [...] In all situations, I guess: health, clothing, care, love". (Antônio, 28 years, building restorer)

In this account, there is a view of paternity that breaks away from the traditional role by including in the speech aspects related to emotional involvement and care in the family sphere. To live a loving relationship, at the same time that one nourishes, protects and teaches, enables fathers and children to fully experience their social relationships, which acts as a catalyst for an effective change in these relationships. The model of paternity is part of a movement that is strengthened in the present moment, denying the predominance of traditional father-son relationships, whose way to experience paternity was based on the son's feeling of emotional distance from the father.¹⁴ Underlying this statement is the desire to break away from stereotypes that cause men to wear the mask of sexism, strength, virility and infallibility.

The socially-required financial function is important from the point of view of survival, but it does not come before the subjective needs for care, love, affection and attention of boys and girls, men and women. In this perspective, to father is, in addition to breaking away from obsolete social values, to give the child the opportunity to construct their gender identity independently from the model that denies man the right to be closer to and experience feelings and emotions with their children.^{11,18} This is because "children gain more in situations where love and relationship [and care] are not a scarce resource, controlled and manipulated by only one person".⁶

In summary, paradigm changes can be observed. Some men begin to worry about fathering, following their son's growth and development more closely, caring in a way society considers to be more feminine, so that the emotional provider is emerging from the material provider. Authority relationships are being replaced by others, permeated by affection and openness, enabling fathers and mothers to share care and strengthen their emotional bonds with their children. This results in paternity helping to break down stereotypes linked to an insensitive and untouchable masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the men/fathers interviewed had social positions that revealed some changes occurring in the sphere of male responsibilities. However, the patriarchal model hegemony is maintained. Man continues to understand his role mostly as the family's moral and material provider, opposing the need to share women's emerging responsibilities and the principle that his children's education must be permeated by the father's and mother's physical and emotional closeness. Thus, among all social gender roles that follow women and men throughout their life cycle, traditional model's social gender roles still persist, leading male work towards production and female work towards biological reproduction.

However, conceptions of a more caring and emotional paternity were also present among the men interviewed, indicating that the family relationship currently experienced has changed the meaning of a father qualitatively. In this sense, the "new father" visits the traditional father, giving paternity a broader meaning, beyond the role of material provider. This dialectical movement shows possibilities of change in parental relationship qualities.

Thus, the plurality of ways to experience paternity, as reported by interviewees, reveals possible changes in the ways masculinity is experienced and paternity is practiced currently. To acknowledge that the male hegemonic model of masculinity and paternity harms the man/woman, father/son and father/mother/son family relationships is the first step to bring new meaning to these social relationships.

However, public policies aimed towards involving fathers in the context of more affectionate experiences and care are required to overcome the hegemonic paternity model. To be a man and a father are issues that must be emphasized in educational, economic and health planning debates. As a result, these changes must not be limited to the dimension of external changes, but rather incorporated into the world views and the way of being in the world. In this way, more egalitarian relationships between men and women will be reached, transforming the future generation of parents that currently experience the role of children.

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