

The Transformation of Fatherhood in the Modern Family

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is the transformation of fatherhood in the context of family and social dynamics, with a particular focus on the emergence of new forms identified as “new fatherhood.” This refers to the “cultural modeling of men as fathers,” addressing the rights, duties, and responsibilities of fathers, as well as the discursive field that defines “good” and “bad” fathers.

The transformation of the family from traditional (patriarchal) to modern, especially the processes of nuclearization and the decomposition of the family core, has led to significant changes in conventional male and female roles. On the other hand, changes in the public sphere, particularly the breakthrough of women into the so-called “male” sphere, are reflected in the private, domestic, “female” sphere and have initiated a new identity for fatherhood. Hence, the aim of this paper is to conduct a gender analysis of the phenomenon of fatherhood in the contemporary social and cultural context, in order to find answers to the question of which cultural, social, and family factors determine the degree of involvement of the father in domestic activities and those related to child care.

Keywords: Fatherhood; Family; Transformation; Private Sphere; Gender Equality

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Introduction

Research on family life shows a gradual change in the way men perceive their role as fathers, how they behave toward their children and wives, and how they balance different spheres of life. This phenomenon is interpreted in the context of the democratization of social relations, the creation of symmetrical marital and family relations, individualization, and the increasing uncertainty brought by late modernity. Macedonian society, with a strong patriarchal heritage, underwent rapid modernization in the second half of the twentieth century, significantly influencing changes in gender classifications, particularly in the public sphere (Matilov, 2002; Stanojevič, 2018). The private sphere, however, remained burdened by patriarchal divisions of gender roles, responsibilities, and power. Examining the private sphere from the perspective of fatherhood seems to be an interesting and exciting challenge, as research from neighboring countries and other European nations suggests that fathers' responses to the challenges of late modernity are somewhat similar but also specific, depending on the societal contexts in which they fulfill this role (Stanojevic, 2018). This study aims to understand how fathers in modern families perceive themselves, how they act as fathers, and how they function as spouses or partners.

Academic research and interest in men's parental roles largely stem from changes in family life during late modernity. Evidently, trends such as the increase in divorces, remarriages, extramarital births, and single-parent families, along with the rise in adoptions and non-heterosexual couples and families, have had significant consequences on partner relationships and parental roles in the private sphere. These shifts necessitate a reevaluation of the definitions of parenthood, particularly the role of fathers. Fatherhood is not a uniform or one-dimensional concept and is not solely defined by biological ties or shared living space between parents and children. This relationship is mediated by legal provisions (for example, in cases of sperm donation, where the biological father does not automatically have fatherhood rights) and by societal and cultural norms (such as a man's sense of his role as a father, his willingness to take on specific duties, and his acceptance by the social environment, for instance, if he lives with a woman who has a child from a previous relationship or marriage) (ibid.).

In recent decades, significant processes of modernization have been observed, leading to urbanization, deagrarization, industrialization,

and substantial inclusion of women in economic and social life, particularly after World War II. At the same time, this period is marked by many families being displaced from their traditional kinship networks, leading to greater dependence on their own resources. The nuclear family has gained increasing importance, with the gradual emergence of new family forms such as single-parent families and families of unmarried couples. Alongside these changes in the family unit, the massive inclusion of women in the labor market (public sphere), especially during the socialist period, has also altered gender roles and relationships between spouses (Tomanovič, Stanojevič, Ljubicič, 2016). Changes in the public sphere, such as the increased participation of women in the workforce and public life, have led to a reduction in gender asymmetry and greater involvement of fathers in everyday parenting tasks and domestic responsibilities. This trend has resulted in a change in fathers' identities, who have adapted to new partnership and family life demands, actively participating in their children's lives and household duties. This shift signifies that fathers are becoming more present and engaged in family life, representing a significant change from traditional gender roles (ibid.).

In the research of parenthood from a scientific discourse, fatherhood is often examined in the context of motherhood, as a remnant of the patriarchal matrix where women are doubly or triply burdened with responsibilities in both private and public spheres. While feminist ideological frameworks and research issues have focused on recognizing and analyzing the various situations women face and changes in their lives, men's lives in the private sphere have rarely been the subject of study. The image of the "distant" and "cold" father from traditional society or the early civic era is disappearing as an ideal and practice. Integration into the cultural and political space of Europe demands new values, discourses, and practices where the roles of both parents in child-rearing are almost completely equal or equitable (Stanojevič, 2018).

The Emergence of New Forms Identified as "New Fatherhood"

Perceptions of the role of fathers are changing in contemporary society. Traditionally, the father's role was reduced to that of the "breadwinner" for the family, and society provided opportunities for men to fulfill this role through higher employment rates compared to women. However, today there is a need for continuous reassessment of family

life, including the roles and relationships between parents and children. Modern research shows that the role of the father as a “breadwinner” is not always easily achievable and is further challenged by greater gender equality in the public sphere. Despite this, men as parents are still expected to retain the role of “breadwinner,” but at the same time, they are presented with opportunities to find themselves in new forms of competence. Alongside the traditional identity of the father as a “breadwinner,” there is also the concept of the “caring father.” The time fathers spend with their children cannot be the sole measure of their involvement in childcare. Father involvement is a multidimensional construct that includes not only behavioral but also affective, cognitive, cultural, and ethical components (Allen & Daly, 2007).

The notion of a “caring father” encompasses practices of “new fatherhood,” which involve a high degree of involvement in all aspects of a child’s life, acceptance of the value of gender equality, and a high appreciation of parental identity. The parental roles of a father who actively participates in raising children can be complementary but often come into conflict, similar to the experiences of mothers. Modern fatherhood emphasizes not only the need to take on traditionally maternal activities but also to foster a different relationship between fathers and children. This relationship involves expressing warmth and emotions, as well as demonstrating protection, care, and attention to the child’s health, progress, and success in school and social settings. All of this becomes an integral part of the father’s role in the modern family, shaping him as a “caring father.” The various forms of fatherhood present men (fathers) with complex and multiple roles, making the experience of fatherhood, satisfaction, and the sense of parental competence vary significantly depending on the circumstances of marital harmony and support. The best way to involve men in caring for children is to encourage them to engage in activities that both the father and child enjoy together. The goal of this encouragement is to build the father’s confidence and allow him to enjoy spending time with his children. According to modern research, fatherhood is seen as an important aspect of the creative development of the adult male, with fathers contributing uniquely to the emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. The physical absence or disinterest of the father deprives the child of the specific contribution that only

the father can offer in their development (Allen & Daly, 2007; Machin, 2018).

Thus, contrary to the traditional belief that parenting is equated with motherhood – i.e., that motherhood, as a biological aspect, is an inseparable part of a woman’s identity, while men are primarily seen as providers of material and psychological support – modern perspectives reject these limited views. In many cases, modern marital relationships challenge traditional social pressures, rooted stereotypes about fatherhood and motherhood, as well as traditional gender roles both inside and outside the home. On the other hand, flexible distribution of duties and responsibilities around children is promoted, applying principles of efficiency, economy, and equal distribution of effort and time. The division of responsibilities after the birth of a child is crucial for a positive parenting experience and satisfaction for both parents. Involvement in child care, especially in the early months of a newborn’s life, significantly impacts the parenting experience and subjective parental competence. The subjective experience of competent parenting, which arises from positive self-assessments by parents, influences the effectiveness of parental actions and creates an emotional climate that positively affects the child’s development. Father involvement not only allows parents to achieve personal goals but also helps fathers bond with their children, while also supporting mothers/spouses in achieving their professional goals alongside child-rearing. As a result of greater father involvement, family relationships become warmer, creating a healthy emotional bond with the father (*ibid.*).

Today, as part of modern partnerships, we can observe that fathers are present at the births of their children. Although there are still not enough such examples, there is a certain degree of integration of fathers in this process, as part of the emotional and partnership support to the wife/mother during childbirth. Despite evidence that future parents view childbirth as a team experience and that a father’s presence can improve outcomes for the mother and baby, many fathers still feel like “spare parts” or “bag carriers” in the early days of baby care, rather than equal participants. Yet, they can be a strong support in caring for the baby and in postpartum support for the wife/mother. Due to the obvious physical experience of mothers during childbirth, the fact that fathers also go through a transitional process with significant psychological and physiological changes is often overlooked. The father’s involvement in caring for the newborn is important not only

for the family but also for his bond with the child and his role as a “caring dad.” Significant cultural reassessment of this situation and the father’s role in caring for the newborn from day one is needed (*ibid.*). To understand individual practices, it is necessary to study their self-perception and the impact these practices have on their everyday lives. Given the changes occurring in cultural representations of gender and the construction of gender, it is important to ask: how do men explain the change that parenthood (fatherhood) brings into their lives, and what significance does that change have for them? Essentially, this question boils down to how their identity as fathers is constituted. Identity is the result of the active interaction between the individual and society. Society and culture, through more or less organized systems of roles and meanings assigned to them, allow individuals to organize their activities and assign meanings to them. It should be kept in mind that society does not possess a clearly defined and final set of roles and that there is no absolute consensus on the norms and meanings that roles carry (Mead, 1962).

In this regard, the political emancipation and entry of women into the labor market/public sphere have contributed to increased pressure on their spouses (men/fathers) to become more involved in domestic responsibilities/private sphere. This new historical situation, among other things, has called for a re-examination of gender roles and identities. While women conquer spheres of public and private life that were traditionally considered male, on the other hand, men either cling tightly to their traditional roles and seek new ways to maintain gender hegemony or accept the new situation and enter spheres traditionally considered female (Burdje, 2001).

Reconstructing Masculinity: Masculinism and the New Roles of the “Caring Father” in the Modern Family

The male identity has been repeatedly revised in academic discourse, becoming a specific field of interest within gender studies—masculinity studies or male studies (Hearn & Morgan, 1990). The term “masculinity” refers to the particular gender situation of men and the identity that develops based on a set of roles men assume. Considering that no single set of roles applies to all men and that they belong to different cultural and social milieus, we can talk about masculinities—varied models of representation, identities, and practices of men. Male identity pertains to everything men do and think, encompassing all

aspects of male life, from personal beliefs and values to societal roles they fulfill. Theories of masculinity provide a conceptual framework that involves behaviors where everything men do and think aligns with identifying and being recognized as men. This includes identification with specific male standards and behaviors and the social construction of masculinity. Masculinity, therefore, refers to a cultural hierarchy where some men are considered “more manly” than others based on standards within a particular culture or society. This is largely due to varying degrees of socially accepted masculinity and ways of classifying men within social structures and cultural norms. Male roles are formed in opposition to women, meaning that anything not feminine is masculine. This distinction helps form gender boundaries and structural differences between men and women (ibid.) (Simonovska & Vasev, 2023).

In forming a male identity, parents play a crucial role. As agents of socialization, parents in the family context actively influence the development of masculine identity through daily interactions with their sons. It is evident that parents are aware of their influence on shaping their children’s gender identity. They do not understand differences solely as gender characteristics but actively strive to establish clear boundaries regarding behavior, sexuality, and appearance according to the child’s gender from an early age. These boundaries, in the case of boys, are set to avoid any form of feminization, helping to shape male identity within social and cultural norms. Every culture has a set of rules, embodied in phrases like “be a man,” which primarily involve controlling emotions. These rules are enforced through various mechanisms: rewards, potential or real exclusion from peers or male groups, or through more or less violent disciplinary measures from parents (especially fathers) or peers. In the process of forming male identity, a key trait boys need to develop is control—over themselves, their emotions, social relations, and others. By doing so, their status among men will become more prominent. This identity structure implies an authoritarian personality, as it demands achieving a position of authority and submissive self-control in the hierarchy of (male) power, preparing boys for life in the pyramid of economic and political power (Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Stanojevič, 2018).

Parenting itself is also a significant source of male identity. In traditional cultures, a man was considered a “true” man only if he established a family and had offspring, particularly male offspring, who

were expected to ensure the continuation of the family lineage. The fact that someone was a parent and capable of supporting a family was seen as a mark of masculinity, while everyday responsibilities were often left to the mother. Experiences of patrilineality in customary and legal practices highlight the importance of this relationship with children and also confirm the patriarchal nature of family relations (ibid.). Children, as heirs to the family name (surname) and property, are viewed as a continuation and affirmation of male identity, reinforcing the patriarchal structure of traditional societies, which still persists in our society today. The patriarchal system emphasized the importance of male offspring for continuing the family line and securing family property, which affirmed his dominant role and identity as a “true” man. This structure, which positioned men as the primary guardians of inheritance and family status, underscored their significance and role in upholding patriarchal norms and values.

With industrialization and modernization, this relationship has shifted towards legal equality, favoring mothers as the primary caregivers due to their role in nurturing and caring for children. Consequently, the identity of fathers has started to change significantly. Even in cases where the modern family model supported a complementary asymmetric model (Parsons), where gender segregation of spheres (private-public) was maintained, the father's/male identity was dominant. However, it becomes noticeable that, in contemporary family systems and value models, this identity is beginning to undergo significant changes. This transformation means that fathers are starting to reassess their self-concept by revising their self-perceptions as parents and reconstructing practices not employed by previous generations of male parents (fathers). This process of reevaluation and adaptation may lead to a rebalancing of their relationship with their partner/spouse and children. The transformation depends on various factors, including the position of women in the labor market, state social policy, and public discourses. State social policy may either support the role of the father as the financial provider (family breadwinner) or promote an equal parenting model (equal parent - “involved father”) through parental leave available to both parents, along with an active policy emphasizing the importance of the father's role in healthy child development from an early age (Tomanovič, Stanojevič, Ljubicič, 2016). Additionally, the socio-economic and class position of the family plays

a crucial role in determining the opportunities and conditions for this type of reassessment and adaptation of parental roles (Babović, 2009).

Another significant factor affecting the likelihood of developing the new fatherly identity (the “caring father” model) is the degree of compatibility between different roles and the desired image of fatherhood. Namely, even if the idea of a father being actively involved in child-rearing is accepted, it is important to examine how well this image aligns with other identities and roles of the man/father. One such identity is the professional role, particularly if the father holds a traditional male profession (such as physical labor or technical positions) and/or holds a high status within the company. In such cases, the company’s business culture may be less sensitive to his parental identity, meaning that his commitment to children might differ from the active, engaged “caring” father role (Stanojević, 2018).

Historically, significant changes have been observed in the dominant models and practices of fatherhood across different societies. In the patriarchal model, the father was considered the dominant parent (legally recognized as such), a moral educator who taught children about the outside world, while the mother was responsible for all domestic care. The basic parent-child relationship was one of duty. The transformation of the family from a patriarchal model to a modern one, especially the processes of nuclearization and decomposition of the family unit, has led to significant changes in the father’s role within the family. Today, on one hand, the father’s role as a parent is secondary due to the separation of work and family spheres, with mothers increasingly dominating children’s lives. This role is seen as the “good father,” who provides financial support and material security for the family. On the other hand, the transition from a patriarchal to a modern family has introduced new roles for the “caring father,” where the father’s authority is built through respect and spending quality time with children, emphasizing an active role in parenting, emotional support, and involvement in all aspects of their development (Матиллов, 2002).

Psychological and sociological discourse also includes critiques that an overly close relationship between mother and child leads to the feminization of boys, necessitating a more active involvement of fathers in raising their male children. This creates demands for fathers to become primary transmitters of masculine identity. Consequently, the model of the “caring father” has become increasingly popular in

recent decades. This model involves an active role of the father in all aspects of child-rearing and fulfilling all related obligations, regardless of gender. It also promotes gender-equal marital/partner relationships and blurs the traditional boundaries between “male” and “female” tasks within the family (Stanojevic, 2018). Simultaneously, as the need for submission and reverence towards paternal authority diminishes, the position of children in modern families improves significantly. The position of children in the family is directly determined by the type of family organization (Матиллов, 2002).

Pierre Bourdieu notes that although it is possible to control and direct the public sphere towards gender-symmetric relations with public resources, patriarchal values and practices can persist significantly longer in the private sphere and take on new forms. Reducing the gender gap in the labor market, narrowing wage differences, increasing women’s political representation, and changing public discourse to affirm women’s roles and achieve gender equality contribute to improving women’s status across various levels of social life. However, patterns of patriarchal dominance can persist and evolve over time. Partial changes in the public sphere, which introduce new forms of gender-equal representation, do not always lead to real practical changes (Burdje, 2001). Achieving changes in daily practices requires a stronger integration of gender aspects across all life spheres, including labor markets, politics, education, and social services. This means that in addition to legislative and institutional reforms, societal norms and attitudes must also change to create true gender equality. Only with a coordinated effort to integrate gender issues into daily life can deep and sustainable changes in practices and attitudes be achieved at all levels of society, ultimately contributing to the demarcation of rigid gender classifications in parental roles.

Conclusion

It appears that the role of men/fathers in modern families is undergoing significant transformation due to socio-economic and cultural changes. With increased gender equality and the active role of women in public discourse, traditional roles and expectations for fathers have shifted, leading to the decline of the patriarchal model. This shift opens new opportunities for fathers to engage and participate more fully in family life and child-rearing. The concept of the “caring father” is on the rise, indicating that contemporary fathers are actively

involved in all aspects of parenting and caring for their children from an early age. This role now extends beyond material support to include emotional and practical involvement in daily family activities, particularly in child development.

Changes in the public sphere and partner relationships have led to broader definitions of parenthood, emphasizing the need for gender equality and flexible distribution of domestic responsibilities. However, these changes are not without challenges. Fathers still face societal and cultural stereotypes that limit their roles as “caring fathers.” The traditional view of fathers as solely responsible for the family’s material support remains deeply entrenched in our society. Therefore, a significant cultural reassessment of the father’s role in modern family life is needed, especially regarding his involvement in childbirth, early infant care, and emotional support during puberty and adolescence. This need is underscored by the growing recognition of the value of his role.

Ultimately, the reconstruction of masculinity and the role of fathers is an inevitable process that requires continued academic research into socio-cultural changes to support and facilitate the acceptance of new gender roles within the family.

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