What's new about fatherhood?

The social construction of fatherhood in France and the UK

Abigail Gregory, Susan Milner

Published in *Men and Masculinities*, December 2011

14 (5): 588-606

URL: http://jmm.sagepub.com/content/14/5/588

Contact Susan Milner at s.e.milner@bath.ac.uk

Introduction

"*fatherhood is a cultural construction [which is] never definitively settled*" (Bruel, 1997: 42).

Social constructions of fatherhood – broadly, public discourses about what constitutes "good" fathering and legal frameworks that define fathers' relationships with children - create powerful pressures to which individuals respond (Doucet, 2006; Featherstone, 2009). Although such constructions vary across time, across cultures, and across different subcultural contexts (Lamb, 1997), there are indications that these discourses are converging in developed nations. Public interest in fathers and fathering – in public discourse, academic and popular literature, visual culture – has increased in western Europe and north America in recent years. Policy discourse has made explicit and purposeful attempts to "make men into fathers" (Hobson, 2002:1). Two broad rationales for policy and legal intervention have been identified: the first, based on an "optimistic" perspective on fatherhood (Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002), results from the feminist

movement of the 1960s and 1970s and its call for men to become more involved in the family (O'Brien, Brandth & Kvande, 2007; Seward et al, 2006). The European Union has actively promoted this agenda of gender equality, most recently in support of its drive to raise female employment rates.[i]

This new public agenda, often called "new fatherhood", also appears to reflect real change in household behaviours, associated with generational change in gender attitudes and socio-demographic change (in particular, increased female labour market participation). However, the extent of real social change may be slower than the public debates suggest or assume. For example, in line with Robert Connell's work on hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995), organizational case studies continue to highlight tensions between work and home pressures for men, limiting the extent to which they are able (and/or willing) to renegotiate their gender roles at home and at work; indeed, competitive pressures at work seem likely to increase incentives to limit time spent at home.

The second, "pessimistic" construction of fatherhood, also known as a "deficit" or "role inadequacy" model (see Dienhart, 1998: 12-13) is associated with wider social changes (lower childbirth rates and higher incidence of divorce and separation). Many authors attribute public interest in fathering to the rise in divorce rates in western societies (see e.g. Hobson, 2002; Neale & Smart, 1999) which has created a "discourse of crisis" (Hobson, 2002: 2) around fears of social disintegration caused by absence of paternal figures and financial concerns about responsibility for children of lone parents. In addition, changes in reproductive technologies have contributed to a "geneticization" of fatherhood in law, in the UK at least, leading to "a heightening of concern about whether families need fathers and, if so, what kinds of fathers these should be" (Collier & Sheldon, 2008: 1).

As a result, the public debate in many countries contains competing and potentially conflicting messages about men and fathers: fatherhood as a problem and as a resource; father absence and father presence; responsibility and irresponsibility (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003) absent fathers, "good-enough" fathers and involved fathers. At the same time, concerns about working mothers have increased rather than attenuated the "matricentrality" of public discourse about parenting (Castelain-Meunier, 2005). These tensions are reflected in, for example, children's literature or in guides for parents (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Sellenet, 2007; Vuori, 2009) as well as media and cultural representations of parenting. The social construction of fatherhood therefore refers to the "cultural characterization or popular images of fathers" (Schneider & Ingram, 1993: 334) as well as the ways in which law and policy seek "to attach men to children" (Collier & Sheldon, 2008: 5).

In this paper we review the way that fatherhood is constructed in the public sphere in the UK and France, drawing on earlier research carried out by the authors on fatherhood, work-life balance and representations of fatherhood in France and the UK.[ii] These two countries are good comparative case studies because they represent different fatherhood regimes, although there is evidence of some convergence between them. The term "fatherhood regime" was coined by Barbara Hobson (2002), following Jane Lewis's (2002) typology of breadwinner regimes, and refers to a set of rights and responsibilities pertaining to fathers which are characterised as strong, moderate or weak. Variations in national regimes do not map neatly onto conventional policy regimes but are rather explained with reference to legal parameters, policy frameworks including fiscal incentives and disincentives, public policy discourse and men's agency (particularly through fathers' rights movements). We find the concept of fatherhood regimes useful for cross-national research but the way in which broader contextual factors are used as explanatory variables

problematic. In line with the country case-studies presented in the Hobson and Morgan volume, and in line with Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon's overview of the socio-legal construction of fatherhood in the UK, we see the broader policy discourse and the relationship it establishes between individuals/households, the state and market as part of the fatherhood regime for a given country, as well as working time (see Authors, 2008) which may reflect a "work culture that does not allow time for family involvement" or conversely create a space for such involvement (Hobson, 2002: 2).

We therefore define the fatherhood regime as comprising a) normative public discourse(s); b) rights and responsibilties relating to family policy and to fathers' legal position in relation to children after separation and c) employment rights (fathers as workers) and the national working time regime. The second of these areas is the most developed and, in the UK in particular, there has been a body of work relating the tensions around fathers' rights (especially post-separation) to the normative discourse of "involved" fatherhood, also termed "new" fatherhood (see for example Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Featherstone, 2009; Smart & Neale, 1999). France constitutes a useful comparator since academic and policy discourses on fatherhood are less developed than in the UK (see e.g. Rault, 2003).

Given the two broad rationales for public policy interest in fathering outlined above, it is worth noting some important similarities and differences in the socio-demographic context of the two countries. Crude divorce rates appear similar for France and the UK: both are high in relation to the EU average (2.6 for the UK and 2.5 for France in 2005, compared to an EU average of 2.0) but it is only very recently that the divorce rate has increased significantly in France (in 1997, France at 2.0 was closer to the EU average of 1.8 whilst the UK had the highest rate in the EU at 2.8) (EC, 2009). Both countries also have relatively high proportions of births outside marriage

(EC, 2006) but in France this seems to be related to births to cohabiting couples rather than lone parents. Single-parent households – held to be the strongest single negative predictor of paternal involvement (Fatherhood Institute, 2010) - accounted for 11.9% of all French households with children in 1990 and 17.1% in 2000, whilst in the UK the proportion was consistently higher at 19.4% in 1990, 20.7% in 2001 (EC, 2006). Moreover, the proportion of lone mothers in) work is much higher in France (82%) than in the UK (50%), with a consequently higher reliance on welfare in the UK than in France.

These differences between France and the UK may help to explain the comparatively earlier and more substantial policy and expert interest in fathering in the latter country, consistent with the "pessimistic" approach outlined above. We would therefore expect to see a stronger focus in the UK than in France on post-separation fatherhood coupled with a more pessimistic, coercive public discourse around "absent" or "irresponsible" fatherhood. In addition, we would expect the correspondingly stronger focus in the UK on fathers' responsibilities to create a larger space for men's agency by fostering a sense of grievance leading to a fatherhood rights' movement (Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Lewis, 2002).

This paper presents key features of the fatherhood regime in both countries, focusing on legal rights and responsibilities and the public discourses which surround them.[iii] Following Collier and Sheldon (2008), we divide our discussion of the socio-legal construction of fatherhood into definitions of fatherhood, fathers within (heterosexual) families, and the situation after divorce or separation. We will show how new public spaces of fatherhood have opened up in both countries, often with unresolved tensions within them and between them, and into which men's agency has intervened and in turn modified and enlarged some of these spaces, but without necessarily resolving the tensions and indeed, in some cases, exacerbating them. We then examine popular

images of fatherhood, particularly as portrayed through an analysis of women's magazines in the early 1980s, and show how cultural representations reflect these tensions between changing constructions of fatherhood.

I. Key features of the fatherhood regime in France and the UK

Legal rights and responsibilities of fathers

(a) Definitions of fatherhood

The way in which fathers are defined in law has undergone considerable change in recent years, due to broader societal changes, attention to the rights of children, and ethical debates around reproduction. Men have been reconnected to reproduction as the link to maternity has come into question (through surrogacy or assistive technologies for example). It has also been suggested that as marriage becomes more unstable, men seek to challenge this marginalization and stake their claim to children (Smart & Neale, 1999). The UK has seen a shift whereby genetic fatherhood is prioritized above other considerations, leading to concerns in some cases about child welfare (Collier, 2010; Collier & Sheldon, 2008). This is due to technological developments (for example, paternity testing), to a societal interest in genetic origins (see e.g. Smart, 2007) and to unresolved tensions in public debates, for example around the 2008 Human Fertilization and Embryology Act (Collier, 2010).

In France, too, law has been changing in a similar direction but still reflects conservative familism. At least three broad strands appear in the debates between political, expert and advocacy actors: legal approaches to filiation, which seek to establish property rights relating to genetic fatherhood; genetic fatherhood and the parent-child relationship; and social fatherhood, with an emphasis on affective, nurturing relationships irrespective of genetic ties but within a

family unit (Verdier, 1998). The French practice of anonymous donation of children for adoption (*accouchement sous X*) and the identity rights of children born as a result of sperm donation have become sites of intense public debate.

French law preserves the right to anonymity of mothers who give up their children for adoption, and the same principle of total confidentiality applies to law on sperm donation.[iv] However, efforts by children adopted under such arrangements to find their genetic parents (usually the mother) have led to campaigns to lift secrecy. Irene Théry's influential 1998 report on family policy explicitly called for an end to the right to secrecy, arguing instead that giving children the right to knowledge about their genetic origin would not only uphold children's rights but also rebalance fathers' rights of access to their genetic children, as the current legal position places all the responsibility for information on the mother. In 2002 family minister Ségolène Royal presented a bill which she described as a "compromise" between parental (maternal) right to secrecy and the child's right to know (Cahen, 2004: 159), by establishing the national council for access to personal origins, in order to help adopted children investigate their genetic background, but also allowing women to retain secrecy if they wished. Opinion on the issue remains divided, with the political right tending to favour secrecy.

The political and legal debates around parents giving up children for adoption focused almost entirely on mothers. However, a case pursued through the courts by one man, Philippe Peter, from 2000 to 2005, acted as a spearhead for a fathers' rights campaign which had started to grow around the issue. Peter appealed to the courts to have his son, conceived during a relationship with a married woman who gave up the child for adoption, given over to his care, and was eventually successful. In their judgements, the courts which gave precedence to Peter over the adoptive parents considered both the right of the child to know his genetic father and the father

who had consistently attempted to gain custodial care since the child's birth. A nascent "hominist" movement championed Peter's case, in the form of websites and books asserting men's rights.[v]

Meanwhile filiation rights were reformed in a 2005 law which, besides giving children born outside marriage the same rights as those within marriage, allowed mothers (and children, once they reach the age of eighteen) to oblige men to take paternity tests in order to establish filiation (see Prieur, 2007). Unlike in the UK (see Collier & Sheldon, 2008: 78-79), France has also been relatively open to assisted reproduction using gametes from deceased partners (including cohabitees in stable long-term relationships), with the national consultative council on bio-ethics seeing no reason to refuse such requests, thus prioritizing genetic fatherhood over a two-parent family unit. The debates on definitions of fathers in assisted reproduction have barely begun in France, however.

(b) Fathers within (heterosexual) families: from breadwinners to (equal) carers?

In the UK, a policy agenda of "new fatherhood" has problematized the tension between fathers' caring and breadwinner roles, around two key themes: the need for father-sensitive legislation and the need to reduce long working hours (O'Brien, 2005). However, despite the adoption of laws aimed at rebalancing rights and responsibilities within couple households (the 1998 Green Paper on childcare, 1998 Fairness at Work Act, 2002 Employment Act and the 2006 Work and Families Act), the Labour project of extending rights for parents was seen as fitful and sometimes contradictory (Lewis, 2009) and the long hours culture was not tackled. Inadequate financial compensation hampers fathers from taking up paternity leave, parental leave and reduced working hours (Fatherhood Institute, 2010). There is nevertheless evidence of behavioural change, with increased numbers of fathers reducing working hours or requesting flexitime after the

birth of a child, relatively high take-up of the statutory right to paternity leave and widespread use of additional informal paternity leave (EHRC, 2009).

In France, too, there are indications that legislative changes in favour of fathers' employment rights are leading them to become more involved in family life. Take-up of paternity leave, introduced in 1984 and extended to two weeks in 2002, exceeded expectations at a rate of over 60% of eligible fathers within the first year of the law's application, rising to 69% by 2007 (Fatoux, Gaillard & Roques, 2010: 23); it provides significantly higher wage guarantees for men than British paternity leave (Fatherhood Institute, 2010: 27).

However parental leave is almost exclusively taken by women, due to the way the social protection system has traditionally constructed childcare primarily as a maternal responsibility and the continued imbalance between male and female salaries, encouraging a male breadwinner-female carer model whereby low-income women leave the labour market (Le Feuvre & Le Marchant, 2007). In 2008-9 a debate was launched on the possibility of reducing parental leave and reserving a portion for fathers on a "use it or lose it" basis, with many family pressure groups divided on whether this would result in higher paternal take-up of leave or an overall loss of support for parental early-years presence.

Thus, whilst in both countries "new fatherhood" has emerged as a new policy agenda for working fathers, it also carries within it "ambiguities and contradictions" (Castelain-Meunier, 2005: 146) both in terms of the extent of real social change and of the content of policy and law. In the UK, low take-up by men of parental leave appears to be related to long working hours as well as to weak statutory rights and wage guarantees (EHRC, 2009). Relatively low levels of time spent by fathers on childcare as a proportion of women's time can also be seen as a reflection of a situation whereby fathers are encouraged to work at least as much or more than before childbirth,

whereas mothers tend to leave the labour market and return to it via part-time work (Fatherhood Institute, 2010). In France, stronger statutory backing for paternity leave allows fathers to spend slightly more time with children, as a proportion of mother's time; however, the persistence of traditional gender role attitudes has been identified as an obstacle to further paternal involvement (Fagnani & Letablier, 2007; Le Feuvre & Le Marchant, 2007), and public support for childcare may allow men to "escape" increased involvement (Smith, 2008).

(c) Post-divorce/separation fatherhood

In both countries, fathers are essentially the object of policy attention when the conjugal relationship comes to an end. Both countries have, over the post-war period, seen the development of moderate rights for fathers with respect to their rights to and responsibilities for their children after divorce or separation and the introduction of the principle of joint responsibility for parenting. However, legal reform relating to divorce and separation has followed a distinctive path in each country and today differences continue to exist in the emphasis placed on financial support for children.

In the British case, divorce law and decisions around care of children was motivated initially mainly by a need to ensure that children were supported financially in the context of high levels of divorce. Collier (2006), however, argues that the changes over recent years in favour maintaining contact between fathers and their children after divorce (in the Family Law Act, 1996, the Adoption and Children Act, 2002 and the Children and Adoption Act, 2006) have, in part, been encouraged by the growing consensus between psychologists, advisors and professionals that children's interests should come first and that children benefit from contact with their biological father after divorce. From the fathers' point of view also, an increasingly expressed desire to maintain a caring

role for children has been interpreted as resulting from a "toxic mixture of fragile adult relationships and involved fathers" (Collier & Sheldon, 2008: 141; see also Collier, 2010; Smart & Neale, 1999), whilst the public discourse of involved fathering may itself have fuelled conflicts between parents over childcare. A fatherhood rights movement has grown up around a self-perception of men as "new victims" of women's rights to assert their financial and sexual independence. By 2010, the fathers' rights movement had gained enough influence to reshape policy in the direction of shared parenting and family mediation, as in the Family Justice Review due to report in autumn 2011.[vi]

In France, civil law was rebalanced in favour of mothers via the replacement of the father's responsibility for children (paternal authority) by the principle of joint parenting in 1970 and changes in divorce law in 1975 to enable divorce by mutual consent, whilst at the same time other laws reinforced the notion of "maternal competence" (Blöss, 2001) and tended to marginalize the father's role. The Malhuret law of 1987 gave judges responsibility for deciding children's residence after divorce, resulting in most children living with their mother, deemed to be in the child's interest (Ferrand, 2001: 199); the father's chances of a child living with him were only increased if he lived in a couple again.

The late 1980s saw a shift towards furthering fathers' role after separation. In 1993, separating parents were given the right to determine residence arrangements for children, except in cases of conflict where judges would continue to decide. As part of wider moves to "democratize the institution of marriage" (Letablier, 2002: 69), Ségolène Royal introduced a law recognizing the option of shared residency arrangements, which she presented as a means of "making the sharing of childcare more equal" after separation. The law was followed up by moves to encourage mediation for parents and a concern for putting the interests of children first. In

recent years fathers have also benefited from reforms designed to involve a non-resident parent in their child/children's education (see Sellenet, 2005:112) such as the sending of school reports to the resident and non-resident parent after separation.

It has been argued that "infrequent use of shared residence orders within the British context and the emphasis that is placed squarely on private ordering alongside a primary carer model" contrasts starkly with the French legal situation (Masardo, 2009: 210). In France, shared residence (usually on a weekly basis) is decided in around ten per cent of divorce cases[vii] and these are mostly agreed by the parents themselves, with around a fifth of shared residence requests made by one parent (usually the father) against the wishes of the other (Ministère de la Justice, 2003). Judges appear generally reluctant to impose shared residence and will do so only after a full social inquiry; in around three quarters of conflictual cases, children are ordered to remain where they are, usually with the mother. Judges have therefore been quite cautious in promoting involved fatherhood after separation but have rather followed social practice which numerically is marginal in relation to the dominant norm of maternal care. Nevertheless, by providing the legal framework for shared residence the lawmakers of the early 2000s contributed to a reconstruction of fatherhood in France, within a "democratized family" approach, and opened the way for fathers' agency in claiming their access rights. Although in a small minority of cases, fathers have themselves sought to reframe fatherhood by pursuing shared residence orders and by participating in fatherhood rights' organizations such as SOS Papa, which is supported by leading lawyers and childcare experts. A series of high-profile cases saw fathers contesting the rejection of shared residence requests and winning their case at appeal, on the grounds that conflict between parents should not be an obstacle to shared arrangements, which in themselves have the potential to encourage the hostile parents to cooperate. As in the Peter case, fathers'

persistent determination to win care orders is often viewed favourably by appeal courts who see it as a sign of “good fathering”.

Shared residence remains highly controversial in the French public domain, with concerns around the motivation of fathers who seek shared residence (since it not only dispenses fathers from maintenance payments but also renders them eligible for child benefits and tax allowances which are substantial in the French social protection system) as well as concerns about child welfare. In debates around child protection, the influence of child psychologists is particularly strong, with some experts claiming that young children separated from their mother will suffer separation trauma.

In sum, although differences exist between the evolution of fathers’ rights and responsibilities in France and the UK, notably in the importance attached to a father’s financial responsibility for his child, in both countries fathers have benefited from a substantial enhancement in their legal rights and responsibilities to parent, particularly in relation to separation and divorce. Encouraged by legislators’ moves in favour of equality between parents and judges’ view that contact with both parents works in childrens’ interest, and stimulated by persistent action by a minority of fathers, a model of joint parenting in the interests of the child is becoming more prevalent in both countries. However in both countries these changes are highly controversial – since it is not always evident that moves to give fathers a greater role in childcare fulfil the stated objectives of greater gender equality or of enhancing the quality of parent-child relationships - and often internally inconsistent.

II. Fatherhood in the popular media

Deborah Lupton and Lesley Barclay (1997) showed how, in the USA, Australia and the UK, representations of fathers in the popular media (television, film, press and magazines, and parenting literature) convey a set of meanings that contribute towards the social construction of fatherhood in a given socio-cultural setting. Their overview found that depictions of traditional gender roles persisted alongside a newer and rather hesitant but equally normative portrayal of "new fatherhood" drawing on the affective and caring dimensions of fathering. Representations of "new" fatherhood were particularly evident in films (rather than television) and in accounts of celebrity fatherhood in glossy magazines. Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s both problematized and celebrated fathers' attempts to find their own way of fathering in the absence of mothers, after bereavement, accidental parenthood or divorce/separation. The most iconic of these, Kramer versus Kramer (1979) and Mrs Doubtfire (1993), reflected the concerns of the nascent fatherhood rights' movement in their portrayal of fathers fighting for their right to care for their children. On the other hand, newspaper accounts of fathers tended to highlight the "pessimistic" account of fatherhood around the themes of family breakdown and lack of generational transmission of values (Lupton & Barclay, 1997: 80-82). Overall, the role of fathers in British and US visual culture has been "problematic and contradictory" (Tinknell, 2005: 75).

In the French case, Catherine Sellenet (2005) describes the gradual change in perceptions of fathers in post-war France, beginning with loss of their traditional power and the emergence of the "inadequate father", depicted as brutal and alcoholic. Subsequently, the theme of absence dominated public representations of fatherhood in the aftermath of divorce law reform, followed from the late seventies by the perception of the economically weakened father (unemployed, socially discredited as unable to maintain his breadwinning role). In the 1980s this was followed by the weak/soft father, the "father hen" (*papa poule*), seen to be overly maternal and providing

inadequate guidance to his children, particularly sons, in their sexual development. The cultural stereotype of the stay-at-home father, *papa poule*, was popularized in France in 1980-1982 by a television series starring Moroccan actor Saddy Rebbot. The term is still widely used in media discussions of fatherhood roles and practices and is strongly embedded in popular discourse. A dominant feature of media representations of fathers in Sellenet's account is an emphasis on traditional parenting roles, whilst "new" fatherhood is caricatured and ridiculed. Similarly, television advertising in France has been found to rely heavily on stereotypes of reluctant, distant or incompetent fathers (ORSE, 2010).

Parenting guides for both mothers and fathers have proliferated in recent years. In both France and the UK, parenting guides cast fathers in a clearly secondary role to mothers as parents and carers, and emphasize men's lack of natural parenting skills (Lupton & Barclay, 2007; Von Munchow, 2007). To some extent, this conservative normative stance reflects the overwhelmingly female readership of parenting guides and magazines (Lupton & Barclay, 1997: 90-92). Even though men have created a significant publishing industry of books and magazines for fathers in recent years, they too tend to emphasise the difficulties of fatherhood and the feeling of being in "uncharted territory", that is, not just the lack of natural expertise in childcare that is often atttributed to mothers, but the lack of authoritative guidance on how to be a father. A typical example is supplied by the well-known novelist and screenwriter Michael Chabon, who in a British newspaper interview (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2010), explained that he wrote a book on his own experiences as a father because "I hadn't read a lot by men of my generation and background about being a father – it felt like I was on relatively untrodden ground.".

As popular culture in both countries has become increasingly influenced by media representations of celebrity, famous role models have featured heavily in the cultural framing of

fatherhood, with the iconic figure of footballer David Beckham an indispensable reference in any media or cultural discussion of fatherhood. When a new magazine aimed at fathers, *FQ*, was launched in the UK in 2003, it featured him on its front cover, and in 2010 its cover photograph was still Beckham. Politicians, too, have sought to frame themselves as celebrity fathers (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Smith, 2008) in a performance or staging of the "new masculinity" (both responsible and caring) that they sought to promote through their policies (Tinknell, 2005: 63-65). Whether the emphasis on actors and other celebrities as "family men" who put their children before partying says more about real change in society's construction of fathers than it does about media obsession with the private lives of celebrities is a moot point. However, there appears to be more frequent, casual reference to the image of caring fathers in everyday culture via advertising images and depictions of sporting and other icons (O'Brien, 2005: 3; see also Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Segal, 2007). Newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Times* frequently publish articles on the pleasures of being a dad and coping with children, including columns written by dads about their day-to-day lives as fathers.

In France too fatherhood is constructed through an idealized depiction of celebrity fathers, whether sportsmen (for example, Yannick Noah, ex-tennis champion and now pop singer, is rated highly in such surveys), TV presenters (often highly visible as husbands and fathers since their partners are often media personalities) such as Patrick Bruel, or actors or singers. Rankings of celebrity fathers, published regularly in women's magazines such as *Elle* and parenting publications such as *Enfant Magazine* (see e.g. Auffret-Pericone, 2004) reflect mothers' choice of their ideal man rather than representing specific fatherhood roles. What characterizes celebrity fathers in both countries is that, rather than providing a guide to how to be a father, they provide a reassuring affirmation of "family values", that is, affective ties to their partner and children within a

heterosexual nuclear family unit, in a celebrity environment that is more usually known for marital breakdown, repeated infidelity, drugs and alcohol and other forms of excess. Moreover, the promotion of role models reflects the dominant media portrayal of fathers which is highly dichotomized (heroes or monsters) (Dienhart, 1998; Moss, 1995; Sellenet, 2007) and thereby fails to recognize the diversity of real experience.

Although media-promoted role models constitute a reference point for men in their own fathering practices, there is no evidence that they actually influence them, and some indication that a significant minority of men actively reject them (Mercier, 2004). Our small-scale research on how working fathers constructed their own roles[viii] (see Authors, 2011, for more details) found that French fathers did not relate spontaneously to celebrity role models (although they did refer, often critically, to stereotypical images of fathers in film, with *Kramer versus Kramer* having a lasting impact). British fathers, on the other hand, spontaneously cited David Beckham and to some extent Tony Blair, and were able to discuss images of fatherhood in current TV shows, even if they expressed scepticism about the link between these fathers and their own experience. Beyond an expression of societal uncertainties and debates, the use of role models in the press and in public life does appear to have some impact on real fathering practices in the UK or at least on the way that fathers reflect on their own practice.

Popular magazines, which have largely female readership and are aimed at women, like to profile famous fathers, that is, celebrities who have an image as caring fathers (Lupton & Barclay, 1997: 73; see also Lloyd, 1995). In our own study of women's magazines in both countries,[ix] celebrity role models dominated coverage in both countries, usually in a way which supported involved fatherhood but sometimes in a mocking way, particularly in France. The persistence of the emasculated "papa poule" stereotype occurred in *Elle* as a way of poking fun at (usually US)

celebrities, especially in cases where male partners were seen as dominated or sexually betrayed by their female partner. Although celebrity fatherhood appears merely to provide a vehicle for celebrity gossip, the use of sex role stereotypes in often contradictory ways – sometimes admiring, sometimes mocking – reflects the stance of the magazines: upholding conservative family values and promoting the celebrity excess which helps to undermine them.

In our study the theme of paternal absence was a key feature of discussions about fatherhood in 2001, not just in terms of irresponsible fathers but also as an expression of fears around an erosion of fathers' roles due to a weakening of their breadwinner status on one hand and stronger maternal control of household fates on the other (Author 2, 2010). In France, for example, the adoption of a new law allowing children to be given either the mother's or the father's surname was seen in an editorial (*Elle*, 28 February 2001) and the theme of "reluctant fatherhood" appeared in several articles both as examples of celebrity misbehaviour and as real-life accounts. Reluctant fathers also appeared in *Red* in 2001, with a piece about "the new bachelors" in the May issue, and newspaper columnist Tim Dowling described the sight of fathers with children - but without mothers - in public as "an utterly compelling oddity" (January).

In 2001, the theme of "new fatherhood" was treated in both a sympathetic and critical way in both countries and appeared to be strongly influenced by public policy debates. In France in particular, the adoption of the law extending paternity leave was greeted as marking "the birth of the new father" (*Elle*, 2910, 8 October 2001). *Elle* expressed strong support for the measure, hailing its author Ségèle Royal as having introduced a revolution in gender relations (e.g. in an editorial of 18 June). Nevertheless the two magazines we studied discussed involved fatherhood (used, like the term "new fatherhood", with inverted commas) with some scepticism and a light, ironic tone was often adopted (with the use of stereotypes, caricatures and cartoons).

By 2005, the same themes reappeared in the same magazines, but the theme of fathers' loss of status in the household had gained prominence in both countries, in particular the British magazine, with *Red* also highlighting questions about whether fathers were needed any longer, due to advances in reproductive technologies as well as women's financial independence (still a major theme of the magazine in 2010). On the other hand, the theme of paternal presence found its way into discussions of "what makes a great dad". The influence of the fatherhood rights' movement is evident in a discussion piece published in March 2005, with writers Guy Browning representing the experience of shared caregiving in a dual-earner household ("I spend a lot of time with my kids") and Martin Deeson reflecting on the positive and negative experiences of post-separation fatherhood as a "part-time dad".

In the French case, the theme of paternal presence ran throughout articles, from pieces on celebrity fathers to a series of investigative articles on post-divorce fatherhood. Changes to family law encouraging shared residence (see above) were reflected in both positive and concerned articles about post-divorce fatherhood, with the appearance of feature articles based on real-life experience of divorced fathers who shared responsibility for their children. The articles showed a new concern with a direct link between fathers and children, without the intervention of the mother: one article (16 May 2005) proclaimed that "Men on their own with children are the fashion now". It was also possible to find at least one case where the "papa poule" stereotype was claimed positively by a (celebrity) father.[x] Conflicts between couples over reproduction also featured in the later articles, with one article specifically on the Philippe Peter case.

Overall, this brief survey of the depiction of fatherhood in transition reflects both support for and unease about men's changing roles. On the other hand, positive treatment of real-life experiences of shared child residence help to challenge traditional portrayal of fathers (particularly

post-divorce) as either heroes or monsters, showing them instead as ordinary men renegotiating their roles and relationships. These doubts and sometimes contradictions reflect the general stance of women's magazines on gender issues: torn between a rather conservative consumerism and consequent promotion of an aspirational "lifestyle", they show interest in societal change but uncertainty in how to deal with it; hence the "problematization" of social phenomena in feature articles. In these publications, new lifestyles which might challenge hegemonic masculinities are, not surprisingly, presented as marginal and possibly threatening to mainstream behaviour. Nevertheless, their very appearance into public debate and the suggestion that marginal behaviours are increasingly coming into the mainstream, are indicative of a society in transition. On the whole, the cultural products in France and the UK referred to here portray conservative representations of fatherhood, but a combination of policy initiatives and social changes led to some broadening of the repertoire of what the magazines consider to be "normal" family practices, such as shared parenting arrangements in France.

6. Conclusion

The breadwinner model of "family man" provided a construction of masculine identity based on "virile" values of performance and achievement in the public sphere and paternal authority inside the home, based on a strict separation of gender roles within a heterosexual family unit. There is now substantial agreement that this breadwinner model, which may have corresponded to a brief period between the 1950s and 1970s in Western societies, has been eroded by economic and social change. However, although new forms of masculine identity based on new behaviours in the public and private spheres of work and family may be observable in everyday life, they are not (yet?) culturally dominant or even mainstream.

Drawing on the work of Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1994), Alain Bihr (1996) argues that old models of masculinity and virility can be resisted only if alternative models emerge. The “new fatherhood”, based on greater paternal involvement at home and conversely lesser engagement in paid work outside the home, and a shift towards a more egalitarian sharing of caring responsibilities within the household, was intended by its advocates to provide such an alternative. Although rather weak and timid in comparison with initiatives in countries such as Denmark and Sweden, public policy measures appear to have at key moments (such as the 1997 family policy conference in France) had an impact both on public perceptions of fatherhood and on fathering practices (in terms of men’s ability to renegotiate their household role). There is evidence that policy interventions do matter, and they can help to shape practice in ways which tackle specific configurations of rights and responsibilities, for example by changing assumptions about the gendered nature of care in legal systems, by modifying working time regimes, and by tailoring targeted rights to leave.

On the whole, however, the evolution of public policy has been very uneven, reflecting both policymakers’ concerns about the boundary between private and public spheres, and broader societal uncertainties. In the UK, a new “masculinity policy” (Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002) based on involved fatherhood was promoted throughout government and we have seen that it had some impact in cultural representations of fathers. In France, it has been more difficult to discern a sustained “masculinity policy” although a series of initiatives in 1997-2002 under the “plural left” government set out similarly to redefine fathering practices within a democratized family policy.

However, we have shown that the “new agenda of new fatherhood” is riven with tensions. On one hand, a “pessimistic” public discourse of new fatherhood emphasizes the negative effect on children and wider society of lack of paternal presence, in a way which stigmatizes fathering

behaviours, particularly in certain socio-economic and racial groups. Such discourse may be seen as a kind of conservative “moral panic” but it fails to provide a coherent alternative for fathering practices. On the other hand, the progressive gender equality agenda is based on “optimistic” assumptions of change in men’s gender role attitudes and practice that have not yet proved valid, whether due to the constraints of employers’ labour market practice (as in the UK) or a combination of labour market constraint and the entrenchment of gender role attitudes as in France. There is a discrepancy between public discourse and the provision of public goods (rights for fathers within a generally supportive legal framework for parents). Legislators have not always been able provide a legal framework around reproduction and separation of parenting partners that adequately recognizes the interests of all, as well as the diversity of situations. Within both these competing discourses, fathers have at times been constructed as helpless “victims”, whether of female agency, broader societal change, or hostile legal environments.

Nevertheless, this complex and “fragmented” (Collier & Sheldon, 2008) construction of fatherhood has provided a new space for societal debates about fathering and new opportunities for men’s agency have arisen which may over time reframe expectations about men’s fathering practices and capabilities, and help to redefine masculine identities. In both countries, the fathers’ rights movement has shaped policy. In the UK, a highly visible movement which has received support at key moments from high-profile men has contributed directly to debates around the development of law in post-separation cases. In France too, the fathers’ rights movement has been less visible but individual men have used the law in unexpected ways that have significantly shifted public debates. However these individual and collective initiatives too have not, to date at least, provided a coherent alternative model.

Representations of the family in the media reflect this unfinished process of change, "in which identities and relationships are constantly reworked, contested and remade" (Tinknell, 1995: 2). The unevenness of change is seen in media discussions and portrayals of fatherhood and changing relations within the household. Overall the cultural products analyzed in this article tended to follow societal trends, rather than trying to lead them, and revealed wider uncertainties about how to respond to them. We suggest that further research, particularly comparative research, would be useful in tracking changes over time as well as differences between different fatherhood regimes.

On one hand, political, expert and media discourses all fail to capture the diversity of everyday parenting and complexity of masculine identities. Stereotypes and ambivalent portrayal of celebrity fathers tend to reinforce a conservative, traditional view of gender roles in parenting, even as "performance of fatherhood" by politicians and some celebrity fathers promotes the idea of involved fatherhood. Our analysis of women's magazines in both countries provides further indication of changing representations but above all of cultural doubts and uncertainties about the role of fathers within the family, particularly around the theme of "absent" or "superfluous" fathers. At the same time, "subordinate" forms of masculinity have found their way into mainstream cultural products and the newer model of shared parenting has made inroads into dominant cultural representations, particularly in France. Previous research suggests that men feel confused by messages in public policy and cultural representations regarding their role within the family (see e.g. Dienhart, 1998; Moss, 1995). More research is needed on how men navigate their way through these competing messages in their daily practice.

References

Auffret-Pericone, Marie. 2004. Le nouveau père est-il un papa idéal ? *Enfant Magazine* (http://enfant-mazagine.com/papas/index.jsp?docId=1680154&soustheme=30678, accessed 14 July 2008)

Authors, 2008.

Authors. 2011.

Author 2. 2010.

Bihr, Alain. 1996. L'univers domestique : les identités, obstacles à l'égalité. *Revue des Sciences Sociales de l'Est*. 23 : 134-142.

Blöss, Thierry. 2001. L'égalité parentale au coeur des contradictions de la vie privée et des politiques publiques. In *La dialectique des rapports hommes-femmes*, ed. T. Blöss, 45-70. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Brandth, Berit and Elin Kvande. 1998. Masculinity and child care: The reconstruction of fathering. *The Sociological Review*. 46 (2) : 293-313.

Bruel, Alain. 1997. *Un avenir pour la paternité? Jalons pour une politique de la paternité*. Paris : Report to the Ministry for Employment and Solidarity.

Cahen, Michel. 2004. *La dialectique des secrets. Histoire et idéologie dans l'accouchement sous X et l'adoption plénière*. Paris: Karthala.

Castelain-Meunier, Christiane. 2005. *Les métamorphoses du masculin*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Collier, Richard. 2006. The Outlaw Fathers Fight Back: Fathers' Rights Groups, Fathers 4 Justice and the Politics of Family Law Reform – Reflections on the UK Experience. In *Fathers' Rights*

Activism and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective, 53-77, eds R. Collier and S. Sheldon. Oxford and Portland: Hart Pulishing.

Collier, Richard and Sally Sheldon. 2008. *Fragmenting Fatherhood. A Socio-Legal Study*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Collier, Richard. 2010. *Men, law and gender. Essays on the 'man of law'*. Abingdon: Routledge (Glasshouse).

Connell, Robert. 1994. Psychoanalysis on masculinity. In *Theorizing Masculinities*, 11-38, eds H. Brod and M. Kaufman. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Connell, Robert. 1995. *Masculinities*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Dienhart, Anna. 1998. *Reshaping fatherhood. The social construction of shared parenting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Doucet, Andrea. 2006. *Do men mother?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Equality and Human Rights Commission. 2009. *Fathers, family and work*. London: Equality and Human Rights Commssion.

European Commission. 2006. *The social situation in the European Union. 2005-6 overview.*. Luxembourg: Official Publications.

European Commission. 2009. *Eurostat yearbook 2009*. Luxembourg: Official Publications of the EC.

Fagnani, Jeanne and Marie-Thérèse Letablier. 2007. The French 35-hour working law and the work-life balance of parents : friend or foe ? In *Gender Divisions and Working Time in the New Economy*, 79-90, eds D. Perrons, C. Fagan, L. McDowell, K.Ray and K. Ward. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Fatherhood Institute. 2010. *The Fatherhood Index 2010-11. The fairness in families index*. London: Fatherhood Institute.

Fatoux, François, Gaillard, Marlies and Hélène Roques. 2010. *Paroles papas. Paroles de dix dirigeants sur l'équilibre entre travail et vie privée*. Paris : Le cherche midi.

Featherstone, Brid. 2009. *Contemporary Fathering. Theory, Policy and Practice*. Bristol : Policy Press.

Ferrand, Michèle. 2001. Du droit des pères aux pouvoirs des mères. In *Masculin-Féminin: Questions pour les sciences de l'homme*, 187-210, eds J. Laufer, C. Marry and M. Maruani. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Hearn, Jeff and Pringle, Keith (2006) Men, masculinities and children: some European perspectives *Critical Social Policy*. 26 (2): 365-389.

Hobson, Barbara. 2002. Introduction. In *Making men into fathers. Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood*, 1-21, eds B. Hobson and D. Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaufmann, Jean-Claude. 1994. Nuptialité ou conjugalité? Critique d'un indicateur et état des évolutions conjugales en Europe. European Journal of Sociology . 35: 3-20.

Lamb, Michael E. (ed.). 1997. *The Role of the Father in Child Development*. 3rd edition. Chichester: Wiley.

Le Feuvre, Nicky and Clothilde Le Marchant. 2007. Employment, the family and "work-life balance" in France. In *Women, men, work and family in Europe*, 211-229, eds R. Crompton, S. Lewis and C. Lyonette. London: Palgrave.

Letablier, Marie-Thérèse. 2002. L'egalite entre les sexes : un enjeu de politique familiale. *Informations sociales*. 102: 60-72.

Lewis, Jane. 2002. The problem of fathers: policy and behaviour in Britain. In *Making men into fathers. Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood*, ed. B. Hobson, 1-21, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, Jane. 2009. *Work-life balance, gender and policy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Lloyd, Trefor. 1995. Fathers in the media. In *Father figures. Fathers in the families of the 1990s*, pp.40-52, ed. P. Moss. London, HMSO.

Lupton, Deborah and Lesley Barclay. 1997. *Constructing fatherhood: discourses and experiences*. London/Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Masardo, Alex. 2009. Managing shared residence in Britain and France: questioning a default "primary carer" model. In *Social Policy Review 21*, 197-214, eds K. Rummery, I. Greener and C. Holden. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Mercier, Etienne. 2004. Le père idéal: maman, Ipsos (http://ipsos.fr/CanalIpsos/articles/1361, accessed 14 July 2008).

Ministère de la Justice et des Libertés. 2003. La résidence alternée des enfants de parents séparés. *Études et Statistiques Justice*. No.3, 01 January.

Moss, Peter (ed.). 1995. *Father figures. Fathers in the families of the 1990s*, London, HMSO.

O'Brien, Margaret. 2005. *Shared caring: bringing fathers into the frame*. Working Paper Series, no. 18, Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

O'Brien, Margaret, Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande. 2007. Fathers, work and family life. *Community, Work and Family*. 10 (4): 375-386.

Observatoire sur la Responsabilité Sociale des Entreprises. 2010. *Les pères dans la publicité*. Paris : ORSE.

Prieur, Nicole. 2007. *Raconte-moi d'où je viens*. Paris: Bayard.

Rault, Françoise. 2003. L'identité masculine. Permanences et mutations. *Problèmes Politiques et Sociaux*. 894 (special issue).

Schneider, Anne and Ingram, Helen. 1993. The social construction of target populations: implications for policy and practice. *American Political Science Review*. 87: 334-347.

Scourfield, Jonathan and Drakeford, Mark. (2002) New Labour and the 'problem of men'. *Critical Social Policy* 22: 619-640.

Segal, L. (2007) Slow motion. Changing masculinities, changing men. 3rd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Sellenet, Catherine. 2005. *Les pères vont bien! Comment les hommes affirment et assument aujourd'hui leur paternité*. Paris: Flammarion.

Sellenet, Catherine (ed.). 2007. *Les pères en debat. Regards croisés sur la condition paternelle en France et à l'étranger*. Ramonville Saint-Agne: Editions Eres.

Seward, Rudy Ray, Dale Yeatts, Iftekhar Amin, and Amy Dewitt. 2006. Employment leave and fathers' involvement with their children: According to fathers and mothers. *Men and Masculinities*, 8 (4): 405-427.

Smart, Carole. 2007. *Personal life*. Cambridge: Policy Press.

Smart, Carole and Neale, Bren 1999. *Family fragments?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Smith, Alison J. 2008. Working fathers as providers and carers: towards a new conceptualisation of fatherhood. In *Social Policy Review 20*, 279-296, eds T. Maltby, P. Kennett and K. Rummery. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Sunderland, Jean-Anne. 2006. "Parenting" or "Mothering"? The case of modern childcare magazines. *Discourse and Society* 17(4): 503-527.

Théry, I. 1998. Couple, filiation et parenté aujourd'hui. Le droit face aux mutations de la famille et de la vie privée. Paris : Odile Jacob.

Tinknell, Estella. 2005. *Mediating the family. Gender, culture and representations*, London : Hodder Arnold.

Verdier, Pierre (with Margiotta, Natalie). 1998. *Le droit à la connaissance de son origine : Un droit de l'homme*, Paris : Jeunesse et Droit.

Von Munchow, Patricia. 2007. Les representations du père dans les guides parentaux français et allemands. In *Les pères en debat. Regards croisés sur la condition paternelle en France et à l'étranger*, 125-136, ed. C. Sellenet, Ramonville Saint-Agne: Editions Eres.

Vuori, Joanna. 2009. Men's choices and masculine duties: Fathers in expert discussions. *Men and Masculinities* 12 (1): 45-72.

The authors would like to thank XXXX for comments on a first draft of this article, as well as three anonymous reviewers for their detailed and constructive advice. The research reported in this article was supported by the CNAF, the British Academy and the AHRC.

[i] For a more detailed review of the EU policy context for men's relations to children see Hearn and Pringle (2006).

[ii] Research was funded by the French Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales (CNAF): project funded as part of its Childhood initiative and entitled "les pères à la recherche d'un nouvel équilibre entre responsabilités familiales et professionnelles – une comparaison franco-britannique", and by the British Academy (Small Grant no.SG-36628 "Men and Family-friendly Employment: An Anglo-French Comparison). Research on representations of fatherhood in France and the UK was enabled by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council under its research leave scheme (award number 112904).

[iii] Our focus here, on national-level developments, does not allow us to explore within-country differences, although this would be a useful avenue for future research (for example our earlier research looked at sectoral differences in employment, and it would also be fruitful to pursue the impact of regional work-family cultures, as well as differences in ethnic and social class background).

[iv] In fact French law does not recognize sperm donors as parents: see Delaisi de Parseval, 2008.

[v] See for example, the book by men's movement campaigner Patrick Guillot, *La cause des hommes* (Paris:Viamedia. 2005) and Philippe Peter's own book, *La Reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Velours, 2006).

[vi] See e.g. coverage in *The Observer*, 26 September 2010 (pp.24-25: "How a new age of fathers' rights is taking hold").

[vii] It is difficult to find reliable comparative figures for the UK. The lobby organization Families Need Fathers provides useful information on shared parenting orders in the UK on its website (http://www.fnf.org.uk/law-and-information/shared-residence) with examples of case law, arguing that a judgement by Dame Butler-Sloss in 2001 opened the way for such orders. It is widely claimed by fathers' rights groups that the UK lags behind other European countries in the granting of shared residence orders.

[viii] Based on interviews with a total of 24 fathers in French and British organisations, as part of a wider survey of the impact of organisational work-life balance policies.

[ix] The study examined representations of fathers in two magazines (French version of *Elle* and *Red*) between 2001 and 2005). For more details, and a fuller bibliography on depictions of gender roles in women's magazines, see Author 2, 2010.

[x] *Elle*, 3100 (30 May) interview with actor Alain Chabat: "What kind of a father are you?" "A papa-poule! […] I am completely involved."