

## Individualization and contemporary fatherhood

Westerling, Allan

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Westerling, A. (2023). Individualization and contemporary fatherhood. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 35, 357-371.  
<https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-823>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

## Individualization and contemporary fatherhood

Allan Westerling<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roskilde University

Address correspondence to: Allan Westerling, Roskilde University, Department of People and Technology, P.O.Box 260, DK-4000 (Denmark). Email: allanw@ruc.dk

### Abstract

**Objective:** This article explores dilemmas related to contemporary fatherhood and discusses how theories of individualization enable the understanding of social change and family life.

**Background:** Theories on modernization argue that ongoing processes of individualization challenge researchers to reinvent key concepts in family sociology. The concept of intimate fatherhood allows for the exploration of men's family practices and presents a basis for understanding what modernization means for contemporary parenthood. Intimate fatherhood can be further theorized through empirically sensitive approaches in the study of everyday family life.

**Method:** Drawing on data from a mixed-method longitudinal study comprising four waves of data from the 1968 cohort in Denmark ( $n = 1,414$ ), the study analyzes qualitative interviews from the second and fourth waves. Social psychological discourse analysis of the interviews is used to explore the participants' family practices.

**Results:** The analysis examines how caring intimacy in contemporary fatherhood is interwoven in a complex entanglement with other positions related to partnering and provision. Individualization is theorized as a mode of orientation in life with reference to oneself but not counterposed to social ties and family practices signified by solidarity and togetherness.

**Conclusion:** Individualization theory can guide analytical attention when examining contemporary fatherhood, but such analyses must remain sensitive to the complex entanglement of everyday family life.

**Key words:** individualization, fatherhood, social psychology, discourse analysis, everyday life



## 1. Introduction

This article uses fatherhood as a lens to explore the meaning of social change for contemporary parenthood. I draw on my own research in a Danish context, but I also engage in a discussion about what ongoing processes of modernization mean for family relations in a European context. Important streams in family research theorize these processes in terms of individualization, emphasizing that the horizon of cultural possibilities of how to “do family” has expanded and brought the individual to the fore of social life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004). Less attention has been paid to the forces driving the modernization of men’s lives and lifestyles, and to how changes in fatherhood can be understood as modernization (Oechsle et al., 2012). A central question is how the cultural framework in societies characterized by ongoing individualization changes conditions for contemporary fatherhood. As part of the social fabric that shapes understandings of fatherhood, cultural frameworks constitute layers of meaning through which lived experience can be articulated. Men who father, do so in relation to these cultural frameworks (Miller, 2017). I explore these cultural meanings from the everyday life perspective of fathers.

Engaging in a discussion on how to theorize contemporary social change and fatherhood by investigating the experiences and orientations of subjects in everyday life allows me to open space for exploring the general development and dynamics of the social structures of modern society (Bech-Jørgensen, 1994; McCarthy, 2012). In addition to focusing on men’s family practices as they develop over time, I explore the dilemmas related to contemporary fatherhood to theorize individualization of family life.

The article begins by presenting the theoretical context of fatherhood studies and modernization theory, where the concept of intimate fatherhood represents a way to move beyond simply understanding fatherhood as new or involved (Dermott, 2008). After presenting the data, I describe the methods used in to produce it. Next, based on qualitative interview data, I analyze men’s accounts of troubles in everyday family life and then I conclude by discussing what can be learned about contemporary parenthood from the family lives of fathers. I assert that analyzing the family practices of men in terms of individualization is valuable, but that contemporary fatherhood is characterized by more than intimate fathering since it involves fathers living their lives with others and negotiating involvement in the complex social relationships of everyday life, which comprises kinship, partnering, and provision, not to mention parenting.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 *Fathers and fathering – doing good fatherhood*

Henriksson (2019), who distinguishes between fathers, fathering, and fatherhood, referring to actors, practices, and cultural meanings, respectively, argues that fatherhood is defined and regulated in multiple dimensions, such as law, medicine, social policy, economics, and politics. Furthermore, fatherhood is contextual and done in various situations. Sparrman et al. (2016) also distinguish between actors, practices, and meanings, arguing that good parenthood is done relationally through complex negotiations across social contexts in contemporary societies. With reference to Scandinavian welfare societies, the authors analyze how good parenthood is done through the reflexive involvement of parents in their children’s lives, in collaboration with other actors, such as professionals, grandparents, children, politicians, and other parents. In this sense parenthood, and fatherhood, can be understood as relational and constituted in social practice.

Good fatherhood is no longer merely understood as being a good provider or breadwinner but includes participation in the domestic sphere, i.e., in household tasks and caregiving (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Miller, 2010). Henriksson (2019) identifies a progressive narrative in fatherhood studies that refers to fatherhood as changing for the better in late modernity and emphasizes a development towards gender equality concerning men’s increased involvement in unpaid domestic work and caregiving. Nonetheless, contemporary fatherhood research demonstrates that a large gap between practice and ideals still exists (Dermott & Miller, 2015). Despite continuous change in the orientations, practices, and attitudes that appear to characterize fatherhood, the division of labor in families remains unequally distributed between the sexes (Oechsle et al., 2012). Changes are primarily related to normative expectations and less so to actions. Although care and involvement are central aspects of contemporary fatherhood, they must be balanced against the norm that men must provide for their families, which seems to have a limiting effect on how progressively

men can father. Moreover, men may seek involvement without seeking equality and exercise dominance over women (Henriksson, 2019).

## *2.2 Individualization as potential democratization of family life*

The progressive narrative in fatherhood research aligns with Dencik et al.'s (2008) claim that processes of individualization lead to the potential democratization of family life. Since welfare systems in Scandinavia can provide basic necessities, adults are no longer solely reliant on their families to survive, which contributes significantly to individualization. Theories of modernization argue that the institutional fibers of the welfare state, such as the educational system and the labor market (Beck, 1992), drive individualization but this does not imply that people lead isolated lives; rather, individualization means orienting in the world with reference to oneself from a lived biographical perspective. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. xxii) argue that this constitutes an ideal intimacy situation, parallel to Habermas' (1984) notion of the circumstance of the ideal speech situation in which the interlocutors' mutual respect for one another's integrity is the underlying premise for communication. Similar potential also arises amid the individualization of family life, where the ideal of establishing intimate togetherness emerges in tandem with respecting the autonomy and individuality of family members. The argument is that individualization does not disable intimacy, but potentially changes it from a set of social obligations and conventions to a new kind of equality (Chambers & Garcia, 2021).

While the individualization thesis has faced criticism for not being empirically grounded and for universalizing the distinctive middle-class ideal of self-expression and personal autonomy, it has also fueled relevant critique in family sociology. Beck-Gernsheim (2002), who argues that we are witnessing a reinvention of the family, claims that the underlying ideas and models for familial relationships of the past century are being reconfigured into new formats that correspond to the dynamics of ongoing modernization. The author challenges family sociology to develop new concepts and theories, arguing that the field's conventional categories have lost their connection to current practices and lifestyles.

## *2.3 Intimate fatherhood and family practice*

Parallel to the challenge of reinventing the categories of family sociology, researchers have struggled to specify how contemporary fatherhood has changed (Dermott & Miller, 2015). Current strands of fatherhood research often discuss fathers' presence as the central feature of involved fatherhood. Scholars suggest terms such as deliberate fathering (Ives, 2015) and reflexive fatherhood (Westerling, 2015; Williams, 2008) to provide an analytical focus for fathers' intentional orientations. I have previously worked with the term pioneering fathers (Nielsen & Westerling, 2014) emphasizing that the path to a contemporary version of fatherhood for men as an exploratory learning process involving the reinvention of the family. Dermott (2008) proposed the concept of intimate fatherhood to go beyond the dichotomy of involved vs. uninvolved fathering, asserting that it focuses on "how intimacy is done by contemporary fathers" (p. 2) and involves centering on family practices and moving the spotlight to actions and interactions.

Accepting the invitation to focus on social practice seems promising when the aim is to explore what individualization means for fatherhood. Social practices can often go unnoticed "below the level of the dominant images and normative expectations – and yet still contribute to the development of new social configurations" (Oechsle et al., 2012, p. 13). Morgan (2011) argues that family practice is a useful concept for studying social change and family life due to its focus on everyday routines and the activities that family members do together, with the term intended to:

(...) convey another sense of the fuzziness of the boundaries between family and non-family. Any sets of practices which we might like to describe as family practices might also be described in some other way, at least in part (...) Practices merge and overlap with each other like splodges of watercolour paint or those puzzles which can be seen at first one way and next some other way (p. 8).

The term family practice links history and biography, with practice also understood as already "partially shaped by legal prescriptions, economic constraints and cultural definitions" (Morgan, 2011, p. 8). The term implies an understanding of the relationship between society and the individual as a dynamic and continually

developing exchange. The relationship between the individual and society is characterized by a dual position in which the self is not constituted through an autonomous center but in and through social interaction. This does not imply that people are reduced to mere products of social relations but are understood as actors who are always also part and outside of society. Being in a relationship with others is not possible without also being distinct from them. This is based on social psychological traditions in which the individual and society are theorized as mutually constitutive, thus viewing people as both product and producer of society (Dencik 2005; Mead, 1934).

### 3. Research design, data, and methods

The study I draw on uses a mixed-method longitudinal design comprising four waves of data. The first dataset was generated in 2003 using a survey questionnaire comprising 139 questions (Westerling, 2018) via computer-assisted telephone interviews. A randomized sample ( $n = 1,414$ ) from Denmark's Central Person Registry of individuals born in 1968 was extracted, 1,003 of whom (71%) were interviewed, leading to a panel comprising 984 individuals. The second wave was derived from face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interviews, which lasted 90–120 minutes each and were conducted in 2003–2004 with a diverse subsample from the panel ( $n = 16$ ). The third dataset was generated in 2014 using computer-assisted online interviewing comprising a web-based version of the 2003 questionnaire with 80 questions given to the panel established in 2003. Forty-four percent responded ( $n = 432$ ). The fourth dataset was collected in 2018 using face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interviews that lasted around 90 minutes each and involved 10 respondents from the 2003–2004 wave.

Table 1: Waves of data production

Wave	Year	Method	N	Age of cohort	Men in sample (%)	Number of questions	Length of interview
1	2003	CATI	1,003	34	50	140	45 mins.
2	2003/2004	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews	16	34/35	50	N/A	90–120 mins.
3	2014	CAWI	432	45/46	45	80	N/A
4	2018	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews	10	49/50	30	N/A	90 mins.

Note: CATI: computer-assisted telephone interviews; CAWI: computer-assisted web interviewing

#### 3.1 The 1968 cohort

Inspired by social network analysis (Marsden, 1990) and focusing on personal networks, both questionnaires surveyed respondents' family practices and everyday living (Westerling, 2018). Both the computer-assisted telephone interviews (2003) and computer-assisted web interviews (2014) focused on the respondents' shared responsibilities and the social networks related to care and domestic work. The questions were related to people who respondents interacted with in everyday life and people who were part of their social networks. We asked about the general frequency of interactions related to a limited set of categories (e.g., partner, parents, siblings, neighbors) and specific activities (e.g., meals, visits) within a limited temporal frame (e.g., within the last week, yesterday). In addition to generating a detailed overview of the households and the patterns of interaction in everyday life (Westerling, 2008), the questions allowed us to describe development over time for the entire panel. The following descriptive analysis uses data from respondents in the first and third waves ( $n = 432$ ), which we call the 1968 cohort since that was the year in which they were born.

Using this data, I distinguish between three household categories: no children, with children, and other (Table 2). The first category (no children) includes three kinds of cohabitation: single (no partner), couple (live with a partner), and living apart together (LAT), the last of which refers to respondents who have been

with their partner for a least 12 months but do not share a household (Levin & Trost, 1999). The second category (with children), which includes respondents who share a household with children 100% of the time or for a shorter period each month, is divided into four kinds of cohabitation: nuclear couple (only with children in common), couple with stepchildren (at least one stepchild, but may also include children in common), single parent, and LAT-c (LAT with at least one child). The third category (other) comprises additional patterns of cohabitation (e.g., living with parents, siblings, friends, adult offspring, or any combination thereof in a shared household).<sup>1</sup>

Table 2: Household distributions among respondents (2003 and 2014)

Household type	2003* % (n = 432)	2014** % (n = 432)
<b>No children</b>	<b>19.4</b>	<b>11.8</b>
Couple	11.3	6.5
Single	6.3	4.6
LAT	1.9	0.7
<b>With children</b>	<b>79.2</b>	<b>78.0</b>
Nuclear couple	63.9	61.1
Couple with stepchildren	8.6	10.6
Single parent	2.3	3.2
LAT-c	4.4	3.0
<b>Other</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>10.2</b>

Note: LAT: living apart together; LAT-c living apart together with at least one child; \* 35 years old on average; \*\* 46 years old on average

This typology provided the foundation for analyzing the family practices described in the qualitative interviews and summarized in Table 2, based on which two important insights can be drawn: 1) only 4.6% of the respondents live entirely alone (without a partner and without children), and 2) various cohabitation patterns emerge, but the majority of adults adhere to conventional configurations. The nuclear family is by far the 1968 cohort's most prevalent form of cohabitation.

An analysis of cohabitation stability among respondents (n = 324) who lived with a partner in 2003 (with or without children) shows that in 2014, 89% lived with the same partner that they lived with in 2003. For respondents who did not have children but lived with a partner in 2003 (n = 46), the share is even higher, at 96%. Among respondents who lived with a partner and had children in the household in 2003 (n = 277), 87% lived with the same partner in 2014. This shows that, for the 1968 cohort, living together with a partner and children is the most common practice, which indicates that stability and continuity in family life is the norm. Analyzing the qualitative interview data provides additional detailed insights into the personal meanings of living one's own life together with others.

### 3.2 Qualitative interview data

The qualitative interviews focused on everyday life and family practice. Since the interviews were conducted face to face, the interviewer was able to pursue immediate exploration of the respondents' personal narratives and subjective experiences in their discussions. Respondents were initially asked to describe an ordinary day, though the most recent one, which was most often the day before, was the preferred proxy. This meant that the respondents' everyday lives provided the structure for the interviews, or as Haavind (1987) maintains, time chose the theme. Thus, the familiar events of an ordinary day allowed collaborative exploration of the social events and relationships of everyday life. The method adheres to the aim of ethnographic interviews, which Spradley (1979) describes as follows:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experiences, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as

<sup>1</sup> The typology does not distinguish between same-sex couples or different-sex couples to avoid having an even more detailed typology that would lead to fewer observations in most categories, though the prevalence of same-sex nuclear couple households would be even greater.

you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 34)

Involving people in research always requires ethical considerations. The respondents volunteered to participate and were allowed to withdraw from the project at any time during the interview and subsequently. Prior to beginning the interview, respondents received written information about the project and provided written consent. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. In addition to adhering to formal ethical guidelines, involving people in qualitative research requires respecting respondents as persons who have agency and ensuring that they purposely participate in the interview. This means that sensitive topics can be explored in the interview situation when they emerge as themes in the collaboration between the interviewer and the respondent. No uniform set of procedures exist to guide researchers; in fact, "Dilemmas arise in particular situations that require difficult judgements and choices involving conflicting concerns. Often, such situations are 'unique'; not something that can be solved once and for all, but that must be continuously addressed" (Kousholt & Juhl, 2021, p. 3).

Kousholt and Juhl (2021) warn researchers against reducing ethical concerns to blindly following a set of procedures. We must instead adjust our ethical commitment throughout the research process. In the present study, exploring sensitive topics with respondents potentially led to reflections and subsequent changes in the lives of the respondents that might not have taken place if the researcher had not engaged with them. However, avoiding sensitive topics could also represent a breach in the contract between interviewer and respondent, since the respondent's motivation for participating in the research might stem from the desire to talk about just those experiences.

### 3.3 *Social psychological discourse analysis*

The interviews explored the respondents' experiences and orientations in everyday life. Investigating interviewees' subjective perspectives and personal narratives during the interview led to articulations of understandings of parenting, partnering, fatherhood, and family. To analyze the interviews, I applied social psychological discourse analysis wherein discourse is understood as "a whole range of different symbolic activities, including styles of dress, patterns of consumption, ways of moving as well as talking" and emphasizes that "... people are, at the same time, both the products and the producers of discourse (...) the masters and slaves of language" (Edley, 2001, p. 190f).

Exploring everyday life and subjective experiences through interviews means that the analysis focuses on the manner in which the respondents talk and the positions they assume while talking. When people talk about their experiences, whether in the context of an interview or in another type of conversation, they rarely account for situations and events straightforwardly or coherently. Instead, their stories are often contradictory and filled with dilemmas. Interviewing permits the exploration of such lived experiences and paradoxes. Social psychological discourse analysis centers on the resources people use to make sense of and understand everyday life complexities. A key concept is interpretative repertoires, which can be understood as relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world. Interpretative repertoires are cultural frameworks of meaning that people draw on to make sense of the world, through which they become intelligible to their interlocutors and themselves. My interest is in the discursive patterns that are central to everyday practices. I examined the fathers' narratives and accounts to analyze how they made meaning of them in the interview situation. The accounts of family practices in the interviews provided the foundation for analyzing the interpretative repertoires, which inherently comprised cultural toolkits for doing fatherhood. The analysis involved identifying the interweaving patterns of meaning that emerge when accounting for situations and practices in everyday life, just as identifying the positions made available and negotiated within these frameworks was required.

As people speak, they inevitably formulate a temporary position to speak from, constructing an identity for the moment as part of the discursive flow. Subject positions are often variable, changing rapidly and dynamically depending on the context (Wetherell & Edley, 2014, p. 359).

A key concept in this research is subject position, which can be understood as locations within conversations and identities that are made relevant through specific ways of talking. The aim of the analysis is not merely to identify subjects' positions or interpretative repertoires, but through this, to understand

contemporary fatherhood from the perspective of men who father. Understanding fatherhood means understanding the cultural representations through which fathers make meaning of their experiences, and understanding how the subjective orientations of fathers contribute to the constitutions of social conditions and cultural norms.

Using social psychological discourse analysis to explore interview data necessitates a departure from the experiences and perspectives of the fathers interviewed. The theoretical lens of intimacy and individualization focus on the experiences of the men in everyday life, while the analysis brings fathers' voices the fore, enabling openness and the possibility to listen to their accounts and move beyond the conceptual straitjacket of modernization theory. The themes that emerge in the analysis arise from the events and situations the fathers chose to present in their biographical accounts of everyday family life as well as during the process of identifying and exploring the discursive frameworks that were referenced in participants' reflexive discussions of actions and feelings. The patterns of talking about fatherhood emerged in the iterative and exploratory process of interpretation.

## 4. Results

This analysis focuses on how the stability and continuity that is evident in the quantitative analyses can be understood in relation to intimate fatherhood. Exploring what intimacy means in men's family practice, I analyze the interpretative repertoires that became relevant in the interviews when interviewees spoke about social relationships in everyday life. Analyzing their talk and the positions the men assumed facilitates the complex process of identifying how responsibility and duty are also relevant in the account of fatherhood and family practice. Examining how respondents' experiences are entangled in the way family practices develop and change over time allows exploration of how stability and continuity is related to rupture and change as seen from the fathers' perspectives.

### 4.1 *Intimate fatherhood*

In the first wave of interviews, I encountered ways of talking about fatherhood that emphasized the relationship between father and child as something in its own right, independent of the mother. Fathers highlighted the ideal of emotional and affectional reciprocity in the relationship. One example is Arthur, age 34, who participated in the first wave of qualitative interviews and had recently become a father for the first time. We talked about his plans to take paternity leave, which he was determined to do to support his wife's career since, in his words, it just made sense. Citing colleagues who had said they would rather suffer multiple broken bones than take leave, he positioned himself in opposition to their reservations, saying, "I don't feel that way," and adding, "but for me, it's a challenge," before continuing:

*Some men probably think that it's fantastic [cuddling and cradling an infant], but for me it's something ... how should I put it ... it's not something that comes natural to me, you know? There might be something interesting in the newspaper that I would rather read, you see. But, when I throw myself into that universe, get to know my son, and get that personal connection, the eye contact and so forth, then I obviously discover a new world, and then it becomes gradually more and more interesting to be together with him because then I discover what it's, that I ... well, what we can achieve together.*

Arthur used phrases like "throw myself into" and "discover" when talking about relating to his child as an enriching learning process, which he reflected on as something he must convince himself to do. "This means that it's not emotional motivation but intellectual." Arthur distinguished himself from a stereotypical traditional father "who sits in his slippers with the newspaper and lets mom do the rest," which is not the kind of father he wanted to be:



*But it's definitely a challenge for me. From being so self-focused and oriented toward myself. My own demands, my own needs, and desires. And then, suddenly, to have to form a relationship with him. It's a challenge, but I think it's enriching. This is at least my feeling so far. It's not a bad thing; it's a good thing.*

Arthur positioned himself as someone who is incompetent but who still possessed the abilities necessary to take care of a child, i.e., as someone who must learn and who has to work to learn since his disposition made him inclined to focus elsewhere. He drew on an interpretative repertoire of traditional fathering as uninvolved and detached, positioning himself in opposition to this kind of fatherhood. During the interview, he explored how he experienced intimacy with his child as emerging and developing through care practices, in opposition to the perspective that intimacy is an expression of inner love. Arthur positioned himself as someone on an enriching developmental journey due to intimate fathering.

Being a father was constitutive of personal development and provided him with a sense of self. This corresponds to the experiences of pioneering fathers that other Nordic studies identify, in which experiences with fathering are accounted for in terms of moving into the uncharted territory of care and intimacy (Nielsen & Westerling, 2014). The father–child relationship as something in its own right is an important aspect of the interpretative repertoire of intimate fathering that Arthur drew on, but this notion of fatherhood also downplayed “other relationships that are integral to the negotiation of fatherhood, such as the role of mothers as both parents and partners” (Dermott, 2008, p. 137). However, these other relationships are also important in men’s family practices. This point became vividly clear when we explore the development of men’s narratives over time, as was the case in the next section regarding a father named Jonathon.

#### 4.2 Longing for intimacy

Jonathon participated in both waves of qualitative interviews (at age 34 in 2003 and at 49 in 2018). In the 2018 interview, when asked to reflect on his account of his relationship with his partner, Jane, he reflected that, “my life ended when we had children.” When the interviewer repeated Jonathon’s account back to him, saying, “It sounds like you’re not entirely happy or content,” after a long pause, he replied:

*When I get really mad and cross, then I'd probably say that my life ended when we had children because the focus moved; there's no focus now on me or her [Jane]. If we go somewhere, the children have to come, which, don't get me wrong, is fine, but it's always: What would the children like to do? It's never about what I'd like us to do.*

Jonathon articulated dissatisfaction with his life as directly related to having children. This part of the 2018 interview is in sharp contrast with parts of the previous 2003 interview. In 2003, when Jonathon’s children were two and five years of age, he spoke about his relationships and being with his sons while working in the field as a way of conveying closeness and togetherness, as something he both enjoyed and idealized. In other words, he positioned himself as a father while drawing on interpretative repertoires similar to those in Arthur’s interview. In the 2018 interview, when asked to reflect on what he felt he was missing in life, he focused on intimacy with his partner. He expressed regret that he and Jane “don’t connect on a deeper level,” indicating that “something is missing” between them. In contrast to Arthur, Jonathon drew on an interpretative repertoire in which fatherhood was at the end of a journey, articulating that having children led to a loss or absence of intimacy. Unlike Arthur, he did not talk about care practices with his children, but he did explore the topic of intimacy, for example:

*Well, we're cohabiting in the literal sense of the word. We might as well be roommates as we could be ... we have children together, and we live under the same roof. We live together and we are together, and we help each other, but yeah, it's strictly platonic these days.*

Jonathon was referring to the ideal of living together and sharing erotic intimacy as constitutive of a romantic relationship that he no longer experienced. He positioned himself as missing this intimacy and as someone with unmet personal desires and needs. Jonathon longed for a romantic relationship in which he is the object of his partner’s attention and desire, and vice versa, but he was unable to attain this and experienced it as beyond his grasp.

Arthur and Jonathon assumed different positions in their interviews. Arthur talked about intimate experiences in developing a relationship with his infant son, while Jonathon spoke of the absence of intimacy between him and his partner. However, they both drew on an interpretative repertoire in which intimacy was not only important and connected to their sense of self and identity but also personally enriching when present, though detrimental when absent. Other studies identify and describe the position Arthur adopted (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Johansson, 2011; Miller, 2017), but Jonathon's perspective presented an additional aspect. Jonathon's reflections allow us to explore how contemporary fatherhood unfolds through multiple relationships and not just through the intimate relationship with a child—more children, one's partner, relatives, and professional contacts are also involved. While intimacy is central to the contemporary definition of good fatherhood, additional elements are also relevant for analyzing everyday family life.

### 4.3 *Fatherhood and financial responsibility*

The family practices of men involve more than just having intimate relationships with their children and were accounted for by the men interviewed drawing on multiple, contradictory interpretative frameworks. The image of a traditional father in his slippers reading the newspaper that Arthur invoked in the 2003 interview echoed past perceptions of fatherhood, i.e., the emotionally absent father who works outside the home all day. This type of fatherhood is associated with being a breadwinner and a provider, not intimate relationality; however, providing for the family is also a key aspect of contemporary fatherhood, not least across time.

Farming was a central point of reference in Jonathon's account of everyday life and concerns with being a provider and sustaining life. His ability to pay the mortgage was a constant source of worry. During the second interview he spoke at length about how economic conditions had changed, the global financial crisis having taken its toll. He explained in detail how agricultural commodities had become a target for financial investment, indicating that grain prices no longer corresponded with the season or crop yields. Financial speculation determines prices, which rendered Jonathon's efforts in the field arbitrary in relation to possible financial gains and his income. He indicated that he felt powerless and like a victim of circumstances beyond his control.

Rather than considering Jonathon's accounts of his financial woes as a digression from the focus of the interview, such thoughts can provide insight into his perspective on family and everyday life. Family practices also involved providing financial stability, which is why discussing financial concerns was not only relevant for Jonathon, but also unavoidable. In the 2003 interview, Jonathon spoke about how the risk of bankruptcy weighed him down and that if he went bankrupt and lost the farm, he would have to move far away to another part of the country, or even abroad, to avoid facing the shame he would feel. In the following interview excerpt, he described the sense of duty and responsibility he felt:

*I'm here on an old family farm and I'm probably the last one [in the family who wants] to do that. I don't think any of my children are interested in taking over. And you can laugh all you want, but I feel the weight of it pressing down on me. And it's ... [sighs heavily] ... it better not fail, you see. (...) It's not just a profession I'd lose; it's also our home (...) and that's a scary thought.*

He proudly described how his kin had been part of the local community for more than 200 years, calling the local cemetery a reflection of his family tree, with his grandparents, his great grandparents, and the generations before them are all buried there. He articulated a sense of obligation to his kin and the community, positioning himself as part of something greater than the immediate present, i.e., as part of past and future generations grounded in the farm and the local community.

A sense of ambivalence ran throughout both interviews with Jonathon. In 2003, he talked about farming and "being in the fields and listening to the birds sing" while ploughing and "everything running smoothly," while simultaneously worrying about making enough money and being "under pressure" and "drained (...) needing energy." In 2018 he described his responsibilities as a burden weighing heavily on his mind. When asked what he would do if he had no constraints, if he could do what he wanted instead of what he must, Jonathon replied:

*This is why I farm. Make no mistake about it. It's because I want to do it; it's my identity – it's who I am [...] and this also means that when we [farmers] are criticized for this or that [not minding the environment or being cruel to animals], I take it personally. It's not my profession taking a hit, it's me, personally.*

Jonathon assumed the identity of being a farmer, as opposed to farming as a profession. He is what he does. His self-account drew on interpretative repertoires, in which his financial responsibility for his family was woven together with kinship and community. Although uniquely related to farming, this highlighted how financial responsibility and providing for the family were central to his account of everyday life and his identity. This did not imply that his relationship with his children was irrelevant to him, but the relationships unfolded in the context of multiple considerations that were permeated by farming and kinship. As a result, a thorough analysis of Jonathon's family practices must include kinship and his profession, in addition to his relationship with his partner and their children. Solely attempting to understand his intimate relationship with his children would have excluded perspectives and experiences that were central to Jonathon's orientation in everyday living.

#### 4.4 Fatherhood as complex entanglements

If we focus on the contemporary family practices of men as only demarcated by the relationship between father and child, we could gain an understanding of the key features of intimate fatherhood but fail to expand our insights regarding the complex situation in which fatherhood evolves. To remedy this, we can analyze various facets of everyday life as it evolves over time from men's perspective.

The context of Jonathon's 2018 interview presented a highly apt example of how the various aspects of his everyday life were intermeshed as family practice. The interview took place at his parent's farm, although we had agreed to meet at Jonathon's own home. Jonathon explained that he traveled between his own home to his parent's home several times a day, every day. During the interview, his mother interrupted us to serve coffee and cake. His brother also popped by to discuss a farm-related issue. These occurrences served as excellent examples of the point Jonathon made in the quote below. The boundaries between Jonathon's household and his immediate kin were blurred to the point that they could hardly be identified. Kinship, household, and work were interwoven in manifold ways. Jonathon, who usually ate lunch at his parent's, shared the day-to-day work on the farm with his brother, who lived on their grandmother's farm with their grandmother, while Jonathon's uncle had a farm nearby. All the farms were within a two-mile radius of one another. When asked directly about what family means to him, Jonathon replied:

*It's hard to define what a family is, I think ... We have lots of work to do together that we share ... and since we're a small family [...] we have chosen the same profession, for starters, so family life becomes part of work life and vice versa. We don't just see our parents during the holidays; we see each other every day. Besides, being mom and dad, they're also part of the community associated with our farms and the work we do.*

This account and subsequent reflections revealed how Jonathon's family practice was more complex than an analysis focused only on his relationship with his children might reveal. These relationships must be included to better understand the complexities of previous accounts and why he said that his life ended when he had children. Jonathon's circumstance was unique in many ways. None of the other respondents in the study had such a close-knit family network as Jonathon's, yet similar patterns of discussing family relationships were evident across the material, with the emphasis on closeness representing a marker of good family relationships. Seeing someone often, or helping someone unconditionally, also signified good family relationships. The ability to reach out and ask for help without reservations or providing help unreservedly were examples of the solidarity signifying family relationships found in other accounts of good fatherhood. This ideal of being there for others was also reflected in Arthur's account of his journey toward intimate fatherhood. But this ideal is also constitutive of Jonathon's reflections regarding his frustrations concerning his romantic relationship, as well as of the financial pressures he experienced in relation to farming.

In a sense, Jonathon's lifestyle resembled feudal conditions, which contrast with the individualized lifestyles identified as a significant aspect of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1994), yet he also experienced the very dilemma of living his own life, together with others, which is just what these theories maintain is a significant aspect of individualization (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Jonathon's experiences contradicted a notion of individualized actors as autonomous, self-reliant individuals who choose their own paths in life, free from

historically rooted social norms and obligations, and in reference only to themselves. According to Jamison (2011), the link between intimacy and the cultural emphasis on freedom to make oneself has been a key aspect of discussions of social change and individualization in family studies. Such perspectives emphasize that a “heightened sense of individual identity expressed by practice of self-centered, self- autobiographical narration” (p. 152) has been both a consequence and driver of social change. Jonathon described experiencing a family life constituted by intimacy and ongoing negotiations of emotional relationality, but his accounts of family life were also permeated by an ongoing shared kinship that was characterized by a sense of belonging situated in continuous time and space relations. From his perspective, we can understand individualization as a mode of orientation in life with reference to oneself that did not stand counterposed to social ties and family practices signified by an obligation to others and solidarity. This becomes clear because the analysis was situated in everyday life, where family practices unfold in complex everyday living comprised of multiple relationships and ambiguous parenting experiences.

## 5. Concluding discussion

Mills (1959) proposes the concept of sociological imagination, which he defines as “the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two” (p. 7) because neither the individual nor society can be understood without understanding both. This article shares this vision, and I have sought to present summations of what is occurring in the world and of what may be happening in the contemporary lives of fathers.

My analysis examined the changing conditions of fatherhood in contemporary society by exploring the everyday family practices of men. Everyday living is continuous and structured by repetition and routines, but it is also continually evolving and subject to change. The analytical focus employed a biographical perspective to examine the interactional or relational aspect of everyday life. This perspective allowed exploration of the continuous juggling of multiple ambitions among the necessities, constraints, and duties of family life (Gouveia & Castrén, 2021). I maintain that the focus on fathers provided broader insight into parenthood. I chose fatherhood, not because it is more important than motherhood, but because valuable and unique insights can be gained regarding contemporary family life through fathers’ experiences. The men whose family practice I analyzed adopted positions that are distinctively masculine.

Both Arthur’s position as a relatively incompetent carer, whose intimate relationship with his son had to grow through practice, and Jonathan’s position, in which he expressed strain in the intimate relationship with his romantic partner in relation to his children, were culturally intelligible. Neither father exerted much effort during the interview to negotiate the relevance of the positions they adopted, as these positions seemed uncontroversial to both them and the interviewer. Had they been mothers, they might have endeavored to position themselves as incompetent carers or taken different approaches when describing the lack of an unmediated emotional connection with their offspring. None of the mothers in the interviews came anywhere near saying, “I know I have to care for my child, but I would rather just read the newspaper,” just as none of them spoke about “life ending” when they had children. This is not to say that the mothers who participated in the study did not have experiences like those of Arthur and Jonathon. Articulating those experiences, however, would have required a different effort in terms of reasoning and explanation. Moreover, doing so would have involved confronting the ideals of good parenthood much more directly than the positions Arthur and Jonathon took. Good motherhood and good fatherhood are articulated differently. Still, or perhaps for this reason, we can gain insights into the challenges of contemporary family life and parenthood by interviewing fathers.

From the position of being caring fathers, Arthur and Jonathon articulated the challenges of parenthood in everyday life in establishing and developing intimacy. While their individual stories differed and were unique, both men struggled with a common theme: developing and sustaining intimacy in everyday life; a feat that becomes simultaneously more difficult and more urgent for individualized actors (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Dencik, 2005). Although intimacy is experienced as giving life meaning, it is challenging to sustain intimate relationships, as the analysis demonstrated.

The complex network of relationships and struggles that Jonathon experienced in everyday family life imposed constraints, but they did not seem to counteract his drive for autonomy or his subjective orientation toward self-realization and the individual creative expression of life choices. Although he did not seem to have the resources available to realize his aspirations and dreams, he was indeed oriented as an individualized

actor. He basically drew on the discursive framework of reflexive modernization in his biographical orientation in life, but his family practices inherently unfolded under the constraints and conditions of everyday life.

A central aim of this article was to examine how individualization theory can be useful for exploring everyday life by drawing attention to conditions and situations in need of closer examination, such as family relationships, with a focus on intimacy. I endeavored to demonstrate that individualization theory has the advantage of indicating where to focus our analytical attention without prescribing what we will find. Individualization theory may guide our analytical attention when theorizing contemporary fatherhood, but such analyses must remain sensitive to the complex entanglements of everyday family life.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Professor Lars Dencik, Associate Professor Hans Sønderstrup-Andersen, and research assistant Ditte Skakke at Roskilde University for their collaboration. There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

## Data availability statement

The research data is not publicly available.

## References

- Bech-Jørgensen, B. (1994). *Når hver dag bliver hverdag* [When every day turns into everyday life]. Akademisk Forlag.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Reinventing the family: In search of new lifestyles*. Polity Press & Blackwell Publishers.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. SAGE.
- Beck, U. (1994). The reinvention of politics: Towards a theory of reflexive modernization. In U. Beck, A. Giddens, & S. Lash (Eds.), *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order* (pp. 1–55). Polity Press.
- Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217580>
- Budgeon, S. & Roseneil, S. (2004). Editors' introduction: Beyond the conventional family. *Current Sociology*, 52(2): 127–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041797>
- Chambers, D. & Gracia, P. (2021). *A Sociology of family life: Change and diversity in intimate relations*. Wiley.
- Dencik, L. (2005). *Mennesket i postmoderniseringen: om barndom, familie og identiteter i opbrud* [Human beings and postmodernization: On childhood, family and identities under change]. Billesø.
- Dencik, L., Schultz Jørgensen, P., & Sommer, D. (2008). *Familie og børn i en opbrudstid* [Family and children in a time of upheaval]. Hans Reitzel.
- Dermott, E. (2008). *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927069>
- Dermott, E. & Miller, T. (2015). More than the sum of its parts? Contemporary fatherhood policy, practice and discourse. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 4(2): 183–195. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14212269138324>
- Edley, N. (2001). Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, & S. J. Yates, (Eds.), *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis* (pp.189–228). SAGE.
- Farstad, G. R. & Stefansen, K. (2015). Involved fatherhood in the Nordic context: Dominant narratives, divergent approaches. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 10(1): 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2015.1013348>
- Gouveia, R. & Castrén, A. M. (2021). Redefining the boundaries of family and personal relationships. In A. M. Castrén, V. Česnuitytė, I. Crespi, J. A. Gauthier, R. Gouveia, C. Martin,... & K. Suwada (Eds.), *The*

- Palgrave handbook of family sociology in Europe* (pp. 259–277) Palgrave Macmillan.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73306-3>
- Haavind, H. (1987). *Liten og stor: Mødres omsorg og barns utviklingsmuligheter*. [Big and small: Mothers' care and children's developmental possibilities] Universitetsforlaget.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action*. Polity Press.
- Henriksson, H.W. (2019). Exploring fatherhood in critical gender research. In L. Gottzén, U. Mellström, & T. Shefer (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of masculinity studies* (pp. 320–330). Routledge.
- Ives, J. (2015). Theorising the 'deliberative father': Compromise, progress and striving to do fatherhood well. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 4(2): 281-294.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674314X14184029517584>
- Jamieson, L. (2011). Intimacy as a concept: Explaining social change in the context of globalisation or another form of ethnocentricism? *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4): 151–163.  
<https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2497>
- Johansson, T. (2011) Fatherhood in transition: Paternity leave and changing masculinities, *Journal of Family Communication*, 11(3): 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2011.561137>
- Kousholt, D. & Juhl, P. (2021). Addressing ethical dilemmas in research with young children and families. Situated ethics in collaborative research. *Human Arenas*: 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00236-9>
- Levin, I. & Trost, J. (1999). Living apart together. *Community, work & family*, 2(3): 279-294.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13668809908412186>
- Marsden, P. V. (1990). Network data and measurement. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16: 435-463.
- McCarthy, J. R. (2012). The powerful relational language of 'family': togetherness, belonging and personhood. *The Sociological Review*, 60(1): 68-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02045.x>
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, T. (2010). *Making sense of fatherhood: gender, caring and work*. Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511778186>
- Miller, T. (2017). *Making sense of parenthood: Caring, gender and family lives*. Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316219270>
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, D. (2011). *Rethinking Family Practices*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/10.1057/9780230304680>
- Nielsen, S. B. & Westerling, A. (2014). Fathering as a learning process: Breaking new ground in familiar territory. In T. Rostgaard & G. B. Eydal (Eds.) *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states* (pp. 187-208). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t894gw.14>
- Oechsle, M., Müller, U. & Hess, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Fatherhood in late modernity: Cultural images, social practices, structural frames*. Verlag Barbara Budrich. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvddzvgg>
- Roseneil, S. & Budgeon, S. (2004). Cultures of intimacy and care beyond "the family": Personal life and social change in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Current Sociology*, 52(2): 135–159.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041798>
- Sparrman, A., Westerling, A., Lind, J. & Dannesboe, K.I. (Eds.). (2016). *Doing good parenthood: Ideals and practices of parental involvement*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46774-0>
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Wadsworth Group – Thomson Learning.
- Westerling, A. (2008). *Individualisering, familieliv og fællesskab: En socialpsykologisk analyse af hverdagslivets sociale netværk i en refleksiv modernitet*. [Individualization, family life and togetherness: A social psychological study of social networks of everyday life in a reflexive modernity] PhD Dissertation Roskilde University.
- Westerling, A. (2015). Reflexive fatherhood in everyday life: The case of Denmark, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 4(2): 209-223. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14347065836218>
- Westerling, A. (2018). Mixing methods in fatherhood research: Studying social change in family life. In E. Dermott & C. Gatrell (Eds). *Fathers, families and relationships: Researching everyday lives* (pp. 189-210). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447331476.003.0011>
- Wetherell, M. & Edley, N. (2014). A discursive psychological framework for analyzing men and masculinities. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 15(4): 355-364. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037148>
- Williams, S. (2008). What is fatherhood? Searching for the reflexive father. *Sociology*, 42(3): 487-502.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508088837>

## Information in German

### Individualisierung und Vaterschaft in der heutigen Zeit

#### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Dieser Artikel untersucht Herausforderungen der Vaterschaft in der heutigen Zeit und diskutiert, wie Individualisierungstheorien zu einem Verständnis von sozialem Wandel und Familienleben beitragen können.

**Hintergrund:** Aufgrund der fortwährenden Prozesse der Individualisierung argumentieren Modernisierungstheorien dafür Schlüsselkonzepte der Familiensoziologie neu zu denken. Das Konzept der intimen Vaterschaft ermöglicht die Erforschung männlicher Familienpraktiken und stellt eine Grundlage dar, um zu verstehen, was Modernisierung für die heutige Elternschaft bedeutet. Intime Vaterschaft kann durch empirisch sensible Ansätze in der Untersuchung des Familienalltags genauer konzeptualisiert werden.

**Methode:** Auf der Grundlage von Daten einer Mixed-Methods-Längsschnittstudie mit vier Datenwellen aus der Kohorte 1968 in Dänemark ( $n = 1.414$ ) analysiert die Studie qualitative Interviews aus der zweiten und vierten Welle. Mittels sozialpsychologischer Diskursanalyse der Interviews werden die Familienpraktiken der Teilnehmenden untersucht.

**Ergebnisse:** Die Analyse der Daten zeigt, wie fürsorgliche Intimität in der zeitgenössischen Vaterschaft in einer komplexen Verschränkung mit anderen Positionen im Verhältnis zu Partnerschaft und Versorgung verwoben ist. Individualisierung wird als ein Modus der Lebensorientierung in Bezug auf sich selbst theoretisiert, jedoch nicht als Gegenpol zu sozialen Bindungen und familiären Praktiken, die durch Solidarität und Zusammengehörigkeit gekennzeichnet sind.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Individualisierungstheorien können die analytische Aufmerksamkeit bei der Untersuchung zeitgenössischer Vaterschaft anleiten, aber die Analysen müssen sensibel bleiben für die komplexen Verflechtungen des familiären Alltags.

**Schlagwörter:** Individualisierung, Vaterschaft, Sozialpsychologie, Diskursanalyse, Alltag

---

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2023, vol.35, pp. 357–371.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-823>

Submitted: March 29, 2022

Accepted: April 24, 2023

Published online: May 2, 2023

Allan Westerling: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1697-2213>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).