Examining different perspectives on fatherhood: a socio-cultural approach

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Abstract

Main purpose of the present investigation is to explore cultural perspectives on different aspects of fatherhood. In this study, we analyze perspectives of different cultures on fatherhood by focusing mainly on mythologies, and religious perspectives. Findings suggest that provision, protection, formation (formation of the child’s character), and endowment (giving legal status to a child) functions seem to be viewed as primary functions of fatherhood across cultures.

Keywords: Fatherhood; Socio-Cultural Perspective; Mythological and Religious Perception of Fatherhood

1. Introduction

Culture comprises values, beliefs and customs that are shared by members of a social group. In every society, culture patterns experiences of persons on the basis of their age and sex. This is also clearly true for perceptions about and expectations from parents. The experience of fatherhood varies dramatically within and across cultures. That is, the way in which a father is expected to behave, and the ways in which others treat the father are highly variable. Diversity in the experience of fatherhood may be closely linked culturally to variations and the social structures such as kinship patterns, family structures, and economic systems (Tripp-Reimer and Wilson, 1991).

Different perspectives of males and females about household roles might be strongly affected by society’s rules and customs concerning gender. Members of every society have expectations and beliefs, sometimes explicit, sometimes unspoken, concerning what men and women are expected to do or not to do (Maccoby, 1999). Historical, economical, and political changes as well as religious beliefs of a society influence expectations, rules, and customs concerning gender and parenting.

Purpose of the present study is to analyze the different cultural perspective on manhood and fatherhood by focusing on fathers’ place in social research, mythologies of different cultures about fathers, fatherhood concept in historical times, and most common religions’ perspective on fathers.

Looking at fatherhood from a socio-cultural and historical perspective will help to broaden conceptual thinking on fathers as important contributors of families within different cultural structures. While considering fathers’ roles and parental practices we should give attention to diverse family structural organization, parental beliefs about child-rearing, and conceptions of “manhood” and “fatherhood” (Roopnarine, Shin, and Lewis, 2001). Parental beliefs and practices regarding child-rearing influenced the cultural pathways to childhood development since they mirror selected cultural practices that ultimately shape children’s behaviors (Harkness and Super, 1996).
First we begin looking at fathers as research subjects in social sciences to see how social scientists (mostly males) studying families and children approach fathers and to what extent they collect data on fathers. Then we turn our attention to mythologies to see how in ancient mythologies deities portrayed as males and/or fathers. Also we try to focus on the characteristics of ancient deities to see to what extent our modern time fatherhood perception reflect the main characteristics of ancient deities in mythologies. Then we briefly discuss the role of the father in ancient societies in order to shed some light on the roots of the role of the father in modern times. Lastly, we look at the most common religions’ god concepts to have some cue on the impacts of the religious doctrines on the role and image of the father in family and society.

2. Fathers as Research Subjects

In the mid of the 20th century there was not enough data on fathers. This neglect of the father by social scientists, according to Nash (1976), reflected a lack of interest by culture in fathers and even by fathers in their role. Because of the lack of interest in fathers by social scientists, we do not have enough data on what fathers in the 1950s, or 1960s, or earlier, really though about their role (Nash, 1976).

Last decades have witnessed dramatic changes in the perception of the father’s role and there has been explosion of research on fathers (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999). Researchers have become increasingly aware of the need to broaden the theoretical and research understanding the patterns of father-child interactions. Consequently, there has been a steady increase in observational work on father-child interactions in a wide range of cultural context (Roopnarine, Talukder, Jain, Joshi, and Srivastav, 1990). There is now a broad consensus that fathers are important contributors to both normal and abnormal child outcomes (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999). Today there is a greater openness about paternal involvement than was evident in two decade ago.

3. Fathers in Mythologies

Parenthood begins with creation. Male creativity is generally identified as more abstract and idealized than its female counterpart. In myth, the first and ultimate creative act is frequently ascribed to the male deity as the father of the universe. The male is considered the point of origin, the prime mover, and the first part of life, of consciousness, of thought. Even in older, polytheistic systems that have a dominant female goddess of fertility, there is often a male who precedes the female as creator.

Father’s shared abilities to nurture and create life are readily abstracted. The father role becomes a metaphor for his ability to create buildings, cities, art, religion, and government. His role in the creation of a child is identified with other kinds of creativity. The creative power of the father is fearful. In the earliest and most primitive forms of the earth father, fathers were being identified with the earth itself. He is the stuff from each life has come. Living things spring from his very body, as in the ancient Norse legend of the giant Ymir. The male figure from whom all life springs is not unique to Scandinavia. Purusha of Vedic India and Pan-Ku of Chinese legend both forms the world from their bodies. From Australia comes another creation story with an earth father. Karora, like Ymir, gives birth through his armpits.

Although sky is a traditional male-father symbol, maleness is also associated with earth and underworld. Freyr in Norse mythology, Pluto in Roman, Osiris in Egyptian, and Tammuz in Sumerian are all gods of that type. They are all the masculine rulers of the underworld, the land of the dead. (Colman, and Colman, 1988).

Images of the sky father have dominated the social structure almost as long as we have recorded the history of our species. The power of the image has been so complete and lasting in all fields of human endeavor that, with only a few exceptions, the characteristics of the sky father and those of masculinity had been one and the same. He separated from the earth and therefore divorced from the intimate nurturing and fruitful functions. These are the attributes of sky father: 1 to provide, 2. to judge, and 3. to protect.

The image of the sky father emphasizes those attributes needed to fulfill the protector and providing roles such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness. This image of the father is interested in techniques, facts, logic, and decision-making and denies the importance of emotion, feeling, and intuition. His nurturance is abstracted from real-life interactions. He leaves the unreasonable, the uncanny, the fecund, the intimate, and the relational to his earth mother opposite.

The sky God is the Zeus, the ruler of the Greek pantheon, depicted with a thunderbolt in his hand. He is Thor, the Norse thunder God, riding his goat-driven sky chariot and swinging his indomitable hammer, Mjolnir. He is also Ra, the Egyptian sun god; Jahweh, speaking from heaven; and all the other deities has associated with the sun,
thunder, and lightning. A sky God is a protector and lawgiver. Jahweh dwelt in the sky. He was associated with light and fire, with thunder and lighting, and with law. In this passage just quoted, He was concerned for the safety of his people. He proceeded to give them the Ten Commandments. As lawgiver He stated the rules and expected his children to obey. His punishment was harsh but just. He stood in opposition to the forces of darkness, irrationality, and the earth, represented by Satan and operating most seductively through woman and such fertility idols as the golden calf.

In most of the modern world, the male parent closely resembles the sky father. His work is in the world. His identity is that of protector and provider. He spends most of his time away from the family earning money, serving the military, developing community structures and services, which his children will need. In that outside world, his behavior emphasizes productivity, competition, and aggression.

In spite of the sky father’s apparent dominance in most cultures, mythology suggests that the male was not always in a position of superiority in the family or the community. The first deities seemed to have been fertility goddesses. It has also been suggested that the first societies were matriarchal (Colman and Colman, 1988).

4. Fathers in Historical Times

In order to understand the roots of the role of the father in modern times we should look at the role of the father in ancient societies. In ancient civilizations, men held a superior position. Also in public worship man claimed a superior position. The family was the basic unit of society, dominated by father, under the paternal roof. The father’s role was monarchal, and the principal duty of the children was to honor and obey him. Father’s power was absolute and holding sway over his wife or wives, his children, and his slaves. Wife was in a position of subordination to her husband. There were many instances of subordination of women to men. Women, wives, daughters, were regarded as of minor importance and put into subservient relation to men, husbands, and fathers (DeBoer, 1974; Hooft, 1982).

Now it is time to turn to a different history and its father perception. The Ottomans (1299 - 1923), originated among Turkic peoples of Central Asia, established an empire based on Islamic traditions and culture. Ottoman Empire dominated the Islamic Middle East in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ottoman Empire was a patrilineal government with only males allowed to succeed to the throne. Fathers, in the Ottomans period, held a dominant position in the household and sons and daughters had to obey their fathers. Women in the Ottomans period was also required to obey their husbands and had to accept their husband’s possible marriages to other wives in their household. Males regarded as authority figures and heads of the families (Hughes and Hughes, 1997).

5. Father Concept in Religions

Gender is fundamental to the structuring of the state and of educational, legal, medical, and other institutions as well as religious institution (Osmond and Thorne, 1993). There is no religion that labels itself as "patriarchal" or "sexist". All religions agree that women should be treated properly, not abused or mistreated. Most people grow up believing that men and women are treated well and equal in their religion. Even when taught that women are inferior to men or that women must submit themselves to men, religious men and women alike are encouraged to see these teachings as valuable and useful, rather than problematic aspects of their tradition. None of the major world's religions --Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the East Asian philosophical traditions of Confucianism and Taoism-- treat women and men equally, though they fail to greater or lesser extent. Applying standard definitions of “patriarchy” to any of the great world's religions quickly reveals patriarchal teaching and institutions. In most cases, as a husband and father, men hold most or all of the roles of authority and prestige in religious organizations. From these positions, they control and dictate the norms of the tradition for all women and children. Women are often not invited or allowed to participate on the interpretation or construction of tradition. Religion appears most often in an oppressive guise, but we should also realize that religious belief could also motivate and empower women (Gross, 1996; Hughes & Hughes, 1997; Jain, 1991).

Judeo-Christian tradition has influenced western conception of fathers. Christianity is distinguished by the concept of “God The Father” in contrast most of other religions. (Nash, 1976). One of the names with which the Jewish-Christian religions refer to God is “Father” (Solle, 1981). In the life and teaching of Jesus, fatherhood has the central concept in descriptions of God’s dealing with people (Hooft, 1982).
There are only eleven places in the Old Testament where God is designated as “Father”. But there is an “indirect” symbolization of God as father in the Old Testament, which occurs when God is identified as “the God of the fathers”. This was the earliest form of association between the idea of God and the idea of father, and it has its roots in the family life of Ancient Israel. Compared to the eleven times God is designated “father” in the Old Testament texts, the testimony of the gospels is startling (Hamerton-Kelly, 1981). The New Testament keeps putting the word “Father” on the lips of Jesus 170 times (Geffre, 1981).

God’s fatherhood implies his right to punish people because of their sins. A father possesses authority, he is the master. He is no less the protector of his offspring. He is wise and kind (DeBoer, 1974).

Unlike Christianity, Islam made no claim to represent God to “Father” but like Judeo-Christian tradition, Islam tradition has male-dominant concept of Allah (God). In the Koran, holly book of Islam, and in prophet Muhammad’s teaching, God is referred as “He, His, or Him…” For example the following “ayet”, God words, are taken from Koran;

“He alone is the God in the heavens and the God in the earth; and He alone is All-Wise, All-knowing” (43:84).

The Allah, God, carries with it the following connotations: fostering, bringing up, nourishing; guardian, one who supervises; leader, head, lord, sovereign (Ally, 1987).

Apart from that traditional Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious doctrines share this same idea that god created the universe and the first man, Adam. Eve was created out of Adam’s rib, therefore she was dependent on him, and it was her duty to be subject of him as her head and lord. In the matter of hierarchy within gender these most accepted three religious views give the priority and authority to the “male” (Mercadante, 1990).

As we see most of the religious doctrines have male dominant God imagery. These concepts of religious doctrines (Male-God) have highly important impacts on the role and image of the father in family and society. In this situation it is not surprising that to have the males as rulers, breadwinners, and authority figure in the family.

6. Conclusion

Culturally defined gender distinctions determine men's and women's political, economic, and spatial positions within the social organization. Religious ideologies that solidify these functions also promote gender identities that further re-evaluate and redefine previously established sex roles (Gerami, 1996).

As discussed in the paper, in order to understand why women as a group have been excluded so systematically from the public power and men excluded from home and child care giving we should study different dimensions of genders in history. Since men dominate the public discourse in the society, they have historically been seen as dominant, or hegemonic, (Cheal, 1991). When we look at the history of the world we see dominant male story of cities, economics, wars, and empires that being portrayed as distant from home, family and emotions (Hughes and Hughes, 1997).

Different perspectives of males and females about household roles are thought to be strongly effected by society’s rules and customs concerning gender. In return, expectations, rules, and customs concerning gender continue to be influenced by historical, economical, and political changes as well as religious beliefs of the society. In today's patriarchal societies, most males may perceive provision of economic support as their main contribution to their children’s and wives’ well being (Pleck, 1998).

In addition, social life usually polarized based on gender. Men historically were associated with culture, production, and public sphere, whereas women traditionally were associated with nature, reproduction, and private sphere. In these gendered dichotomies culture supersedes nature; women’s labor in childbearing and rearing (reproduction) is subservient to men's labor in production women’s; and public domain more valued than private domain. As Gerami (1996) stated these poles provide a hierarchical structure that brands women and their traits, labor, and products as inferior and secondary. As long as this perspective prevails it is not surpzing that mothers all around the world remain the primary source of early care giving. By contrast, the role of breadwinner perceived to be more valuable for fathers and as in the historical times even in industrialized countries fathers remain to be authority figure and head of the family.

References


