

## Relationality and moral reasoning in accounts of fathering after separation or divorce: care, gender and working at 'fairness'

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Based on a qualitative, sociological study, this article presents fathering after divorce as a complex moral and relational process; a navigation of post-separation family life shaped by gendered patterns of caring for children. New contexts of fathering can bring transformative experiences of care, but fathers also encounter the 'pull' of a gendered model of parenting, which normalises different levels of caring responsibility without disrupting a sense of the equal moral status of fathers and mothers. The article highlights two central themes: fathering as 'relational work' and moral reasoning within fathering practices and identity. The idea of 'fairness' as part of capturing processes involved in fathers' efforts to sustain relationships and caring arrangements that are 'bearable' is then discussed. The article argues for a gender-sensitive approach to understanding parenting after separation, which fully appreciates the deeply felt, embodied nature of fathering and mothering, and acknowledges their relational and moral dimensions.

**key words** care • co-parenting • divorce • fathering • separation

### Introduction

Using an analytical framework that makes particular use of the feminist moral philosophical conception of care (Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993), this article presents fathering after separation or divorce as a complex moral and relational process shaped deeply, although not straightforwardly, by gendered patterns of caring for children. It adds to existing literature on fathering and on post-divorce parenting by focusing particularly on accounts of 'working at' relationships and offers insights from fathers not involved in protracted contact disputes.<sup>1</sup> Fathering after separation remains an emotive issue and one continuing to appear high on policy agendas in the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond (Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Doucet et al, 2009; Featherstone, 2010). In the UK, debates over how separating couples should make provision for their children are highly pertinent in personal and public contexts, particularly in the wake of the Family Justice Review (Norgrove, 2011). Current coalition government initiatives for 'relationship support' (Cameron, 2012) and changing legal principles informing private law custody disputes (DfE and MoJ, 2012) seem to indicate shifts in how parental relationships are perceived and regulated. With the expansion of mediation services for separating couples included within the umbrella of relationship

support, it may be that the social-scientific idea of divorce as a transition in, rather than collapse of, family relationships is becoming more embedded in mainstream political thinking (Trinder et al, 2002; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003).

However, Gillies (2005) has powerfully argued that contemporary political rhetoric around families obscures class and gender in its construction and positioning of 'parents'. This is arguably part of the contention relating to separation and divorce, where both fathers and mothers often seek to defend deeply felt, morally significant, gendered roles and identities, while also trying to adapt to changed circumstances (Day Sclater and Yates, 1999; Smart and May, 2004). I suggest, therefore, that across various political and policy debates over fathers, fatherhood and fathering (Morgan, cited in Hobson, 2002), there remains the question of gender. In line with the work of earlier scholars such as Smart and Neale (1999) or Day Sclater (1999), and in particular the approach taken by Doucet (2006), I contend that a critical consideration of gender must engage with conceptions of both equality and difference, enabling greater understanding of when, and in what contexts, gender difference amounts to disadvantage. There is a need for feminist work on fathering (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011) that theorises the gender relations that shape the personal and social organisation of care for children, without disregarding the constraints and opportunities these produce for both fathers and mothers, and without ignoring the domestic and caring responsibilities that women continue to hold.

The study presented here contributes to this critical enterprise. With its focus on the complex ways in which gender shapes the experience of fathering after separation, and its poignant accounts of the process of '*working at it*', the data overall offer both optimism and caution. Fathering after separation and divorce can produce new or different contexts of care, which have the potential to change personal, social and political understandings of male caring practice. Alongside this, however, is the ready availability of a model of parenting that may lay claim to greater gender equality by positioning fathers and mothers as morally equivalent, yet does not substantially alter expectations of, or opportunities for, fathers in terms of caring labour and responsibility. In what follows, I present two central themes from the study – the *relational* and *moral* dimensions of fathers' narratives – and relate these to a particular theoretical implication arising from the analysis: the idea of '*fairness*' as a means of navigating post-separation family life. I then consider wider connections between fathering, care and gender and the need for a gender-sensitive approach to understanding fathering and mothering after separation.

## The 'Working at it' study

This qualitative, cross-sectional study involved 23 biological fathers' accounts of fathering after separation or divorce. The doctoral study received full clearance from the Open University's ethics committee. The fathers identified themselves as having maintained contact with their children over time and across households.<sup>2</sup> The aim was to explore the detail and commonality of fathers' narratives of post-separation fathering, and to illuminate the processes of sustaining father-child and co-parental relationships. All the fathers had at least one biological child where the relationship with the mother had ended and had been separated or divorced for at least one year.<sup>3</sup> The age of the children varied from three to 18 years and some fathers also talked about adult 'children' as part of the interview. The interviews focused on:

- fathers' caring arrangements for their children and how these had developed;
- whether/how their working lives had changed with becoming a father and with divorce;
- the emotional and practical aspects of their relationships, and time spent, with their children.

I interviewed only fathers because my focus was specifically on men's experiences and perceptions. While clearly I heard only one part of a bigger story, my aim was to shed light on how men, as fathers, perceive the process of sustaining fathering roles, identities and relationships after separation. The interviews were coded for their relational, practical and moral aspects, using an analytical framework informed by feminist moral philosophy and a technique known as the 'Listening Guide' (Gilligan et al, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). This reflexive and iterative process, involving both external concepts and participant terms, produced the central themes around fathering, moral identity and strategies for 'working' at relationships.

The purposive sample all lived in a rural region of Eastern England, and the majority were of White British ethnicity. Three main access routes were used to recruit fathers: family support organisations, including two fathers' groups (eight fathers), employers or places of work (11 fathers) and my own professional and social networks (four fathers). Again, because of the deliberately non-prescriptive nature of the recruitment process, the sample was varied in terms of age, employment, type of caring arrangements in place and the reported quality of co-parental relationship with mothers. What this diverse group of fathers had in common was some experience of attempting, and wanting, to sustain relationships with their children, and to navigate co-parental relationships with mothers.

Of the 23 participants, 15 fathers reported consistent weekend, staying-over contact with their children, who also stayed with them for periods of school holiday.<sup>4</sup> Included within this group were three fathers who were main carers, where mothers had weekend contact with their children. Of the remaining eight fathers, one had a shared-care arrangement, where he and his ex-wife each cared for their son for half of the week and alternate weekends. Two fathers, whose children lived further away, had longer periods of contact during school holidays along with regular telephone or email contact. Two fathers had regular supported contact with their children, either via a contact centre or with another professional present as a 'chaperone'. The last three fathers had unstable weekend contact, in a situation of ongoing dispute with an ex-partner.

### **'Care' as an analytical tool for understanding fathering after separation or divorce**

Feminist methodology and moral philosophy significantly informed the design and theoretical framework for this study. The concept of 'care', as defined within the feminist ethics of care (Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) emerged as a productive analytical tool for understanding father-child and co-parental relationships. While the development of feminist moral philosophical thinking has grown out of theorising of women's experiences as mothers, an aim of this study was to explore ways in which care could be used to shed light on men's lives as fathers. My objective was to apply a critical lens to fathering after separation, as one context in which gender

matters; revealing ways in which gender differences and disadvantages may operate, and how these may be perceived, experienced and articulated by men as fathers.

Care, defined as a social and ethical practice, incorporating practical, relational and moral dimensions (Tronto, 1993), resonated powerfully with the research interviews. Using care as an analytical tool provided me with a means, and a vocabulary, to attend to fathers' perspectives carefully and critically; to foreground fathering while still retaining a focus on gender difference and the constraints and opportunities this produces for men. This approach highlighted fathering as an embodied set of practices and as an identity shaped by social expectations and constructions of men (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011). The focus on care as a relational practice and as 'a way of thinking' (Ruddick, 1989) was also valuable. This deeply informed my attempts to capture how fathers felt they tried to 'stay close to', 'provide' and 'be there' for their children.<sup>5</sup>

Using the concept of 'care' also enabled me to highlight the normative dimensions of fathering, which in turn can help to explain the personal, emotional and social investments involved. In analysing the moral aspects of fathers' narratives, I used a sociological, symbolic interactionist perspective, which sees moral questions and deliberation as an intrinsic part of social life. I also align myself with Sayer's (2005) understanding of lay morality and of the reasoned and reasonable nature of moral and emotional commitments (2005: 39). Moral identity is part of being a father or a mother in most contemporary Western contexts, and is, in different ways, at risk as a result of separation or divorce. This means that continuing to be parents to children beyond the ending of a couple relationship involves relational and moral, as well as practical and emotional, challenges, and using the feminist moral philosophical conception of care allowed me to illuminate these, and argue their importance.

### **Fathering as relational; connection, closeness and 'getting the real dad experience**

'He knows I'm there, and his mother knows I'm there for him, and I know that he's gonna be there as well, so it's a kind of two-way thing, so I've tried to set that as a routine in his life, as much as I can do, I've obviously missed an awful lot, but as much as I can, I keep that in there so that he knows he can talk to me.' (Martin<sup>6</sup>, father of 11-year-old Tom; periods of school holidays and regular telephone calls)

The concept of 'relationality' has become increasingly integrated into sociological thinking about family lives (Mason, 2004; Doucet, 2006; Gabb, 2008) and has been explored across a number of social-scientific disciplines (Baker-Miller, 1976; Carsten, 2000; Hollway, 2006). Within feminist moral philosophy, relationality is presented as a defining feature of human experience and agency (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Noddings, 2003) and utilised to highlight the complexity and powerfully felt nature of connection while recognising the asymmetry of many caring relationships (Young, 1997; Gabb, 2008). Applying relationality highlighted the salience of 'quality' relationships to fathers and shed further light on paternal practices and perceptions around love, responsibility and care. It therefore also offered some insight into the relationship between gender and relationality; into how 'relating practices' (Gabb, 2008) are perceived and experienced by men as fathers. My broader argument is

that it is important, in itself, to notice and explore relationality in men's lives, as it contributes both to an understanding of male caring, and to any critical analysis of the persistently gendered way in which care is conceptualised, experienced and valued (Doucet, 2006; Marsiglio, 2012).

Overall, the fathers in this study shared an expressed sense of relationality; in their preoccupation with preserving their position as fathers through their relationships with children and mothers, and their sense of self being felt and enacted, through and because of connections to others. All of the fathers interviewed presented themselves as part of an, often complex, network of people and/or organisations, involved in different ways, and at different levels, in their children's lives. In this way, fathering must be understood as something done in connection, although not necessarily collaboration, with others.

'When you hear really good reports, and the teacher saying, "Oh you've got delightful little children" and all this sort of stuff – and it's not just me, y'know, their mum's played a part in that and my parents have played a part, so it's not just me doing that, but I do feel sort of very good about that.' (Dan, father of eight-year-old Isobel and six-year-old Max; main carer, regular weekend contact with mother)

'There is the fact that he is half and half of each of us, there's nothing that either one of us can change with that.' (Brian, father of 12-year-old Jack, 10-year-old Josh and eight-year-old Luke; unstable weekend contact with Luke, intermittent contact with Josh and no contact with Jack)

In addition to this general theme of fathering in connection, the more specific and inductive concept of 'relational work'<sup>7</sup> also emerged. This term enabled me to highlight fathers' talk in terms of attempts to actively promote, preserve or restore positive relationships with their children; of wanting to feel emotionally close to and at ease with them; of sharing mutually satisfying time and activities; but also having some ability to exert influence over their lives. Actions or decisions were weighed up in terms of their impact on relationships, or responses modified in order to preserve goodwill (however fragile) or at least avoid/minimise open conflict. Such activities, almost always, occurred with mothers or with other relatives, new partners and so on, with fathers' consistently demonstrating awareness of the dynamics of family relationships, which was also connected to their sense of themselves as a 'good' father.

'A lot of the decision making, I've had to make with my present wife as well ... and I've had to think about decisions and think, well what are the consequences of saying something, and weighing that up to see if it's gonna do any good or not, 'cos I think sometimes you can do more damage by making an issue out of it, than, letting it go, or monitoring it.' (Martin, father of 11-year-old Tom; periods of school holidays and regular telephone calls)

One particularly prominent example of relational work associated with father-child relationships, was expressed by one father as the need to provide and to receive "the real dad experience". The interview narratives demonstrated fathers' preoccupation with the quality of the time they spent with children, not just the amount. Specifically,

they sought to retain some sense of a 'normal' fathering relationship, which they saw as enabling them to continue fathering children they felt emotionally connected to:

'I don't know how you could sustain, anything like, proper fatherhood, without looking after them, y'know, wholesale, for regular spells. You couldn't, I mean you wouldn't be involved in their conversations, you wouldn't know the people they were talking about' (Chris, father of 13-year-old Gerry, 10-year-old Oscar and six-year-old Sally; alternate weekend stays and periods of school holidays).

Not living with children full time seemed to have produced reflection about the meaning and consequences of routine caring, and for some, their pre-separation fathering practice. Many of the fathers demonstrated a heightened awareness of the mundane, or of 'dailiness' (Apthekar, 1989), which was linked to the idea of 'normal' and 'good' fathering, and to ideas about what both children and fathers need:

'You have to, look at the time which you're spending with them and make sure that you're giving them, a reason to come back and see you, so they look forward to it, but also, be consistent with whatever's going on at home, so you provide the, real dad experience if you like.' (Paul, father of three-year-old William; overnight stays three times a week)

'That's something you never come to terms with because, you become a babysitter, because you're not seeing them daily.' (Tony, father of 18-year-old Sam and 16-year-old Jess; weekly visits and regular telephone calls)

In this way, fathers who no longer lived with their children demonstrated a certain rethinking of the significance of practical caring tasks (such as cooking, eating and washing) and of 'ordinary' activities (watching television, shopping and gardening). One recurring narrative was the story of 'transformation' or 'intensification' of fathering as a result of divorce or separation. This was particularly, but not exclusively, visible within the accounts of main or shared-care fathers. The work of both Ruddick (1989) on 'maternal thinking' and Doucet (2006) on male caring is relevant here, as both are interested in the transformative potential of intensive, routine caring for children, in terms of its impact on ways of thinking and relating to others. Importantly, in the present study, the theme of 'transformation' was also present for fathers who cared for their children at weekends or periods of school holidays. The intensity came partly from feeling solely responsible, but also from the context of limited time itself. For example, for one father, Chris, the experience of having his three children to stay at weekends had dramatically changed both his feelings about, and practices of, fathering. While he struggled with painful feelings about his divorce, he nonetheless spoke explicitly about the qualitatively different relationship he had with his children and his sense of being transformed by his changed fathering circumstances:

'When you're with them, it's absolutely full-on and hyper-intense emotionally, I mean, even if you're not doing anything much ... and I'm quite happy to go swimming every Sunday afternoon because they love it and because they love it, I love it, and, it really does genuinely change you I think, you do

become different.’ (Chris, father of 13-year-old Gerry, 10-year-old Oscar and six-year-old Sally; alternate weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

So, in the context of having limited or designated time with children, fathers in this study had, in different ways, reconsidered both their pre-divorce fathering and, more broadly, what being a father or a mother meant, in both personal and moral terms. It is important to recognise, though, that ‘transformed’ experiences of care did not often equate to greater amounts of time or responsibility. In line with national patterns, the most common form of caring arrangements was that fathers had children to stay for weekends, overnights during the week and/or periods of school holidays (Lader, 2008). Yet what the study does suggest is how, following separation or divorce, the opportunities and costs of gendered caring roles and responsibilities may be inverted as fathers and mothers struggle to continue caring for children beyond the context of couplehood. If direct care and responsibility come to be seen as important for maintaining relationships with children, then they also come to be seen as something necessary, something valuable; the negotiation of which may involve significant emotional and practical compromise for both fathers and mothers.

### **Moral reasoning and moral self-presentation: ‘putting children first’**

‘I don’t know if I’m proud of it, it’s just, y’know [long pause] something you’re expected, I expected to, to do.’ (David, father of 17-year-old Amy; regular mid-week stays and periods of school holidays since time of separation)

The focus on moral aspects of fathers’ narratives grew out of both the quality and amount of discussion of what was ‘good enough’, best, ‘right’ or fair, for children and for fathers, mothers and other family members, in the context of parenting after separation. In this regard my approach is closely aligned with Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) in that fathers’ interviews can be seen as constituting ‘moral tales’, which are shaped, not least, by social and structural factors such as gender and class. Sociologists such as Finch and Mason (1993) and Duncan and Edwards (1999) also suggest that family life is better understood as a series of complex moral dilemmas to which there are few off-the-peg answers; emphasising the significance of moral identity in relation to both living and talking about family relationships. I argue that in talking about parenting after separation or divorce, moral identity is at stake. To take care of, and have responsibility for, a child involves moral deliberation, which takes place in a particular practical but also relational context, informed by an already gendered experience of social and personal life. In this respect, the following discussion also adds to the exploration of differences between fathers’ and mothers’ narration of ‘good’ parenting after divorce, developed by, for example, Kaganas and Day Sclater (2004).

Across the interviews, fathers consistently expressed ideas compatible with the ‘moral imperative’ presented by Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003), positioning ‘Children’ and ‘Adults’ as distinct moral categories and adults as morally responsible for children in their care. This meant that in their talk about prioritising children, fathers expressed particular ideas about what children need or what is ‘good’ for children:

‘The one thing that I was always very adamant about, was that the children needed a, really clear routine, about where they were and what they were doing, so that they weren’t like, being passed around like, packages.’ (Dan, father of eight-year-old Isobel and six-year-old Max; main carer, regular weekend contact with mother)

‘You can’t penalise a child, based on their parents’ decisions y’know, so she has the same clothes that, her brother has, or benefits the same as her brother does, from, the way I work, and everything else.’ (Jason, father of seven-year-old Katie; regular weekend contact and periods of school holidays)

Out of this general principle that children’s needs should be prioritised, also emerged the more specific, contextualised theme of ‘putting children first’. This was most commonly articulated to indicate an overall moral commitment to children,<sup>8</sup> either through drawing some moral contrast between themselves and ‘other’ men, and/or through explicitly stating that sustaining contact was morally significant:

‘I mean it’s my responsibility, my duty, and I don’t shy away, I’ve never walked away from it, I’ve made that clear, to my wife now, she’s known from day one, I said: “Well I’ve got a daughter that comes to stay and stuff” and I was proud of that.’ (James, father of 12-year-old Chloe; regular weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

Putting children first was also frequently expressed in terms of adding a moral dimension to the process of working at a co-parental relationship; most often in terms of a recognised need to put aside personal disputes, or to separate the history and dynamics of the couple relationship, from the ongoing parental one: “It was always William was first, regardless and fortunately that has remained clear in both our minds, the fact that, y’know, despite, our anger or our hurt, Will obviously still needed to be the primary thought” (Paul, father of three-year-old William; overnight stays three times a week).

Even for fathers who described a high level of animosity between themselves and their children’s mothers, or found it hardest to contain these difficult feelings, there was still an expressed sense that, at least in theory, children’s interests had to be placed before their own grievances and that they continued to share certain moral responsibilities as parents of the same child: “I’ve always sort of known that Adam comes first y’know, his interests, his emotional importance is more important than mine” (Tim, father and main carer of four-year-old Adam, weekend contact with mother).

‘Putting children first’ could be expressed as an idea but was also ‘displayed’ (Finch, 2007) through accounts of decisions and actions, so that it can be linked to ‘good fathering’ as a practice. In different ways, fathers gave accounts of particular decisions in terms of having acted from the principle of putting their children’s interests first. Yet interestingly, the same idea can also be linked to the concept of ‘active passivity’ (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003) in that it could equally mean *not* doing certain things. For instance, fathers described avoiding arguments either with mothers, or between children and their mothers, or not intervening in mothers’ parenting decisions. While such relational strategies arguably carry moral ‘risks’, such as being seen as uncaring

or uninvolved, they tended to be described by fathers in terms of being considered 'better' or 'fairer' for children:

'I've always just tried to support and be there, and not get involved because, if you get involved in arguments, you always drag the kids into it and, they don't need that in their life, it's enough heartache.' (Tony, father of 18-year-old Sam and 16-year-old Jess; weekly visits and regular telephone calls)

'Some people advised me that I should fight for custody, because her mother was so weird, but I said that would do more harm to Helena, and certainly do a lot of damage to her mum, and if Helena saw her mum being hurt, even though she was weird, she still loved her, she's still her mum.' (Robin, father of 15-year-old Helena and two adult daughters; regular, informal weekly visits and weekend stays)

A final dimension of 'putting children first', which particularly illustrates the complexity and ambivalence within the concept, concerns how time is spent together with children. Put simply, the key moral question here was 'should putting children first include doing things you don't like?' All of the fathers were asked about how they spent time with their children, and many brought up the subject of common interests; enjoyed, lacking or lost, but always as related to the sustaining of emotional relationships:

'I really, really, enjoy it, I mean like, doing the football training with the kids, and with Sam and his mates, it's like, we'll get in the car, we'll go off swimming, we'll go to the beach' (Gerry, father of 10-year-old Sam; shared care arrangement with Sam's mother). However, the ways in which fathers perceived the moral responsibility involved in putting children first, in terms of spending time and choosing activities, varied and was further complicated by the age and sex of children.<sup>9</sup> Fathers in this study saw the issue of doing what children wanted as being easier when they were younger; where children's desires and needs were perhaps seen as more intertwined. Fathers of teenage children expressed more ambivalence around focusing on children's interests. This was often accounted for in terms of children becoming more independent, or developing their own social lives:

'Chloe will be the first to admit she wants a bit more excitement now, so, we are having to adapt to that fact, whereas, to be honest, I'd prefer to go on a dog walk and have a pint ... I haven't really ventured towards looking at things I should be doing with her, like rollerblading, or stuff like that, perhaps I should.' (James, father of 12-year-old Chloe; regular weekend stays and periods of school holidays)

The issue of differences between daughters and sons in terms of how fathers spent time with children also appeared as a prominent theme across the interview narratives. Accounts of having daughters often revealed consideration of the question of putting *girls'* interests first. The recurring idea of having to do 'girlie things' and fathers' differing responses to this, demonstrated the added complexity that gender brings

to the general moral principle of putting children first, as it can make the practice of sharing common pleasures more of a challenge, or draw attention to the moral qualities of playing with dolls or going shopping:

'I'm quite good with my little girl, in like, her girly ways – like she's into these Bratz things at the moment and I know all their names – and she wanted all these fairies painted in her bedroom so I done that ... for some reason it's not actually as hard as you might think.' (Dan, father of eight-year-old Isobel and six-year-old Max; main carer, regular weekend contact with mother)

'I struggle to think of things actually, that we would both enjoy, because – it sounds a bit selfish maybe, but I don't want to do something, just because she would enjoy it, but equally I do do things I don't enjoy, because she enjoys them, but it would be nice to have found some, common interests, but we haven't done that, Anna and I.' (Dennis, father of 14-year-old Anna and 13-year-old Craig; regular weekly visits and informal weekend contact)

While the presentation of their daughters' interests is perhaps stereotypical or oversimplified, fathers were nevertheless conscious, sometimes self-conscious, of daughters as having particular needs. In this context, as a father, sometimes the morally responsible thing to do was to support the mother–child relationship, which could still be accounted for as a way of putting children first:

'I don't think, as a father, I could give what daughters need – I forget when they have their hair done, I don't notice and I get moaned at, so I think, they needed a mother ... I can't teach them about make-up, I can't teach them about them sort of things, so it was most probably the right thing for them to live with their mother.' (Tony, father of 18-year-old Sam and 16-year-old Jess; weekly visits and regular telephone calls)

Overall then, the moral claim to be putting children first could be interpreted and enacted in a number of ways: it could legitimate action or non-intervention, it could require fathers to step in or step back, to take on new or different forms of child-centred activities, or provide a means of absolving themselves of at least some of the responsibility for this. 'Putting children first' could be used to narrate non-resident fathering as morally 'legitimate' as long as fathers were seen to be attempting to avoid relational and emotional distance. They did this through trying to spend meaningful time with children, taking children's interests into account and attempting to foster a co-parental relationship. Fathers also appeared to have some ambivalence over the lengths to which they will go to put children first, suggesting that the 'moral space' exists in which they can express such feelings in an interview. These moral and relational processes can be related to both the gendered nature of parenting and to debates around its intensification (Hays, 1996; Faircloth and Lee, 2010).

### **'Fairness' as a resource for fathering after separation or divorce**

A significant, theoretical issue raised by these illustrative examples is the emergence and conceptual significance of the idea of 'fairness'. The study revealed that fathering

is seen as a relational exercise; taking place within particular contexts and networks of care and support (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Doucet, 2006). The presence and significance of such networks, including paternal relatives, second families, ex-in-laws and friends, formed a consistent reference point for fathers' narratives; often implicated in the processes of both relational work and moral accounting. In turn, in this study, fathers' presentation of moral issues or dilemmas was not done in a detached or rights-based way. While another recurring concern across the interviews was that '*dads have it tough*' in terms of social support, the fathers in this study did not express any strong preoccupation with fathers' rights or with fathers as politically marginalised. Instead, the analysis revealed that fathers operated with a highly contextualised, relational form of moral reasoning and that an idea of fairness was used as a working guide for finding bearable solutions to complex moral problems, often involving multiple sets of needs or wishes. Fairness appeared as a prominent participant term connected to the processes of moral reasoning and accounting. Perceptions of fairness also demonstrated the continual presence of gender as a mediating factor, bringing both particular opportunities and constraints for fathers in both their actions and their accounts of these.

Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) define fairness in terms of beliefs about what is both 'just' and 'good' for children in particular; based on an understanding and prioritising of children's needs, but also in relation to ideas of inclusion and equality within a family network. Importantly, the concept of 'fairness' can be linked to a relational understanding of moral reasoning, as while it incorporates moral principles, aside from the privileged moral status of children, rights or obligations appear as negotiable rather than absolute. Fairness seems to be concerned with questions of responsibility, and moral accountability, as much as with rights, making it less binary and highly applicable to the complexities of family relationships. Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) highlight the use of fairness as a practical guide for applying moral reasoning; to achieve fairness, or at least a perception of fairness, is a complex moral and relational accomplishment, central to the practices of 'making families'.

In this study, fathers' use of the term 'fairness' in accounts of '*working at*' family relationships suggests that contextualisation is an important and necessary part of the process of deliberation, action, and for the telling of moral tales in an interview. In relation to both children and mothers, being fair was connected to the allocation of resources – money, time, material resources (including property) and attention – and to a lesser extent, responsiveness to feelings. Considerations of fairness were highly contextualised in that practical and relational factors informed both the process and the outcomes and, whether they did so with more or less reluctance or difficulty, fathers appeared to be having to pay some regard to the circumstances and feelings of others. What these fathers often claimed to have achieved, or be working towards, was some kind of 'bearable solution'. Fathers often described their family situations as 'the best of a bad job' and saw their co-parental and fathering relationships as part of an ongoing process, in which time and effort were involved.

Yet perceptions of and reasoning about fairness also need to be considered in relation to gender, in terms of both how fathering and mothering identities are experienced, and how the activity of caring for children is socially constructed. The interview narratives were shot through with complex and ambivalent ideas about what being a 'man' and being a 'father', and indeed a 'mother', meant. While changed circumstances of caring for children could bring about significant shifts

in fathers' perceptions, it can be argued that there also remains a certain 'optional' quality about fathering, which does not disrupt any sense of the equal moral status of mothers and fathers. I suggest that a 'gendered moral space' exists, in which post-separation fathering and mothering takes place, involving expectations, rewards or sanctions, limits or boundaries, but also room to manoeuvre. I offer this term not just because men as fathers appear to be subject to different evaluative criteria, from both particular and generalised others (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2007), but also because they necessarily engage with particular normative ideas about masculinity, such as 'providing'. This means that, again, there are both opportunities and constraints for men in terms of fathering as incorporating practical activities, relational work and moral reasoning. So, on the one hand, in terms of sustaining father-child and co-parental relationships, fathers may be able to deploy the relational strategy of 'active passivity', or of prioritising mothering as a way of being 'fair' to both mothers and children. This presentation of fairness through stepping back, or at least not taking on more caring responsibility, illustrates the moral status that may be attached to a comparatively limited, 'supporting' role. On the other hand, it may be that, particularly non-resident fathers, feel they have much less bargaining power or may be 'unfairly' expected to compromise, or step back, in the face of mothers' elevated moral status and responsibility. Responsibility contains both obligations and powers, which appear to be revealed and experienced in new, and painful, ways during separation and the process of parenting beyond this. Being fair to each other as co-parents can perhaps be understood as something that involves fathers and mothers in both giving up and taking on different kinds of responsibilities.

### **Conclusion: care, gender and fathering**

The 'Working at it' study sought to explore narratives of fathers who saw themselves as committed to sustaining relationships with their children, over time and across households. While their circumstances varied, what they shared was the experience of fathering in relation to others, and some level of recognition of the ongoing co-parental relationship with children's mothers. Important limitations of this study are that it is a small, cross-sectional exploration of post-separation fathering, involving fathers who felt they had a morally viable story to tell. Yet, the research can offer grounded suggestions about these fathers' perceptions and accounts, which may shed light on the challenging processes of caring for children after separation, or present useful conceptual insights. What the analysis suggests is the extent to which relationality and moral reasoning are relevant to the experience of fathering after separation or divorce; in terms of fathering practices, identity and self-presentation. The study also revealed that this group of fathers held ambivalent views about gender-stereotypical roles and assumptions about both fatherhood and masculinity, trying at some moments to hold on to, and at others to shake off, 'old' ideas in an effort to be both good and often different kinds of fathers. Fathers shifted between accepting and resisting gendered thinking about parenting and care; sometimes seeing it as a way to preserve a sense of the 'unique' nature of fathering; sometimes recognising it as untenable for fathering across geographical, temporal or relational distance.

Across the interviews, the notion of transformed fathering appeared; involving becoming more attentive and available to children. This was linked to spending time together, but was presented much more in terms of the relational and emotional

quality of that time, the 'work' involved in producing it and the consequences, and pleasures, of sole caring for children outside the context of marriage or partnership. Such changes appeared to have led these fathers, in different ways, to reconsider both their pre-separation fathering and, more broadly, what being a father or a mother meant, in both personal and social terms. What may previously have been taken for granted or was unremarkable, could become 'visible' and so more open to reflexivity. After separation, some fathers may come to feel differently about caring for children, gain a different awareness of the opportunities and rewards it can bring and perceive different associations between direct care and sustaining relationships with children, and with their mothers (Philip, 2012).

Yet alongside, or despite, the transformative potential of direct care and caring responsibility, the study also revealed that a gendered model of parenting often appears as a 'default position'; one that may indeed be perceived as 'bearable' or least threatening for both fathers and mothers. This model, which tends to place mothers as primary and fathers as morally equivalent, 'supporting' carers, is recognisable in public discourses around, not just parenting, but also work-life issues (Gatrell, 2005) and is not incompatible with promoting father engagement (Featherstone, 2009). After separation, and despite political interest in formalising 'equal parenting', it can be difficult for both fathers and mothers to relinquish this primary and supporting model, as both may struggle to acquire and to give up certain gendered aspects of their roles and responsibilities. In this way, gendered patterns of caring for children become fault-lines for the reorganisation of parental roles and responsibilities following separation or divorce. Navigating such terrain draws fathers, and mothers, into painful and difficult negotiations, involving the allocation of time and practical care, but also, I suggest, of care in its ethical sense, in relation to responsibility, responsiveness and moral deliberation (Tronto, 1993; Sayer, 2011). Re-negotiating care for children after separation also places demands on fathers' and mothers' sense of moral identity as 'good' parents, and on the significant social and emotional meanings attached to being a 'father' or 'mother'. While such negotiations can involve transformative experiences for fathers, these are only one small step towards addressing gendered patterns of care more widely (Lynch et al, 2009). The readily available gendered model of parenting, while not static, remains both structurally and normatively powerful, and it is still not easy for fathers and mothers to substantially reorder their caring and working lives. Consequently, following separation, fathers often retain a 'supporting' role, which, while morally viable, perpetuates a voluntary element to fatherhood. This can bring, as the fathers in this study experienced, significant costs or challenges in terms of giving and receiving 'the real dad experience', and sustaining their place in children's hearts and lives.

Attempts to engage or empower fathers can be implemented with or without an interest in gender equity, and can too easily produce yet another adversarial context for mothers and fathers, or problematise women as a barrier to fully involved fathering (Featherstone, 2010). On the basis of this study, I suggest the need for a gender-sensitive approach to understanding parenting after separation, which fully appreciates the deeply felt, embodied, gendered nature of fathering and mothering, and acknowledges their relational and moral dimensions. Without such an approach, the transformative potential of direct care for men as fathers may be missed and a significant opportunity to support fathers and mothers in navigating new caring roles and identities will be lost.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Only five out of the 23 fathers were involved in a long-running court case over contact, at the time of interview.

<sup>2</sup> My focus was on fathers who did have contact arrangements and who spent time with their children with some consistency, but I could not impose quantitative limits on what counted as 'regular'. In my recruitment literature I used the phrase 'fathers who see and take care of their children' in order to allow for interpretation and self-selection.

<sup>3</sup> This was a practical decision taken as part of the ethical consideration of the implications of asking fathers to retell painful stories.

<sup>4</sup> This pattern corresponds with the most recent Office for National Statistics data stating that over a third of children have direct contact with their non-resident parent at least once a week (Lader, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> 'Staying close', 'providing' and 'being there' were all themes that emerged from the interviews and were developed in chapter seven of the thesis, which dealt with fathering as a practice but also as a form of gendered moral self-presentation.

<sup>6</sup> In order to protect anonymity, fathers and their family members were given pseudonyms as part of the transcription process.

<sup>7</sup> This term emerged from the data analysis but can be related to the concept of 'emotion work', as explored by Duncombe and Marsden (1993).

<sup>8</sup> This idea was also prominent in relation to fathers' moral self-presentation. Expressed in terms of 'staying', the fathers in this study appeared able to lay claim to a moral identity, as men who had not 'walked away' even though it was often seen as an *option* available to them.

<sup>9</sup> This is also related to talk about the embodied nature of fathering in that fathers' expressed awareness and self-consciousness in relation to caring for children in public (often feminised) spaces, and to perceived cultural suspicion towards men as carers for young children.

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