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Boys' construction of fatherhood when their fathers are absent

Ann Christin E. Nilsen^{a*} and Solveig Sagatun^b

^a*Agder Research, Kristiansand, Norway;* ^b*Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway*

In this article, we address the question of how boys whose fathers are absent construct an image of fatherhood. Drawing on the stories told by three boys whose fathers are absent, we explore how the boys, in the relation with their mothers, siblings and others, construct and negotiate an image of fatherhood, including how they envisage themselves to be as fathers in the future. The data material consists of life-mode interviews with the boys and their mothers. Theoretically, we are inspired by social constructionism and cultural psychology. We find that the boys aspire to become fathers who engage in close and mutual relations within the family, who are emotionally and practically available, who are consistent and predictable, and who participate in activities with their children. This image of fatherhood is in line with the contemporary expectations to fathers in our culture. In developing this notion of fatherhood, the role of the mothers is crucial, and we find that they – in their repertoire of motherhood – propose to their sons a cultural orientation that affirms their sons' identity as men and future fathers.

Keywords: fatherhood; social constructionism; family studies; childhood studies; child welfare

The policy of involving fathers

Across different political parties in Norway, there is a shared goal to promote gender equality. Implicitly, efforts to enhance post-divorce paternal involvement in children's lives have been taken. The reform on dependency allowance, which was effectuated in 2003, was an important step in that direction. Rather than being based on a principle of equal percent sharing of support after parental break-up, it is focused on sharing of care in a wider sense, giving fathers an equal probability as mothers to have the main custody of the children after break-up (on principle). Thus, in Norway, as in other Nordic countries, shared parenting appears to be the dominant parenting ideal, argued to be in line with the ideal of gender equality, but also gaining recognition as a way to promote the reciprocal development of father and child (Perälä-Littunen 2007). Shared residence after parental break-up has consequently become more common, but the proportion of children living in single mother-headed households continues to be much higher than the proportion living in single father-headed households.¹ There is, however, a general tendency for fathers in Norway to spend more time with their children. Indeed, increasingly, fathers decide to stay at home and care for children rather than working full-time outside of home (Kitterød 2012), and more fathers take out their quota of paternity leave (Bringedal and Lappegård 2012). These changes bear witness to a change in the

*Corresponding author. Email: ann.c.nilsen@uia.no

Ann Christin E. Nilsen and Solveig Sagatun equally contributed to this article.

paternal role acknowledged throughout the western world, replacing the stereotypical image of the breadwinning father with an image of a caring father (Doucet 2006; Raeburn 2014; Røthing and Aarseth 2006). Still, it is often claimed that mothering remains to be the parenting norm, and that fathering is being compared to that norm (Doucet 2006; Perälä-Littunen 2007).

The change in role of fathers makes it interesting to ask how young men whose own fathers are absent think about their future role as fathers. Several studies point to how the continued involvement of both parents in children's lives after parental break-up is beneficial for the children (Amato 2001; Dahlhaug 2002; Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda 2004; Lyngstad and Kitterød 2008; Wallerstein and Blackslee 1989). In contrast to most children of divorce, who continue to have contact with both parents, children with an absent parent lose an important caregiver and the remaining parent loses a discussant and co-parent. In most cases, by far, it is the father who is absent (see Golombok 2000).

It is often claimed that boys suffer more from paternal absence than girls, a view that is rooted in a notion of gender role modelling (e.g. Murray 1990 in Featherstone 2004a). Implicit to this thinking is a psychological understanding in which fathers are regarded as crucial to young boys' socialisation and development of independence and maturity. In other words, boys need a father in order to become older boys in socially accepted ways (Nielsen and Rudberg 1989). Within social studies of childhood, this idea of socialisation has been criticised (Nilsen 2000). One point of this critique is that the concept entails a notion of children as passive, in void of agency. The socialisation concept suggests a linear and deterministic process, directed from those with power (the adults) towards those without power (the children) (Thorne 1993, 1997). This prevents us from acknowledging children as competent social actors. Within social work, and in particular child welfare, this understanding appears to be particularly strong. Boys, and especially 'problematic' boys, are perceived to benefit from the assistance and monitoring of fathers, or men in lieu of fathers, in order to become young men in socially accepted ways (Sagatun 2005). We choose to focus on boys due to this prevailing understanding of the socialisation of boys within social work in Norway.

We argue in line with those critical to the dominance of gender role theory. Drawing on the stories told by three boys whose fathers are absent, we discuss how the boys construct, and negotiate an image of fatherhood, including how they envisage themselves as fathers in the future. We will try to understand the boys' ideas about fatherhood through exploring how reference to fathers and fathering appear in interaction with their mothers and siblings. We will also try to understand how their experiences of contact with their own biological father and stepfather, and their interactions with friends and observations of their friends' interaction with their own fathers, affect their own ideas about fatherhood.

Understanding parental roles in a cultural psychological perspective

Gender role theories have been criticised for neglecting the agency and reflexivity of the individual. Moreover, if the perspective of gender role modelling is taken to the edge, the outcome for boys whose father is absent is rather fatalistic. Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda (2004) argue that it is not the absence of a male gender role model that is harmful, but rather that paternal absence leaves many paternal roles (economic, social and emotional) unfulfilled. An alternative approach is to understand gender as a social construction (Solbrække and Aarseth 2006).

In society, there exist different and even contrasting images of motherhood and fatherhood, and expectations of mothers and fathers differ accordingly (Wertsch 1991). Social categories, such as gender, age, social class, etc. are, from this perspective, meaningful entities needed for communication, but contain no objective meaning *per se*. Instead, gender serves as a cultural meaning system (Haavind 2002). It is an organising principle for how women and men understand each other and themselves, and make sense of the reality they live in (Wyn and White 1997). A cultural psychological approach seeks to understand individual behaviour in light of contextual and social aspects instead of through categorical individual characteristics. We use this perspective to understand the importance of the interaction processes for the boys' construction of fatherhood.

We argue that there are no objectively speaking 'correct' or 'true' images of motherhood and fatherhood, but multiple constructions that are the products of social interaction. As far as children are concerned the parents, and in this project the mothers specifically, are the primary mediators of a 'truth', and thus the boys' construction of reality is expected to be strongly influenced by their interaction with their own mothers, but also with others inside and outside the home.

Parenting in the modern negotiation family

As previously mentioned, the role of fathers has changed during the last decades. O'Brien argues that what counts as 'positive' father involvement depends to some extent on the theoretical models of researchers and the age of the child, but that there are certain commonalities. 'Positive' father involvement is commonly related to activities that are likely to promote an emotionally secure environment and well-being in its broadest sense, such as warm, responsive and sensitive interaction, monitoring and guiding behaviour to set limits, spending time to listen and talk about the child's concerns, encouraging age-appropriate independent action and caring for the child's physical welfare (O'Brien 2005, 11–13 in Featherstone 2009, 79).

Alongside changes in parental roles, new forms of family life have emerged. Modern families have been described as 'negotiation families' (Frønes 2003). This concept is used to describe the relations between the family members. The 'negotiation family' is a family type that reflects the increasing focus on children as individuals with their own needs and rights. The child perspective is strengthened, contributing to an image of the child not only as a recipient of some kind of adult effort, but also as a social actor and caregiver who contributes practically and emotionally to the collective. The entry of a culture of negotiation in the family implies a demand for new and different parental competences. Gerhards (1988) and Giddens (1991, 1993) depict how increased intimacy in relations is an aspect of modernity. In modern societies, parenthood based on rights and obligations has been transformed to a relationally and emotionally based parenthood.

Despite this democratisation of families, most people agree that parents are responsible for providing their children with the norms and knowledge required in the society they are part of and to make sure they develop to realise their full potential (Vygotsky 1978). Indeed, parents have a judicial responsibility to do so.² Haavind (1987) states that in a modern family, developmental movement ought to be directed towards increased mutuality, increased responsibility for personal matters and increased responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. When the object of the developmental change is understood to be the increasing ability of the individual to understand him- or herself in relation to others and to behave accordingly, the attention is towards

mutuality. It is a process where the individuals' perception of self as 'I' and as a participant in a sociocultural context, is continuously extending (Gulbrandsen 1998).

Within this understanding of development, the future aspect becomes an important characteristic of the parenting practice. Care is conducted in a manner that increasingly enables the child to take care of him- or herself independently. This future-oriented notion of care is described as developmental supportive (Andenæs 2000). Through developmental support, the child is gradually enabled to meet the social requirements and expectations and to take part in a larger collective (Vygotsky 1978). Thus, developmental support has a cultural component that provides the child with the appropriate abilities to take part in the local community. Knowing how to behave appropriately as a father in the culture that they are part of, is consequently an important ability for boys to adopt. In this perspective, care is a continual work that encompasses both the social abilities and opportunities of the child and the adults' knowledge about the life forms that will gradually be accessible for the child practically, culturally and socially. Hence, parenthood includes a cultural orientation. It is the role of the adult to see where the child is headed and what the child needs in order to move forward (Andenæs 1996, 2000; Sagatun 2005; Vygotsky 1978). Based on his or her knowledge about the child's competency and the situation the child is in, the adult provides guidance and direction. Hence, mothers and fathers are their children's translators and mediators of relevant social requirements. Their role is to enable their children to read and interpret the culture themselves, not to do it for them.

Methodology

The main project-approach has been explorative, generating data from individual interviews with mothers and children in eight families. We have interviewed eight mothers, five boys and four girls. In these interviews, we were inspired by the so-called 'life-mode interview'. This interview form is set up in a manner which provides data material that leaves room for exploration and understanding of interaction. The life-mode interview was first introduced by Haavind (1987). Andenæs (1996) later adapted the technique for use in settings where small children and their caretakers were involved. Researchers have since made use of the method by adapting it for various purposes (Gulbrandsen 1998; Sagatun 2005, 2008a; Ulvik 2005). In practice, it is more of an inspirational framework than a fixed model for conducting an interview. Indeed, it is referred to as an interview *conversation* to underline the open mode of the interview and the active role of both the interviewer and the interviewee.

The life-mode interview is structured according to the chronological order of various incidents throughout a day, and provides an opportunity to ask in detail about the different incidents, in general, episodes that have taken place just before the interview took place (Sagatun 2005, 2008b). This form of conversation is well suited for obtaining insights into the children's own experiences and understandings of their interactions with their own mothers and other significant people in their everyday lives. It brought forward stories about persons in the family network, their participation or absence in different situations.

Obviously, there are some limitations in this design. The sample is small and not representative. Indeed, the boys' characteristics (age, time of fathers' absence, etc.) differ, making the sample unfit for comparison. Our intention, however, has not been to draw generalisations based on the material, but rather to explore the informants' own perspectives and how they negotiate meaning. In the analysis, we used a 'grounded'

approach, in which empirical data serve as a point of departure for developing theoretical knowledge. In order to substantiate our research aim of exploring how boys construct a notion of fatherhood in the absence of a father, we have chosen to provide a detailed insight into the individual stories from three of the boys. We could have alternatively conducted a thematically structured analysis of all the interviews; however, such an approach would impoverish the level of detail.

Our intention is not to compare the boys' stories, but to expose the variation of implications from the father being absent. For this reason, the stories are not reconstructed in identical ways. We have chosen to highlight variation, and at the same time try to stay true to the boys' and mothers' own accounts.

Stories from Hector, Evan and George

'Hector', 'Evan' and 'George' are three boys; each with different backgrounds as far as the involvement of their fathers is concerned. The three are also different ages. Yet, they share some common experiences and perspectives on their fathers and their own lives.

Their stories are selected because they to some extent represent the diversity of the data material. In the main report from the project (Nilsen, Sagatun, and Ellingsen 2009), we categorised the children's stories into three types. These categories were dependent on the children's level of contact with their fathers: (a) children who had very little contact with their fathers (such as Hector), (b) children who had sporadic and rare contact with their fathers (such as Evan), and (c) children who gradually had lost contact with their fathers (such as George). This categorisation was empirically grounded. We found that the level of contact with fathers over time had an impact on how the children spoke specifically about their fathers, and about fatherhood in general. In a strict sense, Hector is arguably the only boy whose father is absent. However, as previously noted, we use the term absent in a comprehensive sense, including fathers who have very little and rare contact with their sons, such as Evan and George.³ It is well documented that the experience of losing a parent may have a negative impact on children's attachment (Daniels 1998; Featherstone 2004b; Golombok 2000; Lamb 1997). Evan and George's reactions to their fathers' absence might very well be made sense of along the lines of attachment theory. However, our quest is to try to understand how the boys construct a notion of fatherhood considering that their fathers are absent, and not to analyse their reactions. We therefore deliberately do not attend to attachment theory in this article, yet we acknowledge its important value in understanding the boys' responses to their fathers' absence.

We will first present each of the stories, and then discuss how the boys construct their paternal images in different ways. Which images of fathers and fathering come to the surface in their stories? These condensed stories build primarily on the interviews with the boys, but the interviews with their mothers are also taken into account.

Hector

Hector is fifteen and lives with his mother. He has no siblings. Hector's biological parents have never been in a lasting relationship, and his father is defined as 'unknown'. Despite several attempts, Hector and his mother have never succeeded in finding Hector's father, as he lives in a different country and his full name and date of birth is unknown to Hector's mother. Still, Hector has met his father twice during his early

childhood years, when the mother managed to locate him in his own country of residence. At one point, Hector also met his father's family that is, his biological grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Hector's mother is dependent on disability insurance and has been ill during the last 10 years. She spends her days at home and has a limited social network, apart from close relatives. Due to her illness, she has had limited opportunity to follow her son closely at school, i.e. participating at meetings, helping with homework, etc. As a single mother solely entitled to minimum dependency allowance, she has struggled financially throughout Hector's childhood, and has at times been dependent on supplementary benefit.⁴

According to his mother, Hector does not often talk about his father. Still, she is convinced that he thinks about him and that he would like to meet him.

Hector is in general satisfied with his life. He has a lot of friends and a few relatives in his neighbourhood. He enjoys school and the teachers, and he participates in diverse leisure activities, primarily unorganised ones, which he takes great pleasure in. He has an optimistic view on his future prospects, and sees himself in the future role of social worker and father.

Hector's memories of his father are fractured. He remembers his father in pictures – visualising how his father was cooking and lifting him. Hector talks about his father in a light tone, and does not express comprehensive sadness of his absence. Still, he would like to have contact with him, like this quote from the interview illustrates:

I don't know if he is dead or alive, or where he finds himself in the world. So I don't really think much about it. But I think it would have been cool to meet him and have contact with him. That would have been cool, because it is kind of nice to have contact with your father.

When Hector refers to the lack of contact with his father, he makes relevant a notion of how a father–son relationship ought to be, which seems to be based on a cultural meaning system. According to this meaning system, knowing your father is a minimum. Elaborating on the father–son relationship, Hector points specifically at sharing and joining of activities. In emphasising this point, Hector tells us about his observations of father–son interactions, primarily with reference to his friends. Thus, in constructing a father figure, Hector builds on his own marginal experiences with his father, his observations of fathering practices, as well as a culturally mediated image of fatherhood. Accordingly, Hector's image of his father is marked by a certain mysticism and excitement, and the father becomes more of a mystical figure than a concrete person. Hector's emotions concerning his father are characterised by a certain ambiguity; on the one side, his father is a mystical character that he admires, and on the other side, he dislikes his father's priorities and that fact that he is not available, like this quotation illustrates:

I have never had a father-son relationship to him. He was only someone who created me, but he never took any initiatives and didn't care about me. So what am I supposed to do? Be really mad at him? I do think it is a bad thing to do.

For a period during his childhood, Hector had a stepfather. According to his mother, the relationship between Hector and his stepfather was close, with many shared interests and activities. Hector expresses the same and refers to his stepfather as his father-figure. Unfortunately for Hector, his mother and stepfather broke up, and though still existing to some extent, the contact between Hector and his stepfather was reduced.⁵

The relationship between Hector and his mother is described by both of them as close and open. Hector reveals that he talks with his mother about most things. Furthermore, he often helps out in the house and he is concerned about his mother's health. It is obvious that Hector plays an important role for his mother, both practically and emotionally. According to the mother, Hector is the only one who fully understands the seriousness of her illness. The mother appreciates the closeness of their relationship and the fact that her son cares about her and is willing to help with the housework. At the same time, she questions the responsibility this involves for Hector:

[He is] very good at listening, talking, expressing emotions, and protecting me (...) He is a nice boy, but at times I'm afraid that ... He has never seen a psychologist or anything like that to talk about what it's like to have me as a mother.

It appears that the content and the importance of the caring relation between Hector and his mother to a large extent are mutual.

Evan

Evan is thirteen. His parents broke up when Evan was still a baby, and he lives with his mother and two siblings. His father has had extensive drug problems, and lives in a different town. Throughout Evan's childhood, his mother has tried to maintain contact with her son's father, but without any mutual initiative. However, Evan met his father two years ago, after a previous 10-year period with no contact. Since then, they have met sporadically, but the last time his father left abruptly and Evan has not heard from him since then.

Evan's family moved recently and Evan finds it difficult to adapt socially in his new environment. He enjoys school and his teachers, but he has few friends. He participates in a few organised leisure activities. Evan has a close relationship to his younger brother and is very concerned about him. His mother tells us that his brother has difficulty accepting that the father is absent.

Evan's mother has a good education and works full time. Still, their financial situation has been difficult and it still is. Like Hector's mother, Evan's mother is only entitled to minimum dependency allowance.

Evan speaks enthusiastically about his father and their first meeting. He describes his image of his father as 'someone sinister' prior to their meeting, but that this image was altered when he met his father and it appeared that 'he was a very nice person'. Evan describes in various ways how his father lived up to the expectations of a father, primarily by participating in activities and being strict. After their third meeting, Evan did not hear from his father. Like Hector, Evan expresses ambiguous feelings towards his father; on the one hand, he blames him for the loss of contact, and especially because it makes his brother sad, and on the other hand, he makes excuses for his father's absence:

I think that he has bad thoughts about himself. That he is not very self-confident because he wrote in his last message that he was not a good father. I think he is wrong. (...) Based on my experience, he could have been a very, very good father.

Unlike his brother, Evan has kept the hope and faith that his father will return.

Evan and his mother have a close relationship, and Evan shares many of his thoughts with his mother. The mother, however, questions whether the son takes on too much responsibility:

Maybe they get more responsibility. Especially the oldest one, he has been a child too little, had to be an adult too early. (...) He should protect [his little brother], then make sure his mother is fine – he has taken the role of the father in the house.

As for Hector and his mother, it appears that care is mutually distributed in the relationship between Evan and his mother.

George

George is nineteen and lived together with both of his parents and siblings until seven years ago. This was when his father filed for divorce. George's parents have had a permanent conflict ever since. According to George and his mother, it is the father who refuses to have more contact with his children. George's father lives in the same town and is settled with a new partner and child. George meets him sporadically.

George's mother is also settled in a new relationship, and apart from the ongoing conflict with her ex-husband and the children's sorrow of the loss of contact with him, she is satisfied with her life. Unlike Hector and Evan's mothers, George's mother has a secure financial situation, despite the number of years since the divorce.

George lives a quite independent life, due to his age and life situation. He has a job that he enjoys and many close friends. However, he expresses great sorrow for his father's priorities. Despite the fact that he likes his new stepfather (in contrast to his new stepmother), he misses the old family life and his 'old' father:

I miss dad very much. The way he used to be, in a way. I miss having a good relationship like anybody else (...) It is just that I have lost a bit of the relationship we used to have. And it has never returned. So I wish that they had never been divorced and could still be together.

As for Evan, George is also concerned about his younger sister, and expresses a great deal of sadness about her loss of contact with their father. Their mother appreciates his concern. Claiming that he wants to help his sister, George has several times confronted his father and told him that he disapproves of his behaviour. However, at the same time as blaming his father, George tries to make sense out of it by making his new stepmother responsible:

But when he got together with my stepmother it was the two of them, right... (...) And then I noticed that it was not my father who told me things – it was as if it was her, even though it was coming from him.

In other words, George has to some extent maintained the good impression of his father, although this has been altered significantly following the divorce, and although he is very disappointed with his father. George's emotional ambiguity, thus, resembles that of Hector and Evan. However, in George's case, the father figure is not an illusionary one, but is based on concrete experience. George has a close relationship to his mother, and the mother provides important emotional and practical support. However, George finds a lot of support and comfort in his friends as well. His mother is concerned about the long-term consequences for the children of the father's sudden absence, and whether the children have had enough opportunity to deal with the bad experiences. Her worries differ slightly from those of the other mothers, due to the difference in circumstances and life situations.

Construction of fatherhood

As previously mentioned, we identified three categories of paternal absence in the main analysis of the project, and Hector, Evan and George represent each of these categories. One major finding is that the children in the last two categories, such as Evan and George, express the most ambiguous feelings. This might indicate that it is not the absence of the father as such, that is most difficult for these children, but the loss of contact with a father. After seven years, George is still sorry about his parents' divorce and the subsequent detachment of his father. He constantly returns to a comparison of how his father is now and how his father was before the divorce, indicating that the divorce marks a demarcation line in his life chronicle. Unlike Hector, George has experienced the loss of an important carer. Hector has not lost a carer; his father has never been present in a caring role in Hector's day-to-day life. However, Hector has lost contact with his stepfather, and there is reason to suspect that this loss might be more traumatic than the constant absence of his biological father. Evan's situation is unique in this respect. His father first 'came out of nowhere' and then left him again. Evan states:

It was really nice that he came, but I don't regard it as a void that was filled. It's not like that. And my life was complete before he came. The fact that he actually came was more like a bonus.

Unlike his younger brother, Evan clings to the hope that his father will return – a hope that might seem rational when taking into consideration his former experience of his father's sudden appearance. As previously mentioned, attachment theory may help to explain the boys' reactions to their fathers' absence or rejection. However, our quest is to discuss how this affects the boys' own construction of fatherhood and of themselves in the role of future fathers.

First, we discuss how the relationship between the mothers and the boys affects this construction. Secondly, we discuss the role of others. Our aim is to show the repertoire in these relations for the construction of paternity.

The relationship and interaction between the boys and their mothers

The mothers of Hector and Evan are single parents and have nobody whom they can share parental responsibility with on a daily basis. Neither do they have an emotional relationship with a partner. The relationship between the mothers and their sons is characterised by mutuality. In that way, these mothers provide their sons with the experience of taking part in a mutual relationship, a dimension of parenthood that is regarded as important from the perspective of developmental support. In the boys' stories, it also appears that mothers give their sons responsibility for practical functions at home, which are of importance both to themselves and to the family as a collective whole. In other words, the boys seem to play an important role in relation to their mothers, both practically and emotionally. One might ask whether the notion of child and adult as meaningful categories are rendered indistinct at the cost of mutuality (Gerhards 1988; Giddens 1991, 1993). This is most clearly expressed in the interviews with Hector and his mother. In sharing her worries and intimate confessions with her son, Hector's mother seems to relate to him as an adult.

One interpretation of the close mother–son relationships might be that the challenge of being left by the father unites the mothers and the boys. Still, the relationship between the mothers and their sons seems to be negotiable, especially from the

mothers' point of view. One important reason for this is that the mothers tend to question their ability to 'father' their children.

There appears to be a set of general understandings among the mothers of what fathers are supposed to do and to offer their children, which differ from the general notions of mothering. Understandings that the mothers display, correspond well with a cultural meaning system of fatherhood (Haavind 2002; Sagatun 2005, 2008a). For example, fathers are expected to participate in activities such as playing soccer, fishing, etc. and to be consistent and strict adults. Thus, the boys' mothers commonly question their success as single mothers, and appreciate masculine role models for their sons, such as their sons' uncles.

The boys, on the other hand, express great admiration for their mothers and regard them as good role models, as this quote from Evan illustrates:

I: How do you think you yourself will be as a father? (...)

E: If I think about how I am now, having seen what my mother is doing and so on, then I would have been very kind and I would have done things with my children, and helping them with their homework for instance.

Based on Evan's above quote, this is representative of the 'new' caring father (Røthing and Aarseth 2006). In many respects, the boys' construction of fatherhood is in line with this notion of the caring father. Mothers are the key mediators of this notion, through their close involvement with their sons. As noted above, the boys support their mothers emotionally by positively responding to their mothering and by uniting with them in the absence of their fathers.

Interestingly in that respect, we see that the boys share their mothers' explanations of their fathers' absence. The mothers appear to be mediators of a 'truth' that has great importance for the boys and their self-concept. In other words, the mothers have a great deal of power of definition, and indirectly, also have great influential power over the father-child relationship. The mothers all note that they have put a lot of effort into bringing the fathers onto the field in relation to their sons. In doing so, they behave according to a cultural notion of motherhood, rendering the mothers responsible for making sure their children have a responsible and interested father (Andenæs 2000). Men's attempts to become more involved in childcare are contingent on maternal beliefs and mothers' assessment of its benefits (Featherstone 2009, 81). This is often referred to as maternal gatekeeping (Doucet 2006).

Hence, the children's constructions of their fathers cannot be regarded independently from their mothers' constructions of their fathers. This is an important point to stress in the counselling of single parents. We find that the mothers put a great deal of effort in creating a good impression of the child's father, and that they often initiate contact with both the father and his family.

The relationship and interaction between the boys and others outside the family

As previously noted, George has experienced a father being present, and his idea of fathering is to a large extent built on his personal experiences. In other words, his father is still a role model as far as fathering is concerned. The situation is different for Hector and Evan.

As we have pointed out, Hector builds a notion of fatherhood where he primarily draws on a culturally mediated image of fatherhood and observations of father–son interactions.

Both Hector and Evan base their paternal construction on others' experiences and a cultural meaning system, as well as their personal experiences with alternative paternal role models. In Hector's case, the stepfather is an important role model whom he continuously refers to. In addition, he bases the image of a father on observations of his friends' fathers, and their father–son interactions. This mirroring of his friends' experiences also contributes to a normalisation of his own situation, as the following quote illustrates. It is most interesting to see how Hector negotiates his understanding of fathering:

At times I miss [my former stepfather]. It might be that I am bored once in a while, and my mother isn't actually the type to join me swinging in a rope. But I do have all my buddies, and we go skating and doing things, so rather for them to ... They aren't always with their dads they either, and I think that they have had their dads all the time so they don't think about a dad the way I do, in a way.

This quote also illustrates the importance of activities for the father–child relationship, which is in line with cultural meaning system of paternity. One of the things George particularly misses in the absence of his father is his company when doing activities. Evan also points out that one of the things he liked about his father was that they could do things together.

Repertoires of fatherhood

We have previously discussed the emotional ambiguity that the children have for their fathers. Given the prominent political and normative ideology of gender equality in Norway, where the societal and individual benefit of paternal involvement has been stressed; it is an important goal is to bring the fathers 'onto the field' in relation to their children, following parental break-up. Various researches have discussed how children benefit from having an involved father (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda 2004; Pleck 2004; Radin and Russell 1983). Furthermore, given that identity is a social product, shaped and developed through social interaction, parents are under normal circumstances the most influential others (Mead 1972). It follows that the absence of a parent, not to say the experience of being rejected by a parent, must have a strong influence on the formation of identity. Hence, the paternal construction, either concrete and present or illusory, has an influence on the construction of self. For a child's conception of self, it becomes important that the father is someone to identify with, and that a father's rejection can be explained and made sense of. We have previously discussed how Evan tries to understand and make excuses for his father's absence. The same applies for George. By conceptualising the paternal absence 'logically', it somehow seems less threatening. However, there is a tension between the children's need to positively conceptualise and excuse their father's behaviour, and their fathers' break with the culturally (and politically) mediated expectation of the involved and caring father. It is interesting to remark how the children, when asked what kind of father they themselves want to be in the future, stress presence and involvement, as these quotations illustrate:

I would have been a good father at least. A sporty dad who did a lot of funny things with his children (Hector)

I want to be a father who's always there for him or her. That they can talk with me about different things, and that I am a nice person and a good role-model. (...) I definitely don't want to be the way my father has been to us. (George)

Drawing on the stories told by Hector, Evan, George and their mothers, we can identify a set of traits which appear to be characteristic of the notion of the present father, and in line with a specific cultural meaning system of fatherhood.

First, the present father is believed to be *caring*. He is emotionally available for his children. He spends time with his children, speaking with them, helping them and supporting them. As discussed by, for example, Giddens (1991, 1993) and Gerhards (1988), the modern family is marked by increasing intimacy, involving a change in parental roles. For instance, the notion of the emotionally distant breadwinning father has been replaced by a notion of an involved and caring father (Røthing and Aarseth 2006). Doucet (2004) has used the term emotional responsibility to capture the essence and work of protective care and the responsibility for its enactment. Many studies on fathering have argued that fathers have the desire and the capacity to be protective, nurturing, affectionate and responsive towards their children (Coltrane 1996; Dienhart 1998; Doucet 2004, 2006; Dowd 2000; Lamb 1987, 1997; Pleck 1985; Pruett 2000; Snarey 1993). When Hector, Evan and George speak about the caring father, we can suspect that they build on this notion of fatherhood.

Secondly, the present father is believed to be *participatory*. He gets involved and takes part in different activities with his children, especially play and physical activities, and he takes on much responsibility for practical work inside and outside the house. Whereas his involvement in activities with the children can be seen in correspondence with the notion of the caring father, his practical responsibility is more in line with the traditional image of men as practical *doers*, in contrast to women as emotional *carers*. Many fathers in studies on fathering talk about making it a point of doing a lot of physical activities with their children and being very involved in their children's sport (Doucet 2004, 2006). It is interesting to note how the focus on fathers' involvement in activities contributes to an understanding among the mothers' in our own study of being less resourceful in this respect. Activities are understood as something fathers are supposed to engage in, and implicitly they are needed. Being actively involved in play and physical activities seems to be intertwined in an understanding of masculinity and fatherhood. The same notion has been documented to be prevalent in child welfare service. The participation of fathers is called for in relation to some specific points in the everyday lives of boys. Fathers are supposed to provide structure to everyday life and participation with the boys in physical activities outside of home (Sagatun 2005).

Last, the present father is believed to be *strict*. By setting up the limits in relation to his children, he is authoritarian, but also protective. This notion corresponds well with a long prevailing idea of parenthood designating fathers as authoritarian: monitoring and guiding behaviour to set limits (O'Brien 2005, 11–13 in Featherstone 2009, 79). Again, we see that the mothers draw a link between masculinity/fatherhood and being authoritarian, leaving themselves in void of an important parental skill. In the scientific discussion about why parental authority has become problematic, it is primarily changing family patterns that have been accentuated. Increasing divorce rates and children growing up in single parent households, primarily single mother headed, has been described as problematic for the exercise of parental authority over children and

youth. Implicit to these explanations, is a notion that paternal authority is lost or threatened. What can be implied from this is that mothers lack the ability to provide the kind of authority that children need, especially in adolescence, and that some fathers fail to exercise the right kind of authority (Hennum 2002). The longing for a strict father is expressed in the stories that we have presented, illustrating that authority has a gendered component. It highlights the public conversation that calls for the father to be the authority figure. A similar public conversation calling for the mother to become an authority figure is lacking (op.cit.).

Conclusion

In their own construction of fatherhood and of themselves as future fathers, the boys draw on and negotiate a specific culturally embedded meaning system. This meaning system is activated in their relationships with their mothers and other people, and is not the result of direct gender role modelling. We argue that despite the boy's fathers being absent, the boys are offered a repertoire of fatherhood through their social interactions with other people. In interaction with their surroundings, the boys construct a notion of fatherhood that seems to be in line with the contemporary cultural meaning system of fatherhood in our western culture.

The stories told by Hector, Evan, George as well as by their mothers have given a unique insight or glimpse into what the absence of a father actually means for the relationship between the boys and their mothers, their relations with others and the boys' own ideas about fatherhood.

An interesting insight from this study is the acknowledgement of the importance of the relationships between the boys and their mothers for the boys' construction of fatherhood. The boys aspire to become fathers who engage in close and mutual relations within the family, who are emotionally and practically available, who are consistent and predictable, and who participate in activities with their children. As such, their image of fatherhood, and implicitly their images of themselves as future fathers, is in line with contemporary expectations of fathers in our culture. Thus, in their repertoires of ways to conduct motherhood, the mothers seem to propose to their sons a cultural orientation that affirms their identity as men and future fathers.

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Notes

1. According to Norwegian Statistics, 82% of children of divorced parents lived with their mothers in 2004, 8% lived with their fathers and in 10% of the cases, there was shared residence (Lyngstad and Kitterød 2008). In 2012, the proportion of children living in shared residence had increased to 25%, whereas there was a decrease to 66% in children living with their mothers. Still, the proportion living with their fathers only remains to be 7–8% (Lyngstad, Kitterød, and Nymoene 2014).

2. As defined by Norwegian legislation, as well as the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.
3. It should be noted that many children may subjectively experience to have little contact with their fathers although they live in the same house. What distinguish children in those circumstances from Hector, Evan and George is that the father absence in the last case is acknowledged and articulated. However, the mechanisms of construction of fatherhood may well be similar for children in both situations.
4. According to diverse research on child poverty in Norway, a large proportion of children affected by poverty grow up with a single parent whose employment status is irregular or non-existing, like Hector's mother (see for example Epland and Kirkeberg 2009). There are several unfortunate consequences of poverty for children. In the public debate in Norway, attention has in particular been to the reduced possibilities for participation that many poor children are subject to. Thorød (2012) points out that many children in poor households endeavour to reduce the stress of poverty for their parents by avoiding to participate in expensive activities. In this article, we do not address the consequences of poverty in particular, but the readers ought to be aware that although it is not addressed here, our empirical data also bear witness that the children take the kind of responsibility that Thorød finds in her research.
5. Acknowledging that this is not the topic for this article, it is still worth questioning a policy that while accentuating the importance of the biological ties between child and father, fails to see the potential importance of emotional ties between child and stepparent, and leaves these kinds of relationship deprived of legal rights.

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