

Fathers and Families: A Cultural Inquiry

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Abstract. Our society has become indifferent to fathers at best, except in connection with money, and hostile to them at worst. It uses law and other cultural mechanisms to promote confused, trivialized and politicized notions of fatherhood. Restricting ourselves for practical purposes to the enduringly massive but increasingly ignored straight segment of society, we argue not only that children need fathers but also that men need fatherhood as the one remaining source of a healthy collective identity. To support our theory, we place fatherhood in the larger cultural context of reproduction by asking what it means to be human, to be a man or a woman, to be part of a family, to be part of a community or nation, and to give or take life. We hope to broaden and deepen discussions of both sex and gender, in short, with resources from the humanities.

Many scholars discuss parenting from the perspective of the social sciences: sociology and psychology. Others do so from that of law, which relies heavily on the social sciences. We do so from that of the *humanities*. Our basic frame of reference is neither society nor the individual, therefore, but *culture*. Of particular interest to us, in other words, is the human ability to create *symbols* and thus to create both meaning in general and *identity* in particular.

Moreover, many scholars discuss parenting in its broadest sense, which includes not only that of straight couples, married or unmarried, but also that of gay parents, married or unmarried, and single parents. Our scope is narrower than theirs, however, in three ways.

First, we focus on the parenting of straight couples. Popular culture and elite culture, legislators and journalists, have tended to ignore the specific needs and problems of straight parents on the assumption that they have no specific needs or problems and thus require no direct attention specifically as straight parents. We argue that they do. Like any other sexual orientation, theirs relies heavily on cultural support. Men and women will always copulate with each other, to be sure, but that is hardly the same thing as doing so in ways that provide the stable environments that their children require.

It would be hard to find evidence, either historical or cross-cultural, of a society that maintained no ideal at all of family life. Although most societies have acknowledged that the family can take several forms, every society has used culture to promote an ideal environment *for children*. Many of the details are variable. Some societies have preferred polygamy, for instance, and others monogamy. Some have preferred patrilocality, others matrilocality. Some have preferred exogamy, others endogamy. But some things do not vary—at least they did not vary until the debate over gay marriage. We refer here in particular to the ideal of providing children with *both mothers and fathers whenever possible*. (In matrilineal societies, the mother's brother functions as a father.). The traditional nuclear family of Western societies, at any rate, was informally *embedded within an extended family*. Not all children actually had nuclear families, whether isolated or embedded, simply because some parents either left or died. Society maintained the ideal, even so, and found ways of caring for children who had no access to it. Related

families took in orphans, for instance, or other families adopted them. But things have changed.

Since the Industrial Revolution, nuclear families have become more and more isolated from extended families (a change that, apart from any other factors, has left society more and more fragmented). More recently, the birth-control pill has made it possible to disconnect sexual intercourse from both reproduction and the family in any form. No-fault divorce has undermined the durability of marriage. Hedonism and extreme individualism have encouraged people to emphasize personal gratification instead of personal responsibilities. Even before the advent of single motherhood by choice (along with single motherhood by default) and gay marriage, these changes and others had undermined the notion that children had rights. Gay marriage, in fact, represents a conflict between *two rights*: that of gay adults to marry each other and that of children to have both mothers and fathers.

Second, we focus specifically on the parenting of straight *men*—that is, on straight *fathers*. That is partly because we have already spent twenty-five years doing research on men, but also because so many more scholars have done research on women over the past few decades than on men. This requires an explanation.

Consider reproductive technologies, which affect the earliest stage of parenting. Over the last thirty years, we have heard a great deal about these, although few debates have included both older *and* newer ones. That is because many people believe, or at least hope, that public debates over older ones—notably over abortion—would re-open conflicts that the courts have already settled. Many other people disagree with them, of course, so the conflicts continue. And that makes sense, because all of these reproductive technologies present similar and often identical *cultural* problems—in other words, symbolic and moral ones. Most people, including politicians and legislators, see reproductive technologies from the perspective of both women and men. This imbalance characterized Canada's Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies (Canada, 1993). The commissioners seldom even mentioned fathers.¹ Their mentality has exacerbated the fragmented and often polarized state of public debates about parenting.

Parenting, which includes reproduction, by definition, is part of at least two cultural systems: (marriage and) the family but also gender. (We use that word and several others in a systematic way; more about that in due course.) Even those who want to abolish gender must acknowledge its continuing influence within the family and elsewhere. And yet fathers have received much less attention than mothers in debates over family life—except, of course, in connection with *pathological* fathers who injure, molest or ignore their children. For whatever reason, the prevalent assumption even among academics, let alone journalists and talk-show hosts, is that family life revolves around mothers. Nowadays, in short, every debate over reproduction, and family life—especially over divorce, custody, reproductive technologies, gay marriage or abortion-on-demand—thus becomes primarily a debate over the needs and problems of either women and their children or gay couples and their children.

We suggest that this assumption about the centrality of women is not only false, or at least naïve, but also dangerous. Assuming that fathers are helpful at best and superfluous or even sinister at worst, is dangerous not only because of its implications for children (who might actually need fathers as distinct from mothers) but also because of its implications for men (who might need fatherhood as a healthy source of collective

identity) and thus for society as a whole (which might need men to make heavy investments in its future).

Third, we focus on the culture that has historically supported straight couples in general and straight fathers in particular—especially, but not only, the symbolic thinking that underlies it. Working in the humanities, we find that any careful discussion of straight fathers and their current problems raises several questions that scholars in those fields seldom ask, at least not directly.

After (1) a brief discussion of our vocabulary and therefore of our theoretical premises, we will ask questions about (2) what it means to be human; (3) what it means to be a man or a woman; (4) what it means to be part of a family; (5) what it means to be a part of society; and (6) what it means to give or take life. If we answer these questions expediently or inconsistently, then we can hardly expect to create a worldview that gives meaning and depth to the human experience, let alone one that provides a healthy context for straight parenting and thus helps hold society together.

Vocabulary and Theory

To be *human* is to live within both nature and culture. *Nature* refers to the givens of human existence, whether external (physical geography, say, and climate) or internal (the human genome and whatever that entails for behavior). Unlike most other animals, though, we actively interpret or re-interpret and even modify nature. To do that, we use *culture* (social, economic, political, artistic, religious, linguistic, scientific and other systems). Every culture represents a collective attempt to create order within what would otherwise be the chaos and tyranny of nature. We rely far less on instincts, in other words, than other animals do. This is why humans are so flexible and can adapt to so many natural environments.

To be a *man* or a *woman*, similarly, is to live within both nature and culture. In this context, nature refers to *sex* (genes and hormones that cause the physical expression of either maleness or femaleness) and culture to *gender* (a cultural system that defines both masculinity and femininity).

Of great importance in this essay is *identity*: the sense of being like some people and unlike others. Although identity can be either personal or collective, we focus here on *collective* identity as humans in general and as men or women in particular. But nature (maleness or femaleness) and culture (some notion of masculinity or femininity) are linked in very complex and sometimes ambiguous ways. We see no point in referring either to “male identity” and “masculine identity,” therefore, or “female identity” and “feminine identity.” Instead, we refer to “collective identity *as men*” and “collective identity *as women*.”

Following Shakespeare’s analogy, “all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” we suggest that *gender*—the culturally created system that promotes various forms of masculinity and femininity—is the *script* (or “role”) that players either try to follow or try to escape.

In this context, it is worth noting that we oppose both evolutionary or genetic determinism *and* social constructionism. Even though human evolution can sometimes explain how or why some features of gender originated in the remote past, evolution does

not actually *cause* them. Evolutionary psychology notwithstanding, it is culture and not nature that presents men with masculine scripts and women with feminine scripts—that is, *cultural interpretations* of or *cultural elaborations* on maleness or femaleness. And it is culture that can modify those scripts. On the other hand, *not everything* is possible—at least not without an extremely high cost. Social engineering can be a very dangerous experiment, especially when some participants cannot give their informed consent, due to unintended consequences. It is cynical to argue that nature dooms people to follow the patterns of their remote or even non-human ancestors, in short, but it is naïve to argue that culture should allow people to ignore human experience in its efforts to create utopias.

What Does It Mean To Be Human?

Human identity is partly a given of nature, which is why many societies understand humans in relation to other animals. Myths project human qualities onto animals, for instance, or classify animals as tribal ancestors or allies. To be human, at any rate, is to participate fully in the natural order. But people are different in some ways from other animals, because human identity is also an *artifact of culture*. To be human, for instance, is to participate not only in the natural order but also in a cultural order. The fact of living within both nature and culture is one of the basic ambiguities that people have always tried to resolve through myth (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). In modern societies, though, the primary “others” are machines rather than animals. Although the popularity of movies such as *Jaws* indicates that we still feel the need to establish human identity in relation to the animal world, many other popular movies explore it in relation to machines. Ever since Mary Shelley wrote the story of *Frankenstein*, in fact, this theme has appeared routinely in popular culture and not only in science fiction. It appears in *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, both the original novel and the famous filmed version. The Tin Man, after all, is a kind of robot (Nathanson, 1991, p. 261). As an extension of his cars, weapons and gadgets, moreover, James Bond is part man and part machine. The same is true of those lovable robots from *Star Wars*, R2D2 and C3P0 (Drummond, 1996). The Trans-humanists, meanwhile, have been developing avant-garde science in the hope of creating a new and better species—an idea that has produced the “cyberpunk” genre of science fiction (Young & Nathanson, A). But whether asked in terms of animals or machines, the question is always the same: Where do we draw the line between what is human and what is non-human?

With that in mind, consider the enduring debate over abortion. Is the fetus human or merely a mass of “tissue”? Or consider the debate over genetic engineering. If we can use technology to produce “designer children,” why not do so to produce beings so different that they would constitute a new or superior—and therefore non-human—species? Related questions would include the following: Do reproductive technologies threaten human dignity? If so, precisely how should we define “dignity”? And who gets to define it? Do people have intrinsic worth or merely instrumental value? Do we want to abandon the integral view of human bodies for a modular one in which sperm, eggs or wombs are merely units to be exchanged or even bought and sold?

Of interest here is neither abortion nor genetic engineering per se, which present complex moral and practical problems, but the *definition of human life*. Of interest here, more specifically, is *who* defines it. This is clearly not a matter of concern only to one segment of the population—not unless you believe that some segments are *less* than human. Everyone has to live with the results of defining human life, after all, in connection with collective choices about the humanity of fetuses, the mentally and physically handicapped, the old and any other group that has a questionable “quality of life.” Because everyone has a stake in the definition of human life, we should surely think twice before excluding any segment of the population from these debates—including men.

What Does It Mean To Be A Man Or A Woman?

Every gender script is a cultural interpretation of nature. Because the purpose of culture is to create order out of chaos, thus enabling us to adapt and survive in changing environments, you could argue that the function of culture is to do so by enhancing or “correcting” nature. Given the natural asymmetry between males and females, only the latter being able to give birth, it is hardly surprising that every society so far has found it necessary to create a gender system, no matter how minimal (Gilmore, 1990, pp. 201ff). Almost every society has used culture to give men a *distinctive, necessary and publicly valued* contribution to make as fathers. But now that women can protect and provide for themselves, with help from the state if necessary, this is no longer the case.

Long before the rise of a “social constructionist” perspective in the social sciences, historians and anthropologists understood that gender scripts vary considerably from one time or place to another (Hacking, 1999; Malti-Douglas, 2007). What one society admires as manly, for instance, another denounces as effete. Each society would presume, however, that its own notion of manliness or effeteness emerges directly from the natural order. This is why academic and political activists try to “deconstruct” gender. But can they go too far in the opposite direction? Does physiology have nothing at all to do with behavior? Does nature have no part at all to play in the creation of culture? Is it true that anything at all is possible? Is anything at all desirable? Is identity infinitely malleable? So far, these questions have almost always been about the needs of either women or gay people (Vance, 1989, pp. 13-14). If so, then we must ensure that every conceivable variation receives the same legal protection and social approval as all others. That might be a worthy goal on moral grounds, at least in theory, but it presents several problems on practical grounds.

One of these is the ever-increasing *fragmentation* of society, which has led to an ever-increasing number of groups that claim the right to constitutional protections (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Siksay, 2010).² Why is that a problem? It is a problem because fragmentation is incompatible by definition with the level of cohesion that every society requires by definition. Worse, fragmentation often leads to polarization: If “we” are different, some argue, it is because “they” have used their cultural resources to make “us” seem different. If “we” need protection, it is because “they” have persecuted “us.” If “we” are a minority, it is because “they” have insisted on acting as a majority.³

Of course, questions about collective identity as men or women threaten many people. Because gender is a cultural artifact, though, the threat is not ultimate. It is at least possible to consider alternative masculine or feminine scripts without undermining collective identities as men or women. But questions about maleness or femaleness are threatening at a much deeper level, because sex is a *natural* given. Should we assume that only the cowardly or stupid feel threatened by anomalies? What if stripping away all the cultural embroidery (versions of masculinity and femininity) still leaves almost all of us with a residue of *maleness* or *femaleness*? For almost all of us, to be human at the genetic level means to be either male or female. To say that either maleness or femaleness is utterly irrelevant, therefore, is to ignore a very basic component of human identity. And yet that is the assumption of some attitudes toward fatherhood or at least of straight fatherhood, although no one, certainly no one who supports ideological feminism would ever say that about motherhood (Nathanson & Young, 2001, pp. 194-233; Stanworth, 1987; Smart, 1996).⁴

Until recently, the feminine scripts of most societies relied largely on femaleness. By definition, after all, female people are those who can (barring some anomalous condition) become mothers. It is true that women do not want anyone reducing their identity to motherhood. Why should they? In addition, though, they do not necessarily want to share motherhood with men. And that would be the result of men using ex-utero technologies to bypass the womb and thus threaten the collective identity of women—that is, the *need* for some *distinctive* contribution by women.⁵ Likewise, until recently, the masculine scripts of most societies relied largely on maleness. Male people are human beings who *cannot* give birth but *can* become fathers who participate actively in family life and communal life.

As we have written elsewhere, though, men already face an unprecedented problem in connection with their collective identity as men. This is due to a very gradual process that began eleven or twelve thousand years ago due to the rise of horticulture and agriculture. The process has speeded up due to more recent cultural revolutions; the male body has become increasingly marginal or vestigial⁶ *as a source* of collective identity (Nathanson & Young, B). Men of the highest status are those who do *not* rely on any distinctive feature of the male body; men of the *lowest* status, on the other hand, are those who *do*. Characteristic features of the male body, which once allowed men to make distinctive, necessary and publicly valued contributions to society, have been replaced by machines, for instance, and by the state. Women no longer need men either to protect them or provide for them; they can turn instead, if necessary, to government agencies. Now, moreover, new reproductive technologies could trivialize or even eliminate the one remaining purely natural contribution of men: sperm. We will return to that in due course.

But first, consider surrogate motherhood. This method allows infertile couples to have children who are genetically related to them. Moreover, it allows male couples to have children. Most people today feel the need for genetic ties with their children or parents, but the “Baby M” case revealed a double standard. Women who insist on the primacy of genetic ties (as did Mary Beth Whitehead, the surrogate mother of Baby M) receive praise for that very reason as good mothers; men who do so (as did William Stern, the genetic father of Baby M) receive condemnation as idiosyncratic or even selfish fathers. When this became a cause célèbre, *Newsweek* featured on its cover both the surrogate mother and the adoptive mother *but neither the genetic father nor the*

adoptive father (*Mothers*, 1987). He, apparently, was insignificant. And the implicit message to boys and men was that *fatherhood* is insignificant. Why, then, should they stick around to care for their families?

The popularity of artificial insemination and the resulting proliferation of sperm banks indicate pervasive sympathy for single women who want children desperately but either cannot find or do not want husbands as well. Although some women who resort to sperm banks are married or living with men, others assume that the absence of a father is irrelevant—possibly inconvenient but nonetheless irrelevant. Apart from depriving the child of a father, this sends an implicit message to boys and men: Fatherhood means nothing more than providing sperm. And some sperm banks try to disguise even that connection. This was the explicit message on one episode of *Golden Girls* (Parent, 1989). No one, however, would argue that the absence of a *mother* is irrelevant. At any rate, some single mothers by choice argue that the old ideal family, which included both mothers and fathers,⁷ is not merely unrealistic but undesirable. New reproductive technologies such as artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization make it increasingly attractive for them to consider having children either alone or with gay partners—especially now that both gay marriage and gay adoption are legal in some places.

Parthenogenesis, still on the horizon, threatens not merely to marginalize men in reproduction but to eliminate them. After all, this technology would require no sperm and produce no males. Moreover, sex selection—selecting fetuses of one sex or the other for abortion—could threaten men as much as women. At the moment, most people focus attention on the threat to women. Aging parents in many countries must rely on financial help from sons and pay dowries for the daughters, after all, which is why some people abort female fetuses. In other countries, though, it might make more sense to abort male fetuses.⁸ This could happen even here, for instance, if we continue to produce an underclass of undereducated and unemployable men—an underclass that would probably produce social and political instability.

What Does It Mean To Be Part Of A Family?

The family is both natural and cultural. No society has tried to socialize children without some version of the family. Like gender scripts, family patterns vary a great deal. Historically and cross-culturally, most societies have preferred some form of extended family.⁹ Our own promoted the nuclear family—preferably, until recently, one that was embedded within an extended family. For various economic, legal and other reasons, it no longer functions very effectively. But even before that became obvious, many opposed what was then the ideal family: mother, father and children. For decades, in fact, the family has generated intense debate between feminists (but also gay activists) and their adversaries.

Many feminists and their professional allies—various sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, legislators, politicians, divorce lawyers, judges and so on—rely in one way or another on the notion of a “social construction,” which claims that the family (and every other institution) is almost infinitely malleable. From this, it follows that there is, or at least should be, *no such thing* as an ideal, or normative, family. Instead, society should embrace the principle of “diversity” or “pluralism” and accept almost any

configuration of the family as neither better nor worse than any other. Feminists per se take several positions on the family, not all of them reconcilable. Some want to abolish it, for instance, as the most deeply rooted and most oppressive institution of “patriarchy.” Others want to reform it so that women can control it, especially in connection with divorce and custody (Nathanson & Young, 2006, pp. 125-156 and 415-438). Still others want merely to redistribute household chores. So far, though, almost every political debate has focused heavily on what *mothers*, not fathers (let alone children) need or want.

At first, debate revolved around the “alternative families” of single mothers. More recently, it has revolved around those of gay parents in connection with the debate over gay marriage. Reflecting this debate, like many others, are the many genres of popular culture: movies, sitcoms, talk shows, blogs and so on. One popular movie, *The Kids Are All Right* made headlines, because the kids have two mothers. Viewers get the distinct impression that this is no longer an “alternative family” but an ordinary family. The children decide nonetheless to find their sperm donor. When they do, he proves likeable and even willing to participate somehow as a member of the family. In the end, though, the kids and their mothers classify him as a superfluous intruder. The implicit message is that sperm donors are not really fathers, which is true in one way. One implicit message in popular culture as a whole, moreover, is that *even live-in fathers* are irrelevant at best (as assistant mothers or walking wallets) and sinister at worst (as potential molesters).

But *do* children need fathers? Or do they merely need two parents, in which case two mothers or two fathers would do just as well as one mother and one father? Or do they need two parents at all? As for two parents, the evidence is in. Children do need two parents.¹⁰ It should come as no surprise, however, that researchers have not provided a conclusive answer to the previous questions. One problem is that not every jurisdiction collects evidence systematically. But the real problem is that researchers *have not had time*, since the legalization in some places of gay marriage, to *complete* longitudinal studies of children who grow *from infancy to adulthood* under the care of either two married mothers or two married fathers. So far, they have relied on anecdotal evidence or inadequate opinion polls and surveys that rely on volunteers rather than random samples. Some longitudinal studies might seem to indicate, so far, that mothers and fathers are interchangeable (Lamb, 2010, pp. 10-11). In that case, lacking a father would make no difference to a child with one or more mothers. But showing that children fail to assign distinct functions to mothers and fathers does not necessarily mean the absence of distinct functions; it might mean only that children are unaware of these. Nor does it mean that children will not become aware of them in later life. We suggest that fathers and mothers do have distinct functions.

All children must separate from their mothers, of course, in order to form identities of their own. They need second parents but not necessarily fathers for that process. Boys must not only separate from their mothers, however, but also transfer the focus of their identity from femaleness and some form of femininity to maleness and some form of masculinity (Pollack, 1993). Both fathers and sons have male bodies, so it could be argued that sons need fathers in order to establish and affirm some collective identity as men. But girls, too, need fathers in order to become effective and responsible as women among men. They can benefit just as much as boys do, in short, albeit in somewhat different ways (Ellis *et al.*, 2003, pp. 801-821; Metzler *et al.*, 1994, pp. 419-438).¹¹ This is not only about conventional or unconventional notions of masculinity and femininity.

In a world of embodied beings, it is also about maleness and femaleness. Only those who deny any importance at all to the natural order are likely to disagree.

But parenting is more complicated than that, we suggest, because children need not one but two *kinds* of parental love. They need the *unconditional love* that most cultures have associated with mothers. This form of love is direct, emotional and immediately gratifying to both children and their mothers. Children need it in order to feel safe and acceptable. In addition, however, they need the *earned respect* that most cultures have associated with fathers (or, in a few societies, uncles who function as fathers). This form of love—and it *can* be a form of love—is often indirect, cognitive and not always immediately gratifying to either children or their fathers. Although infants might not yet need this paternal form of love, older children and young adults do in order to be competent and feel confident in the world beyond home. Any parent could do either task, in theory, which means that any two parents could satisfy the psychological needs of their children. But we suggest that each parent needs to choose or at least emphasize *one* form of love in order to avoid sending a confusing double message to children: “I love you because of who you *are*” but also “I love you because you *act* in ways that make me proud.” For the time being, we suggest, very few women would be prepared to withhold or at least appear to withhold unconditional love from their children (or even from those of their female spouses), although that could change. As for men, we suggest that they are more confused than ever about fatherhood. They often *feel* unconditional love for their children, but they also realize that this is not what their children need most from *them*.

If we are correct, then fatherhood is a much more complicated and even perilous business, psychologically, than motherhood is. It requires a major cultural effort to create fathers who are closely involved with their children but not so closely that they merely duplicate what mothers do (Bly, 1990; Keen, 1991). Bly and Keen became famous for evoking widespread anger toward postwar fathers who had been too busy at work for close relationships with their sons. Nonetheless, our society makes very little effort to help fathers find ways of being not too distant, not too close, but “just right.” Worse, it gives them two conflicting messages. It tells them directly to make heavy emotional (and financial) investments in their children but indirectly to *avoid* making heavy emotional investments in children, who would almost certainly be taken or even alienated from them after divorce (except, of course, in connection with the financial burden of supporting them).

What Does It Mean To Be Part Of Society?

Most people have a strong need for affiliation. Society is not a collection of isolated and autonomous individuals, after all, but a union of individuals and communities with at least some common needs and at least some forms of common identity. To form personal or collective identity is partly to discover the ways in which we are *unlike* others (because we all have distinctive characteristics) but also to discover the ways in which we are *like* others (because we all have at least some common characteristics). Taken together, both factors amount to *interdependence*, not personal or collective independence.¹² As social beings, healthy people—whether individuals or communities—not only receive from but also contribute to others and thus build up society as a whole. Now, consider all this in

connection with reproduction and family life. The fact is that our society excludes one segment of the population from debates over both.

By now, for instance, it has become a cliché to discuss abortion-on-demand as “a woman’s right to choose” or a matter between “a woman and her doctor.” To the extent that many people even think about the rights of men, they believe that fathers should have no legal or moral right even to know that they are fathers, let alone to discuss the ultimate fate of their children. They believe that underage girls should have access to abortion without the consent of their mothers and fathers, moreover, let alone the fathers of their children. Not all women support abortion-on-demand, of course, and not all men oppose it. Some men, those who want no legal responsibility for children but also those who fear losing their children in the event of separation or divorce, collaborate with women who promote abortion-on-demand. But who really *cares* what men think about abortion?

During the 1990s, after legislators decriminalized abortion, many Canadian feminists—ideological feminists as distinct from egalitarian ones (Nathanson & Young, 2001, pp. 199-233)¹³—demanded legislation to regulate or even ban new procedures that might exploit poor women (such as surrogacy¹⁴) and in vitro that might prove dangerous for infertile women, but they *rejected* legislation to ban those (such as artificial insemination) that might help women to gain independence from men. These feminists tended to approve of technologies that promised women reproductive autonomy (such as abortion), in short, but to disapprove of those (such as ex-utero technologies) that promised men a fundamental role in reproduction.

The Canadian government established a royal commission to study new reproductive technologies (Canada, 1993). After years of ferocious public debate, however, Canadians reached no enduring consensus. The gay factor has modified opinions at one end of the political continuum. Some feminists have found it expedient to switch sides; those who had once denounced any procedure that helped infertile men to reproduce (such as surrogacy or buying sperm), although they seldom referred to couples at all, now demanded access to procedures (such as surrogacy or buying sperm) that allow gay couples to reproduce.

This period saw the rise of ideological feminism, which was very effective in promoting the idea that Canada, like every other country, was a “patriarchy.” From this, it followed that Canadian laws oppressed women *per se* but rewarded men *per se*. Consequently, there was no point in even asking how reproductive technologies, old or new, affected men in general or fathers in particular. As for children, many assumed that the interests of women and those of children would continue to coincide (as they had through much of history). Even abortion was really in the interest of children, they assumed, because some mothers were either unwilling or unable to care for unwanted children.

Moreover, this period saw some major victories for the gay movement. Gay activists joined forces politically with their feminist counterparts, because all had a common interest in undermining what they called the “traditional family,” a bastion of patriarchy, and either supplementing or replacing it with “alternative families.” Feminist and gay activists focused on the benefits of new legislation to both single mothers and gay couples. They refrained at first, however, from focusing on the benefits to children; the latter were bystanders to this debate about the rights of adults. When critics insisted on considering the needs and rights of children, activists claimed that the children of gay

couples would be either as well off or better off than those of other parents, even though no one had yet had time to produce a longitudinal study (Bloche & Pecresse *et al.*, 2006, pp. 87-88; Rekers & Kilgus, 2002, pp. 343-382; Stevenson, 1991, pp. 3-8).¹⁵ In short, we suggest, advocates of “alternative families” might be making the same mistake that advocates of no-fault divorce had made a generation earlier. Divorce and custody laws changed in ways that have usually helped mothers but penalized fathers—and therefore children as well. Longitudinal studies on the children of divorce have finally made it very clear, after all, that divorce often helps parents *but not children* (Amato, 2000a; Amato, 2000b; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). One possible major problem, as we saw, is that the children of both single mothers and gay couples—like the children of divorce in most cases—have no parents of one sex, usually fathers. Some argue that there should be a presumption of joint custody in response to legal measures that leave the children of divorce largely under the control of mothers, even though the legislation on custody is couched in gender-neutral terms (Nathanson & Young, 2006, pp. 314-318).¹⁶ In some places, mothers may either remove or not add the names of fathers on birth certificates.¹⁷

This is the atmosphere in which popular culture undermines men in general and fathers in particular, often depicting them with overt contempt (Nathanson & Young, 1991). The explicit message is, by and large, that fathers are luxuries at best and liabilities at worst. This is the overwhelming and relentless message from countless movies, sitcoms, talk shows, comic strips, blogs, newspapers, magazines, commercials and print ads (Nathanson & Young, 2001). The implicit message is that men not only have no inherent place in the family but also that men have no inherent stake in the future of society (or possibly even of the species). In that case, though, why would anyone expect fathers to stick around and make heavy emotional investments in family life? No wonder, then, that some schools no longer encourage or even allow children to make cards for Father’s Day. The excuse is that children without fathers might feel excluded (Nutt, 2008).

These are not the problems only of men or of children but those of society as a whole. It is true that people tend to take sides in public debates according to their own personal or collective self-interest. And it is true that democracy allows self-interest as a motivation for participation in public life. Otherwise, there would be no need for democracy in the first place. Problems arise only in connection with conflicts of interest. It is hardly self-evident, for instance, that the collective self-interest of either women or gay people (at least insofar as activists represent both) coincides perfectly with that of society as a whole. After all, society includes men, both gay and straight. But no one would ever know that from listening to the speeches in legislatures, much less from reading the reports in newspapers or watching the discussions on talk shows. This is what can happen, when the interest of one group, even an alliance of two or more groups, trumps that of society as a whole. We suggest that participation in public discussions about reproduction and family life—about the future of society and therefore the meaning of human life—is not merely a personal right of all citizens but also a civic *duty* of all citizens by virtue merely of *being* citizens.

What Does It Mean To Give Or Take Life?

At the heart of human experience is giving and taking life. Historically and cross-culturally, people have associated women with giving life, producing new life in connection with childbirth. Some would argue that those who promote abortion-on-demand undermine that association (Nguyen, 2011, p. A-12).¹⁸ On the other hand, people have associated men with taking life: killing game, predatory animals, domestic animals and sometimes human enemies as well. We should avoid the tendency to romanticize either the life-giving function of women or to glorify the heroic life-taking function of men. In the remote past, both sexes had very dangerous tasks. Women often died in childbirth, after all, and men were often killed on the hunt or in battle. Nonetheless, both sexes contributed things of very high value—ultimately, their own lives—to society. And they formed *healthy collective identities as men or women* accordingly—which is to say, identities that relied on the ability to make *at least one distinctive, necessary and publicly valued contribution to society*.

It is worth noting, however, that societies probably found it harder to maintain the collective identity of men than to maintain that of women; it probably took a more massive cultural effort, in other words, to make boys and men affirm their symbolic link with death than to make girls and women affirm their symbolic link with life. This explains at least partially why so many societies have required boys to undergo severe and even dangerous ordeals before coming of age in glamorous ceremonies as men but seldom required girls to undergo any comparable ordeals before coming of age as women. Until recently, our own society has expected boys to become men in order to make similar contributions—fighting on the battlefield, say, or in the boardroom—but has long since failed (except in a few religious communities) to offer them any public rituals that signify coming of age (Nathanson & Young, 2009, pp. 155-177). In any case, we have reason to believe that envy of women has been more common than many people in our society might think. Some societies acknowledge it openly, for instance, by allowing men to experience childbirth symbolically or ritually; this is what anthropologists call *couvade* (Paige & Paige, 1981; Young & Nathanson, 2010, pp. 60-124).¹⁹

One episode of *I Love Lucy*, in fact, illustrated precisely this phenomenon. When Lucy gets pregnant, Ricky shows all the symptoms of pregnancy (Oppenheimer, Pugh & Carroll, 1953). Men today have many other reasons for envying women, but childbirth probably remains among them—deeply repressed, of course, to avoid the obvious threat to masculine identity. And how could it be otherwise now that many feminists have shifted from ignoring motherhood to glorifying it?

Conclusions

Our goal here is to stimulate more research on fathers in general and on the distinctive functions, if any, of fathers, in particular. As we explain elsewhere (Nathanson & Young, 2010), every human society has, until now, found it necessary to acknowledge some distinctive and necessary function of men, conferring a healthy collective identity on men by honoring those who function effectively as fathers (and usually punishing those who

do not). From the perspectives not only fathers but also of children, it makes no difference whether this function is distinctive due to natural proclivities or to cultural scripts. Given our reading of the historical and cross-cultural evidence, therefore, we consider a warning appropriate here. If social scientists were to decide that fathers can contribute *nothing* to children that is *distinctive* and *necessary* (whether children and even fathers are aware of it or not), then a significant segment of the male population loses its collective identity and therefore withdraws its collective investment in the future of society. To avoid social disintegration, other cultural leaders would have to “invent” something for men to contribute. By this, we do not mean inventing something out of the blue, as it were. Rather, we mean using rituals and other symbolic mechanisms to elaborate on, say, any beneficial differences that persist between fathers and mothers.

Our point in this chapter is to describe problems that few others have even acknowledged, not to re-iterate conventional wisdom. We do not prescribe solutions or even to assert unequivocally that there *are* solutions.

Notes

¹ Neither volume has an index, but each has a table of contents. *Nothing* in either refers to men in general or fathers in particular as segments of society that might have a collective interest in the findings. No group representing men presented a brief to the commissioners.

² Gender labels under consideration (in addition to gay, lesbian and bisexual) included the following: “transgender,” “trans,” “transsexual,” “intersex,” “androgynous,” “agender,” “cross dresser,” “drag king,” “drag queen,” “genderfluid,” “genderqueer,” “intergender,” “neutrois,” “pansexual,” “pan-gendered,” “third gender,” “third sex,” “sister girl” and “brother boy” (see also Siksay, 2010). Critics pointed out that the bill does not define “gender identity” and “gender expression” but Siksay replied as follows: “On the matter of the definition, the Canadian Human Rights Act does not define the prohibited grounds of discrimination that it contains. This is intentional. It encourages living definitions, grounds that are defined by common usage, experience, jurisprudence, tribunal decisions and science. In keeping with that feature of the act, there is [*sic*] no definition of gender identity and gender expression in this bill.” But one gay lobby group understood what the bill intended by *reading into* it specific groups to be protected. “This kind of explicit reference within the CRHA [Canadian Human Rights Act] would afford transgender, transsexual, cross-dresser, intersex, gender-queer, gender non-conforming and gender-open individuals clear protection against discrimination and help create a safer Canada for us all” (EGALE, 2011).

³ By definition, democracy mandates rule of the majority. But modern liberal democracies acknowledge limits to the power of any majority and thus protect minorities from persecution.

⁴ See Stanworth (1987) and Smart (1996). The point of both authors is to prevent the deconstruction of motherhood; they have no problem with the deconstruction of fatherhood.

⁵ One group made this very clear during the 1990s. This was the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering, better known as FINRRAGE. They opposed many new reproductive technologies on moral grounds: for exposing women to experimental procedures, say, or for exploiting poor women as surrogate mothers for rich couples. But they opposed these technologies also on symbolic grounds: for undermining the essential link between women and nature (at the very least their ability to gestate and lactate) by legitimating the essential link between men and culture (at the very least by using technology to manipulate and harm nature). See Klein (1988).

⁶ You could argue that the male body still provides men with identity in connection with athletes and sports heroes. But athletes and sports heroes are *vestigial*. Their strength is symbolic and even ceremonial, not practical. No one relies on them in particular, after all, to support or even protect society. One parallel comes to mind: late medieval jousting tournaments. By this time, rulers no longer relied in wartime on mounted knights who could wield lances; they relied primarily on soldiers who could shoot arrows or fire guns. The tournaments had come to function primarily as ceremonial statements about aristocratic prestige. In short, they were vestigial. Societies still do rely on male bodies to protect the state in wartime, but an increasing number of them rely also on female bodies. Apart from anything else, therefore, the male body's symbolism in combat has been undermined. Some people argue, even now, for reversion to the earlier symbolism by restricting combat to men. But they seldom point out (for political reasons) that this would be extremely costly. The cost would be measured not only in male lives, as usual, but also in social harmony. This is because restricting the duty of combat to men would require, in addition, restricting the *privileges* that once *rewarded* men for engaging (willingly or unwillingly) in combat.

⁷ This was the ideal family in patrilineal societies, not in the few matrilineal ones (although the mother's brother functions as the father).

⁸ Unlike many countries, neither Japan nor many Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, now show evidence of preferring boys over girls. See Wortz & Fletcher (1998), p. 264.

⁹ This has provided an economic safety net for parents. In small-scale societies, the bands have done so.

¹⁰ On the children of divorce and single mothers, see Amato (2000a, 2000b); Amato & Booth (1997); Angel & Worobey (1988); Bennett & Braverman (1994); Biblarz & Gottainer (2000); Chase-Landsdale *et al.* (1995); Cherlin *et al.* (1998); Daly & Wilson (1985); Flewelling & Bauman (1990); Harper & McLanahan (1998); Hetherington &

Kelly (2002); Johnson *et al.* (1996); Marks & Lambert (1998); McLanahan & Sandefur (1994); Sampson & Laub (1987); Simons *et al.* (1999); Thomas & Farrell (1996); Wallerstein *et al.* (2000).

¹¹ We are not the only ones to say this about adolescent girls. “Clearly, fathers play a central role in civilizing boys. They also play an important role in civilizing girls, as the research on sexual promiscuity and teenage childbearing makes readily apparent. Fathers who are affectionate and firm with their daughters, who love and respect their wives, and who simply stick around can play a crucial role in minimizing the likelihood that their daughters will be sexually active prior to marriage. The affection that fathers bestow on their daughters makes those daughters less likely to seek attention from young men and to get involved sexually with members of the opposite sex. Fathers also protect their daughters from premarital sexual activity by setting clear disciplinary limits for their daughters, monitoring their whereabouts, and by signaling to young men that sexual activity will not be tolerated” (Metzler *et al.*, 1994; cited in Wilcox, 2005). Finally, when they are in the home, research by University of Arizona psychology professor Bruce Ellis suggests that fathers send a biological signal through their pheromones ... that slows the sexual development of their daughters; this, in turn, makes daughters less interested in sexual activity and less likely to be seen as sexual objects (Ellis *et al.*, 2003; cited in Wilcox, 2005).

¹² Interdependence relies on continual negotiation; otherwise, it degenerates into greater dependence for some and greater independence for others. That is inequality, not interdependence.

¹³ By “egalitarian feminists,” we referred to those whose rhetoric revolves around equality between men and women. By “ideological feminists,” we refer to those whose rhetoric revolves around the moral and sometimes even innate superiority of women over men. We associate this second group with misandry, which includes manifestations such as the notion of collective guilt (that of men) and the conspiracy theory of history (that men have conspired since the remote past to subjugate women).

¹⁴ Surrogacy was an ancient practice, but modern surrogacy involves the use of *in vitro* technologies. This is why we classify it as a new technology.

¹⁵ Explicitly or implicitly, Stevenson (1991) compares the best of one thing (“alternative families”) with the worst of another (“the traditional family”); this is not a legitimate form of comparison. Moreover, he suggests that whatever is (“alternative families” as the new statistical norm), should be; this is not a legitimate use of statistics. We discuss Stevenson and his context within “men’s studies,” an academic discipline that officially promotes the perspective of (ideological) feminism, in *Transcending Misandry*. But we are by no means the only ones to challenge what has become academic orthodoxy. For a critique of many social-scientific studies on the children of same-sex couples, citing their political biases and flawed methods, see the edited and translated version of a report that

was written for French legislators (Bloche *et al.*, 2006, pp.87-88; Rekers & Kilgus, 2002, pp. 343-382).

¹⁶ It would be unthinkable now to use gender-specific language in any law or other legal document (one notable exception being American legislation that requires young men but not young women to register with the Selective Service System). How the courts *interpret, implement and enforce* gender-neutral texts, however, is a different matter. Legislators, judges, bureaucrats and even police officers have found ways of doing so that benefit women and penalize men (Nathanson & Young, 2006, pp. 314-318). Although some laws *refer in theory* to both men and women, for instance, they might *apply in fact* primarily to either men or women; in these cases, gender-neutrality is a formality. Even gender-neutral expressions such as “custodial parents,” after all, refer primarily to mothers instead of fathers.

¹⁷ Some jurisdictions now encourage parents to ignore the sex of parents. Instead of “mother” and “father,” for instance, their birth certificates specify “parent a” and “parent b,” “party a” and “party b,” “progenitor a” and “progenitor b,” and so on. Other jurisdictions distinguish between “natural parent” and “legal parent.” Still other jurisdictions retain “mother” and “father” but enter the name of a non-genetic mother under “father.”

¹⁸ Given widespread support for abortion-on-demand in Canada, it is not entirely surprising that infanticide is a lesser crime in Canadian law than homicide. Infanticide assumes post-menstrual stress or some other psychological condition and thus mitigates guilt. The implication is that even an infant is somehow less human than an adult (Nguyen, 2011).

¹⁹ *Couvade* allows men to mimic their pregnant wives in connection with food taboos, for instance, and seclusion. Why would men do that? According to M.F. Ashley Montagu (1999), doing so fulfills a deep emotional need: giving indirect expression to the fact that men envy women for being able to give birth (and possibly for additional reasons). According to one study, *couvade* has nothing to do with emotional needs; on the contrary, as they make clear in the title of their book, it has everything to do with political interests: “Ritual behavior is a bargaining strategy employed out of political self-interest when more potent tactics are unavailable” (Paige & Paige, 1981, p. 255). Their cynical approach, we suggest, owes more to ideological feminism than it does to empirical evidence; by explaining *couvade* as an attempt by men to control the reproductive power of women, they reinforce the unverifiable conspiracy theory of history (Young & Nathanson, 2010, pp. 60-124). Moreover, the authors fail to discuss other expressions of womb envy, such as initiation rites found in which men imitate gestation and menstruation. Finally, the authors discuss circumcision but fail to mention subincision and superincision—both of which function as imitations of menstruation.

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