

The Fragility of Fatherhood

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When they are just born human males and female differ less than at any other time in their lives, but as time passes the gap widens. How much of this is inevitable? As a boy becomes a man he is subject to powerful biological and social forces that seem hard to disentangle. Yet the bodily changes are fairly obvious, while the social pressures are almost invisible, as if they had always been there like the air we breathe. Everywhere you look in history there are men and fathers, emperors, popes, kings, gods, conquerors, heroes. Until as recently as my own childhood democracy was still defined in the now very odd phrase 'one man one vote'. My mother was amongst the first generation of women in Britain to have the vote on an equal basis with men, but the idea that women counted as citizens still took another generation to sink in. Something quite monumental has taken place in the past few decades, which was barely questioned before. Talking about boys and men creates states of mind that are drenched in centuries of culture, and until the recent past, few people questioned the order of things between men and women.

Origins of male power

Why is the male generally seen to be more powerful than the female? The obvious answer is that he has stronger muscles. This is true except of course for probably the most powerful muscle of all, which a man does not even possess - the uterus. This can do what no biceps can, which is push a baby out of a tiny confined space into the open air. Yet male superiority has been unquestioned in most societies for most of human history, but if it only depended on muscle power, we might well ask why it lasted so long. There are males in other species, such as the gorilla, that are even bigger in comparison to the female, and there are the majestic lions with their flowing manes to reinforce fantasies of our masculine heritage. These are thrilling beasts, but it is worth noting that they do not necessarily have the kind of power that we assume they have. Male primates, for example, have impressive ways of showing their might over other males, but they can be surprisingly meek when confronted with females. We might think that males that are so much bigger than females would easily be able to do what they want with them, but they can't. For example, in non-human primates, rape is virtually unknown in the wild (Silk, 1993).

There is something peculiar about human maleness that needs explaining before thinking about what to do about gender differences now. The crucial factor is to do with consciousness. However sophisticated, apes and other higher primates do not speculate about the nature of things the way humans do. Modern ethologists show just how delicate the social lives of chimpanzees can be (De Waal, 1991; Dunbar,

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1996), but they do not have the same preoccupation with meaning that we have. As humanity evolved there was an enormous increase in the size of the brain, and a corresponding explosion of ingenuity and thoughtfulness. One of the most important discoveries was the facts of life themselves, as we quaintly call them, and it is very likely that this had a dramatic effect on the perception of gender. It is almost impossible to imagine what life might have been like for people before they knew how babies were made. They would have been unlikely to know how anything else was made either. The breeding of domestic animals, for example, was only started at around the time when people discovered how to grow plants from seed. Before that, food was gathered, and sometimes stored. If it was animal food, of course it had to be caught first, and it is one of the most persistent myths about humanity that the only food prehistoric people would eat was meat. The truth is far more likely to have been that food was gathered or caught by hand - roots, fruits, insects and other small creatures - and that this could be done just as easily by women as by men. Let us just suppose that prehistoric men played their part in human social life, but that they did not assume any superior role in it (Cucchiari, 1981) .

Although all we have to go on is archaeological remains, there is some very good evidence to show that while in prehistoric times people worshipped female gods, within a thousand years of the discovery of agriculture and the development of cities and of writing, males had taken over, and the gods that we now think of as eternal were invented (Baring & Cashford, 1991). Men began to think about themselves in a self-conscious way and realised that, apart from the genitals, all they really had in comparison with women was greater muscle power and deeper voices. Women on the other hand had actually produced the babies which men could only marvel at, and in many places spent more time bringing them up too. This meant that they would have had to learn many more things about the needs of children, about how to protect them from danger - how, for example, to give them food that didn't poison them but instead helped them to grow. All this was important knowledge which, if men had it too, they probably learnt from women.

This does not sound very familiar, and of course it may be another myth. But there are surviving hunter-gatherer societies (Hewlett, 1987) where men and women do not behave in such unequal ways as they have through most of our history, and it is at least possible that our ancestors were like that also. I use this narrative to help us to think about the particular problem of the human male, with all his brains and brawn and an ambition to be just as good as the female. As they say, the rest is history. There is a strong streak of envy and rivalry in the makeup of historic man (Kraemer, 1991). The promotion of male gods went in parallel with the promotion of male leaders in society - kings and emperors were not the same as big gorillas, they were political rulers who dominated everyone, men, women and children, and animals. Big apes only dominate other males, leaving the females and infants to look after themselves. Furthermore big apes do not own anything. Big men owned people and property (Service, 1975); the archetypal father is not so much a parent as a boss. Once human civilisation got going men found that they were really in awe of women and had to do something to stop them from feeling so inferior. One way of doing this, which seems to be very familiar and widespread right up to the present, is to put women down - to say that they are the inferior ones and that we are better than them. But the result of this is that what is projected into the other has to be kept at bay with fierce energy, in case it comes back to haunt you. Thus there developed a real terror of feminine power in many societies, which has survived right up to the

present. This is a brief extract from an anthropological text of how in some traditional societies, men keep women at a distance:

"Many ethnographic accounts describe how men spend much of their daily lives in their communal houses or sweatshops, gossiping about the evils of women, purifying themselves from female pollution, and guarding sacred objects that they believe their wives are trying to steal from them... The Mundurucu believe that the sex that controls the sacred musical instruments also controls the society and that originally women controlled the instruments. Although men eventually wrested control from women, women are constantly attempting to retrieve it and resume their once dominant social position. The instruments, then, are strictly guarded from women, who are permitted neither to see them nor to hear them played. Mundurucu husbands say that if a woman were to see the instruments she would be dragged into the bush and forced to submit to gang-rape"(Paige & Paige, 1981)

The highland people of Papua New Guinea are even fiercer. The male initiation cult involves learning how to dominate women.

"Inside the cult house, which no woman may enter, the Nama men store their sacred flutes whose sounds terrorize the women and children. Only male initiates learn that it is their fathers and brothers who make the sounds and not carnivorous supernatural birds. They swear to kill any woman or child who learns the secret even by accident. ... After being secluded in the cult house the initiates emerge into adulthood. They are given a bride whom they promptly shoot in the right thigh with an arrow to demonstrate unyielding power over her. Women work in the gardens, raise pigs, and do all the dirty work while men stand around gossiping, making speeches, and decorating themselves with paint, feathers and shells" (Harris, 1993, p65).

How do boys become fathers? The short answer is that many do with very little effort. We need to distinguish the notion of fathering from the far more elementary notion of siring. For a boy who has not yet done so the idea of having sex with a woman may seem like an impossible task, but it turns out not to be so difficult, eventually. There is also a distinction to be made between having sex and making love, but the point is made. It is not difficult for most couples to conceive. It may be that the alarm over falling sperm counts may make a difference to future men, but it is too early to tell. Although as we have seen manhood and fatherhood are social definitions there are obvious biological differences between men and women which make a difference to their experiences of parenthood. A male needs only a few minutes at most to impregnate a female. Unless she has an abortion, she then has no choice but to look after the baby until it is born. Men have the choice of staying or leaving at every stage from conception onwards. Parenthood is entirely voluntary for a man. You could argue that this is also the case for the woman, but only after the baby is born. The difference is that she has usually had nine months of pregnancy during most of which she will have known about the impending arrival. During this time also the process of attachment will have begun - getting ready for a baby, a cot, some clothes, maybe a room, thinking about names and so on. It is very hard for women to avoid thinking about a new baby, but it is quite easy for men to do so¹. By the time of birth, if it is their first child, most women have begun to feel like mothers, even if they are terrified and ill-prepared, whereas most men haven't a clue. And, as we know from clinical and social work experience, it is relatively rare for women to abandon their babies or willingly hand them over to other carers. Attachment, even when it is anxious and insecure, is a very powerful magnet.

The anxieties and disadvantages of being male

The male parent does seem to be at quite a disadvantage. He is probably less attached to his newborn infant, and socially unprepared for the role. In good enough circumstances a young woman will have the help of her own mother in starting to care for a new baby, but what support is there for a young man? Does his father come along and show him how fathering can be done. And what would this actually mean? One can imagine very easily the newly promoted paternal grandfather finding every reason not to be too involved with his son. Maybe he has a busy job that he cannot leave - and what would his employers say if he asked for grandpaternal leave?

This is a very familiar model of fatherhood, which many men in the grandfatherly generation know well enough - absence. Absence from the birth itself, absence from the nursery, and later from the school, and so on. It is only in the last twenty years or so that it has seemed right to question such a role. After all, the father had to make money for his family, especially when the baby is new and there are lots of things to buy. It is a very expensive time, and someone has to pay the bills. This has all changed enormously, and very quickly, in the past few years. Now half the labour force is made up of women, and many expect to return to work fairly soon, even within a few weeks, after the baby is born. So the breadwinner is not necessarily the man in the house. The other change, of course, is that there are many more women who find themselves bringing up children without a man around the house. He is not only absent during the day but also at night. He may be nearby and may visit and provide some money, but he is not part of the household. At the last count over one in five children were living in a one-parent family in Great Britain; 2.3 million children, over three times the total in 1961. Just under a tenth of these lives with lone fathers but the rest, still over 2 million, are with mothers, single (36%), divorced (32%), separated (18%) and widowed (5%). The vast majority of these families, wherever they live, are relatively poor (National Council for One Parent Families, 1996).

Faced with facts like these what is a boy to think? He can see around him women making do without men, and may think that he is not really needed as a parent. This is the first of several threats to his esteem. The second is the lack of job opportunities. He can see that there are many men who do not have jobs. Although unemployment has gone down a bit since 1991 there are still well over three million unemployed people in the UK [1996 figures], and far fewer unskilled jobs available than in the past. The only growth is in professional and managerial work, beyond the reach of many poorly educated boys. And that is the third threat. On average girls do significantly better than boys at school, are less likely to fool around in class, and more realistic about what they can do when they grow up. They are the ones who will get the new jobs in service industries as managers, receptionists and trainers. Some boys still imagine that they can do the kind of work their fathers did, even though the evidence is there: though the top jobs in industry and government are still held by men, ordinary unskilled jobs for men have all but gone.

The paradox is that while in daily life it is clear that women are gaining ground, in the political stratosphere the old patriarchal world carries on just as before. The heads of government, of multinational companies and so on are almost all men, and they seem to have got to these positions by demonstrating a very impressive sort of power, the kind that pushes aside anyone who gets in their way. So up there are

some unattainable but fascinating heroes, in a world from which women are still excluded, just like in the old days. Down here the balance is very different. The only two things that boys do better than girls are committing crimes (Utting 1996)² and committing suicide (Hawton, 1992). Both have shown disturbing increases over the past few years. Maybe there will be more jobs for men in future, but we cannot count on it. One thing is certain, and that is that most people will go on having babies. It is true that more women are now deciding not to have children, but for the rest life goes on essentially as it always has. Couples get together and the woman gets pregnant. Is there a role for men?

One answer to this must be some kind of job description for fatherhood. As we have seen it has changed quite a lot in just one generation. In the past fathers were defined by how different they were from mothers - they tended to have an outside role, while mothers were inside. Now the difference has narrowed and this is the cause of anxiety for many boys. This is the fourth threat - the fear of femininity. Almost any boy, however liberally brought up, will resist doing things that he thinks are only for girls. There is a sort of panic that can overwhelm a boy when faced with femininity. In parallel with the historical and prehistorical development of gender difference mentioned at the beginning there is a similar psychological process at work. Because all of us come from inside the bodies of women we have a very powerful sense of being enclosed by something feminine. For girls this is an issue too, but it is not the same one as it is for boys. They have to establish an identity that is distinct from the mother yet one that is still of the same gender - a subtle and complex task. In contrast, boys as they grow up are bound to feel that their gender is different from their mother's, because it is. But the way this is discovered and understood is crucial. It is quite easy, especially in a world that shows that the only effective men seem to be powerful political and industrial leaders who get their way by bullying, to think that this is the path to follow; that to become a male it is necessary to abandon all identification with the female. Something quite profound has to happen but it does not have to be so drastic, like the Mundurucu or Nama men who barricade themselves away from women in holy terror of them. And of course it is nonsense to say that looking after children is necessarily a feminine role; it is just that women have been doing it for a long time.

The old model of fatherhood was closer to this patriarchal image than the new one. That is not to say that fathers in the past were just bullies or that they did not love their children, but there was no pressure on them to adopt what would have been regarded as maternal modes. You were not expected to attend the birth and the showing of affection was not encouraged, even when it was felt. Here is a man, now in his eighties, talking about his second son, who was born in 1949.

"It wasn't that they shouldn't ever cry. I think it was rather that having seen what a rough, tough world it was, they should be able to face it. Life doesn't owe you a living, you've got to get out there and get stuck in and make your own way. I don't think that either of them were cry babies. I remember an occasion, John used to walk about a lot with bare feet and he used to go into my workshop where I often had odd things in there and he picked up a very heavy condenser, about six inches long. He dropped it on his little toe and the howl of agony that went up went straight to my heart, a cry of despair. I picked him up and hugged him. I did my best to see that they were not mollycoddled and grew up as tough youngsters and I think they are." (Humphries and Gordon, 1996)

No one would say that this father did not love his children, yet he is clearly afraid that there is a danger in being too affectionate in case they become too dependent on him, or perhaps even not manly enough. Manliness on this view means a kind of self reliance. Even though some fathers have changed since those days the model of manliness that he implies is still very clear, and compulsively interesting to everyone. This is the cool pose of the teenage boy trying not to seem anxious. He is like Clint Eastwood, 'the man with no name' in his most famous screen role; he says little and looks after himself. He has no need for anybody. The defining quality of this type of male is that he is ashamed of being ashamed (Krugman, 1995), so he cuts himself off from a whole range of feelings, especially tender ones. But these are precisely the kind that he needs if he is to become a successful modern father.

A further threat, the fifth, is the fear of sexual attraction towards children, even ones own. This is real enough, but as long as it remains a taboo, it appears more dangerous than it is. Parker and Parker (1986) did a controlled study of men who had committed incest against their daughters. These men had far less intimate involvement with the girls during infancy - they rarely changed nappies, bathed, or fed the children. This suggests that committed and involved care from the very beginning can help to prevent later intimacy from turning into sexual abuse. (Of course a determined paedophile can still get himself into a partnership with a woman with the express aim of having children that he can later abuse, but these will be a tiny minority.) But even when sexual abuse is not an issue there are in any case differences between the erotic experiences that men and women might have when in contact with children. There is a difference between an erect nipple and an erect penis, for example, which is one of the obstacles to fathering that is rarely mentioned.

What children need from fathers

In spite of the bodily differences between men and women, the new model of fatherhood is not so very different from mothering. The trouble is that not many boys, or girls for that matter, know this. Nobody wants to talk about it. Kyle Pruett, an American psychiatrist who has written very sensitively about fatherhood, says: "Unlike women, men tend not to talk about their children's caretaking needs in social groups; rather they "own' their experience privately, as if they had discovered a wonderful secret that can be preserved only by not calling attention to it" (Pruett, 1993). This could just as well apply to the father just quoted, in that he somehow felt he was not meant to hug his child, and probably never talked about this incident until interviewed for a TV programme in the 1990s. The difference is that not only is the old model of fathering seriously under threat, but the new one is very fragile and hardly established. It is important to make clear what I mean by the new kind of fathering. This is not the new man so beloved of advertisers. He is, as everyone now knows, a bit of a myth; he looks good and says all the right things, but does no more childcare or housework than the old man. The new kind of father is something far less glamorous. He has probably been around for years but only recently has there been any discussion at all about his experiences and tasks. Essentially he is a father who takes a reasonable share of childcare and discovers that it can be both rewarding and maddening, just as mothers have always known. These are men who have discovered something very simple. Children want their fathers in just the same sorts of ways as they want their mothers. Sometimes the desire is not so intense as for mother, but sometimes it is even stronger. This is not to say that they want the same from each parent all the time. On the contrary; it is the difference that is so

interesting, but it does not have to be forced. That is what fathers have to learn, which is not easy after all these years. Even if he does not feel like it, a young man is often under pressure show off his masculinity (Gilmore, 1990), yet this obligation does not help a him learn to look after, nor even to think about, small dependent creatures like children. If the father is more involved, and takes more responsibility, this will change. What cannot change is that the child has never been inside the father, who in that sense must always represent something 'outside'. If he plays an active part, this outside person is more present than absent (Kraemer, 1995). Though children no doubt enjoy exciting moments with either parent, what they want from the father is not some wonderful patriarch, or adventurer, or breadwinner or bully, or even playmate, but a parent who can look after you and think about you, even when you are not there. This simple discovery is deeply disturbing to the collective male, which is why it has had little press. It does not seem to be very newsworthy in any case. What is so special about men who look after their children in an ordinary good enough way? Nothing, except that it is probably happening in more and more families, as mothers go out to work and become more aware that childcare does not always have to be done by women. Any man who gets admired for this - "isn't he wonderful!" - might well find an angry woman at his side saying 'what is so wonderful about this. We have been doing just this for centuries, and nobody admired us!'

From the point of view of the children themselves, there is no doubt that having fathers look after them alongside mothers is good for them (Lamb & Oppenheim, 1989; Russell & Radejovic, 1992; Burgess, 1997). The research consistently shows that collaborative parents who do not make a major distinction between their roles produce confident and thoughtful children who are also less tied to the old fashioned gender distinctions. Of course this is not an easy arrangement. It is probably simpler to follow the traditional pattern, since that effectively leaves the mother in charge of the children and the father bringing home the money. That way they do not get in each others' way. But, except in increasingly rare instances, the old model is no longer possible. What is most interesting about this quiet revolution is that it is almost certainly what the children want, and would always have wanted if they had been asked. Of course it is nice to have a Daddy who comes home from far away places with presents and so forth, but it is even nicer to have him around in an ordinary daily way.

The noise of divorce and family breakup has obscured these quiet changes in families over the past few years. Even in families that subsequently break up these may persist. Although there are few families in which they take an equal share of parenting, many men who become parents now think it is their duty to take part. A generation or two ago this simply was not an issue. Men were visitors in the nursery. You were considered a strange bloke if you wanted to change your baby's nappies or carry the child around with you, and of course there were none of the baby slings that now make it so easy to do that. Here is an account (from the same BBC programme) of how it was for one father whose daughter was born in 1953.

"I used to do all the nappies, nursing, feeding, whatever was necessary, I did it. Take her out for long walks in the pram, give the wife time to kind of get the housework done or what she needed and I used to enjoy that. I used to walk for miles round here, pushing the old pram, "she's mine". You know.

People in the neighbourhood, you'd walk out and you'd see them. 'Huh, look at him, pushing a kid'. But it never used to worry me, that. They used to look and say 'What's up

with Joan, is she ill?' I'd say, 'No, she's just doing something, ironing, I'm taking the kid' 'Oh, you wouldn't get me doing that.' You know that was the general attitude, and I used to think, 'Well, what the hell is it? She's my daughter, she's my flesh and blood, what's wrong with pushing her around in her pram?' I just couldn't weigh it up. I used to think, 'If they say anything I'll flatten 'em.' I used to think it was the right thing to do. These are your children, and why not?" (Humphries & Gordon 1996, 198-200)

It is important for children to be looked after by women and men. Little children see women being effective both as parents and workers. Unless fathers are included in childcare, how are the children going to see what men are really like, and how can men find out what children are really like? The non-domestic world may still seem to be dominated by male values, but the fact is that men are increasingly marginalized. Without the opportunity to be useful parents, men will slide further into meaninglessness. Even now there is a big problem for men as fathers. Behind closed doors it is fine to get on with it, but in public many men are a bit reserved about being seen to be too maternal. A visible sign of this is how many men drive a baby push chair with only one hand, as if to say "this isn't really my job - I'm just standing in for the wife". There is no serious social encouragement for men to share parenting. In Sweden it took 50 years to break the mould of centuries, yet in Britain we still have no government action on paternity leave (Moss, 1995) - that is leave from work when the baby is born - let alone on parental leave, which is the right to take time off work when a child up to 8 years old is ill or has to be looked after at home for some reason, such as on teacher training days. What happens is that mothers usually have to organise to take over, by phoning work to say that they are themselves ill, because they are not allowed to take time off for children's illnesses.

Few families can expect to care for their children without help. Even in these times of disintegrated families, many grandparents still help out, but most parents also rely on extra help, which is usually paid for, either in cash or in kind. The underprovision and minimal regulation of such caregiving is shameful. It does not have to be like that. With a political will the lives of children, and hence the lives of the next generation of adults, could be greatly improved (Kraemer, 1997). With properly trained (and properly paid) staff to look after them, children will thrive in non-family day care, but they also need to be looked after by their mothers and fathers, especially in the morning and early evening. Britain has the highest proportion of men working overtime in the EU, and the pressures on those in work to overdo it will continue, because jobs, and to some extent partnerships too, are insecure. Either partner may find themselves without work, or indeed without the other partner. So-called 'family friendly' policies in employment are rare. Even if many men cannot afford to work shorter hours, they could work them more flexibly.

Conclusion: Equality and difference

Men and women will always differ, as they must. Equality of opportunity in the workplace and at home does not imply that people will carry out their tasks in precisely the same way. Equality is about difference; it promotes greater richness and variety. No society can prescribe how the sexes should behave, but a civilised modern state cannot restrict the range of opportunity afforded to either. It must allow the greatest freedom to choose, from the traditional arrangement where men earn and women care for children, through equal sharing of earning and childcare, to a total reversal of tradition, in which men stay at home and women go out to work, and of course it must expect a proportion of parents to be separate, even from the

beginning. If it was clear that the choices couples made would be backed up by benefits and leave arrangements then there would be much less of a crisis in family life than there appears to be now. Such a trend would not necessarily halt or reduce the rates of parental separation and divorce, but if men are able to be involved in their children's lives from the beginning, it is a fair bet that that they would be more likely to stay in touch with them even if they did have to leave home later on. And if boys were prepared for parenthood at school, for example, they would not be so incompetent when the day came for them to take responsibility for their own children. They might even find that it is a job worth doing. As we come to understand the primary tasks of parenthood it is clear that the differences between maternal and paternal roles are fewer than the similarities. The promotion of secure attachments is, after all, dependent primarily on attentiveness and consistent firmness, tasks which either parent can perform. Yet the differences are all the more important for that. Children need both parents precisely because they are of different (we still say 'opposite') sexes.

Boys can become fathers if they are encouraged to do so, but it is a political as well as a private matter. There is nothing in the biological makeup of the male that prevents him from being a competent parent. This does not mean that men have to be like women to be ordinary good enough fathers, only that they have to deal with their fear of femininity in doing so. In order to be a father a man does not have to try to be different from a mother. He already is. That is the whole point of the exercise. There are signs of hope. The way boys are brought up is not so separate from girls as it was forty years ago. Most education, for example, is co-educational, and both boys and girls can see for themselves, if they are allowed to look, that women and men do not have to lead segregated lives. Yet there is a real pressure, including from some of the contributors to this book, to reverse this fragile progress to protect the now so vulnerable male. This is mistaken. While women have begun to be liberated from their traditional roles, men are predominantly still trapped in theirs. The rebalancing of genders will not be achieved by reversing the advances that have already been made, even if that were possible.

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ENDNOTES

¹ There are some interesting cases where babies are born to women who did not know they were pregnant until they went into labour. Their situation may be closer to that of some men who cannot face having a child.

² An interesting and important finding from the Cambridge study is that boys whose fathers have a criminal record are significantly less likely to follow them into crime if these fathers have spent leisure time with them at around the age of 11 (Farrington & Hawkins, 1991).