

Men at work? Debating shifting gender divisions of care

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Abstract

In response to four commentaries on our paper ‘Regendering care in the aftermath of recession?’, we extend our discussion of the ongoing knowledge gap that prevails around shifting patterns of male work/care. Recognizing the spatial limits of extant theories of male primary caregiving, we discuss first the need to attend to the variegated landscapes of male caregiving across the globe. Likewise, the theoretical stakes of expanding the focus of ‘mainstream’ analysis to take account of the situated experiences and knowledges of men and women in countries of the global South. We then consider the subjects of our research inquiry (the ‘who’ of contemporary fathering) and how different definitions of male primary caregivers may reveal or conceal patterns and shifts in male caregiving practices. Lastly we consider questions of scale and research methodology. Although our paper employs a national-level analysis, we fully endorse the use of alternative scalar lenses and underline the need to analyse male care within the context of multiscalar and interacting sites of normative change: from nation state, to community, to home, to the body.

Keywords

fatherhood, geographical scale, men, regendering care, social reproduction, stay-at-home fathers, work-life

Introduction

Recent studies of the changing practices of fathers – which show men engaging in everyday tasks of childcare and housework to a greater extent than in the past – initially seemed to offer the realistic

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prospect of greater gender equality. However, such shifts have not (yet) led to the wholesale transformation of men's and women's responsibilities for childcare. As a consequence, much academic research has concentrated on describing and explaining the failure of societies to move significantly towards more gender equitable forms of work. This, in turn, has led to the relative neglect of households where men *do* take primary responsibility for social reproduction even though it is these arrangements which may offer the most useful insights into alternative, and more gender equal, work-lives.

In our paper, we sought to address the ongoing knowledge gap that exists around shifting patterns of male work/care and deliberately phrased our paper title as a question. Our discussion explored the multiple factors, motivations and institutions that are potentially facilitating a complex 'regendering of care' phenomenon (with a particular focus on the United Kingdom), and their relative significance in different place contexts. We also sought to identify the role of economic crisis, labour market change, austerity and economic recovery in (re)shaping household decision-making around gender divisions of care. And we emphasized the wider implications of these changes for repositioning the mainstream 'work-life balance' (WLB) research agenda, rooted in widespread social constructions of WLB as a 'female only' problem (and within that, almost the exclusive preserve of working mothers).

We view our work as part of a broader effort to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic normative idea that childcare should principally be the work of mothers. As neatly summarized by Gorman-Murray (2017), the aim is 'to prompt more careful and critical spatial thinking on gendered divisions of care and their uneven geographies'. Here we engage with the core elements of our respondents' invitations to continue the conversation in relation to variegated geographical landscapes of male caregiving; male primary caregivers as agents of change amid stubborn societal and structural constraints on co-parenting and the regendering of care work; and the (dis)connections between multiscale sites of normative change: from nation state, to community, to home, to the body.

Variegated landscapes of male care

First, we highlighted the important contributions that previous work has made in theorizing the uneven rise of male primary caregiving in North America (specifically the United States and Canada) alongside Scandinavia where studies have yielded important insights into the growth of more 'democratic' national models of childcare and fatherhood. To extend the empirical scope of these debates, we offered an enlarged empirical focus on the United Kingdom, arguing that men in the United Kingdom have remained relatively under-researched within these debates. Through a particular focus on the aftermath of the 2008–09 recession and double dip of 2011–12, our analysis identified a series of challenges to established household gender divisions of work/care in relation to economic restructuring, welfare spending cuts, rising costs of childcare, policy interventions which seek to culturally and numerically defeminize care work and concerns over WLB in an 'age of austerity'. Extending this geographical focus of analysis further, Gorman-Murray's response focuses on the experiences of men in Australia (see also Cox, 2014; Winchester, 1999; Wright et al., 2016) and calls for further comparisons between urban areas and rural areas, and between cities, regions and nation states. As Longhurst (2017) also identifies in her response, the aim should not be to privilege any one spatial scale. Rather:

comparative work between places, between scales and across scales could help, on the one hand, to map variations in geographies of male care giving, and on the other hand, to identify what kinds of economic, social and political processes enable and constrain gender-equal care work. (Gorman-Murray, 2017)

We fully endorse these calls.

As part of this geographical comparison, it is also vital that future research expands the focus of 'mainstream' analysis beyond advanced capitalist 'core' economies to those in the global South (see also Longhurst, 2017). This is important in order to recognize the spatial limits of theories of stay-at-home fatherhood and male primary caregiving developed in Western settings and thereby give

voice to a wider variety of situated experiences and knowledges among men and women in countries of the global South. Examples of research that engages with fathers outside the empirical heartland ‘core’ economies of the United Kingdom, United States, Western Europe and Australia include studies in Vietnam, Costa Rica and Mexico (e.g. Chant, 2000; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011; Willis, 2005). This work (mostly located within a development studies tradition) has begun to ‘provincialize’ and de-essentialize over-generalized theories of male and female breadwinning and gendered divisions of care by exposing a wider variety of male work/care practices and masculinities in different household and community settings. Nevertheless, fathers in the global South remain marginalized as an empirical focus for study within ‘mainstream’ debates around fatherhood and work/care, which limits our understanding of these uneven geographies of transformation. Following Olds (2001), we still lack a truly global human geography (see also Peck, 2015). Key research questions remain, therefore, around what different forms of ‘stay-at-home fatherhood’, ‘female breadwinning’ and ‘nontraditional’ household structures look like if our theory-building process begins instead in the global South. How are different policy actors differently able to challenge societal barriers to male primary caregiving in order to promote more gender equal divisions of work/care in different locations? And what are the geographical possibilities for more gender equal divisions of work and care in the informal sector, for workers in the global South engaged in work that is not formally contractualized nor recognized by the state? In engaging with these questions and seeking ‘to build theory in non-familiar places’ (Raju, 2006), the aim is to develop more cosmopolitan theories of fathering and the regendering of care – and in a manner that disrupts and challenges the mantra of the ‘west is best’ that continues to define the ‘mainstream’ geographies of academic knowledge production. It also demands that we get better at engaging with migrant communities, in which practices of fatherhood and care learned in the global South are increasingly challenged and ‘unlearned’ in the global North (and indeed, whose

members often maintain ‘stretched’ gender divisions of household care at a distance).

Agents of change? Societal and structural issues and the regendering of care work

Schwiter and Baumgarten’s (2017) commentary on our article argues that an overly narrow focus on stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) is misplaced. They suggest that a regendering of care may equally occur through other shifts in men’s patterns of employment, such as the reduction in weekly hours spent in the labour market which has recently taken place in Switzerland. This comment raises an important question about how to define male primary caregivers which goes beyond the technical issue of measurement. As we noted in our original paper, academic studies of SAHFs have used a number of different definitions of this term. They vary according to whether these men are not engaged in any paid work at all or do a small amount (measured either in time or as financial contribution to the households), over what period of time the household arrangement should exist for men to be classified in this way, or indeed whether an assessment should be made using an ‘objective’ definition at all and should (or could) instead rely on a subjective one. The most easily discernible, discrete category – that of fathers who are not participating in the labour market and are instead wholly engaged in doing unpaid childcare – will significantly under-represent the wider population of men who think of themselves as SAHFs (as well as including others who do not identify in this way). John Adams, a prominent UK stay-at-home dad blogger (dadbloguk.com) noted that his (small) income from blogging would mean that he would not count in national statistics that are primarily concerned with capturing levels of economic activity (Adams, 2015). Significant numbers of those men whom Schwiter and Baumgarten (2017) highlight as reconstructing their relationship to the wage labour market in Switzerland through less than full-time employment and increased responsibilities as carers may identify as primary caregivers even if they are not recognized

as such in formal statistics. The myriad ways in which fathers simultaneously reconstruct their relationship to caregiving and the wage labour market in a Northern European context clearly holds the potential for changing societal norms around both the feminization of care and expectations related to full-time working. We would simply suggest that while for individual couples and households any system which moves away from the Fraserian ‘universal wage earner’ model and towards something closer to the ‘universal carer’ model (Fraser, 1997) may be transformative (and even potentially more sustainable in the long term than the switching of breadwinner and caregiver), there also remains genuine cultural significance in the image of fathers embracing the role of primary carer. As Gorman-Murray (2017) suggests in his commentary, SAHFs both epitomize and embody a shift away from patriarchal masculinity; and this visibility may be an important marker even when it is not wholly embraced by individual fathers.

This leads to a broader question raised in the commentaries by Schwiter and Baumgarten, Gorman-Murray and Locke, as to the relative societal and structural issues that impair or support co-parenting and the regendering of care work in general. Locke (2017) is right in noting that the United Kingdom has witnessed relatively low levels of parental leave take-up by fathers since its introduction in 2015. There is some consensus that this in large part reflects the importance of financial considerations and hence that policies which aim to really shift caring responsibilities need to offer realistic financial remuneration for undertaking unpaid work. However, this is far from the whole picture. Financial explanations can be presented as rational post hoc explanations for ‘traditional’ gendered divisions of labour as behaviours and identities are adjusted to each other (see Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). Thus, as we suggest in our original paper, it is *disruptions* to the organization of paid and unpaid work and care in households (including financial arrangements) which may prompt the adoption of less stereotypically gendered roles. Indeed, it is our view – also in line with Locke’s (2017) call to consider economic factors within a larger social framework – that ‘the economic’ must be considered as

socially, spatially and temporally situated rather than operating as a stand-alone set of explanatory factors. Consequently, economic crisis and recession may provide only a partial prompt for gender reconfigurations of paid work and care.

Multiscalar and interacting sites of normative change: From nation state, to home, to the body

In seeking to explore the spatially uneven effects of labour market restructuring, welfare state retrenchment, and shifting social constructions of acceptable masculinity in facilitating versus constraining more equitable gender divisions of household care following the 2008–09 recessionary period, we looked to the scale of the nation to illustrate the relationship between the contemporary development of more equitable gender divisions of household care and wider public policy. Our argument was that the recent UK recession offers the potential for either an entrenchment of gender roles in paid and unpaid work or a regendering of parents’ financial and caring responsibilities. It is, as Gorman-Murray (2017) notes, in times of crisis when ‘external pressures on workplaces and employment conditions provide fissures through which new gendered expectations and practices might emerge’. By focusing on the scale of the nation, we sought to foreground the role of the state and public policy in changing expectations around men’s contribution to household work and childcare. Drawing from evidence in the United Kingdom, we saw an emergent shift in policy: From a primary focus on supporting women’s work around an assumed majority burden of childcare, to measures that sought to facilitate and encourage men to increase their share of childcare in order to aid the pursuit of improved labour market positions among women. We acknowledged the role of policy in sustaining the upward trend in male caregiving by making childcare aspirational to men and encouraging employers to make possible nontraditional working arrangements (e.g. destigmatization of part-time) for men as an important part of this process (see also Dermott and Miller, 2015). Locke (2017) suggests that a deeper exploration of shared

parental leave could provide us with additional insights. Certainly, the formulation of parental leave in the United Kingdom as ‘transferable maternity leave’ – meaning that the default position grants leave entitlement to the mother – reflects an ongoing conservative strand in prioritizing the role of mothers over fathers. This indicates the way in which the political context and underlying principles behind specific policies need to be taken into account.

Longhurst’s (2017) and Locke’s (2017) commentaries raise important issues about our use of scale, highlighting the ways in which experiences of male primary caring are cross-cut and shaped by various kinds of social difference (including sexual orientation, class, race and cultural background) and the potential of male primary caring to destabilize gender binisms. While our aim in the paper was to provide a broad-brush view of societal-level trends, we agree with Longhurst and Locke that analysis at the scale of the nation must be enriched by understandings of the many and varied ways that male caring is differently experienced ‘on the ground’. We are cognizant of the extent to which place-based norms of masculinity and gender relations mediate on-the-ground responses to government policy. Indeed, our paper pointed towards the role of different labour market histories, industrial heritage and local geographies of recession and recovery in moderating productive and social reproductive identities and household relations. Adopting a focusing on intimate geographical scales importantly allows the analytical capture of lived experiences of men negotiating nontraditional masculinities of work/care and their familial relationships. This has value because it opens up important questions around gender performance that are relevant to our conversation about male work/care. Toward this end, alongside the writing of this paper, we have over the last three years collectively supervised three PhD students (Eleni Bourantani at the University of Southampton; Robert Stephenson at Queen Mary, University of London and Alex Dimmock at the University of Bristol)¹ whose work has helped advance knowledge in this vein through nuanced analyses of different aspects of men’s embodied and affective experiences of primary caring. Our paper is

intended to complement and extend these finer-grain analyses insofar as experiences of caring for young children – and decisions about who will do this work – are not solely private matters decided by individual families. Rather, they are made within a context of policy and labour market opportunities (or lack thereof) and shifting and geographically variable normative understandings about masculinity and fathering.

In a similar vein, we advocate for further attention to be paid to the processes through which productive and reproductive identities are constructed through bodies in order to make sense of the lived experiences of male caregivers. Longhurst’s (2017) commentary pushes us to consider how parenting work is attached to particular sexed and gendered bodies and to trouble dualisms such as man/woman and father/mother (see also Aitken, 2000; Longhurst 2008). She asks, are SAHFs’ fathering children, mothering children or both? And do ‘men who mother’ have the potential to shift hegemonic understandings of maternities, and if so how? In recognizing the performance of care as an embodied practice, we welcome the provocation to think deeply about the way bodies are sexed and gendered as well as the ways built form and other material actants within parenting assemblages (prams, baby bags and suchlike) anticipate female bodies.

Longhurst’s (2017) argument for research that seeks to examine the regendering of care at the scale of bodies, homes and communities in order to provide ‘a deeper understanding of the emotions and affects that surround caregiving’ is compelling. Who can parent, who can work, and who can stay at home are underwritten by definitions of masculinity, which are informed by sexual, racial and class identifications, and this affects the identities to which different parents subscribe as well as the work they perform in their parenting role. For example, there is evidence to suggest that heterosexual married men and women in household circumstances that contradict ‘normal’ expectations of gender ‘compensate’ for this arrangement by either increasing or decreasing their contribution to household task in accordance with traditional gender roles (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000; Sullivan, 2011). This underlines the need

closely to examine the relationship between care and paid work responsibilities and how they are negotiated at a familial and household level within the context of multiscale and interacting sites of normative change (from nation state, to community, to home) in a manner that takes into account the emotions and affects of caregivers.

One means of doing this is through in-depth qualitative research. In the course of querying the potential of men's increased role in young-child caring, Longhurst's (2017) commentary is enriched by autobiographical references to her partner's experience of being an SAHF 25 years ago. We suggest that this retrospective view provides just the kind of rich insight that makes big-picture analyses such as ours particularly salient. At that time (and place), Longhurst and her partner's decision was very uncommon. In the contemporary United Kingdom, it is not: or at least it is much less so. Unlike for Longhurst's partner in the early 1990s, many towns and cities in the United Kingdom now have support networks and dedicated groups for dads, and in some places, male primary caring is not even particularly remarkable. While the geographies of male primary caring are still highly variable, we nevertheless suggest that these practices have exciting potential as a means of challenging and denaturalizing essentialized gender binisms that reflexively posit young-child (and other forms of) caring as women's work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are very grateful to Andrew Gorman-Murray, Abigail Locke, Robyn Longhurst, Karin Schwiter and Diana Baumgarten for their careful and critical engagement with our paper, and hope that it will help to foster new interdisciplinary debate and dialogue around the future of work, gender inequalities of work and care, and the regendering of care in the aftermath of recession.

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1. Two of us have recently moved institutions. Boyer from University of Southampton to Cardiff University and James from Queen Mary, University of London to Newcastle University.

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