

Rethinking Gender Roles within the Family: Single Fathers and the Domestic Sphere

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Abstract : Nowadays, a record number of households are headed by single fathers in most of the European societies. Our research aims to explore how French single fathers experience the domestic sphere, a traditionally feminized field while accomplishing their role of fathers. We adopt a gender role and a parenting role construction theoretical perspectives. Indeed, the interior domestic sphere has been traditionally considered as related to the role of the mother. Moreover, according to the masculine domination theory of Bourdieu, men avoid caregiving and domestic practices that are economically and culturally undervalued. Hence, mothers are considered as more likely to handle the expressive dimension of duties whereas fathers' role is represented as instrumental, functional and independent. Long interviews have been conducted with twenty French single fathers in order to investigate how the absence of the mother affects the practices of fatherhood. We combined the long interviews with projective techniques method in order to better understand their conception of the family and their family values. Seeking a qualitative diversity, our respondents are from various ages (between 30 and 60); they are coming from different regions in France; living in rural, semi-rural and urban areas. Based on the analysis of 427 pages of data, we identify three main categories of single fathers depending on their strategies to copy and/or delegate the role of the mother. 1) Nurturing fathers completely assume the role of the absent mother as well as her functions. Their discourse is characterized by abnegation and sacrifices reflecting a nurturing role. 2) Juggling fathers are those who take charge of a part of the household duties and delegate the other part to the market or to 'feminine resources' for lacking skills or time. 3) Resistant fathers are the very few respondents who refuse to assume any activities related to the domestic sphere that they perceive as feminine. For lacking competences and even for ideological reasons, they have tendency to delegate all the tasks that were assumed by their ex-spouses. Generally, the majority of fathers seem to experience the domestic sphere differently, and their domestic involvement has been underestimated and even misunderstood. Household duties such as cooking and housekeeping in addition to the nurturing role are experienced by many of the respondents as constructing elements of their fatherhood. Our respondents do not seem to accomplish house holding duties in a functional way. The domestic sphere is managed by those fathers with a strong dimension of abnegation. Thus, our research contributes to illustrating the evolution of gender roles and shows how being simultaneously 'a father and a mother' seems to be an emerging social norm in a French and European cultural context.

Keywords : fathering, gender roles, gender studies, identity construction, single fathers

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