SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE MOTHERS, PERSONAL CHOICES FOR THE FATHERS
Mothering and Fathering in Finnish Expert Texts in the 1980s and 1990s

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Social motherhood

When feminist researchers have analyzed the history of western welfare states during the 19th and 20th centuries, one central theme has been summed up as maternalism. In relation to the emerging social policy and women’s citizenship in general, maternalist ideas in Finnish feminist discussions have been termed ‘social motherhood’ (Sulkunen 1990; Rantalaiho 1997, 24-28. see also Bock & Thane 1991).

Besides motherhood and mother and child protection, ‘social motherhood’ deals with women’s social duties in general. According to maternalist ideas everything that women do in society has to do with their capacity to mother. Every class, both married and unmarried women, mothers as well as non-mothers have duties of their own. In families it’s the women’s duty to give birth, to nurse and educate children but also to act as good housekeepers and wives. In the civil society and in the emerging women’s occupations and professions women are to act motherly, even if they don’t have children of their own. ‘The women had to take responsibility for making the society a home for the people’, writes Liisa Rantalaiho (1997, 25-26). This is why especially in Finland ‘social motherhood’ was a somewhat more comprehensive idea than what Hirdman (1990) calls ‘a housewife contract’ in the 1930’s Sweden; being a full-time housewife in Finland never really was an option for women, even among the small middle-classes.

The ideal of ‘social motherhood’ was a central frame for the activities of emergent professionals and experts as well as for lay workers in the civil society. During several generations girls and women were advised, educated and directed to fulfil their maternal duties, first by male priests and doctors then by women themselves in their own organizations, at schools and within health care. Actually, the strong maternalist ideals did not break down until in the 1960’s. After that women’s social and occupational activities did not need to carry a ‘maternal’ hallmark in order to be legitimate.
In the 1960’s this emphasis on women’s duties primarily as mothers or motherly professionals broke down with the strengthening ideas of equality between the sexes. Women were now seen both as workers and mothers. In relation to the earlier idea of ‘women’s social motherhood’ this cultural and social view of a women’s role has been summed up as ‘wage-worker motherhood’, which for most women in Finland, and mothers as well, became to mean working full time and having the right for a maternal leave which, compared to other parts of Europe or North-America, is rather long. Even among the Nordic countries, Finland has had the highest numbers of women in full-time work outside home. It may be said that the Nordic welfare states acknowledge parenthood as a part of the worker citizen’s responsibilities and thus provides social rights and services for the organization of everyday life (Rantalaiho 1997).ii

Anneli Anttonen, however, stresses that in Finland womanhood was defined rather through work than through mothering even before the sixties (Anttonen 2001, 31). For me it seems that mothering itself was defined merely as work – in and outside the household – instead of a close and emotional relation to the children, which we now tend to take for granted when speaking of motherhood. It is illustrative that in the feminist discussions of ‘social motherhood’ and ‘wage worker motherhood’ the emphasis has never really been on women as mothers, but on women at work, in women’s organizations and in politics (Vuori 1999).

Anneli Anttonen claims – looking at the struggle for childcare policy in Finland from the 1960s to the 1990s - that two contradictory, simultaneously working discourses can be identified. According to the first one, women’s right to wage work needs to be guaranteed by providing day-care services for children. According to the other, childcare policy should promote women’s rights based primarily on the idea of mother-citizenship. The problem is solved by building two parallel societal support systems for child care: municipal day care centres and home care allowance for parents who care for their children under three years at home (or today even in private care). Although the laws are gender neutral, it has turned out it is the mothers who actually take care of the children. More than 90 per cent of parents staying at home are women although one of the explicit aims of the reform was to promote gender equality and the father’s right to care for the children. (Anttonen 2001; Leira 2002; Borchorst & Siim 2002.)iii

Anttonen suggests that ‘the rhetoric of motherhood as national service’ has been replaced by a ‘rhetoric of motherhood as personal choice’. Arnlaug Leira’s analysis is that the child care reforms in the Nordic countries show efforts to update the gender contract via the transformation of traditional parental responsibilities into social rights of parents (Leira 2002, 85). I think this may be true if one looks at motherhood from the viewpoint of family or labour market policy. Women may make personal choices concerning things like whether they want to become mothers at all and also whether they want to take care of the infants themselves at home or if they rather choose a form of municipal day care. But after they have chosen to become mothers, they don’t have very much to choose from, if they want to take the overall responsibility for arranging their children’s care. Being a working mother employed full time does not mean
one wouldn’t have the same social responsibilities as the mothers working at home have, i.e. caring for your child, educating her, doing housework. In this paper I will argue that men still have the option to decide what kind of fathers they want to be and what kind of responsibilities they will include in their fathering.

**Conducting the conduct of mothers**

At about the same time, towards the sixties, the attitude of women towards proper mothering also went through changes. The emphasis changed gradually from housework, hygiene and proper physical care of the children towards a close and mutual relationship of the mother and child. In my dissertation I put an argument – which is more a hypothesis than a thoroughly analyzed issue – that mothering as a close and personal relation between an infant and her mother was emerging gradually and was really grounded only from the 1950’s onwards in Finland. New scientific ideas concerning the development of children had emerged, and the dyad of the mother and the child was brought strongly to the centre of attention.

In spite of the changing focus, **motherhood held its character as a social duty.** The guidance of mothers was still central in many institutions and with different experts and professionals. In fact, after the Second World War these institutions extended into new fields, they grew in size and specialized. However, the tone of the work changed. The direct and ‘negative’ means of control were gradually replaced by a more positive ethos. Internalised knowledge and self-direction became the final aim. This is a major tendency in all ‘biopolitical’ direction, which, following the work of Michel Foucault, has been analysed as ‘governmentality’ or, as in Mitchell Dean’s work, with a somewhat less complicated term, as ‘government’ (Foucault 1991; Dean 1999; Rose 1991; Helén 1997).

‘Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes’, outlines Mitchell Dean (1999, 11). Briefly, government may be summed up as ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault 1982, 220-1). The emphasis is on intervening people’s actions without violence and without prohibition. The modern society is not kept going by coercion but by showing how life is and creating visions of how it could be even better. (Rose 1996a, 73) This kind of expertise is not ‘bad’ (or just social control), but it isn’t harmless either. The focus on the critique of government is not saying the modern society should or could function without it (and without a multiplicity of different experts and professionals), but to analyze how our society has come to be as it is and to consider if things could be otherwise.

In this business of different experts and professionals, mothers are not only targets but sometimes even impassionedly involved in defining which is good and which is bad mothering. It has even been argued that
laypersons nowadays define their everyday problems in the same way professionals might handle them and that they also define their lives with the same concepts and attitudes as the experts (Rose 1993, 61).

An essential feature of the government of motherhood is multiplicity. There is a variety of institutions and different practices where professionals meet mothers. The work is done in many different ways and with many different aims. However, knowledge is a central part in every practice and this knowledge is very much constructed by recurrently dividing mothering and parenting into normal and abnormal, ordinary and exceptional, healthy and pathological. The knowledge about normality is gained by mirroring those children, and their mothers, who have social and mental problems and who arrive – of one’s own free will or by professional direction – inside the institutions. (Helén 1997, 19-20; Miller & Rose 1997, 113, 119-121; Dean 1999, 16-18, 68).

**Fathers enter**

What happened when fathers became more central in this network of social relations around child care and parenting? This took place at the same time as the psychosocial mother-child dyad was established as a central theme of concern for family expertise, and at the same time as the cultural image of women was turning from mere mothers to working women and mothers. ‘The new fatherhood’, as it is often positively called, was from the very beginning rooted in a somewhat contradictory cultural ground. The primary importance of the fathers was seen either in giving women the space to enter other social fields outside home (in equality discourse) or in giving the children a chance to grow up in a close relation with their fathers (in developmental discourse). The former put the stress on men’s social responsibilities, the latter on their personal engagement. In the former the sharing of housework equals in importance with child care, in the latter there is a clear tendency to stress the emotional relationship between the parent and the child and to consider housework and the ‘physical’ care work less important. The latter was to increasingly outweigh the former during the 80’s and 90’s.

From 1960’s onwards, especially in the Nordic countries, the father has been seen more often beside the mother – building a close relationship with the child or as a target of professional work and guidance. Since we understand equality as an increasing symmetry in the division of labour, we are used to conceptualizing this change of fatherhood mainly as a central part of the expanding equality between the sexes. Even inside the feminist theory, in gynocentric feminism, the change of men towards nurturing fathers has been a central aim. It has even been said that the modification of fatherhood is the most central key in breaking the gendered divisions individually, culturally and socially. The most prominent advocate of this view has been Nancy Chodorow’s book The Reproduction of Mothering (1978).

In this paper, however, I explore the idea of growing symmetry and equality between the sexes in the process
where fathers in the everyday life in fact have become more central in the lives of their children, in caring and in parenting in general. Not all fathers of course, but some fathers in a very consequential manner. This is what ‘we’ as feminists and mothers hoped and worked for. This is also something we in Finland and in other Nordic countries already have some experience of. However, we haven’t analyzed this change very much in practice or analytically. We have mainly concentrated either on celebrating the idea of new fathers or looking at the statistics and concluding rather sceptically that in general not so much has changed.

I started from the idea that mothering has been very strongly a social issue. Women are collectively addressed as mothers. Women may (perhaps) choose if they become mothers but after they are mothers, the duty of raising the children and keeping a household going is theirs. Perhaps even today, whatever else they do for example as paid workers, citizens or spouses is associated with a hint of motherly hold. In this paper I will argue that fathering is different. In Finland and in Nordic countries in general, fathering is very much a central social issue in the sense that it is widely and extensively debated in public. However, it is not a social issue in a sense that men would be collectively addressed as fathers. The choices of the fathers are discussed almost exclusively as personal choices. To sum up, if mothering still is a social issue, fathering is personal and elective. From a policy view, Arnlaug Leira concludes that ‘by tradition, fathers’ right not to engage in the care of children has been widely accepted’ (Leira 2002, 84). Lisbeth Bekkengen writes that men are seen as ‘dads’ but women as ‘parents’ (1999).

Let’s look at this through some examples. For example in a recent booklet “Kidbooklet for the parents of small children” of The Family Federation of Finland (1999), embedded in the experts’ texts there are several referrals to parents’ voices (perhaps taken from interviews, perhaps imaginary). Ten of them are men’s voices and only two women’s.

A father of three children: ‘I have certainly been a so called good father. We have been preparing for this and I was ready to do everything. What surprised me was responsibility. One was to do as the wife said. It meant that my wife wanted to have all the responsibility to herself. So what, one didn’t bother to do very much then. One gladly evaded like men do.’

(Essi Juvakka, a psychologist, refers to anonymous parents in her article in the guide book “Kidbooklet for the parents of small children”, The Family Federation of Finland, 1999, 10).

I base my analysis on my dissertation in which I analyzed the ways in which family experts perceive parenting as gendered action, as mothering and fathering, in their writings. The data consists of Finnish research, textbooks, guidebooks and popular literature on child rearing from the mid 1980’s to mid 1990’s. The texts connect to a variety of disciplines, research traditions, professions and institutions.

In the data I uncovered two discourses that explicitly deal with the division of labour between women and
men in parenting. I named the discourses “exclusive mothering” and “shared parenting”. The exclusive mothering discourse emphasises the woman’s innate character as the one who gives birth, takes care of children and as their primary nurturer. The discourse of shared parenting denies the absolute division between the female and male nurturing roles and suggests that men also should take more responsibility for the care of very young children and their nursing.

In the light of the data analysed the position of the shared parenting discourse seems to be strong in Finland. By building a mother-centred understanding on caring and nurture the exclusive mothering discourse is distinctly defensive and warns about the fathers’ too deep involvement in the mothers’ tasks. The shared parenting discourse often presents itself as a self-evident social reform program. However, there is no reason to regard the exclusive mothering discourse and the shared parenting discourse as totally opposing. They get their driving force in their reciprocal relationship: they challenge one another, raise the same questions from different points of view and avoid the way the other is framing questions. Both discourses perceive both parenting and gender as internal issues of families.

I want to point out that in both of the current versions of discourses the father is a point of special interest and concern. It was a rather surprising discovery to me that fathers have almost displaced mothers. In the close reading of the texts I found that the experts describe fathers in a more multifaceted way than the mothers. Fathers are described as acting, feeling, thinking and saying actors and with various attributes. The talk about fathers is mostly positive and encouraging. It invites men into fatherhood, to identify with other fathers and the models offered by the experts. The father has a special place in the development of the child – and especially in the development of the boy. One example:

How to involve the father from the very beginning (subtitle)

The father is nowadays often there to witness the birth of the new baby. For many men this is an enormous emotional experience, which might arouse their own feelings of being small or helpless. Giving birth is a very intimate family event which gives the father an extraordinary occasion to start a close interaction with his child. Participation should however always be voluntary and the social pressure should not affect the father’s decision too much (…). The father may create a unique and just as equal a relationship to his child as the mother does.

Men are asked to enjoy their fatherhood, to learn new things, to liberate themselves as fathers and to leave the traditional burden behind them. In the spirit of ‘governmentality’, I sum up that the experts are very intensively blazing the way to paternal agency.
However, as the example above suggests, **fatherhood is interpreted as an issue of the men’s individual choice and, at most, as the result of in-family negotiations.** Christoffer Tigerstedt and Ilana Aalto have studied autobiographies of Finnish men and they draw the same conclusion: even for the so called home daddies their choice does not seem to be an equality project but instead a personal and family based solution (Tigerstedt 1994; Aalto 2002). Another excerpt:

> Of course an outsider cannot just go and say how the father and the mother are to share and organize their work. One can consider it a sign of success if neither of the parents feels the need to complain, neither feels that he/she is sacrificing himself/herself. To achieve this, the matter should sometimes be taken up by the family members. (The guide book “The first year of the baby”, Mannerheim League for Child Welfare 1985, 42.)

In both discourses the mother’s subjectivity is more ambivalent than the father’s agency. Only a small part of the mothers’ agency described in the texts is taken up as consideration of women’s agency, as her experiences, thoughts, feelings and words. (In text analysis, this becomes very clear: the authors really don’t describe women as actors very much.) To sum up, the mothers are looked at in a more objectifying way than the fathers.

The experts are not united in what this new father should be like. The exclusive mothering discourse emphasises the woman’s innate character as the one who gives birth, takes care of children and is their primary nurturer.

The discourse of shared parenting originates from the equality discourse from the 1960s. It denies the absolute division between the female and male nurturing roles and suggests that men also should take more responsibility for the care of very young children and their nurture. In addition, they should participate more extensively in their older children’s lives. The question seems to be: what is the minimum amount of parenting needed from the father’s side to guarantee the child’s normal development and how much the man should rework his masculinity in order to be able to act as a good father. In principle, men have the capacity to do everything that women do. The question is rather what a man desires.

It is exciting that even the advocates for exclusive mothering – those who define childcare as a women’s task and also in other respects think that women and men have different roles in the family – nowadays centre their discussion around the father. Men are persuaded to broaden their mission but at the same time they are warned not to broaden it too much. They should not become mothers and displace women as primary caregivers. Instead, men should more intensively support mothers in caring for the baby and take more and more part in the child’s education as he/she grows up. The discourse of shared parenting is, however, so
strong, that the experts are constantly wondering to what extent the father can participate in child care without causing problems to his/her development or his own masculinity.

Every man longs for the kind of activity in which he feels his manhood grow strong or even stronger. An outsider can’t know what it is like. Neither can an outsider know how or how much time a man can spend with a baby before getting anguished or whether a man can take care of a little child at home without losing his sense of manhood – we’re, after all, talking about an activity which in our unconscious traditions for so long has been regarded as women’s work.

(Vesa Manninen, a psychoanalyst discussing a son and a man in his book, 1991, 135.)

Men are addressed almost solely as individual men and very seldom as political agents or as members of male collectives who should assume responsibility for child care. In addition, housework is seldom discussed at the same time as fathering the child is (see also Tigerstedt 1994).

Janet Sunderland has conducted rather similar text analyses about British parental guides as I have done about Finnish material. She finds a much more mother centred discourse where men are nothing more than ‘baby entertainers’, mothers’ bumbling assistants’ or ‘line managers’ (2000). The Finnish discussion seems to go further. However, the fact that men enter into expert’s texts as fathers does not automatically echo a growing balance or equality between the sexes, as Sunderland seems to think.

**Texts in their settings**

The story goes like this, as far as we look at the texts experts write on parenting. In practice, however, the professionals meet mostly mothers. Even if the fathers seem to have taken a lion’s share in experts’ considerations, it does not mean the mothers have lost their importance. They may be in the background, but they are still there. In fact, the experts try to direct the conduct of fathers by making the women mediators. Women as mothers and as female professionals are asked to make room for fathers’ agency, to persuade men gently into the new fatherhood, to help and to support them. My example derives from the 1980s but it sounds very familiar even today:

If the mother thinks that the father takes too little part in child care, presumably better than to nag and temper is for the mother to discreetly ask the father to join her when she is about to do something nice with the baby. Together the whole family can enjoy the company of the baby instead of each dutifully doing his/her own ‘watch’.

(The guide book “The first year of the baby”, 1985)

Paradoxically, the talk about men as fathers is very often women’s talk to each other, for example in the
child welfare clinic or social welfare office (Kuronen 1993; Forsberg 1994 and 1998, 210-218). Although the texts in the data clearly address men and speak to them, as a genre the texts on parenting and education largely work in the relationships between women. The author may be a man or a woman, but the student or the professional is far more often female than male. And the parent who reaches for a guidebook on the book shelf is far more often a mother than a father.

The father is therefore constructed through women - whether he is a man who equally shares all the work and responsibility for parenting with the mother or the other kind of man who works beside the nurturing mother, supports her and is marked by the gender difference. Mothers and women professionals are summoned to give space for the father's agency, to discreetly coax men into fatherhood, to help and support them. It is paradoxical that sharing the responsibility for parenting in the family between the mother and the father, which – at least in equality utopias – was supposed to lead to increased options for women, seems to lead to women’s growing responsibility.

On the other hand the mother needs to understand that it is not always so easy for the father to understand. There is no-one kicking inside the father. The father cannot, for that matter, always have the baby in his mind. It would be nice if the mother had the patience to wait until the father is ready to participate. The father will do it, albeit somewhat slower. The mother can help the father do this by, for example, telling him about the facts she has learnt concerning the development of the foetus, baby care, child development etc. (…) It is important for the mother to try to involve the father. The father also should learn to see the baby as a human being with whom a relationship is to be established from the very beginning.


Some conclusions

… in the conference.

References


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i This paper is a first draft for an article. I try to make my main argument clear and do not put so much emphasis on references at this stage. PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

ii I leave all the exact numbers and social policy comparisons outside this paper. See Leira 2002.

iii For example in 1997 45 per cent of children under the age of three were in care arrangements subsidized by home care allowance, 90 % of them looked after at home (Anttonen 2001, 42.)

iv This a part of a larger frame that I call the psychosocial discursive formation ant that has to do with an increasing field of family experts and institutions and the grounding of developmental psychology, psychoanalysis etc.

v In the last year in Finland the number of non-fiction books discussing fatherhood at the first time beat the number of books concentrating on mothering.

vi In this paper I take the examples partly from outside my original data in order to make my point clear. In my dissertation the examples are rather long and taken from complex discussion, they are for example excerpts from developmental psychology books, child psychiatry etc, which are nor easily translated for this purpose.


viii My data consists of 86 books selected from altogether about 200 books which in a way or other discuss parenting, published between 1986-1995. I carry out (sociological and linguistic) discourse analytic close reading especially on those books which deal explicitly with the issue of gender.

ix Isä mukaan alusta alkaen (väliotsikko).

Isä on nykyisin usein mukana todistamassa uuden vauvan syntymää. Monelle miehelle tämä on valtava emotionaalinen kokemus, jossa myös omat pienuuden tai avuttomuuden tunteet voivat tulla lähelle. Synnyttys on hyvin intensiivi perhetapahtuma, joka antaa isälle ainutlaatuisen tilaisuuden aloittaa lähimpien vuorovaikutus lapsensa kanssa. Osallistumisen tulisi kuitenkin aina olla vapaaehtoinen. Ihan mielellään on ollut niin kuin mielestämme. (…) 
Isä voi luoda lapseen hautahtoiseen ja aivan samanveroisen suhteen kuin äiti. (Marjatta Sipponen, Väestöliiton perinnöllisyysklinikka, Perheverkko-projektin sosiaalihoitaja: Väsymys, alakulo ja eristyneisyyden tunteet, Vekaravilkon perikulamisen ja aivan samanveroisen suhteen kuin äiti. (VK 2, 42.)

x Ulkopuolinen ei voi tietenkään menä sanomaan, miten isä ja äiti työssä jakavat ja järjestävät. Onnistumisen mittapuuna voidaan pitää sitä, ettei kummallakään vanhemmalta ole valittamista, ettei siis kumpikaan tunne uhruutuvansa. Jotta tähän päästäisiin, perheessa olisi asiasta siltiin tällöin keskusteltava. (VK 2, 42.)

Ilana Aalto notes that men in their autobiographies about fathering very seldom tell about the mothers of their children
Jokainen mies kaipaa sellaista toimintaa, jossa juuri hän tuntee miehisyytensä vahvana tai vahvistuvan. Ulkopuolinen ei tiedä mitä se on. Ulkopuolinen ei liioin tiedä, miten ja missä määrin mies voi kestää ahdistumatta vauvan kanssa tai pienien lapsen hoitajana miehisyystunteensa katoamatta - toimintaa, jota syvissä piilotajuississa perinteissä on niin pitkään pidetty naisen työnä.


When I looked at the very recent discussions in popular books on fathering, this seemed to be changing gradually. However, most of the books were not written by experts but men themselves from a perspective of their own experiences as fathers.

Jos äidin mielestä isä osallistuu liian vähän lapsen hoitoon, nalkuttamista tai raivostumista parempi tapa on luultavasti se, että äiti hienovaraisesti pyytää isän vierelleen silloin, kun hän on aikeissa tehdä vauvan kanssa jotakin mukavaa. Koko perhe voi yhdessä nauttia vauvan kanssa seurustelusta sen sijaan, että kukin tunnollisesti vastaisi omasta "vahtivuorostaan". (Vauvan ensimmäinen vuosi 1985, 35.)

Toisaalta äidin pitää ymmärtää, että isän ei ole aina niin helppo ymmärtää. Isän sisällä ei ole ketään potkimassa. Isällä ei muutenkaan voi joka hetki olla vauva mielessä. Olisi hyvä, jos äiti jakaisi odottaa isän mukaan mukavat tulemusta. Isä tulee mukaan, vaikka vähän hitaammin. Äiti voi tässä itse auttaa isää siten, että hän esimerkiksi kertoa isälle kaikenlaista mitä on oppinut sikiön kehityksestä, vauvanhoitosta, lapsen kehityksestä tms. - On tärkeää, että äiti yrittää saada isän mukaan. Isänkin pitää oppia ottamaan vauva ihmisenä, johon solmitaan ihmissuhde alusta alkaen.(VK 1, 30.)