

Changes in fatherhood in Spain among egalitarian men at the arrival of their first child



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Abstract

The authors analysed the emergence of new fatherhood and gender relations ideals in Spanish men expecting their first child, and whose wives enjoy stable working conditions and have high or middle education levels. Research was based on Grounded Theory and used a qualitative methodology with the in-depth semi-structured interview technique (n=68). The authors found that meanings associated to work, job status and professional career as well as the primary socialization experienced by the members of the couple are relevant variables in order to understand the emergence of new fatherhood attitudes in men. The findings show that these new attitudes are shaping a new fatherhood model in Spain, more often in couples where women show higher negotiation skills, an equitable sharing of household chores exists and men show a more instrumental orientation to work.

Key words

Fatherhood, new parental ideals, hegemonic masculinity, gender equality, Spain.

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Introduction

To a large extent it is still a relatively frequent phenomenon among heterosexual couples with children in Spain for the men to focus their lives on their jobs and women on the home and on looking after the kids. Traditional and hegemonic gender roles continue to bear an influence on their everyday lives and on the work sphere as well. It should also be acknowledged however, that in European countries with postmodern societies changes are taking place in males' perceptions in these areas: their values, private desires, responsibilities and attitudes towards the family and the home are undergoing important changes. The role of the husband as the main and only breadwinner for the family is culturally in decline in these societies and is gradually being replaced by the emergence of new ideas of active paternity and equality in sharing childcare responsibilities. New ideals of paternity are therefore emerging among males, which nevertheless are not always implemented due to the social conditionings that still persist in several areas.

Recent studies mainly in the Nordic countries have focused on the emergence of this "new" paternity, but also in Southern European countries like Spain have witnessed in recent years greater participation on the part of men in the reproductive sphere, especially among the younger generations. The construction of identity and the traditional masculine role have been affected and weakened over the last decade by the new role and social status acquired by women due to higher education and job opportunities for the latter as well as the weakening of men's circumstances in the labour market, all this aggravated in Spain and other Southern European countries since 2007 by the economic and financial crisis. Many young men currently are not able or willing to take on the role of the family's chief breadwinner and new alternative ideals concerning paternity and gender relations are slowly but steadily emerging, despite the strong patriarchal culture that still impregnates work relations in the labour market.

Within this framework, this article explores the strategies, negotiations and decisions concerning work and family, made by some Spanish heterosexual couples that are about to become first time parents. It is based on a study of a sample of 22 interviewed couples, from a total of 68 interviews carried out in the months prior to the birth of their first child, between 2011 and 2012. The main characteristic of this sample is that the women's job situation is more stable and/or they have a higher level of studies than their spouse. The men on the other hand usually show more precarious and unstable jobs and express their wish to get equally involved in looking after the children once they are born. For this reason, we have chosen to call them egalitarian males.

Theoretical discussion

Structural and social constructivist theories of gender and society provide an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding how and why men maintain an ambivalent attitude towards the family sphere. Family and masculinity are social

constructions because they acquire meaning only in historical and cultural terms. By combining the social constructivist approach with an analysis of the social structure, we are able to show how economic and social forces act and mediate with people's lives. This combination then enables us to evaluate the changes in family patterns.

Along the same lines, Barbara Risman puts forward a multilevel theoretical approach whereby gender is analysed as a social structure, where individual, relational, economic, cultural and institutional factors jointly interact. In other words, she proposes an analysis of gender as a configuration of practices. Morgan situates the study of gender and of masculinities within the paradigm of post modernity, which entails placing the emphasis on the fluidity and diversity that characterises social phenomena and processes, as well as the concepts for their study. This paradigm enables us to analyse the construction of gender as a dynamic and changing process, and in regard to masculinities allows us to analyse them in their constant (re)elaboration and (re)creation-context, trying to interrelate them with a diversity of flexible models alternative to hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, increasingly more fluid and diverse family life provides new scenarios for questioning gender relations, masculinities and femininities. It is in this context that people "perform" gender and where masculine identities are (re)configured and more openly displayed, and in a fluid, ambiguous, conflictive or contradictory manner in relation to the hegemonic model. Concerning the transition of some men towards adopting more egalitarian practices inside the family, Marsiglio and Pleck point out the need to carry on research on how and why some men move away from the traditional patterns and get more involved in home care. They agree on the need to link this transition with those changes taking place in social, economic and cultural structures on the one hand, as well as personal and psychological factors on the other, in order to try and work out how men and women negotiate their family status and their contribution to parenthood and domestic chores.

It is precisely these multiple changes that are taking place in the postmodern societies of Northern and Central Europe, and their consequences on family relationships that have given rise to the concept "new" fatherhoods. Identity types have been identified such as that of the "new father" and the "equal father" as well as essentialised identities such as the "masculine father". The new gender ideals that men adopt and exercise in relation to fatherhood and the caring associated with it have also been studied, in an attempt to establish the weight of factors such as age, social background or religion on the men's gender narratives and gender. Other authors attribute the adoption of this "new" fatherhood purely to personal and individual decisions, unlike motherhood which is determined by a certain degree of social duty.

Other literature highlights the fact that men's transition towards fatherhood and active child care involvement can help many of them develop caring personalities. Magaraggia, Sveva, in a research study on first time fathers and mothers in Italy pointed out that despite the cultural obstacles such as the repression of emotion and affection in men, individual desires and the pleasure of caring can transform men's gender identity and their behaviours. Furthermore, there is a social demand that is

being interiorised by many men, with regard to more participation on their part in looking after their children for the benefit of their spouses, of their own children as well as for their own good. This is not devoid of contradictions, given that the fathers' active and positive involvement can lead men to experiencing conflict, stress and low self-esteem.

Among the structural variables that can partly account for these changes it is worth mentioning the economic system's shift away from industry towards a greater weight on services. This in turn has led to an increase in the number of employed women with higher participation in the labour market over the last decades. In contrast, in this new economic scenario male employment and job stability have remained or somewhat declined. Women have gradually acquired more and more importance as "family breadwinners" thus challenging the traditional distribution of work "inside" and "outside" the home, along with men's "right" to less involvement with childcare and reproductive tasks. In Spanish society a number of studies have shown that sharing and use of time between women and men continue to be unequal. However broad social consensus seems to have emerged in the last decade in favour of balancing these out. The low fertility rates in Spain, companies with lower productivity levels and the difficulties that workers of both sexes experience when it comes to reconciling work and family time, are all influenced by this imbalance in the use of time between men and women. The ones mostly affected by this imbalance are women, who are forced to take on a double shift work (a job and at home). However, increasingly more and more men are willing to readjust their use of time, renegotiate roles and above all, become fathers who are present in the care of their children.

Authors like Holter highlight in their studies the fact that although men would like a masculinity more closely linked to caring as well as an increased participation in the family, they often encounter traditional masculinity attitudes of an organisational nature inherited from the patriarchy which are deeply rooted in their work places. Other studies have shown that the time men devote to caring for their children depends on factors such as the number of hours of paid work they have and their relative contribution to the couple's total income. The findings show that those who work fewer hours outside the home get more involved in the reproductive sphere. Men who work as salary earners in the public sector, who are under a continuous employment contract and do not work long hours tend to participate relatively more in domestic chores and childcare.

The economic and financial downturn that began in 2007 has had a devastating effect on Southern European countries, leading to a considerable rise in unemployment among men which is having consequences for gender practices and relationships. In this respect, Holter pointed out that unemployment among men can be used to promote gender equality inside the couple. Along the same lines, Connell and other authors state that unemployment as well as the precarious on-and-off jobs that men are being increasingly forced to accept may end up reducing the pressure and gender expectations of being the main family breadwinners thus opening them up to alternative patterns, greater balance and flexibility in the gender division of labour at

home, as well as to “multi-optional masculinities” which may entail more participation of men in household chores and childcare.

Methodology

The empirical work undertaken in this research study was based on Grounded Theory, on inductive analytical procedures and on a qualitative research methodology based on the semi-structured interview technique, following guidelines set down by Glaser & Strauss, Strauss & Corbin, Silverman and Charmaz, among others. The couple recruitment process for the study was mainly carried out at medical and healthcare centres, and more specifically in childbirth preparation courses given by midwives. The reason for this was that selection criteria for recruiting the couples had to target women pregnant with their first child at the time of the interviews. Some of the contacts were made through social networks. The goal was to obtain a broad sample from all walks of life and social-economic backgrounds. When drawing up the sample, in addition to the geographical distribution of the couples, with research teams located in Barcelona, Madrid, Pamplona and Seville, basic social-demographic characteristics were taken into account as well as education levels of the members of the couple. We finally interviewed 68 couples that met our criteria. The protocol followed consisted of interviewing the couples, first individually and then both members of the couple together (3 one-hour interviews per couple, approximately). Then each analyst examined their allocated interviews and subjected them to the same procedures. The transcribed text from the interview was analysed line by line using generative questions, carrying out systematic comparisons and seeking out relationships and hypotheses. The theoretical memos and emerging codes were then discussed and defined in work groups comprised of all the researchers. Finally, the interviews were studied once again and the quotes were codified following the code book jointly agreed upon by the research team and validated by the intersubjectivity pair test. In the second phase we analysed the contents of the multiple quotes associated to the different codes using the Atlas.ti (v. 7.1.8) computer programme whilst taking into account the personal characteristics and conditions of the interviewees, the quality of couple interactions and the application of tactics and strategies, as well as the potential influence of social phenomena and broader change processes on their relationships.

Description of the subsample couples

In order to draw up this article a sub-sample of 22 couples from the study were selected. Our selection criterion was to choose couples whose members had stated they were sharing household chores in an egalitarian fashion and that they also intended to do the same in caring for their child after birth. Due to different circumstances, these couples had decided that the male would have a prominent role in looking after the baby. In these couples the father was willing to take charge of looking after the baby on an almost exclusive basis during the first year of life. In some

cases this was so because he intends to take a longer paternity leave beyond the 15 days that men are entitled to under Spanish law, as they had agreed with their partners that she would transfer part of her maternity and/or nursing leave to him. Spanish law allows mothers to transfer up to ten weeks of their maternity leave to the father. In other cases the father was planning to ask for fewer working hours; take a shift compatible with that of the mother's; or intended to work few hours a day from home and look after the baby then. And in case he was still unemployed, he would put off his job search so as to care for the baby on a full time basis.

One of the outstanding characteristics of this sub-sample was the high education level of the interviewed women. 16 out of 22 had attended university: 1 of them had a PhD, 9 hold five-year degrees and 6 had a 3-year one. Only 6 of the women had only completed secondary vocational education or lower studies. In contrast, men had a lower level of education since less than half of them had university degrees (1 PhD, 6 university graduates and 3 with three-year degrees) whereas 12 of them had only completed secondary vocational education or lower levels (twice as many as the women). Among the women, 17 had a full time job, 4 of them worked a half-day shift and 1 was unemployed at the time of the interview. The women's jobs were generally skilled: 10 of the women held positions of responsibility as people managers, and only 3 of them worked in low skilled jobs.

The men's jobs status were more precarious: 9 of the interviewees were unemployed at the time of the interview, 2 worked freelance and the remaining 11 were employees. In general the men worked in less skilled jobs and held positions with lower responsibility. In 15 of the 22 couples women had higher incomes than men. In 7 of the couples although he earned more, their salaries were not markedly different.

Taking into account that we were dealing with couples expecting their first child, the average age was high. For the women in the sample it was 38.8 years and four of them were above forty. In Spain as in other countries many women have delayed their maternity until they have finished their studies and got a stable job with a certain degree of economic security. The obstacles they have to face when joining the labour market, a legal framework that makes it difficult to reconcile family and work life plus the lack of subsidies for families, all this contributes to the current state of affairs. The average age of men was 35.7 years, in six of the couples the woman being older than him.

Hence, it is important to point out that the women of this subsample had a high level of negotiating skills thanks to their education level and social-economic background, whereas men's resources and the socialisation process they had been experiencing would predispose them towards equality in their couple relationship and childcare attitude, as we shall see further down.

Findings

Do the job market and one's professional career account for a greater or lesser likelihood of sharing household chores and childcare?

The couples perceive that they are entering into a new phase of their lives with the arrival of their baby and hence their desire to build a stable and secure environment for the child. Consequently both members of the couple express their wish to achieve a certain level of job stability, economic security and to improve their work conditions, especially with regard to type of work shift and schedules. In some cases they state that they wish to achieve or to continue with the model of two breadwinners for the family through paid work, trying to negotiate the changes in the conditions and working hours that will enable them to make their job compatible with their family obligations. Some of them also consider the possibility of changing jobs when they see it unlikely to negotiate all this with their employers. In other cases they bear in mind entrepreneurial initiatives and intend to start a business of their own in accordance with their professional aspirations, thus enabling them to enjoy more flexible schedules and be able to look after the baby.

Work conditions are a key factor for these couples. The ideal set up for both members of the couple in order to adapt to their new situation as parents is to have a continuous work schedule whereby they work morning shifts and have the afternoons off. This would enable them to combine their professional careers with looking after their spouse and caring for the baby. Hence, some of them state that their ideal would be that companies should be flexible with demands for childcare needs and reduce both the father's and mother's working hours for an extended period of time, also until the child begins to attend nursery school (at the age of 3).

As previously mentioned, the careers of many of the women in the sub-sample we analysed were more stable than those of their partners. Most women were upwardly mobile in either the civil service or private companies, in some cases with management positions and chances of promotion and above average salaries. To a large extent they were more oriented towards paid work than their partners. Carrying out their profession and earning a salary had been a priority in their lives for these women, just as important as the relationship with their partners and any maternity plans, and at times their top priority was even "above" that of partner relationships. "Let's see, my ideal, as I said before, I., well, I have to, mmm...well, I want to work out of the home, what's more for me work is a way of self... well of self-fulfilment, but you see I am also clear about..., for me work has always been my priority, many times above my partner (...)" (Conchi; university degree)

"(...) I'm not going to give up my life for the baby, that doesn't mean I don't love him, he's still going to be my child (...).Will need..., I'll be with him as long as he needs me or when I think that he needs me, but after that we must lead our own life and I'm not going to give up mine because...Because that's what our

mothers did...they just devoted themselves to that, luckily we have other expectations, don't we? (Gema, university degree)

Nevertheless, pregnancy on occasions triggers a certain change in the attitude these women have towards paid work as they manage to "disconnect" from work once their day is over or become less involved, as Carlos points out when talking about Conchi, his partner:

"You could say... the level of commitment that she might bring home with her, disconnecting, well, this has changed a lot with... the pregnancy and all. It has changed an awful lot, but before then was really hard, working eight hours and then coming home, not working physically but her mind was still on her job". (Carlos; university degree; unemployed)

The concern about reconciling work and family life is a conflict that comes up again and again in the interviews. Women especially anticipate the difficulties they will come across having to hold onto their professional career whilst also providing for the needs of family and childcare:

"Well, yes, it worries me, that my girl might think sometime in the future, 'you, you only devoted yourself to working in your life and you haven't dedicated any time to me', that worries me, looking after her properly and caringly doesn't mean having a nanny to look after her...And that she, you know, she can count on you for everything...and having enough time to devote to her"; (Margarita; university degree)

In the case of the men we found that most of them had been working on an on-and-off basis or didn't have steady jobs. On occasions their professional careers had been negatively hurt by the economic downturn that has hit Spain since 2007 and which initially affected men more, in sectors such as construction and industry. The men from the subsample were on the whole less oriented towards paid work. Although they did acknowledge that work was a means of "earning money", they considered that "caring" for the "family", and especially "their partner" and "the baby" as their main priority. Partner and baby come up in the interviews as key references which gave meaning to their lives and required dedication and "quality time" which came in first, with jobs in second place. In opposition to the model of the absent father who is not very much involved in child caring the males thought that "spending time with the baby", "as much time as possible", was "more fundamental" than doing their jobs, which to a large extent they regard as something instrumental in their lives and therefore they ideally would prefer to spend "minimum" amount of time at work compared with time devoted to the family ("for me my priority is 'life' and I prefer to earn a little less, yes, that's right"; "what's the point of working and earning money if your relationship goes down the drain?, Or if you are going to have a baby, who is going to just sit for hours on end and you're not going to.../... play with him or educate him, spend time with him, god, it's more important to spend time with the baby and today I think this is one of the main problems, isn't it; "combining one's job with caring

[for the baby]”). “(...) for me job stability and peace of mind are important and I don't.... I'm not ambitious in the sense of wanting to earn a lot of money” (Ignacio; university degree)

“(...) yes I would like to have more time for myself and earn less, yes I would”.
(Angel, Secondary education)

We observed that many of the men who were interviewed had a proactive attitude towards caring for the baby in the future and were willing to cut their working hours or change jobs in order to spend more time with the baby:

“Each of us has to have their own time, you have to have time to work, your leisure time, time with your partner, time with your daughter, and sometimes it can all overlap, except work, it can be leisure, partner and daughter at the same time (...) I see nothing wrong with that, I can look for a job or something I can do from home and I can share it without problems, in other words my manliness isn't going to diminish if my wife supports me, that's how I see it”.
(Carlos; university degree; unemployed)

“(...) personally it comes out better for me to work a half day and be able to enjoy being with my son, it's not just the fact that... it's the time, being able to be with him, at least for the first two years, I see it involves... four, six months, without having to put him in a nursery, .../...,”. (Angel, Secondary Education)

This going against the tide of the masculinity model in regard to what is “expected” of men as to their degree of orientation towards work and their commitment to caring for their children is not devoid of difficulties and pressures, which come out in the men's conversations as we can see from these comments by Angel:

“(...) I don't rule out the idea, I would love the idea of spending four consecutive months with my son, but obviously it will all depend on how I am [referring to his being currently unemployed], you can't just say, I'm going to wait until my unemployment benefit runs out and then I'm going to start working again, no.., because the way things are in the job market right now, you can't wait right till the end, it will all depend on how the state of the job market is, that's for sure (...). Well I would like things to be a lot more balanced (...) to be able to be there to give him his afternoon snack and do the homework or for the man to be the one who goes to the park, you go to a park and it's pathetic, for every man there are a thousand women”. (Angel, secondary education; unemployed)

Angel, who is currently unemployed, has considered putting off sending his child to the nursery until he is over a year old, and stay to look after him all by himself from the fourth month on, when the mother goes back to work, despite the fact that this decision would not meet with social “approval” in his surroundings. In the Spanish social imaginary the construction of the masculine identity is still very much linked to work and a successful career (status achieved in one's place of work, salary level, working conditions).

Males with an unsteady, precarious job background who have often gone from one job to the other, more frequently adopt an instrumental job orientation and develop a higher degree of co-responsibility when it comes to looking after their baby to be, especially when this circumstance is combined with experiences of autonomy and emancipation at an early age, a flexible or continuous work schedule as well as with being unemployed. In these cases, doing jobs that are not highly skilled, routine or not very motivating jobs seem to lead these men towards building their identity around concepts linked to the family as a source of meaning. Hence all the activities that are related to the private sphere (relationships of emotional affection and sociality) or carried out during their leisure time, take on a great deal of importance. The flexibility and the capacity to adapt acquired from performing different types of jobs and activities throughout their lives are also conducive to learning the essential skills for the male's greater involvement in domestic chores, and in looking after the child they are expecting. Work that is frequently carried out in bars, restaurants and hotels for example make them also familiar with performing different kinds of household chores (shopping, cooking, washing-up, laundry...). On the other hand, being unemployed as a transitional identity but socially stigmatised to a certain degree for men goes hand in hand with a reappraisal of their status within the couple, to a greater extent when the woman is employed or is temporarily the sole family breadwinner. To a large extent this state of affairs "breaks" the male's traditional "role" as the regular provider for the needs of the family.

"That's something I always had clear in my mind... that one day, mmm, when I had a child I would like to give him at least everything he needs or as many things as he needs, wouldn't I? And, well, obviously, being unemployed and then finding out that my wife is pregnant it kind of breaks... it broke down all my preconceptions". (Jorge; Secondary education; unemployed)

Hence, the commitment to personally contribute to household chores and caring for the coming baby can be interpreted here as a strategy on the part of the male to (re)balance and renegotiate his contribution to their life in common: to show his active collaboration and the importance of his future dedication to the baby given his personal job situation that he hopes it is temporary, but in which his resources for negotiating his symbolic role in the couple are quite limited for the time being.

E: And in the event that you were unemployed, mmm, would you go out to work and how? NATALIA: Well, if I, if he is...he were still unemployed E: Yes, once your maternity leave has ended. JORDI: yes. NATALIA: He would stay with the baby and I would go back to work. E: And would that become a problem? JORGE: Mmm, no, not a problem, I hope it doesn't happen, I would like to be working but if I'm not, well clearly I would have to do something useful, wouldn't I?, And looking after my son a little, obviously, but yes... if things worked out like that I would obviously do it and it would be no problem, no problem". (Jorge; secondary education; joint interview)

Parental leave and caring plans

As regards parental leave, in Spain as in other European countries, the transferable weeks of parental leave are generally taken up by the women. Even job oriented women in positions of responsibility in the majority of cases take the whole 16 week leave. In the majority of cases the couples we interviewed also made the same choice with regard to paternal leave and plans for looking after the baby during the first months of life. In many cases the explanation behind their choice had to do with breast feeding plans. The majority of future mothers plan to breastfeed their child at least during the 16 weeks of maternity leave. In the conversations with these couples, caring for babies needs during their first moment of life appears to be mainly assumed by the mother, this being a naturalised perception of caring based on traditional gender roles. It is assumed that it is for the mother to be mostly involved in looking after the baby early on, basically because of the breastfeeding issue. All the mothers we interviewed intended to breastfeed their babies. Breastfeeding is perceived equally by women and men as associated with performing the “ideal” mother role. Hence, breastfeeding is viewed as “something natural” and “we should give it a try”, “it is the best thing” for the baby, although couples are aware that compared with using the baby’s bottle, breastfeeding entails exclusive dedication on the part of the mother during a more or less extended period of time, with the limitations and extra burden resulting from this. In all cases, they intend to extend breastfeeding as long as four to six months until the mother goes back to work.

The sense of “obligation” when it comes to breastfeeding is on occasions justified based on medical arguments concerning its benefits in protecting the child against diseases, and the mother-baby bonding achieved (“because doctors recommend that you continue breastfeeding for six, seven months until you start introducing baby food, which would be the ideal”) The conflict that women have with the “compulsory” breastfeeding norm can be observed from the expressions of resignation displayed by some of those who finally chose this option for their babies (“since they say it’s the best thing for the baby, well we’ll sacrifice ourselves a little”) and the majority give preference to the benefits of breastfeeding versus baby’s bottle, or combine breast and bottle as from the sixth month.

Breastfeeding is therefore understood as a component that forms part of a natural process that is exclusive to the mother, and where fathers play a secondary role. Only two couples intended to involve the father in this activity by opting for indirect maternal feeding, whereby the mother’s milk is previously extracted and then given to the child in a bottle.

However, although breastfeeding continues to appear in men’s conversations as a biological imperative linked to women, an interesting change is emerging as in many occasions feeding is seen a shared “task” with males “accompanying” the mothers.

“(…) I can’t breastfeed the baby but I can accompany Caro, I can be by her side [when she is breastfeeding]” (César; university degree).

What we are witnessing here is indeed the emergence of a new masculine positioning based on which men try to get involved and participate more in caring for the future baby, breaking away from the limited activities reserved for him by the traditional father/carer role, and showing more openness and increased interest in jointly carrying out this task. This also means playing down the “biological imperative” which tends to give prominence only to women in carrying out this activity.

In 2007 the Spanish parliament passed a law that entitled fathers to two weeks of exclusive non-transferable paternity leaves. Despite the fact that it is socially becoming increasingly accepted that men should apply for their paternity leaves, in some economic sectors men still find it hard to ask for it or exercise other rights entitled to them by law (baby feeding or the transferable part of maternity leave). In a still “very masculinised” work environment such as construction, “it does not go down well” with the bosses for example when men try to take this sort of leave because of the extended belief that looking after a baby is fundamentally a mother’s job. In these sectors there are also men who try to “open the way” as Ana, Angel’s spouse points out. Angel holds a mid-level position in the construction sector, in public works and civil engineering.

“And what’s more, the construction sector is very hierarchical and from what he tells me it’s a very despotic background too... this is the plan, I give the orders here - and male dominated-, everything goes without saying, so the initiatives of taking paternity leave and all thatwell it seems they don’t go down very well either, but anyway I wonder if this can be changed, if some headway can be made”. (Ana; university degree)

The same thing happens when it comes to applying for a shorter work schedule in their company because they have become fathers. Some men, however willing they are to do so (“in order to improve quality of life”) consider that it is “quite tricky” to negotiate these conditions, and on occasions even “impossible” to accomplish them without repercussions or being stigmatised. It seems that the economic crisis is also limiting their chances of requesting paternity leaves or negotiating more advantageous working conditions in order to reconcile work and family.

In the majority of cases, those men who are only going to enjoy a 15 day paternity leave express their wish to take a longer leave. However, they do not question the fact that their partners are also going to have 10 weeks of transferable leave.

The few exceptional cases of couples with men exercising their right to take the 10 weeks of transferable maternity leave were that of a couple in which she was involved in politics and another one where the woman was freelance and running a hair salon and managing employees. In both cases this unusual sharing of responsibilities was motivated by the fact that it was the women who requested it with the intention of going back to work quickly, given that the future fathers were able to perform household chores and look after the future baby. However, as far as the other couples are concerned, although they were not sharing the transferable part of the leave, most

of interviewed couples were planning to make arrangements so that fathers would look after the baby beyond the 15 days of paternal leave as allowed by law. In some cases they would do so thanks to collective bargaining agreements of some public administrations which extend paternal leaves up to 4 weeks. For civil servants, the fact that civil service counts with the support of trade unions enables them to overcome the pressure that men working in the private sector are subject to. In other cases the mother intends to transfer her breastfeeding leave to the man. Men who work freelance can take advantage of their jobs' flexible schedules in order to better manage their time and adapt to the needs of looking after the baby and their partner's job conditions. Other men try to reach agreements with their companies, such as to negotiate a continuous work schedule, or ask for a shorter work schedule and days of teleworking from home. Finally there is the case of those unemployed men, most of whom acknowledge that if their situation doesn't change they would get involved in looking after the baby during the first months. The majority of the men we interviewed assume that their role in caring during the first months is going to be "contextual", more focused on domestic chores and logistics than directly involved with looking after the baby. However, all the couples assume that after this period, both parents are going to be equally involved and sometimes the father even more, mainly as a result of the couple's actual job circumstances. They also stress the need for an "active presence" on the part of the father in caring for the baby as something key for the baby's own wellbeing.

A series of interesting changes can also be observed in men's perceptions concerning their future role as fathers in relation with the following issues:

They anticipate changes and organisational adaptations even in their leisure time which will take place once the baby is born. The majority of the men who fall into this category clearly perceive the changes that will be brought about once the baby arrives ("it's going to change my life a lot"), and they are aware that as fathers they will have a lot of caring to do especially at the beginning ("it is practically absolute dedication, isn't it? At the start", "the baby is there and you have to take care of him, but not only that? It also clearly requires a lot of time a lot of dedication, a lot of effort, whatever it takes, doesn't it?")

They see changes in their everyday lives, and what is more important, a reorganisation of their personal leisure time and the free time they share with their partner, which includes "giving up certain things", and giving priority to their role as carers ("and if you have to give up certain things, then you have to give up certain things, that's how it goes, doesn't it?"; "the thing is that you have decided to devote your free time to your baby, right?"; "but the most important thing for us is to get ourselves organised so that both of us can have enough time").

As part of a strategy to keep on sharing leisure activities with their partners they also express the wish to involve the baby from a very early age in the activities they will undertake during their free time: going out into the countryside or swimming courses are examples of activities they can do together with the baby from an early age.

What's more, they strongly reject the figure of an "absent/father" due to work reasons which they see in other couples and they don't want to play this father's role.

".../...it really pays well and the guy works Monday to Friday from early morning to very late in the evening, he only sees his son at weekends, that's something ...that's something I'm not [up for]..., no way!" (César; university degree).

On the contrary, they perceive their responsibility of looking after the baby as associated with devoting "as much time as possible to it", as a matter that principally concerns both members of the couple, trying to avoid resorting to the grandparents and if possible to day nurseries as well.

"(...) or one or the other, it's a matter of not leaving it either at the nursery, nor with grandmothers, nor grandfathers, with anyone, it's yours, you've made your bed, lie on it, right? That's what they say." (Fermín, Secondary Education).

They express the desire to get more involved in caring and educating and to offer "something better" than the functions contemplated in the traditional father role. One can discern in this category the men's preoccupation with being able to perform their father role properly, with being a "good father" who can offer his child "something better" above and beyond the traditional functions of caring and protection. And among the characteristics that they consider as "good father" they should have mentioned the need to establish "strong, special and unique bonding with the child", based on "responsibility" and on "participation" in caring for it and in its education. They also show a lot of concern that "their role should not be secondary to that of the mother", to "avoid being the second person", to take a direct part in caring for it and in its education.

"I want to have a relationship with the baby boy or the baby girl... that is equally intense, and that comes from taking on responsibility and taking part in looking after them, and , and educating them (...) the two of us equally (Óscar, University degree).

That's the reason why they intend to look after the baby by themselves during part of the day, sharing the caring tasks on an equal basis, although not totally planned ("in a very natural way.../...now it's your turn, now it's my turn", "working in the mornings in the store and spending the afternoons with the baby").

Gender socialisation, egalitarian attitudes and "new" masculinities

Regarding gender socialisation of the interviewed couples, the family background usually corresponds to the traditional model, where the father has been the main breadwinner and the mother a housewife. In the cases where the woman worked outside of the home the sharing of household roles continued to be asymmetrical or there was stereotypical specialisation: (she took care of chores inside the house,

cleaning and food and he looked after the garden, the car, DIY, etc...) All the couples interviewed reject this model for themselves, and state that they do not want to reproduce it, although on occasions they also acknowledge they are influenced by it:

“My mother is obsessed with cleaning, I try to get away from that but sometimes I can’t help it” (Verónica; university degree)

Their aspiration is a balanced sharing within the couple and the involvement of men in childcaring.

In some cases the influence of the family of origin is apparent, and especially in the case of the mothers in whose own families sons and daughters had received an egalitarian socialisation which broke away from the traditional family model, starting with an egalitarian sharing of household chores at home.

“Let’s see, let’s see if I...I know, I know how to do everything because I grew up with three women and they showed me how to, I can iron, I can wash up, I can do it all, (...) (Angel, secondary education; unemployed)

The “absence” of the father is a subject that comes up in the conversations with several of the interviewed men. This absence due to work reasons, divorce or other causes, leads to a reaction of rejection towards this traditional fatherhood model.

In other cases the desire for egalitarian parenthood is reinforced by their socialisation with experiences of autonomy early on, “the fact that I had to take care of myself very early on has triggered learning that helped establish egalitarian relationships in the couple”. We also observed among the interviewees cases of families of origin where the father had played an important role in childcaring. The socialisation experienced in these families, with a father figure who collaborated or participated in educating and looking after the kids, seems to have been an important point of reference when it came to establishing or considering this same model as the ideal one for their couple relationship.

Nevertheless, whereas the egalitarian model applied by the parents in their families of origin may have influenced some men, the adaptation and resocialization processes they had to go through in order to adapt to their present couple relationships seem to have exerted a greater influence. And here women have played an active protagonist role when it came to making the men aware of the need for co-responsibility as regards the essential tasks and chores for proper housekeeping. Through their conversations, negotiations and recurrent messages women had made it clear to their partners that they would not take on the role of replacing their mothers. We came across situations where it was obvious that these men had been brought up among typical stereotypes of traditional masculine role, which do not imply household chores for men, but that they had been instructed otherwise by their partners once they began living together.

“Of course ‘he helps me’, ‘he takes part in the house, because that’s how it is. No, ‘he does help me’ well and... and I still point out the fact that his mother is surprised, and sometimes she used to say, ‘Oh my god, my son doing these things’, but not in a negative way, as if she were saying ‘I can’t believe it’, because at home he didn’t do anything [referring to housework], because obviously, she was at home and.... of course”. (Fátima, secondary education)

A key argument put forward for deciding to share these tasks on an equal basis was that both members of the couple were salary earners: two breadwinners, two carers alike (“both of us work.../... and so the idea is fifty percent, isn’t that right?; “today if we are fifty percent, we are fifty percent for everything”). These men have incorporated household tasks as part of the responsibilities they have taken on at home.

In general, the male interviewees do between 40% and 60% of all the household chores and once the child is born they also foresee plans for equal sharing of reproductive tasks. Nevertheless, they view this egalitarian sharing as atypical. They are aware that the majority of couples in their environment do not maintain these types of agreements with men willing to get more involved in childcaring. In some cases they see themselves as “weirdoes” in relation to other couples in their surroundings. In other cases they set “examples” for other couples in their surroundings.

“(…) In our circle, for example, my cousin... he doesn’t do it there, he began doing it after he came home and watched us (...). He’s a really nice guy, and we have other close friends as well, in other words friends who see it and then learn from it”. (Juana; Secondary Education)

This feeling of “being different” from other men also comes up in the conversations with several interviewed men. For example, Carlos has always regarded himself as an “oddball” among other men. He points out that his “feminine side” is more developed than that of other men in his surroundings and that he has always liked children. This created problems and at times got him into trouble with other males especially when he was a teenager:

“(…) I am of the opinion that all of us,... women have, a feminine side, a masculine side, and that men have a feminine side, it may be more or less developed, so I, this facet is very developed in me, so, mom, I have always been a bit strange, the one who stood out, the one who got slapped in the face (...). (Carlos; university degree; unemployed)

The process of assuming a new more egalitarian masculinity entails a critical reflection upon the traditional model exercised by men in childcaring. Although this wasn’t the usual case, some reflections were made by male interviewees on the role of caring in the home and they criticised the traditional fatherhood model.

“(...) I would give him a slap on the neck, I would say to him, I would say ‘hey what are you doing, that’s what I would do’, your role here is equally important as your wife’s and you can’t place all the responsibility on her (...)”. (Angel, Secondary Education)

At times the critical reflection upon the masculinity and paternity model came up during the group dynamics sessions which discussed men’s role in caring and co-responsibility. This “almost activist” stance is only a minority view, but it comes up in some of the interviews. For example Javier points out that he became less traditional after having taken part in these groups on gender.

“(...) and it’s a group dynamics, we have learnt, it has made me try, ah, to learn how to cook, take care of the house, clean, do the shopping, decorate, well, I wasn’t at all like that, mmm, I used to be a lot more male chauvinist, more traditional in that respect. (...) I am quite activist you know and it makes me mad that we men are thrown out of the house, (the women laugh) and I, well, I can do these things, well I can do them myself, why should others do them for me? Generally speaking and not just in matters of gender, it annoys me when men behave as “handicapped” at home”. (Javier; university education)

Conclusions

First-time parent couples following the caring strategy whereby the father has committed to play a prominent role during the baby’s first year are quite heterogeneous as regards their lifestyles. But they share a series of characteristic features which help us to understand why men’s involvement and their decision to take care of the baby gains even more relevance.

In the first place, women are better positioned to negotiate with their partners all the issues related with housework and looking after the baby when it arrives. They have higher education and professional qualifications, they are clearly job oriented because most of them are currently working and they have more successful careers, they usually earn a higher income than their partners and on many occasions they are the sole breadwinners at home because the men are unemployed. Despite this negotiating power, and their greater job orientation we can observe a certain conflicts in these women between their professional career and family life with the arrival of the baby. The naturalisation of caring that goes hand in hand with maternity can bring about a change in these women’s priorities towards more traditional gender roles. This is an important issue that needs to be taken into account when their ideals and caring plans are put into practice.

Secondly, these couples are relatively consolidated. They have lived together for around 6 years, during which time they have gradually established a more or less egalitarian distribution of household tasks. In some cases, thanks to the socialisation in egalitarian values in their families of origin, and in others as a result of complex

negotiations and resocialization processes basically instigated by the women when they began living together as a couple. The outcome in both cases is that men are more committed to everything pertaining to reproduction tasks in the home, which means that women can count on their partner's active participation in looking after the baby and then not having to resort to the family network, which also allows them to delay the private day nursery option until the baby is one year old.

Thirdly, men in these couples show an instrumental job orientation and place a great deal of importance on their experiences in the private sphere inside the home. There is a new male positioning whereby these men try to get more involved in looking after their future child and break away from the few activities that have been reserved for them by the traditional father role. What we are witnessing here therefore is a rethinking of the "traditional" priorities that must guide men's lives, and above all of those sources of meaning contributing to given sense and form their masculine identities, such as the sphere of employment and professional career. The interest they have shown in caring for their first child as well as their wish to become actively involved and occupy an important place in bringing it up, represents with regard to the past a desire to link the construction of their masculine identity with their new identity as "caring" fathers.

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