Matriarchal Families and Interchangeable Fathers
- How discourses on parenting allocate positions to women and men in post-divorce families
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How discourses on parenting allocate positions to women and men in post-divorce families

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Abstract

This paper is about family constellations post-divorce or post-separation. The aim is to get access to discourses on family life and parenting in society. The empirical data are interviews in Estonia and Latvia. These are used as narratives to help us understand how parenting is worked out after divorce. The analysis points to different ways of understanding the rights and responsibilities of women in relation to men. While women are expected to resume full responsibility for care and maintenance of the children, men express the right to move on to new relationships. Thus, fathers are seen as interchangeable, while mothers are permanent. Power over the new family post-divorce is assumed by mothers, thus forming a familial matriarchy. Men manifest their power position in society and in relation to women by being able to choose their degree of involvement in the family.

Keywords: family discourses, gender relations, parenting post-divorce, matriarchy, Estonia, Latvia
Introduction

In this paper, parenting after divorce or separation is described. It looks at how the rights and responsibilities that come with being a mother or a father are articulated. In order to find out what is thought to be proper for a woman and a man in relation to her/his children, parents who have divorced are interviewed and asked about how they organize their lives. The aim is to get access to the discourses on family life and parenting that are present in society. An ultimate aim is to look at how society is structured in consequence of different ways to organize family life.

The data analysed is from Estonia and Latvia, ten years into the independence period. I argue that the turbulent times of this period form the context to a family discourse that allocates the rights and responsibilities of the family to mothers, while fathers are seen as secondary. This may partly be a reinterpretation of family discourses of the Soviet time, partly a way of rationalizing experiences of the new economy. Thus, the tight mother-child bond of the family discourse in society limits women’s choices in life, while men’s detachment from the children gives them access to a more diverse labour market and to the opportunities offered by the new economy.

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Theoretical Perspectives

It is assumed here that the discourses on family and parenting reveal power relations in the family, and in society. We start from the assumption that power in the family is constituted by a practice of articulation, a process in which the meaning of family is partially fixed. ‘Family’ is in this context supposed to be ‘a floating signifier’, that is, a signifier whose meaning is ‘suspended’ (Laclau 2007 pp. 69 and 131). This means that there are alternative ways, in which the meaning of ‘family’ may be fixed. The ‘floating’ dimension of ‘family’ is most visible today, as it is commonly talked about ‘the crisis of the family’. The symbolic system related to ‘family’ is assumed to be undergoing a radical recasting (Gabb & Silva 2011).

My study of parenting is based on the poststructuralist assumption that ‘our ways of talking (...) play an active role in creating and changing (...) identities and social relations’ (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008 p. 1). When we talk about ‘family’ we negotiate the meaning of being a family and living family life. From this follows that meaning is contingent. At the same time, such meaning-making processes are more or less caught up in existing discourses and structures. Thus, ‘our thinking can never transcend all existing structures’, and the social can never be shaped freely (ibid. p. 38).

The talking of family studied here is conceived as a practice of articulation, where nodal points are constituted. These are ‘privileged discursive points’ that fix the meaning of ‘a signifying chain’ (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 113). The nodal points distinguished here are mother and father. These are privileged signs ‘around which other signs are ordered’, signs that ‘acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point’ (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008, p. 26). What do we mean with being a mother, and a father, when we talk about rights and responsibilities towards children? How is family life organized and what meaning is given to rights and responsibilities in relation to these two nodal points?

It is assumed that in this articulatory practice, the meaning of being a mother is established in relation to being a father. Thereby, discourses on family are formulated (Laclau 2007 p. 68). When assigning rights and responsibilities to mothers and fathers in relation to the children they have in common, subject positions are discursively constructed for mothers as different, or similar to fathers. (Cfr. Laclau & Mouffe 2001, pp. 144f.). Discourses form frames of reference for acting, and therefore have social consequences (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008, pp. 25f.). When doing parenting in
everyday life, social structures are established accordingly (Morgan 2011, 2.7).

Poststructuralism is here conceived as a subcategory of the broader category of social constructionism (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008, p. 6). In feminist poststructuralism doing gender us used as opposed to being a woman or a man. West and Zimmermann (1987, p. 187) write: ‘Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or biological’. Being a women or a man would thus denote the opposite, that is, be grounded on an explicit or implicit assumption that differences between ‘girls and boys and women and men’ are ‘natural, essential or biological’. It would then correspond to the procedure of categorizing by sex; that is, placing the persons we study ‘in a sex category’. This is done according to a previous classification of these persons as female or male, a classification that is based on ‘socially agreed upon biological criteria’ (ibid, p. 127). The alternative of doing gender would instead be based on the assumption that ‘(g)ender is something one does, not something one has’ (Kimmel 2008, p. 122). It is an invitation to study the processes, by which gender is achieved. In this way poststructuralism points to the need of studying how women and men are ascribed certain characteristics, duties and rights in society. The ultimate aim of feminism would in this poststructuralist context be to make every outside categorization by sex irrelevant for the lives that we choose to live. Until this is achieved, we assume that categorizations by sex are processes occurring both in research and in everyday life, and are previous to and have more profound implications than any other categorizations in society; that is, according to class, ethnic identity, nationality or other categories commonly used.

Elvin-Nowak (2005, p. 133) writes that being a parent is the most gendered position possible. In this paper, the focus is on the discursive construction of family, more specifically, on doing parenting. The assumptions behind this expression are in parallel to how doing gender is described above. Thus, mothering and fathering are floating signifiers, in parallel to mothers and fathers, the meaning of which is decided in articulatory practices, where they are assigned different subject positions.

According to Kimmel (2008, p. 1), '(w)hen we speak about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply difference’. He further asks ‘why men always get more’, when social political, and economic resources are divided between genders. Therefore, it is impossible to study gender in society without studying power, because power is what
produces gender differences (ibid. p. 105). It is assumed here that relations of power form ‘a pattern of constraint on social practice’ (Connell 1987, p. 107). For example, power is put into play, when organizing everyday family life. According to Connell, ‘the family is a scene of multilayered relationships’ and in ‘no other institution are relationships so extended in time, so intensive in contact, so dense in their interweaving of economics, emotion, power and resistance’ (ibid., p. 121). In this context, the discourses on family give meaning to the gender order that is put into practice, and may make any difference in power seem ‘normal’ or ‘natural’, depending on the characteristics that are ascribed to women in relation to men. The settlements reached at this private family scene spill over to society, how it is organized and what is considered to be normal positions for women and men.

Here we examine the following questions: How is parenting defined and worked out after divorce? How do mothers and fathers understand the responsibility to care for their children, and to provide for them economically? What discourses on family are put into play in the narratives on divorce and parenting that are brought forth? Which subject positions are assigned to women/mothers and to men/fathers in their telling about how they organize family life after divorce or separation? What alternative ways of organizing family life are excluded?

Method

In this study, I use interviews in Estonia and Latvia as narratives, in order to understand how parenthood is worked out after divorce. The aim is to study ‘subjective practices’ of parenting, and to combine this with descriptions of the ‘structural conditions’ (Howarth 2005, p. 327) of these two countries in the first decade after independence. The narratives on family practice in everyday life are compared with other studies on family, both in these two countries and in others. Descriptions of the political and economic conditions of these countries are conceived as contexts to family life. Here research results from other studies of this period are used. (Cfr. Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 149).

Sixteen divorced women and men with underage children were interviewed in 2000 and 2001 respectively in Tallinn, Estonia, and Riga, Latvia. The interviews were semi-structured. These are interviews in which the interviewer makes sure that specific themes are brought up in the conversation. At the same time, the interviewers were instructed to keep an ‘ethos
of openness” to the other’ (Howarth 2005, p. 339), to make the interviewees feel free to develop their own narratives. It is assumed here that when a couple divorces, it becomes necessary to spell out how to share duties and responsibilities that previously did not require explanations. In addition, any situation where persons are asked about these matters, just as happens in interviews, will presumably spark off their own thinking about everyday life and how it is organized. It is further assumed that the way people talk about family life after divorce will illustrate family life in general.

There were two steps to the transcription; the recorded text was transcribed and then translated into English. Thus the original interviews have been interpreted twice. This transcription obviously limits the information that can be gained from the interviews (Kvale 1988, pp. 97f). The translation from the original languages also means that it is not possible to analyse wording or specific expressions. Here such fine nuances were set aside, and instead broad analytical themes were drawn from the recorded narratives of divorce. The meaning of these themes is discussed in relation to the totality of transcribed text, that is, the chorus of voices expressed in the interviews (Kvale 1983, p. 186). Ultimately it is up to the reader to judge, if the analysis adds to our understanding of parenting and divorce.

Context

If we assume that meaning is contingent, as suggested above and that meaning varies according to historical, cultural, local and social contexts, it becomes necessary to put every naming and acting into context. In this case, the specific structural context is one of political economic and social transformation, here corresponding to the structural conditions as suggested by Howarth (2005, p. 327) above. To these structural conditions I also refer the Soviet legacy as to social norms and accustomed ways of organizing everyday life. This is not to say that these structural conditions are not discursively constituted. It is only used as an analytical distinction in this study. What it does mean is that I will not try to analyse how these structures are constituted; I will, instead, take the results of other studies at face value, and refer to their results as contexts to the subjective practices of parenting analysed here.

The assumption is that when people describe their universe of meaning, they relate to both formal and informal practices and institutions and combine ideas and concepts that are seen as new with what is handed down by
tradition. In this case the ‘new’ is a turbulent and rapidly changing society, while the ‘old’ consists of well-known strategies of coping with everyday problems. We learn from research that in the process of transformation, political and economical issues were given priority by the governments of these years, as they set about ‘establishing a market economy and reinforcing political independence’ (Aidukaite 2004, p. 88). Less effort was invested in solving social problems, and there are many reports that testify to the loss of welfare (Gassman 2000; Narusk & Hansson 1999). This resulted in ‘expanding differences in the living standards’ and an increased ‘risk of falling below the poverty line’, especially for families with underage children and single-mother families (Hansson 2001, p. 14; Trapenciere et al. 2000, pp. 14-15). As we shall see, explanations of ways to organize family life, or failures to do so, often refer to experiences of social and economic unrest.

A second context of the narratives on family life studied here comes from discourses on parenting. It is assumed that when parents in Estonia and Latvia talk about family life, children and divorce, they have access to a wide range of ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 106f). Some are specific to their local or national milieu; some are given by tradition, either from Soviet times or from the period of pre-war independence, while others reflect interchange with discourses from other post-Soviet countries and from the West. The narratives of the interviews are therefore compared with what other research endeavours tell us about discourses in other countries. Special attention is given to the possibility of a Soviet legacy in the ways that family life and divorce is talked about today.

Theories on Family

It is commonplace today to talk about the crisis of the family. In the words of Tabuna (1997, p. 287), ‘(t)he modern-day European family is experiencing a crisis’, signs of which are low fertility rates, cohabitation instead of marriage, children born outside marriage, and finally, divorce. The cause of this crisis is assumed to be the failing family policies, Latvia being a case in point.2

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2 In both Latvia and Estonia, the divorce rates were amongst the highest in Europe (Svarckopfa 2001, p. 144; Hansson 2000, p. 46). However, the number of marriages declined abruptly during the first decade of independence, and so also the number of divorces. Both marriages and divorces have since then stabilized to equal the EU mean (European Commission, Eurostat).
Let’s start by trying to pinpoint this family ‘in crisis’. I assume here that the family that forms the background to this talk about crisis is the married heterosexual couple with children, living in lifelong relationships. Family life is supposed to be organized around a man as the main breadwinner, and the woman the main carer of her children and of her husband. In the citation above, it is also assumed that if the degree of state support to families were ‘good enough’, these ‘normal’ families would not be experiencing a crisis.

This is the long-standing idea of a stable nuclear family, handed down by tradition, which has served as a reference point, both in studies of social policy (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hobson 2002; Sainsbury 1999) and in studies of family life (Carlbäck et al. 2012). It has also been described as the moral foundation of society and a necessary defence against the rise of individualism (Etzioni 1995, cited in Reyes 2005, p. 237). If we assume that we make sense of ways to organize everyday family life by implicit or explicit reference to a family discourse that outlines the ‘normal’ family in this way, we also find that this idea is enacted, in a more or less modified form, in most West European countries (Reyes 2005, p. 234; Regnér 2011).

The crisis of the family is the starting point also for Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1999, p. 1). What is falling apart they describe as the ‘nuclear family, built around gender status’. What is happening is that women’s emancipation and demands for equal rights ‘no longer conveniently come to a halt outside our private lives’. When women are on a par with men in society, they will not accept a subordinate position in the family. But, according to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, what will take over from the family is the family (p. 2)

(O)nly different, more, better: the negotiated family, the alternating family, the multiple family, new arrangements after divorce, remarriage, divorce again, new assortments from your, my, our children, our past and present families.

This negotiated family will become the arena for a long and bitter gender struggle (ibid., p. 14). This is because both women and men will seek economic independence and self-fulfilment outside marriage. Furthermore, Tabuna (1997, p. 290) observes that the ‘traditional family type is being replaced by new family structures, in which emotional links are dominant’. Giddens (1992), in turn, outlines a possible scheme for reconciliation between women and men, a promise of intimacy in a pure relationship char-
acterized by a democratic order, in which rights and responsibilities are continuously renegotiated in an open communication.

Frazer’s version of ‘true gender equity’ (1994, p. 613) is both more specific and more comprehensive. In her vision of a welfare state in the post-industrial world, ‘citizens’ lives integrate wage earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society – while also leaving time for some fun’. In this world the gender coding of activities performed in the family and in other social institutions would be eliminated.

In the above theories on family, the traditional model of the nuclear family is somewhat modified. First of all, the possibility of successive family unions during lifetime is suggested. Secondly, men’s right to be the head of the family is questioned, and the possibility of negotiations over family matters, eventually leading to gender equality, is proposed. Thirdly, attention is brought to emotions in family life, both keeping family together and tearing it apart. Finally, the traditional model is done for, when a future welfare state is thought to be the panacea to all the ills of family life as we have hitherto known them.

If gender relations and family life are characterized by negotiations, it is to be assumed that the need to negotiate intensifies in connection with divorce, especially when there are children involved. It would be a mistake to think that marriage ends with divorce. Instead, the marriage ‘transforms itself into a new phase of post-marital ‘separation marriage’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1999, p. 147). We must also assume at the outset that children cannot be divorced from their parents. This means that divorced people remain linked to each other not only by their shared biography, but also the children they have in common. The question at issue here is what post-marital negotiations are about. All matters concerning the children have to be negotiated at the moment of divorce, but also for many years to come.

As mentioned before, it is assumed here that people interpret their experiences of everyday life in the light of the repertoires given by discourses available in society. What knowledge do we proceed from when we try to distinguish such repertoires in the interviews? Another question to answer is whether these repertoires are different in former Soviet republics versus countries in the West. Asztalos Morell et al. (2005) advise against overemphasizing the East-West divide. They believe that the concept of Eastern Europe is meaningful in the social sciences, however, because the communist and post-communist legacies provide ‘certain countries with specific common experiences’ (p. 17). Haukanes (2001, p. 2) also points to the
shared experiences of the communist period and to ‘certain structural similarities’ produced by communist politics. What is of special interest here is how parenting was conceived of in the Soviet times; that is, when family policy was common to all the countries in the Soviet sphere.

Parenting in the East

Issoupova (2000, p. 30) studies the ‘changing construction of motherhood in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia’, by comparing a journal that was a ‘mouthpiece for state policy’, with the presentation of ‘contemporary opinion’ in the press during the latter period. According to her, Soviet policy emphasized ‘the links between mother, state and child’, while the bond between father and child was ‘relegated to the level of financial obligation’ (p. 38). In her study of men in Russia, Kay (2006, p. 138) also notes that ‘Soviet family legislation and social provision was constructed overwhelmingly round the mother-child role’. In the 1980s the provision of state nurseries and kindergartens and increased maternity leave and child benefit ‘made reliance on the state rather than the individual man quite feasible’ (Issoupova 2000, p. 39). In the late Soviet period a pronatalist discourse was promoted by the state, which was alarmed by the low birth-rate, and again mothers were called upon in a discourse charged with ‘essentialist language and imagery’, and ‘a cult of maternity’ (Kay 2006, p. 154). Parallel to a discourse that played down men’s tasks in the family, the 1980s experienced a discourse in which emphasis was placed on men’s roles as providers, with women returning to ‘primarily domestic and family-oriented roles’ (ibid. 77). This call for women to be good mothers and wives was reformulated by Gorbachev during perestroika (Brunovkis 2001, p. 22), and was then supplemented with an extension of maternity leave and increased child benefits (Gradskova 2012, p. 167).

A popular image of both sexes in post-Soviet Russia was that of ‘the feminine, caring, nurturant, home-making, fertile female, partnered by the strong, economically active, dependable husband and father’ (Bridger 2001, p. 14). This was framed within a discourse of anti-communism and was repeated in varying forms also in other post-Soviet countries (Aidukaite 2004, p. 122f.; Hansson 2001, p. 75; Haskova 2005, p. 32f.; Haukanes 2001, p. 4; Narusk and Hansson 1999, p. 15f.; Koroleva 1997, p. 308). Surveys in Estonia and Latvia in the 1990s have shown an overwhelming support for traditional gender roles. Thus, for example, around 80 percent agreed with
the statement that ‘it was man’s task to earn money, and woman’s task to take care of home and children’ (Narusk and Hansson 1999, p. 15; also Rungule 1997, p. 313; Gradskova 2012, p. 175).

Motherhood has been re-conceptualised in the post-communist period as a private experience, and the state has retreated somewhat from its former responsibilities. In Russia, this has opened the way for ‘the reclamation of the institution of fatherhood’, not only for financial provision, but also for paternal participation in care (Issoupova 2000, p. 42). Also, in the three Baltic countries, attempts have been made to ‘promote fatherhood (…) and involve fathers more in the upbringing of their children’ (Aidukaite 2004, p. 159). Recent research also points to a more child-centred family discourse (Hansson & Ugaste 2012).

To summarize, what we find in the communist and post-communist context is a traditional family discourse, which emphasizes different versions of the mother-child bond. During the Soviet period this was complemented by state support for maternity and childcare. When fathers were added to this threesome relationship, it was first as providers and later also as carers. By then the state had abdicated from its previous ambition to monitor reproduction.

Parenting in the West

In the West as well, there are studies that describe changes in family rhetoric. Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) have studied how parenthood is described in popular magazine articles in the United States from 1900 to 1989. They conclude that the most dramatic change was ‘a shift toward gender-neutral parenting articles over the century’ (ibid. p. 980). Thus ‘parenting began to be conceptualized as gender free, rather than as equivalent to mothering’. They also find that ‘fathers were most often defined as nurturers’ in the later decades, in contrast to being defined as providers up to the 1940s (ibid. pp. 980-981).

In their study of ‘law and legal interpretations on custody, support, and paternity’ in the United States, Walters and Chapman (1991) also identify a trend toward gender neutrality. Thus, on the eve of the twentieth century, the preference for fathers as custodians of children shifted to the preference for mothers. Subsequently, ‘(r) ationales for preference for mothers as custodians of children have progressed from motherhood as instinct, to the tender years doctrine [the assumption that ‘young children belong with
their instinctively nurturant mothers’], to the standard of best interest of the child’ (ibid. p. 85). Starting in the late twentieth century, when the notion of the best interest of the child was introduced, a father could be awarded custody, though mothers generally continued to be favoured. Walters and Chapman conclude that the latest trend is toward shared custody, with reference to the best interest of the child. This confirms the previously noted discursive change in favour of gender neutrality in the United States.

Also in Europe there are reports on the promotion of fatherhood in official documents. Sarre (1996) has looked at how fathers were conceptualized in social policy in England from the 1950s to the 1990s. She concludes that the idea of fathers as cash providers ‘has maintained its ideological importance’, throughout this period, though ‘the growth in child psychology’ and a greater emphasis on child welfare in policy ‘has increased the importance placed on the father as carer’ (p. 46).

Turning to Western Europe, we find great diversity in policy models and public discourses with reference to the family. Thus, for example:

(T)he southern countries share a cultural emphasis on gender division of labour within the family, on the crucial role of mothers’ presence and care in the early childhood years, and a high reliance on family for supporting individual and household needs, including childcare needs (Saraceno 2000, p. 140).

In this ‘Mediterranean model’ the male is the breadwinner (Bimbi 1997, p. 175). In some other Western European countries, a somewhat modified form of the male breadwinner model is still prevalent in practice, if not in official rhetoric. Women’s participation in paid labour is generally encouraged, and maternity leave is quite generous. However, childcare services are missing, and women adjust their working life to their caring duties. Therefore, although there has been a change in official rhetoric towards two-earner families and shared parenting, women’s activity rates have not reached those of men, and men’s participation in care has not reached that of women (Meyers et.al. 1999, pp. 124ff.; Sarre 1996).

European Union institutions have been paying attention to the problems of ‘traditional fatherhood’, and ‘encouraging men to embrace new and modern gender roles’, which would include the caring roles previously left exclusively to women (Tereškinas & Reingardienė 2005, pp. 5ff.). Although they point to the new EU countries in particular, the traditional model seems to present a problem in many of the old EU countries as well.
In the Scandinavian countries the state actively supports a two-earner family with shared parenting. The parental leave policy is flexible and generous, and childcare services are available (Leira 2000, p. 157; Saraceno 2000, p. 140). Reforms have been created to reduce ‘the actual hindrances that active fathering meets’ (Holter 2005, p. 122). One example is the introduction of ‘daddy quotas’; that is, a portion of the parental leave that cannot be transferred to the mother (Leira 2000, p. 159; Elvin-Nowak 2005, p. 92f.; Haas & Rostgaard 2011).

As described above, in the East the emphasis has been on the mother-child bond. In the 1980s fathers were added to this relationship, mainly as providers, but not until the turn of the century as carers. In the West we find a similar development, though fathers as providers seem to have been present in the discourse throughout the twentieth century, and the change towards fathers as carers in official rhetoric has come sooner than in the East.

To conclude this synopsis of theories on parenting, we may now add a few questions to those specified earlier. If we assume that divorce is a window into the negotiated family, the issue is not only how rights and responsibilities are articulated for mothers and fathers after divorce, but also which discourses are available to negotiate and organize life in families that are not broken. Another question is whether fathers are conceived mainly as providers or are expected to be carers, as was pointed out above. Is mother as a nodal point in family discourses articulated as a tight mother-child bond, thus forming the node of every discourse? Is mother the centre of the family, the nodal point which is generally not explicitly mentioned but is always taken for granted?

An open door to success

As mentioned before, the context of the interviews is a turbulent and rapidly changing society. This time was experienced as turbulent on a personal level, too. In many interviews, the ‘spirit of freedom’ of those years is brought up.

All around the country, something was in the air. Don’t you remember, those first years of independence? That was a time when one could imagine that the door to success was open; a new life would start (Latvia 2, male, 37)
The open ‘door to success’ was situated mainly in the new economy, but on some occasions, the possibility of starting ‘a new life’ also referred to the private sphere. New constellations were formed in the area of the family life, where ‘winners and losers’ realigned according to the value criteria of the new societies. Thus, ‘success’ seems to be a key word when describing the new society. Life is about competing for material assets, and the image of ‘winners and losers’ is also used in research to analyse the outcomes of transition (Gassman 2000, pp. 85f.; Narusk & Hansson 1999).

Accordingly, both kinship and non-kin ties were loosened, either when poverty made it difficult to ‘be either hosts or guests on a regular basis’ (Trapenciere et.al. 2000, p. 132), or when the ‘quickly upward-mobile people’ found little interest in keeping contacts with those who were less successful (Hansson 2001, p. 82). When such expectations of success failed, it was sometimes difficult to keep up a marriage.

Unfortunately, that was just for some years, and then all the problems started to come. Lots of problems related to business and debts. This affected my family life. My wife didn’t understand lots of things, what I was doing and about my business. She started to criticize me and to push me, saying that the train had already left the station. She thought that I was a loser. (...) And I had to shift from one job to another. My working opportunities changed, and I had to spend more time in Riga, but my wife and my children stayed in X (Latvia 2, male, 37).

When ‘change’ is the rule of the game in society, ‘change’ was also sought in the family. In their study of poverty in Latvia Trapenciere et.al. (2000, p. 38) have described how families disintegrate under ‘the continuous anxiety to make ends meet’, and when spouses, just as in the above case, blame each other for not ‘doing as much as he or she could’. In both Latvia and in Estonia, the divorce rates were high already in the 1980s, and actually decreased from 1990 to 2000. However, also the number of marriages declined abruptly in that decade. This does not mean that couples were not formed. Instead, the increasing proportion of children born out of wedlock indicates a high rate of cohabitation, that is, from 27 percent to 57 percent of life births in Estonia and from 17 percent to 39 percent in Latvia (CSBL 2000, p. 50; SOE 2001, p. 40). The share of remarriages in Estonia increased to account for one-third of all marriages. This shows that people were inclined to give ‘a new relationship a try during this period of transition’ (Jacobsen, 1996, p. 35).
Men as fathers

Kay (2006, p.73) has pointed out that in media and cultural discourses of the Soviet Union, ‘work was the centre of the Soviet man’s life’, while his private, personal and family life was paid less attention. As has been noted above, this was also a tendency of Soviet policy. In the interviews as well, the issue of whether men are able fathers is often brought up.

I guess I’m so conservative in my thinking, but I think that children are the meaning of a marriage. But men see things totally differently, at least the men that I’ve been in contact with. (…) It seems that a man and a child (…) at least in our case, it has turned out that being a father is too difficult for a man (Estonia 4, female, 38).

Even if this is thought to be ‘conservative thinking’ we shall see that the notion of women and children forming a ‘natural’ unit is the self-evident background to the discussions of men. A distinction is made between being a man and being a father. Thus men are men, but being a father is something that men may choose. As we shall see, the demands put on fathers are generally not too high. But even so, it may be ‘too difficult for a man’. Another single mother finishes recounting her experience with men with the remark: ‘there is a shortfall of fathers, yes’ (Latvia 13, female 31). Consequently, women may decide to do without.

I’ll manage. I won’t give up. The main thing is that I have a job and my health won’t fail. I can manage by myself, and I don’t need anyone by my side. I have an Estonian soul, or rather, a soul of an Estonian woman. I have decided for sure that I will not want a man by my side. At least until the kids are grown. One more experience like I had, and I couldn’t take it anymore! (Estonia 4, female 38).

In this citation, we see that the disappointment with men may take the form of praising women for their capability and sense of responsibility, in contrast with men and their shortcomings. Here the struggle of women for their family is related to the national rhetoric of independence: ‘an Estonian soul’ striving for independence and self-fulfilment. To relate to the noble cause of Estonian independence, may also be a way of staving off a possible stigma related to her situation as a divorced lone-mother. The interviewer’s presentation of this study as one of divorced parents and their children may
have implicitly invoked the notion of a deviation from the norm of a traditional family.

Kay (2006) reports on similar attitudes amongst divorced mothers in Russia, who were ‘antagonistic towards the idea of remarriage and were far more negative about men in general, describing them as irresponsible, egotistical and a burden to women’ (Luniakova 2004, cited in Kay ibid., p. 175).

This questioning of men’s position as fathers is an example of a rearticulation of the traditional family model in favour of a familial matriarchy. Also Oakley and Rigby (1998, p. 122) write from their research in England that ‘it is clear that men’s presence in the home is not automatically a gain for women, and thus for those for whom women care’. They point to how much work wives do for their husbands, and how small husbands’ contribution is to childcare and housework. This results in stress and health problems both for women and for children (also Pringle 1998, pp. 319f.). Oakley and Rigby conclude that ‘it is primarily patriarchy that is bad for women and children’s health’ (ibid., p. 123f.). Their argumentation amounts to a critique of the traditional family model, where ‘the exploitation of women’s work and caring’ is ‘disguised by the rhetoric of heterosexual love and protection’. In sum, women and children might do better without a man in the house.

**Fathers after divorce**

The interviews provide a more specific image of the mother/father/child triad after divorce. In this image as well, mother and child form a unit to which the father is less tightly connected. The following citations illustrate this point.

> I think that it is the right thing to leave the kids of divorced couples with their mother. But the child has every right to know who his father is. In the kindergarten and at school, children like to speak about their fathers, especially boys. My daddy works there, and my daddy has such-and-such a car. And when there is no daddy at home, the kid has the right to know that somewhere there is a daddy for him as well, who cares and whom he could meet every now and then. And so he also has someone he can be proud of and speak about. A child cannot be brought up with the feeling that he has no father at all (Estonia, 2 male, 26).
In this description, the tie between father and child is weak and somewhat distant. The father is thought to be someone to ‘meet every now and then’, but not on a daily or even weekly basis. A father is pictured more as a mental figure than a real person who is present in everyday life. Similar descriptions are given in Latvia; for example, when asked about how often he meets his now-eleven-year old son, a Latvian man says:

Sometimes. They [the son and his mother] live where my parents live, and I visit them [his parents]. Once I met him in a shop and I asked him: What do you want me to buy for you, my son? And he asked me to buy him a packet of potato crisps (Latvia, 1 male, 30).

In this description occasional encounters have superseded regular and planned visits. For this man, visiting his parents is more important than keeping in touch with his son from a previous marriage. He goes on to say that his new partner has two sons and ‘we’re raising them together’. As in other cases, a new family has taken the place of previous engagements, and this new ‘we’ no longer includes his son of a previous marriage. As to his partner’s ex-husband and his visiting habits, his interest is said to be declining.

The next citation goes even further, when concluding that fathers are interchangeable and that it might be best for the child to lose contact with the biological father when the mother finds a new partner.

It’s difficult to say what the best way is, as there are so many different situations, and people are different. Take my case, for example. My ex-wife and her new partner made a new family, and it’s the family of my son. Then there’s my partner and me; we are the family for her son. And I know that the father of her son has also made a new family, and he’s exactly in the same position as I am.

It’s even a bit difficult to explain it. I might like to meet my son three to four times a month, but then if contact with me is too close, he might not accept my wife’s new partner as a stepfather. And at present it’s just like that – he doesn’t call him daddy; he calls him by his first name. If I considered it very important to meet him as often as possible, then it might make things worse for him. I think that by the time they are a bit older - I mean the kids - they are able to make their own choice. I mean about who’s important and who’s not (Estonia 3, male, 33).

The description given here illustrates how this man draws on different repertoires from the family discursive field to explain his situation. The diffi-
culties that he finds when trying may be an implicit reference to the traditional family model, to which he does not live up. He goes on to give examples of situations from his own family circle, where social ties between parents and children are more important than biological ones. This turns into an articulation of fathers as *interchangeable*. Fathers can shift their engagement to a new family after divorce, and correspondingly accept to be replaced by a new father in their previous family. He also draws on a child-centred discourse to make his explanation more convincing. Finally, the choice of ‘who’s important’ is left to the child to make sometimes in the future. With this comment he states that he has no intention of cutting off from his child definitely.

First and foremost, this reasoning illustrates a discourse that is openly expressed in society in both Estonian and Latvia; that is, fathers are interchangeable. However, what is described here is not the image of a dead-beat dad but a father who gives priority to his social ties of fatherhood rather than his biological ties. Thus this man considers himself a dependable father, but to the children of his second family. He inverts the fact that he does not think it ‘very important’ to meet his son ‘as often as possible’, to mean solicitude for his son. However, in spite of these seemingly rational explanations, it may well be that the separation is more due to how things came about than the result of a well-founded decision (cfr. Duncan 2011, 2.11).

When asked about it, and when trying to find reasonable explanations to the situation, these fathers can draw from a family discourse that according to the studies cited previously was more or less hegemonic in the Soviet era. In this discourse fathers are seen as secondary, while the presence and engagement of mothers is taken for granted. In the turbulent times of the independence period, this discourse is reformulated and the status of fathers in the family becomes even more uncertain.

This discourse has to be put into context. In this interview and in many others, both men and women talk about their long working hours, sometimes combining two different jobs. Turbulence in the new economy, in which firms appear and often soon disappear, also makes it difficult to make demands to employers concerning working hours or days off (Hansson 2001, pp. 61f.; Trapenciere et.al. 2000, p. 63). The stressful lives of adults lead some to rationalize a situation where there is little time to spend with a child from a previous marriage, and any spare time left is spent with the new family.
Mothers and children after divorce

The interviewees express no doubts that the biological mothers are their children’s social mothers, even after divorce. Instead, what mothers as well as fathers discuss is the father’s involvement. Usually mothers accept even sparse and irregular visiting patterns. A mother of two - a twelve-year-old son and a ten-year-old daughter - explains this irregularity as a result of her ex-husband’s commitment to his new family.

Before he had got his own children, he visited more often, once every two or three months. He took the children to the beach or went with them to the theatre, if admission was free. After his second wife gave birth to a boy for him, he started coming more seldom, only during birthdays and not every year (Latvia, 5 female, 32)

In this case, the mother seems to accept her own explanation as to why the father’s not very frequent visits were phased out when he got a new child. When she talks about ‘his own children’, she means the children of his new family. It is no use to count on a father - this seems to be accepted as reality and no cause for complaint or worry for the sake of the children. The demands that women place on their ex-husbands, the fathers of their children, are extremely low.

Newfound interest in a child, coming from a father who has long been distant, may also be interpreted as a threat if it starts just when the mother has found a new partner.

After we got separated, my husband was very supportive, also financially. But then a couple of years passed and he disappeared. And we had to manage on our own. When he doesn’t care for us, if he isn’t interested in us, I won’t force him. He had just disappeared, for us he didn’t exist any more. And now when I have started a new family, and everything seems to be OK, now he’s back again and ready to support us. And as for his support, it’s not much after all. Two or three times a year he comes, brings some expensive gifts, and that’s all. We are well-off and we are able to buy everything the kid needs, there is no need for any kind of support any more. It looks like he’s trying to strengthen his position; some day in the future he could come and say, I have bought this and that, and I have to have some rights. Now when we have found a man who could be a good father for my son, it turns out that there is one father too many (Estonia 5, female, 29).
Also here we see acceptance of the father’s disappearance: ‘for us he didn’t exist any more’. This mother seems to include her son in the ‘us’, and later in the ‘we’ who ‘have found a man’. She seems to assume that her son does not miss his father and that a new father is in his interest. Consequently, the fact that the son enjoys his father’s attention is a big problem.

It’s quite a problem. And I’m really worried about it. The thing is that my son is old enough to understand who is who and who is his real dad, and by buying all these things the child could be manipulated. Already now he sometimes stresses that he wants to put on the coat his daddy bought.

Strangely absent from the reasoning of both mothers and fathers are comments on how children might possibly want things to be organized or what their needs might be. Instead, children are expected to adapt to the plans of adults. However, there are comments in the interviews about children seemingly to resist the arrangements made by their parents and wanting to hold on to their biological fathers instead.

Children’s experience of divorce has been described more thoroughly elsewhere. Thus, for example, Butler et al. (2004, p. 93) conclude that children have strong feelings about their parents’ divorce: ‘the anger, the sense of betrayal, the sympathy for the resident parent, the resentment of her father’s new partner, the deep personal hurt and the confusion of many of the children’. On the other hand, they note that relationships between parents and children may improve, ‘once any divorce-contingent conflict subsides’ (ibid., p. 115). Other studies show that children may closely identify with their fathers even though they see them infrequently. So for example, in their long-term study of divorce, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1990, p. 159) find that children generally wish to maintain the bond to their sometimes failing fathers (also Pryer & Rodgers 2001, cited in Skevik 2006). Thus ‘for the child of divorce’, they note, it ‘represents a grave injustice and a personal tragedy’, when remarriage replaces the former family. But they also conclude that in the long-run, the quality of mother’s parenting is the single most important factor for a child’s well-being. The crucial role that the mother-child relationship plays in children’s well-being is also confirmed in a later study (King & Sobolewski 2006, p. 554). In view of these findings, it seems more important for the children that their mothers still are there for them after divorce than that their fathers prioritize other engagements.
What we hear in these narratives is a discourse that justifies fathers’ cutting ties with their children after divorce. A new family with children is accepted as an excuse for breaking the bond with children from a previous marriage. In this discourse, mothers are supposed to be there for their children, while fathers may choose their engagement. Children have little say in these matters, and their wishes and emotions are not heard. The caring fathers and shared responsibilities for the children is not an issue. Instead, care and keeping the family together are assumed to be something for mothers to manage. This distribution of responsibilities presumably reflects the way family life is organized in non-broken families. Thus, the demands on fathers are not high, nor do women who remarry ask much of their new partners. The men whom the children are expected to accept as their new fathers will probably not identify themselves as carers. It is thus mothers who are assumed to be the managers of family life. In practice, the family model articulated and lived here is a *matriarchy* (cfr. Thornton Dill 2000, p. 44). In this model ‘the mother and children constitute the stable family unit’ (Jensen 1995, p. 237).

**Parenting in context**

If we put this discourse in a global context, a matching example can be found in the cultural values of the Southern European countries noted above. The emphasis there is on a traditional gender division of labour in the family, and women are assumed to be responsible for childcare and other caring duties as well. The official and unofficial rhetoric of other countries stresses instead shared duties within the family and promotes fathers as carers. With reference to divorce, it is generally stated that divorce is not a divorce from the children. An explicit discourse of interchangeable fathers is not to be found. The trend towards joint custody and shared care also goes against this idea (Doucet & Merla 2007; Masardo 2011).

If we instead take a look at practice, we find that men’s participation in care does not correspond to the official and unofficial discourses on fathering. For example, in Norway and Sweden, men take only about one-fifth of the available days for parental leave, and more women than men work part-time, which makes childcare still more a duty of women than of men (Holter 2005, p. 138; Ivarsson 2008). And in spite of the general emphasis on the desirability of continuing parental contact with children after divorce, a national survey in the United States reports that 20 percent of the
children have no contact of any kind with their father (King & Sobolewski 2006, p. 545). In France, more than half of the children ‘never see their father (…) or see him less than once a month’ (Bertaux & Delcroix 1992, p. 181). Similar figures are reported from Australia, Canada, England, Norway, and other Scandinavian countries (Jensen 1995, p. 237; Skevik 2006; Swiss & Le Bourdais 2009). Even in Sweden, where there is a strong discourse of fathers continuing as parents after divorce, one-fourth of children of divorced parents have little or no contact with their fathers (Rädda Barnen 2005, p. 7, also SCB 2005).

Fathers and child support

Women often bring up problems with getting economic support from the fathers: ‘We agreed that he would pay me twenty-five lats [approximately 40 euros] each month for child subsistence. He did pay for about half a year, but then he disappeared somewhere’ (Latvia 6, female 28). When mothers describe fathers’ failure to provide for the children after divorce, the reason they often give is that he just disappeared. How do fathers themselves explain their failure to support their kids of a previous marriage? Not earning enough money is one reason that is often mentioned. Problems with employment and difficulties in coping with the new economy are others.

At first I didn’t pay anything because I had no income. My business had gone bankrupt and I hadn’t found a job. I was unemployed for a while. But later on I started to work for the X company [health foods] as a distributor, and I started to pay. But usually it is not a monthly fixed sum or anything (Estonia 7, male, 49).

Another reason given by the men is that they have a new family to support.

And again, I feel guilty, of course. It is my child, but I have a family, I have two children to bring up. And if I don’t have money, I manipulate my ex. I say, I don’t have money right now, could you wait for a bit, please. And she waits (Latvia 1, male 30).

This situation seems to be both recognized and many times accepted by the mothers.
It’s not his fault that the present situation in the economy is bad. Due to the economic crisis in Russia, many companies and entrepreneurs are in difficulties (Estonia 3, female, 29).

The fathers interviewed are generally neither homeless nor penniless. But even when a father is well-off and has a stable income, he might find reasons not to pay, as in the case below, where he thinks the economic agreement after the first divorce was unfair. He divorced also a second time.

Well, I did buy clothes to them and things like that as well, naturally. But well, basically I gave less to the first child, because she got that money when I left home, and I didn’t think it was right, because it didn’t take long until she found another man. And they had more kids, and why should I toil for those as well? If my own kid got the money, then all right. Anyway, they weren’t going hungry or anything. (Estonia 5, male 49)

Another reason that fathers give for not paying child support is that they show their good will in other ways, for example, by buying presents for birthdays or on other occasions.

We agreed on what child support I should pay. Sometimes I pay more; sometimes I do not pay at all. When I pay more, it is, for example, birthday gifts. (Latvia 15, male, 30)

This is a recurrent theme when men discuss paying for their children. They want to make sure that the money they bring is only for their own child. The fathers’ remarks - about buying clothes and occasional birthday presents instead of paying regular support – may point towards another model of fatherhood, a ‘fun father’ who pretends to be accessible, but has no ‘specific child rearing tasks’ in the family (Tabuna 1997, pp. 295f.) They do not see themselves as carers or stable providers, but they do not want to disconnect altogether from their biological children.

Fathers who have little or no contact with their children talk about reconnecting sometimes in the future: ‘we will talk about it one day, sooner or later, or when she has graduated from school (...), and she will understand’ (Latvia 8, male, 36). This may point towards yet another model of fatherhood – one in which the father is a mentor to a young adult rather than a carer of a child. The image is one of continued connection in some way and an expectation that the child ‘will understand’, when the time comes. These
fathers expect to be understood, but they themselves do not attempt to understand their children.

It is possible in both Estonia and Latvia to go to court to demand child support and to have it garnished from the father’s salary. However, mothers generally do not see any point in doing so, because they say that their ex-husbands make sure that their earnings are all off the books. They describe different ways men evade payment.

If a man has some feelings towards his child, he will find a way to support him. And in case he doesn’t, then the court cannot help either. You see, in our wage system a man can make his official salary very small, and the rest could be given to him in an envelope. You have heard about these tricks, haven’t you? I know that it’s very often done that way. And in such a case women really get practically nothing. (Estonia 5, female, 29)

The father’s non-payment of support is regarded as equivalent to a lack of feeling for his child; and the prospects of forcing him to pay are gloomy, however much the mother might need this support. This mother has resigned herself to not getting anything – no affection and no support from the father of her children, and no backing from the outside society. She will manage on her own.

The narratives on child support and visiting rights in England are somewhat different. Ellie, who divorced five years ago says that her ex-husband

... used to see her [their daughter] every week-end, and he used to pay the rent of our flat, but then he stopped paying it (...) and of course I had to go to the social, that was called family credit, because I was working, and they gave me extra money then to pay my own rent. And because he had stopped paying maintenance, I then decided that he would not see her, anyway, if he can’t pay, he should not see her. So he took it to court, where the court said that I have no right to stop him seeing his child. (...)

So we had to see the Child Welfare, and they came, and they interviewed me, they interviewed X [her husband], and they interviewed XX [their child]. (...) This went on for months and months, going back and forth through the court, and then in the end the judge said that she should see her father every other week-end. (...) I had to apply for legal aid, so I could get a solicitor, and it cost me 25 pounds a month, (...) and I keep on paying 25 pounds every month. And I still would not get any mainte-
In her story there are public institutions available, and she expects to receive assistance from these institutions, in her position as a lone mother. She demands the right to decide whether her ex-husband is to see their daughter, and interprets the situation according to a common-sense logic of ‘no pay – no right’. Here, she loses against the alternative logic of father’s rights, and concludes that ‘from that day to this day, without paying a penny he still has the right to see her’. However, he does not use this right. ‘As far as X is concerned, he does not bother’; he took it to court ‘only to be awkward’. His mother, ‘who works with my new partner’ is more interested, and occasionally she takes her daughter to see her grandmother on weekends. She also explains that the issue of child support is handled by another institution, the Child Support Agency (Fox Harding 1996); ‘they keep sending him letters, and he is sending letters back’, but so far without any success.

Similar to what is told from Estonia and Latvia, however, is her acceptance of the father’s lack of interest in his daughter, and failure to visit her; ‘he sends her a birthday card, and a Christmas card, and a present for her birthday’. She also has accepted that he doesn’t pay child support; ‘after all I do not need it any more, though I did then’. Similar are also her demands to decide about visiting rights, and who is to be included in her family. And finally, she wants her daughter to cut off her ties with her father, by changing her family name. ‘I’m getting married in August, and I want her to have the same name as us, but he won’t allow it’. The notion of an interchangeable father seems to be at play here, too.

Parallel to this discourse of fathers who choose to disconnect from their biological children, there is a fathers’ rights discourse in England, as well as in Spain, and also in Estonia and Latvia. In the interviews, father’s rights are usually brought up, when talking about conflicts over visiting rights.

I’d consider it natural that the kids had every chance to see their father and that no one would prescribe what I could or couldn’t do with them. It should be my perception of being a parent, of what I should pass on to them (Estonia 6, male 36).

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3 This interview is from a previous project, financed by the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research, grant dnr. 950553:8.
Such demands for rights can be related to a discourse of the ‘new father’, in this case expressed as an ambition to be different from one’s own father.

I know what was really difficult for me, or what I was really sorry to have missed, was that my father never had time for me. My uncle, my mother’s brother, did that for me. But it would have been so much more valuable, if my father had raised me himself.

I have listened to this same way of explaining conflicts over visiting rights, when interviewing divorced fathers in Spain. Also when Swedish men describe active fathering, they distance themselves from the traditional male role played by their own fathers, ‘at least I am not the old stupid type’ (Holter 2005, p. 139). However, we cannot conclude that this father’s rights discourse is about participating in daily care, or paying child support. Instead, it refers more to moral authority and control than to practical tending and economic support. This seems to be the case also in England (Williams 1998, p. 74) and in Spain (Municio & Pujol Algans 2000).

Child support in context

Here we encounter what Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1990, p. 136) describe as ‘a continuing sore spot in most coparenting relationships’. It illustrates the fact that divorce does not end marriage. Instead, the stage is set for many years of post-marital negotiations. In the citations above, we hear more resignation and acceptance than gender struggle. This acceptance derives its meaning from a discourse in which mothers are carers but also providers. Thus on the economic side of parenthood as well, mothers are thought to be tightly bound to their children, while fathers may reject both caring and providing.

The turbulent economic situation of these countries is again brought up in the interviews as a cause of non-payment of child support. Another problem is said to be the difficulties the authorities have in monitoring people’s income and whereabouts. Chandler (2002, cited in Aidukaite 2004, p. 67) describes the ‘shadow economy’ of the Baltic countries as a problem in collecting taxes. Obviously, this also makes it difficult to enforce payment of child support. In both Estonia and in Latvia, our informants express a deep distrust of the courts’ ability to solve this kind of problem. Nor do they expect any assistance from other state or local authorities.
In her study of welfare in Latvia, Gassman (2000, p. 161) concludes that the majority of people in need do not apply for help because they do not expect to get any (also Aidukaite 2009, p. 97). This may be an effect of ‘transitional shock’ (Hansson 2001, p. 13), which led most people to believe that the umbrella of state protection was no longer there. However, Aidukaite (2004, pp. 113f.) notes that different measures of state support for families are still in force, but the levels paid are generally low. Therefore, either people believe that it is not worthwhile applying, or they do not identify themselves as the ones most in need.

In a global context, it is generally assumed that divorce entails economic hardship and that these are biased against women. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1999, p. 32) put it bluntly: ‘after divorce the woman is left with the children and without an income, the man with an income and without children’. In many countries the two-earner family has gradually supplanted the traditional male-breadwinner family. However, women’s position in the labour market is weaker than men’s, and if fathers are reluctant to share child expenses, it is generally recognized that women-headed families risk poverty (Elm Larsen 2000, p. 210).

State measures to eliminate this risk differ from country to country, depending on the availability of state support for families and on the ability to enforce payment from fathers (Lewis & Hobson 1997).

In the United States, since the 1980s there have been successive federal and state efforts to enforce child support payments (Laquer Estin 2001). However, according to Handshau & Kisthardt (2006), child support decided by the courts is generally low, and many single mothers cannot afford to pay the fee for a lawyer and take their demands to court. Meyer (2012, p. 261) reports that less than half of non-resident fathers pay the ordered amount, while almost 30% pay nothing at all (also King & Sobolewski 2006, p. 545). Similar figures are reported from the United Kingdom (Skinner 2012, p. 245).

In their long-term study of divorce Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1990), show that non-resident fathers have difficulties recognizing the needs of their children and may therefore reason that their ex-wife and children will manage on their own. Their conclusion is that ‘out of sight is often out of mind’ (ibid., p. 144). This may also be applied to the Estonian and Latvian cases. Thus the discourse of interchangeable fathers supplies arguments excusing loss of contact with the children; and lack of contact goes hand-in-hand with low propensity to pay child support.
Meyer & Cancian (2012) give an overview of research on conditions affecting non-resident fathers’ willingness to provide for their children. Besides limited economic resources, lack of control over how resources are used in the resident family and ‘either partner entering a new romantic relationship, or having new children’ are reported to affect fathers’ propensity to pay child support. Similar arguments were used in the policy processes reforming child support in Australia, where men’s rights groups successfully claimed their right to restart and resettle their lives (Cook & Natalier 2013). Also in Spain, where issues of child support are processed in Family Courts, the non-paying fathers claim their right to form a new family, and connected to this, the right to leave the economic responsibility for their children to their ex-wives. As in Estonia and Latvia, we find reports on ways that fathers use to hide their income in order to evade payment. However, in contrast to Estonia and Latvia, the strongest argument these fathers have why they should be exempt from paying is that the state should take on that responsibility, as in other welfare states in the EU (Municio & Pujol Algans 2002).

Sweden is used as a case in point. In cases where there is no private agreement, child support issues are handled by the local Social Security Offices. If it is estimated that the father cannot afford to pay the minimum amount established, the state pays the difference. This can also be organized so that the state pays this amount directly to the mother, and collects whatever sum decided from the father. States that have programmes for advanced maintenance payment are, in addition to Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Austria, Belgium, France and Germany (Millar 1996, p. 104; Millar 2000, pp. 230f.; Skinner et.al. 2012). This gives priority to children’s need for economic support, and removes the conflict over payments of child support from the post-marital negotiations.

Grandparents

Grandparents are very much present in the descriptions that families make of themselves, and their resources are also counted on for solutions to practical problems. Emotional ties to grandparents, especially grandmothers, are emphasized. Close contact with an ex-husband’s parents seems to be given more importance than with the father himself.
I tried to explain that she is still a Granny, that she still has a grandson who likes her very much, that anytime she wants to meet him, she can. And when my son wants to go to her place and stay there overnight, he also can do that. I would never like such kind of ties to be broken. What has happened between my ex and me, it’s another thing, but grandma’s and grandson’s relationship has to be normal (Estonia 3, female, 29 years).

I can still take our son to the country, to his parents’ place. And I think that they [father and son] can spend a lot of time together there as well. But still in summer he is mostly with grandma and grandpa [her parents] (Estonia 1, female, 38).

In these citations, grandparents are given preference in relation to the father. The fact that a stay with grandparents might ‘as well’ give the child an opportunity to spend time with his father is seen as a secondary benefit. However, when grandparents are included in the family circle, it is not only with reference to emotional ties, but also described as a solution to the neediness that many single mothers experience. So, for example, when fathers do not pay child support, which often is the case, any help from his parents is welcomed (Municio 2012, p. 288f). This may include self-produced food. This fits well into the way people organized their living in Soviet times, when a flat in town many times was supplemented with a country house, where much of the winter’s supply of food was sourced. Grandmothers on both sides are also expected to help, when no cheap day-care is available or during summer vacations.

In these narratives of a family extended to three generations, it becomes clear that mothers draw the boundaries of their family. While mothers describe how they take on an active part in organizing contact with grandparents, fathers note that this is the case. Thus, what I have previously noted as a matriarchy, in the sense that mothers decide whether to include a man in the family, is confirmed when it comes to the older generation. Here, too, women decide whether to count grandparents, preferably grandmothers, in the family. Grandmothers, in turn, are generally expected to respond positively to being included.

Grandparents in context

These descriptions of close relations within an extended family may partly be leftovers from the Soviet times, partly an adaptation to the turbulent
times of the transition period. In Soviet times, people found ways to obtain goods and services without having to pay with money (Hansson 2001, p. 73; Trapenciere et. al. 2000, p. 75). This included not only self-grown food supplies, but also contacts for mutual help and access to scarce goods. Hansson (2001) shows how networks were created anew in the period of socio-economic reforms in Estonia, and that well-functioning networks played a crucial role for becoming a winner in the new system. Pranka (1997, p. 343) paints a similar picture of social networks in Latvia. In the 1990s, when economic conditions worsened, networks became a ‘friendship market’ that was essential for achieving success in life. According to Gassman (2000, p. 129) family ‘living outside the household’ provides most of the assistance received from the social network. Hansson (2001, p. 80) shows that ‘the ties on the vertical line’ of kin, that is, with parents and parents-in-law, are most important, both in traditional and new social networks. Thus, the extended family is used as a survival strategy in situations of need (Narusk 1992:168).

The East-West divide reconsidered

We find that there are differences in how the official discourse has developed in the East, as compared to the West. While the turn to gender-neutral family policies and the inclusion of fathers as carers has come sooner in the West than in the East, we find that the practice in the Western countries shows similarities to how parents in Estonia and Latvia talk about the rights and responsibilities of women and men in the family.

The strong mother-child bond of the Soviet era is continued into the family life of today, in Estonia and Latvia. A discourse is developed, where the responsibilities to care and provide for the children after divorce, are assumed to be for mothers, while fathers may choose their degree of engagement. Consequently, mothers may appropriate the right to define the boundaries of their family. Their position in the family might anyway be subordinate in relation to men’s, if we consider men’s possibilities to choose their degree of involvement, that is, both to enjoy the benefits of belonging to a family, and to be free to engage outside it. Would women not demand equal sharing of responsibilities, if they felt that they had the power to do so? Doesn’t this apply equally to how family life is organized in the West? Is it so, as suggested by Oakley and Rigby above, that women’s work and caring is exploited by both men and society, by disguising it in ‘the rhetoric of
heterosexual love and protection? ‘Or put simply: Love is enough.’ (Twamley 2012, p. 5.1)

Power in the family

Throughout this essay, I have showed how mothers and fathers, women and men, make sense of their positions in family life. My interpretation of these narratives is that the traditional family model, as described above, is the measure, to which present family arrangements are compared. Thus, the ‘family’ that forms the background to every rearticulation of family is one that does not need to be explained, one that orders family relations in a ‘natural’ hierarchy. In this order, men have the right to choose their degree of engagement, in- and outside family, while women take on whatever is required to keep the family going. Thus, mothers’ presence in the family, their taking care of their children and providing for them is very little talked about. Instead, it is taken for granted (Duncan 2011, 2.7, also Snitow 2000).

In this family discourse, men’s position is one of power, and men’s life choices outside the family are not hampered by caring responsibilities. Women are positioned as dependants to men, and their participation in the world outside family is conditioned by their caring responsibilities.

In the informants’ efforts to make sense of their own experiences of family life we hear different ways of rearticulating the traditional family model. Here we meet the discourse of interchangeable fathers. The way family relations turn out after divorce is described in terms of social ties with children being more important than biological ties. However, this only refers to fathers, not to mothers who are assumed to be tightly knit to their children, both biologically and socially. This discourse seems to be a response to experiences post-divorce. If this is what actually happens, why not accept it as reasonable and ‘normal’, in a situation of abnormality? By adding the notion of ‘the best interest of the child’, this discourse turns the attention away from fathers and their choices, while mothers are still taken for granted. In Estonia and Latvia, the family discourse of the Soviet era seems to admit such a re-interpretation, while the official rhetoric of the West resists an explicit negation of the norm of shared parenting even after divorce.

In this discourse, men’s position of power is different to the one in the traditional model. However, they are still in a position of power. They relinquish their position in the family, in favour of the freedom to choose new relationships, work opportunities, places to live, or just to use money and
time more freely. The power of the family is transferred to women, but also the responsibilities of caring and providing for herself and her children.

We also hear narratives that may be interpreted as an advocacy of matriarchy. In this discourse, children and women form families without men. If we know by experience that women are dependable providers and competent carers, why not accept a social order where family life is for women, but not for men? In this order, men have thrown off the yoke of providing and caring for others. They are now free to match the demands of the labour market for mobile and ambitious individuals without any social commitments. Women and children lose economically, but gain in non-material assets. They will appropriate for themselves this haven of affection, company, and rest, this contrast to the cold outside world – all the things that family life is supposed to be. In this family, women and children will not risk their health because of violent men, or men who are demanding attention and service without contributing to the common good.

This family discourse takes the previous one a step further, as men are counted out completely. The power over the family is for women, but women’s position outside family may be even more precarious. They will also be more dependent on the welfare state, not only for childcare but also for other forms of economic support. But when women talk about forming a family without men, there is also a notion of another, possibly fairer, family model. A family without a father is seen as something exceptional and temporary, ‘as long as the kids aren’t grown yet’. Also, when they say ‘I’ll manage on my own’, this is said in contrast to easier ways to manage, if receiving love and support from someone – possibly the idea of a ‘loving, caring and sharing’ partner (Jamieson 1998, cited in Morgan 2011, p. 3.7).

In the narratives brought forth in this study, we see little of the gender struggle in the negotiated family, as described by Beck & Beck-Gernsham (1999). What we see instead is acceptance and resignation on the part of the women, as to the possibilities of getting a fair share in such negotiations. Nor do we see the experiences of family life post-divorce contrasted with the democratic family model, as envisaged by Giddens (1992). Also, strange to these narratives are ideas about a welfare state that enables families to live in ‘true gender equity’, as described by Frazer (1994). Instead, we meet a gender order, where the positions of women and men in the family reconstitute the power relations that disfavoured women in the traditional family model.

Studies from Sweden and Denmark have shown that the ideal of a democratic family is difficult to live up to, and that women try harder than
men (Elvin-Nowak 1999; Bø 2008, pp. 448f.). If we assume that discourses form a frame of reference for acting, and therefore have social consequences, it would be important to keep on talking this democratic family discourse, and keep on trying to put it into practice. Hopefully, it will someday soon replace the traditional family model as point of reference for describing everyday family life. Likewise, it seems important to stand firm to the vision of a welfare state that supports families of any constellation.


REFERENCES


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