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**‘Working At It’  
Developing a Theoretical Orientation for Researching Post-  
Divorce/separation Fatherhood**

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**Abstract:**

My research entails an inductive study of the experiences of divorced or separated fathers who have regular physical care of their dependent children, with particular reference to their caring and work responsibilities and activities. Such fathers may have the potential (not necessarily by choice) to challenge the enduring gendered model for organising earning and caring, and are therefore sociologically and politically significant. Drawing on the work of sociologists such as Duncan & Edwards (1999) or Ribbens McCarthy Edwards & Gillies (2003) which suggests that divorce/separation may provide a catalyst for thinking and acting differently about parenting and gender roles, this paper will review some of the theoretical reference points in my work. I will evaluate, in particular, different models of rationality and of choice and consider some of the empirical questions arising from my engagement with these. Lastly I will discuss the creative tension between my interest an inductive approach, which demands an ‘openness of mind’ and my desire to construct a more general argument about, and critique of, gender roles and gender inequalities.

**Key Words:** Fatherhood, Post-divorce Parenting, Gender Roles, Moral Rationality, Individualisation



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The aim of this paper is to more clearly articulate a position (or more accurately, a ‘hunch’) and a number of theoretical themes that have steered my route into sociological work on family lives, informed my interests and shaped my current doctoral research. From earlier work on moral philosophy and citizenship for my MA dissertation, through personal and academic engagements with lone motherhood (in particular Duncan & Edwards, 1999) and post-divorce parenting (Smart & Neale 1999, Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003) to developing a proposal for a project on post-divorce/separation fatherhood, a number of threads and ideas have persisted. One is that I believe family relationships, roles and daily lives provide a powerful and resonant context for applying and evaluating abstract philosophical or theoretical models of human action, motivation and reasoning. A second is that I feel that recent sociological work on family lives, which takes an empirically grounded and reflexive approach, provides constructive (and much needed) insights into phenomena such as post-divorce or step-parenting, and provides a crucial resource for developing more attentive and egalitarian social policy. A third persistent idea is that, when considered more generally, people in certain positions, such as ‘lone-mother’ or ‘divorced/separated father’ have the potential (not always by choice) to challenge enduring, gendered social norms, making such (at least theoretical or demographic) groups, sociologically and politically significant. My own research entails an inductive study of the experiences and perceptions of divorced or separated fathers who have regular physical care of their dependent children, with particular reference to their caring and work responsibilities and activities. My overall hunch then, is that doing sociological research into the processes and practices of being a an ‘involved’ or co-parenting father after divorce/separation may also enable me to say something about how broader social or normative change is both being shaped by, and shaping, family members. Having declared my position, I will briefly identify particular recent theoretical debates, which I feel can be related to post-divorce/separation fatherhood and consider the empirical questions and issues that are arising from my attempts to operationalise these.

In exploring theoretical work on family lives generally, it is useful to consider not only what models or concepts have been offered, but also what kind of theorists have engaged with the topic. Here, an interesting shift has been the increasing attention paid to family life, partnership and parent-child relationships by, arguably more ‘meta-theorists’ such as Giddens, Bauman, Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim, as part of their much wider analysis of contemporary

social life and social change. Concepts such as ‘intimacy’, ‘individualisation’, (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 95, Beck-Gernsheim 2002), ‘confluent love’ (Giddens, 92) and ‘reflexivity’ attempt to offer ways of understanding an increasingly unpredictable, less ‘bounded’ social world and the practices or coping strategies (either collective or individual) we might employ to deal with such conditions. Family life, and within this, parenting, has been presented as a ‘project’, a ‘contract’, a ‘refuge’, an ‘investment’. Other sociologists, working more directly in the field of family lives, have acknowledged and critically engaged with these broad analyses, with a variety of responses. A recurring line of critique, particularly from those researching post-divorce/separation parenting (such as Smart & Neale, 99, Duncan & Edwards 2000) is that such theoretical models tend to over exaggerate both ‘choice’ and homogeneity (in terms of over-generalising processes such as individualisation), and underestimate the persistence of structural factors and normative ideas in shaping the experience and practice of family members.

More specifically, a key area of debate, which forms part of this critical engagement between those trying to theorise family lives, is that of how best to explain actions and reasoning; how do people decide what to do and then account for their ‘choice’? This ‘puzzle’ can be seen as theoretically, empirically, and policy, relevant and the responses to it are likely to have very real consequences for those to which, particularly policy, is directed (Barlow et al. 2002). Theories of rationality and theories of choice then, have become very much part of attempts to understand contemporary family lives, and it is worth noting some of the contrasting, or often competing, models available.

In terms of theories of rationality, there are particularly interesting crossovers between the disciplines of sociology, economics and moral philosophy, all of which clearly have a longstanding interest in trying to explain how and why people act. In relation to family lives, such interdisciplinary engagement and critique is giving rise to an important argument between the alternative models of economic and social or moral rationality. Most specifically, Duncan & Edwards (1999), Barlow et al. (2002), Carling, Duncan & Edwards (Eds.) (2002), have argued that reliance on an economic, or instrumental model of rationality, whereby individuals are said to make decisions or choices based on their rational assessment of costs and benefits, is inappropriate and constitutes a significant misunderstanding of the behaviour of family members. Criticisms of this model include: its emphasis of individual autonomy, the exclusive focus on utility or efficiency as motivations, and the lack of recognition of the social (and

relational) contexts that shape human experience. Also interesting is the more feminist argument which suggests that economic rationality, when presented or accepted as a ‘universal’ model for both understanding and organising social life, is yet another mechanism which masks the gendered assumptions on which it is based, and ignores the gender differences in the world it seeks to explain.

In contrast to the notion of the economic, rational ‘man’, the model of moral rationality (or perhaps rationalities, as it is part of a much more pluralistic understanding of family lives) firmly places the individual within particular social, cultural and relational contexts. This theoretical position does not see rationality as distinct or detached from affective or normative concerns, and argues instead that these, alongside more obvious material factors, actually provide the frameworks for deciding what is the best thing to do and how to account for it. It challenges the idea of individuals acting primarily out of self-interest and suggests that family life is better understood as a series of complex moral dilemmas to which there are no generic or ‘off-the-peg’ answers. Researchers such as Duncan & Edwards (1999) and Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003), draw on, and contribute to, the model of moral rationalities in terms of exploring family practices, but also stress its relevance to understanding the significance of moral identity and presentation of self, involved in both the living and researching of family lives. Such a reflexive approach, for me, constitutes both a theoretical and methodological development, requiring the researcher to think more carefully about the topic, the subjects, and the process of research. This development of a concept of socially situated rationality also takes as given that the social world is gendered (Duncan & Edwards, 1999) and that therefore the dilemmas and social norms encountered by women and men may be different. A further reference point for a model of (gendered) moral rationalities can also be found in feminist moral philosophy, particularly in terms of arguing the possibility and legitimacy of alternative forms of reasoning, such as a ‘feminist ethic of care’ (Sevenhuijsen, 1998) or a ‘different voice’ (Gilligan 1982).

Alongside theories of rationality that may be applied to family lives generally, or fatherhood specifically, there are also important, contrasting theories of choice. Choice has arguably become an increasingly prevalent and seductive concept in contemporary social and public life. It is frequently presented as a form of empowerment, an indication of the liberty provided by modern, democratic, free-market societies; we are called upon to exercise our ‘consumer choices’ in more and more areas of our lives. Within sociology the notion of choice

is treated with greater ambivalence. Once again, within the more general social theory of Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) or Bauman (2003), choice appears as a 'strategy' for, or feature of, late-modern or post-industrial life. In an attempt to illustrate this, the focus of such theorists on the changing nature of human relationships, or the 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens 1992) is characterised by an emphasis on contingency and on choice. Collectively, their theme is of 'individualisation', as both a personal 'project' and a broader social process, presenting a 'double-edged sword' of both greater freedom, and greater uncertainty. The 'individualisation thesis', and its increasing use as a lens through which to see family lives, has been another important point of critical engagement for sociologists directly involved in researching couple-relationships, parenting, kinship, divorce etc. In addition to the critiques of over-generalisation about, or homogenisation of, family lives a significant line of argument concerns the concept of choice. The individualisation thesis arguably presents a more agency-focused model of the individual, as being less constrained by, or merely reactive to, 'traditional' social structures (including the nuclear family). Smart & Shipman (2004) argue that whilst this may appear 'liberating' or desirable, it also seems to rest on a conception of choice as 'free' and entirely individual. A growing body of research on contemporary family lives (Smart, Neale & Wade 2001, Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003, Duncan & Edwards 1999) strongly challenges the validity of this conception, arguing instead for the more distinctively sociological model of "contextual choice amongst socially constructed options, or relational choice in the setting of attentiveness to others" (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p493). Such writers also argue that such notions of 'free' or indeed instrumental choice, have produced an interpretation of individuals as increasingly selfish and superficial (Bauman 2003), which again does not resonate with research findings. Clearly this debate over the motivations of individuals and the processes of choice is highly pertinent in relation to post-divorce fatherhood and the related public anxiety about 'fatherlessness'.

Having indicated some of the contested areas of theoretical debate with which my research is engaged I want now to briefly consider two additional theoretical contributions: those of intimate citizenship and of reflexivity. In his book 'Intimate Citizenship' (2003), Ken Plummer provides another example of attempts to theorise a (re)connection between the personal and the social or political and to talk about social change. He too, focuses on transformations in, and the significance of, intimate human relationships, but he does so in a

way that is much more in tune with the sociological research on family lives I have referred to. Plummer proposes that intimacy “as a wider, more inclusive understanding of the personal life” (Plummer, 2003, p65) and citizenship, as a way of marking and politicising issues of belonging, recognition, participation, and of course, rights and responsibilities, provide important tools for making sense of contemporary societies. The subtitle of the book: 'Private Decisions and Public Dialogues' illustrates his argument that any attempt to develop any kind of ethical framework for living in such societies, may have much to learn from the 'grounded moralities' of intimate lives and identities. In a tentatively proposed model of intimate citizenship then, there seem to be some important affinities with recent research on changing family lives. Plummer seems to share an interest in alternative theories of rationality, in the complexity and diversity of intimate life, and in the significance of 'story-telling' or narrative in both personal and public life. He does in fact refer to feminist moral philosophy, and to the work of Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) and Smart & Neale (1999) as examples of research which empirically explore aspects of intimate citizenship and argue the case for the dynamic interplay between personal lives and social institutions. Ultimately, Plummer suggests that a model of intimate citizenship could capture “new ethical strategies that are moving into the public sphere and that are starting to configure the ethical worlds of the future” (Plummer, 2003, p101). This theoretical model then, taken together with the reminder from Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) and others that narratives are as much about self-presentation and viable moral identity as anything else, I feel could be a useful resource for research on post-divorce/separation fatherhood.

A final theoretical concept that I want to consider is that of reflexivity. Whilst this is a longer-standing concept, it is one that has been developed in relation to both social theory and research and I feel it is relevant and useful in both contexts. As a theoretical construct the term reflexivity can be taken to mean a process of critical self-reflection, which has been applied to the behaviour of individuals, institutions, or even to describe a more general, societal 'attitude' (Giddens 1990). Whilst theorists like Giddens might once again be criticised for overstating the ability (or resources) of individuals to engage in a 'reflexive project of the self' (1992) (which refers us once again back to considering notions of 'choice'), I feel there is still something compelling about the concept in terms of its analytical usefulness. For me, the concept seems to offer both the capacity to recognise agency and competence, and also to emphasise responsibility and self-awareness. It seems to capture something of the pleasures and pains of

both making decisions and knowing that you may be held accountable for them, and could therefore be relevant to understanding the complex moral dilemmas of family life.

However, there is the danger that applying ideas (or expectations) of reflexivity could be seen as another mechanism for making moral judgements about the behaviour of family members (particularly if qualities such as self-awareness are seen as socially desirable). Yet, the development of reflexivity as an increasingly central part of the (particularly qualitative) research process, and therefore a requirement of the researcher, seems to me to safeguard against this. In qualitative or ethnographic studies where the inevitably interactive nature of research and research relationships produce multiple layers of narrative, presentation and analysis, notions of both the researcher and the researched as reflexive individuals seems to be fruitful. There remains, for me, something exciting and awful in a concept that seems to persist in quietly reminding us that, at some level, we always know what we are doing, or perhaps can always produce a 'story' if necessary. Two further thoughts on reflexivity: one concerns the possibility of considering whether (as implied by some of Giddens' and Beck's work) particular circumstances, such as transition or disruption, might necessitate or facilitate greater levels of reflexivity, either in individuals or institutions. This could, again, make the concept useful for understanding the behaviour of fathers and mothers after divorce. Second, is whether the concept could itself be part of a debate about the gendered nature of reasoning and acting? Processes of self-reflection, self-monitoring and the re-consideration or modification of action, could arguably be seen in contrast to notions of single-mindedness, (absolute) certainty, instrumentalism and so on. This might mean that reflexivity could also contribute to the exploration of alternative models of reasoning and ethics, seen as being both more egalitarian and more appropriate, particularly for understanding family lives. Overall then, I would argue that the concept of reflexivity remains useful for exploring post-divorce/separation fatherhood as a personal and social process of negotiation with, and orientation to, public discourses, material and cultural resources, and 'moral identity'.

Having, I hope, set out some theoretical reference points, I want now to consider my grounds for arguing that the divorced/separated co-parenting fathers, who are the focus of my research, are sociologically and politically significant. At the broadest level, since the 1980's onwards, fatherhood has had an increasingly high public profile and been the recipient of a number of both hopes and fears. Divorced or separated fathers have been a particular focus of

anxiety, about changes to ‘The Family’ and about a parenting deficit or the problems of ‘fatherlessness’ specifically. Together with this there has of course also been the high political profile of campaigns for fathers’ rights. Partly in response, research into experiences of post-divorce/separation fatherhood, typologies of fatherhood, and factors, which help or hinder father involvement (Simpson, McCarthy & Walker 95, Arendell 95, Lupton & Barclay 97, Lamb 2000) has gained momentum. Related to this is the, also growing, literature on post-divorce and step parenting, and taken together these provide an important counterbalance to the recurring cries of a breakdown or crisis in family life. That said, there does seem to be agreement that for fathers to adapt to, and sustain an active and meaningful role in their children’s lives following divorce or separation is not easy. This makes the question of how fathers who do continue to have regular contact and physical care of their children manage this even more pertinent. Such fathers are therefore sociologically interesting partly because they may be unusual, but also because the reasons for their ‘success’ may stem from their, either active pursuit, or more passive or even resistant acceptance of, different ways of thinking about and doing parenting. My sense of this is very much informed by researchers such as Smart & Neale (1999), Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) etc, who take a more positive approach to divorce/separation than occurs in much public debate, suggesting that it may provide an important catalyst for reassessing or remaking both parenting and gender roles.

Fathers who work at sustaining a regular, physical and emotional presence in their children’s lives then, clearly embark on a personal and most often painful challenge, bringing them encounters (whether consciously acknowledged or not) with public and institutional discourses, social norms and practical constraints. Their experiences will certainly constitute a transition. My suggestion is that, in the course of this process, they may also present challenges, not necessarily intentionally or willingly, to an enduring gendered model of organising earning and caring. This could be through making different living and working arrangements, adapting to new roles, activities or levels of responsibility, or through developing a new or different sense of both father and masculine identity. But, taken cumulatively, it could be that the experiences and dilemmas of this group of fathers do contribute to greater public dialogue (Plummer 2003) about normative assumptions that perpetuate or reinforce gender inequalities and constraints. This makes divorced or separated co-parenting fathers socially and politically significant, either through their ‘stories’ and/or through their potential claims to, or interest in, changing legal and

social status, flexible working practices, shifts in organisational culture, support services, facilities and resources etc.

The motivations, commitments, rationalities and decisions of this group of fathers may also be significant in terms of revealing the cracks or tensions in certain traditional ways of thinking about, and managing social roles. It seems to me that the experiences of post-divorce parenting appear to expose the limitations of the traditional nuclear model of family life for both men and women. Despite some flexibility (which is different from equality) in terms of how earning and caring is organised, there are arguably still powerful gendered norms or expectations around parenting, which position women as primary, and men as supplementary, carers, with all the subsequent or corresponding losses and gains for each position. As Smart & Neale (1999) have suggested, this may help to explain the particular and different vulnerabilities experienced by fathers and mothers after divorce or separation, and their conceptions of each other's 'power' or 'advantage'. The problems with this enduring gendered model (again for both fathers and mothers) are perhaps also revealed through the ways in which battles over 'caring' become apparent and potent during and after divorce; often producing the rather ironic situation of fathers demanding the right to care and mothers struggling to relinquish sole responsibility for it. This may mean then that divorced or separated co-parenting fathers are significant because, in an arguably less public and more constructive way than some father's rights organisations, they are involved in challenging attitudes about men and caring. Once again, the process of re-negotiating the father's role may be undertaken with more or less conscious self-reflection, more or less willingness, resignation (Simpson, McCarthy & Walker 95) or resistance; experiences are of course, diverse. But, it seems that in order for them to *be* co-parenting they will have made, or be in the process of making, changes to both their particular lives, and also, I would argue, challenges to much broader normative assumptions.

Considering the extent to which divorced or separated co-parenting fathers may be sociologically and politically significant, and may resonate with particular theoretical debates, also gives rise to certain empirical questions or issues. I will deal briefly with three that have emerged during the development of my research so far. Firstly, there is the question of how far it is possible to talk about these fathers as a group. A recurring theme in research on family lives and fatherhood specifically, is that of diversity. As I have referred to, this forms a key part of the critique of the individualisation thesis and other attempts to generalise about family or intimate

life (either historically or recently), put forward by writers such as Smart & Shipman (2004), Lewis & Lamb (2006). Whilst clearly it could be said that I have ‘created’ this group, by virtue of their sharing of certain circumstances, for the purpose of sampling, I am also asserting that their collective impact on, or implications for, wider society makes some level of generalisation valid. This means that the identification and exploration of what, if any, experiences, perceptions or feelings divorced/separated co-parenting fathers have in common will be important in my research. There is an interesting tension between the desire to acknowledge and be attentive to diversity and the desire to construct a more general argument about, and critique of, gender roles and gender inequalities.

Secondly, related to this, is the issue of orientation to existing research on fatherhood and post-divorce/separation fatherhood. Again, a theme within the field is of diversity and complexity of behaviour and practice, with a range of available models or typologies of fathers (Morgan, in Hobson, 2000), father involvement (Lamb 2000), role identification/orientation (Arendell 95) and so on. A key area of debate, I feel, is whether to talk about fathering (or indeed mothering) or parenting. Are the activities, roles, contributions or competencies of fathers seen, or experienced as unique and sex-specific, or as interchangeable with those of mothers, and what are the implications of each position? There is also a suggestion of the need to recognise both continuity and change in discourses surrounding, and therefore by implication, experiences of fatherhood (Marsiglio et al 2000). There are suggestions of a ‘new fatherhood’ involving expansion beyond traditional or stereotypical roles, but also of shifts in the ways in which fathering has been publicly understood, which result in greater appreciation of the complexity (and difficulty) of what fathers actually ‘do’ (Doucet 2006). I have engaged particularly with theoretical positions interested in interpreting changes to family lives as transitions rather than tragedies, or in exploring alternative models of thinking and acting as a means to pursue gender equity. This means that I will have to consider carefully my own analytic and interpretive processes, in terms of what kind of account of fathers’ experiences and perspectives I give, on what grounds, and how this aligns itself with the existing literature and beyond.

Thirdly, given my stated interests in, and hunches about, reasoning and decision-making in relation to re-negotiating fatherhood after divorce or separation, there is the important question of how to explore this empirically. This means considering, as my supervisor put it,

‘what a decision looks like’. Asking fathers to talk about their experiences of negotiating arrangements for caring for their children, the factors involved in this process and their feelings about these, will involve their subjective perceptions of what counts as a decision. Their stories are likely to depend on their sense of agency, control, power, priorities, accountability, resources and so on. The research will in this way provide the opportunity to evaluate the theoretical models of rationalities, agency and choice I am interested in, to explore the range of ‘strategies’ or responses perceived as available, or the range of rationales or ‘moral tales’ (Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003) offered. However, it will require me to ensure that I do not oversimplify the idea that parents ‘decide’ what to do and to be highly attentive to the ambiguities and tensions involved in the process of both living and talking about fatherhood.

In conclusion, I have tried to articulate, or make transparent, some of the debates, issues and processes relevant to my research particularly, but I hope too, research on post-divorce/separation fatherhood or indeed family lives more generally. I have sought to show how studying the routine but poignant dilemmas of parenting after divorce or separation might provide a context for exploring and challenging broader normative assumptions around gender roles and the personal and social organisation of earning and caring. It may be that co-operative post-divorce/separation constitutes a particularly powerful example of ‘intimate citizenship’ that may require all the creativity and sensitivity that those pursuing alternative ethical frameworks for, and analyses of, family lives can muster. In terms of my own contribution to the debate, I feel that a central creative tension in my research will continue to be between my decision to adopt an inductive, ethnographic approach to my primary research and my interest in the theoretical positions I have outlined. All of the empirical questions or issues I have raised here (and many others), particularly attentiveness to diversity, complexity and ambiguity, seem to require an ‘openness of mind’ and a willingness to see what’s out there, rather than being overly constrained by pre-conceived ideas. Part of my interest in a qualitative, ethnographic approach is its insistence on reflexivity and ‘critical distance’ on the part of the researcher, and its ability to make an analytic resource out of the ‘problems’ of interactivity or researcher effects. I continue to hope that this framework will enable me to explore a sensitive and highly pertinent topic with both rigour and imagination, to illuminate a particularly poignant bridge between theory, and lived experience, and to provoke further public dialogue about fathers, post-divorce parenting and gender roles.

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