

Katarzyna Suwada

Naturalisation of the Difference : The Experience of Fatherhood in Sweden and Poland

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Katarzyna Suwada*

Polish Academy of Sciences

NATURALISATION OF THE DIFFERENCE: THE EXPERIENCE OF FATHERHOOD IN SWEDEN AND POLAND

Research indicates that the gender of a parent has a great impact on how s/he engages in parenting. The expectations towards men and women significantly differ and are strictly connected with dominating models of masculinity and femininity. They are also related to biological differences between men and women that often serve as a convenient explanation for the unequal power order. The article seeks to answer questions on how men in Sweden and Poland experience their parenting, taking into account the naturalised differences between fatherhood and motherhood, and how these differences affect power relations.

Keywords: fatherhood, process of naturalisation, gender roles, Sweden, Poland

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that there are great disparities between male and female parenting (Dribe and Stanfors 2009; Schober 2013). The role of a father is often defined in contrast to the role of a mother. The definitions of fatherhood are still based on the obligation of breadwinning, while motherhood is mostly seen in terms of care work and emotional engagement. Yet in times of changing gender roles and greater focus on the issue of gender inequality, the traditional models of parenting are being reconstructed. The new model of fatherhood indicates men's ability to nurture and take on traditionally female duties. The aim of this article is to show how men in Sweden and Poland deal with their parenthood and the often conflicting social expectations on fathers and mothers. The crucial problem is the impact of biological differences between men and women on actual practices of fathers and their engagement in parenthood. Parenting is not only an area of negotiations between men and women, but also a sphere based on power relations – male domination and female subordination – that fit a broader system of gender inequalities. The society uses different strategies to explain this power order. Those one that interests me here are strategies based on the process of naturalisation of the differences between men and women.

* Corresponding author: Katarzyna Suwada, Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii, Polska Akademia Nauk, ul. Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa; e-mail: k.suwada@gmail.com.

NATURALISATION OF PARENTAL ROLES

The relation between nature and society is one of the most fundamental themes in social sciences, especially when it comes to the issue of gender equality and family life. In many theories, referring to natural differences between women and men, biology is a convenient explanation for the social order and social processes (Bales and Parsons 1955; Buss 2008; Parsons 1955; Zelditch 1955). But critical research on gender relations shows that the problem is more complicated. As R.W. Connell (1987) underlines, the assumption of a natural dichotomy between men and women as human beings is fundamentally wrong. She argues society is unnatural, since its structures cannot be derived from natural structures. This unnaturalness, however, does not mean that society is not connected with nature at all. In fact, society accepts its biological origin and uses the concept of *nature* as an explanation for the prevailing social order. Although men and women, as representatives of one species, are more similar to each other than different, society exaggerates and emphasises the differences between them. In many cases biological explanations are not sufficient in explaining the social order, especially the unequal balance of power. Therefore, in social practices the natural dimension of social life is underlined. Similar reasoning is characteristic of Norbert Elias and his study on the relations between biology and society and his historical analysis of the uneven balance between the sexes (see Elias 1978, 1987, 2007). As he claims, in contemporary times the term *nature* refers to a particular order. Similarly to the social order, the natural order is based on specified laws, *natural laws*, that are characterised by autonomy and independence from human beings, and as such are uncritically accepted by society (Elias 2007, see Introduction). The process of *naturalisation* of the social order can, therefore, be a powerful ideological instrument legitimising the prevailing social order.

Connell formulates a theory of the reproduction of gendered bodies that is based on two processes. First, in the *process of negation* social categories assign new meanings to the human body. These new meanings are not connected with the body's biological predispositions. The negation of the body does not necessarily mean the neglect of biology, but rather its deformation. In this process similarities between different bodies are marginalised and distinct social categories, as a man or a woman, are imposed on individuals. It is particularly evident in the case of children who, as Chris Shilling notices, "have gender identities imposed on them long before they are capable of reproducing, asserting dominance over each other, or even understanding the processes involved in reproduction" (2003: 95). After the negation of similarities, the body is *transformed* through social practices. The body belongs to some extent to the natural order, but in social practices it is transformed to fit social categories. Social categories of femininity and masculinity that are seen as contrasting in terms of physical strength are reinforced by the social expectations that encourage boys to be physically active, while at the same time teaching girls to passively focus on their bodies by dressing up or applying cosmetics. As a consequence, the processes of negation and transformation work as a self-fulfilling prophecy that validates the initial social categories.

Our conception of what is natural and what natural differences consist of, is itself a **cultural construct**, part of our specific way of thinking about gender. Gender is [...] a practical accomplishment – something accomplished by social practice (Connell 1987: 76).

The dichotomy between male and female parental roles can be analysed in a similar way. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987) introduce the category of *doing gender*. Gender is connected with sex categorization that is based on the biological categorization of a person as female or male. On the grounds of this categorization individuals behave and are evaluated according to cultural beliefs of what is regarded as female and male. In such circumstances, doing gender is unavoidable in every domain: domestic, economic, political, and in every interpersonal relationship as well. Since the modern family is one of the most gendered institutions in contemporary times, the roles of a mother and a father are conceptualised on the basis of biological differences between women and men. The question is, to what extent are these differences a result of actual biological features and to what extent are they based on social categories that – in the processes of negation and transformations – reproduce highly gendered parents.

Dealing with the issue of the *naturalised* difference between fatherhood and motherhood, it is useful to analyse the power relations in particular social settings and consider the category of *choice*. Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold (2007) notice that the issue of employment in the context of parenthood is often framed as a choice for women, but not for men. In fact, in many cases parenthood reinforces men's employment (Kuhhirt 2012). As a result, the main questions are whether mothers ought (not) to work and what the impact of women's employment on the well-being of the child is. Care work and the conflict between parenthood and career become mainly women's issues. The unequal situation of men and women in the labour market should be analysed in terms of men's domination over women and the power relations within the household. In her studies on married/co-habiting couples with employed women, Caroline Gatrell (2007) shows how men try to enhance their parental role. She refers to the concepts of *situational* and *debilitative power* proposed by Bren Neale and Carol Smart (1998). Situational power is a kind of power that women have over men within the household – a woman is usually the one who manages domestic work and holds the expertise regarding children. I would add to this the cultural norms which, based on the *naturalised* differences, put the woman in a privileged position as the main caregiver. This kind of power is easy to recognise. The second type of power, debilitative power, is harder to define and observe, yet it is often wielded by fathers against mothers. Gatrell gives an example of it: "fathers may claim unencumbered quality time with children, but may abrogate to mothers the responsibility for all child-related domestic chores" (2007: 356). In other words, this is the *choice* men have, to what extent they want to engage in parenting and what kind of parental practices they want to appropriate from women. This *choice* is often justified by naturalised differences.

METHODS

The study is based on qualitative analysis of transcripts from 52 in-depth interviews conducted with fathers in Sweden and Poland¹. The research was carried out between July

¹ The Polish research project was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland (No. UMO-2011/03/N/HS6/01110). The Swedish interviews conducted during the research stay in Stockholm in 2012 were funded by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Science (No. 1/SNS/2012).

2012 and April 2013 with heterosexual, middle-class men living in big cities. All of them lived with their partners or wives and their children. The goal of choosing homogenous groups was to compare fathering in two distinctively different societies and institutional contexts.

32 interviews were conducted with Polish men and 20 with Swedish men. The study employed a wide sampling strategy – the interviewees were recruited through childcare institutions and playgrounds, as well as through social networks on the Internet. Then the snowball sampling strategy was adopted. The interviewed fathers lived in Stockholm, Malmö, Warsaw and Krakow. The aim was to choose the most heterogeneous group. Men varied in their occupations and type of employment (self-employment, public or private sectors, part-time employment), level of education, number of children and their ages, and the length of parental leave taken. The ages of the men ranged from 21 to 49.

Swedish and Polish interviews were based on similar semi-structured guides. They concentrated on such themes as: definitions of fatherhood, differences between fatherhood and motherhood, parenting practices and division of domestic and care duties, social expectations of parents, and opinions about the family policy systems in both countries. The interviews with Poles were conducted in Polish, while the interviews with Swedes were conducted in English. Since the analysis deals with the socially sensitive issue of gender inequality and changing gender roles, all interviews were transcribed with confidentiality. All names were changed and the occupations of the interviewees and the gender of their children were purposively not indicated. The analysis was conducted with the standard qualitative procedure (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I employed a mixed strategy of thematic coding and open coding (Ayres 2008; Benaquisto 2008a, 2008b). Since my interviews were based on semi-structured scripts, the analysis started with creating a list of themes that corresponded with the scripts. Based on these themes, the codes were distinguished and introduced to the qualitative research software HyperResearch, although during the process of coding, new codes and themes inductively emerged that were added to the code tree. I sought patterns that appeared both in Swedish and Polish narratives of men's experiences of parenthood and tried to find significant relations between the ways they spoke about differences between male and female parenting, gender roles and social expectations.

TWO REGIMES OF FATHERHOOD POLICIES

Since Swedish and Polish fathers function in different social settings, it is necessary to briefly describe them². In the sociological literature the impact of the welfare state on the organisation of family life and men's involvement in fatherhood is often underlined (Hobson and Morgan 2002). Jaana Vuori distinguishes between two types of parenting discourses

² For more detailed description of the Swedish and Polish systems see: Klinth 2008; Lundqvist 2011; Lundqvist and Roman 2010; Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007; Suwada 2013.

adopted in the family policy: the *shared parenting* discourse, and the *exclusive mothering* discourse. “The exclusive mothering discourse emphasizes women’s innate character as primary nurturers. The shared parenting discourse denies the absolute division between female and male nurturing roles” (Vuori 2007: 45). In such an approach the attention is drawn to the problem of how female and male parental roles are defined and what is expected from men and women with regards to parenthood.

The comparisons between Sweden and Poland clearly show that they adopt different discourses. Sweden is characterised by a longstanding pro-fatherhood family policy, whose aim is to reduce gender inequalities in private and public spheres. It is based on two instruments: a generous parental leave scheme and an extensive public day-care model. Swedish parents can take up to 480 days of paid parental leave. The leave is neutral, yet for each parent 60 days are reserved. This reserved days are often called “daddy quota”, since their aim is to encourage men to use at least two months of parental leave. Additionally, parents who share their leave equally receive the *equality bonus* in the form of a tax reduction. Besides, every child at least one year of age has a guaranteed place in a day care institution. The extensive public day-care allows parents to work full-time after having used 13 months of parental leave. In contrast, the Polish system is mother-oriented. The parental leave system is still mostly based on the scheme introduced in the late 1970s. There are four types of leave: (1) 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, (2) 2 weeks of paid paternity leave, (3) 26 weeks of paid parental leave, and (4) 3 years of extended parental leave, which is basically unpaid; the lowest-level benefit is available to the poorest families. In theory, the third and fourth types of leave are available for men and women, although fathers were included in the parental leave scheme only at the beginning of the 2000s, mostly because of EU requirements. There are no incentives for men to take parental leave days. Consequently, women are often presented as the main recipients of parental leaves. Besides, there is a problem with access to public (and private) day-care institutions, especially for children under three (according to data from Central Statistical Office of Poland in 2013 only 4.8% of children aged 0–3 years were enrolled in day care institutions).

The family policy systems in Sweden and Poland are entirely different, with different histories grounded in different cultures. The main aim of the Swedish family policy is to increase gender equality in the labour market and the domestic sphere, and as a consequence strong degenderising mechanisms have been introduced. This approach has a 40-year-old tradition. Therefore, the shift from the exclusive mothering discourse to the shared parenting discourse should be seen as a long process reinforced by a great effort to actually change people’s attitudes toward parenthood and gendered parental roles. In contrast, in Poland there is no such tradition. The framework of gender equality, especially applied to the domestic sphere, is not a commonly used framework for Polish politicians and the majority of the Polish society. Though the situation is changing, it is rather a consequence of requirements of the European Union than of a deep societal commitment to this issue. As a result, the contemporary political discourse on parenthood in Poland advances the traditional model of family, in which the mother occupies the traditional role as the primary and irreplaceable carer for her children.

“PARENTHOOD IS SOMETHING VERY NATURAL”

Parenthood is regarded as a natural phenomenon, because it is strictly connected with the human body and childbearing is seen as a biological mechanism that is necessary for the species to survive. The *natural* and biological character of parenting was also underlined in my interviews by both Swedish and Polish fathers.

Being a parent is somehow so deeply imprinted somewhere in our minds, let's say in our nature of living creatures, not only human beings, that we very often do it mechanically (Poland, Konrad, 32 years old, 2-year-old child).

I think this [parenthood – KS] is something very natural, you cannot really learn it. You react instinctively when you take care of your child. We are somehow programmed to be parents. It's biology (Sweden, Johan, 44 years old, 1-year-old child).

Yet, even though fathers regard parenthood as natural for men and women, it is not the same for both genders. A strict difference between women's and men's approaches to children is emphasized, especially in the Polish interviews. It is connected with the traditional models of femininity and masculinity in which women are more emotional and fragile, and men stronger and more rational.

My wife, she has so much love and warmth for our child that she has problems with being consistent, therefore one of my obligations is to make sure we are consistent in parenting and our behaviour (Poland, Wojciech, 26 years old, 21-month-old child).

The stronger character of men in parenting is frequently explained by the references to the biological differences between men and women. But it is also closely connected with the model of traditional fatherhood that is based, besides breadwinning, on the father's parental authority. The Swedish men tended to ignore the *naturalised* gender differences at the beginning of their narratives. In the Polish interviews this issue usually appeared, even if the interviewees were not asked about it – as while talking about fathering, the Polish men often automatically refer to mothering and its *biological* dimension. In the case of the Swedish interviews such references were not that obvious. What is more, when directly asked about the difference between fatherhood and motherhood, fathers liked to underline that it is mostly connected with society and culture rather than biological differences between women and men.

– Are there any differences between motherhood and fatherhood?

– Probably... but I am not sure if that is... it is probably mostly a cultural thing. Not that much a gender thing really (Sweden, Olof, 36 years old, 30-month-old child).

This initial resistance in talking about gender differences between motherhood and fatherhood can be explained by the institutional context in which Swedish parents function. Since they are expected to cross the traditional parental roles, it is easier for them to accept the cultural differences between a mother and a father, rather than refer to biological explanations. On the other hand, men do not experience parenthood similarly to their female partners. On

the contrary, they very often stress that, because of biological differences, they have no chance to experience parenthood in the same way as women. This is especially palpable when they describe the first months of their children's life and compare their situation with that of women.

From my point of view it is kind of changing, because during the first months as a father you are just standing **outside watching**, because at least during the first months it is very much the... mum and the children together, so you are not really... **sometimes you feel that you are not really participating** (Sweden, Olof, 36 years old, 2.5-year-old child).

APPROACHING NATURALISED DIFFERENCES

Based on the data from my interviews, I distinguish two kinds of strategies that men can adopt facing the social expectations grounded in the naturalised differences. On the one hand, they can fight against them and try to question the prevailing gender order within which their high involvement in parenthood is not acceptable. This is the case of men who cross the traditional gender roles and assume the obligations that might be regarded as reserved for women. On the other hand, men can accept the social expectations, and even if they find themselves in a situation in which to some extent they disrupt the social order, they immediately withdraw and agree with the fact that they should not do particular things for reasons of *biological predispositions*.

A good example of the first strategy in which the gender differences are questioned is the narrative of Markus. Since the following quotation nicely illustrates the problems he had to deal with at the beginning of his parental leave, it is given here in full.

A: **She didn't trust that I could handle this.** When I was alone for the first time, the first day, I got lists and lists and lists and pages of lists: he's going to eat at this time, he's going to poop at this time, if he's wet, you need to change his diaper, there was everything! And it's still a little bit like that, but much less so. **Also I told her after a while "you need to stop this, I'm not stupid"**, but this is quite interesting how hard it was for her to let go. I mean she has been home with him... but also at the beginning when we were together and he was with me and screamed for some reason, a half second later **she was there and was basically tearing him out my arms** and taking him. And I said: "What are you doing?" I mean babies cry and do it for different kinds of reasons, so I wasn't abusing him or anything, just... **I don't know, I wouldn't say it's a maybe not a mistrust, it was just – she couldn't really let go.** So being at home was actually really really good, because she didn't have any chance not to let go, she needed to let me... **and after a while, after a couple of weeks she actually became confident that I would not let him starve or hit him or let him freeze or forget him in the market** and things like that. So it was actually quite interesting.

B: And how did you feel about that?

A: Um, annoyed. **Really annoyed actually.** I was quite frustrated. And **at the beginning I didn't really understand it, so at the beginning I was like... "Oh he's crying" and then she came and took him, so I was like... oh ok that was nice.** And after a while... **it's actually not nice, this is actually really bad** (Sweden, Markus, 29 years old, 5-year-old child).

Markus makes several noteworthy remarks about the way relations between women and men are organized in the family sphere. He says that at the beginning he had to deal with stereotypical images of male parenting his partner had. He had to convince her that he was able to take care of their son when they were alone. The process of changing her expectations was not easy and took some time. Interestingly, he also had to realise that her initial behaviour was grounded in the traditional images of motherhood and fatherhood, and that these images were actually hurtful for him. In the following narrative, Markus tries to understand the reasons for the situation.

I don't think you can actually reflect on it, because when I told her this at the beginning, she was "No no no, I don't do that" and after a while when I could finally convince her that she was actually acting this way, she was like... **she felt pretty bad about it, because she didn't want me to think that she distrusted me**, it just felt like that. That was interesting actually. And then... **let's say I wouldn't be at home at all at the beginning, I think we would have very non-modern and stereotypical gender roles at home nowadays where she would basically be a mum and I would be like reading my newspaper**, I don't read the newspaper but... no I would do stuff I would like to do and she would take care of the kid, but **because we attacked [the traditional gender roles] pretty early, I took a little bit of this role so it still works** (Sweden, Markus).

The woman's reactions were not directed against Markus, but were rather connected with her internalized conviction that she as a woman is mainly responsible for taking care of a child. This example shows that the questioning of prevailing gender beliefs is not easy and requires considerable effort from both sides. Markus also indicates the moment when this process of questioning should start – he is convinced that if they did not start to do it at the very beginning, their organisation of family life would be probably based on the traditional parental roles.

On the other hand, there are fathers who fully accept the social models of parental behaviour that are based on the *naturalised* division on motherhood and fatherhood. Such a strategy is more visible in the Polish interviews. The Polish men more openly talk about their acceptance for the traditional models. Even the ones who are fully aware of their cultural dimension rarely feel they have to confront them. Conversely, they adopt an easier strategy – to follow them.

I think that as members of a particular society we have in minds certain patterns that we have to follow. I mean the father plays football with children and the mother cooks dinner. So **I mean it is difficult to escape from this model** (Poland, Michal, 30 years old, 30-month-old twin children).

Michal's approach is characterised by a high level of reflexivity. He knows that as individuals living in a particular society and culture, we are socialised to particular behaviours that often are ascribed to us on the basis of our gender. But for him it is not a reason to challenge and reconstruct them. Such an attitude is not surprising if we take into consideration the highly genderizing context of parenthood in Poland. Men who are not behaving accordingly to the gender beliefs are exposed to critical remarks from other people, not only their significant others, but also complete strangers.

I think that now, **because of the age of our daughter the mother is more important for her and it was proved several times in stressful situations**. For example the first time we went to

the swimming pool, I entered the water with her, my wife stayed outside and she [the daughter – KS] was very stressed and she started to cry. I was trying to calm her down and at some point one woman approached me and she told me: “With all due respect, but as you may know, the mother is needed here”. And **she was right**. Ida was 8 months old at that time, she was very little, but **it shows that in a stressful situation a child’s instinct leads her to the mother** (Poland, Marcin, 30 years old, 2.5-year-old child).

In this situation the reaction of a bystander results in a deeper reflection about the gender roles and parenthood. Marcin did not question the remark he heard, but took it seriously and explained it by referring to the *naturalised* differences between men and women. This example shows that men, who more or less consciously overtake some *female* care practices, have to face disapproving or negative reactions³ from the society. They also often notice that they are not treated as equal parents.

A woman is not only biologically determined to have a different role [than a man – KS], but also the society makes her... feel guilty and thus she has to control everything. For example, just recently we happened to have an interesting situation in the nursery. So for a few days in a row I brought and took our son to and from the nursery and the teachers didn’t have any contact with my wife and they didn’t tell me anything. Then after a while, my wife came to pick him up and they told her, her not me, although the situation has already lasted for a while, that she should give a bigger portion of food to Staszek for lunch⁴, because he is hungry. And of course **I felt offended that they hadn’t told me. And I even told them that they should have told me. And they rightly noticed that my wife is a person who makes decisions about feeding our son. And after all this is true** (Poland, Dominik, 28 years old, 9-month-old child).

In the described situation Dominik’s reaction is similar to Marcin’s: although at first he felt that he was treated unfairly, he then realised that they were right. These two situations show that social expectations can have an enormous impact on men’s parenting behaviour – if men at some point cross the *naturalised* borders between male and female parenting, other people’s reactions have the power to restore the *right* order of gender relations.

THE NATURALISED DIFFERENCES AND POWER

Crossing gender roles in parenting is strictly connected with the issue of power and the men’s and women’s right to choose how to combine engagement in parenthood with paid work. In both the Swedish and Polish interviews, the problem of situational and debilitating power is evident. In my opinion, these two types of power should be studied in the context of the right to choose. Tina Miller (2011) analyses the category of choice along with the category of *constraints* that can restrict or deny men’s possibilities as they become fathers. Fathers in my

³ I call these reactions negative, since they question men’s behaviour, yet I am aware that they are usually a result of a wish to help – especially from older women who believe that the man simply does not know how to take care of a child.

⁴ In Polish nurseries parents often have to provide their own food for their children.

interviews indicated the existence of situational power of women, for instance in the above-mentioned stories of Markus or Dominik. In such situations their parental involvement was restricted by a conviction of substantial *naturalised* differences between men and women⁵.

Yet, from the perspective of fathers and their right to choose the debilitating power is more important, since it strongly impacts the division of domestic and care duties. The debilitating power could be seen as an opportunity to avoid engagement in some, usually the most tedious, parental practices that in the end should be done. Some men consciously use this power.

At some point **I just stopped changing diapers**. I felt uncomfortable with it. I mean I can do anything, but when the diet is changing, it is... Really, if my wife is not around, then of course I have to do that, but when she's near I just can't. All other things – we are sharing (Poland, Wojciech, 26 years old, 21-month-old child).

In this case Wojciech fully accepts the dominant role of his wife in taking care of their son. He declares that he shares all responsibilities with his wife, but at the same time he underlines that he chose not to change diapers, because it was disgusting for him. Other men also notice fathers' tendency to avoid parenting duties:

And on the other hand, men are neglecting their families. They are not eager to take care of them, they think it's not fun. And you have to make it enjoyable. You have to think about some activities, because if you stay at home with the kid and the wife, it's not fun at all (Poland, Grzegorz, 29 years old, 21-month-old child).

Grzegorz' strategy to deal with the boredom that might come with parental obligations is to find activities that make parenthood more enjoyable. It fits the model of fatherhood in which a man is more responsible for the more *fun* aspects of parenthood. In such a model the division of parental obligations is that men are responsible for playing, taking care of children at weekends, and outdoor activities, while women have to take care of the most tedious, and unavoidable, duties in the household such as doing laundry, cooking, cleaning up, feeding, and taking care of ill children (see Johansson and Klinth 2008; Szlendak 2011: 445–446). As a consequence, the power relations are still sustained, but by a different strategy.

Additionally, it should be noted that doing gender is so deeply imprinted in ourselves that it is difficult to avoid it. Some of the interviewed fathers notice that even though they try to be fully engaged in care and domestic work, the traditional model in which women are mainly responsible for children and the household still prevails. Some of them felt that they had to explain to me why it is so.

We usually shop together, we go out on weekends for major shopping, otherwise my wife picks up, you know, the dinner stuff on the way from work, because she gets off work earlier than me. **So it is just practical, I didn't think about that like it is... like really sexist and stuff, but...no it is just practical**, it doesn't have anything to do with being a man and a woman at all. It is just... how it is (Sweden, Fredrik, 34 years old, 5- and 8-year-old children).

⁵ This situational power of women is sometimes called *maternal gatekeeping*. In this perspective it is underlined that a mother plays a crucial role in (not) allowing her partner to become an involved father. See Gaunt 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2008.

This quotation is interesting, because I only asked how the domestic duties are shared in their household and it was Fredrik's own remark that it might look *sexist*. It may indicate that in the Swedish context the focus on gender equality and men's engagement in the domestic sphere is so strong that people might actually feel uncomfortable if they have to admit that they do not do everything to achieve real partnership. On the other hand, the traditional model is also deeply rooted in people's attitudes and therefore men and women tend to engage in different parental activities. A good example is Anders, a father who actively engages in his parenthood and tries to deal with the *naturalised* differences. Together with his partner they seek to share domestic and care duties, yet Anders worries that even though he really tries to participate in everything and does not want his partner to be overwhelmed with the parental duties, her responsibility is still greater.

She [his partner – K.S.] does more, but more important is that she feels that she has a lot more responsibility for it, so even if I help her out with washing the clothes, she still thinks it's her responsibility and **that's hurting us in the end** (Sweden, Anders, 31 years old, 3- and 2-year-old children).

On the other hand, men are not always able to use their power to fulfil their parental roles in the way they want. I described above the process of negotiation between Markus and his girlfriend, who did not trust him to properly take care of their son. She had situational power and Markus had problems gaining access into the traditional female sphere. This case shows that debilitating power of men has its limits, especially in situations when it is used to violate the traditional gender order. One way to deal with it is to actively assume traditional female duties, for instance by taking a long period of parental leave. Yet the essential thing seems to be the woman's attitude toward her partner.

For me it was very important – the knowledge I learned during the birthing classes [...]. This knowledge made me calm and I was the first who gave the bath. I changed diapers. I didn't have any problems [...]. But I think **that the role of a woman is also very important. If she helps her husband or partner, supports him and is aware that it is for him mentally difficult, taking into account the fact that as men we often have no models or bad models**, you know? (Poland, Oskar, 40 years old, 9- and 6-year-old children).

People in general need to learn how to fulfil care and domestic duties. Many of the interviewed men underlined that they had no good examples of fathers in their life course. The generation of their parents is especially negatively evaluated, both in the Swedish and Polish societies. The contemporary new fathers usually look to their friends or other people their age as they seek inspiration on how to be a dad. They learn parenthood by participating in various professional courses for new parents or by reading books about parenting. Encouragement from women also plays an important role in men preparing to become an involved father. The woman often becomes her man's teacher. Furthermore, women usually expect their partners to be involved. In the Swedish interviews men frequently underlined that the decision to have a child was based on an agreement that they would share the parental leave equally.

It was obvious that I would take at least half a year of the parental leave. **My wife told me that this was her condition** and if I didn't agree, we wouldn't have kids at all. And I guess this is fair (Sweden, Lars, 41 years old, 10-, 7-, and 5-year-old children).

The question is whether this strategy is in fact a resignation from the situational power women have over men within the household, or rather from the means of wielding it. The above analysis might suggest that a man often engages in fatherhood only to the extent his partner allows him to. It also suggests that the woman has the power to force the man into being more involved than he actually wants to be. Bonnie Fox (2001, 2009) in her analysis of motherhood underlines that becoming a mother now means not only new responsibility for taking care for a baby, but also greater responsibility for the household and towards her partner, who needs help in being a good father. As a result, women take over responsibility not only for their own parenting, but also for the parenting of their partners, and this should be seen as a new *hidden* burden imposed on women (see also: Gatrell 2007; Sevón 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

The process of *naturalisation* of differences between the roles of the mother and father is a powerful mechanism that impacts the organisation of everyday family life. The cultural scripts of what it means to be a father and a mother are deeply imprinted in individuals' minds. The analysis of fatherhood shows that there is an inherent duality of parenting practices in contemporary Western societies. Parenthood is concurrently a biological and social phenomenon. The difference between mothering and fathering is legitimised by the biological differences between men and women. Yet the problem is what the biological difference means. As I have tried to show, the current cultural definitions of motherhood and fatherhood are *naturalised* in the process of negation and transformation of human bodies. They should also be seen as elements of the *naturalised* dichotomies between masculinity and femininity models. Yet, the strength of the *naturalised differences* varies depending on the social contexts. The comparisons of Swedish and Polish fathers clearly show that their various visions of parenting are strictly bound to the perception of differences between male and female roles and predispositions. These viewpoints have an impact on the level of practices – on how men engage in care work and other types of domestic work, and on how they approach the traditional *naturalised* differences between fatherhood and motherhood. The more profound the beliefs in the *biological* predispositions of women to take care of children are, the easier it is for men to wield their debilitating power and avoid these parental duties that they do not find appealing. On the other hand, as *naturalised differences* become less salient, the situational and debilitating power of women and men loses power, and a more common acceptance of gender equality values arises, along with adopting a model of involved fatherhood. I suggest that neither Swedish nor Polish fathers function in a society in which expectations are not based to some extent on the biological definitions of parental roles. As I have showed, they can adopt different strategies to deal with what are considered *natural differences*; they can accept and behave according to the model of traditional fatherhood, or adopt an active strategy to fight against them in various social situations. Each of these strategies has its drawbacks, and each shows how difficult it is to achieve gender equality.

Yet the comparisons between Sweden and Poland provide additional reflections on parenthood in today's societies. The way men and women experience parenthood is strictly

connected with the institutional context, i.e. the family policy systems and their definitions of motherhood and fatherhood. The highly degenderising context of the Swedish system provides not only tools to enable men to cross gender roles, but also explanations as to why they can do it. In a way, Swedish parents are encouraged by the state to actively deal with naturalised gender roles. In the case of Poland the situation differs distinctively. The instruments of family policy still prioritise the woman as the main caregiver. Although men at the beginning of the 2000s were also included in the system as its recipients, their role is still defined in terms of a secondary caregiver who is expected to help women rather than be primarily responsible for taking care of children. In such a context, the greater acceptance for traditional parental roles among Polish fathers is not surprising. Every attempt to cross gender roles is exposed to social criticism, which has the power to restore the traditional gender order and can force men and women to *do their gender* properly. The crucial issue here is the problem of power and men's domination over women. A system that does not recognise men as parents and perceives care in terms of female obligations reinforces the patriarchal social order based on gender inequalities.

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NATURALIZACJA RÓŻNICY: DOŚWIADCZENIE OJCOSTWA W SZWECJI I POLSCE

Badania pokazują, że płeć ma wpływ na to, w jaki sposób rodzice angażują się w rodzicielstwo. Oczekiwania formułowane wobec mężczyzn i kobiet zasadniczo się różnią i są silnie związane z dominującymi modelami męskości i kobiecości. Są one również związane z biologiczną różnicą pomiędzy mężczyznami i kobietami, która często odgrywa rolę wygodnej wymówki dla nierównego układu władzy pomiędzy płciami. W artykule tym autorka próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, w jaki sposób mężczyźni w Szwecji i Polsce doświadczają rodzicielstwa w kontekście znaturalizowanej różnicy pomiędzy ojcostwem a macierzyństwem oraz jak owa różnica wpływa na relacje władzy.

Słowa kluczowe: ojcostwo, proces naturalizacji, role genderowe, Szwecja, Polska