Being a father, being a man
Exploring fatherhood ideas and practices and the construction of masculinities among some men in Mexico City

MA Thesis
By: Mariana Rios
Supervisor: Eileen Moyer
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To vovó Delmira, my beloved grandma (1923-2007)
To my itinerant father
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Executive Summary

In the past decades, Latin America has undergone a series of major social and economic changes, most importantly, economic and welfare reform, a massive inclusion of women into the labor force, and profound transformations in family structures and relationships. Although the way these changes have impacted gender and power relations remains largely understudied, there seems to be an agreement in that they have affected the perception of what constitutes the hegemonic masculinity.

Part of this hegemonic or traditional model is the father as provider, a figure of authority that is however absent in the household and distant from his children. Such notion is no longer portrayed as the one and only role model within men’s discourse throughout the region, and certainly the case of Mexico is not different. Furthermore, the traditional model does not even begin to describe the great diversity of fatherhood ideas and practices found in recent studies.

Current research on fathering ideas and practices in Mexico indicates that notwithstanding the extent to which men participate in childcare and parenting, most partly define their own and others’ masculinity in relation to fathering activities, and consider fatherhood a fundamental part of their lives. However, the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood, and between discourse and practice can translate into a myriad of parenting arrangements, something about which still very little is known.

In the present qualitative exploratory study, conversations with nine men about fathering everyday practices, expectations, ideas and feelings are the entry point to explore the construction of fatherhood and masculinity. Attention is also paid to the relevant role societal norms and other structural constraints have in shaping men’s desires regarding their performance as fathers, and the way these same categories are reproduced and contested. In doing so, I hope to show that gender identities are diverse and complex and, ultimately, the product of cultures in motion.
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1. Introduction

In the century-old history of anthropology, ‘the study of man’ has been the centerpiece of ethnography. The last thing we need today is renewed attention to men instead of women. Rather, an emphasis on men and masculinity, on men as engendered and engendering persons, on men-as-men, should derived from the kind of questions being asked in studies of women regarding the relation between difference and inequality, between cultural reproduction and cultural creativity, and between such excessively dichotomous pairs as nature and culture, sex and gender, and, especially, women and men.

Reproduction is a central feature of social life, which is inextricably bound up with the production of culture. Reproductive experiences are therefore a space where cultural understanding and hierarchies are generated, and normative categories among which those of masculinity and fatherhood are reproduced and challenged (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). In the same line, this research takes reproduction as a privileged space to look at the way fatherhood and masculinities are constructed among a group of men living and working in Mexico City. The present is thus a men centered study, meaning that it focuses on the experiences of men as engendered and engendering beings (Gutmann 2003; 2006). As such, it is framed within the relatively recent field of masculinity studies, which in Latin America has been significantly informed and fostered by feminist scholarship and activism throughout the region (Gutmann 2003).

Most of the research within the field of Latin American masculinity studies has aimed to show that there is not just one way of being a man. Instead, one can see from the studies carried out in the last years that there are multiple practices and meanings attached to being a man, which are shaped by the socio-economic context, class, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, what it means to be a man and a father in Latin America, both in social and personal histories, has often thought to be best appreciated in relationship to hegemonic masculinity in the region (Gutmann 2003). The vast majority of studies of men-as-men, not only but including the ones undertaken in Latin America, take Connell’s model of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities as an analytical framework. In his widely referred text *Masculinities*, Connel “warns against trans-cultural or trans-historical concepts of masculinity”. Instead, he prefers an analysis of masculinity grounded on the material
circumstances that shape the “relational concepts” of masculinity and femininity (Connel 1995:43-44 in Nye 2005). Connel stresses the importance of understanding masculinity as a plurality of kinds, reflecting class, sect, race, and sexual orientation, while “tracking the ways these varieties relate to the hegemonic forms of masculinity that society celebrate as ideals” (Connel1995:76-81 in Nye 2005). His formulation derives from a critique of the sex role theory, “which identifies social structure with biological difference, reducing gender to two homogeneous categories, thus underplaying social inequality and power” (Demetriou 2001:338). Sex role theory conceives the female role and the male role as equally dependent on each other, as reciprocal categories. Connell argued that sex role failed to acknowledge not only engendered power relations, but change and gender diversity as well. For him, gender is a configuration of practice, which entails what people actually do and not only what they are expected to do. He takes as a premise the structural subordination of women to men and suggests the model of a hegemonic masculinity, which he defines as “the configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 1995:77, cited in Demetriou 2001). Hegemonic masculinity is dominant in relation to women and to other subordinated masculinities. An example of this are gay men, who are subordinated to straight men in terms of social status and prestige, and by a series of material practices, which include political, cultural, economic and legal discrimination (Demetriou 2001:341).

Recent studies have nevertheless put into question the existence of a single hegemonic masculinity, both within countries and between them (Gutmann 2003; Viveros 2003). Latin America, for instance, has undergone a series of major social and economic changes in the past decades, most importantly, economic and welfare reform, a massive inclusion of women into the labor force, and profound transformations in the family structure and personal relationships. Although the way these changes have impacted gender and power relations remains largely understudied, there seems to be an agreement in that they have affected the perception of what constitutes the hegemonic masculinity (Escobar-Latapí 2003; Gutmann 2003 and 2006; Olavarría 2003; Amuchástegui 2007). Authors have referred to this “crumbling of dominant forms of discourse” as a “masculinity crisis”, pointing out the fact that, at least in urban contexts (where most of the studies concentrate),

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the traditional male identity and the old social contracts that used to shape men’s and women’s relationships are being widely challenged (Amuchástegui 2007; Escobar-Latapí 2003). Part of this traditional model is the father/provider, a figure of authority that is however absent in the household and distant from his children. This notion is no longer portrayed as the only role model within men’s discourse throughout the region, and certainly the case of Mexico is not different. Furthermore, this model does not even begin to describe the great diversity of fatherhood ideas and practices found in recent studies (Gutmann 2003; 2007).

In Mexico, the father-breadwinner is still widely considered the dominant model, and absence is usually portrayed as the most prominent feature of fatherhood throughout the country. De Keijzer (1998), for instance, groups different types of fathers into four categories, three of which are characterized by absence. These categories range from runaway fathers, migrants, and divorced neglectful fathers, to those few committed ones challenging traditional models in striving for loving and fulfilling relationships with their children, the latter being nevertheless represented only by a handful of men.

Yet, current research on fathering ideas and practices in the region indicates that notwithstanding the extent to which men participate in childcare and parenting, most partly define their own and others’ masculinity in relation to fathering activities, and consider fatherhood a fundamental part of their lives (Gutmann 1997; Fuller 2000; Escobar-Latapí 2003; Viveros 2002; Olavarría 2003; Fachel-Leal 2000). However, the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood, and between discourse and practice, can translate into a myriad of parenting arrangements. Besides being affected by individual and structural factors, this translation from discourse to practice is highly wrought by ongoing negotiations with the partner. Notably, however, the role of women in the negotiation of masculinity and fatherhood remains largely unexplored. Gutmann (1997) argues that male identities have little meaning except in relation to women and female identities and practices, and calls for ethnographic investigations about men and masculinities to include women’s ideas and experiences with men. This is fundamental according to Gutmann, if we are to understand in a nontrivial manner processes by which masculinity and fatherhood are constructed.

Although this research project originally intended to include the views of men’s partners as well, this turned out to be impracticable due to time and other logistic
constraints. In order to make up for the lack of women's point of view, the interviews focused heavily on the division of parenting tasks. Consequently, men in the study sample produced accounts where women were substantially present. This by no means replaces women’s version of the story, but it does stress the relational character of gender, which necessarily implies that fatherhood is often defined in relation to motherhood and *vice versa*. In the present study, conversations with men about fathering everyday practices, expectations, ideas and feelings are the entry point to explore the construction of fatherhood and masculinity. Attention is also paid to the relevant role societal norms and other structural constraints have in shaping men desires regarding their performance as fathers, and the way these same categories are reproduced and contested. In doing so, I hope to show that gender identities are diverse and complex and, ultimately, as Gutmann (2003) reminds us, the product of cultures in motion.
2. Behind the scenes

The aim of presenting an account of my fieldwork experience, is not only to describe the practical aspects of it, but also to clarify my position, the reasoning behind some of the decisions made along the way, and the effects of other elements that, beyond my control, I believe to have greatly shaped the course of the research. Emphasis will be made on issues that have to do with reflexivity, accountability and transparency, as well as the potential effects that the positionality – in terms of background, gender, age, class, etc- of the researcher and participants have on their interactions and the knowledge produced. In doing so, the immediate goal is to provide the reader with elements to better understand and judge the outcomes of the present study. However, looking at the broader picture, these six weeks of fieldwork have been a truly formative experience, one which has made me reflect long hours about the ethics and politics of the research process. Experiencing and communicating that, I believe, also constitutes a fundamental part of this learning exercise.

The main purpose of this section is therefore to provide an honest account of the research process, documenting its twirls and turns, drawbacks and successes, in other words, to make it as transparent as possible. Ultimately, the picture of fatherhood that will be drawn in this study, is one that has been to a certain extent negotiated with the participants, shaped by our interaction and informed by individual backgrounds, expectations, emotions and lived experiences.

Anthropological research is a dialogical endeavor, from the formulation of research questions through the writing up of dissertations, books and articles (Fabian 1990; Pool 1994). The type of dialogue I am talking about here includes, although is not limited to, the verbal interaction that takes place during interviews. Furthermore, invoking dialogue in this context, is assuming an epistemological position, a way of stressing the “intersubjective nature of ethnographic investigations” (Fabian 1990:765). Themes from conversations will be the basis for discussion and analysis, and some fragments of dialogues will be introduced whenever useful for argumentative and explanatory purposes. However, I would like to paraphrase Pool in order to say that this dissertation is dialogical not only because it contains a series of conversations. Dialogue, as it will be shown, is here considered not “just
a question of literary form”, but rather “a means to enable us to reflect on the nature of fieldwork and the kind of knowledge which this produces” (Pool 1994:242).

Another assumption underlying this research is the lack of clear boundaries between gathering data and interpretation (Fabian 1990; Pool 1994). This implies that information is not simply collected during fieldwork, but rather produced, constructed. Interviews, which were my main instrument during fieldwork, were not a mere “gathering data exercise” or a “simple transfer of pre-existing information”, in the sense that participants did not have “information in their heads ready to be called up in response to my questions” (Pool, 1994:26). In the research process, both participants and researcher bring considerable ‘baggage’ – personal history, identity and understandings- into their interactions. The way these elements are enacted, necessarily affects the interview dynamics, and therefore the accounts and meanings produced (Arendell 1997). Part of the present chapter is thus dedicated to the acknowledgment of this baggage, or at least the most relevant elements of it, and discussing its implications in the context of this study.

Having said the above, two issues will be analyzed in more detail. The first one refers to doing research at home. For that I will borrow Reis’ concept of ‘at homeness’, which refers to shared experiences and processes of identification between the researcher and the researched, a process that is not necessarily bound to being at one’s own city or country (Reis 1998). In my case, going to the field literally meant going home, which implied that the number of shared experiences was enormous. On the other hand, being at home also made me aware and sensitive of the differences that, although subtle, were undeniably present.

Finally, since the focus of this study revolves around the analysis of engendered relations and practice, it only makes sense to pay a closer look at the way these same forces might have shaped the interaction with the participants, and the products of our conversations. My experience, as a young female student interviewing men about fatherhood, will be discussed in relation to some of the literature on cross-gender interviewing, and the negotiation of gender in the qualitative research process.
2.1 Fieldwork in a nutshell

Participants first knew about the project through common friends or acquaintances, or directly through me, after which we exchanged emails and phone calls. In our first communications, I would give them more details about the study, answer their questions, invite them to participate, and ask them to set the hour and place of reunion. Nine men composed the study sample, out of which six were living with the mother of their children, and three were separated. Their ages ranged from 26 to 42, and they had one or two children, the oldest being nine years old and the youngest a three-month-old baby. All men fell into a broad middle class category, although, as it will be shown, the individual socioeconomic situations varied greatly.

All interviews but one took place in Mexico City, mostly in the southern area. We met at cafes, bars, their working places, homes and one interview was carried out through Skype (electronic conferencing). Conversations lasted from two to four hours, during which we would discuss topics that I introduced according to the flow of their stories, although always covering the same topics with each participant. Before starting the interview, I would make clear that the content of our conversations was confidential, and ask them to pick new names for them, their children and partners, something that provoked laughs and amusement. All volunteers agreed to have their conversation recorded, and did not seem bothered or uncomfortable about it. Before starting, I would also let them know I intended to email them a summary of the interview, and that I would ask them then let me know if they recognized their story in my condensed version of our conversation, indicating the aspects, if any, that were unclear, missing, or wrong. Although elements from the summaries were going to be analyzed and discussed in the thesis, I explained, the complete summaries would not be included. They were nonetheless offered to have their full summary and those of the other participants, together with their copy of the thesis if they so desired. Due to time constraints, six out of nine volunteers received their summaries, returning them with very positive feedback.
Once in Mexico City, I set out to start my research with the firm intention of interviewing six to eight first-time parents of children between three months and one-year-old. The reasoning behind that was that, in Mexico, only women are officially entitled to maternity leave, which allows them to take a total of 90 days off work. Officially, this time off should to be taken after the baby is born, although sometimes women can negotiate to allocate it before and after delivery as best suiting their needs. After this period, parents have to make other arrangements to ensure their baby is taken care of. My assumption was that up until the child’s first year, couples face new necessities and challenges that necessarily make them take critical steps toward establishing a particular kind of parenting arrangement.

After several emails, phone calls, and visits to a health care center, it became clear that I needed to be more flexible about the characteristics of the study sample. It is not at all difficult to find first time fathers, but finding fathers that are actively engaged in parenting activities and are also willing to talk about it, is definitely a different story. First when I told people I needed to contact *papás* (fathers), I would always get back names of women. This was partly due to confusion arising from the fact that *papá* can be both used to refer to father and parent. Another reason for that probably relates to something that came up several times during the interviews, which is that parenting is usually associated with women and not men.

Soon enough, I also realized that talking to both men and women was not going to be as easy as I had first imagined. Though women were also to be part of the study, their interviews were supposed to revolve around issues regarding broad ideas about fatherhood, and perceptions about their own partner’s performance as fathers. I did not want the men to feel marginal to their partners as parents. The main objective of the study was, after all, to explore men’s own parenting experiences. Therefore, after discussing with my supervisor, I decided to contact the men first, and then ask them if they felt comfortable with inviting their partners to participate in the study.

My first option for contacting parents was through a small clinic/research institute that provided high quality pre- and post-natal services to low-income women and families. The head of the education department kindly showed me around and allowed me to observe
the infant stimulation sessions, at the end of which the instructor would give me a few minutes to talk about my research and distribute some flyers providing further information about the research, the format of the interviews, and my contact details. I attended six sessions, explaining my research and distributing flyers to an audience mainly composed of women with their babies, their mothers, often their older daughters, and occasionally their husbands. Although I emphasized I was interested in men’s experiences, the same question would come up over and over, ‘Are mothers invited to the project as well?’ I feared missing the chance of getting men on board. The contact with fathers would have to be through their wives, giving the impression of being yet another activity centered on motherhood. Plus, several members of the staff had already warned me that most men dismiss all activities related to the clinic, to which women usually attend accompanied by other female relatives. ‘Although women’s point of view is very valuable, there are very few studies about men’s perspectives, this time I would like to interview fathers’, was my response to the women attending the baby stimulation sessions. A couple of women asked if I could interview their husbands during the weekend, because this was the only time they were available, but most just had a quick look at the print outs and put them in their hand bags. If a husband happened to attend the session, I would approach him and his wife and would give both details about the research. However, in these cases I would hand the flier to the husband/partner. Some men seemed more interested than others, but women in general, seemed a bit uneasy about the whole thing, especially when I explained that rather than filling in a questionnaire, I was requesting a one on one conversation with me about their personal lives. Perhaps the type of interaction I was suggesting, although I used technical terms such as in-depth interviewing and qualitative research, was conceived as that which usually occurs between men and women when they are very close friends or dating. The fact that I was a young woman who looked more like the student type, probably unmarried, and did not wear uniform like the clinic staff, did not help much either. In a study of divorced fathers, Arendell came across something similar during the phone calls she had with the men in her study in order to choose a meeting place. In that regard she says:

The logistics of establishing a meeting place were much more complicated than in my earlier study with women (Arendell 1986). Then I gave little thought to potential safety questions and often met in participants’ homes…Seeking to always protect a participants’ confidentiality, I told no one exactly where I was going nor the name of the person I was meeting. Common sense suggested that going to a strangers’ home, especially under
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these constraints, was not the wisest course of action. Additionally, in the latter study, during our initial telephone conversations, numerous men used the phrase ‘your place or mine’. This comment was typically followed with the speaker’s laughter, seemingly implying a veiled analogy to arranging a time and place for a blind date, and suggesting a stance of informality which I then tried to alter by finding a more neutral meeting place. Arendell 1997:350

Before going to the field, I had anticipated that dealing with both partners’ expectations about my role as a listener to their stories, especially the ones about arguments between them, could turn out to be problematic. However, that the seemingly intimate character due to the nature of the interaction with men –long informal conversations– and the topics discussed –romantic relationships, marital arguments, stories about children – could bring the interviews into a gray area that could make women feel uncomfortable, was something I did not see coming. After giving the matter some thought, I came to the conclusion that the difficulties that came along with interviewing couples did no necessarily make this an impossible endeavor. However, dealing with the situation in a satisfactory manner, required time. Time to have joint and individual meetings with partners, which was something I needed to establish my position, and build a relationship of trust. Time, unfortunately and most regrettably, was a limited resource.

Since the initial idea was to explore the ways discourses about masculinity and fatherhood translated into everyday practice, I decided to keep the original focus but to change it slightly. The fact that women’s accounts were no longer going to be part of the research, clearly limited the focus on the negotiation of parenting arrangements. Therefore, I chose to give more weight to the men’s involvement in parenting tasks. Much of the research about fatherhood in Mexico focuses on the various versions of a recurring theme: fathers’ absence (see, i.e, De Keijzer 2000). Little is known about the experience of men who are actively involved in taking care of their children, the way they do it, and how they feel about the kind of parenting arrangements in which they are engaged (Gutmann 1997; 2006).

In order to find these ‘involved fathers’ I used a different strategy: spreading the news. I explained my research to everyone I knew, and asked them if they happened to know any men potentially suitable for the project. Whenever I saw an opportunity, I invited people as well. The criteria for including men in the sample consequently changed. Finding first time parents of children less than one year old proved to be complicated, so the invitation was readdressed to fathers of small children –one or more–, preferably not older
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that five years old, who were heavily involved parenting activities, and were willing to talk about it. ‘Heavily involved’ remained a loose category, allowing people to interpret it freely, which eventually led to a sample of men that experienced ‘being a father’ in very different and interesting ways. The sample in this study is therefore one of convenience; in the sense that participants are the men that were curious about the project’s content and form, and were interested in sharing their stories.

2.3 Women interviewing men

You have to let these guys know you’re on their side. because in this world of feminism…you know what I mean.

Fellow student

Just a few days before traveling to Mexico, we left the AMMA room and broke into small groups to discuss our research proposals more thoroughly, especially the aspects having to with our fieldwork. When talking about each other’s position as researchers, a male colleague suggested that if I really wanted men to talk to me, I should let them know I was on their side. His comment was followed by a heated discussion, which began with the advantages and limitations of doing cross-gender interviews, but quickly detoured into an argument about the meaning of taking sides during research. Listening to my friend’s remark made me feel uneasy, puzzled, and frankly a bit upset. In the end I have only to thank him, because this comment, and the discussion it generated, triggered a series of reflections having to do with methodological issues, and the very nature of this study.

The research I was to undertake, even though it was not explicitly placed within a feminist theoretical framework was, and is, very much informed by feminist perspectives. This is a study that takes gender power imbalances and inequalities as a central feature of society at large. Power works in several directions, and the relations and means through which it is exercised are complex, and shaped by a myriad of factors such as age, class and ethnicity. However, historically, women and other marginalized masculinities, as it has been increasingly recognized, have experienced the largest share of oppression and subordination in a society that remains stratified by gender (Arendell 1997:343; Gutmann 2006). In addition to that, the study of men and masculinity in Latin America holds a close relationship with feminist scholarship and activism. Gutmann (2003), for instance, conceives
Behind the scenes masculinity studies in the region as a conscious attempt to extend feminist theory and gender studies in new directions. Much of the impetus and personnel that enabled scholarship on men and masculinities in Latin America, he argues, came from the field of women and feminist studies in the first place.

Although I did not know exactly what my friend was referring to with ‘this world of feminism’, my immediate impression was that he did not think very highly of women holding feminist views. I came to recognize, however, that my colleague did have a point, which related to the question of “how much should a researcher with feminist politics, or any other, for that matter, discuss these with her study’s participants” (Arendell 1997:343). After giving the matter some thought, I decided not to volunteer my position if not asked. First, because I did not want to make participants feel uncomfortable. In the past I had come across many people, men and women alike, who expressed mixed feelings about feminism, even as an broad notion. The other reason for not framing the research in ‘gender terms’ was that I did not want to push men into the politically correct discourse about gender relations and inequality. The research was therefore presented as a study that intended to explore men’s experiences about being a father in everyday life. I deliberately avoided using terms such as gender, gender roles, inequality, sexism or machismo, so as not to force fit them into the participants' accounts. Furthermore, I personally find the use of some of those terms to be problematic, like the term machismo, which is basically a stereotypical notion, rather than a useful analytic category. Participants would invariably bring gender to the table, however, every time we discussed paternity leaves, and the possibility of men becoming officially entitled to parental leaves and other benefits, such as state provided daycare, in the near future.

Insights on the role of gender in the qualitative research process and its products, especially the ones regarding women studying men, are scarce, although the issue has received more attention in the past years (Arendell 1997; Lee 1997). Besides matters of presentation, such as the one mentioned above, scholars have raised other questions in this regard. Some of which include: “what does gender mean for the research process, in general? More specifically, what are the power dynamics when a woman studies men? Do power imbalances shift because of the researcher’s expertise with respect to the topic being studied?

1 For a discussion on the history and uses of the term machismo, see Gutmann 2003:221-242.
and her initiation in handling the study? Or is the conventional gender hierarchy maintained or re-established across the interaction? Are there variations in these dynamics by race, ethnicity or class, and, if so, how are they shown?” (Arendell 1997:343)

Deborah Lee (1997), for instance, draws on her experiences of discussing harassment at the workplace with male participants to reflect upon “the implications of discussing sexualized topics in the context of gendered interview dynamics”. In this article, the author is mainly concerned with the researcher's personal safety and vulnerability, and “the deriving dilemmas regarding control, rapport and reciprocity in the interview process”. Both Lee and Arendell reported incidents during one-to-one interviews at the participants’ home, where verbal or physical interaction had made them feel uncomfortable, unsafe and at times harassed. Although it was not the case in this study, I do believe that safety and vulnerability issues might often shape the interview dynamics. Early in the fieldwork, when the idea was to interview men that were total strangers to me, safety was always in the back of my head. Originally, interviews were supposed to take place at the participants' homes, which was supposed to provide additional data on living conditions and socio economic context. However, that idea was soon discarded, since I felt it could indeed place me in a vulnerable position. In the context of my own research, concerns about safety and vulnerability were not a factor when choosing a meeting place. As I mentioned earlier, men in the study were contacted mostly through common friends. In addition to that, all the interviews but one took place in public places, and most of the friends who had introduced us and, as I later found out, partners, children, and close friends of participants were also aware of our encounters.

Relationships during interviews are complex, and influenced to a certain extent by the identities and histories of those involved, researcher and researched alike (Arendell 1997:364). That being said, while interacting with participants requires from the researcher a respectful and non-judgmental attitude, I do believe a difference exists between establishing an environment of empathy and one of complicity, the latter resulting problematic for same-gender and cross-gender research alike. Choosing sides, or making participants' know I was on their side, something my fellow student was most concerned with, was never an issue in this study either. Even when stories included difficult or painful experiences, no participant ever made offensive comments about a partner or about women in general. In fact, I was surprised with the extent to which most men in the study were concerned with presenting a
balanced picture, in the sense that they would never place blame or responsibility solely on one person. An example of that is Luis’ (34) account, in which after describing his painful and years-long separation process he told me: ‘it is hard for me to talk about these things (the separation) because it implies mentioning very negative things that happened with Jeanne (his partner). But you know there is never one side to the story and things are always very complex’. He proceeded to talk about what he thought it was like to be in his ex-partners’ shoes during the separation.

Furthermore, contrary to Lee and Arendell’s experiences, I did not feel vulnerable, disrespected, or even patronized during my interaction with men in the study. Participants would listen to what I had to say and would wait until I finished talking before intervening, in the same way I did with them. Since the purpose of the interviews was to listen to their accounts, they were the ones doing most of the talking, however, none of them would try to take charge or control of the interviews, which was something Arendell encountered when interviewing divorced fathers. Participants took the time they needed to recount their stories, and the time allocated for each of the topics varied greatly from person to person. If interventions moved too far from the scope of the research, I would wait for a moment that felt appropriate and try to bring the conversation back by posing another question, or would kindly ask them to go back to their accounts to clarify a particular aspect. None of the volunteers seemed offended or bothered by that, to which they would respond sometimes going back to the point where they had left their story, and sometimes introducing a related issue. No participant at any time dismissed or ridiculed any of the issues presented for discussion, although it happened a few times that one of the questions would seem strange, confusing or unnecessary. For example, when talking about day care, Odiseo (28) explained to me that his daughter Paikeia was diagnosed with a health condition one month after birth, which made him change his original plan of sending his daughter to public daycare. Instead, Paikeia is nowadays attending a private institution, where teachers are in charge of far less children, and are able to monitor her closely, in case new symptoms shall appear. I asked Odiseo if this particular decision had required much negotiation, ‘what do you mean?’ he asked, and immediately replied ‘no’, almost as he did not see the point of the question, ‘this was something we (he and Paula, his ex-partner) fully agreed on’.

Feminist scholars have also stressed the need to analyze the role of women as listeners during interviews with male volunteers. Arendell found that men in her study had
Behind the scenes
seldom disclosed their experiences and feelings about divorce, and many of them actually thanked her for having the opportunity to share their stories. Something similar happened after many of my own interviews, where men made positive remarks about being able to talk about issues they had not thought of, or talked about in a long time. Or, on the contrary, for having the chance to share aspects of their lives to which they dedicated much thought and reflection, but which they felt no one else could be interested in or willing to listen. ‘People who don’t have children are annoyed by these kinds of stories’, ‘this was a nice therapeutic experience’, and ‘I think women talk about this stuff (experiences with children), but you can imagine how it is between men, it is very difficult’, were the kind of remarks that would come up often during interviews. In her own study, Arendell came to the conclusion that it was not so much her as a person having a particular interactional and interview style to whom participants were sharing their stories. In her opinion, they were relating to her on the basis of their expectations of her as a woman, as a feminized Other, which in this context refers to the traditionally feminine role of the passive listener (Beauvoir 1949 in Arendell 1997). It is by no means the intention here to underplay the fact that differences in gender politics and positions of power can indeed set up interview dynamics where reproducing gender hierarchies and traditional strategies becomes extremely hard to avoid. However, in my own study, I attribute participants’ willingness to talk more to the characteristics of the space generated by our conversations, than to the fact that I was a woman. Our meetings were a mixture of familiarity and anonymity: I was not a total stranger because we had friends in common, but we did not belong to the same group of close friends either. Therefore, in most cases I had never personally met the participants’ children, partners or ex-partners, relatives or other friends. The interviews’ academic nature probably also helped to render the project more reliable for participants, since several of them work at the university and were used to discussing and thinking about ethics in research. Most importantly, men in this study were engaged in relationships characterized by partnership rather than subordination, where major decisions were not imposed but negotiated. In sum, they were men used to listening and taking women’s opinions into account, both in their personal and professional lives, and therefore men with whom conversations could be held as equals.

While I feel comfortable asserting that having been interviewed by a woman was not a critical factor for sharing their stories, it is possible that participants would have recounted their experiences differently if interviewed by a male researcher. Although the fieldwork
Behind the scenes experience leads me to think that stories would have remained basically the same, I wonder if it is possible that participants omitted or emphasized certain elements in their accounts because they were talking to a woman. However, how and how much different participants’ narratives would have been is not something I am in a position to determine. In a sense, it is not that important, since stories would have also changed to a certain extent if a female researcher other than me had carried out the interviews. At the end of the day, and this applies for male and female researchers alike, the quality of the interview product relies more on interviewing skills, and a “sense of awareness of the considerable social, historical, and cultural baggage that both researcher and participant bring to their encounters” (Arendell 1997:342).

2.4 Being at home

Finding a balance between distance and proximity is more than a cognitive problem. Being ‘at home’ refers to the field of emotions as well. Reis 1998: 295

La Ciudad de Mexico, although not being my place of birth, is the city where I have spent most of my school years, where most of my friends live, and the place I consider to be my home. Neither of my parents are Mexican, however, they settled in Mexico City long ago, even before my brother, who is now fifteen, was born. Therefore, besides speaking Spanish fluently, among other things, I consider myself a chilanga.\(^2\) Most of the participants, seven out of nine, had studied or worked at the National University, where I also studied for five years. Seven participants lived in the South of the city, and two of them resided in the same neighborhood where I lived for ten years. We had similar accents, knew people in common, and belonged to the same middle class group with strong ties to the university life, usually having a background in humanities, arts or sciences.

However, doing research in one’s city does not necessarily mean being ‘at home’, in the sense that it does not guarantee proximity to the participants in the study. The concept of ‘at homeness’ introduced by Reis (1998), which refers to “shared experiences and processes of identification”, is most helpful in this regard, because it allows to look at the researcher-researched relationship in a more complex manner, detaching the issue of distance and

\(^2\) Chilango is an informal term to refer to people from Mexico City.
proximity from being or not from a particular geographical location. Going back to Mexico City to do fieldwork, however, did present some immediate advantages. I did not need time to find my way around and did not need to use an interpreter. During interviews participants could speak freely, using slang if needed, making use of cultural references they knew I would share.

Widdowfield (1999) stresses the need for acknowledging and analyzing the prominent role of emotions in academic research. She argues that despite the increasing recognition that “research is not done by someone ‘out there’”, which has made writing up one’s research in the first person a common practice, “the emotions experienced by the researcher and the impact of these in the work undertaken seldom figure in accounts of the research process”. This is important, according to Widdowfield, since “not only emotions can affect the research process in terms of what is studied, by whom and in what way, but they may also influence researcher’s interpretations, and ‘readings’ of a situation” (Widdowfield 1999: 199-200). Participants’ experiences at times ‘struck home’ because, as a daughter, I could not help to compare some of the accounts with my own story. While listening to the interview recordings, I was amazed and touched by the way men in the study knew their children, and the importance most of them assigned to spending as much time with their children as possible. A few times I caught myself feeling uneasy as well, and having mixed feelings that I could not quite understand. It was only after summarizing the last interview that I realized the relationship with my own father had much to do with my motivation for doing this study.

Although I was an insider in many ways, I was also an outsider. The first and most obvious reason for that derived from me not being a man or a parent myself. Retrospectively, I have come to realize that my outsider status was also clear in the expectations I had from people (Gilbert 1994:92). Based on my readings and own experience, I was prepared to find a group of men holding a discourse of engaged fatherhood but with a rather disengaged practice, however, to my surprise, I found the exact opposite.
3. Situating the study sample

3.1 Mexico City

The parenting experiences portrayed here should not be understood as representative of the totality of fathers living in Mexico City, of middle class fathers living in Mexico City, or of any other sub group for that matter. The first and more obvious reason derives from the size of the sample, which is too small to generate any statements that apply to a larger group. Furthermore, and most importantly, the impossibility to generalize stems from the character of the narratives, since the participants’ stories reflect a great diversity of fatherhood discourses and practices, rather than a solitary model. The latter being in line with the findings of previous studies about fatherhood carried out in Mexico. (De Keijzer 1998; Alatorre & Luna 1998; Viveros 2003; Gutmann 2006)

The relevance of the accounts presented is not grounded on their ability to produce general statements about Mexican men or fathers. As it has been stated before, the accounts presented here are a valuable contribution insofar as they improve our understanding of the way men experience fatherhood, something about which still little is known. Recent masculinity studies have stressed the need to overcome “the universalist temptations that haunt gender analysis by situating masculinities in diverse temporal, social and spatial
settings” (Nye 2005: 1939). Taking that into consideration, I will here make an effort to position the sample in relation to a few large-scale trends that directly affect the manner in which, not only the men in the sample but, men in general, experience being a father in Mexico City.

‘La Ciudad de México’ is home to one of five people in Mexico overall. Its nearly twenty million inhabitants make it by far the most populated city in the country, followed by Guadalajara with just over four million and Monterrey with three (Puig-Escudero 2000). Though in the last couple of decades some governmental planning strategies have strived towards the decentralization of Mexico City, tax subsidies and other government actions often make the city more attractive than other areas. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the national predominance of Mexico City will change very much in the coming years.

Roughly 100 million people live in Mexico nowadays, from which 70% are concentrated in urban centers, which is a result of the rapid urbanization and migration processes that took place during the 1950s and 1970s, in which whole families resettled in Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey (Escobar-Latapí 2003; INEGI 2006). In nearly half the cases, the participants’ parents had arrived in the City during the second large wave of migration, and two of the participants had been born in a different state, coming to the capital in order to study an undergraduate course. A third participant, Diego (37), also moved to the city in order to follow a course at the National University, however, he came from Argentina, which made him a different case.

The majority of the men in the study (6) had only one child, and the rest were fathers to two. All except one said they were happy with the number of children they had and, although not always for the same reason, most of them explicitly expressed reluctance to have more children. Time and money limitations were often cited as important factors for deciding not to have more children. When asked about having a third child, this is what Dario replied: ‘Kids are wonderful. But they are also a lot of work: if I had a nanny, a cook, a driver, and lots of money, yes, then I could think of having a third child’.

The latter is very much in line with the overall trend in Mexico. Birth rates throughout the country have plummeted in the past three decades, falling from 5.7 in 1976 to 2.2 in 2006. They are even lower in Mexico City with 1.6. Although certainly much lies behind these numbers, probably what is most important for the scope of this study is that
such demographic transitions are undoubtedly bound to a shift in “the meanings and practices of maternity and paternity, and to gender identities overall” (Gutmann 2006:164). Repeated economic crises, with their subsequent changes in access to resources and services, and ideas about quality of life strongly promoted by family planning policies in the 1980s should also be kept in mind when analyzing this demographic transition (Gammeltoft 1999).³

Education, on the contrary, does place participants within a minor sector of the overall population, since all of them held an undergraduate degree and five had completed, or were enrolled in postgraduate courses. The 2002 National population and housing census found that, from the portion of the population who could potentially go to college, only 8.7% had the opportunity to do so, despite the fact that the number of undergraduate students more than doubled between 1980 and 2001. Higher education is thus still a privilege limited to a small number of people, which markedly contrasts with countries such as for example, the United States and Korea, where the coverage of this particular educational level reaches 40 and 50% respectively (Bustos 2003).

Access to education varies greatly throughout the country, revealing the presence of “continuing and gross inequalities between the poor in rural and urban areas” (Gutmann 2006: 163). While in Mexico City the number of completed years of education for people older than 15 averaged 10.2 in 2005, in the predominantly rural and indigenous state of Chiapas the average was 6.1 years for the same period (INEGI 2006). Contradictions and inequalities are evident in the capital, which has the highest rate of men and women who have attended undergraduate studies (one quarter of the total population), compared to the country’s average rate, which falls to nearly ten percent (Didriksson undated).

Inequality in access to education, however, is much less pronounced between genders than across social classes. Girls are expected to achieve and do achieve roughly the same levels of education as boys, and it is fair to say that education – at least until middle school- “is no longer a male enclave” (Gutmann 2006: 163). Between 1969 and 2000, the number of women in higher education tripled. Of those enrolled in higher education, 50% account for women and 50% for men. This proportion was reached on the national level in 1999,

³ Gammeltoft refers to Vietnam, however, family planning policies for developing countries in this period were formulated at the international level and implemented in several countries.
although at the National University this had already been the case since 1993 (Bustos 2003).

Structural changes, as it has been officially recognized in Mexico and other Latin American countries, have had a profound impact in the configuration of Mexican families. Years of structural adjustments and economic crises such as the ones in 1982 and 1994 have brought about high levels of unemployment and low salaries, and families have adopted strategies that allow them to diversify and increase their income (Jimenez-Guzmán 2003). Consequently, men have ceased to be the only breadwinners in the household. Women, and sometimes children, have gone outside the house to work, though women’s integration into the labor market has been by far more prominent and widespread than that of children. Although feminization of wage labor can be more clearly appreciated among working-class women, it is “a societal change in the sense that women in all social classes participate more intensively in employment and remain working throughout their childbearing years” (Escobar-Latapí 2003:84-85). Whereas during the seventies the higher proportion of working women were single women in their early twenties, nowadays higher participation in the labor market occurs among women in the 35-39 age range, age at which most Mexican women have already formed a family (Instituto de las Mujeres del Distrito Federal 2006). This is reflected in the study sample, since all participants worked outside the home, and all but one of the participant’s partners and ex-partners, also did so.

Changes in the structure of labor force might translate into a shift in power relations in the domestic sphere, possibly tending to more favorable arrangement for women. This matter has been subject of certain debate, and has yet to be documented and further understood (Escobar-Latapí 2003). One of the elements generating discussion is that women, although having integrated massively into the labor market, still get paid a fraction of what men receive (Gutmann 2003). Furthermore, although there is a trend towards greater male participation in domestic affairs, and growing recognition of women’s work and professional achievements, women who work outside the house are still the ones doing most of the housework (Gutmann 2006).

A few studies, however, do report that power relations and negotiation over household affairs have changed to a certain extent. Some studies, among which this one, have found a tendency for more horizontal and democratic power relations in the household, where women and sometimes children participate more actively in decisions
affecting the family (Latapi-Escobar 2003; Jimenez-Guzman 2003; Gutmann 2006). It should be nonetheless kept in mind that gender based inequality and sexist attitudes are still pervasive and often harmful. In the sense that the so far mentioned shifts in the manner “power is manifested and wielded” in the domestic sphere, should not “prevent us from recognizing recurrent element in the wider sociological context”. Domestic violence and rape are examples of such elements, and the main concern of masculinity and gender scholars, feminists, men’s reflection groups, governmental and NGO advocacy efforts, and of course that of affected women (Gutmann 2006).

3.2 Meet the participants

Jorge
Jorge has a background in Biology by the National University (UNAM)\(^4\) and currently works as a laboratory technician at the faculty were he followed the undergraduate course. His wife, Kumi, who has a background in the same subject, holds an administrative post at the same faculty. Together they have a 4-year-old son, Sergio. Kumi, Sergio and Jorge live in an apartment located fairly close to the National University.

Santiago
Santiago is a 33-year-old engineer that works for a federal agency for energy supply. He lives in the Southern area of Mexico City with his wife, Irene, and his 2-year-old daughter, Ana. Santiago did his undergraduate studies at a renowned private university, where he met Irene, who was studying an undergraduate course as well. Irene has a political science background and nowadays works for a newly registered left winged political party.

J. Odiseo
Julio Odiseo (28) has a background in psychology from the National University, where he has been working for the past three years. He lives by himself in a rented studio in the Southern end of the city, located fairly close to both his work and the apartment where his daughter Paikeia, who will turn 2 this year, lives with her mother, Paula.

\(^4\) National Autonomous University of Mexico
Luis Buñuel

Luis Buñuel (34) has a background in Biology from the National University, and is currently writing up the dissertation for a PhD in Biological Sciences, which he hopes to finish during the coming two months. He presently lives from the scholarship he has been granted to follow the postgraduate course, and divides his time between writing at home, and working at the university. Luis has a four-year-old son, Bernardo, and is currently separated from his ex-partner. He lives in the Southern end of Mexico City, in a three-floor house that he shares with his mother, his sister, and his sister’s husband and children, each occupying a different floor.

Diego

Diego (37) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he lived until ten years ago, when he came to Mexico City to do his postgraduate studies in Biological Sciences at the National University. He is now married to a Mexican woman, Frida, and together they have a 3-year-old daughter, named Mariana. The family of three live in a house in the South of the city, and both Diego and Frida work as researchers at the National University.

Rodrigo

Rodrigo (42), his wife Atenea (42) and their two children, Ciro (5) and Ulises (1) live in an apartment in the north of the city, in a street that divides Mexico City with the neighboring state, Edomex. He and Atenea used to sing together in a rock band that was popular during the nineties. Nowadays Rodrigo dedicates most of his time to being a stay-at-home dad, while Atenea supports the family by teaching yoga, giving massages and acupuncture therapy sessions.

Carlos

Carlos (30) has a background in Geography by the National University. He currently shares a house with his mother and sister, in a small rural town located in the south of Mexico City. He is currently separated and has two children, Mateo (4) and Alejandro (2), who live with their mom and two older brothers from a previous relationship. Carlos works at a private company that provides GIS (geographic information systems) related products and services.
Dario

Dario (35) is a professor/academic technician, who works at the Faculty of Sciences of the National University. He holds a PhD in Applied Physics, also from the National University, which he finished in 2005. Next September Dario, his wife Macarena, and his two daughters, Julia (9), and Fernanda (3) will be moving to Western Europe, where he has been offered a postdoc job. The family of four has recently moved back to an apartment owned by Dario’s mother, which will help them to save part of the money they need for moving abroad.

Mauro

Mauro is a 26-year-old biologist from the National University, who has recently settled in Alberta, Canada, where his partner, Clara (31), is now following a PhD course in Human Geography. They have a 3-month-old baby daughter, Luana, who also happens to be my niece by adoption. Mauro arrived in Canada around nine months ago, after graduating from a Masters course back in Mexico. He is currently working as a visiting scholar at the University of Alberta, and next September he will go back to being a student, since he has been accepted in a PhD program, and has been granted with a scholarship for that purpose.
4. Being a father, being a man

4.1 Narratives: emotions and detail

‘Do you want me to tell you about the feelings I had at the time?’ he asked me. ‘Yes’, I replied, ‘tell me everything you want about it’. Luis said that when he accompanied Jeanne to pick up the blood test (pregnancy test), he was terribly nervous, and when the results came positive he felt at first very uneasy. ‘Your first reaction is to wonder, what now? I started thinking about all the projects I was giving up, for which I had been working so hard. After a while you begin to lighten up, and you can start thinking better’. Luis, 34

The relationship between masculinity, fatherhood and emotion remains practically unexplored. Mora (2005) argues that, although often neglected by social sciences, emotions can tell us much about the reproduction and challenging of normative values. Fatherhood, as one of the fundamental dimensions of masculinity, is supposed to embody great part of the symbolic elements of the traditional model of fatherhood, namely responsibility, the ability to procreate and provide for offspring. Research on fatherhood, argues Mora, should not be limited to understanding the link between different masculinity codes and diverse fatherhood practices. Emotional issues should be explored as well as a “signifying liaison between identity and action”, and as motor and reflection of transformation processes (Mora 2005:27). Emotions, he concludes, are situated in space and time and regulated by social and cultural factors, and constitute both a motor of and reflection of change.

Since the focus of the study was on practical activities, I was expecting cut and dry narratives. Instead, men in the study talked at length about their sons’ and daughters’ personalities, favorite activities, favorite cartoons or songs, best friends, and so on. One of them, who happens to be most passionate about films, told me the following about his son’s taste for movies: ‘Bernardo is an excellent film critic and not just a passive viewer, he knows all the characters, dialogues, and can watch a particular film one or two hundred times. We play the characters from his favorite films. Sometimes he tells me that we should be the same one. I think that is nice because it means that he likes us to be similar’.

Generally, participants were proud to share similar passions with their children, and expressed satisfaction when describing an activity that belonged to the father and
daughter/son sphere. When talking about his daughter, this is what one of the participants told me:

Mariana is not a very extroverted person, and whenever she faces a new situation, she likes to observe before exposing herself, physically or emotionally. She is a great observer though, and together we spend a lot of time observing, touching, feeling the texture and the smell of plants...she has come to understand the notion of parenting and growth through observing plants and animals, and she knows that big plants are parents to the small plants, which are the equivalent of babies. Mariana also likes smells and essences, and she has the ability to recognize many different smells with an amazing accuracy. Diego, 37

Participants also expressed feeling uneasy, anxious or angry at given situations, which was in a sense a relief because it contradicted one of my fears, which was getting an overly romanticized picture of their experiences. Santiago, for instance, was made what I perceived as a very honest account of his experience in the labor room. He described it as a very tough experience, since the baby swallowed amniotic fluid at birth and had to receive CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). ‘Frankly’, he said ‘it was terrible’. ‘It was a very tough experience for me really, I mean, it started like something great, when I saw her for the first time, but it developed into something very difficult’.

In her study with divorced fathers, Arendell (1997) found that the majority of men in her sample ignored basic information about their children, such as their birth dates and grades. A small group however, could easily provide not only birth dates, but also the exact times of their children’s birth. She confessed to have reacted with some surprise to the fact that those fathers were so knowledgeable about their children, since they were so strikingly different to most of the participants in her study. Although a direct comparison between her study and mine is not fair, since they are different in many ways, such as in the size of the sample, the location were they were carried out, and the fact that not all of the men in my study were separated, Arendell’s findings were similar to the expectations many people in Mexico had about my study. Therefore, although having explicitly addressed the invitation to my study to men that were actively involved in parenting tasks, I was still somehow pessimistic of what I was going to encounter. I was pleasantly surprised then to listen to the participants’ accounts, since they were filled with details and feelings, which I interpreted as an indication of the intense involvement in their children’s everyday lives.
4.2 We’re having a baby!

Although not always planned, all participants but one affirmed having made the decision to have a child jointly with their partners. The conversation with Santiago is an example of this:

Having Ana was something we decided and planned. In our generation having a baby is something people take for granted after being married for so long, besides it was something we wanted as well. We decided to wait for a while but did not want to postpone it indefinitely. Once we came back from Canada (were they both got their master’s degrees), we started to try for a baby. Irene got pregnant very soon, so it was great.

Whenever having a baby had been a planned decision, pregnancies were programmed to accommodate men’s and women’s work commitments. In two cases, the main reason for planning ahead was the woman’s professional interests. The story of Diego and his partner Frida illustrates this point. They decided to try for a baby a few months before Frida finished her PhD in Molecular and Cell Biology. The reasoning behind this decision was that if they decided to do a postdoc abroad, the baby would be old enough to travel, and integrate into their academic lives without much trouble. Frida was already pregnant when she was finishing writing up the dissertation, and Mariana was four months old when she defended it.

In three of the five cases where pregnancies had come as a surprise, partners were not living together nor had they any plans to do so. In face of the news, couples discussed which way to proceed, taking three different arrangements into consideration. The first was one in which the men would not be involved at all, in the second one men would be involved but couples would live separately, and in the third one men and women would live and raise the child together as a couple. This was different to the traditional model, which in principle foresees two alternatives for men: getting married or not recognizing the child as his. Mauro’s case illustrates this point. Clara and Mauro met at the research institute where he was following a postgraduate course and she was a research fellow. Clara is not Mexican but Spanish, and at the time they met, she had been living and working in Mexico already for several years. Also by the time they started going out, she had been already agreed to do the PhD course she is presently enrolled in. After a few months of being involved, the time had come for Clara to leave Mexico and their future was uncertain. She traveled to Europe,
where she had to attend a congress, and just a few days later, found out she was pregnant. Clara immediately communicated the news to Mauro, who at the time was in Puerto Rico, where he had an academic appointment as well. ‘It was very hard’, Mauro told me, ‘because we were in different places, and our communication was basically through email’. However, he also said that in a sense being apart was a good thing, because it gave them the space to digest the news and reflect upon what they wanted for them as a couple, and what to do about the pregnancy. Clara decided she did want to have the baby. However, she let him know that the fact that she was having a baby did not necessarily mean it had to be a project for them as a couple. However, after giving the issue some thinking, he decided he did want to have a baby as well, but he wanted to be involved, and share this experience as partners.

All the couples in a situation similar to the one described above, opted for getting involved and eventually living together. However, none got officially married at the time. This is interesting because it indicates that participants did not necessarily attached procreating to being a father. In the same line, being married was not a fundamental condition for exercising fatherhood. The fathers’ involvement has been maintained to date, even though some had decided to separate from the child’s mother after one or two years. At the end of or interviews, separated fathers would usually dedicate a considerable amount of time to discussing changes to the traditional model of the family. Luis, for instance, who is separated and has a five-year old son, said that he felt he was in a very unusual situation. He told me that despite being separated, he and his ex-partner shared responsibilities and tasks, and relied on one another. ‘We’re a different type of family, Bernardo is our link, otherwise we would not speak to each other. We see each other on a daily basis, we’re not single parents’, he added.

Talking about deciding to have a child sometimes led us to discuss abortion. Although participants felt differently about the issue, nearly half of them had had one with the same or a previous partner. While recounting those episodes as shared experiences, participants also believed the last word belonged to women. Dario and Macarena’s case is an example of that. They had been discussing the use of a contraceptive method but were using none at the time Macarena got pregnant. The pregnancy still came as shocking news since it meant a radical change in their lives. Initially Dario did not consider an abortion, but after hearing of other’s experiences he decided to ask Macarena how she felt about it. ‘She
burst into tears’ he recounted, ‘I understood that it was not my body or my choice, and did not raise the issue again’.

4.3 Pregnancy and birth

‘Though I had seen Luana in the ultrasound scans and I had pictured her in my head many times, it is never like you imagine, it is like suddenly you open a door and your daughter is there. It is a strange feeling, to see that being, partly foreign to you and partly familiar, and at the same time you know it means so much to you. It is like, the next second, you’re already a father. It is mind-blowing’.

Mauro, 26

Compared to deciding whether to have a baby or to get involved in her upbringing or not, which for some was a stressful moment, pregnancy was unanimously described as a happy period. The issue of men’s involvement during pregnancy was brought to the table by asking participants if they had attended any kind of birth preparation course. After asking
that question, I would immediately say something like, ‘you know, some couples are very fond of these courses’, so as to indicate that I did not consider preparation courses as the only way to be involved during pregnancy. Instead of a homogenous way of involvement, I found very different styles of what came across to me as very engaged participation. Men in the study reported attending to all medical appointments, join their partners when buying newborn clothing and other appliances, and would sing, talk, play music and read books to the babies before they were born. Participants were also very knowledgeable about pregnancy and labor, and by their own initiative, men in the study sample would resort to different sources in order to learn about physiological and psychosocial aspects of these processes.

Luis’ experience constitutes a good example of a case where no preparation course was followed, but alternative sources of information and support were used. During the pregnancy Luis was working at the University and Jeanne had a job at a government dependency for biodiversity management. Neither earned much money but they managed to get by. Luis described the pregnancy period as the happiest he ever was with Jeanne, since during that period they had no arguments whatsoever. I asked Luis if they had followed any kind of birth preparation course, and he replied that at the time they were so happy about the pregnancy that they just saw it as a natural thing, and did not consider it necessary to attend one. Plus, he explained that because both Jeanne and he had a background in biology, they knew more or less what to expect, and what kind of risks were involved. Whenever they had doubts they would resort to books or the Internet, and both their mothers were there to answer their questions.

The expression ‘we were pregnant’ was used in the narratives of three participants. That caught my attention during the interviews and made me do a quick search for studies that explored the use of the expression in a Latin American context. The quick search turned out not to be so quick after all, and not very fruitful either since little research has been done on the subject. Tania Salem, however, wrote a doctorate dissertation on the ‘pregnant couple’ phenomenon in Brazil, which she described in a subsequent article as follows:

The expression denotes, in the first place, the desirability of intense participation and involvement of the male partner during pregnancy. In the same line, the presence of the father during birth is taken as a sine qua non condition. Pregnancy and labor are, in sum, conceived as experiences that,
Being a father, being a man

more than with the extended family, concern the couple and, as such, should be shared ‘in two’. Salem 1987

I found the above to be basically true for all participants, regardless of the use of the phrase, or their attendance at birth preparation courses. However, participation of grandmothers, especially during the immediate period before and after the birth of the child, as it will be shown in the coming sections, was also most welcomed by most of the couples. Men often reported asking questions to their mothers or mothers-in-law, and childbirth was indeed something shared ‘in two’ but, before and after, grandmothers played a significant role.

Mauro and Clara, who had recently settled in Canada where they did not have any close relatives, looked for that support elsewhere. Clara had heard doulas were very common in Canada, so when Mauro arrived they decided to get in touch with one. Mitzi, their doula, also provided them with additional printed and audiovisual material, gave them a short preparation course, and answered their many questions. Mauro said that having a doula was a great experience, especially because they did not have close friends or family around, to what he added that ‘a doula is like your mother, but without the emotional implications and attachments. Plus, she has a lot of experience and knows what the woman is going through’.

In Mexican public clinics and hospitals, men are not allowed to be in the labor room with their partners. Two participants had their children delivered in the public health system. However, they both saw that option as a constraint to their participation. One of them tried to compensate by having the ultrasound scans done in a small private clinic, where the appointments could last longer and he and his partner could ask more questions. Carlos said he really enjoyed the ultrasound sessions and added that he did not miss any of them. Odiseo was in a similar position. His daughter was born in a third level hospital because his partner, Paula, had a chronic condition that increased the risk of complications during pregnancy and delivery. They attended two different birth courses, one imparted at the hospital, which was more ‘scientifically oriented’, and another one that had more of a holistic approach. Odiseo said he had enjoyed the courses, even attending by himself when Paula could not make it to a particular lesson. Although they still hoped to deliver in a maternity clinic if everything went well, and had even saved some money for that purpose,
they also knew chances were that the birth was going to take place at the hospital as initially planned. ‘It was at times frustrating’, Odiseo said, ‘knowing that I was not going to put in practice all I had learned in the course’.

All participants that could afford going to a private hospital chose to do so. In all cases, c-sections included, they expressed having enthusiastically opted to be present in the labor room. Some took pictures, and some engaged in active coaching, while others were just amazed observers. In two cases, however, men expressed feeling more like a witness than anything else. The following fragment of the conversation with Diego is an example of this:

At first I did not know exactly what was going to happen, the baby would not come out, and the doula would tell me how to place the pillows behind Frida’s back to help the process. I tried to help in that part, but honestly, I did not feel that useful during labor. I think the doula was helping much more than I was. But being there at the moment Mariana was born was very exciting anyway.

While the importance of being in the labor room was never put into question, men openly expressed feeling afraid, surprised, shocked, astonished and, at times, powerless and not very useful. However, as it was the case with Diego, men would usually make a positive balance of their experience in the labor room, describing it variously as ‘exciting’, ‘amazing’, and ‘mind-blowing’!

4.4 Long nights…

Listening to men’s accounts regarding the first months after the birth of their children was most interesting. These were periods filled with expressions of joy and amazement, but also marked by tensions and uncertainty, and, above all, tiredness. Talking about the first long nights was also interesting as it provided a forum for participants to discuss some of their ideas about the differences between motherhood and fatherhood. Four of them stressed the biological nature of motherhood as an essential feature, one to which there was no way around. Despite the biological character of motherhood which, in the eyes of some participants, made women’s involvement during the first phase more relevant than men’s, all but one expressed that waking up at nights to attend to their babies was an important part of
being a father. However, not all participants were involved in their newborns’ first nights to the same extent.

Work and financial aspects, which until that point of our conversations had remained somehow in the background, acquired critical relevance and invariably emerged throughout the stories. During the pregnancy, in all cases but one, men and women had full time jobs. Women worked until the third trimester in order to use most of their maternity time after their babies were born, and all men were able to negotiate some time off work, ranging from a couple of days to one month and a half. Mexican men that are willing to take time off work when their babies are born, have to ask for it informally, since they are not entitled to any kind of leave for that purpose.

Participants who enjoyed more favorable working conditions, either because they held higher positions or tenure, or earned higher salaries, experienced the first long nights as an overall exciting period that could sometimes be tiresome. They had the basic needs comfortably covered, could negotiate relatively flexible arrangements regarding working hours and, besides having their families’ support, had the resources to hire extra help from nurses and maids. This was the case of three men in the study. The experience of Santiago can be seen as representative of this group. Santiago and his partner Irene were working full time when their daughter was born. Irene took the three months of maternity leave after the baby was born, and not 45 days before birth and 45 days after birth, as it is established by law. Santiago asked for one month of paid leave, which he could get because he had not asked for holidays in quite a long time. Once back home from the hospital, Irene and Santiago hired a full time nurse to help them out with the special care Ana needed at the beginning, due to some complications at birth, such as injected medication and antibiotics. At first they intended to rely on the nurse just for a short period, but after a while they felt well adapted to her and decided to rely on that help throughout Ana’s first year. During the first month Santiago, Irene and the nurse would wake up to feed Ana with formula. Santiago affirmed he did not recall that period to be particularly exhausting. Although they had the nurse’s help and the choice not to wake up at night, they both did so because, as he explained, ‘the excitement is such that you do feel like waking up’. Also, he continued, ‘that is why I asked for a month of vacation, to be with my daughter. I did not ask for that month to get eight hours of sleep’. After a while the nurse started coming at seven in the morning
until seven in the afternoon, when either Santiago or Irene (after the maternity leave ended) were already back from work.

On the other hand, participants that had an unstable working situation, or a lower salary, had less negotiation power at work, and usually worked longer hours. Carlos is one of the men grouped in this second category. This is partly how he described his experience during his first months as a father:

I was so desperate to work that I took a job at a furniture shop. I started at eight. It took me two hours to get there and two to go back. The job I had did not allow for Laura (his partner at the time) to stay home longer that her leave, so she went back to work immediately after. Plus, we had to support two other kids (kids from his partner’s previous relationship). She went back to her work at the diner, but was transferred to the night shift. I would pick her up everyday from work at one in the morning. And then during the night I would wake up with the baby’s crying. I would sleep in the bus to make up for the time I was not sleeping. I just couldn’t help during the week. Friday and Saturday I could attend to my son at nights. He inspired such tenderness in me. I often sang him a song that John Lennon wrote for his son. I did not want to miss those moments with him.

Money is certainly not the only conditioning element affecting men’s involvement in taking care of their newborns. The experience of being a father could not be properly understood without taking into account personal views and history, the balancing of engendered power relations within the household, or the way broader discourses about fatherhood are appropriated. However, a comfortable financial situation is undoubtedly a critical enabling factor. As we could see in the two cases presented, men’s working conditions greatly shaped their experiences, not only regarding the kind of resources they could rely on, but also in terms of the amount and quality of the time they could spend with their children. The case of Dario is most interesting in this regard. He recounted his experience as a story of change. As it can be seen below, his performance as a father radically changed between the birth of his first and second daughter, who are five years apart. Dario’s account is a nice example of the way the elements cited above interplay to produce different ways of being a father.

At the time his first daughter Julia was born, Dario was working full time as a high school teacher, and was simultaneously writing his undergraduate dissertation. Macarena, his partner, had quit her job a few days before finding out about the pregnancy. Dario told me he recalled being tired all the time during his daughter’s first months. He would come
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home around 7pm to his in-laws’ place, have dinner, help with Julia for a little while and he would go then to bed exhausted. Some nights he would help with the baby but he recalls usually feeling just too tired. At the beginning, Macarena took care of Julia practically by herself, until one day she warned Dario that if he did not start helping he would have to leave, and since he did not want to leave, he began to get a bit more involved in taking care of Julia. However, according to Dario, it was not until five years later, when his second daughter was born, that he ‘realized he was a father’, and ‘understood what fatherhood was all about’.

I told Dario I was curious to know if, before the baby was born, he and Macarena had ever discussed the way they wanted to ‘split’ the parenting tasks between them. ‘Not at all’ he replied. He added that, ironically, both his mother (a psychologist) and his father (a programmer) had always worked outside the home, leaving Dario and his brothers a great deal of time with the nanny. However, he told me, ‘when Julia was born, I immediately interpreted my father role as working hard and Macarena interpreted her mother role as taking care of Julia full time’. The first three years with Julia he worked long days on his PhD and Macarena stayed home looking after the baby. Though Dario slowly became more and more involved, according to him, the big change was still to come.

‘When Fernanda was born things were totally different’, said Dario, and explained, ‘the role I played and still do is strikingly different. I understood that what Macarena had needed all this time was someone to support her, to look after the girls, as a father’. When Fernanda was a baby, for instance, he would wake up and help at nights. ‘Motherhood is a biological thing, the mother is the one who has to breastfeed and there is no way around that. However, as a man, there is much you can do, being there, helping, coaching’, he told me. During the first three months he was the one attending to Fernanda during the night, and would wake up Macarena only if the baby was hungry. ‘This time I did everything I could’ he said. He also got much more involved with the housework: ‘when I get home I wash the dishes, sweep and clean, you know, anything Macarena needs’. Partly because of the birth of his second daughter and partly due to some disappointments at work, Dario started to cut down on his working hours to spend more time at home with the family. Their financial situation was also different upon Fernanda’s arrival. As opposed to when Julia was born, the expenses of the private hospital were covered by Dario’s insurance as a university
employee. Also around that time, Dario’s mother moved out, lending her apartment to Dario and his newly extended family. Not paying rent for a while significantly eased their financial situation: ‘to put it bluntly’, he said, ‘we could finally go out for sushi without killing our budget’. Moving to the new apartment marked a shift in Dario’s attitude towards their living space as well. He told me he did not care much about those matters during the first years together, leaving Macarena all decisions regarding Julia and the house. This time he wanted things to change and started to care about the apartment renovations. ‘I wanted to be involved and I wanted a fresh start’ he said, ‘so I painted all the walls white when we moved in’.

Parental support, as we can note from Dario’s accounts, was also an important part of the picture. Dario, however, was not the only man in the study counting on help from his parents. Parents were often a major source of financial support. Rather than giving money to their children, they would instead receive them into their homes, and cover part of their living expenses such as food and services. Half of the men in the study moved in and out of their parents’ and in-laws’ homes according to their financial needs and, in a couple of cases, moving in with the parents was also a strategy to save money for eventually buying a place of their own. Latapí-Escobar (2003), found a very similar kind of inter-generational cooperation among young two-career couples from Monterrey, Guadalajara and Mexico City. He suggests this is largely the product of the differences between the generation of the grandparents, who benefited from Mexico’s rapid urbanization and modernization processes, which took place between the fifties and the seventies, and that of their own children, often beset by economic woes and by a situation in which two jobs are necessary merely to get by. As in Latapi-Escobar’s study, I also found that intergenerational assistance was of such relevance that often couples defined the place where they lived based on the proximity to one of the parental homes. However, while he reported that usually young couples chose to live close to the wife’s mother, couples in the present study could have just as easily lived close to the men’s mother.

All participants also relied heavily on their parents or in-laws for extra help in taking care of their children. Four of them, for instance, were invited to spend the first month of their babies’ lives with in-laws or parents in order to get advice about their newborns and help during the day. In three other cases, couples stayed at their own apartments, but one of
the grandmothers moved in with them for one or two weeks. However, when grandmothers helped with the baby, their role consisted in providing moral support and coaching. They would also be there as a backup person, keeping an eye on the baby if parents were on the shower, or out doing grocery shopping. In other words, grandmothers were there to provide additional support, and not to replace the father. Most fathers did not expect or want that to be the case, but grandmothers did not expect or were willing to play that role either. Odiseo, for example, admitted he assumed his mother in-law would be around during the first days to help with the baby. However, the kind of help he and his mother in-law had in mind turned out to be different. When it came the time for Paikeia’s first bath, he turned to Paula’s mother and asked if she could do it, to which she responded with a loud and clear ‘you go ahead and do it’. ‘I have to admit I am most grateful to Paula’s mom in that respect’, he said, ‘because it helped me to assume right from the start that the baby was already there’. The grandmother rather than the grandfather was nevertheless always the one more actively engaged in providing support, including those who worked outside the home. It would be interesting to see if that pattern is followed or modified in the future, that is, how will men in the study support their own children if they decide to become parents as well.
4.5 Everyday life

‘Do we have what it takes?’ Mitzi, 2007

I wake up in the morning and play with Ana. Since she was a baby she used to wake up very early in the morning. I’m a morning person too. Depending on our schedule for the day either Irene or I take Ana to daycare. If one of us has an early appointment, the other one takes Ana to day care, and *vice versa*. Once a week Ana spends the afternoon with Irene’s parents and once a week with my parents. Two days per week Ana stays in daycare until six in the afternoon and her mother picks her up after work. Most Fridays I finish up early at work so I’m the one who picks up Ana and is with her the rest of the day. We (Irene and Santiago) try to be at lunchtime with Ana but these days usually just one of us gets to do it, depending on who has the time that day. Santiago, 33

Although all arrangements described in this study varied according to each participant’s particular situation, they all shared similarities with Santiago’s typical day. All participants were involved in several tasks during the day and usually their days were organized around their work and the children. Men’s accounts included tasks such as bathing, feeding, reading, playing, doing their kids’ laundry, taking them to the pediatrician and giving them the prescribed medication when needed.

In a study about fatherhood meanings and practices among low and middle class men, also carried out in Mexico City, Alatorre Rico and Luna (2000) found that men’s and women’s obligations regarding their children were expected to be and were strikingly
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different from one another. According to the men and women interviewed in their study, 
women were considered to be responsible for cleaning, washing, ironing, preparing the food 
and looking after the children. Men, on the other hand, were expected to help (their 
emphasis) women with these chores. In very few cases, reported the authors, men viewed 
domestic chores and childrearing as their own responsibility as well. Men were as a rule 
expected to provide the main or the only income to support the family and, as far as 
children were concerned, they were expected to provide moral guidance, participate in 
leisure activities, and sometime to help with school related chores.

Such differences between men’s and women’s tasks were not found in the present 
study. Some men expressed an awareness that their style of parenting was not very 
common, since other people, such as teachers, doctors, and other parents did not expect 
them to be as involved as their partners. I asked Santiago, for instance, if there were any 
activities regarding his daughter Ana that were exclusive to him or his wife. ‘No’, was his 
immediate answer. He told me he had noticed that other people assumed that was the case, 
like Ana’s teachers or her pediatrician. He then said: ‘Even when I’m the one taking my 
daughter to the doctor’s office, he tells me to communicate to Irene how to give Ana the 
medicines, though I give her the medicines too!’

Participants were involved in ‘indispensable’ tasks, such as their child’s personal 
hygiene (bathing, clipping nails, etc) or taking them to the doctor; in tasks more related to 
housework, such as cooking and doing the laundry; and leisure activities such as going to 
the movies, playing, drawing, singing, or going on short trips to the countryside. My 
impression was that similar importance was given to all tasks, which was confirmed by 
some participants directly. Being involved with the children was usually linked with being 
involved with domestic chores. Participants generally also swept, cleaned, cooked and 
washed, unless they had a maid, in which case neither they nor their partners dedicated 
much time to those activities.

Throughout the years, the amount of time men and women allocated to those 
activities varied depending on the circumstances. Usually partners relied on one another, 
even those who were separated, and whenever one of them was less present, the other 
partner would compensate for that time and activities. One again taking Santiago’s as an 
example; Santiago described the bond with his daughter Ana as a very strong one, and said
he felt truly happy about seeing his daughter every day, and with the amount of time he got to be with her. Around the time of our interview, however, it had been a very busy time at Irene’s job. She had to be away a few weekends and, during the week, work meetings finished late at night. Hence, sometimes Ana and Santiago did not see Irene in days. Santiago felt this situation affected Ana to a certain extent, therefore he was trying to compensate for the time Irene was not there so that their daughter did not feel lonely or unattended. Although he knew this situation was temporary, he wished it would quickly go back to normal. When I asked him about any aspect he would change from his parenting arrangement, this was the only issue he mentioned. I then asked him if he was happy with the time Irene generally allocated for her work, apart from this busy period. Santiago said he was generally OK with it and, as an example, told me about a deal Irene had made with her previous employer, in which she was able to leave the office early two days per week to spend a bit more time with Ana. Santiago added that Irene is ‘a great negotiator and a very competent woman, so she can reach these types of agreements without compromising the quality of her work’. ‘I believe we’re doing fine’, he continued, ‘soon Ana will go to school, where she will spend more hours, and will probably attend other lessons in the afternoon. We as parents cannot give up our professional projects. Besides, I think we do a good job combining our activities with taking care of her (Ana). It is a matter of supporting each other, and filling in for one another in case something comes up’.

The men who were less involved, were usually those who did not live with their children. This was a matter of concern for them, and also a central issue in the arguments with ex-partners. The three separated men in the study were engaged in a permanent negotiation with their partners about the time they spent with their children. When asked about what they wished was different from their present arrangements, they all expressed that although they knew it was not possible, they would like their kids to live with them full time. They all reported striving to reach an arrangement where the kids spent an equal amount of time with their mother and father, something which they hoped to accomplish in the near future. This latter is contrary to findings from other studies about separated fathers (Alatorre Rico & Luna 2000; De Keijzer 2000; Arendell 1997), where men sought to have, and had little contact with their children. Being able to share more of the ‘indispensable’ and
‘housework’ tasks was an argument separated men in this study used with their partners in order to gain more time with their children. An example of that can be found below.

Odiseo, one of the separated fathers, picks his daughter up from daycare three of four days per week. He takes her to the office and then to whatever errands he has to do that day. In the evening, around eight or nine, he drops Paikeia at his ex-partner’s apartment, where he sometimes puts her clothes in the washing machine, or washes her bottles. Odiseo told me he would like to increase the time he gets to spend with Paikeia, and said that little by little he had been gaining ground in that respect. Besides spending several afternoons with her, sometimes he takes her on weekend trips. ‘When I have her with me during the weekend I have the chance to deal with everything: clothing, food, bath, medicines, everything’. One of the arguments he gave Paula to get more time with Paikeia, was that since he was the one who got to be with her during leisure time such as weekends, family reunions, and parties, Paula would probably later on regret not sharing those more relaxed moments with Paikeia. Plus, looking ahead, if things were to remain the way they were, he would not be there to help their daughter with homework and other daily duties that are usually a bit of a struggle.

Parenting tasks were not always equally distributed among men and women. Men and women were just as likely to participate less or more at a given time. Furthermore, in almost all the stories, partner’s engagement changed throughout the years, and usually men’s and women’s participation averaged similarly. This of course is based on one side of a story that necessarily has two versions. Unfortunately, perceptions and expectations of women about the parenting arrangements described by men, could not be included in this study, and are impossible to infer. Having women’s views would add enormously to the picture, even though I am most convinced that most of what men told me was, according to them, basically the truth. However, partners might not always have the same perception of what constitutes a ‘great’ amount of time, a ‘fair’ arrangement, a ‘stressful’ period, or ‘fully’ relying on one another. I have the impression, however, most of the partners and ex-partner’s accounts would not differ too much from those of the participants, at least regarding parenting tasks. Half way into the only interview held in a participant’s home, the wife arrived at the apartment with the younger son. The husband took the son to one of the rooms for a moment, during which I had the chance to have a short chat with the wife,
Atenea, and ask her a couple of questions I had already asked her husband. To my relief, responses were remarkably similar.

4.6 Their own fathers

Although one of the participants interestingly portrayed his father’s performance in a way that almost mirrored his own, the rest of the men in the sample did start their accounts expressing that things back then and now were totally different. According to de Keijzer, the traditional model of the father, which is also the one that currently predominates, is that of the father-breadwinner. This type of father, he argues, feels incapable of looking after his children or doing domestic chores. Being involved in the early development and care of his children is not considered important within this model, and a close relationship will only be desired if the child is a boy, and that only after the son can speak (De Keijzer 2000: 224). When analyzing the participants’ accounts of their fathers, however, I could never find that traditional model as such. Nearly all participants did refer to the relationship with their fathers as different to the one they now had with their own children. However, during the first interview, I would come across accounts as the following:

My dad has a special gift for children. Things were completely different though. My dad is from San Luis Potosí (a northern Mexican state). He grew up in a farm and was educated with beatings. He also hit me. It was very different. They (his parents) told me to do things but never explained me why. I don’t want my kids to go through that, so I always explain things to my kids. Here in Xochimilco5 my friends had a very traditional education. (For them) The woman stays home and the man goes to work. With me it was different, because my mom always worked. I stayed often with a nanny. Once, I had to do an exercise at school (primary school), where we had to describe who did what at home. I remember I said both my mom and dad worked, ironed and cooked. But my classmates had written down that their dad worked and their mom was in charge of all the housework. I remember at that time I even thought that what I had written was wrong. I was very different from them. I

5 Xochimilco is a neighborhood in the south of the city that was originally a small village that was absorbed by the booming growth of Mexico City during the second half of the 20th century. Therefore, everyday life in Xochimilco is a fusion, at times contradictory and tense, between old traditions and the hectic modern urban life (Fabian Gonzalez, Human Geographer, personal communication).
thinks I look after my kids so much because my dad also took care of me. He would read me books and thanks to him I acquired the habit of reading. With my kids I think I tend to worry a lot like my mom, and I encourage them in their school activities as my dad did with me. I think I grew up to believe it was important to look after my kids because of them. Carlos, 30

When putting all the narratives about the participants’ fathers together, it was impossible to order them in any kind of continuum. Most of the narratives were a mixture of involvement and absence, of what were supposed to be old and new schemes. In general, however, participants affirmed being more involved in parenting activities than their own fathers, and spending far more time with their own children. In some cases this was so to a dramatic extent. Two participants were particularly critical about their father’s performance, and made a conscious effort to distance themselves from that. One of them, Luis, an Ecologist by training, explained the situation very clearly:

I’m going to explain this to you in statistical terms. The difference between the two relationships is statistically significant. It is a numerical thing. My father never kissed me nor told me he loved me, and not a day goes by without Bernardo receiving more than ten kisses from his dad. You can see it is very different.

In some cases (4), participants affirmed having a close relationship with their fathers, but also recognized they did not spend much time with them while growing up. Often fathers were not around much because they ‘worked all the time’ (Rodrigo), which sometimes meant traveling for long periods. This parenting arrangement took place in families were the mother was dedicated full time to their children, but also in cases were mothers worked outside the home. The experience of Diego, who was the eldest of five brothers, is representative of this kind of arrangement. When asked to compare his relationship with Mariana (his 3-year-old daughter), with the one he had with his own father when he was a child, this is what he replied: ‘Things were very different. I have to say I don’t recall much about the relationship with my father when I was as young as Mariana. My father used to work a lot, and while he was the one who took me to school everyday, he was not around much’.

Almost all men in the study mentioned aspects that were different between the two relationships, among which aspect they did not want to repeat with their own children. Odiseo, for instance, maintained having a good relationship with his father, and recalled the
time spent with him as good experiences and great learning. However, after his parents’
divorce, Odiseo’s father moved on with his life, and eventually the time he spent with his
son diminished greatly. That, Odiseo told me, is something he does not want to repeat with
his daughter Paikeia.

Besides time spent with children, which was by far the most cited difference, men in
the study often made comments indicating that the father-son relationship was more vertical
in the past compared to now. Two participants, one of whose account was provided above,
told me that when they had grown up, parents did not explain to their children the logic
informing orders or decisions. Children were told what to do and parents always had, at
least in principle, the last word. Correctives often entailed physical punishment, either with
the bare hand or with a belt, which was the way three of the participants were educated. The
three of them also hit their children occasionally, all of them admitting doing it more often
than their partners. Although, according to them, intensity and frequency of this kind of
punishment was minimal compared to what they experienced during childhood. One of the
men in the study told me that, while growing up, he had also witnessed much violence
between his father and mother, including physical violence. Luis cited that as one of the
reasons why he decided to end the relationship with his ex-partner Jeanne, since he felt it
was better for Bernardo to interact with his parents separately, rather than seeing them
arguing all the time. Besides Luis’ case, no other participant reported something similar
about their parents’ relationships. Furthermore, participants made no reference whatsoever
to any form of physical violence between them and their partners or ex-partners.

4.7 Role models?

Usually, men in this study were very critical of their friends’ or acquaintances’
fathering styles and, instead of seeing them as role models, referred to elements they viewed
as negative. Two participants, however, did make reference to positive elements. One of
them, Dario, immediately mentioned three or four friends that, though with different styles,
and despite being at home much less than him, he considered to be present and dedicated
fathers. Managing time intelligently, being affectionate, setting limits and spending quality
Being a father, being a man

time with their children were some of the positive aspects Dario identified in his friends’ role as fathers.

The idea behind asking participants to use men as other points of reference was that, positioning themselves in relation to others would help to draw their own picture, and therefore help me to better understand their own experience. In his chapter on English men’s talk and discourse about fatherhood and the construction of discourse and identities, Martin Robb argues that the negotiation of personal identities involves positioning oneself in relation both to external discourses and to other people, whether real or imagined (Davies and Harre 1990 in Robb 1997:126). Although drawing a line from others’ performance is also a way to position oneself, it is interesting to note, that men in the study only brought other men into their narratives when asked to do so, and not before. One of the participants was in fact somehow reluctant to that idea. When asked to look among other fathers he knew or were friends with, for positive aspects that were striking to him about their fathering styles, Santiago told me that compared with guys that have children the same age as his daughter he, perhaps due to his particular circumstances or personality, was the one most involved in his child’s daily activities. However, comparing himself with other male friends was something he did not feel to be of much use, since ‘your life is your own business’ (cada quien su vida). Another father also replied in a similar line. ‘No, I don’t see it that way’, said Carlos, ‘on the contrary. The men I’ve seen who are separated. I see them and think: I don’t want to be like them. They neglect their kids, don’t give their kids’ mother any money, and brag about having children with more than one woman. I don’t think I have taken any other men’s experience as a role model’.

Time, whether its management, allocation or quality, was a recurring theme in all but one response. Luis, for instance, said that his closest reference of another separated father was very different, because this friend did not see his daughter but once a month, and that was something he did not like. Luis explained further: ‘I believe it is a trade-off, the same as in Ecology (his area of expertise): you can’t do everything at the same time. Either you engage in several activities and disregard that part (taking care of your child), or you put certain things on hold for a while and take care of your son’. Another participant, Rodrigo, asserted in this regard: ‘No. I compare them with me, and no. They spend far less time with
their kids than me. I have a good relationship with them (his children), we get along just fine’.

Odiseo, on the other hand, referred to the quality of the time spent with children, a concern that emerged several times in his account. When asked to think of elements that struck him, for whatever reason, from another father’s performance, he told me about a friend who was living a similar situation (separated). This person had a PhD and a permanent research position at the University, and had now a more comfortable position to ‘sit back and enjoy his child’. Plus, he had ‘fulfilled an academic interest’, something to which Odiseo would like to dedicate more time in the future.

Two other participants cited the division of parenting tasks between partners in their responses. One of them, referred to an arrangement that he perceived as negative. Jorge told me that he and his wife were friends with another couple, in which the wife had stopped working after the first child was born. ‘We’ve seen that dedicating all the time for the kids has been very complicated for her, because she feels frustrated. She studied something related to computer sciences. We have not seen her complain or say she wants to separate, although she maybe does so and we don’t know about it. But when we talk with her she does say it is very tough. He (the husband) keeps traveling, and the absences are very long, so we don’t envy them, not really’. Mauro, on his part, replied with a series of impressions of what he perceived to be the way of being a father in Canada, which he saw as positive, and compared it at times with what he had seen back in Mexico. This is what he told me: ‘Here, the father-child relationship is very open. I mean, it is socially well accepted. You see in the street many men with their children, playing or just passing, alone (his emphasis), and that is nice. It is funny, because you see that gender roles here are markedly defined as well. You see, at least in this city, that men are the ones who barbecue, and drive big pick-ups, however when it comes to parenting tasks, you don’t see much difference’.
4.8 Paternity leave

Societal norms into which people discover themselves born and reared – that is, an “inherited consciousness” – in interact with individual decision making and practical consciousness, leading people to acquiescence to or to challenge the status quo in the lives of their infants, and in their own lives as caretakers. It is an ideological concern intimately connected to a practical one. Gutmann 2006:75

Talking about paternity leaves led conversations every time into the public sphere. While some men limited their opinions to discussing the likelihood of paternity leaves becoming official in Mexico in the near future, others pointed out that leaves were just the tip of the iceberg as far as public policies to foster engaged fatherhood were concerned. In general, paternity leaves were considered an important, necessary and even urgent matter. However, just as it happened when I brought up birth preparation courses as a form of participation during pregnancy, parental leaves were the departure point from which participants elaborated on their own views and concerns. This time, men in the study talked about fatherhood as a collective practice, one that was highly affected by prevalent societal norms and constrained by structural factors.

During our interviews, men insisted that in order to mainstream men’s participation in childrearing, much had to change, not only in paper but in practice as well. Participants’ outlook on change was often a pessimistic one, for which they gave several reasons. Odiseo, for instance, strongly believed that paternity leaves were not going to become official any time soon. As other participants, the reason he gave me for that was that due to the state of the country’s economy, it was impossible for the Mexican pensions system to absorb additional leaves. He nevertheless believed the issue to be of great importance, and extended the argument to other parental benefits. Odiseo told me that nowadays all parental benefits at work are exclusive to women, such as daycare and leaves. He expressed mixed feelings about the responsible fatherhood discourse, since it was not realistic to talk about true engagement as long as public policies to enable men’s involvement in practice were lacking.

According to another participant, much had to be improved regarding women’s benefits as well. Santiago explained that the time established for the official maternity leave of 45 days before and 45 days after birth was not just insufficient but nonsensical. He strongly felt that the first 4 to 6 months, while the baby was being breastfed, were critical for
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the child, and the presence of the mother was essential, even more so than that of the father. 'Improvements have first to be made regarding the maternity leave', he argued further, 'before we, as a society, can even begin to question ourselves whether is it appropriate for fathers to take a leave or even to take it instead of the mother'.

However, participants usually said that establishing leaves by law was just part of the problem. Laws cannot be enforced, I often heard, if practices are not socially accepted. Mauro, for instance, told me: 'maybe they (paternity leaves) could happen at the policy level, but I think it is unlikely that things are going to change in practice as well'. Mauro explained that in the academic environment where he used to work, it is hard for women to take their maternity leave without having their work affected negatively. ‘Sometimes women are not granted positions because they might get pregnant, and lower their productivity at least for the first months’, he said. Mauro explained further that the academic system is not set up to absorb the time people are absent on leave, because there are not enough resources and also because maternity and/or paternity leaves are not seen as a priority. He closed his argument by saying that another point against paternity leaves was that Mexican society is in general very sexist, in the sense that taking care of children is thought to be a women’s endeavor:

I haven’t personally had the experience of being a father in Mexico, because Luana was already born here (Canada). However, I do have the impression that parenting is very much associated with women only. Also here, people usually turn to Clara when they want to know anything about the baby. In the childcare center interview, for example, the woman (doing the interview), would only address Clara, and would not even look at me. Although, to be sure I’d need to experience being a dad there, I think this kind of things happen even more often in Mexico, because children are thought to belong to the realm of women.

Luis had a similar opinion, but just like the other separated fathers, he introduced legal custody of children into our conversation about leaves and other parental benefits:

Well, it is part of the same thing (paternity leaves and shared custodies). People’s first reaction is always to associate children with motherhood, and I don’t see why this has to be like that.
Luis stressed that men and women should have the same rights and obligations regarding parenthood and, except for breastfeeding, they should share the same tasks. This rights and obligations, he explained, should be acknowledged in the law, but also by society at large. To which he added:

The social side of it is perhaps even more important than the legal one. You can make policies and laws about paternity leaves and other things, but if it is not socially accepted, which in Mexico isn’t right now, it is difficult for things to change.

When talking about societal norms and expectations it was interesting to hear that often participants would share their reflections about the fact that society was changing and new practices and models had to be created along the way. Several men referred to the structure of the family, which they believed to have suffered great transformations from the previous to the present generation. Carlos’ account is a good example of that:

I was talking about the rising rate of divorce with my sister in law. I told her that was happening because women would not patiently endure like before. They are now more independent. But if that is to happen, and (consequently) it is becoming more likely for men and women to be single parents, then the concept of society and family has to change accordingly. They are always saying that the family is the foundation of society, and their concept of family is the father, mother and children. If families that don’t follow this structure start to grow in number, things have to change. ‘This is dangerous’, she said. ‘No’, I replied, ‘it is dangerous that people don’t realize that things change. That’s what’s dangerous, not the fact that things are changing’. Things don’t have necessarily to be like that, what about families where parents are of the same sex? I was most worried about not following the traditional family model, but things just did not work out between Cecilia and I. I was worried because of all the things you read, about how things should be, but some things you have to figure out what to do based on your own experience.

After the interview with Odiseo, he asked me about my motivation for doing this study. Since we had met years ago and had a very good rapport during our conversation, I allowed myself to share personal views in a way that, up until that moment, I had not done with any other participant. Part of the reason for conducting the study, I said, was a curiosity about the kind of choices people from my generation were making regarding living with a partner or having children. From the readings I had done while preparing the research proposal and based on my own experience, I told him I had come to the impression that the
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The former traditional model that portrayed fathering as a synonym of providing was not as desirable and respected as it was before. Therefore I wanted to know, if that was the case, what had replaced that model. After giving the matter some thought, this is what he said in response to my comment:

The problem is that it is not as easy as saying: I don’t want this (to behave according to a traditional model) anymore so now I’ll go for this instead. That other thing doesn’t exist. You know you don’t want to be like that anymore. You know that doing this is not well regarded anymore. You know that seventy per cent of the girls will tell you to fuck off if you do that. Plus, you do not want to do that either. The problem is that there is no other category where you can follow a different set of approaches in order to situate yourself differently. This is something you have to build along the way.

Although change was considered necessary, more than once, change regarding fathers’ involvement was directly linked to women’s advocacy efforts towards gender equality:

Yes, I don’t think this (paternity leaves) is going to take much longer. Especially because women’s organizations that have insisted in the need of getting men involved in taking care of their children, have realized that there are many disadvantages for fathers (i.e. men are in a disadvantaged position to participate). Women are very sensitive to this, and will make pressure for this to happen. I think at the beginning leaves will be optional. It probably won’t be easy, but it will happen. Rodrigo, 33

Furthermore, usually criticisms to the commonly held idea that men and childrearing belonged to separate worlds, were followed by references to women headed households and same sex parents so as to argue that things were changing and traditional gender roles were not as valid as they used to be. This could account for the lack of models many participants referred to. In the sense than instead of embracing a discourse with readily available precepts of how to be a responsible father, participants rather expressed being in the midst of change, and consequently new roles needed to be defined, and different ways of being father had to be constructed.
5. Concluding remarks

‘Is there anything you would like to change from the present arrangement? That is, besides spending more time with your daughter’ I asked Odiseo. ‘Improving the quality of the time I get to share with her right now. I want to see her without being tired, with no hurry, and in an adequate space’. He explained that the studio where he currently lived was not an appropriate place to bring his daughter, and that he would like to change that. Odiseo felt he had created a symbolic space to share with his daughter, one that was independent from Paula (his ex-partner), the family and school, therefore what he felt the next step was to generate a physical space accordingly. He pointed out that having that space also depended on having a better income. ‘I know that it is in my hands. It is not up to me to earn millions, but it is in my hands to earn a better salary. In the same way that it is not within my reach to isolate her from all the violence that exists in the city, but it is in my hands to have a space where I can protect her from that’. Odiseo, 28

At this stage of the study, I have come to understand participants’ fathering experiences as a day-to-day creation of space. This ‘fathering space’ was grounded on a net in which resources, family relations, societal norms, partners, children, personal history and views were interwoven in such a complex manner that it would be impossible to isolate each factor to track its effect. Furthermore, it would make no sense to do so. Fatherhood is an all-embracing cultural practice and, as such, should be addressed in an integral and comprehensive fashion. Just as Odiseo, men in the study reported to be striving to create the conditions for practicing what they perceived to be a very unusual parenting style. Also in the same way he did, men in this study expressed an awareness of the fact that achieving some of these conditions was in their hands, and some others were beyond their reach.

The picture of fatherhood deriving from these men’s accounts is one marked by creativity and inventiveness. However, participants’ experiences did not exist in a social vacuum, but rather were the product of their particular milieu, context and history. Consequently, the personal histories here portrayed stress the dynamic balance between what are supposed to be traditional and new practices, between change and permanence. While recounting their stories, participants navigated through the boundaries of the new and the established, between what they perceived as the old and the modern way of being a man and a father. This was reflected in the fact that participants reported to feel lonely in their
fathering style, and at the same time said to be simply behaving in line with the current large-scale societal transformations that reduced inequality between men and women.

At this point, it is hardly necessary to say that men in this study considered engaged fathering an uncommon albeit important and necessary form of parenting. Yet, it is interesting to note that the justification for a higher participation of men in childrearing was often articulated around gender equality and not around a responsible fatherhood discourse. Arguments for the acceptance of involved fatherhood relied more on the acknowledgement of the current flexibilization of men and women roles, than in reclaiming fathering as a feature of manhood, or on the exaltation of the benefits of being a responsible father.

Contrary to similar studies carried out in the region, men in this study did not portray being a provider as the main feature of fatherhood. Work and money were rather seen as critical enabling factors that had a profound effect on the quality and time dedicated to childrearing. This responsibility was shared with women, whose professional projects were considered, just as the men's, a priority and key element that was taken into account in the making of major life decisions.

While defining their fathering practices, men in this study made women visible at all times. The fundamental role of women in the negotiation of fatherhood and masculinity, although largely acknowledged in the present study, remained to a certain extent unexplored. A future follow up research should include women’s views. First and most obviously, because parenting stories have necessarily two versions. Furthermore, as it has been shown throughout this thesis, structural factors greatly shape men’s experiences as caretakers. Given that society remains stratified by gender, it is likely that women experience childrearing differently from their partners. After all, mothering just as fathering, takes places in a society that views and treats men and women differently. Exploring and understanding men and women’s experiences jointly, is therefore critical to get a comprehensive grasp on the negotiation of gender relations and parenting experiences.
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