The role of the father in child development
& the intergenerational transmission of social inequality

Renske Keizer
Who am I?

- Endowed professor Fatherhood, Department of Child Development (University of Amsterdam)
- Associate professor Family Sociology (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
- Interdisciplinary perspective on fatherhood (sociology, developmental psychology, economy, and demography)
Content of my lecture today

- Introduction on the topic of fatherhood
- Paternal involvement & child development
- The intergenerational transmission of inequality
- The need to focus on context
Research on fatherhood of only recent nature
Why is the literature on fatherhood now burgeoning?
Focus of research over time
Father’s role in child development

- What do we know about father’s influence on children’s development?
(Some) mechanisms of influence

- Play partner
- Regulating emotions
- Regulating behaviors
- Socialization agent
Mechanisms
(Some) mechanisms of influence

- Play partner
- Regulating emotions
- Regulating behaviors
- Socialization agent
Do all children benefit the same? From individual effect to diverging destinies

To answer this question, we need:
- Interdisciplinary insights
- A focus on lives in context
Implications for children?

- Children’s diverging destinies (Sara McLanahan, 2004)
- Inequality in child outcomes
  - Focus changed from poverty and family structure
  - to parental resources and time investments
Inequalities in children’s developmental outcomes already present in early childhood years

- hypothesis: differences in parenting play an important role in explaining children’s diverging destinies

- Parental involvement creates a largely unseen but distinct division line between families, leading to widening gaps in social mobility and inequality that may last for generations (McLanahan, 2004).
Interdisciplinary work

Let’s add some sociological insights…..

What’s driving father’s (and mother’s) behavior?

- Developmental psychology:
  Individual intentions, goals, agency

- Sociology:
  Social mobility, focus on class and structure
Interdisciplinary work: Agency in structure

Agency / Construction

- structures
- social self-organization
- actors

Constraining and Enabling
Father involvement: Agency in structure

- fathers ➔ active agents who not only mediate the effect of social structure but also make decisions and set goals that shape social structure

- fathers and families can construct, negotiate, and traverse life course events, experiences and outcomes, but some are more successful in doing so than others.
Father's role in child development

From individual effects to intergenerational transmission

- Father involvement can be seen as a reflection and/or expression of social class differences, and may therefore function as a key mechanism for the transmission of social inequality from fathers to their children.

- Father involvement can be seen as influenced by cultural and moral frameworks, which are themselves shaped by the particularities of class, locality, and perceived opportunities.
Class-based cultural logic of parenting (Lareau)

- Important social class differences in the extent to which, and the priorities by which, parents manage their children’s lives
- Concerted cultivation versus natural growth
- Focused (mainly) on the role of mothers
Education and mother’s parenting
Now how about father’s role in transmitting inequality in children’s outcomes?

- Polarization of father involvement
- Higher educated fathers: stable family life, stable career, good financial resources and substantial time investments in children
- Lower educated fathers: more likely to divorce mother of their child, more likely spells of unemployment, lower income, less time investments
Fathers over time more involved

Spending time with the kids
The average number of hours parents spent with their children each week rose since 1985.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Journal of Marriage and Family

THE WASHINGTON POST
Averages can be misleading: Polarization

Total (sum of) mother, biological father, and social father activity engagement and mean household income by family type (adjusted for baseline characteristics).

Note: each stacked bar represents the total (sum of the) number of activities engaged in with children in the week before the interview by mothers (black section), biological fathers (gray section), and social father (white section) for each family type. Activity engagement for each parent was assessed on a 0- to 56-point scale. The diagonally striped bars represent mean household income for each family type.

Figuur 8: Verschillen tussen ouders in hulpbronnen en tijdsinvestering naar familiestructuur
Bron: Carlson & Berger, 2013
Do children from higher social class families benefit more?

- Socio-economic status
- Father involvement
- Child development
Lives in context (1)

■ To fully understand the intergenerational transmission of social inequality, important to take context into account

■ Paternal involvement is strongly context-dependent and more dependent on context than maternal involvement

■ The role fathers play in the intergenerational transmission of inequality might be highly dependent on characteristics of the mother, the wider extended family, social context and country characteristics
Lives in context (2)

- Homogamy in relationships → what is the relative importance of the father in transmitting inequality?
- Increases in divorce rates → what is the role of biological fathers versus the stepfathers in the intergenerational transmission?
- Peer influences → as children become older, other social influences become more important. Does the influence of fathers change with child’s age?
Lives in context

- Differences in social context (laws, policies) may mitigate or strengthen inequality in child outcomes

- Scholars have shown that greater state support through parental leave provisions and tax and child-care schemes decrease the gap in children’s academic performance between single and two-parent families (Pong et al, 2003).
Lives in context (3): The country

Is Paid Leave Available for New Fathers?

Source: Children's Chances, Harvard University Press, Forthcoming
### % Dutch who take up parental leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working for the government</strong></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private sector</strong></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dutch policy seems to increase inequality in child outcomes

- Negative consequences for career
- Taking up leave costs money

This suggests that mainly children from fathers who have stable careers and enough financial resources to afford to take up unpaid leave may benefit from their father’s involvement.
Policies may mitigate or aggravate inequality in child outcomes

- Whether leave is (partially) unpaid
- Whether leave differs across sectors
But Scandinavian literature shows intriguing complexities

- Universal policy but differences by social class
- middle-class fathers: father’s quota as substitute
- working-class fathers: father’s quota as support

→ policy, culture and daily practices of fathers interact
The need to take context into account

By comparing fathers’ influences on their children’s development
across social classes
across family structures
developmental stages
and countries

we will increase our understanding of how context affects the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages from fathers to children
Thank you for your attention! Questions/comments?

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