Contemporary Trends in Parenting

Research financed by the
Belgian Science Policy

Promoter

Jacques Marquet

Associate promoters

Jean-Michel Chaumont
Jean-Pierre Delchambre
Vladimir Martens
Luc Van Campenhoudt

Researchers

David Laloy
Charlotte Plaideau

Associate researchers

Bernard Fusulier
Benali Guenach
Cathy Herbrand
Julie Hermesse
Nicolas Marquis
Laura Merla
Murielle Norro

This research into *contemporary trends in parenting* is exploratory. Its main aim is to shed light on the modern-day forms of parenting, be they timid or bold, repetitive or inventive, that are taking shape between the groping-in-the-dark of social practices and current uncertainties of legal norms.

Many studies of emerging family forms (single-parent families, reconstituted families, and so on) highlight women's views, which is quite legitimate. As a result, little is known about men in this field. Yet, in the interests of equal opportunities it is necessary to allow for both men's and women's points of view. This is perhaps even more warranted as men are usually considered to be bastions of resistance against changes in family structure. The originality of the research approach that we chose was precisely to give priority to **tackling the subject from the male and masculine angles.** In a major departure from most studies of the subject, ours strove to grasp contemporary trends in parenting based on (homosexual and heterosexual) men's statements and viewpoints, with the aim of producing more elaborate significations concerning these developments.

To do this, we analysed the subject matter basically on two levels. The first level is that of the **institutional**, where the more symbolic aspects of parenting are examined. For the most part, this approach examined the **legal strand** of parenting, based on analysis of how "normative discourse" is produced. Studying the conditions under which this normative discourse is produced calls for exploring and comparing the laws and regulations that govern the formation, functioning, and possible breakdown of families. This approach via the legal sector postulates that civil, judicial, social, and fiscal law reflect collective representations to a certain extent and that the movements that are seen in them are likely to deliver information about currents in public opinion.

From a practical standpoint, given the variety of laws and draft legislation related to family and parental matters in Belgium, we mainly focused on those that were crystallised by the discussions conducted during the *Etats-Généraux des Familles* (EGF) or "Convention on Family Issues. The EGF took place from November 2003 to April 2004, at the initiative of the State Secretary in charge of families and people with disabilities at the time, Isabelle Simonis. This was a broad consultation that assembled political representatives from different levels of power, associations, academics, and administration staff to discuss family policy issues. This convention had two objectives, namely, to assess the country's family policies in the broad sense of the term and to make policy proposals that would be best designed to fulfil contemporary families' expectations. Five working parties were thus set up, to wit, (1) Combining Work and Family Life; (2) Families and Social Security; (3) Families and Civil and Judicial Rights; (4) Family Services and Aid for Parents; and (5) Families and Taxation. Neither the working parties, whose compositions were highly contingent on circumstances, nor the reactions of the public at large, who were invited to react to the work through an Internet site created for the occasion (www.lesfamilles.be), allow us to make any claims of representativity with regard to the opinions expressed and/or summarised in the various reports. Consequently, this material must be used with a certain degree of caution. Despite this obvious limitation, it seems to us that the material that we gathered in this way is an irreplaceable foundation for identifying the great contemporary discussions concerning the family and parenting.

The second level is the **practical level.** The goal was to apprehend the **diversity of today's forms of parenting,** to understand the different ways that individuals act when grappling with the reshuffling of filiation, while putting emphasis on the emerging forms of living and the difficulties that they encounter because of the material and normative contexts (moral and/or legal norms) in which they develop. Using a certain number of potentially problematic situations or key moments, we tried to analyse, from a comprehensive standpoint,

how individuals managed to give meaning and identity to their families' configurations and roles as parents.

Concretely, the material consisted of interviews of some forty fathers who had to cope with situations that we felt were particularly enlightening about the stakes riding on contemporary parental life experiences. These semi-directed interviews were conducted between May 2004 and February 2005 and lasted 90 minutes on average. Given such a sample, we obviously did not intend to measure the weight of any specific family configuration, given social demand, or even specific attribution of meaning. In the beginning, we gave priority above all to borderline cases in which extreme conditions (male transsexuals, gay fathers, fathers with large families, househusbands, homeless fathers, etc.) might have *revelatory* value, in the sense given to this adjective by Edgar Morin with regard to crisis situations.[1] Seen from this angle, studying situations that are out of the ordinary has the advantage of being able to reveal the presence, form, or meaning of what ordinarily remains invisible. We subsequently tried to diversify the biographies of our interviewees by means of a systematic search for opposing cases in order to multiply the number of points of view on the issues that we studied (ways of taking on parental responsibilities, degrees and forms of reliance on experts in "family affairs", ways of connecting home life and work, etc.) and reach the saturation point, that is to say, the situation in which additional interviews would add no new information.[2]. The cases were diversified according to the following criteria: age, family configuration (matrimonial status, number of children, parental status), occupation, and level of instruction. At the end of the analyses, we were not certain that we had reached the saturation point. Consequently, this research remains exploratory more than ever.

The research consisted of an incessant to-and-fro between the two levels of analysis, *i.e.*, **the way changes in the parental daily life experience (practical level) were reflected in legal reforms and discourse about the family (institutional level) and vice versa**, for while many bills in Parliament seemed at first glance to dovetail with peoples' wishes as individuals, some of them nevertheless clashed with complex mechanisms that were deeply anchored in individuals and society. As we see it, the main stakes riding on contemporary changes in the family and parenting surface at those very moments when the law suddenly is out of phase with the individuals' wishes. Identifying these stakes revealed four guiding themes corresponding to four avenues of thought at the heart of the current parent-and-family problem complex. These four themes, which were further broken down into sub-themes, served as our working categories to analyse our material. We shall thus start by presenting them briefly.

1. The survival of the parental couple: a forced ideology?

The slogan "the conjugal couple is survived by the parental couple" seems to express a new norm, whereby the dissolution of a conjugal relationship must not lead to the end of parental co-responsibility, "in the best interests of the child". However, some people wonder about the realism of this model, in which the "parental couple" continue to work together, after their marital ties have been sundered, in a situation of respect for each other and love for their children[3]. A schism could then develop between *legal procedures* that strive to minimise conflict in order to support the ideal of "successful divorce" on the one hand, and *the realities* of the spouses' difficult

---

[1] MORIN, E., *Sociologie*, Fayard, 1984, Paris.
[2] DESMARAIS, D., and GRELL, P. (Eds.), *Les récits de vie. Théorie, méthode et trajectoires types*, Editions Saint-Martin, 1986, Montreal. MILES, M. B. and HUBERMAN, A. M., *Qualitative data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1994.
[3] This is Louis Roussel's opinion in ROUSSEL, L. *La famille incertaine*, Odile Jacob, 1989, Paris.

negotiations on the other hand. Hence the importance of knowing whether this continuity of parental identity "at all cost" is actually a part of the family's reality or if it isn't rather the expression of an ideal of the dedramatised "post-divorce" period, that everyone wants so avidly but has not necessarily found the actual means of instating in daily life.

2. Social and moral guidance for the parental roles

The explosion of parallel educational bodies leads one to believe that rarely has social and moral guidance for parental roles been so forceful and pervasive. *From the judicial institution's point of view*, we can thus wonder if this institution was not in the process of empowering new experts to supervise the family? This problem raises the question of familial and parental knowledge's transmission, which seems to be less and less ensured by tradition ("folk models") and more and more by public institutions and their specialised agents ("expert models)[4] on the strength of their legitimated "scientific knowledge". *From the points of view of those involved¸* we can wonder how this "reparentalisation" is experienced. Isn't this tendency to compensate for "lacks" in familial knowledge likely to strip the individual of her/his parental identity and generate fear of failure?

3. The complexity of filiation or "what to do with the additional parents?"

Today's analyses of the different ways of exercising one's parental rights or duties after a separation tend rather commonly to pit the idea of substitution (or supplantation) against the idea of additivity. According to the substitution rationale, the family is doomed to reform, to recover its original shape[5], meaning that the parent who has not been awarded custody will be evicted to make room for her/his replacement. The additive rationale leaves room for the noncustodial parent and opens up additional space for the new partner(s). In this case, the the family space is organised in a network in which the various protagonists know each other and are led to collaborate. *From the judiciary's point of view,* some authors claim that the lawmaker has until now preferred supplantive filiation over additive filiation[6] and consecrated the impossible role of the second spouse[7]. Other family configurations, such as adoption, foster homes, and artificial insemination with anonymous donors, raise the question of filiation. Where, today, does the law stand on this issue? *From the points of view of those involved*, there is a need to study how individuals piece together the various fragments of parenting and parenthood.

4. Combining work and family life

The notion of "parenting" is not foreign to the idea that both mother and father must be able to have successful careers and family lives if the family is to be in tune with society's evolution. In introducing a "time-based economy"[8] into the home, working women have allegedly assigned to "parenting" the role of referee between home life and work. In so doing they have created the need to redistribute and reinvent the roles of father and mother. Currently, a weakly gendered "cumulative" model, in which

---

[4] To take up Sutherland's terms in SUTHERLAND, K., « Parent's beliefs about child's socialization. A study on parenting models », in SIEGEL, I., LAOSA, L., *Changing families*, 1983, New York, London, p.137-166, quoted in SCHULTHEIS, F., LÜSHER, K., « Familles et savoirs », in *L'Année Sociologique*, n°37, 1987, p.245.
[5] THERY, I., « Remariages et familles composées », in *L'Année Sociologique*, n°37, 1987, p.131.
[6] LE GALL, « Recompositions homoparentales féminines », in LE GALL, D., BETTAHAR, Y., *La pluriparentalité*, PUF, 2001, Paris, p.204.
[7] THERY, I., « Remariages et familles composées », in l'*Année Sociologique*, n°37, 1987, p.136.
[8] BARRERE-MAURISSON, M.-A., *La division familiale du travail – La vie en double*, PUF, 1992, Paris.

investing in work is not incompatible with investing in the family, has become more popular. The question is whether this model for combining family and work corresponds to the individuals' values and its actual application does not clash with constraints over which the public authorities have no direct control.

∗ ∗ ∗

This summary tackles each of these four branches of thought in succession. For each one we shall briefly set the stage, then describe the main elements of the analysis of the legal texts and debates and summarise what we have learnt from our analysis of the fathers' statements about their day-to-day parental experience. The importance given to each of these three aspects will however be fairly variable from one branch of thought to the next.

1: The survival of the parental couple: a forced ideology?

1.1. On the contradiction between conjugal and parental norms

In industrial society, the family was the horizon or dream of each man and woman. Feelings were subordinated to the stability of one's marital and social status to the extent that the family order reflected the social order. The distinction between the parental axis and the conjugal axis had meaning, but did not appear to be as crucial as in the modern family, given that the child was inseparable from and the primary purpose of marriage.

This model gradually gave way to another one founded on the values of personal fulfilment, authenticity, gender equality, and so on. The rationale that has presided over the founding of post-modern families is the search to satisfy the psychological needs of both members of the couple. The quality of their interpersonal relations has more value than the persistence of the family group. The "we" depends on the "I"[9]. As a result, many question arise. How does one create a lasting relationship in an era marked by the primacy of self-fulfilment? How does one found family and social ties solely on the frailty of human love?[10] How does the family withstand the contractualisation of relationships? All of these questions refer directly or indirectly to the difficulty of finding a way to connect the demands of living together with those inherent in the preoccupation with self-fulfilment[11].

Many people in Europe consider parents' responsibility for their children to be indeclinable, everlasting, and unconditional[12]. Whatever happens, parents must rear their children and meet their needs. This obligation for parents to guide their children to independence is seen as being separate from their parental feelings and thus a limit on their desires, but also a limit on the process of the contemporary family's de-institutionalisation and privatisation.

The tension between parental and marital norms lies at the very heart of this limit. There where parental ties are perceived as unconditional, marital ties, on the contrary, appear to be extremely fragile. The efforts that are required to keep the family cell united, whereas the partners' bonds of love with each other have disappeared, are no longer valued. Such a context of marital instability raises the question of the everlasting parental tie. How does one conciliate the values of freedom and independence that preside over marital relations with the value of responsibility that structures parental relations?

---

[9] DE SINGLY F., *Sociologie de la famille contemporaine*, Ed. Nathan, Coll. 128, 1993.

[10] MEULDERS-KLEIN, M.-Th., « Les recompositions familiales et le droit au temps du démariage », in MEULDERS-KLEIN, M.-Th. Et THERY, I. (dir.), *Les recompositions familiales aujourd'hui*, Nathan, 1993, Paris.

[11] DE SINGLY, F., *Libres ensemble. L'individualisme dans la vie commune*, Nathan, 2000, Paris.

[12] See, *inter alia*, Eurobarometer 39.0 – March/April 1993 and Eurobarometer 47.2 - July 1997, ZAR, Cologne University, Germany.

Divorce currently affects one of three marriages[13]. Yet the daily investment that the parental tie requires is not always obvious for these couples, neither for the mothers, the overwhelming majority of whom will be awarded custody of their children[14] and will have to take on this responsibility either alone or with a partner whose role and status are not clearly defined, nor for the fathers, who, if they do not flee their responsibilities[15], have to make twice as much effort to maintain strong ties with their children, given that women have traditionally had the relational prerogatives within the family.

The need to find new common landmarks for marital relations and filiation while allowing for the contractualisation of marital life is now being felt. In this regard, Irene Théry[16] thinks that the "the freedom not to marry or to unmarry" that adults are now recognised to have" should be offset by institutionalising "the persistence of filiation". This refers back to the distinction between the conjugal couple and the parental couple, with the former being subject to the choices of the members of the couple, and the latter fated to become indissoluble (logic of everlastingness). So, the place of parent is adopted for life.

This formula is already starting to be implemented in the middle and above all upper classes, but is allegedly less frequent in the blue-collar world, where the substitution model remains widespread. Will the model instituting the *parental* couple's indissolubility spread throughout society? Only time will tell. However, we can already single out some hesitations in the law and hesitant practices by the people who are concerned.

1.2. The legal position: the parental couple survives after separation

The joint parental authority act of 13 April 1995 has overhauled the principles that apply to the management of coparenting after a break-up, thereby incarnating the principle that the parental couple survives the conjugal couple. In this law, which strives for educational and symbolic value, the lawmakers thus promote the principle of the continuation of exercising parental authority jointly after and during the divorce procedure as well as in all cases of a couple's separation, whether they are married or not.

This perspective prompts questions about the types of *divorce, alimony,* and *residential arrangements* preferred by the law, as the choice in favour of one or the other alternative can be decisive for the subsequent peaceable sharing of parental responsibilities.

In the matter of divorce, in line with the ideology according to which the parental couple must live beyond the conjugal couple, the lawmakers seem gradually to have become desirous of offering a framework in which it has become possible to divorce relatively peaceably, thereby keeping all chances for the ex-spouses to be able to continue functioning as a parental couple.

The divorce reform that the lawmakers are hammering out is marked by bills that are mainly concerned with abolishing divorce for fault. The promoters of these bills argue that

[13] BOULANGER, P.-M., LAMBERT, A., DEBOOSERE, P., LESHAEGHE, R., SURKYN, J., 1997, *Ménages et familles.* Monographie N°4 du Recensement Général de la Population et des Logements au 1er mars 1991, Bruxelles, Institut national de Statistique et Services fédéraux des Affaires scientifiques, techniques et culturelles, pp15-16.

[14] In the early 1990s, the courts awarded custody to the mother 85-90% of the time. These figures are quoted by THERY, I., *Le démariage*, Odile Jacob, 1993, Paris, p.133 and SEGALEN, M., *Sociologie de la famille*, Armand Colin, 1993, Paris, p.179.

[15] See in particular VILLENEUVE-GOKAP, C. and LERIDON, H., « Entre père et mère », *Population et Société*, n°220, 1988, Paris; CARDELLI, R., « Vers une approche pluridimensionnelle de la monoparentalité », in BAWIN-LEGROS, B. (Ed.), *Familles, modes d'emploi. Etude sociologique des ménages belges*, De Boeck Université, 1999, Brussels, pp.49-72 ; THERY, I., *Recomposer une famille, des rôles et des sentiments*, Textuel, 1995, Paris.

[16] THERY, I., « Familles recomposées : les raisons de l'incertitude », in STEICHEN, R. and DE NEUTER, P. (Eds.), *Les familles recomposées et leurs enfants*, Academia, 1995, Louvain-la-Neuve, p.27.

one must first reduce the irreparable consequences that are inherent in the obligation that divorce for fault creates of proving the other party's culpability. While the various bills sometimes vary considerably, with some of them refusing to drop all references to the notion of fault, many of them discuss ways to attenuate the strife that marks the spouses' relations. Even those who want to keep a place for conflicts in the procedure do so in the name of the peace-making effect that this will have on the parties' later relations. The suspicion is that pacified or accelerated divorce proceedings or those that settle only some of the problems turn a blind eye to the conflicts rather than resolving them, so that the conflicts will be free to gush forth later on.

Fault is at the heart of the debate about awarding alimony. There is a proposal to do away with the link between fault and awarding alimony in the case of both divorce for fault and divorce for *de facto* separation. In this new scheme of things, alimony is seen as reparations for the inegalitarian consequences of the marriage, rather than punishment for the behaviour of one of the parties.

When it comes to the children's living arrangements, before 1965 marital fault had impact on the custody decision, to the extent that the "bad spouse" was considered to be a bad parent. This fault is no longer supposed to affect the decision on how parental authority is to be exercised and living arrangements. What is more, while the 1975 divorce reform set the principle of the exclusive awarding of custody to one of the divorced parents, the opposite principle, *i.e.*, the obligation for each of the two parents to continue being responsible for their children and to respect and encourage each other's parental responsibility, seems to have been upheld for more than the past ten years. The state has taken upon itself to ensure the dual filiation ties for all time and regardless of the ups and downs in the couple's lives by instating the principle of the joint exercise of parental authority. However, nothing is specified as to how this coparenting is to be organised with regard to physical and temporal custodial arrangements. These aspects are currently the focus of debate. Some people propose applying the alternating, egalitarian residence scheme by default. Both the advocates and opponents of this proposal are using the argument of the degree of the relations' conflictuality to make their point. The former argue that instituting this residence scheme would make the procedures more egalitarian and less conflictual, whereas the latter claim that imposing this model would not obviate the duty to proceed case by case, which would dash its promoters' hopes of restoring the peace. However, the latter do not oppose the idea of setting a certain number of criteria that the judge would take into account in deciding on the coparenting arrangements. These criteria include "the ability to respect the other parent's image". This is proof that the reference to the degree of conflict in the parents' relations is indeed present in both camps.

1.3. Coparenting put to the test

While there seems to be a consensus in legal circles about the desire to reduce the conflictuality of relations between former spouses, which testifies to the adoption of the norm according to which the parental couple must survive the conjugal couple, we can nevertheless wonder how practicable this norm actually is. Indeed, based on our findings, fathers have various difficulties in sharing parenting after divorce or separation.

First of all, there are a small fraction of men who are totally out of step with the move towards privatising marriage that began more than thirty years ago and do not at all expect the law to intervene in favour of coparenting after divorce. Rather, they expect it to support the continuation of marriage, if necessary by making divorce harder. Their accounts illustrate in exemplary fashion the sociological diversity of our cultures and how hard it is for those who are bypassed by modernity to grasp and subscribe to its legitimating principles. The debate

about coparenting belongs to a perspective in which the couple is formed by two free and independent individuals.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, most of the fathers whom we met subscribe to the coparenting model. However, the law does not as yet spell out how the joint exercise of parental authority is to be organised, and where the children will live in particular. The fathers underline the gaps in the current situation, and above all their lack of recognition, as coparents, by first the judicial institution, and then by the other institutions. The lack of formal rules organising coparenting leads the judges to settle these matters in what may sometimes seem an arbitrary manner to the parties and does not encourage the parties to heed these decisions if the decisions are felt to be forced upon them, even unjust. The ambiguousness and heterogeneity of the rules that do exist in this field are not foreign to the existence of conflicts after break-ups, for the failure to bring the child to a rendezvous or non-payment of alimony is often the only way parents can boycott court decisions and thus show their dissatisfaction with the measures taken by the judge. The lack of markers concerning the post-divorce arrangements thus lead many "secondary parents" to marginalize themselves from the coparenting idea that was initially agreed upon. Some fathers also denounce the lack of recognition of coparenting by other institutions (schools, mutual insurance funds, hospitals, etc.). They talk of interlocutors who "do not play the game", thereby attesting to the fact that legal recognition of the principle of joint exercise of parental authority is not enough.

However, the issuer of recognition, in particular recognition of the parent's authority, also concerns the former spouses. While the law of 1995 provides for joint parental authority, the authority's effective legitimacy is contingent on the other spouse's compliance with and recognition of this authority. It is all well and good for a parent to be vested with parental authority by virtue of the law. This authority cannot be exercised unless it is confirmed by the other parent. Now many fathers in our group said that their authority was taken away from them or delegitimised by the mother of their children. These difficulties were particularly underlined by the fathers who were not given custody of their children. Several interviewees put forward the idea that the phenomenon of being relieved of one's authority is specific to inegalitarian residential arrangements in which the time spent with the "main parent" is perceived to be a source of power, or at least of influence, over the children. One of the main dangers of this process is the gradual abandonment of one's parental responsibilities, even the psychological eviction of one of the co-parents. To overcome this problem, some people propose instituting alternating equal-time living arrangements by default, without idealising this formula in the slightest.

In the event of difficulties, the content of our respondents' statements underlines the fact that the former spouses tend to reorganise around the child, at least up to a certain degree of conflict. This behaviour is in phase with the importance that the legal texts and rulings attach to "the child's best interests". Some parents do not hesitate to move house or accept the conventional living arrangement (one home outside holidays and weekends) so that the child can continue attending the same school, or to change their schedules or type of work in order to be able to cope with alternating custody schemes. The need to "ensure continuity" for the child is an area in which the child's best interests are referred to particularly often. Although the "best-interests-of-the-child" argument can take on the trappings of an absolute principle when voiced by some fathers, it should probably be taken more realistically as a relative argument, that is to say, just one amongst several arguments. We have to admit that the "best-interests-of-the-child" argument is used profusely to justify coparenting arrangements, by the parents as much as by the judges and psychologists. It seems to have acquired a highly legitimating status, to the point of sometimes masking the multicausality of decisions concerning coparenting's organisation. It must be possible to connect the child's best interests with at least the parents' professional and social constraints, if not with the

parents' interests. The best interests of the child alone clearly are not enough to justify cooperative coparenting after a break-up.

However, cooperation after divorce often comes up against another reality, that of the difficulty of separating parenthood from conjugality. This difficulty can take various forms. Some accounts testify to the difficulty of separating the conjugal dimension totally from coparenting, not because the conjugal conflicts weigh on the parents' cooperation with each other, but because this cooperation can become conjugal again, because the relationship is potentially resexualisable. The need for the "continuity of the parental couple at all cost" encourages the former mates to keep their relations cordial, even as harmonious as possible, for the child's sake. The current demands for cooperation after a break-up clearly help to keep conjugality and parenthood less far apart than the conventional custody scheme of permanent residence in one home, in which the noncustodial parent was often sidelined, thereby reducing relations between the ex-spouses to their simplest expression. In other cases, the determination to maintain the parental ties seems to handicap the formation of new couples. There, too, the links between parenthood and conjugality seem more complex than they appear at first sight. This allows one to understand how certain legal positions that consider the parental couple's survival to be obvious can be out of phase with the separated couple's actual situation. Analysis shows that it is as if the chances of dissociating parenthood from conjugality are greater if the spouses already had separate "identities" before they broke up, whereas if their identities were more entangled, such dissociation would be difficult to achieve. But it is not enough for the partners to give each other sexual freedom to turn this tendency around, for the "parental identities" of both partners can also be inextricably intertwined. In this case, the break-up is always accompanied by a certain amputation of each party's identity.

While in some societies separation is included in the group's normal functioning, and although some people feel that this applies to our society today, this apparently is not the case for certain men, who take it for granted that the break-up will be fraught with high drama. Perhaps the modern myth of love involves a dramatic ending by definition. Love has become a supreme value, the condition for a socially approved union. Consequently, expressing the deep wound that a break-up inflicts would be a fitting tribute to this value. Showing that one finds it hard to recover from a break-up and turn what was once love into coparenting would in a way be a way to consecrate the past love. In contrast to the "successful divorce ideology", here we find the traces of a "painful break-up ideology" that is more in tune with the precepts of the contemporary romantic tragedy.

When faced with the effervescence of the concrete and the power of the passionate love model that some people live out, the ideal of the "good divorce" appears to be a thousand miles from their daily experiences of break-ups. But more generally, settling a parental couple's organisation by wiping the past marital slate clean seems difficult to do when the "parental couple" is built first and foremost around the "couple". While the parental dimension of the couple is taken instead of the erstwhile conjugal dimension, it is no less true that the expression reveals the requirement that they remain "a couple" of sorts. Seen from this angle, reciprocal ignorance and keeping conflicts secret from each other no longer seem feasible, on pain of jeopardising the harmonisation of the child's two worlds. If we extend this intuition, the "parents' transformation into co-parents" should go hand in hand with efforts to "turn the spouses into ex-spouses". The interviewees seem to have felt that such a transformation was necessary to be able to "go on to something else". Yet the legal principle of the parental couple's indissolubility, in encouraging the parental couple's "continuity at all cost", could smother the transformations that the shift from parent to coparent requires. In that case, the legal procedures are likely to result in the conflict's resurgence on the parental stage. In other words, the ex-spouses may feel the need to transplant their dispute from the

conjugal stage to the parental stage, knowing full well that they will be listened to there. Given this prospect, it might be better to consider reorganising certain areas so as to allow the moderate expression of the grudges and guilt feelings that are likely to gnaw at modern lovers and endanger their future coparenting.

2. Social and moral guidance for the parents' roles

2.1. The institutionalisation of parenting

In analysing the institutional debate about family affairs, we see that guidance is a key issue, caught between growing interventionism and parental empowerment. Many authors hypothesise that we are witnessing a shift away from the couple's institutionalisation in favour of ties of filiation[17]. The emergence of the notion of "parenting", which refers to "the function of parent that takes the father's and mother's legal, moral, and educational responsibilities into account"[18], is emblematic of this trend. While this notion refers back to the fact that being a parent "cannot be taken for granted" and is not an easy role to play, it is also associated with "parenting" models and models for evaluating the ways in which people take on this role. The principle of "reparentalisation"[19] says a lot about this tension. Moreover, it is reflected in the implementation of a series of parenting assessment and support measures that "include a desire of control, as families are more and more the targets of social, judicial, and educational measures"[20]. These measures are intended to compensate for the existence of parenting "deficits". "Being an acceptable parent is not so easy nowadays, judging by the increasingly frequent need for society to interfere within the family structure"[21]. The social guidance for the parents' roles basically revolves around the child's interest – an alibi that legitimates intervention in families.[22]

Legislative developments regarding divorce conventions are exemplary in this regard. So, before 1994, parents who divorced by mutual consent were given quasi-unlimited freedom to decide how to organise the effects of their divorce on their children's living arrangements, maintenance, and education. The divorce law of 30 June 1994 limited this freedom by having the Prosecutor's Office and court verify the content of the prior agreements concerning the spouses' common children, to safeguard the latter's interests[23]. So, at the spouses' first hearing, the judge and King's Prosecutor can propose that the spouses modify their agreements and even decide, against the parents' will, to organise a hearing for the children.

The social and moral guidance for the parental role raises the question of the parents' abilities to take on these roles. Having seen that alongside appraisal schemes to evaluate the parties' parental skills (social and psychological assessments for adoption, divorce, and abuse) other "parenting support" schemes (meeting areas, mediation, etc.) have been institutionalised, we hypothesise that the courts are in the process of empowering a series of

---

[17] This is the case, for example, of Marcela Iacub, in IACUB, M., *Le crime était presque sexuel, et autres essais de casuistique juridique*, EPEL, 2002, Paris, p.31.

[18] BUGHIN, M., LAMARCHE, C., & LEFRANC, P., *La parentalité : une affaire d'état*, Ed. L' Harmattan, coll. Logiques sociales, 2003, Paris, p. 34.

[19] The term "reparentalisation" refers to the policies instituted, in particular by the public authorities and their experts, to "restore" the parental function.

[20] BUGHIN, M., LAMARCHE, C., & LEFRANC, P., *La parentalité : une affaire d'état*, Ed. L' Harmattan, coll. Logiques sociales, 2003, Paris, p. 8.

[21] CAILLE, P., « Etre parent aujourd'hui : performance d'un rôle ou vécu d'un état ? Dilemmes et contradictions de la position parentale contemporaine », in *Thérapie familiale*, Geneva, 2003, 24(2), p. 130.

[22] MEYER, P., *L'enfant et la raison d'Etat*, Ed. du Seuil, 1977.

[23] SOSSON, J., *Aspects juridiques des relations familiales (syllabus)*, LLN, UCL, 2003, p.108.

experts (social workers, psychologists, family mediators, etc.) to provide such family guidance.

2.2. Changes in parental roles

The growing framing of parental roles partly refers to their transformations. The way of being a parent have considerably changed compared to what our parents experienced. In his book *Le Soi, le Couple et la Famille* (*The Self, the Couple, and the Family*), François de Singly shows the transformations of the contemporary family, which is at the centre of the construction of individualised identity[24]. He contends that it is becoming a privileged area turned towards new purposes concerning the "institution of fulfilled, autonomous individuals". He shows how parents' preoccupation about their roles is bringing a new fundamental dimension of parenting to the fore, one that could be called the "Pygmalion" role[25]. In his book *Good Enough Parent*, Bettelheim documents what one could call "a new parental duty" linked to this Pygmalion role. To achieve this goal, parents must not strive at all costs to create the child that they would like to have, but, on the contrary, allow the child to achieve its potential, to allow the seed to blossom[26]. Family socialisation must henceforward participate in asserting the individuality of each family member. The family is confined to satisfying individual needs as well as the needs of each one of its members, and must ensure their happiness.[27]

At a time when some social discourses tend to point the existence of a "parental dismissal", our interviews reveal that parents are not placing the matter of their responsibility on the back burner of their concerns. Parenting and parenthood have become a life target and constitutes a project of success for a good number of parents. The fathers whom we interviewed have reflexive relations with their parental roles and the ways to take them on. The child's best interests are central in the parental roles, as indicated by the concern for giving priority to the ingredients that are propitious for building the child's identity. We were able to identify basically four conditions that are conducive to creating a favourable family environment for such a child-rearing approach, based on our respondents' statements, as follows: (1) Taking on one's parental role calls for establishing a **differentiated bond** with each child while guaranteeing the continuation of **egalitarian relations** amongst the siblings. (2) The role of parent seems to be equated with the values of **authenticity** and **transparency.** However, such transparency must not encroach upon the children's **intimacy** and **secret gardens.** (3) The parents must also foster the child's **autonomy** by enabling her/him to establish her/his own operating standards as much as possible, based on her/his own experiences. This development of the child's autonomy is done within certain limits, sometimes leaving room for a **heteronomous** process whereby standards are imposed on the child from outside. (4) Communication with and taking **the child's words** into consideration are a last indispensable set of conditions if each family member is to achieve the status of a fulfilled individual. The parents must nevertheless make it possible for "what the child has to say" and "the child's carefreeness" to cohabit. **Parental responsibility** is a central element of the "Pygmalion" role.

---

[24] DE SINGLY, F., *Le soi, le couple et la famille*, Nathan, 1992, Paris, p.14

[25] This is a reference to George Bernard Shaw's play, in which a speech professor, Dr. Higgins, takes in a Cockney flower girl (Eliza) and wagers that he can turn her into an elegant lady, by "waking up the duchess inside", in a matter of months.

[26] BETTELHEIM, B., *Pour être des parents acceptables*, Robert Laffont, 1988, Paris (French translation of *Good Enough Parent: A Book on Child-rearing*)

[27] SEGALEN, M., « Les relations de parenté », in DE SINGLY, F. (Ed.), *La famille : l'état des savoirs*, Ed. La découverte, 1991, Paris, p. 232.

2.3. Changes in the sources of knowledge

2.3.1. Changes in familial transmission of knowledge

The modifications affecting the transmission of parental knowledge at home contribute to these difficulties. According to the German sociologist SCHÜLTHEIS, the modern era is characterised by a transition in legitimate knowledge's reference frameworks. This is the transition from "folk models" - based on knowledge that is legitimated as "traditional" – to "expert models"[28] – based on knowledge that is legitimated as "scientific". The modalities of learning parental skills show the retreat of tradition in favour of growing intervention by public institutions and their specialised staff.

We may well wonder why such a transition has taken place. Analysis of our interviews points to three factors of interpretation. First, when the men we interviewed situated their own parental values by referring to how they themselves were reared, they often used a logic of opposition to do so, asserting in this way their autonomy from their parents' traditional references. Secondly, the men regularly underlined the obsolete nature of some of their parents' child-rearing values, advancing the rapid changes in society and parent's function as reasons for this. Finally, the transmission of parental knowledge would appear to be less direct and systematic than in the past, due, amongst other things, to the changes in women's work (and the rise in the number of women who work outside the home). Indeed, in shrinking around the nuclear family, the family environment would appear no longer to be a social environment in which children benefit from the "traditional" transmission of knowledge from the earliest age by helping their mothers with daily housekeeping. As a result, a whole set of operations has become less familiar. Some of these actions are even unknown to them until they become parents in turn. The transition is from "familiarity" with the knowledge to a feeling of being outside this knowledge.

These changes in the transmission of parental knowledge mark today's parents' autonomy from the intangible traditional references of yore. The parents may thus search outside the family for that which was traditionally transmitted inside the family. The social and normative environment nevertheless does not seem to supply the security that the parents expect. Awash in a sea of Dolto's principles, grandmother's recipes, advice from family doctors, and the columns of *Le Ligueur* (the newspaper of the Catholic families' league), parents are sometimes drawn hither and thither by various injunctions that are often contradictory. These various instructions open a myriad of possibilities. In this context, it happens that "The father and mother's heads whirl; they are certain of only one thing, that they are doing the wrong thing: doing too much or too little, smothering their children with too much intensity or keeping their distance, which can lead to a 'dangerous fragility'. The right setting can be found only under a specialist's competent gaze."[29] It appears that the role of parent cannot be taken for granted and is likely to be a source of anxiety for the parents. The changes in the family's roles, explosion of normative sources on the right way to be a parent, and growing state interventionism doubtless give rise to constant worry and lead to diverging coping reactions, depending on the situation.

2.3.2. Reliance on expert knowledge

For those who bring them up, relying on expert models is in part linked to the distrust that the prescriptions generated by the traditional models trigger. Those who refer to the experts look for scientific legitimacy, neutrality, and externality or outside opinions. The

---

[28] To use Sutherland's terms in SUTHERLAND, K., « Parent's beliefs about child's socialization. A study on parenting models », in SIEGEL, I., LAOSA, L., *Changing families*, 1983, New-York, Londres, p.137-166, quoted in SCHULTHEIS, F., LÜSHER, K., « Familles et savoirs », in *l'Année Sociologique*, n°37, 1987, p.245.
[29] DE SINGLY F., *Sociologie de la famille contemporaine*, Ed. Nathan, Coll. 128, 1993, p. 39 (own translation).

fathers we interviewed also expressed the desire to remain active players in this relationship with the experts. They did not want to be reduced to passive recipients of instructions. They wanted to piece together their own child-rearing standards by dipping into the various available references. This tinkering can take a pragmatic track through the parents' reappropriation of knowledge as they strive to cope with the uncertainty of the modern world in a search for reassurance. It can also follow a strategic track, when the fathers refer to expert knowledge to corroborate and legitimate their own behaviour. Finally, the desire to remain an active player in the relationship with the expert is reflected by the rejection of a "passive assistance paradigm". The parent advances the "revelatory" function of resorting to experts; he feels that he is already the depository of knowledge and basically needs help to let it rise to the surface.

Our analysis of our respondents' statements adds some touches to the expert knowledge's central position in learning parental skills. While relying on expert knowledge continues to seem to be effective for many individuals, we see the emergence of criticism of this "expert" knowledge's legitimacy, sometimes as a result of negative experiences at the "access points". These access points are points of contact between the layman and these expert systems' representatives. These moments of meeting between the daily world and social assistance systems rest upon a "trust versus mistrust" tension with regard to the aid system.

We were able to detect some reproaches levelled at the expert reference, coming from negative experiences at the point of access or from personal conceptions of the father we interviewed : (1) The lack of rooting in reality and in the user's specific experience. This characteristic often leads to a diagnosis that does not seem to fit the situation, according to the men we interviewed. (2) The heterogeneity of the answers and uncertainty that this engenders about the proposed solutions relevance. (3) The normative pressure that is generated by the diversity of references. (4) The stigmatisation to which using expert assistance can lead. Asking for help in rearing one's children seems to be close to taking the risk of admitting one's failure as a parent.

It is the type of relation developed between the expert and the user that appears problematic in the first place, in the negative experiences that were related. Given the major obligation that they have to produce results, especially when they are the subjects of special measures, parents feel that their "way of being a parent", *i.e.*, parenting, is being judged. In sliding from a system of assistance to a system of oversight, the asymmetrical structure of the interactions can set the stage for power relationships. According to Goffman, such contexts heighten the probability that situational violence will arise[30].

That is one of the reasons that prompt some parents to turn to a third source of learning familial knowledge, *i.e.*, informal exchanges with close friends and relatives. Several of our interviewees compare their practices with those of their social environment; they appear to evaluate their child-rearing models by the yardstick of what is done around them. The main characteristic of this alternative model is that it institutes an exchange, a dialogue, that gives rise to the gradual but nevertheless active construction of the parents' child-rearing values and ideas. The corollary of relying on informal exchanges is avoiding having to rely on asymmetrical parenting aid (that is, tradition and experts). That is why such individuals end up looking for a symmetrical form of aid. The search for symmetry rests upon another set of criteria for evaluating the relevance of turning to a source of information, namely, the life experience, sharing the same situations, and actual practices.

---

[30] GOFFMAN, E., *Les cadres de l'expérience*, Coll. Le sens commun, Ed. de Minuit, 1991, Paris (French translation of *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.*)

This "alternative" use highlights one of the issues of parents' relation to the experts. It supposes that parents are in search of a certain symmetry when they turn to experts. What they want to avoid at all cost is to feel that they are being supervised from the outside, as this can undermine their confidence in their parenting abilities. The expert does not come across as a purveyor of miracle cures, but a source of aid that cannot be applied without the user's cooperation. Consequently, a pragmatic communication between the expert and user, who are both in the same situation of uncertainty, is necessary. Everything that the fathers mentioned as not being right (uncertainty, heterogeneity, stigmatisation, the lack of grounding in the person's real life, etc.) must be discussed by the expert and user, with the former admitting her/his uncertainty and the latter grasping the meaning of the proposals. Those who hold knowledge about how families work face the challenge of making use first and foremost of the parents' skills[31], of mobilising their abilities and giving them the tools to be the agents of the change that will come about with the expert's help. Any relationship of assistance or control that involves an asymmetrical relationship can only thwart such an objective. We can assume that the logic of control will only be exacerbated if there is collusion between the therapeutic system and the legal system. If that is the case, is it possible to design interventionist measures that can institute a symmetrical relationship between the system and the individual to whom these measures apply? The idea of a clearer separation between the legal and therapeutic fields may seem to be an interesting avenue to explore.

3. The complexity of filiation: What to do with the additional parents?

3.1. Filiation's rough ride

The explosion and multiplicity of family compositions that have marked the past thirty years or so appear to be key elements in the changes that typify the contemporary family. The contemporary family thus seems to have broken with the family of the past in many respects: marriage no longer appears to be the hegemonic demographic model, people are getting married later; the numbers of cohabiting couples and children born out of wedlock have risen, the matrimonial bond has become weaker, the forms that families can take have diversified, and so on. Although the nuclear family remains a reference for thinking about contemporary family relationships, the diversity of family structures forces us to question the obviousness of filiation. Fewer and fewer children are living in families headed by married parents, while more and more are living in single-parent families, reconstituted or blended families, and families with cohabiting parents.

Besides reconstituted families following break-ups, other types of family configurations have arisen due to the rise in the possibilities of having children other than by natural ways. So, simple or full adoption, foster parents, artificial insemination with a third-party donor, and same-sex parents are gradually taking up positions on the family stage. Beyond their diversity, these configurations also issue new challenges to the apparent obviousness of "nuclear filiation", just as they underline its multidimensionality, given that the biological, domestic, and genealogical (or symbolic) components of filiation are not combined in the father and the mother.

Faced with this burst of different family forms, the courts appear to be more and more at a loss to define what is a parent. The challenge for the courts is gradually to invent *de jure* multiparenthood, that is to say, to create a place for family relations in the world of kinship when filiation is unclear. The issue of multiple parents underlines with great acuity the distinction between the idea of *replacing* one parent with another and the idea of *persistence*, where different people in charge of parenting may coexist. The stakes riding on the new

---

[31] AUSLOOS, G., *La compétence des familles. Temps, chaos, processus*, coll. Relations, Ed. Erès, 1995.

family configurations seem indeed to be on this level. The gnawing question remains that of adding or subtracting bits to or from a scattered set of relations.

3.2. The law: The current legal framework and contemporary debates

The law takes different positions, depending on the family configuration involved. In the case of a reconstituted family, the stepparent who holds a parent-like position vis-à-vis her/his spouse's child may be legally recognised as the child's "parent" only if s/he legally adopts the child; the noncustodial parent keeps her/his parental authority over the child. In the case of a full adoption, the situation is one of complete substitution, for it creates a new scheme of filiation for the adopted child that gives her/him the same rights as if s/he were the adoptive parents' birth child. It also cuts her/his original kinship ties once and for all. In the case of simple adoption, we come closer to an additive model, since the effects of this procedure allow the new filiation to be added to the first one without extinguishing it. In the case of foster homes, the foster parents may claim unrecognised social kinship only, unless they decide to adopt the child. However, the latter is contingent on the birth parents' consent or disappearance. When it comes to artificial insemination involving an anonymous donor, we can speak of legal ignorance. In the eyes of the law, the sterile man who turns to such a solution is the child's only father. If the parents are married, he "enjoys" the presumption of paternity. If this is not the case, recognising the child as his own is enough, provided that his companion does not oppose this. For same-sex parents the questions of filiation and multiple parents are raised differently, depending on the option chosen to have a child. In cases of adoption or insemination, the problems could be the same as for heterosexual couples. Nevertheless, to date only single people or spouses or unwed couples of different sexes may adopt children in Belgium. As a result, the sharing of parental authority in same-sex couples currently is not possible, since it is reserved for people who have ties of filiation with the child. The domestic component is put forward to justify filiation between the parent and child for cases of insemination of a lesbian and adoption by a gay man alike. Nevertheless, this component may not be mobilised for the same-sex spouse, for in such situations the presumption of paternity or a blood tie does not come into play. In the case of coparenting involving several people, the same-sex partner has no possibility of legal recognition vis-à-vis her/his partner's child.

As we see, when the biological component is not mobilised to justify the status of parent, then the domestic component is, and in some cases both components are recognised. The biological "truth" is mobilised in contradictory ways, depending on which situation is involved. Similarly, the domestic component, which alone justifies filiation in the case of adoption, is not mobilised at all when it comes down to defining the stepparent's status in a reconstituted family. The draft legislation examined at the Convention on Family Issues and debates to which they gave rise also attest to the legal hesitations in this area. Some of them bear the traces of a judicial context that consecrates the impossibility of the second spouse's role, whereas others are grounds for believing that the situation is changing.

The hesitant affirmation of additivity is found in, *inter alia,* a bill providing for the creation of legal recognition of the second spouse as a "second parent" that was put forward in December 2003. This draft contains intrinsically both arguments in favour of accepting multiple parents and arguments that reflect, on the contrary, the difficulty of recognising "the additional parent" as a full parent. In the end, the idea of substitution wins out: the "second parent" may be recognised only if the noncustodial biological parent withdraws.

Similarly, the bills encouraging reform of the social kinship system continue to use very timid language when it comes to considering adding bits of kinship. It is as if they were reluctant to touch the *principle that parental authority cannot be shared by more than two people.*

In the "all or nothing" alternative that characterises continental European law's perception of the stepparent, adoption has the flattering status of "the all", conferring the status of "parent" on the stepparent. This kinship undermines the one that unites the child and noncustodial parent to a greater or lesser degree, depending on whether the adoption is full or simple. From this standpoint, the choice between simple and full adoption is not innocuous. Some Belgian jurisdictions that were previously in favour of full adoption and its substitution logic now seem to be more open to simple adoption and its additive logic.

The problem of same-sex parents may change significantly if the bill to grant them adoption rights becomes law. According to its sponsors, opening up (internal) adoption to same-sex couples must be encouraged, on pain of discriminating against homosexuals.

3.3. The implications of additivity from the father's standpoint

The admittedly hesitant moves towards adopting an additive logic that draft legislation has made in recent years entail embracing a certain form of multiparenthood and -parenting. However, it is doubtless advisable to distinguish between multiple parents from the functional and legal standpoints. This is because the additive logic can be mobilised to achieve two different objectives: either to recognise *de facto* multiparenting (generally linked to sharing the domestic component) and give each of the protagonists a status or to defend *de facto* kinship (linked at least to filiation, if not to the biological component) and/or safeguard the status of biological parents who have been taken out of the picture. It can even be mobilised to achieve both objectives at the same time.

According to the fathers whom we interviewed, the matter of what characterises the "true" parent reveals a constant tension between the biological and domestic components, for one or the other was invoked at different points to justify the family configuration being considered. The case of reconstituted families is paradigmatic of the conflict between these two components of filiation. The domestic component is largely mobilised to illustrate the tie that develops between a child and her/his stepparent. The biological tie seems to disappear in favour of the concrete social bond that develops in day-to-day life. Nevertheless, the biological parent is the only one to have this place in filiation, regardless of her/his parental investment. In some cases, biological filiation confers a sort of right of precedence. This is the case, for example, when the role that a stepfather takes on regarding his companion's children is largely dependent on the degree of the biological father's investment, somewhat as if the stepfather were a "backup". The biological (or "original") father's place plays a part in creating the stepfather's role.

Additivity seems to garner greater support when it concerns multiparenthood as defined by the law rather than multiparenting. When it comes to adoption, the fathers we interviewed said that they attached more importance to the child's origins, even though opinions diverge about the importance of blood ties in daily life. The low probability of the biological parents' re-entering the parental picture seems however likely to rule out all fears of interference from them. This turns this case into the opposite of foster homes, where the original parents' presence and potential return of their children leads the foster parents to act with a certain degree of caution. Here, the foster parents' emotional investment appears to be made largely in relation to the original parents' investment and probability that the child will return to his/her original parents.

The matter of the biological factor's weight seems to be exacerbated in the case of artificial insemination with an anonymous donor (AIAD). AIAD has some particularities, *e.g.*, the secret of the child's filiation (donor anonymity); the couple's "inequality" regarding the child's biological filiation; and of course the question of the importance of the biological factor in the father-child bond. Opinions regarding this last point diverge the same way as for adoption; it is more a question of multiparenthood than of multiparenting. And even that

must be qualified, for there is a great temptation to reduce the male gametes to a few milligrams of fluid. In addition, the possibility of a return to one's origins is strongly rejected.

Generally speaking, the conviction that the biological factor has little influence over the exercise of one's parenthood (i.e parenting) appears to be necessary for people to subscribe to the additive logic. The importance that is given to the child's origins is added to this.

Many of our interviewees stressed the importance of the child's origins, sometimes combined with blood ties, mainly as threads that individuals can follow to find their places in history through their family lineages. In this connection, we are tempted to hypothesise that this desire for a place in the scheme of things has become meaningful because of longer life expectancies and the weakening and increased complexity of family structures. The former entails overlapping of generations, as a result of which individuals become aware of the fact that they belong to a family lineage, while the latter trend blurs family boundaries, functions, identities (Who belongs to the family?), and time frames (How long will the family last?). The purpose of belonging to a vaster historical and temporal dimension might be to recreate longer-term identity, to restore significance to family ties that can no longer be taken for granted and, what is more, have become ephemeral and fragile. The fathers, for their part, insisted on the importance of origins because of their role in identity building: "Genealogical discontinuity" was deemed negative and "continuity" was seen as structuring identity. The ways that individuals spin the thread of the family's memory should also be analysed from this perspective, notably through the matter of the transmission of heritage, be it cultural or material. The importance that is given to origins can also be glimpsed in one of the functions that have devolved on the grandparents. The presence of grandparents is a form of security when a family crisis arises. A crisis can reveal the strength of children's ties with their grandparents and the grandparents' function as guardians of the family's continuity, as sources of stability.

When it comes to multiple parents, one source of problems mentioned often by our respondents is the confusion of roles, whether parental, generational, professional, or sexual, and the fuzziness of the various protagonists' statuses. Many cases of reconstituted families reveal a certain uneasiness with the definition of the stepfather's role. Of course, the stepfathers all concur that they do not fill the same role as the father and do not think they should. But beyond that, opinions diverge. Some men feel that they are inevitably forced to take on a parental role, given that they live with the children on a daily basis and have to make the children comply with rules in the home. Others claim, on the contrary, that the parental role of authority cannot be delegated to the stepparent and must continue to belong exclusively to the biological parent. The problem of grandparents underlines the need for precision concerning intergenerational roles as well. The grandparents are often called upon to play a major role when family problems occur. The grandparents' availability and the help that they give tend to be appreciated. Nevertheless, the boundary between the feeling of help and the feeling of interference seems to be crossed rather quickly. For the grandparents, it is a matter of working with the rule of "neither too close nor too far". In the case of intervention by social assistance professionals, some fathers also brought up lack of relations between the family and the institutions. Finally, another type of confusion mentioned by some of our respondents concerns the roles that are "traditionally" or "culturally" linked to one or the other gender. The first element that the fathers who are opposed to same-sex parents muster to explain their reluctance to approve of such parental arrangements is the risk of confusion between women's and men's roles.

Many of our fathers mobilised the argument of the child's best interests, sometimes in tandem with that of the confusion of roles, to justify their reluctance to accept certain family configurations. The "clincher", for some of them, was that the risk of being stigmatised

because of the lack of social recognition of this type of kinship was contrary to the best interests of the child.

When multiple parents, same-sex parents, transsexuality, etc., are considered to be so many situations that help to blur pre-established social landmarks, the phrase "But where are we heading?" that some of our respondents uttered reflects their fear of seeing a foreign world for which they do not have the keys of understanding spring up around them. Assigning names to these new forms of parenthood and parenting makes them intelligible, communicable to one's peers, in other words, commensurable. This symbolisation is indispensable if one wants to recreate coherence and rebuild an operating logic on the ruins of past experience. Many of the fathers whom we met felt it to be imperative: where words are lacking, uneasiness prevails. Social non-existence appears to be a major obstacle to accepting today's forms of multiple parenting arrangements. The legal discourse plays a crucial role in this necessary symbolisation process, even though it is not sufficient.

4. Connecting home life and work

Far from being a minor phenomenon, the problem of combining work and family is at the heart of contemporary transformations[32]. Indeed, according to Bernard Fusulier, the changes that have occurred in work and family require rearranging the ties between these two spheres. Not only have the rise in the percentage of working women and end of the "breadwinner father" model's predominance affected the connections between work and family, but the increasing importance of single-parent families, flexibility and intensification of work, continued gender inequality in employment, ageing of the population, and so on, are also affecting this relationship. Many people thus feel that they have to juggle contradictory imperatives, are handicapped on the labour market, or suffer because they cannot find a satisfactory way to meet their various commitments.

4.1. Towards a weakly gendered cumulative model

As Bernard Fusulier[33] points out, the tension between work and family is all the stronger as the ethos of duty that structured people's relationship with work in the industrial society is breaking down in the post-industrial society and giving way to the ethos of fulfilment[34]. It follows that the idea of sacrificing one's family life for one's career (or vice versa) is more difficult to accept. The challenge is a sizeable one[35]. It challenges the alternative of "I shall have a professional life or I shall have a private life", referring back to the prospect of a zero end game in which "I win in one and I lose in the other". Today, there is more support for a weakly gendered cumulative model[36], where investing in one's work and investing in the family are not considered to be incompatible.

One of the conditions of the "cumulative" model is to broaden men and women's degree of freedom regarding the need to sell their labour on the market in order to achieve acceptable living standards. This is a condition of "decommodification" of labour, made

---

[32] FUSULIER, B., « Introduction : Un enjeu de société », in *Les politiques sociales*, issues 3 & 4, FUSULIER B. (Ed.) « Articuler travail et famille », 2003, pp. 6-12.

[33] FUSULIER, B., « Concilier emploi-famille en Finlande : un modèle « cumulatif » aujourd'hui contrarié », presentation at the colloquium of the Association d'Economie Politique *« De la conciliation emploi-famille à une politique des temps sociaux! »*, 18-19 November 2004, Montreal.

[34] LALIVE D'EPINAY, Ch., « Significations et valeurs du travail, de la société industrielle à nos jours », in DE COSTER, M., PICHAULT, F., *Traité de sociologie du travail*, De Boeck, 1994, Brussels, pp. 55-82.

[35] LEWIS, S. & LEWIS, J. (Eds.), *The Work-Family Challenge: rethinking employment*, Sage Publications, 1996, London.

[36] BECK, U., *The Brave New World of Work*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000, Oxford.

possible by various schemes (for example, working time regulations, right to leaves, suitable minimal wages and social benefits, etc.). The cumulative model also involves giving people more freedom when it comes to taking on their family responsibilities and tasks. This condition is that of the "defamilialisation" of family requirements[37], that is, that the family's needs do not have to be met exclusively by the family's members.

In Belgium, some types of institutional support for combining family life and work incarnate the idea of decommodification or defamilialisation. The various types of leave (maternity, parental, paternity leave) and shortening or suspending work time via time credits are examples of the first idea, whereas setting up daycare facilities for children is an example of the second idea. A series of proposals was made during the debates that took place in the 2004 Convention on Family Issues that also took the line of greater decommodification of workers in close conjunction with keenness to achieve gender equality. These proposals include encouraging men to take leaves (via more state intervention) and making working time more flexible (provided that this is governed by collective agreements). The various proposals aimed at improving access – in terms of numbers of places and costs - to daycare facilities, for their part, are examples of the defamilialisation line.

4.2. The figures on the cumulative model

Yet implementing a gender-neutral cumulative model seems difficult. Women remain the main users of the various schemes for combining work and family. In December 2004, a total of 48,458 women benefited from time credits across the country, compared with 30,762 men.[38] It is encouraging to note that the growing success of this scheme over the past few years (up 140% between 1996 and 2001 for men in the Walloon Region, for example), has been accompanied by improvement in the gender ratio of its take-up, which went from 10 men per 90 women in 1996 to 36 men per 64 women at the end of 2004. Still, there is no guarantee that these career breaks are being used for family reasons. Men are allegedly using this system more as a way to reduce their hours on the job at the end of their careers. Used of the parental leave is even more unequal: In 2004, 4,522 men took parental leaves compared with 22,558 women. These gender inequalities occur in all of the country's regions: So, the numbers of men and women who took parental leaves were 3,614 and 16,082, respectively, in the Flemish Region, 688 and 5,282, respectively, in Wallonia, and 220 and 1,194, respectively, in the Brussels-Capital Region[39]. The mean ages of those taking these career breaks were gender specific: from 30 to 39 years for men and from 25 to 34 years for women[40].

4.3. Hobbles on implementing the weakly gendered cumulative model

Our analyses of the experiences related by our respondents remind us that the players are people of flesh and blood, not passive subjects who are easily swayed in one or the other direction. That being so, they must deal with constraints over which the public authorities may not necessarily have direct control (either because they are deeply rooted representations or because they are imposed by the labour market, the autonomy and room for manoeuvre of which are rising steadily).

---

[37] Alongside this "defamilialisation" trend there is also the matter of a more balanced distribution of household chores and childrearing responsibilities amongst the family members.
[38] Source: National Employment Office
[39] Source: National Employment Office
[40] This difference can be explained by the young parents' age differences.

4.3.1. The economic imperatives

The field study revealed the leading role played by the economic imperatives with which families are faced. The possibility of availing themselves of special leaves or time credits simply was not an option for many of the fathers in our sample, due to the financial impact that such a choice would have on the household's (or single parent's) income. This hobble is stronger if the man's salary is higher than that of the woman, as is the case in many households. This finding has been made before, notably in various studies that focused on fathers who invested massively in the family sphere and showed that not only the salary and work schedules, but also career prospects and the mood at work, were preponderant factors when a couple had to choose which of the two parents would reduce her/his occupational investment.[41] The early findings of an ongoing study of families in which the father stays home to take care of the child(ren) while the mother works show that when the choice is deliberate, the parents calculate all of the factors that we have just mentioned plus the costs of travelling between the home and workplace and childcare costs. In some cases, it is practically less expensive for the couple to do without all or part of the income of the lower wage-earner or the one with the less stable employment position than to place the child(ren) in daycare.[42]

4.3.2. The stereotype's roots

Everything does not hinge on economic computations. Our survey also revealed how deeply traditional norms of the sexual division of labour are rooted in individuals' (men's' and/or women's) attitudes. Individuals tend to invest more energy in the activities in which they are most highly valued[43]. Now, historically, women have enjoyed such recognition in the family sphere. Men's desires to reduce their career investments to take care of their children and/or the household can thus sometimes be stymied by their wives, who take these wishes for paternal investment for intrusions in their domains. Inversely, some fathers are reluctant to get more involved in an area that has until now been reserved for women. However, the attitudes are not so black and white, but depend more on the contexts in which this power struggle takes place. It appeared in the course of the interviews that the men who said they were "new fathers" found it much less difficult to be more involved in childcare than their predecessors, although this did not carry over to housework. And even when changes were detected, we often found that the women in these households continued to carry more of the weight when it came to making decisions about and organising the household chores. This can be explained by two types of cultural change. Indeed, representations of and norms concerning paternity have evolved considerably over the second half of the 20th century, to the point that a series of injunctions for fathers to become more involved in the emotional scene, in exchanges and feelings, can be identified in the myriad of positions that are voiced on the subject. According to C. Castelain-Meunier[44], the "affectionate and present" father model is spreading. At the same time, no similar cultural movement can be detected when it comes to men's involvement in household chores. Of course, from time to time one comes across advertisements for housekeeping products that feature men, but these are exceptions to the rule. Moreover, the public authorities do very little to help change these

---

[41] ROST, H., "Fathers and parental leave in Germany", in MOSS, P., DEVEN, F., (eds.), *Parental leave: progress or pitfall?*, NIDI/CBGS Publications, 1999 et GERSON, K., *No Man's Land. Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work*, Basic Books, 1993, New York.

[42] MERLA L. « L'articulation entre vie professionnelle et familiale en Belgique : le cas des pères qui réduisent leur investissement professionnel pour s'occuper de leur(s) enfant(s) », ongoing research.

[43] DUBAR, C., *La crise des identités : l'interprétation d'une mutation*, Coll. Le lien social, PUF, 2000, Paris.

[44] Quoted by DES DESERTS S.: « Au bonheur des pères », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n°1914, 12-18 July 2001, Paris, p.14-18.

representations, be it through the advertising campaigns for service vouchers or "home help coupons" (here we refer to the advertising campaigns to hire cleaning *ladies* only) or the absence of measures aimed at giving housekeeping a positive, non-degrading, image. Let us also point out with regard to the service vouchers that, besides being an attempt to prise paid housekeeping work away from the shadow economy, they can also be seen as a way of encouraging housekeeping's outsourcing and thus help, *ipso facto*, to disqualify it compared with other activities, especially paid work. The statements that we gathered from our self-proclaimed "new fathers" underlined their attempts to give taking on household chores a positive meaning by minimising this work's arduousness and the fact that it has to be done (this was done by accentuating the consensual and freely chosen nature of the distribution of these chores). It remains to be seen whether this is a way to make tasks that would ordinarily be seen as a bind less burdensome and more bearable (through the feeling that at least how they are carried out is freely chosen), or a way to give a modern accent to a division of labour that in the final analysis remains very traditional, even inegalitarian. At the same time, we can wonder whether these men, in minimising the personal investment that taking on household chores demands, are not helping to keep housework invisible.

4.3.3. Child-rearing norms

Besides the financial issues and male and female resistance, we must single out one last aspect that refers to the measures aimed at encouraging and facilitating the use of childcare services. To manage to reconcile work and family life, but also to be able to engage in sport and recreation, the fathers whom we met also mobilise their environments, whether by using outside schemes that contribute to "defamilialisation", or by making use of domestic solidarity. Indeed, whether for childcare or housework, the men often use existing schemes, such as crèches, daycare facilities, babysitters, and cleaning ladies, to give those mentioned in the interviews. However, such outsourcing may run against the grain for parents who feel that it is important to take care of their children themselves. This desire could be discerned in some of our survey interviews, but also surfaces in Laura Merla's doctoral research, and can be reflected in behaviours ranging from limiting the time spent in a crèche (which some parents recognise as being useful for socialising young children) to mistrust and outright rejection of such solutions. This desire can be accompanied by guilty feelings when the parents have no other option but to entrust their children to someone else, be it a daycare facility, grandparents, or friends. The parents find themselves once again grappling with a dilemma, that of sacrificing some of the time spent with their children for the desired or forced investment in their work, or accepting the financial and personal costs of the reverse scenario.

Today, it seems to be commonly accepted that handling work and a family no longer means that women must give up the former. Parents must think about how to combine the two together, or "all together", *i.e.*, as a trio or quartet in the case of reconstituted families. Of course, we have a long way to go before deeply ingrained individual and collective representations and practices can be uprooted. The Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, have tried to attack such stereotypes through various measures, such as waging a broad media campaign featuring male politicians and their children and developing strong political messages stressing the fact that each parent loses out if parental leave possibilities are not used.[45] It would be worthwhile to think about instituting similar measures in Belgium, while taking care that they attack ingrained ideas about housework as well as childcare. Other

---

[45] FUSULIER B., MERLA L. « Articuler vie professionnelle et vie familiale : enjeu de société, enjeu pour l'égalité », in « *Les Cahiers de l'Education permanente n°19 : Quel genre pour l'égalité ?* », 2003, Brussels.

awareness-raising campaigns could target businesses in order to make employers aware of the positive effects of setting up schemes to improve ways to combine work and family for men and women alike, *i.e.*, greater job satisfaction, less stress, greater chances of attracting talented new recruits, less absenteeism, and so on. The Belgian campaign to promote paternity leaves (*Congé de paternité. Choisir d'être présent* or "Paternity leaves: Choosing to be there.") launched by the Institute for Gender Equality is a first example of this.