



“You Just Throw Yourself Into It”: On fatherhood and family in the Faroe Islands

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the empirical realities of fatherhood and family lives as experienced by Faroese men, through an anthropological lens. It delves into the question about men’s ambivalent roles and identities in Faroese society today: what does it mean to be a father in the Faroe Islands today? Drawing on information from an ongoing ethnographic study of contemporary Faroese fatherhoods, the first extensive research project on men and masculinities in the context of the Faroe Islands, in this article I am querying common representations of the so-called ‘new man’ disseminated through diverse contemporary studies on fathers and fatherhood: Is the Faroese father a ‘new man’, a ‘traditional’ man, or a representative of something else entirely? My objective is to rethink the father and his fathering styles through empirical exploration of the generative interplay between local gender and masculinity norms and images of the ‘new man’ from political and academic discourse and hence, to further the anthropological participation in and contribution to public debate on culture, parenthood, gender, and masculinity in understudied corners of the global North.

Keywords: Fatherhood, fathering, new man, family life, children

Becoming a father

Picture this! A maternity ward, where after long hours of waiting for the meticulously monitored body to be born, constantly inspected by advanced medical instruments, you hear the first cry of a baby.

In one such ward, a smiling midwife gave me a pair of scissors and invited me to cut the umbilical cord of my new-born son still attached to his mother. To her surprise, the corporal ribbon cutting ceremony, representing the father’s new active role in childbirth, materialised without any photos being captured and instantly digitally disseminated to friends and relatives. A nod of approval from her told me that the soft incision separating the baby from his mother had been done according to the book, or at least adequately from the midwife’s professional point of view, and that I had passed the test for new fathers. Not many years back, fathers were under no circumstances allowed to witness the birth of a child. Today however, fathers generally need a very good excuse for declining the opportunity to be by the mother’s side during delivery, for happily cutting the umbilical cord under supervision of the midwife, and for observing and supporting the mother through the initial phase of the postpartum period. For the father thrown into the orbit of this elementary human biological

transformation, as a body in its web of technological and socio-cultural organisation, the whole experience, with its intense and highly affecting course of events, involving a "complex imbrication of the social and the somatic" (Protevi 2009 cited in Garlick 2016: 49), is hard to grasp and put into words. The setting invites him to reflect on his life, his new-born baby, his family, his masculinity, and his future, but what does his body think? The affective atmosphere puffing the father, "something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable," is impersonal "yet can be felt as intensely personal" (Anderson 2009 cited in Frykman and Frykman 2016: 10). The inclusion of the father in the team welcoming the baby's arrival into the world in the delivery room, a change of practice largely promoted by women, was highly motivated by a desire to affect the father in direction of a new postnatal fatherhood, which would assumingly result in an array of more 'intimate' fathering practices (Dermott 2008). However, the father's active presence in the delivery room can also be interpreted as a passage destabilising men's relation to the natural world; hence also, men's bodies' relation to freedom, through affect, complicating "divisions between natural, technological, and social domains" (Garlick 2016: 53). After having finished the contemporary father's close to mandatory duty, when I gave the medical scissors back to the midwife, who continued her work, I felt happy, proud, but also a bit puzzled. The atmosphere in the room was of an emotional assemblage associated with happiness.

The maternity ward of the national hospital located in Tórshavn is where all childbirths in the Faroes take place nowadays. The tall windows of the ward point towards the seafront and the untamed North Atlantic Ocean. They play a significant role in reminding the new-born's relatives of their attachment to the sea and the land, their reliance on the capricious nature of the weather, and the scope of their imagination. The wind shakes them, the rain whips them. The fog blurs them, the sea salt taints them. On a cloudless day, moving boats and ships encircled by nomadic seabirds are eyed through them. The ever-changing colours of the scenery, in stark contrast to the clinical and placeless interiors of the hospital, may accentuate feelings of being alive and part of nature, as in Spinoza's notion of 'conatus' referring to an ingrained and intensive tendency to continue to exist. The new-born cannot but sense the moods and intensities of the place, the sounds penetrating the thick windowpane and blending with the close-by human and non-human pulse and soundscape. The human voice surrounding the new-born is also a part of the chorus of the nature, because Faroese is, according to some visitors to the islands, a sort of deep and soft 'underwater' language (Minervudóttir 2003), which very well could be a homely melody for the baby recalling its aquatic antenatal life.

The aim of the study

Talking to Faroese fathers from different walks of life, the moment they became fathers, the long hours and days spent at the hospital together with the mother and the baby, was always narrated as an unbelievable episode in life. This article is about Faroese fathers and their family lives. It delves into the multi-layered question about men's ambivalent roles and identities in Faroese society today: what does it mean to be a father in the Faroe Islands (Faroes) today? How can knowledge about the father and the family help us better understand and interrogate representations of Faroese culture? As a Faroese father of four children myself, I have for many years been engaged in discourse on and scholarly exploration of the discrepancy between dominant cultural representations of Faroese men and the everyday

lives and personal narratives of islanders since the end of the twentieth century. In my ethnographic project, I easily attuned myself to most of the scenes composed by the fathers and summarised in my (field)notes, happenings from a familiar world evoking familiar affects and ‘intensities’ (Jansen 2016, p. 68), but without the ambition of uncovering truths approving a dominant ‘picture of the world’ of fathers (Stewart 2007: 1). Rather, scenes of ‘immanence force’ (ibid.), singularly and in combination, can map connections moulding an (unexpected) image of fathers and fatherhoods. In this article, drawing on information from an ongoing ethnographic study of contemporary Faroese fatherhoods, the first extensive research project on men and masculinities in the context of the Faroe Islands, I inquire about common representations of the so-called ‘new man’ disseminated through diverse contemporary studies on fathers and fatherhood: Is the Faroese father a ‘new man’ unlike his predecessor, or a representative of something else? My aim is to research Faroese men’s navigation through gendered spaces – in relation to family life, the child-father relationship, childbirth, etc. – based on their own words and action. My objective is to also rethink the father and his fathering styles through empirical exploration of the generative interplay between local gender and masculinity norms and images of the ‘new man’ from political and academic discourse; hence to further the anthropological participation in and contribution to public debate on culture, parenthood, gender, and masculinity in understudied corners of the global North. Doing anthropology at home, as a father among fathers, I am obviously compelled to contextualise and reflect on my positionality – as an ‘insider’ in a small-scale society – in the field (Hastrup 1987). It was a mistake, says Anthony Jackson (1987: 8), “to think that the distant “savage” had more to give to anthropologists than one’s local ‘compatriot’: they simply have different types of information to impart.” In my analysis of the contemporary father in the family and society, I aspire to address processes of unfairness in relation to society’s presentation of men as fathers in the Faroe Islands. With the help of the voices of the fathers from my study, I aim to unsettle usually taken-for-granted assumptions, as well as to make restricted knowledge about fathers’ everyday lives and fathering practices accessible (Madison 2011: 5). The father is an important part of the anthropology of reproduction. This study therefore, also aims to guide people who have been “challenging long-standing structures of oppression and striving towards reproductive freedom and justice” (Han and Tomori 2022: 15).

This article is based on the ethnographic project ‘Faroese Fatherhood: Exploring everyday life, family life, and masculinity across two generations of men in contemporary Faroe Islands’ (2019-2022), at the University of the Faroe Islands. Together with my research assistants, I conducted 20 individual interviews (more interviews have been conducted in 2022) with fathers of different age groups and from different regions in the Faroe Islands. In most cases, the interviews were held in the family homes of the fathers, but in a few cases the conversation took place in other settings. All fathers involved in the discussions were Faroese men in heterosexual relationships with active participation in the labour market. Most fathers were from the capital Tórshavn or regional towns in the northern and eastern parts of the Faroe Islands. The participants have pseudonyms in this article and information about their families, homes, working places, and biographies is presented without details that could uncover their real identities. Conducted in 2019 and 2020, the interviews were voice-recorded and lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. In addition to semi-structured individual interviews, the project includes a national online survey, essays from students,

observations, and media-extracted material.

Doing ethnography 'at home,' in the Faroes, is tricky in the sense that it is difficult to keep a 'professional' distance from the research participants – relatives, friends, friends of friends, colleagues, or others belonging to the same small community as the anthropologist – in the field. But fortunately, it represents a journey bypassing most of the 80 different hazards (e.g., coup d'état, malaria, depression) enlisted in the American Anthropological Association's *Surviving Fieldwork* report (Howell 1990, cited in Nimb and Rubow 2018: 111). Why go through purgatory if you can enjoy ethnographic ventures in a laid-back homely location? But obviously, it could be suggested that there are other challenges facing the ethnographer at home, one of the most evident being the way extensive local knowledge 'blindfolds' the researchers, blocking their eyes for new perspectives on well-known phenomena (Hastrup 1987: 104). However, doing ethnography at home in a small-scale community has in many cases been an enterprise with the aim of creating counter-narratives to dominant images of the northern periphery as backward and 'traditional.' Doing ethnographic research at home is also a way of critically reassessing earlier authoritarian ethnographies by visiting scholars. In the North Atlantic and Arctic communities, the 'native' researcher from the local community is also a person with the capacity to adjust and revise myths and stereotypes about their community rooted in colonial history and the primitive/modern dichotomies of evolutionist theories (Gaini 2021).

The context

The Faroe Islands (also spelled Faeroe Islands) or the Faroes, is an island country in the North Atlantic Ocean, halfway between Norway and Iceland. It is a self-governing (constituent) country of the Kingdom of Denmark – yet not a member of the EU. The Faroes, with a population of 53,000 inhabitants, is a group of 18 islands (of which one is uninhabited) with an area of 1,400 square kilometres in total. The Faroese are of Nordic origin, descendants of Viking settlers arriving to the archipelago in the eighth or early ninth century (settlers from Great Britain and Ireland had been in the country a few centuries earlier), and speak Faroese, a Nordic language. The economy is heavily dependent on export of fishing and fish farming products to the world market. More than 95 per cent of the population is Christian, of which more than 80 per cent are members of the (National) Lutheran Church of the Faroe Islands (including the Inner Mission), but there are also many active free church congregations, the largest and most powerful being the Open (Plymouth) Brethren. There are more than 140 churches and congregation houses in total in the Faroes; according to recent surveys, this is the Nordic society with the largest percentage of people considering themselves to be religious and to have a religious identity (í Skorini et al. 2022). The Faroes have one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, 2.5 births per woman, and relatively high life expectancy for women (85 years) and men (81 years). Unemployment rates are very low (less than one per cent today) and the economy has been very strong for almost a decade now (until the COVID-19 pandemic). An advanced urbanised society inspired by the welfare systems of the neighbouring Nordic countries, the Faroese society is strongly connected to the globalising world through economic, political, and cultural collaboration and networks. As a small-scale island community with strong religious and local identities connected to large collaborative family networks, and with a large part of the population engaged in activities associated with Faroese rural lifestyles (sheep farming, small scale fishing, fowling,

whale hunting, etc.), the Faroes are often portrayed as an exotic and conservative ‘exception’ in the Nordic region. In this landscape, men and fathers have also commonly been defined in relation to the work of rural men at sea, in the valley, or in the mountains (Gaini 2011).

Hithertofore, fathers in this society have commonly been associated with self-reliant characteristics; they are often illustrated as hardy men in no need of any special support in relation to their social and family life. Men’s associations, offering counselling and legal assistance to men of all ages, do not exist in the Faroes. Research and (academic) instruction on gender has predominantly focused on Faroese women and the Women’s Rights Movement (e.g., Rafnsdóttir 2010; Jacobsen et al. 2011; Knudsen 2016). For some years now, the Faroese Gender Equality Board (an outcome of the Gender Equality Act 1994) has tried to develop a focus on men and fathers in some of their projects, most noticeably in the political debate about parental (paternal) leave reform. Slowly but steadily, the Faroes is moving in the direction of the neighbouring countries in the Nordic region, but contemporary family life and parental roles continue to be presented in media debate as a ‘remnant’ of the past (Hayfield et al. 2016; Hayfield 2020; Gaini 2011). “Gender equality cannot be achieved without men and boys,” Faroese Prime Minister Axel Johannessen emphasised in a conference speech in 2019, which resonates a careful turn in the gender equality discourse in the Faroes. “Sometimes we forget how much it means to have a father who refuses to accept that his daughter should not have the same opportunities as a boy,” Mr. Johannessen added in defence of the Faroese fathers who discreetly contribute to gender equality through their fathering practices. My own ethnographic research on contemporary fatherhood and masculinities in the Faroes has also made the public aware of the men missing in the mainstream gender equality debate (e.g., Gaini 2010, 2011, 2016; Lopez et al. 2018).

Since the 60s and 70s, growing urbanisation and administrative centralisation, cycles of international out- and return-migration, new opportunities and motivations for (secondary and tertiary) education, the introduction of modern (electronic) media, the downfall of small-scale traditional fishing, and other intersecting structural processes, have promoted new lifestyles and the recognition and empowerment of a range of groups symbolising new gender and family identities (Rozanova-Smith et al. 2021). In the post-war era, young Faroese women in large numbers moved out of their small village communities in quest of a future with formal education, professional career, and a more ‘modern’ social life. Many men and women belonging to sexual minorities also left their native islands for good, as a reaction to the extensive stigma and homophobic prejudices targeting them, which made it practically impossible to live – openly – as non-heterosexual in the Faroes until the 90s (Joensen-Næs 2015). The strong position of Christian faith and conservative moral values in relation to family and gender issues reinforced intolerant attitudes towards, and parochial suppression of people not fitting the dominant heteronormative family model. Generally (in gross statistical sense), men have higher incomes, higher representation and position in boards and committees, and higher representation in local and national councils and governments (Rafnsdóttir 2010). Research has shown that many Faroese women (the majority) are in part time jobs, hence earning less in average than men do (Hayfield et al. 2016; Nielsen et al. 2020; Knudsen 2009).

Searching for the 'new man'

The 'new man' has not really gained a foothold in the local understanding of men's everyday lives and fathering practices in the Faroes; this, even though the general characteristics associated with the 'new man' have an impact on the values defining the conversations on health and gender equality policy today. In the Faroes, which is commonly presented as an island community with relatively conservative family values (Gaini 2013), public interest in fathers and fatherhood issues seems to be very limited. The father is normally absent from public conversation about family, culture, and society (Gaini 2020), with the recent heated and crucial political discussions on paternal leave and gender equality in the labour market being an exception (e.g., Hayfield 2020). "There are few things like a father, nothing like a mother," an old Faroese proverb says, indicating that it is easier to substitute or do without a father than a mother. Historically, the dominant representation of Faroese manhood was an image of a man at work, first and foremost physically demanding and hazardous endeavours in untamed nature. Songs and legends were dedicated to the heroic working man, but hardly any word was uttered about the man in the context of the family. The Man was in focus while the father was absent, or rather, the man and the father covered *one* and the same identity. To be an adult man was to be a father, as is clearly testified in the narratives of the fathers involved in this study.

The representation of a 'new man' and 'new father' championing inclusive and caring fatherhood styles, and practicing 'gender equalitarian fathering', as a contrast to his 'patriarchal predecessor', has been in focus in a range of international studies on fatherhood and masculinity drawing on rudimentary 'not new man'/'new man' oppositions (Edley and Wetherell 1999: 181-182). In my point of view, this timely discourse has raised many important questions inspiring analysis of tensions between different groups of men, but regrettably, it has neither paid enough attention to men's own narratives and experiences, nor demonstrated rigorous understanding of cultural variation and transformation concerning family values.

Gender equality is a characteristic of what has been coined the 'new Nordic manliness' of the middle-class (Gottzén and Jonsson 2012). The topic of paid parental leave policies and practices, with focus on 'daddy's quota' (the father's exclusive portion of the parental leave) schemes in the different countries, has been at the centre of the academic debate. In the conclusions of the volume *Fatherhood in the Nordic Welfare States*, edited by Guðný Björk Eydal and Tine Rostgaard, the editors point out that:

While the overall results confirm that the goal of policies on gender equality, families and the labour market are the equal rights of both parents to earn and care, structural and *cultural hindrances* remain that need to be recognised and defined in order to eliminate these obstacles (2016: 398, my emphasis).

From the above point of view, fathers are still not doing enough. In a new report, *State of Nordic Fathers*, readers are also alerted that 'progress is slow' and that the goal, a Nordic world with fathers and mothers sharing childcare responsibilities equally, "is nowhere in sight" (Cederström 2019: 44). In pursuance of a better understanding of what it means to be yesterday's, today's, or tomorrow's man, we need to carefully explore the cultural

narratives and family discourses in the local setting (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2003; Edley and Wetherell 1999). Many Nordic studies on fatherhood draw on national surveys, which rarely shed light on men's peculiar ways of interacting with their children and involvement in their children lives at micro level (Marsiglio and Pleck 2005). Another limitation is the reports' lack of information about fathers and families from rural and autonomous island communities (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands) in the Nordic region, places representing an alternative modern and democratic (caring) family man belonging to the twenty-first century society.

The Nordic studies are to a large extent drawing on research from the school of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM), rooted in progressive feminist-academic discourses on men and gender (especially among scholars in Northern Europe, Australia, and USA) emerging in the eighties (Hearn 2004). Since the end of the twentieth century, we have witnessed a massive growth in the academic literature on men and gender, with topics such as sexuality, health, and fatherhood being in focus (Johansson, 2011). The scholarly literature on fatherhood and fathering in social and interdisciplinary research has predominantly queried what has been considered precarious and problematic facets of men's lifestyles and masculine values. Many of the central discussions engaging researchers from this milieu revolve around representations of the 'good father' (Edley 2017; Miller 2011) embodying 'democratic manhood' (Kimmel 2006: 254) and practicing 'responsible fathering' (Doherty et al. 1998) resonating a 'healthy masculinity' (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017: 179). This has been reviewed in opposition to 'irresponsible men' (Fox 1999), 'bad dads' (Furstenberg 1988), and other undesirable father figures. The 'post-patriarchal family' (Johansson and Andreasson 2017: 190), which is the natural home of the reflexive father resonating 'intimate fatherhood' (ibid.), has largely turned away from the father-as-breadwinner ideal in favour of a dual earner/dual carer regime. This is an interesting observation, defining present-day middle-class dads in the global North through the lens of an imagined patriarchal past; however, it does not shed light on the lives and social realities of different groups of fathers representing other cultural norms and family values in the twenty-first century (Gaini 2020).

In the Nordic literature on fatherhood, most projects discuss one or several of these themes: (a) family policies of the modern welfare state; (b) the core values of individualism and gender equality in family and everyday life; and (c) the social and political organisation of the labour market (e.g., Brandt and Kvande 2003; Cederström 2019; Eydal and Rostgaard 2016; Johansson and Andreasson 2017). Anthropological studies of masculinity and family have exposed the huge variety in fathering experiences around the globe (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2003; Guttman 1997). It is important to realise and take note of the plurality of fatherhoods and masculinities and the fact that endemic notions of fatherhood "are constantly created and transformed in everyday interactions" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 10).

'Being there'

Contemporary Faroese fathers do *want* to be good fathers spending time with their children and taking part in the family's everyday chores. The fathers participating in my project energetically emphasise their 'new roles' in the family in contrast to common images of their fathers' and grandfathers' parenting styles, but they do also connect their fathering practices to selected qualities associated with Faroese manhood of past generations (Gaini 2020). Jacob, a father of three children (and a fourth baby on its way) in his 30s, explains:

The father role...yes, well...in the past there was one, and I think today there is another, right... or you have got some additional things, right...I remember my grandmother always used to say, that when my grandfather was going out to stroll [the baby stroller] it was shame, you didn't do such a thing those days, right? You didn't hang diapers on the string, that was totally shameful. That was what grandmother did, and mothers did that. Now we go on [paternity] leave, we clean, and we wash, we do all those things that the mothers or the women do, right? And that is fine, it suits me fine, but still, I think there are some things...that we men, we should just not do it...and some things that women should not do either, because this is one thing and that is a boys' thing...and I think it is fine, that some things are kept separated. Everything does not have to be just to be...Now we talk very much about everything having to be the equal...[Gender] equality is a bit inflated today, a bit hysterical, I think.

Jacob, like many other present-day Faroese fathers, genuinely wants to be closely involved in his children's lives and to encompass an intimate fathering practice; he prefers however, *doing* fatherhood in his own way, without too much meddling from others. His performance of intimacy in relation to his family life does not necessarily indicate a symbolic revolt against more traditional forms of breadwinning masculinity.

Faroese fathers might well be more visibly involved in child-related activities today, 'being there' and valuing hands-on fathering with one-to-one relationships. However, they generally avoid any explicit self-identification as 'new' or 'modern' fathers destabilising Faroese manhood as mirrored in dominant cultural representations. In many cases, the fathers deliberately turn focus to parenthood, rather than talking about fatherhood per se, for the sake of stressing the symbiosis between the father's and the mother's parenting and social practices. To summarise, you could say that the fathers prefer talking about everyday autodidact fathering practices and family life instead of expounding abstract fatherhood and masculine ideals. According to many of the fathers, parenting is a dynamic 'teamwork' enterprise with intra-familial negotiation about many practicalities in relation to work, education, care, play, etc. They want to talk about the 'secret life of the fathers,' what they *really* do at home, among the closest family members, rather than debating dominant and somehow mythic-exotic images of Faroese men and manhood stemming from media and popular culture. The fathers from the Faroese study do not express any strong nostalgia when they talk about the transformation of the Faroese family and of the father's position in society since the late twentieth century. Leo, a 37-year-old father of two from a village, says:

I think what is really frustrating is that you as a man have so many roles. The role is so wide-ranging. Because you have to be both this ultra-macho man for your sons and all that, and be there for your spouse...at the same time as you ought to be the soft and caring and all that in the other end of the spectrum, and you have to do all these uninteresting everyday chores and wash the floors and wash the toilet and all that...at the same time as you should represent this macho father...or this perfect father. It can be quite a task to know where you are going and how to act all the time...I think this is quite frustrating and tiring, sometimes...surely [...]. In a way things were simpler in the past. But on the other hand, I think the children are richer today, because they have much closer relation ['nærvera'] to the father and the fathers are much more involved in everything. So, I believe this is an advantage for the children. I think so.

Here, Leo is narrating the negotiation and combination of different father-types – local and global, ‘new’ as well as less new – that Faroese fathers pragmatically engage in, as well as their pragmatic and strategic struggle to find identity solutions based on what looks like a set of ambivalent gender styles and norms. In her book *Do Men Mother?* (2018), Andrea Doucet examines fathers’ navigation through the ‘maternal worlds’ of the mothers. She suggests that “rather than comparing fathers to mothers, we require novel ways of listening to and theorising about fathers’ approaches to parenting” (2018: 222). This is indeed one of the ambitions of this article. What Faroese fathers want to communicate is not that they do more or less work than their wives and partners, or that they ‘do mother’ more than the mothers ‘do father.’ They detail how they (day by day) struggle, together with the mother, to cope and make ends meet. They do not invest much energy in instruction of ‘how things ought to be,’ because there is no clear answer to this question. Most of the fathers offer very detailed narratives about small episodes in the story of their family, about their routine communication with and reflections on their children, but they express hesitancy when invited to share their personal perspectives on fatherhood at a more general level. “This is really funny, to sit here talking to you, it is just like being at the psychologist or something like that,” says Jacob suddenly in the middle of the interview, smiling cheerfully thereafter.

Jack-of-all-trades

The detraditionalised ‘new man’ performing inclusive ‘gender-equalitarian fathering’ (e.g., Edley and Wetherell 1999: 181–182), echoing dominant ‘Euro-American models of masculinity’ (Powis 2020: 203), is amalgamated with the local fatherhood norms in the everyday lives of contemporary Faroese men. “I did not think about it at all,” says Julias, a father of three children aged 3–10, who worked as an officer at the sea for many years, when he is asked to share his personal thoughts on ‘life as father’ before his first child was born. The couple was young and had not planned the coming of their baby. “It was not really before half a year after [the baby was born] that I registered that I had become a father,” Julias explains, “but when the baby came to this world, that was a very powerful experience!” Julias is very eager to tell his story, to openly share his thoughts on his life as a father, and it is quite clear that he is very happy to be a father, even if his family life has forced him to change his working-life – to be less at the sea, and to earn less money. He recalls his young adulthood and the worries running through his mind when he for the first time was becoming a father: “to have a place to live and to earn money [for the family].” He reveals that he was all the time thinking about his ‘ability to support’ the family. He went from working almost 300 days a year at the sea to being half of the time at home. Now he works on land. He does not miss the life on board the modern vessel, which can be quite a lonesome trade for the officer, but, says Julias firmly, “what I miss, is the money.”

While Julias has a lot of reflections, ideas, and curious experiences that he wants to talk about, he also admits that there is no good advice for the emergent father to pick up from the family: “In my family, you don’t talk about such things.” It is taboo, he claims, to talk about ‘problems’ in relation to fathering practices in the Faroes. Asked about the possible need to provide birth-preparation courses to first-time fathers as a strategy for better preparation for the role as father, Julias reacts with a puzzled look. He believes that young men might need it, but at the same time he does not really suspect that they will take the offer. “If someone had told me at that time [before becoming a father first time], I would not have listened

anyway," he says, because "when you are young, then you know best yourself." In other words, you will not confess that you need any guidance. Half-jokingly, Julias says about himself and his wife that they are 'curling parents,' hinting at their round the clock rush to take the three kids to sports training, music lessons, birthday parties, school meetings, etc.

Contemporary fatherhood is an 'intimate relationship,' says Esther Dermott (2008), and this represents a conceptualisation, which seems to fit very well to the material from the Faroese study on fatherhood. She concludes that "because caring activities flow from an emotional connection rather than themselves constituting the fathering role, the practicalities of 'intimate fatherhood' are fluid and open to negotiation" (Dermott 2008: 143). According to her study from England, the idea of intimacy can help us analyse the relation between 'culture' and 'conduct,' or, in the Faroese context, between cultural representations of fatherhood and fathering in practice. It is also important to differentiate between fatherhood and fathering, fathering usually being defined as "a set of everyday practices performed by men in relation to their children" while fatherhood, in brief, refers to "a society's collective understanding of what it means to be a man" (Edley 2017: 99-100). More precisely, fathering concerns the personal individual experience of men 'as they engage in fathering practices' (Miller 2011: 6). The media caricatures of fathers as hypermasculine fishermen, images of hardy fathers not adhering to the 'post-patriarchal' family norms of the 'new man' (Johansson and Andreasson 2017), obscure the real masculinity of the majority – the 'silent majority' (Inhorn 2012) – of Faroese fathers today.

Julias avoids describing and defining the 'good father' categorically in our talk, because he finds it difficult to create a general image fitting all families. He says that it is easier to talk about 'good parents,' because couples make their own creative arrangements defining the responsibilities and privileges of the father and the mother. Talking about the qualities of a good father, another participant in the study ponders:

There are very many roles, I think, that you put in a pot, right? But I do not know...well, Jesus, this is really funny, this thing, now I really have to think myself, I am not conscious about these things myself...it just...it just happens automatically.

The father's lightness and friskiness echo a state of ontological security in a shifting landscape of fatherhood and parenthood, yet also a spontaneity and passion for what is to come. Reflecting on Julias' story and examining it in relation to my own fathering experience, as well as in relation to the narratives of other fathers from the Faroese study, I find it quite challenging to draw upon the sociological literature on fatherhood in the quest of defining their fathering styles and gender identities. The Faroese fathers seem to be embedding an obscurity and ambiguity in their narration: they generously share rich and exciting information about their lives as fathers at the same time as they are holding back when the assured ethnographer awaits the father's endorsement of his conclusions. The father weaves the information about fathering and fatherhood into a story about a life, a family, and a culture. The fathers prefer keeping a low profile and to be inspected as a part of a family, not as fathers per se. I suspect the Faroese fathers want to identify with a jack-of-all-trades, fathering being one of the trades. You could, maybe even use the term 'father-of-all-trades' focusing on his apparent ambition to master different (local and global, new and

less new) fathering styles at the same time. Most of the fathers disapprove the ‘masculinity crisis’ scenario and the need for a “narrow vision of the family perpetrated by [...] moral entrepreneurs” (Coltrane 2001, cited in Doucet 2018). One of the fathers told us that he hated talking “about modern fathers”, which he considered to be a chimerical concept about complex and contradictory realities. What worries the fathers, much more than any potential change in the power balance between the mother and the father, is the growing societal pressure on families leading to a more ‘regulated’ and less ‘autonomous’ life for the children and the parents. Their fathering emancipation is, so to speak, shielded and bolstered by resilient family values and norms of a ‘family-oriented’ island community (Enderstein and Boonzaier 2015). Their renegotiation of masculinities and fatherhoods is grounded in the local cultural and gender norms (Powis 2020).

‘Everything, except the laundry’

What the fathers seem to agree on is that fatherhood is not something that fathers spend much time chatting about, at least not man to man. Most of the participants in my study openly admit that they hardly ever talk about ‘being a father’ and fathering with their friends and relatives. Curiously, only their partners had queried about these issues before. “Well, I still have not been sitting at a birthday party or anything, where the men gathered in a clump to talk about when they became fathers,” says Danie, a father of two children in his late 30s, satirically when he compares the men’s behaviour with the ‘maternal world’ of the mothers. While Daniel, who lives in the capital of the Faroes, indeed fits the image of the inclusive and caring father, he dislikes the idea of being part of this confined category. “Well, the father role [fatherhood] is not being defined because you sit down and decide to define the father role,” he explains. The point is, according to Daniel, that the father is “not told what the father role is” today, and thus, he concludes, the father role “is to a higher extent defined on basis of how the relationship [father-mother] is.” Chris, a father of three from Tórshavn, explains that he “does not talk much about how to raise his children with others, friends or colleagues.” He claims that he does not really want to. All this makes it difficult for the ethnographer in the field to scrutinise the Faroese father based on the father’s own narratives. He has a lot to tell, but how can the information help us understand what it means to be a Faroese father today? The adult father is a man, and the Faroese man is, as mentioned earlier, absent from the arena of discussion on gender and parenthood.

The father-of-all-trades reinterprets and remodels dominant images of parenting practices through his flexible and unpretentious style of fathering. It is important to recognise, as Andrea Doucet does in the preface of her book, “the complexity and diversity of mothering and fathering as relational identities and practices – sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping – depending on the contexts within which they unfold, and the approaches used by those who study them” (2018: xv). While fathers, in some international studies, might give the impression that they do more – caring and involved fatherhood – than they are doing in real life, I strongly doubt that this is the case in the Faroese study. It might even be the other way around, as the fathers seem to have very limited interest in making a fuss over their work at home. They would never explicitly maintain that they do *more* caring work at home than the mothers do.

Thomas, a married man in his 30s with four children under the age of ten, lives with his family in a town in the northern part of the Faroes. When asked about his experiences he

says, "I don't know really...it is difficult to say what you think before". He is searching for his feelings about 'becoming a father' before his partner became pregnant for the first time nine years ago. "Of course, you find yourself a partner and you want to have children," he affirms unequivocally, but "you talk privately with your partner about when to get children...about names...about if it is a boy or a girl, etc." Thomas, who works in a large IT company, says that he was flooded with euphoria when he became a father. He says that he was "extremely proud and happy to get a healthy child and that everything went well." He also says that it was tougher to be a father than he had imagined. How does he describe a 'good father?' Thomas narrates:

I think that you, of course, have to show love and compassion and presence to the children – and, yes, upbringing. To educate them in a reasonable style in all respects, and to be a good role model, not only in words, but also in deeds. And yes, just be there and try as well as possible to get them through life. And to give them appropriate challenges and to support them and not too much of that thing of wrapping them in cotton wool.

Thomas, who has fully used his paternal leave quota, says that most contemporary fathers spend a lot of time with their small children. They feed the babies, change their diapers, play with them, he adds. "I don't know if my father has changed diapers or such things," he says laughingly. How did he prepare to become a father? "No, no. You just throw yourself into it," he says, even though he had been to a 'preparing for the birth' seminar together with his wife. "That was not about the father's role or anything like that," he stresses, "and it was only once." Thomas says that he and his wife did not talk much about the role of the father and of the mother before they became parents. Now, "we manage to take care of most issues on our own, but, of course, you always ask your parents if you are unsure about anything," argues Thomas. He takes part in all activities and chores at home. "I actually do anything except washing clothes. I don't do that, but I can wash the floor and Hoover and wash the toilet and clean and all that."

When Thomas says that the new father cannot be fully prepared for the expected baby – "you just throw yourself into it" – he suggests that it represents a deep shift in life, a 'miracle' of some kind, or, from a cultural anthropological perspective, a *rite de passage*, that moulds the father, doing whatever he needs to do as a father. While this might sound quite naïve and romantic, even irresponsible, it should not be misinterpreted as a statement of primitive nonchalance, because the Faroese father will usually have many people around him – his partner, relatives, in-laws, co-villagers, friends – who have relevant experience and expertise, and who will make his 'throw yourself into it' idea less risky – and more collective. From another viewpoint, Thomas' perspective also reflects an image of the mother as the 'coordinator,' as the parents make themselves ready to welcome the baby. As many fathers reveal in the interviews, the mothers work hard to learn and get advice from friends and older (female) relatives – to be as ready as possible for the birth of the new family member.

The father, as the jack-of-all-trades, seems to be in a position where he quite unrestrictedly can move between 'being there' and 'being elsewhere,' being at home and being at work, but, nevertheless, in a way demonstrating his efforts to support his family. The fathers talk about how strenuous it is to be parents in a modern family, and about how

little they knew about this before their first child was born, but, albeit without saying it directly, they also seem to trust that the mother will be at the centre of the family, at least as long as the children are small, while the father will be contributing on many different fronts. It is also important to emphasise that most of the fathers participating in the Faroese study do not represent marginalised masculinities or ethnic minorities. They represent heteronormative masculinities and dominant family values, and do not feel vulnerable and compromised in the interview situation. Unlike mothers, according to Tina Miller's study from England, for the fathers "telling of any difficult experiences is less problematic and, sometimes, unexpected and difficult personal experiences are candidly voiced" (2011: 183). This is interesting, and most likely also valid in the Faroese context.

'It just happens'

Frank, a 35-year-old workman with a wife and two children under school age, says that he had a "dream of becoming a father" when he was a teenager, but that he did not have any elaborate goal concerning his family life. "It just comes naturally," he holds. Frank believes it is important to have a good foundation – first housing and income – when starting a family life with children, but he does not worry much about other family issues. "We find out," he says (more than once during our talk) reassuringly about his family project and its predicaments. He is self-confident and opposes 'too much planning' in life because it is – in his own words – 'not natural.' Things 'change rapidly' in life, he explains, and you need to be ready to adapt to new conditions. Frank says that a 'good father' should always be there for his family and for the children. "He should always take the lead if he or his family are facing problems. He should try to be a role model for his children."

Pondering about his own childhood, Frank feels that children are less free to do what they want today. Reflecting on the difference between the Faroes and other countries (well-known neighbouring countries above all), Frank talks about large cities where "it is not possible to just let the children play outdoors," but also about age and parenthood. "We are maybe a bit younger when we start our lives," he says, "while in Denmark they do more planning to reach a certain age before starting to get children." This is an important difference, according to Frank. "You know many people here in the Faroes, who are parents from their 20s or early 20s," he insists, adding that in the Faroes, in contrast to Denmark, "you can start a family life before you start with anything professional," referring to modern young adults' educational and career plans and strategies. Frank links this narrative to his perspective on 'freedom' in the Faroes. You can do both at the same time, he believes, be a father and study or work, without social stigma.

Frank is also eager to talk about parental leave, which is an important topic for him as father. His employer tried to convince him to continue working, but Frank insisted on taking paternity leave for two weeks soon after the birth of his child. "I was once fired because I asked for permission to go on paternity leave," he reveals. He talks a lot about the daily routines and collaboration with his wife concerning the children's activities, upbringing, and education. Frank and his wife continuously discuss and negotiate all the family-related things that must be done, and there seems to be a large degree of flexibility in their arrangements. "It would maybe also have become quite boring or uninteresting if it were to be completely directed by a template," he says graciously, 'so I also think it is fine to take it as it comes.'

Frank's narrative, speaking for a 'take it as it comes' formula in relation to different family arrangements, echoes the general attitudes of some of the other fathers in the Faroese study, who also defend a 'laissez-faire' position within a Faroese cultural context. Yet, this does not represent a promotion of accidental parenthood, because its outcome is stringently influenced by common family values and child rearing norms within the family (Gaini, 2020). The negotiation between the father and the mother, as well as between the parents and their close relatives, is to a large degree based on tacit knowledge and cultural codes. Among these fathers, the father-mother relationship is immersed in the life of a larger family group supporting the young first-time parents without taking control of their everyday matters.

Unveiling the father

The Faroese fathers from my study, without exception, talk about a transformation of the Faroese family when they compare their own childhood with their contemporary family life with partner and children, but they at the same time also identify a strong continuum in the fathers' roles and identities consolidating narrated contrasts between the so-called 'new man' and the man that he pushed into the abyss of the authoritarian and patriarchal family structures of the past. Through review of the "micro-politics of men's family lives," we notice that the Faroese father, as a 'modified breadwinner,' is living with and negotiating different masculine styles of caring today (Miller 2011). Therefore, obviously, there is a gap between cultural representations of radical change in fathering styles and the individual men's own narratives about small-scale change in their everyday fathering practices (Dermott 2008). In my study, as already stressed, as well as in an English study of fatherhood (Williams 2008), none of the fathers refer to their fathering approach as being 'new.' The Faroese men are pragmatic jack-of-all-trades fathers performing a personal-style intimate and caring fatherhood, and in general they focus more on protecting the autonomy of the parents in the larger societal context than to sustain any idealised image of Faroese fatherhood.

The way the fathers talk about the family's freedom and wellbeing, as well as about how family life evolves according to a 'it just comes naturally' and 'take it as it comes' script, an implicit attempt of "equalising all aspects of parenting" resonates from their description (Dienhart 1998). The easy-going attitude of many fathers echoes a feeling of safety, autonomy, and togetherness in the local community, but also a nature-human symbiosis in the everyday life of Faroese men. In my study, I learnt that the Faroese fathers were masters in the art of presenting ambiguous and unconfined explanations to categorical queries. Most of them gave rather messy descriptions of the 'messiness of the experiential' (Ahmed 2010), thus a quite honest response to what they most likely considered to be unanswerable questions. Many fathers' narratives about fatherhood seem to represent a 'throwtogetherness' (Massey 2005) of affects, feelings, objects, and the past. Concerning the transition to parenthood, Faroese fathers demonstrate a strong paternal involvement and emotional engagement in the process, even if they indeed are "involved in their children's lives in a variety of ways" (Habib 2012: 104). Most of the contemporary fathers in the Faroes perform a 'shared caregiver role' (co-parenting), while their fathers and grandfathers, especially among men working at the sea, had a relatively peripheral role in the everyday parenting of small children (Gaini 2020).

The Faroese jack-of-all trades fathers, belonging to a 'family-oriented society' (Gaini 2013) with child-centred family arrangements, and with a culture giving the women a 'natural' primary caregiver position, have a certain 'pick and choose' privilege in their negotiation of

the father's parental role in relation to the small children (Johansson and Klinth 2010, cited in Miller 2011: 44). This does not mean, nevertheless, that they necessarily escape the most tedious tasks in the everyday life of the family. The family arrangements depend very much on the labour market position of the parents. Among some of the men whom I interviewed, engagement in child-focused active care seemed to reflect a kind of compensation for the loss of the father's strong breadwinner status. A non-European immigrant father married to a Faroese woman shared his view on 'Faroese fathers' in an interview. He explains:

I think fathers here are more involved in their child's life in terms of changing clothes, making food, and playing a lot. I don't remember my father played with me a lot because he had to work all the time. But here in the Faroe, at least fathers are more involved and are more connected. They know how to communicate with children. Like I see many fathers here, they know how to do everything with a child. Like they know how to clean after they [defecate], they know how to give a shower. They know how to read the stories, watch TV, and play a lot, which is fascinating because we don't have that back home.

From this perspective, the fathers do indeed mirror some of the qualities of the 'new man,' who is defined in opposition to 'emotionally distant and authoritarian fatherhood' (Dermott, 2008: 23), but, as we have seen in this article, this is not the outcome of an embracement of Euro-American models of global masculinity, but much more a result of the Faroese family's pragmatic and silent adaptation to a new era without gender melee and rejection of local fatherhoods.

Another approach to the outlining of the Faroese father, is to look at rural fatherhoods. In a Norwegian study on rural masculinity and changing fathering practices, Berit Brandth says: 'The trend towards blurred gender roles in childcare indicates that gender boundaries are now more fluid than before.' But, she argues, the Norwegian rural fathers' "involvement in childcare does not, however, seem to clash with dominant rural gender norms" (Brandth 2016: 446). Her conclusion is that the fathers do not break with the dominant gender norms despite moving towards a 'new fatherhood' fitting the universal 'new man' ideals, but the problem, in my point of view, is that the image of the 'dominant' rural gender norms represents a simplified understanding of 'traditional' families, which reflects myths about the past (Coontz 1992). The lack of a 'clash' between normative regimes can be misinterpreted as the absence of change and progress in rural communities, hinting a conservative cultural resilience hindering the implementation of the modern democratic family to the place, but what young Faroese fathers, as well as many other rural fathers, struggle to achieve is to maintain their lifestyles and working identities at the same time as society expects them to be more "connected to the family process" today (Williams 2008: 499).

Kaleidoscopic image of the father

Contemporary fathers embrace new styles of fathering. For instance, the almost obligatory ritual of cutting the bloody umbilical cord of the new-born baby (preferably also photographed as documentation of the father's active presence at the childbirth) in front of the approving smiles of the midwives and the mother, entering what Doucet (2018) called the 'maternal world,' but also 'masculinising the experience' in his narratives (Herrera 2020:

263). He is willing to cross the line, to step into what used to be the mother's domain, and to domesticate it, giving new meaning to the identity of the reflexive father-of-all-trades, but the father avoids talking loudly about this shift. He prefers doing the 'new fatherhood' in his silent and unpretentious way, without any brouhaha, and without too much focus on gendered behaviour, because in this way he will defend the family from too much unwanted external attention. One of the fathers told me that he does not favour 'too much planning' in his family life, indicating an almost spiritual belief in the force of (human) nature in the life of his family, echoing his peer's stoic open-ended 'you just throw yourself into it' reaction to queries about the transition from being a young man (without children) to becoming a father; also such reasoning testifies a strong future optimism among (married and working) men belonging to large and tightly connected family networks.

Properly educated people, says Thomas Hylland Eriksen, know "that simple answers to complex questions are rarely satisfactory" (2018: 53). No educated person, he adds, believes "that a single kind of theory and a single kind of scientific method is capable of generating all the answers one wants or needs" (ibid.). There is no simple answer to the question about the contemporary Faroese father. Attempts to unveil the father should be based on different imaginative perspectives. Listening to fathers telling their stories, but at the same time also reflecting on my positionality in relation to the fieldwork, has convinced me that the fathers' narratives about fathering and fatherhood serve as knowledge largely absent from the Faroese debate on gender, parenthood, and cultural norms. A global kaleidoscopic mapping of the Faroese father is not an easy undertaking, and, as a father jokingly says, "it would probably be much easier to just film me in everyday life," rather than having a conversation in the form of an interview. "Men are not one-dimensional. Their lives are full of contradictions" (Lorentzen 2011: 113), and Faroese fathers are no exception to this observation.

The Faroese film *Atlantic Rhapsody (52 pictures from Tórshavn)* from 1989, represents a kaleidoscopic story structured as a series of vignettes in a relay race - a person or object out of a scene brings the audience to the next scene with new people, tensions, and intensities (Ottarsdóttir 1989). It is about a small town, the world's smallest capital, its people, meetings, and places, and there are many men and fathers - fishing, drinking, cruising in their cars, doing police work, serving breakfast at home, visiting their mistresses, writing poems, etc. - in the small unforeseen scenes, which are like knots on a string. A knot is something "for things to be joined," something "always in the midst of things," says Ingold, and these things are lines with loose ends (Ingold 2013: 132). "What is life, indeed, if not a proliferation of loose ends!" (ibid.). The Faroese father is also at a crossroad where things happen, while other things happen elsewhere, and it is therefore not easy or desirable to isolate him in totalising descriptions of the identity of the father overlooking his affective relations with the material world, the ocean, the fish, the sheep, the mountains, the weather, but also with the culture and language of the islands. As we have observed, the father prefers expressing or doing fatherhood rather than talking about the father, but he is also, so to speak, 'worlding,' creating a world through engagement with several interrelated phenomena (Stewart 2012), his fatherhood as his way of being in the world. The father, circumnavigating academic efforts to curtail him to a father category separated from other humans and nonhumans, is a jack-of-all-trades (or father-of-all-trades) relying on affect, emotion, and reason in his everyday enterprises.

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