

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Fatherhood: Gender, Caring and Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2011, 214 pp. \$US 29.99 paper (978-0-521-74301-3), \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-521-51942-7)

At the heart of feminist scholarship are questions about the obstacles to egalitarian gender relations. The consequences of motherhood for individual women are chief among those obstacles in advanced capitalist countries (although they vary by class, race and location). Motherhood involves 24/7 responsibility that very few fathers (living with women) ever take on, it entails housework, it significantly handicaps women in the labour force, and it often transforms women's identity. Because parenthood usually moves heterosexual couples to adopt more conventional household patterns, many scholars aiming to assess the extent of gender inequality in families have focused on whether men are sharing housework and child care.

In *Making Sense of Fatherhood*, British sociologist Tina Miller explores how fatherhood is changing and whether fathers' increased "involvement" in infant care represents the "undoing of gender." The book follows Miller's parallel study of mothers, which examined changes in women's identity as they journey into motherhood. Because Miller conceptualizes gender as individuals' identities and performances — not their social relations or the social order in which they are embedded — she takes a "narrative approach," examining men's and women's stories as indicators of how they construct their identities in the transition to parenthood.

Miller's study of mothers, reported in *Making Sense of Motherhood* (2005), involved three interviews with 17 women, between late in their pregnancy and about nine months after the birth of their babies. She found that their initial trust in both "nature" and expert (medical) knowledge was shaken — and their sense of self disrupted — by their experiences of childbirth and the early postpartum period. As they struggled to reconstruct a stable identity, which for Miller meant presenting a competent performance of good mothering, they slowly developed a sense of competence as mothers. And as they did, they began to challenge expert discourses on mothering, which Miller implies are the key oppressive forces in their lives. Interestingly, in the last interview these women

often corrected their earlier stories, to describe difficulties they had initially glossed over; Miller interprets this as evidence of the disciplinary power of discourses on “good mothering.”

To explore how men make sense of the personal changes they experience in the transition to fatherhood, Miller interviewed 17 men (unrelated to the women in the previous study) late in their partners’ pregnancy, six to eight weeks postpartum, nine to ten months postpartum and (for nine men) two years after the birth. All white, middle class and partnered, these men fit not only dominant ideals of masculinity but also the image of the individual who populates “late modernity” — which is how Miller contextualizes the men’s lives — a time of constant change and uncertainty that calls for self-conscious reflexivity and continual renegotiation of life plans, and that offers “fluid notions of masculinities.”

Miller focuses on these men’s narratives before the birth, in the early months of fatherhood, and afterwards, when life settles into a pattern. She finds that in contrast with the women in the earlier study these men have a variety of ways they can present themselves as good fathers and/or good providers — both acceptable — because of the diversity of discourses available to men. She argues, then, that men have more choice than women do about how they fulfill their identity as “good” parents, which indicates their greater power. Central to the way these men position themselves as fathers is their common expression (and promise) that they will “be there” — presumably for both their babies and their partners. A variety of different practices seem to fulfill this commitment. Thus, Miller argues, the men construct their responsibility very differently than their partners do: they assume that the women will take primary responsibility for meeting their infants’ daily needs. Accordingly, fathers’ care of their babies often occurs outside the home and is activity based. Miller argues that this is one of the consequences of the constraints that fathers face as financial providers, working for employers who typically see no need to accommodate family demands. As a result, the men talk about “fitting in” fathering around the demands of their employment. The kind of care they provide their babies, then, is not the same as that provided by mothers, even though these British men often began parenthood on paternity leave (available through an even less generous policy than that offered in English-speaking Canada), learning how to do infant care alongside their partners — and, according to some, “sharing” the care.

Miller’s attention to narrative uncovers something less expected and quite intriguing. She finds that the men often describe themselves in language associated with stereotypical femininity. For example, they used phrases like “sheer fear,” “really scary,” and “nervous wreck” to describe how they felt about the impending birth of their babies; one man

wondered “am I up to it?” Another man described himself as a “blubbering mess” at the birth. In the early postpartum months, the men talked about “love,” about parenthood being “very overwhelming ... can’t quite believe you can love something that much,” and how “we [he and his partner] were both the same” in their reactions to their baby. According to Miller, these fathers “draw upon a language of caring, bonding and paternal instincts and convey a sense of more emotional, tender and caring masculinities” than in the past. The men in her study also indicated feeling pulled between the demands of employment and family, as is common for women. At the same time, Miller indicates that these men sometimes distanced themselves from feminine descriptors. And they sometimes cared for their babies in ways that underscored their masculinity. She concludes that their narratives evidence men’s greater choices, given the fluidity of masculinity. She also makes less obvious arguments, which some readers will question. She argues that in using feminine self-descriptors in the domestic arena (a feminized sphere) and nowhere else, these men are reinforcing gender duality. She also concludes that because their narratives are “inflected by gendered expectations, orientations and language” they are failing to undo gender: “There seems, then, no way of escaping gender.”

Conceptualized as Miller has, “undoing” gender means ending the idea of gender difference, and thus gender identity, altogether — an enormous task in a culture where the belief in gender difference is profound and so powerful that it constitutes a major organizing principle in society. But for many feminists the goal of “egalitarian” gender relations and social arrangements means that difference does not entail inequalities in power, privilege, life choices, and well-being. We can look to evidence on foraging societies to know that gender differences, and even women’s greater performance of child care, do not necessarily entail gender inequality. A subtheme in Miller’s book is that the constraints posed by men’s jobs stand in the way of sharing infant care. Given the evidence in this book, and elsewhere, of changes in men and rigidity in the economy, I would argue that social-organizational barriers are likely greater obstacle to gender-egalitarian families than gender identity. This large issue aside, people interested in men’s transition to fatherhood will find this an interesting book.

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