

‘If I had a job, I’d pay somebody to look after my child’.

The practices and discourses of Spanish fathers experiencing periods of unemployment.

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ABSTRACT

This article critically engages with the practices and discourses around fatherhood of men who had experienced unemployment. Comparing and contrasting men's testimonies with those of their partners was a key feature of the research design. We conducted in-depth interviews in the Basque Country (Spain) with 15 heterosexual couples, aged 30-50, with children under 12. In every case, the father had been unemployed for a period of at least six months. The results indicate that unemployment affected fathers' involvement in care in very different ways. In some cases, it promoted co-responsibility and a reinterpretation of masculinity, while in others traditional gender roles remained uncontested. Furthermore, we identified tensions between behaviour, on one hand, and expressed preferences, expectations and self-perceptions on the other. To capture this diversity, we made use of three categories in our analysis: primary caregiving fathers, helper fathers and breadwinner fathers. Employing a broad and multidimensional definition of care, this research facilitates an interrogation of privilege and masculinity, and the extent to which these are challenged in contexts where men are forced to respond to a disruption of their lifestyles due to unemployment.

Keywords: fatherhood, unemployment, care, masculinities

Introduction

Over recent decades, the demand that men become more involved in care has gathered strength, reflecting a social shift in support for ‘new’ or ‘responsible’ fatherhood (Dermott, 2005; Fisher & Anderson, 2012). In parallel, interest in ‘caring masculinities’ has increased in the academic literature. Caring masculinities refers to co-responsible and involved child-raising, and is defined in opposition to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), as it rejects patriarchal authority and is based on principles related to ethics of care, including empathy and interdependence (Elliot, 2016).

This article contributes to research in this area by focusing on fathers who had experienced periods of unemployment. Specifically, we explore the tension between their discourses and practices around fatherhood and the gap between ‘ideals and reality’ identified by Kaufman and White, (2014). This focus enables us to critically and systematically reflect on emerging trends in discourse emphasizing ‘new’ fatherhood mentioned above. Exclusion from paid work can imply having more time available to become more involved in care and domestic work. Furthermore, unemployment can foster a resignification of masculinity, insofar as the link between masculinity and the traditional breadwinner role can be challenged in these circumstances. Given this, we ask whether unemployment can play a role as an impetus in favour of social transformation in men, towards a more co-responsible and egalitarian model of masculinity. To this end, we conducted research in the Basque Country (a region of Spain), involving in-depth interviews with heterosexual couples with children, in which the man had experienced at least six months of unemployment.

The existing literature addressing ‘involved’ or ‘engaged’ fatherhood identifies a shift away from fatherhood centered on employment, exemplified in the figure of the male breadwinner, towards a model of fatherhood oriented more towards care that ‘encompasses openness of

emotions, expressing affection, and building a close relationship' (Dermott, 2005, p. 97). Given this, we oriented our research by focusing attention on the two central questions around which this existing literature revolves: care and unemployment. We interviewed both partners separately and asked each to describe the everyday arrangement of family domestic work in periods when the man had been unemployed, and more concretely, what childcare tasks and responsibilities he had taken on. We also enquired about fathers' expectations, attitudes, and preferences in this area. Talking to each partner separately offered a means by which we were able to examine the coherence or otherwise between fathers' actual involvement and their expressed discourses and desires. We also wanted to hear about the lived experience of unemployment through different sets of eyes. We asked both partners if paid work had remained a central concern even during periods in which the man was unemployed, that is, if his behaviour, preferences and expectations remained job oriented or if instead care work had displaced paid work as a central orientation. This enabled us to better understand these men's relationship to fatherhood in terms of both discourse and practice, and to explore the complex interplay of coherence and divergence that played out in this area over time. With respect to both issues, the structured comparison of two narratives in each case throughout the research process was key in allowing us to reliably determine if periods of unemployment were productive of a genuine transformation. This is because we understood that an authentic questioning of masculinity and real transformation towards involved fatherhood must be reflected in behaviour as well as expressed discourses, expectations and preferences, and evident to both partners in a relationship.

There is a considerable body of literature focused on stay-at-home fathers which addresses the question as to whether being outside the labour market promotes involved fatherhood (Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Solomon, 2014; Gatrell et al, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2016, among others). However, most studies do not make a distinction between

practices and discourses, nor engage with multiple dimensions of care. They do not include the voices of stay-at-home fathers' partners, even though several papers (Doucet, 2016; Lee and Lee, 2016) underline the relevance of contrasting and complementing fathers' discourse in this way. Our research thus addresses some gaps in the existing literature.

Our enquiry as to whether unemployment promotes greater co-responsibility in the household and, resultantly, provokes a questioning of masculinity, is rooted in the understanding that gender relations are dynamic (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). While dynamic, processes of change and continuity are complex and remain the subject of extensive research. The concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) has oriented this research, complemented by subsequent research engaging with caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016) and hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Our focus on the tension between practices and discourses was guided by the research of Kaufman and White (2016). We borrowed our broad and multidimensional notion of care, another key concept, from Tronto and Fisher (1990).

The article is divided into four sections. The first includes a theoretical reflection on masculinities, unemployment and care, the second describes the methodology, and the third presents the results by making use of three categories: *primary caregiving fathers*, *helper fathers* and *breadwinner fathers*. The fourth and final section discusses the findings and identifies further challenges in the study of fatherhood and masculinities.

Masculinities, unemployment and care

Gender, fatherhood and masculinities

Gender is formed through interactions in the context of a social structure (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and thus gender relationships must be understood as historically specific and subject to change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender is a relational category built around

hierarchy: men have more privileges than women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This perspective is particularly valuable when analyzing fatherhood as an interaction that takes place through domestic labour, which involves ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987; 2009). Not only is family and home life produced and (re)produced on a daily basis, but the material embodiment of feminine and masculine roles and behaviours are as well (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Along these lines, we understand masculinity as a configuration of practices shaped through the structure of gender relationships (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Processes by which representations and practices of gender change are not uniform or free of contradiction, and this is also true of masculinity (Gutmann & Viveros, 2007). Contemporary hegemonic masculinity seems to be less bound to explicitly sexist attitudes than earlier iterations, although this does not necessarily make it more egalitarian. That is, an ideological rejection of the traditional model is not always accompanied by changes in practices (Alberdi & Escario, 2007).

Reflections on hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities and hybrid masculinities are relevant to debates around fatherhood. Hegemonic masculinity, defined as a model which expresses generalized ideals, fantasies and desires built around masculinity in various forms, is also a pattern of practices that allows men to dominate women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Employment has long been a pillar of hegemonic masculinity as it is a source of men’s social acceptance and recognition (Valdés & Olavaría, 1998). Within this traditional model, fatherhood is based on authoritarianism, lack of interest, absence and detachment (Hunter et al., 2017). There is, however, a consensus in the literature that expectations of what a father should be are changing. While Dermott (2003) does identify a shift in the conception of ‘good fathering’, she criticizes the tendency to create overly simplistic categories that do not capture the complexity of these transformations, including the dichotomy of ‘new fathers’ versus ‘traditional’ ones.

As stated by Elliot (2016), caring masculinities include a commitment to equality, as caregiving implies adopting values and characteristics that are often excluded from hegemonic masculinity. Caring masculinities, then, seem to represent a model of masculinity that implies a loss of privileges and ‘excludes domination and embraces the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care identified by feminist theorists of care’ (Elliot, 2016, p. 252). This said, some research calls into question the extent to which this loss of privilege actually occurs. The ongoing evolution of masculinities, especially the emergence of hybrid masculinities, reveals flexibility in systems of inequality and that ‘men’s practices that initially appear to be feminist can also reinscribe gender inequality even as they obscure it’ (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 255). These practices include; ‘the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities’ (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246).

The Spanish context reflects the complex interplay of change and continuity discussed above. The existing ‘familialistic welfare state’ is characterized by highly gendered and intergenerationally structured family solidarity (Saraceno, 2016). Women are the main caregivers and the state provides limited support through social services and basic family subsidies (Naldini & Jurado, 2013). This said, more recently a shift towards more egalitarian modes of gender relations has become evident in both social attitudes and public policies supporting increased ‘defamilialization’ of care via the state (Saraceno, 2016). This has included labour reform making longer parental leave available to fathers (Meil et al., 2021). In spite of these changes, fathers continue to play a secondary role in caregiving (Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017), in a period characterized by ambiguity and tensions between the ideal of co-responsibility and the persistence of traditional practices (Miguel et al., 2019).

Unemployment and masculinities

A great deal of literature focuses on unemployment as a means to study masculinities and men's involvement in care, due to the central role of labour market participation in masculinity. Men engaged in housework and childcare outside the labour market pay a high price in terms of social and family stigma (Merla, 2008), and 'their identity as men is challenged because they do not engage in paid work' (Borràs et al., 2012, p.409). Some studies about stay-at-home fathers offer a glimpse of a tendency towards attitudes which question hegemonic masculinity (Solomon, 2014; Gatrell et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2016). Others, however, observe more complex dynamics which make it difficult to determine either a questioning or affirmation of traditional gender roles (Castrillo et al., 2021; Doucet, 2016; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Merla, 2008). Time-use studies have observed that in the case of heterosexual couples in which the man is unemployed and the woman provides a majority of household income, the sexual division of labour can even be reinforced in order to symbolically enact gender norms (Brines, 1994) or compensate for deviation from the traditional 'breadwinner/housekeeper' model (Greenstein, 2000).

Research addressing the Spanish context exhibits a comparable lack of consensus. While Borràs et al., (2012), who base their findings on a qualitative methodology, affirm that unemployment does not necessarily undermine the breadwinner model, in another paper these same authors suggest that a context of widespread unemployment and precarious labour conditions can restrict the extent to which paid work is experienced as a central element of identity (Torns et al., 2011). Furthermore, precarity itself generates problems in terms of maintaining traditional arrangements for sharing out domestic and childcare responsibilities in heterosexual couples (Abril et al., 2015). Some quantitative studies have identified a positive effect of unemployment on men's involvement in domestic and care work (Dominguez-Folgueras, 2020; Flaquer et al., 2016). These authors, do, however, warn that 'male unemployment per se may not be necessarily conducive to extra father involvement' (Flaquer

et al. 2016, p.77) and suggest that this positive effect might be a reflection of a more general change in values at a societal level (Dominguez-Folgueras, 2020). Resultantly, other factors including gender ideology and partners' work status must also be taken into account when analysing the involvement of unemployed men in domestic and care work (Gutiérrez-Domènech, 2010).

When analysing the relationship between unemployment and masculinity, many papers focus on the figure of the stay-at-home father. Although we do make a contribution to the literature in this area, we do not use this term to refer to the men in our study, for several reasons. First, the category stay-at-home-father is not used in everyday language or statistical studies in Spain or the Basque Country. Secondly, it has been criticized from feminist (Doucet, 2016) and class (Liong, 2017) perspectives. Most work on stay-at-home fathers has focused on fathers at home on parental leave (Brandth & Kvande, 2016) or on with a high socio-economic status, which has made it easier for them to stay at home and take responsibility for care work (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2016; Merla, 2008). Most of the couples in our study were not of high socio-economic status and none of the parents made the deliberate choice to stay at home. They did so as a consequence of involuntary unemployment in the context of economic crisis and generalized economic hardship.

Exploring practices and discourses

Our focus on the tension between practices and discourses was guided by the research of Kaufman and White (2014). These authors analyse men's attitudes toward their wife's employment, paying attention 'to the continuity or divergence in men's ideals and reality' (Kaufman & White, 2014, p. 2). We describe this as a tension between discourse and practice. On the one hand, we understand practice as fathers' actual behaviours in terms of their response to unemployment and their role in childcare (i.e. everyday arrangements). On the other hand,

we include within the concept of discourse their expressed preferences, beliefs, ideals, expectations, self-identifications and attitudes about the same topics. Following Kaufman and White (2014) ideals, or discourses, reflect gender ideology.

On the basis of this theoretical perspective, Kaufman and White (2014) looked at the attitudes of men towards their partners' participation in formal employment. They analyzed how gender roles operated within heterosexual couples and identified potential shifts towards more egalitarian roles. On the basis of their observations, they categorized relationships according to a system that addressed the tension between ideals and reality. One category included *traditional* (stay-at-home wife) and *egalitarian* (working wife) domestic relationships, while the second category encompassed *expectant traditional* (ideal was stay-at-home wife, reality is working wife) and *expectant egalitarian* (ideal is working wife, reality is stay-at-home wife) relationships. Related work by Van Hooff (2011) about young heterosexual couples with university level education similarly reveals an abyss between theory and practice. While the discourses of both partners supported equality and co-responsibility, practices revealed a very different reality.

These findings coincide with research carried out in Spain focused on middle-class heterosexual couples (Sánchez-Mira & Muntanyola-Saura, 2020). Miguel et al., (2019) affirm that, in a European context, current contradictions accompanying the emergence of 'engaged fatherhood' evidence conflict between expressed values, theory and practices, a contradiction more notable in Spain than other countries, such as Norway. Work by Castrillo et al., (2021) also observes tensions between the practices and subjective perceptions of unemployed fathers acting as primary caregivers: fathers resist taking on this role in terms of the practical division of labour and daily arrangements, and also in terms of identifying with it. Along the same lines, in this paper we contrast the practical involvement of fathers in care with their discourse on fatherhood.

Defining care

When assessing the implication of men in the domestic sphere it is also important to recognize the complex character of care. As do Tronto and Fisher (1990), we understand that care encompasses several dimensions. On the one hand, it involves carrying out the activities necessary to sustain life (taking care of) as well as those related to housework (including cooking, cleaning, etc), which Razavi (2007) defines as indirect care, in other words, as precondition for caregiving to occur. On the other hand, care (caregiving) also involves carrying out specific actions (feeding, putting to bed, listening, etc.). Finally, beyond specific actions, it involves developing an attitude (caring about), of being concerned for others and, subsequently, this is related with a more emotional or subjective component of care. In this article, we have looked into fathers' experiences of care across the multiple dimensions involved in exercising care described above.

To engage in a nuanced reading of care, it is also important to distinguish between different tasks. Time-use studies have shown that women do most core housework (Borràs et al., 2021): the most laborious, routine, and least rewarding tasks, carried out mainly within the home (related to cleaning, laundry and meals). Furthermore, despite increased participation by fathers, mothers still take on responsibility for the management and organization of housework and care (Latshaw & Hale, 2015). Masculine involvement is also particularly low in areas which receive little recognition, such as caring for the elderly and for disabled adults (Torns, 2008). By contrast, men engage more in fun and game activities, which are associated with childcare (Sayer et al., 2004). The times at which domestic and care work occur is also an important factor when determining the implication of men in the domestic sphere. Fernandez-Lozano (2019) suggests that in two-income couples, one of the main reasons that men participate is that their partners are simply not always available. Similarly, Latshaw and Hale

(2016) note that ‘stay at home father - breadwinner mother’ families often continue to ‘do gender’ in more conventional ways during evenings and weekends.

Methodology

The research presented in this paper is derived from a larger project on the impact of the economic crisis on the division of housework and care in heterosexual couples. It focuses on in-depth interviews conducted in 2017 in the Basque Country (Spain) with 15 heterosexual couples (30 people), between 30 and 50 years old, with children under 12. The decision to include only subjects under 50 was taken so that, in the case of being unemployed, this was not understood as a form of early retirement. In all cases, the economic-financial crisis affected the employment of at least one partner. All the men interviewed had experienced at least six months of unemployment between the start of the global economic crisis in 2008 and the time at which interviews were held. While some of these men had engaged in paid work sporadically during their period of unemployment, often in the informal economy, this did not alter their self-identification as unemployed nor substantially impact the organization of their daily lives and, as such, they were included in the sample. At the time the interviews were conducted, six men and four women were unemployed while both partners were unemployed in the case of only one couple.

Recruitment was initially carried out through the snowball technique: we sought out participants by asking around amongst colleagues, family members, friends and community organisations we had relationships with. We then asked participants we identified if they could refer us on to other people in similar circumstances. When this method was exhausted, we engaged two recruitment agencies.

We asked all participants about their level of education and professional qualifications (from their current job or, in the case of unemployed participants, their previous job). The sample to

which we refer in this article was selected ad hoc. Of the men, seven had university level qualifications, five held vocational training certificates and three had completed basic compulsory education. Of the women, nine had university level qualifications, five vocational training and one had completed basic compulsory education. Both partners had the same level of education in the case of ten couples: seven with university level qualifications and three with vocational training. Of the five couples with heterogeneous educational levels, in four the woman had a higher level of education. This is partly explained by the fact that there were more university-educated women than men in the sample.

Nine couples had one child, four had two, and only one had three. We included only interviewees with children under the age of 12, so that the demands involved were comparable across different cases. All parents except one father were born in Spain. Participant details are shown in full in the table included in the appendix. The distribution of participants across the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics identified above was not representative of Spanish or Basque society as a whole. While this is a limitation, both practical considerations and the qualitative approach underpinning this article led us to prioritize a deeper engagement with the cases at hand over the inclusion of a representative sample. Subsequent research could include a more systematic comparison across determined socioeconomic or other indicators.

Although interviews were conducted separately, the script used was the same for both women and men. We asked each member about their own experiences and, to a lesser extent, those of their partner. Interviews were divided into three sections: 1) career path from their first job up to the time of the interview, paying special attention to unemployment; 2) the division of housework and care and the meaning given to motherhood and fatherhood; 3) leisure and free time. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. They lasted between fifty minutes and two hours, although the majority were between one and a half and two hours.

Interviewees gave informed consent to their participation in the research. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. In order to guarantee confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed. Once the interviews were transcribed, we carried out a discourse analysis (Ruiz, 2009) of the testimony given by men and their partners, which allowed us to analyze the narratives recounted and understand them in context. We paid special attention to what fathers said about their work history, participation in housework and care, leisure and free time. We contrasted the accounts of both members of each couple and interrogated silences, that is, aspects that men did not speak about that were mentioned by their partners.

Results

This research identified fathers' daily practices of care during unemployment, and contrasted them with the discourses expressed by couples with respect to fatherhood. It also analysed ways in which fathers experienced and responded to unemployment. We were especially interested in the extent to which traditional gender roles were challenged. On the basis of our observations, we established three analytical categories: *primary caregiving fathers*, *helper fathers* and *breadwinner fathers*. Rather than being objective descriptors of different parenting styles, these categories represent different discursive positions. We used them as tools of analysis to read the interviews recorded with both partners. We chose to do this for two reasons. First, as we have stated, we observed tensions and contradictions between practices and discourses. Resultantly, fathers' self-perception was not always reliable as the basis of a categorization. Secondly, we are aware that all three of the categories we used contain their own tensions and contradictions. It is precisely for this reason that we believe they offer a rich field for critical reflection. While these categories have each been deployed by other researchers and their use here is similar, we apply them specifically to identify specific and particular content.

Primary caregiving fathers

While this figure has been subject to academic attention, it is not consistently defined in the existing literature (Castrillo et al., 2021). In this paper *primary caregiving fathers* are those who are more involved in childcare than their partners and take on a larger proportion of housework. They self-identify as primary caregivers and this role is also recognized by their partners. At the time of interview, the only fathers in this category were long-term unemployed (2¹/₂ to 6 years) with working partners. However, not all the fathers in these circumstances took on this primary responsibility; in fact, it was the case of a minority. Furthermore, not all *primary caregiving fathers* experienced this role in the same way. We identified three positions: seeing care positively, defining it as a burden, and an ambivalent discourse. Joaquin, Manuel and Ivan are examples of each of the above.

Joaquin was 44 years old. He left school at 16 and had held unskilled jobs. Faced with the monotony of joblessness, he saw his responsibility for the daily care of his 8 years old daughter as a way to organize his time, which gave structure to his life. While she was at school in the morning, he did the housework with his partner (who has a part-time job), and when his partner was at work in the afternoon, he looked after his daughter alone. His narrative reflects how he gave new meaning to unemployment through care:

In spite of how bad it is to be unemployed, I have to admit that my daughter Nagore is the best thing in the world. (...) She keeps me calm so I'm not always mulling over the same thing in my head; she shows me affection, keeps me busy and breaks the monotony (Joaquin).

Two factors might explain why Joaquin didn't experience unemployment negatively due to his role as a carer. First, sharing a large part of the housework with his partner reduced the workload. Second, Joaquin did not have high expectations of finding work. Other research has also observed a connection between having limited job prospects and greater involvement in care (Abril, et al 2015). Joaquin was happy to continue in his role. For him, having a job was

important (to earn money) and he saw that he would have no choice but to get a job when his daughter was older and child-raising expenses increased. Providing income was seen as an extension of care; it served to guarantee his daughter's well-being.

Manuel's view was entirely the opposite. He was 42 years old, had a university degree and had held professional positions. His partner had a professional job which demanded long hours. He looked after their 2-year-old daughter, who attended day-care for three hours a day. He also did most of the housework. This was a source of conflict for the couple. Manuel admitted that he did not like routine housework, and preferred DIY and outside activities such as looking after the garden. He felt that caregiving interfered with his career development. He mostly conceded it a burden:

There are a lot of days that I'm not in good spirits, for example days when it's raining and it gets dark early and my kid is sick and cries all day. I end up thinking: here I am with no job, what on earth am I doing? (...) Staying home alone looking after my child, doing everything myself. There are times I just can't stand it (...). My daughter is a joy, but the truth is that she has cost me a big part of my lifestyle (Manuel).

Manuel's questioning of gender roles was ambivalent. His behaviour led him to question the breadwinner model, yet given the choice, he would not take on the role of primary caregiver, and he did not expect to fill this role permanently. His preferences and expectations were job-oriented. He stated that if he had a job he would pay someone to care for his daughter.

Ivan's feelings sat somewhere between those of Joaquin and Manuel. He was 35 years old, held a vocational training certificate and had worked in trades. Since becoming unemployed, his daily life had revolved around housework and caring for his 3 and 5-year-old daughters, a job that went on all day and all week:

Starting from when I walk the dog, then clean the windows, make lunch, tea and dinner... all I can say is that I work a lot more than eight hours. The worst part is that you can't disconnect at the weekends either (Ivan).

Like Joaquin and Manuel, Ivan's leisure time was limited by the obligations imposed by care and housework: 'You don't have time to really, fully relax' (Ivan). Ivan's attitude was

ambivalent concerning care work. On the one hand, a positive was that he was pleased with himself for his role in the home. On the other hand, a negative was that he felt that his daily work was not appreciated or valued. Furthermore, some of the people in his social circle did not understand or approve of his situation. Like Manuel, Ivan felt alone.

Although *primary caregiving fathers* did a majority of the childcare and a large portion of the housework, certain tasks and responsibilities continued to fall on their partners. Joaquin narrated that when his partner arrived home once her workday was over at 8:30 pm, he let her enjoy one-on-one time with their daughter. Manuel's partner also finished her shift in the evening, and her interview revealed that she bathed and fed their daughter when she arrived home. She also noted that she had to get up during the night if the child demanded it, even though she had to get up for work at 7am on weekdays. In addition, in all cases, the management, organization and planning of domestic-family work was the responsibility of primary caregiving fathers' partners. All the women reported that they planned and supervised the work carried out by the fathers. Nerea, Ivan's partner, summed it up this way: 'he takes care of the house, but I supervise'.

In spite of the different meanings attached to care work and the fact that some tasks and responsibilities were left in the hands of their partners, the *primary caregiving fathers* in our study described domestic and childcare labour as 'hard work'. Furthermore, they noted a loss of privileges: they were unable to negotiate the division of care, had no time for themselves, and felt lonely, unappreciated and misunderstood. They did see employment as a desirable future, although not in all cases.

Helper fathers

Helper fathers (Abril et al., 2015) took on an auxiliary role in housework and care. Some fathers in this category experienced intermittent periods of unemployment between jobs.

Others, however, had experienced long periods of unemployment of up to three years. Their participation in housework and care increased with unemployment but they did not become primary caregivers. They contributed in two ways: through playful and educational care, or by taking responsibility for routine housework. Ramon and Carmelo were examples of the first, which was the most common in our study. Only one father, Fernando, took on responsibility for core housework.

Ramon and Carmelo were 36 years old. Ramon had a 5-year-old child and Carmelo had two children, one 5-year-old and the other 16 months. Both had vocational qualifications, and their employment had become precarious, involving alternating periods of paid work and unemployment. Both held unskilled jobs at the time of the interview. They practiced communicative-relational parenting (Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017), based on games, fun and education. They shared some routine tasks (including bathing, dressing and feeding their children) although this was barely mentioned in their interviews. While they recognized that playful-educational care takes time and energy, they found it positive and rewarding. This was reflected in their testimonies: 'I like to spend time with my daughters (...) I feel that it is special for them to play, or go to an exhibition or just do something together' (Carmelo).

I feel that being a father means teaching your child and, in the end, it's a full-time job that's very hard. It is an extremely difficult task. That's what I think it is. And the other part of being a father is being my son's friend (Ramon).

These fathers' partners confirmed their involvement in playful-educational care. They valued it very positively, so much so that they overstated the involvement of the fathers in childcare. Eider, Carmelo's partner, expressed it this way: 'I'm lucky because I do realize that he does a whole lot'. Along the same lines, Ainara, Ramon's partner, affirmed that 'Ramon plays a lot, a whole lot, with him [his son]'. She explained the greater masculine presence in this area through an essentialist argument: that men's lack of maturity acts in their favor when it comes to playing with children, because they have more imagination than women do. In fact, both

women's narratives evidenced an essentialist perspective and the persistence of traditional gender roles in the division of care work.

Fernando was 45 years old and had completed basic education. He had held unskilled jobs and had been unemployed for three years at the time of the interview. His partner was also unemployed. He took on a large proportion of routine housework with a positive and satisfied attitude. Nevertheless, he underlined that his experience was exceptional and he considered himself somewhat 'weird'.

I don't mind making beds or cooking. As I mentioned, I enjoy cooking, and even mopping the floor... My approach to this may be different from most men's... Not minding the cleaning and that sort of thing... maybe that is what makes me strange (Fernando).

Despite taking on a large share of the housework, Fernando had not played a big role in caring for his children (8 and 10 years old). Although this changed somewhat when he became unemployed, his partner continued to have primary responsibility. For this reason, we categorized Fernando as a *helper father* and not a *primary caregiving father*. He associated care with motherhood and femininity and expressed this in the following manner: 'Children are more attached to their mothers. It's always like that. (...) We only have one mother' (Fernando).

Fernando, Ramon and Carmelo did not fit the traditional fatherhood model exemplified by the figure of the breadwinner, a model that they identified with their own fathers. This did not mean, however, that having a job was not important for them. Ramon and Fernando felt that paid work made their lives more meaningful and made up part of their identities, which is why being unemployed was a source of anxiety. The feeling of helplessness caused by unemployment was such that Ramon preferred precarious employment with abysmal conditions to being unemployed.

Being unemployed is really depressing, and consuming, and is a big source of anxiety. I think it's even more stressful than ending up in a business like the one I did, where they have you literally beaten down. I don't know how to compare it really; I don't know which is harder (Ramon).

In Fernando's case, it was his partner rather than Fernando himself who spoke about the emotional impact of being unemployed. When asked how unemployment had affected her partner, she responded as follows:

I've been able to deal with it pretty much OK, but my husband has had a really hard time. It's true that he's had moments of being depressed... 'this is all fucked... I don't wanna live like this...' But you know, you fall into a pattern.... (...) He hasn't gone into depression totally, but he's taken it.... he's had a hard time. A really hard time (Sara, Fernando's partner).

Helper fathers were ambivalent in their questioning of gender roles for four reasons: (1) Taking on the role of caregiver did not automatically imply a loss of privileges, since co-responsible fatherhood does not necessarily imply the same investment of time and level of responsibility demanded of mothers (Dermott, 2005). (2) Taking on routine housework meant confronting gender roles, as it was often experienced as a deviation from masculinity: Fernando emphasized that it was generally considered 'strange' for a man to enjoy these tasks. (3) Care was linked to motherhood and femininity, reiterating hegemonic discourses around gender (Kaufman & Whitte, 2014), and (4): employment did not lose its central role.

Breadwinner fathers

Breadwinner fathers were those who participated very little in home and family life during their unemployment. Interestingly, the length of periods of unemployment did not determine which fathers were in this category, and one had been unemployed for four years at the time of the interview. The common defining feature was that the daily activities of these fathers continued to revolve around the labour market, through active job searching and ongoing training. Their behaviour as well as their attitudes, preferences and expectations remained job-oriented and the responsibility of being the main breadwinner in the household was their

primary concern. For these reasons we have identified them as breadwinner fathers, independently of their role in the household economy.

Galder, Jose, Raul and Victor were breadwinner fathers. Galder and Jose were 44 and 36 years old, respectively. Galder had a 6-year-old daughter, and Jose a 3-year-old. They both held university degrees and professional positions. They had both experienced periods of unemployment, for a year and a year and a half respectively. They held professional jobs at the time of the interviews. Galder mentioned that his main concern during his period of unemployment was training and searching for a job: 'I was actively job searching, like 200%. I was also taking some courses'. Jose's experience was similar. He lost his job when his child was just a few months old. He did state that while unemployed, 'I had the chance to be with her [his daughter] and to enjoy it'. However, he narrated that his daily life in this period consisted of dedicating himself to training courses and refining his job-search strategies. His narrative did not focus on the time he spent with his daughter and barely mentioned the housework and childcare he engaged in. His partner confirmed that intense involvement in home and family 'was not an option' for him while he was unemployed:

I would tell him: 'You can study while your daughter is in day-care, and spend time with her when she is home. Don't use all your time job searching or being upset because you haven't found anything. Try to enjoy this time.' But that was just not an option (Maite, Jose's partner).

As indicated above, in the daily lives of these fathers, time spent on care work was considered 'wasted' time and the day-to-day objective was 'to kill time'. As Galder described: 'I spent my time watching TV series in English with subtitles, and reading a lot... it was a bit, well, almost just killing time, killing time because you can't see a way to...' (Galder). Perhaps relatedly, both fathers understood their role in care as providing an income for their families, a role which implied pressure to meet this responsibility. As Galder narrated: '...it may be a sexist social

attitude or whatever, but one always feels responsible (...). It seems that the man is obliged to bring home most of the family income (...). That puts pressure on you...’ (Galder).

Breadwinner fathers reproduced a sexual division of labour, and some even openly defended it. Raul, 40 years old, who had basic education and a history in unskilled work, was one example. He and his partner were a traditional breadwinner-housekeeper couple until he lost his job and they decided that she would seek paid work. They had a 13-year-old daughter and twin 11-year-old sons. Despite his partner working out of necessity, he openly disapproved of the arrangement and said: ‘I’ve always believed that women shouldn’t work outside the home’ (Raul). He could thus be understood as an *expectant traditional father* (Kaufman & White, 2014), because he would have preferred that his partner didn’t have paid work, despite reality being the contrary. Not all *breadwinner fathers* agreed with the sexual division of labour. Some, including Galder, thought that co-responsibility was desirable, but admitted that they couldn’t practice it. Others stated that co-responsibility was part of their day-to-day practice, but this was not actually the case. When Jose was asked if one partner did more of the domestic labour, he replied with a definitive no. However, looking at the testimony of his partner, it was evident that this did not reflect reality.

Being unemployed was a source of anxiety for *breadwinner fathers*, as they were unable to continue providing income. In the case of both Jose and Raul it was their partners who mentioned this rather than they themselves. Raul’s partner expressed this as following: ‘I had a hard time, but it was much worse for him, I think because in the end they [men] take on the role of, “I have to support my family” and, of course, he wasn’t doing it’ (Marisa, Raul’s partner). Furthermore, in two cases recorded in the research, children were not told that their fathers were unemployed. This made the taboo or loss of social acceptance that many men feel when they are not the main breadwinner explicit. This was Victor’s experience. 47 years old, he held a university degree and had a professional career. He had been unemployed for 4 years

at the time of the interview. He did not speak about concealing his unemployment from his 11-year-old son in his own interview, but his partner did mention it and give the following justification:

I don't know if we've done the right thing, but we haven't told our son that his father isn't working, it's like a big lie (...) and my son sometimes tells me: 'Wow! Victor's job is a lot better than yours, because he doesn't work as many hours and he earns more than you do'. I think it's sort of a defense mechanism for him. I don't know where he got that idea, but I don't tell him any different (Iratxe, Victor's partner).

Amongst *breadwinners*, we identified more traditional attitudes on the part of fathers, expressed both openly and more obliquely. The experiences of *breadwinner* fathers fit with traditional gender roles. There was little loss of privilege or questioning of the traditional model of masculinity. Attitudes with respect to the sexual division of labour and an extensive attachment to formal employment, maintained even during periods of unemployment, were important factors when it came to explaining the unequal distribution of housework and the persistence of traditional roles in these couples.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study makes a contribution to the literature on fatherhood and masculinities, specifically in relation to men forced to take on the role of stay-at-home fathers due to job loss. We analyzed practices and discourses related to fatherhood in order to shed light on one key question: can unemployment act as an impetus towards responsible parenting, and, thus, be a lever of change towards the questioning of gender roles? To answer this question, we focused on periods in which the fathers in our study were unemployed, and looked at how this unemployment was experienced subjectively. We compared couples' arrangements to share out domestic-family work in these periods and identified fathers' practices and discourses around child care. Understanding discourses, including fathers expressed expectations, attitudes, ideals, self-perception and preferences, as distinct from and sometimes in tension with their practices, was

a key element of the research. Specially in this area, contrasting and supplementing men's testimonies with those of their partners was indispensable.

With respect to the divergence between discourses and practices, our results coincide with those of Kaufman and White (2014): the gap is notable and does not always occur in the same way. On the one hand, among *helper fathers* who practiced playful educational care and some *breadwinners*, discourses around fatherhood were more egalitarian and co-responsible than practices, a finding supported in research by Dermott (2005) and Alberdi & Escario (2007). On the other hand, we also found practices that broke with discourses in the other direction. Some *primary caregiving fathers* and *helper fathers* responsible for routine housework questioned gender roles through their behaviour, but reaffirmed them in their discourses. In these cases, the *breadwinner* father was the ideal model and the reality of involvement in care and housework was understood as a 'short term contingency', a finding anticipated by research by Sánchez-Mira (2021) about households in which the mother was the primary income provider.

Secondly, a majority of the fathers who participated in our study continued to place a problematic importance on paid work. Unemployment was often seen as empty time which was filled with care work or active job searching and gaining further qualifications. Most experienced anxiety and believed that unemployment undermined their role as providers, a phenomenon also observed by Shirani et al. (2012). In some cases, fathers' unemployment was concealed from children.

In line with findings by Castrillo et al. (2021), our research does not identify a linear process in which longer periods of unemployment produce greater involvement in caregiving and increased subjective identification with the role of primary caregiver. We identified some men who had experienced long-term unemployment as *helper fathers* and others as *breadwinner fathers*. This demonstrates this deep-rooted nature of the male breadwinner model.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply paternal absence. Instead, it indicates that paid work is valued above other ways of being responsible for children, income provision being understood as a masculine way of delivering care (Hunter et al., 2017). This calls into question the degree of tension between the breadwinner model and caring masculinities. In fact, some of the *primary caregiving fathers* did change the way they understood and experienced unemployment through the exercise of care, as suggested by other research (see Gatrell et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2016; Brandth & Kvande, 2016). For these men, care became a source of meaning and identity. Nonetheless, this was not always the case.

Thirdly, by contrasting and complimenting the testimony of fathers with that of their partners, we have addressed one of the limitations that other papers have identified in their own research (Lee & Lee, 2016). The main reasons for doing this are twofold. On the one hand, as noted by Doucet (2016), this approach enhances the reliability of information about the involvement of men in the domestic-family sphere, as men's own assessments of their participation in the household sometimes exceed estimates made by their partners. Interestingly, we also identified some cases in which the partners of *helper fathers* who practiced playful educational care, by focusing primarily on the relational-subjective dimension of care, overstated the father's overall level of implication. On the other hand, we saw that women's narratives about how their partners experienced unemployment described men as being more vulnerable than men themselves admitted. This demonstrates the persistence of the myth of full autonomy which lies in tension with the sense of interdependence that is characteristic of caring masculinities, as described by Elliot (2016).

Finally, we used an open and complex definition of care to assess the implication of fathers across its different dimensions. This offered an opportunity to understand gender in domestic relationships with greater complexity. *Primary caregiver fathers* were extensively involved in care. There were, however, tasks and responsibilities that they were not responsible for. The

management, organization and planning of housework and care was taken on by their partners. Additionally, as also noted by Latshaw and Hale (2015), we found that the employed partners of these fathers took responsibility for care in the evening, once their working day was over. This may suggest, as described in research conducted in Spain by Fernandez-Lozano (2019), that the involvement of fathers in the domestic sphere is determined by mothers' working hours, and necessity is what ultimately underlies these men's role as involved fathers. We also observed that sometimes *primary caregiving fathers* engaged in self-provisioning activities (DIY, gardening), which Doucet and Merla (2007) and Van Hoff (2011) suggest are a way of reproducing masculinity.

Similarly, we found that examining all the activities related with care (including housework) rather than looking only at those related to the emotional, relational and subjective dimensions of care offers a better understanding of the extent to which men engaged in care challenge their privileges. The *primary caregiving fathers* interviewed defined their experiences of doing care work across all its dimensions in the same terms as women: 'hard work' (Lee & Lee, 2016; Brandth & Kvande, 2016). This point is confirmed by Brandth and Kvande (2016): men understand what care involves when they are primary caregivers, and they appreciate the work and effort of mothers. For this reason, they are reclaiming social recognition (Doucet & Merla, 2007). Care requires time and energy (Himmelweit, 1995). As reported by the *primary caregiving fathers*, when it is done intensively, it limits careers' power to decide, to exercise autonomy over their daily routines, and interferes with their enjoyment of free time. Relatedly, our study evidences that not all emotions related to care are positive. *Primary caregiving fathers* sometimes experienced it as a burden and source of frustration, identifying with the 'exhausted father' figure (Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017). Care does not remit social or monetary recognition (Torns, 2008). It consequently imposes a loss of power and privileges and implies occupying a subalternate position (Tronto & Fisher, 1999). In consequence, some

primary caregiving fathers in our study felt lonely. Their situation was not always understood and approved of in their social groups. Although a paper by Solomon (2014) suggests the opposite, a self-perception of having deviated from gender norms and loneliness were common amongst stay-at-home fathers (Lee & Lee, 2016; Doucet & Merla, 2007). Elliot (2016) further adds that a failure to fulfill masculine roles implies a risk of social ostracism. The role of *primary caregiving father* is often difficult, and this paper also makes a contribution to debate around patriarchal privilege by suggesting privileges are reduced when dedication to housework and care is intense.

In answer to the main question guiding the research, in line with Connel and Messerschmidt (2005), we conclude that masculinity is currently a battlefield where traditional and co-responsible practices and ideals are in conflict. Concurring with Barbeta-Viñas and Cano (2017) we characterize contemporary conceptions of masculinity as broad, pluralistic and multidimensional, characterized by tensions and contradictions. This is a process in which gender is not ‘undone’ but ‘redone’ (West & Zimmerman, 2009). The affective, relational and subjective aspects of care, which are linked to positive rewarding feelings (for example, communication, showing empathy, involvement in games, fun, education...), currently form part of the standard conception of fatherhood (what a father should be) and do not in themselves imply challenging patriarchal privilege. Therefore, ultimately, we cannot affirm that unemployment constitutes a de facto impetus in favour of change and social transformation among men, towards a more egalitarian and co-responsible model of masculinity. It may imply a movement towards a ‘hybrid masculinity’ (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), insofar as the traditional role of breadwinner is not fulfilled. This, however, does not entail a rejection of the model of traditional masculinity, nor a questioning of patriarchal privileges.

Finally, this paper suggests that, for men, marginalization in the labour market due to unemployment is not in itself sufficient to generate either increased involvement in the

domestic-family sphere or a questioning of traditional gender roles. Thus, in order to move towards a society in which the sexual division of labour is not a structuring axis, further changes that promote not only a greater participation of men in domestic and care work but also a transformation of gender ideology are needed. This factor should be taken into account when designing public policies around unemployment. Awareness-raising to appropriately value domestic and care work would represent a step towards taking these outside the private sphere and delinking them from gender roles.

While making several contributions, our research also has its limitations. It did not, for example, take into account possible differences in interpretations of fatherhood tied to class or other sociodemographic characteristics, nor the different economic circumstances that impact on couples experiencing unemployment. It also did not differentiate between couples at different stages of the family cycle (with children of different ages). For this reason, it would be valuable to include these and other questions in future research in order to continue moving towards a more complex understanding fatherhood and masculinities.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All interviewees participating project EHUA15/28 gave their informed consent and ethical approval was obtained through the authors' host university.

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of the sample

Name	Level of education	Period of unemployment	Children's ages	Partner information
Joaquín	Basic compulsory education	4 years	8	Ane. University degree. Employed.
Manuel	University level qualification	5 years	2	Irene. University degree. Employed
Iván	Vocational training certificate	6 years	3 & 5	Nerea. Vocational training. Employed.
Fernando	Basic compulsory education	3 years	8 & 10	Sara. Vocational training. Unemployed
Ibai	Vocational training certificate	Intermittent periods of unemployment	3 & 6	Elena. University degree. Unemployed.
Ramón	Vocational training certificate	Intermittent periods of unemployment	5	Ainara. Basic compulsory education. Unemployed.
Carmelo	Vocational training certificate	Intermittent periods of unemployment	5 & 16 months	Eider. Vocational training. Employed (with periods of unemployment).
José	University level qualification	2 years	3	Maite. University degree. Employed.
Galder	University level qualification	1 year	6	Iratí. University degree. Employed (with periods of unemployment)
Raúl	Basic compulsory education	8 months	11 (twins) & 13	Marisa. Vocational training. Employed (long period of unemployment in which she acted as homemaker).
Jaime	Vocational training certificate	1 year	8	Enara. Vocational training. Employed.
Jorge	University level qualification	Intermittent periods of unemployment	9 (twins)	Mercedes. University degree. Employed.
Víctor	University level qualification	2 years and 10 months	11	Iratxe. University degree. Employed.
Damián	University level qualification	Intermittent periods of unemployment	20 months	Maitane. University degree. Employed.
Germán	University level qualification	Intermittent periods of unemployment	13 (with disability) and 16	Ania. University degree. Unemployed.