

‘HE UNDERSTANDS ME IN A DIFFERENT  
WAY THAN OTHERS DO’:  
FAROESE TEENAGERS’ NARRATIVES  
ON FATHERHOOD, MASCULINITY,  
AND FAMILY LIFE

ABSTRACT

In this paper a group of young people from Torshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands, share their personal reflections and views on the ‘Faroese father’ in present-day society. The material from this qualitative study is used to examine and analyse the role and position of the father in relation to his family and working life, his masculinity and identity, and his general historic status in society. The main aim of the paper is to outline and illustrate a pattern of transition in Faroese fatherhood resonating with new gender and family values, but also a social shift towards a (late) modern and diversified labour market with emerging female-dominated professions. Seen from the son’s and the daughter’s perspective, this paper suggests, the father’s place in the life of his children mirrors a very special relation associated with feelings of affection, safety, and guidance. Drawing on theoretical scholarship from fatherhood research in the tradition of critical men’s studies, as well as from anthropological family studies, this paper contributes to scientific reviews of fatherhood and masculinity in small island communities in shift. This study is part of the larger research project called *Faroese Fatherhood in Transition* (2018–2021) financed by Research Council Faroe Islands.

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Keywords: fatherhood, masculinity, family life, fishermen, small islands, young people

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## INTRODUCTION

Firstly, I will present a brief introduction of recent research on men and masculinities, focusing on the Nordic father and family, in order to justify my project—legitimizing its

questions and perspectives as a contribution to new knowledge on an understudied group of men. The fast-growing body of scholarly literature on fatherhood and fathering in social and interdisciplinary research has predominantly focused on precarious and menacing facets of

men's (usually from Western countries) lifestyles and masculine values. Many of the central discussions among scholars revolve around representations of the 'good father' (Edley 2017; Miller 2010) embodying 'democratic manhood' (Kimmel 2006: 254) and practicing 'responsible fathering' (Doherty et al 1998) resonating a 'healthy masculinity' (Johansson and Andreasson 2017: 179), in opposition to the 'irresponsible men' (Fox 1999), including 'bad dads' (Furstenberg 1988) and 'absent fathers' (Eydal and Rostgaard 2016: 8), for instance the disgraceful 'deadbeat dad' (Zoja 2001), sticking to 'aggressive, phallic masculinity' (Genz and Brabon 2009: 136). The image of a 'New Man' and 'New Father', who champions the inclusive and caring fatherhood styles, and who (especially in the literature from the so-called 'women-friendly' Nordic countries) practices 'gender equalitarian fathering', as a contrast to his 'patriarchal predecessor', has been employed in a range of studies on fatherhood and masculinity promoting quite strict old/new dichotomy of fathers universally (e.g. Edley and Wetherell 1999: 181–182). The motivation has, in brief, been to engage in academic and policy dialogue aiming to find 'solutions' to men's multi-layered struggle of overcoming the so-called crises of masculinity and the father as breadwinner (main provider) following the 'erosion of patriarchy' in modern societies (Eydal and Rostgaard 2016; Gillis 2000; Holter 2005; MacInnes 2001). This timely discourse has, in my point of view, raised many important questions leading to analysis of oppositions between different groups of men, but it has, unfortunately, neither paid enough attention to men's own narratives and experiences, nor demonstrated meticulous comprehension of cultural variation and transformation concerning family values. Much of gender research has portrayed fatherhood as a pathological experience (Lupton and Barclay

1997). The 'post-patriarchal family', as Johansson and Andreasson (2017: 190) call it, which is the natural home of the reflexive father representing 'intimate fatherhood' (ibid.), in many cases involving 'modern coupledom' (Edley 2017: 99) with a blend of biological and social fathering (and in a growing number of cases also Western stay-at-home dads), has largely turned away from the traditional father-as-breadwinner ideal in favour of a dual earner/dual carer regime. This is an interesting observation, defining present-day middle-class dads through the lens of an imagined patriarchal past, but it does not really help us understand the lives of all the other fathers, who represent different family types also existing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the Nordic academic literature on fatherhood, based on sociological and critical gender studies perspectives and theories, in particular these three main themes have been reviewed: (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; Barneog likestillingsdepartementet 2008). The issue of paid parental leave policies and practices, with focus on 'daddy's quota' (the father's 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 say: '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). Obviously, the work is not done yet, because, as Margaret O'Brien says, 'the processes of de-traditionalisation are still under way and incomplete' (2016: 389). In other words, from this perspective the fathers are still not doing enough. In a new report, *State of Nordic Fathers*, we 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). This is a quantitative and quite reductionist illustration of complex family arrangements and gender practices, which might be very valuable for policy and social planning, but which does not explore the father's—or for that sake, the mother's—role and meaning in his children's lives. While gender equalitarian parenting in families in very affluent Nordic countries is an interesting and important issue, inspiring scholars and activists globally, it does not tell much about the nature of the parent-child relation and the cultural construction of fatherhood, which might represent a 'cultural hindrance' against the idealistic national project of eliminating any trace of structural gender inequality. In pursuance of a better understanding of what it means to be yesterday's, today's, or tomorrow's man, we need to look more carefully at the cultural narratives and family discourses in the local setting (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2003; Edley and Wetherell 1999; Kimmel 2003).

Many studies of fatherhood in the Nordic countries draw on national level surveys, which rarely manage to capture 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 their general lack of information about fathers and families from rural and autonomous regions (Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Åland Islands) in the Nordic region, localities which

could have offered a different image of the modern caring family man of contemporary society. The small fishery dependent communities in the North, for instance, are often characterized by families with fathers working on the sea (on fishing or cargo vessels), hence fathers with work-dependent absence from home, and this has, obviously, a deep impact on the everyday life of the children and parents (Gaini 2013; Hayfield 2020). It is crucial, says Michael Lamb (1987: 24), 'to recognize intercultural and intracultural diversity when exploring paternal influences on child development'. It is, hence, also necessary to examine the home, the household, and the family constellations in relation to the parents' working life practices in studies of changing fatherhoods (Gillis 2000). There is a crisis of (voluntary) childlessness and fatherlessness, but also of a growing number of never-marrieds, says Gillis (ibid.: 232) referring to the 21<sup>st</sup> century family in North America and Europe. Clearly, the traditional family concept, defined as a rather static constellation of mother, father and children, which, as a matter of fact, never suited family research outside the Western world, is being questioned and contested in relation to new family types (Aspen and Larsen 1995). Anthropological studies of masculinity and family have demonstrated the enormous variety in fathering experiences around the globe (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2003; Guttman 1997). Writing about rural Ireland, for example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes men as 'socialized into feeling extremely inadequate and clumsy around babies' (1979: 148, cited in Gutmann 1997). The categories 'mother', 'father' and 'parent' vary—concerning roles and duties—through time and from culture to culture (Goody 1982, cited in Hennem 2012: 12–14). It is therefore important to realize and take note of the plurality of masculinity and the fact that

endemic notions of fatherhood ‘are constantly created and transformed in everyday interactions’ (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 10). Parents’ tasks, says Esther Goody (1982), are divided into five key parts: conception and pregnancy, transmission of family status and identity, care, education, and economic support. All of these, in different constellations, and involving many different ‘supporting’ persons—uncles, aunts, co-villagers, and so on—with different roles in the lives of the children in question, are part of the child-father bonding. In this paper, I look at fathers and fatherhood from the viewpoints of young people, the men’s children, with the intention of exploring the complex and shifting roles and positions of fathers in the lives of their children. The family as context for youth life, says Gestur Gudmundsson, represents a gap of knowledge in Nordic youth research (Gudmundsson 2000). It has not been in focus. Lack of research interest in young people in families is a result of the western understanding of adolescence as a life stage characterized by expanding autonomy and independence from family ties (Hennum 2002: 75). The study of parenthood (and fatherhood) is at the intersection of youth studies, family studies and gender studies (ibid.).

How does the Faroese father look *anno* 2020, and what has changed during the last three or four decades, according to his teenage children? In this paper, intersecting youth and fatherhood studies, the role and status of the father is examined and analysed in relation to his family and working life, his masculinity and identity, and the narrative of his historic societal position. Seen from the son’s or the daughter’s angle, this paper suggests, the father’s place in the life of his children mirrors a very special relation associated with feelings of affection, safety, and guidance.

## METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on empirical material in the form of individual essays written by eighth grade pupils (aged 14–15) affiliated to a random public secondary school in Torshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands, in January and February 2020. A total of 32 essays in digital format were collected from the pupils, representing a cross section of present-day Faroese youngsters, who all had very interesting narratives and reflections drawing the complex landscape of 21<sup>st</sup> century Faroese fatherhoods. While a study looking at another local community in the Faroes, let us say a fishing village with few job opportunities for people not interested in the sea, most likely would have led to essays with a stronger maritime tone, and maybe also to a stronger presence of ‘traditional’ working-class family values, there is no reason to conclude that the Torshavn study cannot serve as representation of the Faroese family landscape. In biographic interviews with a group of fathers and relatively young grandfathers from village communities (in another section of the *Faroese Fatherhood in Transition* project), we discovered, slightly surprisingly, that the fathers’ narratives were largely congruent with the capital’s youth’s images of the Faroese father today. A random school-class in any of the public schools in Torshavn constitutes a blend of children from different geographic areas and socioeconomic layers of society, more or less, but there will be relatively few pupils with fathers working as farmers and/or fishermen in the capital. The pupils received this introductory text (in Faroese language) to base their essays on:

## FATHERS IN THE FAROES

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*In this text you should describe the 'Faroese father' in 2020 through reflections on these themes in his life: children and family life, working life and career, masculinity and identity, equality and equal rights, and values and styles. You are welcome to combine and merge the topics if you like. Additionally, you should say something about historic shift: what do you think has changed through the last three or four decades in the Faroes as regards the father's role and family life? You are welcome to discuss other topics telling the story about the Faroese father too.*

This might seem quite overwhelming to an eighth grader, but the outcome of this venture is a rich collection of texts focusing on different questions and problems—some general and some very personal in style of writing, some brief and some fairly lengthy—relating to the fragile father-child relation, which rarely come to light in public debate in the Faroes. The passionate and energetic narratives echo what I believe to be young people's yearning to talk about the father and his place in the modern family. It is obvious that essays, as method in qualitative research, do not impose the same intimate connection between researcher and participants (or 'research co-worker') as for example participant-observation and conversation, but the creative text gives the participant a sense of being more unrestricted and comfortable in relation to his delivery (Corti 1993). It is, in brief, easier to blur the line between private experience and hypothetical ideas in the written essay than in the face-to-face interview. The essay, in other words, lacks the everchanging and dynamic spatiotemporal context of spontaneous 'real life' interaction, because it delegates the research participant with extensive power to control and confine his message through self-reflection and strategic

narration (Alaszewski 2006). The essay writing process of this project does also share some of the qualities and characteristics of the Mertonian sociological autobiography (Stanley 1993). When it comes to young people's narratives about fatherhood and masculinity in the Faroes, the essay, as method, facilitates and empowers the multi-layered perspectives of the youth, but it also encourages young people to develop new creative writing and critical thinking skills (Trell and Van Hoven 2010: 93). Essays, you could also say, emancipate the boys' and girls' past/future 'worlding', which invites analysis through the optic of an ongoing generative process (Knight 2017). Using eighth graders, instead of younger or older groups of people, who are approaching the end of compulsory schooling (nine years' schooling is obligatory), was a decision based on the intention of gathering stories from people in transition between childhood and adulthood, between early life memories and future dreams, but indeed also a setup inviting innovative and progressive dialogues about the father and his children. Participation was, of course, voluntary and no pressure was put on pupils to join the project. This project draws on the foundation that ethical reflections and precautions are of utmost importance in any scientific endeavour involving children and young people (Shaw et al. 2011).

The essay project is part of the larger project *Faroese Fatherhood in Transition: Exploring everyday life, family relations, and masculinity across two generations of men in contemporary Faroe Islands* (2018–2021), which is the first research enterprise on fatherhood(s) in the Faroe Islands. It aims to contribute to Nordic and international research on changing fatherhood and masculinity with a focus on rural and small island communities in the global North. The Nordic region, widely admired for its promotion of the 'caring father' in academic and

political discourse on gender equality and family life, usually refers to five independent nation-states (Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark) associated with the 'Nordic model of welfare' (maximising labour market participation, promoting gender equality and extensive benefit levels, etc.), but it consists of three (postcolonial) autonomous island communities (Greenland, Åland Islands and the Faroe Islands) as well. Sápmi, the region traditionally inhabited by the Sámi people, stretching over four countries, is also a part of the Nordic region, which seldom is reviewed in Nordic volumes on fatherhood and family life. Investigating the Faroes as case, this paper aims to fill a gap in knowledge on the masculinity and family life of present-day fathers in the Nordic region. The aim of the paper is to search for an answer to this question: how do young people in the Faroes describe and explain changes in the role of the father, and what does it tell us about the Faroese societal context?

## THE FATHER IN THE VIEW OF HIS CHILDREN

The Faroe Islands is an archipelago in the North Atlantic and autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. The Faroes, covering an area of 1,400 square kilometres, has a population of 53,000, of which some 20,000 live in the capital area. Life expectancy for men and women is 80.5 and 84.7 years, respectively. The total fertility rate is relatively high in the Faroes, which in the years of 2000, 2010 and 2019 could show the moderately decreasing rates of 2.58, 2.51 and 2.39, respectively. In 2019, there were 289 (church and civil) marriages and 75 divorces in the country. In 2010, by comparison, there were slightly fewer marriages and more divorces (in numbers as well as per capita). Among the 21,086 men aged 16 or older in

the Faroes today, 9,715 men have the marital status 'unmarried'. Further, the total number of married (including separated) men, divorced men, and widowers is 9,784, 1,044, and 543, respectively (January 2020). The Census 2011 (Statistics Faroe Islands 2011) offers more information about the Faroese family and household. In the larger capital area—Southern Streymoy Island—there were for instance 2,527 households composed of (married and consensual union) couples with children, of which 1,795 had more than one child under the age of 25 in the house. At the same time (2011) there were 81 single father households with children in the capital area. The single mother households with children were, quite as expected, far more numerous: a total of 538 households in the capital area. 1,357 men aged 20 or older say (in the Census 2011) that they are not part of a family nucleus. In the capital area, sons/daughters (under the age of 20) in two-parent and single-parent households count 4,218 and 858 persons, respectively (Statistics Faroe Islands 2011).

In the post-war era, growing urbanization and administrative centralization, cycles of international out- and return-migration, new opportunities and motivations for (secondary and tertiary) education, the introduction of modern (electronic) media, and the downfall of small-scale traditional fishing, were among the intersecting structural processes leading to new ways of life and the recognition and empowerment of a range of groups representing new gender identities and cultural values, which again has impacted images of the Faroese father and changing masculinities (Gaini 2013).

## THE FATHER AND THE HOME

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Faroese fathers spend much more time at home, and together with their family, today than

what was common some 30 years ago. This not very surprising observation is emphasized in passages in most of the essays authored by the eighth graders from Torshavn. Without exception, this general shift is welcomed as a good thing, signalling a new era with new roles for the father. The teenagers, who in their texts take the role of a kind of family's ethnographer with a watchful eye on new practices and movements, seem to identify predicaments and contradictions in the father's 'homecoming' to the new family arrangements. The teenagers are naturally pleased to witness the father's ambitions as a 'family man', in many cases symbolising a deep contrast to the teenagers' (paternal) grandfathers' family lives and values, but they are at the same time acutely aware that the fathers in many cases are struggling to deliver at home, at work and among friends, because of their stubborn refusal to admit that their energy and power are not unlimited (Gaini 2010). Maternal gatekeeping, blocking male participation in housework, is also something that is hidden in some of the messages in the essays. In a rather miserable statement, hinting a kind of 'new father' conundrum, two sociologists argue that 'househusbands suffer from the housewife syndrome. Invisible achievements, lack of recognition and lack of self-confidence' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, quoted in Johansson 2011: 233). The children's voices are in harmony with recent international fatherhood research when they articulate the hardship and frustration that many fathers experience in the quest of being provider, (supportive) partner and home builder at the same time (Miller 2010: 9–10).

Many of the study's essays are written in defence of the father, who much too often serves as caricature of 'olden days' (hyper) masculinity in local media. Media discourses fail to capture the diversity of everyday

parenting and complexity of masculine identity (Gregory and Milner 2011: 602). The children of the fathers, in other words, aim to reclaim the narrative on Faroese fatherhood and masculinity by renouncing disgracing stereotypes and empowering the fathers in relation to dominant constructions of the family and gender identities in present-day societal debate. They compensate for their fathers' lack of 'discursive resources', as researchers have termed the capital that can empower men in modern family settings, for articulation of new demands (Miller 2011: 1097). While not directly mentioned in any of the essays, the clownish and rather untidy father in the popular (British) *Peppa Pig* cartoon for children somehow came to my mind when I read some of the eighth graders' stories. The Faroese fathers are neither Daddy Pigs nor superdaddies from magazines about sports, music, and television celebrities. The Daddy Pig of the cartoon might look a bit lost, struggling to find his place in the family, but the children adore him. Betty, a girl from Torshavn, the youngest person in a group of four siblings, describes her father in this way:

Daddy is such a good and modern father. He helps in the home, taking care of chores together with mommy, such as cleaning, Hoovering, and washing the house. He also really likes to keep everything nice outside our house. Together with mommy, he often makes good and healthy dinners, occasions to gather the whole family now counting eleven people. Actually, mom and dad do a lot to keep the family together. Additionally, daddy is good at helping me with homework and e.g. if I need to rearrange my bedroom.

Her father, who has tried his hands at a number of work industries, including a few years as

sailor, is a 'modern' family man, she says, who participates much more actively in family life than what fathers did in her grandparents' generation. 'If I had lived 30–40 years ago, everything would have been different', she says laconically. Largely, without doubt, because of my introductory text drawing a framework for the essays, many young people emphasize—and maybe overdo—a deep transformation in men's position and identity in the Faroese family in a 30–40 years scope. Amy, who is pondering over divorce and absent fathers in the start of her essay, and who says that she 'was lucky' to get a father that did not leave his family, also talks about the change in society:

Before, fathers most often had a lifestyle of fishing or being a farmer, or the like. You can imagine a father from the 1950s–1960s, in a knitted sweater, rubber boots, looking dirty and smelling of wind-dried meat. That is not how my father is. He is shopping in the grocery store, playing football and other things that a modern man would do in everyday life. Today, there are more opportunities for earning money than before, and therefore people do not depend on fishing or living off agriculture.

Contrasting the 21<sup>st</sup> Century father with an image of rustic and hardy fishermen without much time for their family, Amy clearly hints which type of father she favours and feels 'lucky' to have on her side. Her father, who loves technology and computers, she says in the end of her short essay, 'is healthy, training a lot, and he looks really happy'. Her essay is a powerful testimony of affection and admiration in a time where many young people witness the separation of their parents and the decline of their contact to the father. 'I give him a lot of hugs, maybe

too many, but this is just because I love him', Amy says. Another girl, Ruth, whose parents divorced a few years back, talks about her close attachment to the father. She appreciates her father's efforts to keep a good relationship to the children, and for his (and the mother's) decision to talk openly about the difficult divorce, which, Ruth stresses, 'has helped us immensely', and, she adds, 'which is not a matter of course'. While Ruth has suffered from the separation from her father, she seems very mature in her analytic discussion of complex family issues and the father-child relation. After all, she says,

I am very thankful for my father. He has been there for me, when I needed him, through my whole life. Daddy is a very kind-hearted and sweet person. He always wants the best for everyone. I love him so incredibly much. He is so good to talk to, and I feel that he understands me in a different way than others do. However, there are times when he really infuriates me, but we always talk about it right afterwards.

The images of men from popular media, which often resonate a powerful narrative of Faroese men and masculinities as conservative and anti-feminist in relation to (modern) gender equality values, but also as unsophisticated and rustic in social conduct, do not match present-day Torshavn fathers as their children portray them. While the sons and daughters, as mentioned earlier, seem to appreciate the shift in the family and in the father's new gender identity, many among them do also mull over the things that men have failed to keep in this process of transition. Lena, recalling what her grandfather has told the grandchildren about his early life, and about his own parents' family arrangements, says in her essay:

Today's fathers are (...) not as masculine as their fathers used to be and they are much softer; they express more sentiments and are not afraid of showing that they cry when something touches them. Today, some men can even cry while watching a movie, something which was unheard of in the past (...) But today fathers also help much more at home, and they do all the chores together with the wife. They are on paternal leave, they make food, they wash and help with homework.

Yet, she remarks in the end of her text, 'the fathers are not all alike, some do more than others do', and this is of course an important point, because the fisherman's family in the small village community and the office worker's family in the capital city represent very different everyday lives and (nuclear) family arrangements. It is therefore important to look closer at the role of the sea in relation to the everyday practices and parent-children relations of the family in the Faroe Islands.

#### THE FAMILY AND THE SEA

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The seaman working on a fishing or cargo ship, in adjacent waters or across the Seven Seas, has for generations been a national hero in Faroese cultural narratives, but since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a growing number of aspiring young men looking for a career in other businesses and a daily life ashore, the fisher has lost his superior status among young people in the Faroes. While the contemporary fisher working on one of the large ultramodern trawlers normally will have a high annual income (many fishers earning more than university professors and medical doctors), and hardly have the look of the stereotyped fisherman (his common attire, fishy smell, gait, etc.), his lengthy and

recurrent temporal absence from home, which unavoidably impacts his social and family life, is something keeping many aspirants away (Gaini 2006; 2016; Hovgaard 2015). Very few women are fishers, so the vessel is a man's world. The Faroese fisher was—and very often still is—presented as a fearless hunter putting his own life at risk in the search for the catch to bring home to his hungry children and community, and this romantic narrative of the hunter is echoed in a vast number of popular Faroese songs, poems, and tales, which inspire people to value the past, but also to reflect on present-day realities: how does this aquatic 'hunter' adapt to new styles of fathering and family orientation? As a maritime and heavily fishery-dependent nation, the Faroes have for generations been characterized by families organised in relation to men's work on the sea (Gaini 2011; Hayfield 2020). In most societies, including the Faroes, mothers are perceived as close, and fathers as distant (Gillis 1997). Jim writes this about his father in his essay:

The behaviour of fathers in the Faroes is diverse. My father he is sailing, and he likes football; it is good when he is at home, because then he is at home all the time, and he makes dinner and such things. Based on my own father, I believe that fathers in 2020 really like sailing, but also like to be at home. Fathers are usually also good at changing light bulbs, tires, and so on, so that is often what they are doing in the house; and then the mothers take care of the washing, look after the children, prepare dinner, and so on...

Men are, from a general Faroese point of view, and according to several essay-writing teenagers, expected to be handymen (Gaini 2006; 2011). They are supposed to master the

tasks of repairing an old car, fixing a boat engine, changing the roof of a house, slaughtering sheep, and many other things. Today, in most of the modern families in the Faroes, they are also trusted to actively participate in household chores and parenting. For many men, the fisher's mentality lives on, the sense of responsibility as breadwinner of the family, even in cases where the woman he shares his life with has a well-paid full-time job. Paul gives this brief introduction to the shift in the family life of the Faroese fisherman:

...most fathers used to be out at sea for several months at a time, to feed the family back home. When they came back home, to wife and children, it often happened that the youngest children did not recognise their father. They had never seen him, or else they were so young when the father left for work on the sea that they did not remember having seen him before. This could often be the reason for father to feel as outsider, and not as a part of the family at home (...) This has changed with time. Fathers, whom nowadays are working on the sea, are away from home for maximum four-six weeks at a time. They are on sea for shorter periods of time and can thus keep a closer connection to their children than men who were sailors in the old days could.

Clearly, there is a focus on temporal change, awarding the seafaring fathers extended uninterrupted time at home as an outcome of the introduction of maritime working journeys of a shorter and more 'family-friendly' duration, which indirectly also indicates that work at sea—in modern fishing and shipping industries—remains an important part of the lives of Faroese men and their families. According to several

essay-writing teenagers, the modern fisherman is eagerly trying to compensate for the regular intervals of absence from home by concentrated and intensified family involvement, reflecting an 'intimate fatherhood' (Johansson and Andreasson 2017), with plenty of time for the children and chores. Tom feels lucky that his father only sails between islands in the Faroes, and hence is at home every week:

In the Faroes, many fathers have been fishermen, and therefore they have only been at home for limited periods of time when the family was young (...) Nowadays, men are not on sea for more than three months at a time; I know that granddad was away for five-six months at a time, and then just came home for a very short visit before going back fishing; and my father, he is not away for more than four days at a time, but he is just sailing between two islands here in the Faroes, so he is not far from home (...) Me and my father, we do a lot of things together.

Many fathers feel a duty to transmit cultural knowledge about the 'old days', through fishing and other activities in nature, to their children. The fisherman and the fishing family is still today an essential part of the cultural identity of many people in the Faroes, not only through the adventurous memoirs of brave fishermen, icons of a maritime masculinity, but also as a peculiar way of life influencing everyday routine and family relations. The wife of the fisherman was—and still is—the actual head of the household 'running the firm' on day-to-day basis. In a study from a Dutch fishing community, a retired fisherman admits this reality when he says: 'Yes, a fishermen's wife has a great responsibility. She is a mother and a father at the same time' (Van Ginkel 2009: 165–166). When the fisherman

was home, says his wife, 'it was always a party for the kids'. To be fisherman's wife, she explains, 'demanded a particular attitude (...) Oh well, you were aware of that if you married a fisherman' (ibid.). This information could as well have been from a Faroese village. The relationship of seafaring to masculinity is a key to the unpacking and reinterpretation of the Faroese family, especially the father's multidimensional role and meaning within the family today, and should not be misinterpreted as a relic of aggressive patriarchal masculinity. For many young fathers, the strategic negotiation of gender identity may look like an oscillating process between images of the 'hunter' of the past and images of present-day modern caring man, which fosters feelings of ambivalence and tension, as well as a pressure to coalesce a pair of clashing masculine styles, but, as the essays mutually articulate in powerful narratives, the fathers are pragmatic and flexible handymen not worrying too much about pride and honour in relation to their masculinities and past.

#### THE FATHER AS SUPPORTER AND INSPIRATION

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The essay-writing teenagers, who bravely put into words the complex and in many cases quite perplexing child-father relationship, which resonates with the emerging fragmentation and hybridization of the conventional (nuclear) family, feel personally affected by the lack of interest in the father—and in his central place in the life of his offspring—in society. Through their peers and relatives, and chat on social media, young people learn things about other families and fathers unveiling a rugged landscape with pitfalls and gorges. Today, says Tommi Hoikkala, parents are expected to take the roles of 'managers and coaches' in relation to their children's development (Hoikkala 1998).

The father is no longer taken for granted, and no one is more aware of his *value* than young people who have lost contact to their father. Linda talks about today's father as a man who can be feminine and masculine at the same time:

Today a boy can talk to his father without just being told to 'man up', which can be very derogatory to the child. But instead the boy can have a normal conversation, where the father helps him to find out what is wrong and how to solve the problem. The father can, thus, show his feminine side at the same time as he is masculine—and that is well accepted today!

In this way, the father can give his children advice and knowledge like a mother without jeopardizing his masculinity. But he is, according to many essays, not a clone of the mother, because he has other skills and style. Ben, for instance, talks honestly about how his friends' happy everyday social activities together with their fathers makes him feel as an 'outsider'. He writes:

My father lives on Western Island, so I don't see him frequently. I think that is very sad. I often hear my friends walk and talk about their fathers, and about what they normally do together with them. After school they are maybe going to bowl or play football together with them. Go out buying a gift for their mother or something like that. I don't do that. I cannot participate in the chat when they talk about their fathers, because I don't see mine.

Many young people do not live under the same roof as their (biological) father. Some of them have, for a variety of reasons, very

limited contact to the father, who might live in the same town or in a faraway place. Like the sailing fathers, they are absent from their children's everyday life, but in other ways they do not belong to the same category of fathers. The fishing father is absent because of his work, other fathers are missing because the parents split up and the father moved away. Alf does not write directly about himself, but presents a prudent moral message about the basic duties of the father and the problems that his misconduct and indifference can give his children. Alf writes as if the reader is the father that has forgot to listen to his son. It is a warning, I think, about the potentially serious consequences of a father-child noncommunication. He explains:

A Faroese father should be with his children, because a child needs a father; it is important to have a father when you are a small child. A father can teach a child a lot of things, mothers can too, but it is just something else that fathers can teach their children, like playing football or building things, fishing and also baiting (a line) (...) When a father does not talk to his children, or if he does not have much to do with the child, then it can become difficult for the child to talk about its father, or it can make the child try to find out how the father has been, and the child can become sad, and then it can just become difficult to go through life by feeling sorrowful.

The desolation that the child longing for its father feels in Alf's essay is also a reaction to a family-oriented society's enduring idealization of the father's role in the (boy) child's upbringing and road to 'manhood', notwithstanding the push for more gender equal parenting practices in so-called post-traditional families without 'controlling' authoritarian fathers (Seidler

2003: 213). The response to queries about the 'male role model' is not unambiguous, some scholars asking provocatively if families actually need fathers? (Johansson 2003: 318). The teenagers, obviously, agree in unison that they need a father, but there are different perspectives on the father's absence versus presence in the family, and the girl or boy dreaming about a closer attachment to the remote father will indeed imagine his function and importance in relation to current dominant constructions of family and fatherhood, but also in relation to own (family) life experiences. Fathers want to protect their family, says another teenager, but they are today forced to adapt their fathering styles to new social conditions:

Men in the Faroes usually become fathers in their late twenties or early thirties (...) A typical family in the Faroes is composed of father, mother and two to four children (...) I think the Faroese man is struggling to adapt to the new constellation of society (...) I think it can be difficult for men, because they have to be hard and soft at the same time, because men have the instinct of wanting to be the one to protect and to provide for the family, but they cannot realize this to a very high degree anymore, and that makes some men feel that they lose their identity.

In this passage, and quite a few other essays too, the teenager abstracts the assumingly irreversible parenthood alteration in the parlance of the scholar, using 'identity' and other concepts in his reasoning, yet including a primordial 'instinct' as one of the roots of the adversity of present-day fathers, hence suggesting a sort of *Catch-22* with fathers needing an alternative 'instinct' for tomorrow's expected fathering style. The dominant

father-and-mother-and-two-to-four-children family model with new focus on care and intimacy in emerging fathering practices does not, strictly speaking, request a peculiar child-father relationship, except for the generally caring and supportive role of the father.

#### CHILD-CENTRIC FATHERS

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From the sons' and daughters' ideational perspective, the father is much more than a family member—and cohabitant within the household, married to the mother—because he is a source of inspiration, a coach and supporter in the difficult and precarious transition from childhood to adulthood, but also a 'soul mate' that gives them a feeling of affection and safety. From this point of view, the power and resilience of the child-father relation make it overcome the emergence of so-called 'post-family' life, which (with serial families, single households, etc.) 'contributes to the de-centering of fatherhood' (Johansson and Andreasson 2017: 192). Fatherhood might be de-centred, but the father is still central in the offspring's map of relations. There has been a shift towards more 'child-centeredness', maybe more than towards 'gender equality', in families in the Nordic countries (Forsberg 2007 in Christensen and Jensen 2014: 65). One of the female pupils from Torshavn, who admires her relatively young father who divorced her mother before she was in school age, and who says that she is very happy that her beloved father found a new woman to marry and have children with, says that she will always be close to her father. In her essay, she says:

My view on my father must be that he makes everyone happy that he meets, he makes them smile when he goes out. Or, well, he makes me laugh and be happy the

whole day, if I was sad. He is always there for me; and he is with me when I need it. Daddy makes everyone smile even if they are not happy on that day. I always had daddy as my role model (...) If anyone asks daddy for a favour, he does it (...) Daddy has taught me so many things that I am glad to know. For instance, I have learned to find things on cars that are not functioning, or that need to be improved. I usually help daddy repair our car and our boat.

The father is not the agent of a new family policy demonstrating his talent and worth as 'new father', but rather a daddy transmitting knowledge and cultural codes to the next generation, but first and foremost, he is a person who, at least according to the teenagers themselves, is giving the children a mental strength and sense of being protected in a 'fatherless' society with fragmented and blended families. The essays mould the fathers and their fatherhoods in a tender and emotional fashion, striving to give a genuine account of the inconspicuous transformation of the Faroese family. Then, what is new about the Faroese father? Using the findings from the essays as deep kaleidoscopic entrance to the field, and adding general facts about the social and cultural transformation of the Faroes since the 1970s and 1980s, especially as regards labour market and family issues, but also in terms of emerging lifestyles and gender values, we can encapsulate the 'new' in the new father: he embodies some of the practices and qualities linked to the Nordic-style 'reflexive' and 'intimate' fatherhood (Johansson and Andreasson 2017), but at the same time, as strongly verified by the youth from Torshavn, he also builds his fathering style and father-child relationship on robust local knowledge linked to traditional cultural values. Life at home, the modern house with

all fancy hi-tech facilities, has nevertheless changed. While the father has always spent time with his children, and been their close ally and guardian in time of crisis, he was much less involved in many of the everyday activities and chores at home, especially regarding the smallest children's needs, in past generations. Not so much because of pride or conservative patriarchal values, rather as an outcome of working conditions and practical arrangements within the family.

## REVISITING THE FAROESE FATHER

Based on the narrative essays written by a group of teenagers from Torshavn, the father's role and status in the family and in the life of his offspring has been presented and discussed in relation to the family home, the workplace, and the care and cultural education of the child. The father is irreplaceable, say his son and his daughter, at the same time as he, indeed, often is replaced and ostracized from the family home. In what has widely been called the post-nuclear and post-traditional family, with 'serial nuclear' families, single-parent families, international families, and other late modern family constellations based on flexible and individualized lifestyles, the father resonates with the inclusive 'new father' ideals (Johansson 2009: 109). The previously discussed normative visions of fatherhood create images of fathers, says Tina Miller, 'who are employed, partnered, present, and intending to stay' (2010: 2–3). Beverly Skeggs (2004), referring to the situation in UK and Europe, links this endorsed image of the family to the new middle class. The new father is also, according to some researchers, a middle-class creation (Griswold 1993). While you could say that the Faroese family settled in Torshavn has a more evident 'middle class'

(socio-economic and cultural) status than the fisheries-oriented 'working class' families of the smaller towns and villages, and that the majority of the essays indicate this socio-cultural differentiation, it would represent a fallacy to define present-day families in the capital of the Faroes as hybridized and de-traditionalized families fitting Skeggs' urban 'middle class' model. International family research suggests that the gender gap is narrowing concerning (routine) housework (Doucet and Lee 2014: 360) What the essay-writing teenagers reveal in their narratives, first and foremost through the representation of the father, is the child-centeredness of the family and the power of the father-child relationship. As a family-centred society, with the father symbolizing the main link between the intimate family and the larger (anonymous) society, young people feel fragile and weak if the father is unreachable. The general process of individualization in society, which for instance is discussed in relation to sexuality and family life in Anthony Giddens' (1992) pivotal book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, seems, in the case of the Faroes, to magnify the father's position in young people's imagination and aspiration, while the risk of separation from the father, increasingly, troubles their mind. The discussion about change in the family in the Faroes since the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on the fathers' new fathering practices and everyday lives, tells us at least two things: fathers generally spend more time at home and are more involved in their children's everyday lives today, and fathers try to keep a close and caring relation to their children, even after family breakup. The child-centricity is therefore not only part of the (late) modern family project, with children binding the individualized parents together into an integrated family, as discussed in Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) work on the sociology of the family,

because it is also a manifestation of Faroese men's desire of having children regardless of their family status.

Slowly but steadily, you could say, the Faroes are moving in the direction of the neighbouring countries in the Nordic region, but the 'traditional' gender and family identities of many islanders remain deep-rooted, especially amongst men and women from relatively small village communities relying on fisheries (Hayfield et al. 2016; Hayfield 2020; Gaini 2011). 'Gender equality cannot be achieved without men and boys', Faroese Prime Minister Axel Johannessen emphasized in a speech at a gender conference in 2019, which resonates with 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 defense of the Faroese fathers who discreetly contribute to gender equality through their fathering practices. The far-reaching 'changes in gender relations around the globe', says R.W. Connell, 'produce ferociously complex changes in the conditions of practice with which men as well as women have to grapple' (2001: 46). Undeniably, modern fatherhood is complex and multidimensional (Miller 2010). There is also growing documentation in European fatherhood research showing that 'men are taking increased responsibility for child care', first and foremost in dual-income families (Williams in Miller 2010: 17–18). We have in this paper seen that young people observe and experience these changes from an angle uncovering dynamics of intergenerational relations and family temporalities. It is, so to speak, a view from the future, because young people reflect on the past and the present by imagining and portraying the future as an alternative to current realities (Gaini 2018: 4–5). The father

is, in the view of the youth, instrumental for his children's futures, because of his key role in the intergenerational transmission of identity and education within the family network. Today, the family is, according to Nordic family researchers, an institution and organisation offering a supportive framework for the individual family members—it supports and helps them in their engagements outside the family (Dencik and Schultz-Jørgensen 1999). This is what many young people write about in their essays, addressing the father specifically in the narratives, but it is important to study this practical family objective beyond the framework of modern (post-traditional) and individualized families in Nordic countries. While the articulation of this quality might be influenced by contemporary jargon, it also suggests a cry out for the restoration of intergenerational continuity and stability in the family. The father, therefore, symbolizes a frontier in young people's everyday struggle to sustain their general well-being and sense of belonging. More than a question of consanguinity, in the form of biological fathering, the teenagers talk about fathers' social and cultural roles in relation to children's upbringing and development.

When a girl says that her father understands her 'in a different way than others do', and that this understanding is important to her, she also says that he gives her something that, in principle, cannot easily be provided by a surrogate, because of the imagined primordial bonds between child and father. The Faroese father is sometimes exoticized as an icon of something 'authentic' in a globalising world, as the body of capsuled stories about the Faroese family of the past, but he is also, in the everyday life of the modern family, presented as the (handy) man struggling to find the perfect balance between being at home and being away.

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