Virtual Invisible Men: Privacy and Invisibility as Forms of Privilege in Online Venues for Fathers During Early Parenthood

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Given the proliferation of support technology for men entering parenthood in virtual forums this project’s aim was to explore a virtual forum exclusively for fathers and elaborate on gendered questions for men’s parenthood within that milieu. An archival forum study was undertaken using principles for nethnography. The categories presented in the results overall indicate that the online venue creates a privileged invisibility from experiences in “real life” gender relations. This suggests that both horizontal and vertical homo-social dimensions are present in the forum support/negotiations which occur among the forum posters, whereby issues of invisibility and entitlement in some cases take a central position. We suggest that being virtual invisible men entails participation in both a marketplace of opinions and a homo-social competition.

Keywords: parental practice, internet forum, nethnography, invisible masculinity, parenthood

Becoming a father is a life-transforming event and the transition into being a parent is of interest for a broad range of disciplines and research networks. A growing body of research on men’s parenting highlights extensive interest among public media and policy circles in the part that men can play in modern family life and in a family-oriented society (Hearn, 2002). Moreover, many new fathers in Scandinavia say they want to assume a more active parental role for their children (Holter, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008).

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Therefore the issue of becoming and being a father is connected to a much broader gendered context positioning men’s parenting as a social institution within a continuum of welfare state ambitions and regimes (cf. Ranson, 2001; Seward, Yeatts, Amin & Dewitt, 2006). In the Scandinavian countries, which are generally regarded as representing a relatively progressive approach to gender equality, parenthood has often been described as a “golden opportunity” for challenging conservative and traditional gender expectations and norms (Melby, Ravn & Carlsson-Wetterberg, 2009). Indeed, becoming a parent can for some men also be the first time they become aware of gendered power relations in a personal and embodied manner (Aldous, Mulligan & Bjarnason, 1998; Brannen & Nilssen, 2006). For example, men’s encounter with parental health care support systems during pregnancy can, as shown by Fletcher and StGeorge (2011), contribute to the “first” awareness for men that they are a part of a gendered order where parenting is regarded as primarily a “women’s domain.” Studies show that men who participate in formal health care activities often feel “slighted” and “left out” when health care workers support the parents (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011; Rashley, 2005). Regardless of how justified or not such feelings might be, this sudden awareness can be a consequence of the fact that much of men’s day-to-day practice in public and private is not recognized by them as being either political nor gendered (Egerberg-Holgren & Hearn, 2006).

This lack of consciousness by many men about their structurally privileged gender position can be analyzed in terms of the concept of invisibility. Kimmel (1993, p. 29) uses the Chinese proverb “the fish is the last to discover the ocean” to make sense of the fact that men’s privileged position often seems to remain invisible to them. Moreover, he refers to his own experience as a middle class White man: “I enjoy the privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not to another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred” (1993, p. 30). Kimmel (and colleagues) have described how this invisibility and sudden awareness of gendered power structures are experienced by men today: as Kimmel notes, “It is a luxury that only men have in our society to pretend that gender does not matter” (Kimmel, 2010, p. 4).

Applied to men in virtual reality, Kimmel’s concept of invisibility acquires a two-folded meaning, embracing both the experienced gender relations referred to by Kimmel as well as the anonymity the online venue offers. Being invisible therefore refers to this instantly accessible comfort zone: being in your private sphere and interacting within the seclusion of a privileged group.

Additionally, our theoretical frame also draws upon the concept of entitlement. Kimmel developed the concept of entitlement to partially explain the dynamics by which some men come to feel dispossessed within a gender order where—overall—their interests predominate (Kimmel, 2001). These feelings of dispossession may not necessarily be rooted in any actual loss of power or position: it is the perception of the loss of a position to which some men believe themselves entitled that is the central dynamic to the feeling of dispossession (Kimmel, 2008). The concept of entitlement can then also be usefully linked to that of invisibility. For instance, using the concept “entitlement”, one can explain how men’s gendered privileges are invisible to some men until they are in a gendered situation where their normal privileges may not apply—or, at least, where they feel that they do not apply. At such a point, the denial of men’s “entitlement” to privilege (as they see it) can be experienced by them as a profound feeling of dispossession. Despite the privileges
associated with the category of “men” as a whole and with individual men, such feelings of entitlement and dispossession can then become in some cases a central motive for their future actions (Kalish & Kimmel 2010).

Entering into health systems where parenting is regarded as “women’s domain” can therefore, for some men, also mean moving from a position of gender invisibility to one of appearance (to themselves)—and thereby, via a sense of thwarted entitlement, to feelings of dispossession in relation to the gendered structures in which they are located. This in turn may also create an increased consciousness among some men regarding gendered power relations in general and their own position specifically. Egerberg-Holmgren and Hearn (2006, p. 405) suggest that men’s gender-conscious positioning can be comparable to a left–right continuum from those men who “actively are supportive of gender equality onto those in favour, in theory, but who do not do anything in particular, to those ‘not bothered’, onto those actively hostile.” Furthermore, Jalmert identified an important position, characterized by what he defined as “the in principle man”: those men who agree that they should share the domestic burden but feel that, in their individual case, there is no practical solution that would allow this to happen (Jalmert, 1983; Magnusson, 2000). So, the common aspiration expressed by many men does not necessarily mean that it will be put into practice (Johansson & Klinth, 2008). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 834) characterize this position in a similar way: “(m)en who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity” (see also Aboim, 2010).

These patterns of complicit maneuvering in relation to men’s parenthood among men have been characterized as a vital and conservative “core” for the power structures associated with gender systems and orders (Bekkengen, 2002; 2003). The process of “gaining without effort” (as theorized by Connell, 1995), from which the in principle man benefits, has therefore become an important starting point for some researchers in understanding fathers’ investment in their parenting and how “equality” is negotiated in couple organized parenthood and households (Doucet, 2006). Meanwhile, another direction in research on men’s parenting focuses more on the problems and obstacles to a gender-equal life that men experience (Mar siglio, 1995). Nevertheless, further understanding is needed of the relationship between men’s aspirations and parental practices in the context of that process of “invisibility” highlighted by Kimmel. That is the purpose of the present article and the project upon which it draws.

We focus upon one consequence of the patterns in traditional parental health care revealed by Fletcher and StGeorge (2011), namely that the support available for fathers online and in internet fora has mushroomed (Flether, Vimpani, Russell, & Keatings, 2008; Morris, Dollahite & Hawkins, 1999). Online support groups for fathers are quickly becoming a frequently accessed internet resource, making them a new and important tool for fathers who want to discuss their experiences (Daneback, & Plantin, 2008; Plantin, & Daneback, 2009). A study by Eriksson and Salzmann Erikson (2012) shows that communicated support for involvement in early parenthood among fathers included a reciprocal sharing of concerns: how to be a better parent in relation to caring for an infant. Concerns for their child’s well-being and shared feelings of joy and distress in everyday life were recurrent supportive themes in the communication. Information gained from contacting others in similar situations is one important reason for the fathers’ use of the Internet.
It seems that men participate in virtual communities because they want to hear stories of men’s parenting from others who have faced similar situations. The possibility of gaining social support during the transition to parenthood while remaining in one’s own comfort zone is one of the primary reasons for participating in virtual communities supporting fathers, research suggests (Eriksson & Salzmann Erikson, 2012; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011). However, as mentioned above, remaining in one’s own comfort zone has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, men using the internet have potentially less need to reach out and encounter one another within those formal activities and support systems where they have felt excluded. On the other hand, they also find refuge in a context which is both homo-social and which potentially assists them to remain “invisible” to one another in Kimmel’s terms (Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 1993). Given the proliferation of support technology for men entering parenthood, it seems relevant to explore the key relationship of men’s parenthood aspirations and practices within that milieu.

METHODS

Men in Cyberspace and Virtual Arenas

Social arenas have previously been limited geographically with social activity being arranged in physical space with face-to-face interaction. However, over the last twenty years, the Internet has revolutionized and extended the boundaries of social arenas, thereby impacting upon the need for traditional “in-person” interactions. During the 20th century, a shift took place in some anthropological enquiries and researchers started to conduct ethnographic studies “at home” (Messerschmidt, 1981). Karra and Phillips (2008) argue that this shift implied many advantages, including easier access to study sites and the need for fewer resources, as well as making translation easier. Related anthropological shifts are still ongoing.

Acknowledging the existence of several important facets of identity and culture in online interaction (cf. Kendall, 2000; Nicholas, Palomares & Eun-Ju, 2010) we were inspired by anthropological points of departure and ethnographic approaches when framing this study. The next big shift in the 21st century may be an extension of Messerschmidt’s (1981) concept of doing ethnography “at home”, with the focus now being on what “happens in cyberspace.” Presence is no longer limited to “face to face interactions” only. Instead it now exists through interactivity in cyberspace (Chen & Yen 2004). Moreover, both verbal and affective intimacy exists online in social networks and may be, at least partly, correlated with the frequency of postings (Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008). Using cyberspace to gather data becomes very “natural” in the internet-age and indeed inevitable when studying specific phenomena that would be very time-consuming if not largely impossible to access using offline study designs. In this context, online research provides opportunities to gather unfiltered viewpoints on parenting and social processes whereby men make meaning of parenthood and gender relations. The forum posters can be regarded as a very

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1 As shown in Plantin and Daneback’s (2009) overview, the age of the average parental website (i.e., websites aimed at parents regardless of gender) visitor is quite low, most often less than 35 years, given that such visitors are often first-time parents. Additionally, 62% of all visitors to parental websites are reported to be women.
select group of men who are motivated to actively think about the parenting role, based on their decision to participate in an online forum. By socializing within this virtual context and culture, plural dynamics and forms of masculinity are imaged within the relationship among the men reflecting questions about early parenthood in private as well as public life (see Aboim, 2010).

In this study, we were inspired by Spradley’s (1979) structured ethnographic method in combination with Kozinets’s (2009) methodology for conducting ethnographic research online, called *nethnography*. Nethnography is designed as an archival and cross-sectional observational forum study. In the initial step, we searched and reviewed some of the existing literature on the context of men’s parenthood and parenting. Thereafter, we located a “men only” parental internet forum that would be suitable for the elaboration and exploration of our research question. As Wolcott (1999, p. 68) states, “One can do ethnography anywhere, anytime, and of virtually anything, as long as human social behavior is involved (or was involved […]”). We adopted four inclusion criteria for selecting a discussion forum: (a) written in a language that was understood by all researchers; (b) highly relevant to the research question; (c) a public site that does not require registration to access posts (thereby not ethically prohibiting research); and (d) which can be considered an active forum. By using a large and well-known search engine we located an online forum relevant for our study. The selected forum was a Scandinavian forum for fathers. Posters communicated in the forum via Scandinavian languages.

Since there were more than 1,000 postings on this topic, we found that consensus data collection would be massive. Instead, posts were gathered “sequentially top-down” meaning that data were gathered from the top thread and down, working backwards through the sequence of discussions. Data were gathered simultaneously by the two first authors. Along with this step, we wrote analytic memos which came to be the embryo of the analyzing procedure. Data from the cyberspace forum was dumped cross-sectionally from the forums’ most recent posting and backwards. We estimated from previous studies (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2011; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2013) that 200 threads would provide an appropriate amount of data for in-depth qualitative analysis. We did not know what kind of information that posters (participants who actively post comments in the forum) would share, but we decided in advance that pictures and links to other parts of internet should be excluded since the dumping would otherwise become cumbersome. Redundant information (repeated quotes from earlier posts, graphics, etc.) was “peeled off”, reducing our data from 1,203 to 1,049 pages. All authors accessed the resulting data and skimmed it separately. As we became familiar with the data and language used in the forum, we asked, “what are the ways that fathers share engagement in early parenthood?,” and “how is this engagement expressed in the communication and language?”

Our analytical point of departure was the frames offered by previous explorations of men’s parenting and masculinity and, in particular, by the perspective of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841): “(i)t is men’s and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education.” Recognizing the vital resource for everyday parenthood that is offered in forums for men-to-men interactions as a “practice”, we started a process of reasoning and reflexive discussion that formed a preliminary structure
for the results, constructed according to the complexity present in data (cf. Kendall, 2000). Iterative reflexive discussions between the authors were integral to the analysis that consisted of several analytic steps. After an initial reading of the 1,049 pages of posting, a second condensed set of data consisting of 111 pages emerged from our analytic point of departure when content in posting was themed via different keywords associated with major topics. This keyword sorted data was then interpreted and discussed until consensus was reached about emerging themes from grouping and re-grouping of the keywords. As these themes were clarified, excerpts were at this point translated from Scandinavian to English, specifications were developed, and concepts were identified. Finally, the themes were abstracted, interpreted, and sorted into three categories linking the underlying meanings together in previously presented frames and understandings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Data collection and presentation of the findings are subject to the principles of international ethical standards for conducting covert archival and cross-sectional observational studies in open accessible on-line forums (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Bruckman, 2002; Enyon, Schroeder & Fry, 2009; Walther, 2002; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2010). No regulations in the forum has been violated and guidelines from the Nordic Research Councils concerning online research have been considered and fully applied, including respecting the anonymity of the posters (SFS 2003:460; NESH, 2009). Kozinets’ (2009) criteria for achieving the highest level of cloaking, where personal information and nicknames in direct quotes are rewritten with masked alternatives in the results, have been fully addressed and applied when framing results.

**FINDINGS**

Below we present descriptions of shared experiences of engaging in early parenthood among men who visited an Internet-based forum for fathers. The most profound element of the forum culture was the provision of support to other fathers. By sharing and commenting on a wide range of parenting-related questions the forum serves as a window into men’s parental experiences. Findings are presented according to three categories: “virtual parental negotiations among men,” “virtual reciprocity in night and day parenting,” and finally “setting the virtual standards for other men”.

**The Invisible Committee—Virtual Parental Negotiations Among Men**

Evidence from data suggests that fathers’ opportunities to network with other fathers through the forum amount to a valuable resource for sharing their parenthood experiences and parental practices. This then allows some of them to confirm with each other (and thereby to themselves) their ability to function as fathers. Sharing values and beliefs about parenthood applauded in society was an ongoing topic in many discussions. The forum made it possible to connect with others who share the same situation and create a network that offers a link to an “outside home” perspective, thereby validating parenting practices and engagements with day-to-day experiences. This touches upon the oft-addressed and more general topic of gen-
dered relations in the public and private spheres (see for instance Collinson & Hearn, 1994), in the sense of the forum being “outside home” where the perspective of men predominates as opposed to the “domestic/private” space where (in the view of these fathers) women’s perspectives predominate.

Certainly, questions concerning equality in the parental relationship connected to entering parenthood were frequently shared and addressed. The communication below between “amazing” and “moto22” illustrates the shared ambitions often posted in the forum:

amazing

Re: Gender Anxiety Anyone?
Personally, I have a little bit of difficulty with the word equality. I do not think 100% equity is something one should strive for in areas such as cooking, changing diapers, contribution to household economy, etc. for the simple reason that I do not think it’s fair. And even if it were, so that both parties have exactly the same conditions, physically, mentally, and at all other levels (I’ve read four years at university and my partner does not even have high school grades, difficult to motivate her to earn as much money) so that an equal distribution would be fair, how is cooking to be compared with taking care of a crying baby during the night, how many times do you go out with the trash to make up for the fact that she did the dishes for two hours after the family came to visit later. ...

moto22

Re: Gender Anxiety Anyone?
can do no more than stand up and applaud “amazing”;) ... you took the words right out of my mouth and formulated them in a very good and eloquent way ... if I had written it myself, it would have been a bit sloppy ... I’ll probably hire you to write out my posts here! ;)

As shown in this conversation, the fathers frequently confirmed one another’s notions and experiences of sharing both the joys and burdens of parenthood in the forum, but seldom specifically connected these to the concept of equality. The overall pattern of shared understandings of the concept of equality among men in the forum was that it was whatever “works for both parents.” As expressed by “amazing,” there was a shared understanding that when distributing the negotiable burden associated with parenthood, consideration had to be given to level of education, work, and the earning potential of the partners. There was also a common understanding that equal distribution of “household work” was difficult to fit into other models than those that included both “public” and “private” spheres in their calculation of equality.

The feeling of being slighted in “parental support” forums (i.e., forums for both genders) and in contacts with Health Care professionals was another shared and underlying notion. It could lead to skeptical, disparaging, and sometimes even misogynistic language between the men posting. A common perspective among the men posting on this issue is that fathers are “visitors” during childbirth and delivery as well as during the initial period of maternity care. Whilst the newborn mothers were absorbed within the clinic system, a frequent shared experience among the fathers was that they travelled between an “empty” home and the ma-
ternity ward where the “action” was. With this discovery a personal awareness of being in “gendered” contexts and society also gradually develops among many of the men. They feel that practice and attitudes in early parenthood are primarily targeted at the women and mothers. The experience for the fathers is one of being downgraded. The various posters can be categorized on a continuum in relation to these feelings of gendered alienation, ranging from actively hostile to highly adaptable. These feelings also have the consequence of some men positioning themselves in quite an intricate process of negotiation regarding the social dimensions of parenthood.

So the overall feeling that “parenthood” is primarily associated with mothers was a frequent and explicit topic in the posts—and possible ways of addressing/dealing with this feeling was also a shared issue. For example, starting a magazine for fathers containing the same ingredients as the magazines that are already available for mothers is regarded as a serious possibility by some of the men in the forum. In this extract, “Geir” and “Robert” touch upon a suggestion made by “Nordic Light” about such a magazine directed towards fathers:

Geir
Re: Nordic Light
A Magazine for fathers. 17% of all parents’ days taken by fathers. There are a plethora of Maternity Magazines with tips and activities and general leisure time reading. Where is FHM/ Car Sport/M3/ Poker Magazine for Fathers? Presenting little cool baby stuff, stuff to find to do with your own kid, answers to all the strange questions that the mothers for some strange reason already know, but as fathers are not obvious to us....

Robert
Re: Nordic Light
Yes, the next step in this forum’s plan for world domination ;) No, but seriously, it’s something that I miss too. Just like everything else, when it comes to children / education / pregnancy and so on, it is directed towards the mothers (generalization, but it may well be considered as fair).

As shown above, fathers share experiences of being exposed to attitudes which provoke feelings among some of them of being patronized, for instance by health professionals (whom they often identify as being women). A central motive expressed above—in a fairly balanced way by Robert—is the loss of group privileges when entering parenthood and comparisons with mothers. A common topic, as addressed above, is a recurrent theme and dream of “a turf of their own” in relation to parenting. The sense that they have “lost something” or are “missing something” to which they feel entitled is a recurrent description of situations where fathers in their day-to-day experience encounter a gendered context where they often feel they are required to accept a “subordinate position.” Sharing within the forum gives the possibility to address these questions of entitlement. Networks of other men therefore become an important resource for sharing the responsibility and duties of infant care. At the same time, the forum can simultaneously be regarded as an “invisible committee”—and an exclusively male one: a virtual arena aimed at potentially influencing the flow of gendered power relations within everyday parental negotiations.
Looking at the Men in the Mirror—Virtual Reciprocity in Night and Day Parenting

Sharing of practical experiences of handling sleep, food, and health-related topics such as infant stomach aches and other common issues was the first and important father-to-father activity in the forum. Common forms of reciprocal sharing included putting forward for common consumption one’s own practical experience and views in the mass of related postings. Advice is communicated in terms of how to manage practical and health-related worries about infants. Despite the negative attitudes that fathers sometimes express towards the parental health care systems, such systems are undoubtedly considered to be a credible resource when it comes to professional expertise on issues such as breastfeeding and other physical problems that proved recurrent topics in the forum. Fathers also share experiences about day-to-day parenting functions where they offer reassurance to one another that everything will go “like clockwork,” as described by “bigfather” and “Spencer” in excerpts below:

bigfather
Re: Sleep and sleep deprivation as a father
We deal with this as many have written above, that the wife takes on the duty of lactation and diaper changing at night. The first two weeks I was also up and changed a diaper now and then.
But as more people write here, what is the point of ruining both partners’ sleep for an issue of principle. Instead, it’s better to for one to give the other support in the daytime, evenings and at weekends!
My wife periodically has been totally wiped out and a bit grumpy—the best solution for this is that she gets a powernap during the daytime or evenings when I can take care of the little guy = she is much happier and I do my little bit to help: o

Spencer
Re: Sleep and sleep deprivation as a father
I am just taking my 10 days of paternity leave now. Felix is 5 days old. We have arranged, as is the case with many other parents, that I do not have the night shift (type 23-07) but take a heavier load during the day, i.e. making the most out of it. It’s also daft if two of us have to be awake when he is breastfeeding and he wakes his mom anyway he can if he needs to have his diaper changed at night.

The thing is that the little guy came 3 weeks early so we had basically nothing ready at home by then. So I had to get around all off IKEA, the Kiddies House, Baby land as well as decorate the baby’s area in our home, and build the diaper-changing table, etc .. in addition to cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, dish-washing ..

As shown in this conversation, reciprocal agreement and reconnection on day-to-day activities is a vital part of the communication in the forum. Breastfeeding is a major topic and concern related to both day and night activities since compensating for being the one “not carrying the food around” is a major demarcation line in
how to handle task negotiation and compensate one’s partner as described by Spencer above. By men’s sharing and comparing reactions and strategies to breastfeeding, both issues of invisibility and entitlement are explored in the forum. On the one hand, discussions focus on issues of (dis-)empowerment and didactic approaches to invisibility as a result of being the one not able to feed the infant with one’s own breasts. At the same time, issues about entitlement in relation to partial or full participation regarding feeding are also explored in the forum. Such “in principle” negotiations regarding breastfeeding are the starting point that generates a set of approaches shared among the posters designed to facilitate their new rhythm of life arising from parenthood:

amazing
Re: Have got a son. Would appreciate some advice
I don’t think you can breastfeeding/feed too much. At least not if you are just breastfeeding/feeding when the baby wants food. All children are unique in terms of how much, how often they eat and how often and how long they sleep. The most important thing I learnt is that as long as the child grows and feels good, do not worry, just listen to what the child wants. If he wants to eat, he will get food; if he does not want to eat more, do not try to persuade him; if he wants to sleep, he will get to do it until he wakes up. It is difficult, especially nowadays when there are thousands of forums where you can compare one’s child’s behavior with other children and think that “all other kids” are sleeping through the night, and “all other kids” eat x ml when they are y-weeks/months old, etc. ... Our infant has had a very different sleep/food routine from “all the other kids” on different forum sites but is a lovely little 8-months toddler now with lots of energy.

As shown in amazing’s answer, breastfeeding is a frequent and important issue addressed by fathers in the forum. Positions in the forum range from those who are actively supportive of it (since it promotes long term health outcomes for the child) to those who are actively hostile (since it prevents the possibility of the father engaging in parenting on the same terms as the mother). Most of the posts are focused on practical issues about handling night and day parenting. Moreover, as amazing writes, “nowadays when there are thousands of forums where you can compare one’s child’s behavior with others,” the virtual reciprocity in mirroring yourself in terms of others sharing the same experience has become a vital resource for men entering parenthood. At the same time, his comments also capture the ambivalence and ambiguity of the men’s attitudes to all these opportunities for comparing their performance as fathers.

Appropriate Parenthood—Setting the Virtual Standards for Other Men

In the guise of offering advice to fathers in the forum, we suggest that implicit visions of child-centred masculinity—which combine conservative and progressive values related to men’s parenting—often become central features, setting the standard for men entering the discussions there. Typically, advice was often given or sought in connection with health-related worries about an infant or worries about how to engage as a father. These issues are illustrated by the responses to Berno’s question in the following conversation:
Berno
Paternity leave? How can one deal with this?
hi, I’m going to have a baby soon, maybe just in a few hours .. : p (due date is April 19) and then I would like to take out the first 10 days of fathers paternity leave (daddy days, authors comments).\(^2\) But on thinking about this again, I think it will be hard for me to take the “daddy days”: I have the greatest share of our income, and the daddy days lower how much we will receive per month very much. So, I would like to take paternity leave but I do not understand how parents (in my position) are able to take paternity leave at the same time. I have been fortunate to have a lot of holiday time over this summer and could maybe consider using my overtime to take time off ...

but I do not dare to take paternity leave .. because then we will end up with a bad financial position.

Reima:
Re: Daddy’s Leave? How can you deal with it?
Sorry if I sound rude, but I think you should have thought about this about a year ago.... And as I said before, money is not a good-enough argument for not being with one’s children.

Robert
Re: Daddy’s Leave? How to deal with it?
Very true words from Reima. Personally, I blame the illusion about our right to self-realization that we Scandinavians live in, to generalize. We believe that we need so much and that we also have an absolute right to it. To put it a little crudely, I would say that we have gone from a self-sacrificial society to a highly egocentric one, creating a hell of a lot of social problems in the process.

But to return to the OP [overall problems] anxiety about money in the context of parental leave. Try to take in what has been written here in the forum. No one here has any idea about what your finances look like, but take advantage of the advice anyway. You can probably be on paternity leave if you cut down on some other expenses, or? :) Keep in mind that you’ll never get this opportunity again..

As shown in this conversation, the “older” posters offered guidance, support and played an “educative” role in relation to the “younger” posters entering the forum. Berno, who is about to enter fathering, encounters the more experienced Robert and Reima. In the conversation there exists a rather intricate confirmation and support of the older posters’ complicit vision of men’s parenthood underscoring their point of view in the answers to a very nervous Berno. The pedagogical tone in comments by older posters is recurrently encountered in the forum. Another example is “Feven” who under the heading “Modern father” seeks opinions from the forum.

\(^2\) The poster refers to national legislation providing that men in this context are entitled to ten days paternity leave around the time of childbirth followed by parental leave.
about his “fatherhood” status since he has had three children with three different mothers during the last years. Feven is met with the same kind of intricately constructed response, expressing supportive opinions concerning men’s parenting shared among the older posters. “Concordia” writes:

Concordia
Re: “modern” father?
Should probably drop this, but I do not get it … what do you mean by taking responsibility? By contributing financially? You’ve already missed 2 births for two of your children and a whole year of the middle child’s life. It is very difficult to be a part of everything in a normal life. And you are going to juggle your working career with having three families? I can’t even begin to imagine how you are going to be to have and handle an everyday life.

As demonstrated here, values which can be construed as both conservative and progressive regarding men’s parenting often become a vital point of departure in advice given within the forum. “Concordia’s” attitude can on the one hand certainly be described as highly progressive and “non-traditional” in terms of gender practices since he applauds active child-oriented parenting for men. At the same time the attitude and approach might also be described as rather gender-traditional and to some extent heteronormative. So, the virtual standards for men entering the forum seem to partly depart from core values and visions concerning masculinity that are upheld, confirmed, and supported among the older posters in their advice to the new posters.

**DISCUSSION**

By addressing the discursive dimensions of gender that are connected to Internet resources and communities, this study gives some insight about how engaging in early parenthood is shared as a practical virtual experience by some men. The overall pattern suggested by this ethnographic fieldwork is that being virtual invisible men entails participation in both a marketplace of opinions and a homo-social competition (cf. Kimmel, 1993). By contrast, discussions encountered in our forum are largely based on the sense that the men have lost something to which they normally, and presently, feel entitled to. Based on our admittedly limited study and its provisional results, we discuss three conclusions that require further exploration.

First, we suggest that the forum can be regarded as an “invisible committee” where the men participating in the forum share presence, conversation, and negotiation. The forum is then used as a tool for reducing the impact on the men of those subversive and gender vertigo experiences which, for example, they often seem to encounter in formal health care systems and which tend to destroy the invisibility of their hitherto privileged positions. Paraphrasing Kimmel (1993, pp. 29-30) we argue that “(they) enjoy the privilege of invisibility” since the “processes that confer privilege to one group and not to another group” are excluded from the forum’s proceedings, and this in fact becomes almost the primary engine for the forum. Even if the posters do challenge one another gender-wise and even if some unexpected gendered relations are highlighted within the forum discussions, the forum it is still an in-group homo-social activity. Moreover, that fact is the major reason why the forum is fundamentally attractive for the participants. As shown
above, the forum made it possible for men to connect with others who share the same situation and to create a network that offers a link to an “outside home” perspective. Results suggest how this then serves as an invisible committee whereby the men can engage in parental negotiations via this virtual arena while remaining in the comfort zone of their own homes, thereby sharing—and shaping—arguments for domestic negotiation within their family and with their partners. It seems to provide a refuge where the men’s invisible assumptions of gender entitlement can be preserved, in contrast to what is happening in their non-virtual worlds.

In relation to this, it is important to note the more general point that the wide range of virtual forums now available to men on the web potentially offer many points of “refuge” where men can seek to maintain for one another the invisibility of their gender entitlements. For example, forums described by Blevins and Holt (2009) focusing on the subculture of “johns” show results similar to ours. The focal points in the “johns’” forum were the interrelated norms of experience, commodification, and sexuality. Blevins and Holt suggest that online relationships define identity and that subcultural boundaries among the participants shape the attitudes and actions—and most importantly—provide justifications for their actions. The code of conduct in the forum—as well as the very exclusion of women from it—is commensurate with the fact that some men’s power over other men in the forum shapes the underlying logic of its operation. So, too, does another central characteristic: the fathering forum seems to provide resources to the men whereby they can maintain their “invisibility” (in Kimmel’s terms) with one another at a time when their experience of parenthood is destroying that invisibility in the world outside the forum.

Second, we suggest that the virtual reciprocity in mirroring oneself among others sharing the same experiences has become a vital resource for some men entering parenthood. As demonstrated in the second section above, this resource allows fathers to both monitor and reflect upon themselves, not only descriptively but also judgmentally. Opportunities for comparing their performance as parents with “peers”—who are reflecting actively about the fathering role—seem to promote not only potentially gender “progressive” approaches to men’s parenting but also some potentially traditional, narrow, and essentialist ideas about parenthood as a dichotomous social organization. In this context we might suggest that men in our forum move across a spectrum of positions ranging from rather gender traditional to more gender progressive and “non-traditional” in terms of gender practices. At the same time—and rather like the “patriarchs” and “pioneers” in Barker’s study of lone fathers (1994)—we often encountered a complex interplay of gender traditional and gender progressive attitudes among individual men. Attitudes on some issues might be “traditional” in origin but result in some rather “progressive” outcomes, and vice versa. Perpetuating the collective assumptions and ideals about men’s parenting in such networks can also be interpreted as a way of disciplining oneself by means of the constant introspection and self-examination that sharing with “equals” induces. This has an important impact since the shared postings, in relation to for example heteronormativity and the tendency towards misogyny (i.e., ironic remarks like, “the only unmodern family today seems to be the heterosexual nuclear family” and references to female health personnel as “child health dragons”), probably also reflect the creation of a comfort zone for the posters. Within this comfort zone they seem to uphold their identity by defining themselves in terms of what they are not rather than in terms of what they are.
Third, we suggest that a child-oriented, serial-monogamous, heterosexual orientation is to be found in the visions of masculinity that dominate other forms of masculinity in the forum. Lively discussions are based on “friendly and educative” as well as intricate homo-social processes among more “experienced” posters who back up one another in encounters with less experienced posters entering the forum. Discussions thus tend to include what we might term “vertical” dimensions where internal and hierarchical gender logics among the posters are negotiated within the forum setting (Flood, 2002). Moreover, we also see present in the forum the continuum of perceptions of gender equality identified by Egerberg-Holmgren and Hearn (2006). This is especially clear in relation to those horizontal and vertical homo-social dimensions that we have argued are present within forum negotiations around complicit and “in principle” masculinity structures (Jalmert, 1983).

As shown in the third section, we interpreted the men’s experience of individual and group privileges being challenged when entering parenthood as a central motive for their forum activity. There appears to be a silent underlying agreement and promise about respecting each other’s comfort zones and about keeping subversive and gender vertigo experiences—which otherwise undermine invisibility—to a minimum within forum boundaries. As Connell (1995) emphasized, the subversive shared experience of gender vertigo is a central process in transforming the lives of men. In the present case study, this experience, prompted by entering parenthood, includes not only encounters with a clearly embodied gendered context but also the reconstruction and negotiation of gender identity that follows such a transition.

In conclusion, we argue that the gendered meanings of everyday life for men in this study may have great relevance to an understanding of their perspectives and levels of engagement as parents. Of course, this conclusion requires further research and exploration. Nevertheless, we believe our study has demonstrated both the empirical and methodological promise that (n)ethnographic forms of research offer to the critical study of men’s practices.

REFERENCES


