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My dad lives in the 21st Century How can fathers improve their paternity

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Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze how the concept 'fatherhood' is defined after socio-economic and cultural changes occurred over the past decades. Although there is little numerical research on this item and there is not a set of rules to define it, it is relevant to study what has been said about this term in these past years and how we can approach it, in order to set a better family development for children.

Therefore, I will try to design what this work should take into account, by analyzing three blocks: economic and social changes that are shaping fatherhood and motherhood; consequences for children's education; and tips that can help to achieve a better development for them once these changes are assumed.

Above all, after the massive women's incorporation into the labor force, the first reference point to study fatherhood is to analyze how mothers are changing their contribution to society. In that sense, it is also important to mention that not only the father's behavior is changing but also the mother's. Therefore, we need to analyze both roles and what 'co-parenting' really implies, now that the breadwinner model is not the norm any more.

Secondly, we should study the consequences for children that arise from these changes. Children's well-being is crucial for the future and that has a lot to do with the way parents face their task. As a recent study by the British Children's Society has shown, the family stability is the main predictor for that well-being¹. Then, it would be interesting to analyze why each family adapts differently to these changes and how some parents seem to be more ready to fulfill their role in the new situation, while others find in it the reason to delay or even to abdicate from paternity. In fact, a closer look shows that it brings the opportunity to understand different family situations and to analyze advantages and disadvantages of each one in order to perform our task as parents in a more consistent way, and particularly what is the role of the father to achieve it.

Finally, we could ask what the role of policy makers and practitioners is. As some good practices show, social policies are effective as far as they 'connect' with people needs. That is why it is so interesting to study good practices from that perspective.

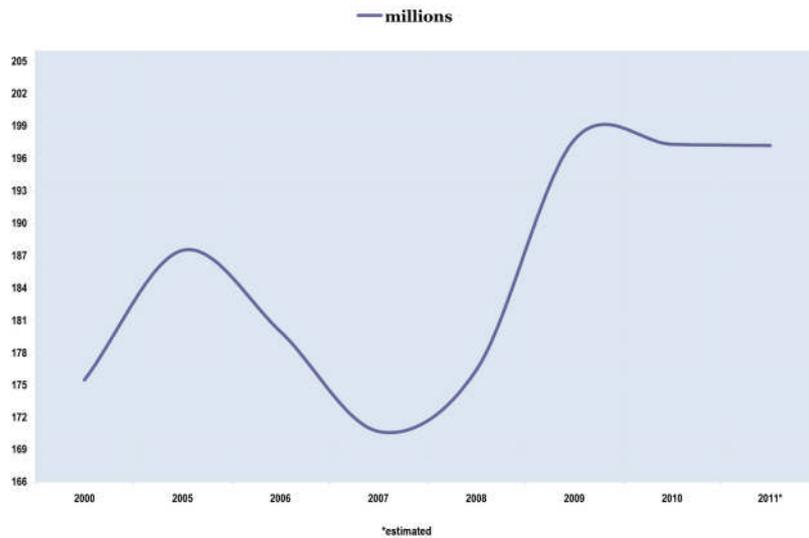
Economic and social changes

From 2008 until now, the world has experienced the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, occurred in 1930s. Of all different economic and social changes during the past decades, I would like to mention unemployment, causes of population ageing and women participation in the labor force.

Since 2000 there is a stubborn unemployment rate all around the world and a lot of different families are being affected by this issue. Most of them are trying to survive with little savings or even without a job. But still, the labor market is not offering enough opportunities for these families. Men normally suffer more from these economic crises than women do. Men-tailored sectors such as automobile, finance, construction are more affected by economic downturns than those of women-tailored sectors.

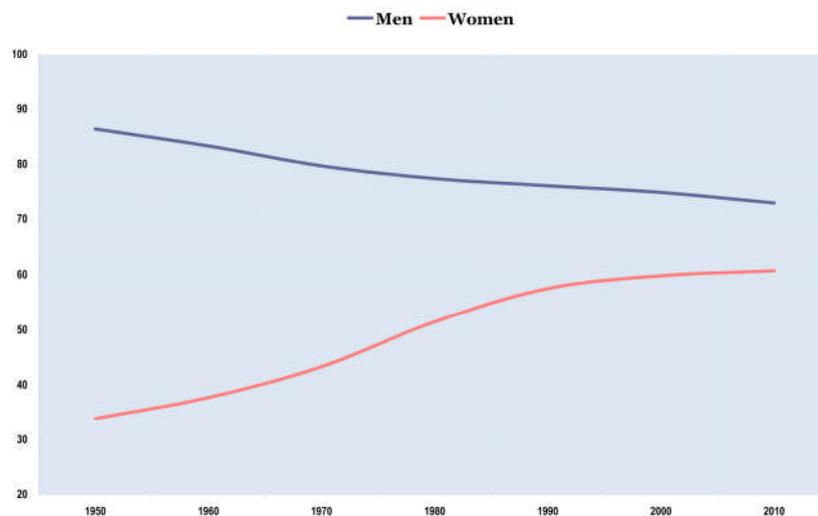
¹ Gwyther Rees et al., 'Developing an index of children's subjective well-being in England' (Children's Society, 2010). Available at http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Developing%20an%20Index%20of%20Children%27s%20Subjective%20Well-being%20in%20England_0.pdf

World Unemployment 2000-2011 ²



Also, global unemployment rose sharply from 170 million of persons in 2007 to more than 205 million in 2009 ³. As a consequence, most of the families and individuals directly affected are falling into extreme poverty. It has been estimated that 1.2 billion were living with their families below the US\$ 2 a day poverty line in 2009 ⁴.

Percentage of Labor Force Participation in United States 1950-2010 ⁵



There has also been a persistent and massive women's inclusion into the world labor market. During the past few years, the number of women in the world labor force has increased significantly, and a lot of them are married women. Therefore, the family in which the mother stayed at home for the care of the children and to perform domestic tasks is no longer the kind of family we are used to see or to talk about. Now, most mothers also have their professional job and those responsibilities should be shared among all the members of the family. This situation produces a very good advantage that brings us new and enriching values.

Thirdly, there is a very important new social phenomenon –fertility and life expectancy at birth rates. Fertility rate has decreased since 1950-1955 to 2005-2010 from 4.9 children per woman to 2.6 and is expected to decrease to 2.0

² United Nations, Demographic and Social Statistics Collection (2012). Available at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indum/default.htm>

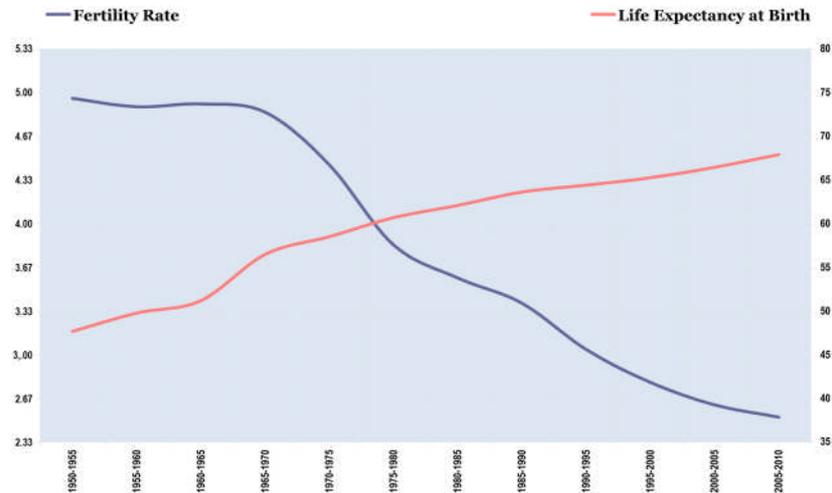
³ International Labor Organization, Global Employment Trends (2012). Available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_171571.pdf

⁴ International Labor Organization, Global Employment Trends...

⁵ Howard N Fullerton, Jr., 'Labor force participation: 75 years of change, 1950-98 and 1998-2025' (Monthly Labor Review, December 1999).

for the year period 2045-2050. For developed countries, this number is 1.6, far below the replacement level (2.1). On the other side, life expectancy at birth is increasing. In 1955, it was 46.6 years and nowadays this digit has increased up to 67.7 or even more in some developed countries and is expected to increase to 75.5 or even more for the period of time 2045-2050. One important consequence of this phenomenon is the population ageing in societies. In 1950, the percentage of population with 60 years or over was 8%, while now this percentage has increased to 11% and is expected to reach 22% by 2050.

Causes of population ageing 1950-2010 ⁶



The potential support ratio (number of 15 to 64 years old persons for each older person over 65) has decreased from 12 in 1950 to 9 in 2009 and is expected to decrease to 4 ⁷. Moreover, there is also an increase in the old-age dependency ratio (percentage of older people that will depend economically on younger people). By 2050, this percentage can reach 50% in Europe. All these socio-economic changes have shaped both terms: fatherhood and motherhood. The first thing to take into account is the possible economic effects: decrease in savings, investment, consumption (GDP) and labor market pensions, increase in healthcare services demand, differences increase in taxation and housing demand, etc. Moreover, we need to delve into family issues. Children's well-being and interests are at first stake and fathers react to these socio-economic changes in different ways. Some of them stay at home in their country trying to sustain their families, while others leave their homes because they feel they can't support their families anymore, maybe leading into a divorce or sometimes just because they go to another country in order to get a better job and be able to support financially their families. Therefore, two situations regarding fathers and affecting children directly can be distinguished ⁸: 'Father presence' and 'Father absence.'

'Father presence' is made up by fathers who stay at home and care about their children when these socio-cultural transformations occurred inside their country. These fathers who live with their children are normally more intensely involved in their lives, spend more time with them and get into different activities with them. In United States, the National Survey of Family Growth ⁹ showed 40 years ago that 11% of children lived apart from their parents. In 2010, this figure was 27%. The new Pew Research Center analysis shows that one in four fathers with children 18 or younger live apart from them ¹⁰. Then, 'father-absence' appears and they are less involved in the activities related to their children.

It is important to try to distinguish these 'father-absence' models so we can understand better the way fatherhood is faced (or escaped) in our century. What are those models? How are children affected by each one of them? Can we help fathers to solve their problems? In my opinion, we should distinguish these different types of 'father absence':

- 'Original': characterized by no father present from the beginning for different reasons. Its effects on children depend on how they perceive the father's responsibility (from none in case of decease to full in case of neglect) ¹¹.

⁶ United Nations, Demographic and Social Statistics...

⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - Population Division, World Population Ageing (December 2009). Available at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WPA2009/WPA2009_WorkingPaper.pdf

⁸ Natasha J. Cabrera et al., 'Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century' (Child Development - Volume 71, January/February 2000).

⁹ The NSFG (just for childbearing age women) was created in 1973 and it has been conducted regularly since then in United States, including also men into their analysis from 2002 onwards.

¹⁰ Gretchen Livingston et al., 'A tale of Two Fathers - More Are Active, but More Are Absent' (Pew Research Center, June 2011). Available at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/06/fathers-FINAL-report.pdf>

¹¹ The findings of the study by Elizabeth Marquardt et al., 'My Daddy's Name is Donor' (Institute for American Values, 2010) are very interesting to understand this, as they show the feelings of children born through anonymous sperm donation when they grow older.

- ‘Supervened’: characterized by a father that ‘disappears’ from a given time. In this case, the effects for children will be worse, depending also in their age when it happens.
- ‘Work-related’: sometimes fathers can ‘escape’ from their task and find in their job a ‘refuge’ and a ‘pretext’ for not being accountable, even if they are physically present (or maybe absent because of emigration), leaving to mothers 100% of child care responsibility, sometimes jointly with grandparents.
- ‘Prejudiced’: characterized by as father who is scared because of the difficulties to rear a family nowadays, leading to the recent phenomenons of abdication and resignation. They just give up before even trying, which is probably the most harmful model of ‘father-absence’, because it is not evident at all and children may get the impression that they ‘had a father’ while his presence was only apparent.

We also need to understand motherhood modifications to explain fatherhood modifications. In that sense, it is said that motherhood has been more affected by socio-economic transformations than fatherhood. Then, changes in fatherhood are first explained by changes in motherhood. The World Movement of Mothers, a non-profit, non-political and secular organization started in 1947 in France after the devastation of the World War II and before than any fatherhood movement, carried out a very interesting online survey to 11.000 mothers. The results show that women experience profound changes when they became mothers. They also want to participate in the labor market and 63% of them prefer to share time between job and children, but few of them are able to do it. As children grow up, they then prefer to spend less time with their children and enter (or re-enter) the labor market. One impressive result was that the majority wanted the work at home to be considered as one of the variables in order to calculate pensions ¹².

Consequences for children

As we can see, last decades transformations have had a very deep impact in the way we understand fatherhood (and motherhood). Women’s incorporation into the labor market and cultural transformations are clear calls for fathers to realize that they must fulfill their paternity role. Unfortunately, societies are not taking advantage of this issue because the labor market is not offering enough flexibility for both: mothers and fathers. Women are entering the labor force and participating in it as it was never thought of before, but they are not easily allowed to devote the time their children need, and same happens with the fathers, so that taking advantage of the opportunity for them to take care of their children while the mother is at work becomes really difficult.

Although parents are the ones who are directly affected it is important to understand that children’s development is at stake, and that parents constitute the right context for children to grow up, because the well-being of each individual person requires individual attention. A mother and a father must not establish equal rules for all members of the family but instead they should try to find the right way for each one of their children. There is not such thing as a ‘unique way’ to be applied as a general rule in education. This starting point should take into account the best development-interest for children in order to bring them along a path in which they themselves do not miss the current and future benefits for any other individual inside the society.

I have tried to show that fatherhood and motherhood are both very relevant for children’s development in all situations. Socio-economic and cultural transformations have produced without doubt negative and positive effects on children’s development. Different other studies such as ‘My daddy’s name is donor’ ¹³, ‘Divorce and well-being of older Australians’ ¹⁴, ‘The effects of Marital Instability on Children’s Well-being and Intergenerational Relations’ ¹⁵ have shown that ‘Father absence’ does affect children. When delinquency, school failure and addictions start to appear, this can be the answer of why it is happening.

As a consequence, motherhood and fatherhood are concepts that should not be altered by themselves in shape and definition. These terms must be adapted (rather than changed) to socio-economic and cultural changes looking always for the ultimate goal: the well-being and development of children. Parents need to reflect and learn for themselves the responsibility regarding with the task of educating their children. Moreover, they need to devote much of their mutual dialogue on designing and putting into practice the best way to educate each one of their children. For this, they need to reconcile work and family. And added to this reconciliation, public policies and private actions can help us to better define what parents and children really need. Some good practices and presentations on family issues in our next Expert Group Meeting that will take place in Brussels will help to it for sure.

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¹²‘Survey of Mothers in Europe’ (World Movement of Mothers - Europe, 2011). Available at <http://www.mmmeurope.org/en/results-survey-mothers-europe>.

¹³ Elizabeth Marquardt et al., ‘My Daddy’s Name is Donor’ ... Available at http://www.family scholars.org/assets/Donor_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴ Matthew Gray et al., ‘Divorce and the well-being of older Australians’ (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2010). Available at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/rp46/rp46.pdf>

¹⁵ Anna Garriga and Juho Härkönen, ‘The Effects of Marital Instability on Children’s Well-being and Intergenerational Relations’ (Equalso, 2009). Available at http://www.equalso.org/uploaded_files/regular/Garriga-Harkonen-marital-instability.pdf