8 Being a Father

I think fathers should be very involved with the children, and I think the time for them to be involved is right from the word go. I think, if they’re going to get on well with their children when they are older, they’ve got to start right from the beginning and develop the relationship at the same time as the mother develops a relationship. Maureen Rankin (I)

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this chapter is the problematical nature of fatherhood. It was evident from my interviews that whereas many fundamental aspects of ‘being a mother’ were taken-for-granted, this did not apply in the same way to ‘being a father’. No matter how dissatisfied the wives might feel about the adequacy of their parental behaviour, they had, nevertheless, negotiated with their husbands a subjectively satisfactory base of early motherhood. At this stage this comprised, in essence, an involvement on a general level which was ‘proved’ by being constantly available and responsible for the children, and thus in a continual learning situation. The parents in my group defined this basic situation of being at home with small children as extremely demanding but vital in the context of present day British society.

Fatherhood was not perceived as having this fundamental and unchallengeable base. In order to sustain their underlying beliefs about parenthood, these couples did not consider it adequate for the husband simply to earn the money and act as a male presence in the household. Being a father was perceived as entailing also a direct involvement and active interest in the children. Therefore the problematical nature of being a father lay in negotiating with the mother a mutually satisfactory degree of direct involvement in home and family life, during the non-job time perceived as available. Although, within the group there was variation in the kinds and range of ‘appropriate’ behaviour being negotiated, respon-
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dents held very similar everyday images of fatherhood. More importantly, they had similar myths and coping mechanisms which enabled them to sustain belief in the reality of the paternal behaviour which they were creating.

Spouses negotiated with each other mutually satisfactory arrangements which enabled them to maintain belief in the direct involvement of the father. In terms of actual behaviour this involvement varied both between couples, and within each family over time. The crucial factor in the process of belief maintenance was the ability to draw on various spheres of behaviour at different levels, all of which provided ‘proof’ of involvement. These will be discussed in this chapter. Importantly, it was not, however, perceived as necessary for the father to participate fully and constantly in all of these spheres. Rather, it was a matter of his participating sufficiently regularly in those particular spheres which spouses had identified as relevant to their own family situation. (Or, alternatively, being able to rationalise his temporary non-participation, in which case beliefs could be suspended!) In other words, for father involvement to be subjectively satisfactory it did not tend to be measured against some abstract set of behavioural ideals. It was negotiated and evaluated in terms of the paternal behaviour perceived as appropriate by the spouses within their own special situation at any one point in time.

II PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIVISION OF LABOUR

A brief description of respondents’ general perceptions of the overall division of labour provides background to the following discussion of the different levels of father involvement. Basically their accounts provided a picture of the division of labour as a flexible and dynamic entity. During the course of the multi-interview study each couple described many changes in their everyday administration of home and family. They saw these changes as being related principally to (a) alterations in the extra-familial commitments of group members and (b) to differing perceptions of children’s needs.

(a) The majority of respondents (including both husbands and wives) reported, for example, changes in their paid employment commitments, or routines, throughout the months spanned by the interviews. All of these had necessitated re-arrangements in