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Adapted fathering for new times: refugee men's narratives on caring for home and children

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Middle Eastern men's narratives on how they adapt their fathering to new circumstances during resettlement in Sweden. It is based on individual interviews and diary notes collected over three years. Swedish policies encourage mothers as well as fathers to participate in paid labour and to be involved in household and child-care duties. Migrants who have been granted residency as refugees are entitled to extensive social welfare benefits, but they are also required to participate in language studies, accept trainee positions, and actively search for employment. The results of the present study suggest that the refugee fathers come to share daily chores and childcare with their spouse more equally than prior in their home countries. This new fatherhood is referred to in several ways: as a necessity to make family life work; as positive for the father-child relationship; and, as very time- and energy- consuming. *Emerging masculinities* and *caring masculinities* evolve in the analyses, and the results show *comprehensive fathering*, that is, fatherhood characterized by care, intimacy and love that are the result of hard, straining (reproductive) work that takes place with limited financial and/or cultural resources.

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Introduction

Parenting involves constant adaptation and adjustment. The child develops and grows older (as does the parent) which requires reinvented parental strategies. Moreover, external factors often change over time, for instance the parents' occupations, financial resources, and the social network (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). However, some changes are generally more life-altering than others, such as international migration. Parenting practices are influenced by the societal context in which they are enacted, and migrant and ethnic minority parents often face additional burdens and challenges compared to the majority due to low socioeconomic status and insufficient skills in the majority language (García Coll & Pachter, 2002).

All aspects of life, such as social policies, cultural context, occupation, financial resources, social networks, family structure, et cetera, influence parenting (Smith, 1987); this goes for

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mothers and well as fathers. *Fathering*, like mothering, ‘entails the [father’s] practices in relation to the child and/or what [he] does to provide, foster, and care for the child’ (Bergnehr, 2016a, p. 29). It involves ‘doing family’ and ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 2011), which can include domestic duties, childcare and providing for the family with paid labour.

Social studies on (Western world men) have explored notions of good fatherhood. The good father provides for the family, but also ‘steps into domesticity’ (Wahlström Henriksson, 2019, p. 321). This ideal does not always mirror practice, since generally, fathers are more absent parents than mothers, and their involvement in childcare is not always equivalent to them being involved in household work and daily chores (Wahlström Henriksson, 2019). But men and fathers are indeed capable of care, for home and children, and it is important to explore *caring masculinities*, that is, how men by their caregiving, nurturing and domestic work contribute to everyday family life¹ (Hanlon, 2012).

The roles of men in societies are changing, and caring masculinity is increasingly realized in the everyday lives of men (e.g., by taking over caregiving tasks in families, by working in ‘feminine’ professions of care or through increased self-care consisting of awareness of health or emotional issues, deeper friendships, less risk taking, etc.). (Scambor et al., 2014, p. 555)

Studies that focus on labour migrant men’s fathering show that the new societal context and situation prompt fathers to reinterpret their caring practices and domestic responsibilities, and to take on more household chores and childcare (Kilkey et al., 2013). This is also found in contexts and/or families with traditional ideals of parental gender roles (Pustułka et al., 2015; Santero & Naldini, 2017). Much previous research on migrant fathers focuses on labour migrants, and/or ‘distant fatherhood’, that is, what some would term ‘transnational parenthood’, when labour migrants leave their children behind to work in another country. Although such studies are interesting, the circumstances of being a parent are very different from being a forced migrant who resides with his or her children and strives to resettle in the new country.

As stated in the introduction of this paper, fathering, as well as mothering, involves constant change and adaptation throughout the life course (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015), and caring masculinities evolve due to new societal ideals and policies (Scambor et al., 2014). Inhorn has in her studies on Arab men suggested the term *emergent masculinities* ‘to embrace historical [and social] change and new patterns of masculine practice’ individually and across generations (Inhorn & Isidoros, 2018, p. 322). In times when Arab and Muslim men are increasingly defamed and stereotyped in the Westerns public discourse, Inhorn with colleagues propose that we as scholars have a special ‘responsibility to engage with these dominant discourses and to deconstruct them’, for instance, by studying Arab men’s nurturing and caring practices and how these emerge (Inhorn & Isidoros, 2018, p. 326; see also Inhorn & Naguib, 2018). This study contributes to such analyses by utilizing the complementary and overlapping concepts caring and emerging masculinities.

The study

The present study explores Middle Eastern, refugee men’s narratives on how they adapt their fathering to new circumstances during resettlement in Sweden over three years. It analyses how their ways of being a father (and man) change, that is, how their masculinities emerge and alter (*emerging masculinities*), and how they talk about caring for

home and children (*caring masculinities*). The study illuminates men and fathers as carers, and care as practices that are situated and prone to change. The study contributes to previous research on migrant fatherhood with its *longitudinal design*, and its focus on *refugee fathers who are present in the home*, that is, they practice their fatherhood in close proximity to their children together with their spouse. Moreover, it adds knowledge of *resettlement*, and how *Middle Eastern* fathers residing in *Sweden* respond to the gender and parenting practices that they encounter in the new society.

The Swedish context

Sweden is a Nordic country with a population of 10 million of which 19% were born abroad (Statistics Sweden, 2019). Since the 1970s, the country has been generously granting residency to refugees (Sainsbury, 2012), and the most common nations of origin for families with minor children are Syria, Iraq, Somalia and former Yugoslavia (Statistics Sweden, 2017). The differences in living conditions between migrant and native families are stark (Forte, 2017). Among refugees, unemployment rates are high, as is long-term dependence on the social assistance (Bergnehr, 2016b). Migrant children have increased risks of growing up in poor households, of school failure and health issues (Forte, 2017; Statistics Sweden, 2017). Such unexpected migration outcomes appear to cause psychological stress, and to affect not only the children but also the parents' wellbeing in negative ways (Bergnehr, 2018).

Sweden has for many decades promoted mothers' participation in the paid employment, and fathers' involvement in domestic chores and childcare. Families with minor children receive universal, financial support such as free maternal health care, paid parental leave for more than a year, free healthcare and dental care for the children, a monthly child allowance, free school meals, and subsidized public childcare. Most young children aged 1–5 years attend childcare outside of the home, and mothers are part of the paid labour force almost to the same extent as fathers. Mothers do spend more time on household chores and childcare compared to fathers by taking more parental leave and part-time work, but the differences are small compared to many other Western world nations (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014).

Despite the universal support provided to families, being a parent in Sweden is hard work. It is a child-centred parenthood that takes and requires time, energy and financial resources (Bergnehr, 2008; Forsberg, 2009). For mothers and fathers who have been granted residency due to refugee status, and who experience low socioeconomic status, parenting is particularly challenging (Bergnehr, 2016a). Entitlement to social assistance, or to the settlement benefit which refugees gain for the first two years after having been granted residency, requires attendance at the course Swedish Tuition for Immigrants or any trainee position offered by the Swedish public employment service. This applies to mothers and fathers alike, and thus both parents are occupied in studies and/or training on an everyday basis (if not on parental leave).

Method

The data of this study were obtained from a longitudinal, three-year qualitative research project on refugee, Middle Eastern (Syrian, Iraqi, Palestine) families' resettlement in

Sweden. The families resided in disadvantaged suburban areas. For the present study, data from ten married fathers have been analysed, but four of the fathers are in focus in the results section in order to give space to the analysis of how autobiographies develop and evolve over time (Bruner, 2004). The four fathers represent the diversity of the total sample of ten fathers in terms of class (education and income), religious affiliation (Muslim or Christian), and time in Sweden. *Samuel*, in his mid-50s and an affluent businessman in his home country, had just obtained a residence permit and waited to start Swedish Tuition for Immigrants when first interviewed. *Paul*, a manual worker, was in his mid-40s, and had six years of education. He had been residing in the country for almost two years, and was attending Swedish Tuition for Immigrants. *Jacob* was soon to be 50 years old, and had worked in consulting with an upper secondary school degree. At the first interview, he had resided in Sweden for three years. He had passed the Swedish Tuition for Immigrants courses and was taking upper secondary school language classes in Swedish and was also in training to become a health care nursing assistant. *Jay* was in his early 40s, and was granted residency two years prior to the first interview. He had a higher education degree in engineering, good skills in English, and was employed as an engineer. All men and their families, besides Jay, were at the beginning of the project dependent on the social assistance or settlement benefit. Their wives had been stay-at-home mothers in their home countries but were now assigned to language studies and/or trainee positions, and had contacts with the employment service.

The fathers were recruited from the children's school, after verbal and written information in Arabic was provided to them. Participation was voluntary and the participants were informed of their right to opt out at any time without any specific reason. All names in this paper are pseudonyms, and information that risks identifying the participants has been removed or altered. The Regional Ethics Committee has approved the project (dnr 2016/4–31).

The data consist of consecutive interviews over three years (2016–2018), and diary notes (1–2 weeks) from the first two years of the project. The interview questions, and the questions that directed the diary notes, were focused on everyday activities, family life, and relationships. The instructions for the diary were: 'What have you been up to today?' 'Who did you meet, and what did you do?' 'Was there anything that happened today that was particularly fun, exciting or joyful, and if so: what and why?' 'Was there anything that happened today that was particularly boring, hard or difficult, and if so: what and why?' And, 'Any further comments on your day?' The diary notes were written in the mother tongue of the participants and then translated into Swedish. The interviews were guided by the following questions: 'Please tell us about your everyday life and what you usually do'. 'Whom do you socialize with and whom do you meet during the week?' 'How do you find work/language studies?' 'Is there anything in life you wished would change?' 'Is there anything in life that worries you?' 'What gives you the most happiness in life?' 'What troubles you the most?' And, 'What do you wish for in the future?' Probe questions were asked, and could include questions about fathering.²

The interpreter was of Syrian descent and spoke several languages that are used in the Middle East. She attended all interviews and became an active participant who sometimes asked the informant to elaborate or clarify his answer. She could relate to the fathers, having been a refugee herself, and the fathers appeared to relate to her. The interview

narratives were mediated by these specific interactional circumstances. The interpreter, and her background, contributed to the trusting, relaxed climate that characterized the interviews. The fathers explicitly stated that they appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences. Unavoidably in research, the power to interpret, analyse and lay out the argument is in the hands of the researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). However, I have tried to be true to the fathers' narratives by rich descriptions in the results section that also provide analytical transparency to the reader.

Analytical departure and procedure

Narrative analysis informed this work. The study of narratives is the study of human psychology. From peoples' talk, we can discern how they interpret and understand, reinterpret and retell their sense of the world and who they are (Bruner, 2004). Identities are fashioned through narration (Riessman, 1993). But the study of narrative is also the study of the specific social and cultural context in which the narrating occurs. Cultural and linguistic structures form the narratives and our sense of self (Bruner, 2004), and as such, stories about private matters are interlaced with stories about social and societal matters (Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis also 'gives prominence to human agency and imagination' (Riessman, 1993, p. 5). A story is never set; the individual reinterprets his or her experiences in the light of new experiences and the changing circumstances that he or she faces. There is a continuous 'development of autobiography' (Bruner, 2004, p. 695). The analysis of narrative thus has the potential to explore agency, development and change. In studying the narratives of refugees, it becomes particularly interesting to investigate how they refer to change and alteration.

The analysis of the present study started with reading the interview transcripts and diary notes, and detecting talk about domestic and caring practices. The data were imbued with such accounts, as parenting is not separate from but intertwined with other aspects of life (Smith, 1987). The analytical questions were: How do the men's reproductive work evolve in accounts of everyday life? What fathering practices surface? How are these emotionally charged? How can the fathers' accounts be understood in relation to the specific cultural and societal context and the circumstances that they face? And, how do the fathers refer to change and adaptation? Patterns in how the narratives were composed, and what they contained, were discerned. Individual agency was revealed by looking at differences and similarities in what the fathers brought up and how they outlined their narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The longitudinal data set enabled analyses of how the fathers' narrating changed or persisted over time.

Results: caring for home and children

The results section builds upon the narratives of four fathers. It shows how their fathering practices *emerge* in relation to the new societal context and the new circumstances that they face, and how their *care* for home and children evolves as part of the everyday (family) life.

Samuel

Samuel was in his mid-50s. He had been an affluent businessman in the Middle East. When first interviewed, he and his family had just obtained their residence permit. The children were attending school; Samuel and his wife were unemployed and waiting to start Swedish Tuition for Immigrants. In his county of origin, his wife had been a stay-at-home mother, and Samuel was mostly occupied with his business rather than domestic work and childcare. In Sweden, he had started to contribute in new ways, according to his narrative. He picked up the children from school, he shopped for groceries, and did errands. When describing his everyday life in the first interview, Samuel said:

- Samuel: I'm the one who runs around and does the chores [laughter]. For example, if Clara [daughter] needs glasses, I run there. If Toby [son] has forgotten his bike somewhere, then I run there. She [the wife] is like the police [laughter]; she phones me and says 'Get that', 'Do that', and I run here and there. (...) In my home country, that was not the case.
- Interviewer: No?
- Samuel: I was the one who phoned in my home country. If I needed meat, then I phoned, if I wanted rice, then I phoned, and they [the shops] delivered it at home.
- Interviewer: Ok.
- Samuel: Now I run around a hundred places. Here, everything is different. And we don't have a car here so I use the bike. In my home country, I had three cars.

Samuel provided diary notes for two consecutive weeks, a couple of months before the first interview, and then again before the second interview. According to the notes, Samuel was much involved with domestic chores but also with relational caregiving. For instance, he wrote: 'I was spending time with my children to make them happy'; 'I went out to the playground with my youngest daughter, then we went inside and had some food'; 'I was at home all day with my oldest son who wasn't feeling very well'. On the question: 'Was there anything that happened today that was particularly fun, exciting or joyful, and if so: what and why?', Samuel wrote one day: 'I took the children to the playground close to where we live. I get happy when I see the children happy'. This account – that his happiness comes from seeing his children being happy – appears also in the interviews, and in the other fathers' accounts, as well as in other studies on refugee parents (Bergnehr, 2017, 2018). Through Samuel's narrative, he comes across as being a father who spends much time caring for home and children, and who is intimately involved in practical daily chores as well as emotional, relational caregiving, which are intertwined: parents' domestic chores can be conceptualized as care for the children (Bergnehr, 2017). Although he does not appear to have been uninvolved as a father in his home country, he portrays fathering there as having been mainly about providing for the family. During resettlement in Sweden, his fathering strategies and everyday life have changed dramatically.

At the second interview, approximately 1.5 years after the first, Samuel was occupied with language studies during the days, and the family had bought a car, but he was still unemployed (and so was his wife). A sense of despondence saturated his narrative. The interviewer asked him at the beginning of the interview how he felt about life in Sweden, and he answered:

- Samuel: What's important to me now is that my children are well, that the family is satisfied. In my country, I had a job, I had things going on [with work] all the time, but that is not the case here which I have to accept.
- Interviewer: How does that make you feel?
- Samuel: (...) I'm used to working and being independent, so that [being unemployed and dependent on the settlement benefit] is what makes me feel bad. Now we [him and his wife] follow in the tracks of our children.

In the interview, Samuel came back several times to accounts that pointed to what I here call *reversed fathering*: before, as a parent, he was the one leading the way for his children. As migrants in the new country, his children had become the ones 'in the know' regarding the Swedish language and culture, and he and his wife now followed 'in the tracks of the children'. Such accounts appear, and are accentuated, in the third interview, where Samuel referred to himself as coming last in line after his children and also his wife. He was still unemployed and he struggled with Swedish. Samuel talked about his children having adapted fine, with friends and sufficient skills in Swedish. When asked about how he found life he referred to his children's contentment and happiness, 'When the children are happy, I am happy'. When pushed to answer what he wished for, for himself, he said: 'A job'. When following Samuel's narration for three years, we discern an increased sense of despondence and frustration. Samuel's strategy to stifle or remedy the frustration of his own situation appears to be to emphasize his children's wellbeing and adjustment. He has come to reinterpret and rephrase the future aspirations of his own life, self, and fathering.

The new situation had caused many challenges and unwanted migration outcomes for Samuel, but he talked about his new fathering practices also as something positive that had boosted his relationship with the children. In the second interview, the interviewer asked: 'So how do you find being a father in Sweden? Is it different from being a father in [the country of origin]?'

- Samuel: I am more of a father here.
- Interviewer: How come?
- Samuel: I think you are more of a father here. You see the children more, you spend more time together, and I have more time for my children. In my country, I worked all the time so we didn't see each other that much. When I got home [from work], my youngest daughter was asleep. Here, we [him and his wife] go to school and they [his children] go to school at the same time and we get home at the same time.

Samuel's diary notes and interview narratives portray family life as being much about spending time together: they talk at dinner, they socialize with other families, he takes the children to the pool or the playground or to restaurants, and sometimes the children join him when he goes to the shops for groceries and errands. Samuel's narrative is much in accordance with the other fathers in the data, including those who over the years gained employment and thus re-obtained their status as a family provider. More time and energy is spent on domestic and caring practices, which also affects the father's relationship with his children.

Paul

Paul was in his mid-40s. He had six years of education, and had provided for his family through manual, low-paid jobs. At the time of the first interview, he had been attending the basic level course at Swedish Tuition for Immigrants for approximately a year, and found the studies hard. Paul wrote diary notes for two weeks before the first and second interviews. Similar to other fathers in the data, he came across as involved with the daily chores on a regular basis, and as spending much time with the family and other relatives. He noted that he shopped for groceries, tidied up at home, washed clothes, and took care of the children. The diary notes accord with how he referred to his everyday life in the interviews. In the first interview, he provided an elaborate answer to the question ‘How does an ordinary day look for you?’

Paul: I get out of bed in the morning, and then wake the children. Because my wife, she leaves home earlier than me [to go to school], so I wake the children around 7.30. If they want breakfast, I have breakfast with them, but most of the time they don’t want breakfast and don’t have any. Then I send Patrick [the youngest child] off to school at eight. The others know their times for school. After that, I go to a relative of mine who has a shop in town. I sit there while he is working, to learn some of the Swedish language before my language class starts. I start school at 12.30 because I only have one class. Then I leave school at 4.15 pm, and go home.

Interviewer: What do you do when you get home?

Paul: If there’s anything I need for the home, I go to the stores. After that, I spend time with the children.

At the time of the second interview, Paul had been in Sweden for three years. He was still taking language classes on a basic level. His frustration about the situation appeared to have increased, similar to Samuel, and permeated the interview. He brought up difficulties with learning the language, with being a father in Sweden, and with being unemployed and dependent on social assistance with few prospects to gain employment. But his wife was training for a driving licence, which he talked about with anticipation: a car would make life easier for the family. The interviewer then asked him how he found life in Sweden, and he answered:

Paul: Thinking about myself, I’m not happy in Sweden. I’m not happy.

Interviewer: No?

Paul: Thinking about my children, then it’s great. And my children are of the most importance to me.

Paul also raised concerns about fatherhood in Sweden. He described fathering to be more demanding and difficult in this new cultural context, since the children had ‘too much freedom’: they no longer respected their parents and the parents’ wishes, as they used to. He talked about this at quite some length in the second and third interviews. He seemed particularly concerned about his teenage son who was hanging out with friends that he and his wife did not know. Paul said:

He [the son] must consider his future. There are courses here, there are all sorts of opportunities. We came here for his sake. Like, if he fails [to get an education and a job], then his life is a waste, and my life is a waste.

At the time of the third interview, Paul's frustration had if anything increased. He still had great difficulties with the language but no longer attended Swedish Tuition for Immigrants. He was in a trainee position at a building firm but had little hope of being employed. When the interviewer asked: 'How do you find life in Sweden now?' Paul answered that he was not happy, nor satisfied:

Paul: We want jobs, so that we don't have to go to the social services. We can't buy a car, because you are not allowed to when you are on welfare.³ You can't do anything, and a family needs a car, how are you supposed to live without one?

Living on scarce means, and being dependent on welfare, restrained Paul from being the father he wanted, and made everyday life harder. Paul continued to talk about his wife, and the great efforts she was making to get a job. She was taking classes in Swedish and driving lessons, while Paul's chances to regain his status as family provider were small. He had altered his fathering practices, which became a necessity when his wife was occupied on a daily basis with studies, and had come to place his hopes for the future on his wife and the children. Paul, as Samuel, appeared to have a sense of his fathering having gone into reverse, when comparing his cultural adaptation to that of his wife and children.

Jacob

Jacob was almost 50 years old. In his country of origin, he had worked in consulting. At the first interview, he had resided in Sweden with a residence permit for three years. His children were attending school, and Jacob and his wife were taking upper secondary school language classes in Swedish. Jacob was also in training to become a health care nursing assistant. He justified his choice of education as being the shortest way to gain employment and the ability to provide for himself.

According to his diary notes, Jacob spent much time on domestic and caring activities with, and for, his family and relatives. For instance, he wrote on a Saturday: 'Me and my wife went to the shopping centre and bought clothes for our children. After that, I went to IKEA with my sister's son, and helped him shop for his new apartment'. Later that day, he noted: 'I tried to help my daughter with her homework, with her Maths, since she has national tests [this semester]'. On the weekdays, he wrote about doing errands, helping his mother with different chores and accompanying her to the dentist, et cetera. On one of these days, in answer to the diary question 'Was there anything that happened today that was particularly fun, exciting or joyful, and if so: what and why?' he wrote: 'It's nice to keep oneself busy, doing stuff, because then you feel that you've accomplished something good'.

Like the other fathers in the data, Jacob stressed the importance of gaining paid employment. His frustration about being unemployed and welfare-dependent came through strongly in the first interview.

Jacob: Now, it feels like there's something missing, you are at home with no job. There's something missing inside you, and you are ashamed of yourself, in front of your children, for not working. Especially when you are used to working, used to having a good life, and then you come here and you have nothing.

Jacob's ambitious studies paid off, and at the time of the second interview he was working part-time as a nursing assistant in eldercare, although he still had some classes to pass in his training before he got his certificate. All the same, Jacob still came across as being worried and stressed. He talked about his concerns for the children and their school results; two of the children had changed schools, to secondary school, and their grades had suffered. Also, he found it hard to adapt and to feel content in the Swedish society: 'It's hard for me, it's really hard. Because I'm in my 50s, and it's really hard to adjust to the society, although I try, I work, and well I try'. Later in the interview, the interviewer asked: 'What's most difficult about living in Sweden?', and Jacob answered: 'I'm always tired, a lot of stress'. He went on and gave examples of how he cared for his children, helped them out, took them to the dentist, to the hospital, and so on, while also studying and working part-time in eldercare. 'I run all the time. (...) There's an awful lot of stress. Stress. So much that you have to do'. He described life in Sweden as being very different from life in Syria. His wife was also studying and working part-time in eldercare; in the home country she had been a stay-at-home wife. This, Jacob argued, affected their parenting and the parent-child relationship negatively. None of them now had much time for the children.

Interviewer: How does it work, with both of you working?

Jacob: It's very hard for the children, because you can't attend to them, raise them or keep your eyes on them [the same way] when you only see them two, three hours before bedtime. You hardly get time to ask about their homework. And sometimes I work until 9 pm or 11 pm, and they are in bed when I get home. In my home country, my wife was at home and she knew about the children's school work and helped them out with homework, she did the household chores, and when I got home, she told me about their day, and then I knew. Now, none of us know.

At the time of the third interview, Jacob had graduated and was a trained health care assistant. He expressed great hopes of getting a permanent position. When asked about how he now found life in Sweden, he answered:

Jacob: Sometimes I get sad. I feel that it's really tough to be here, because of the language, and there [in the home country] I knew everyone, I knew about everything. (...) The only dream I have is that my children will succeed, that they will get a good education, that's what's most important for me.

Here, we see that his reasoning corresponds to the other fathers in the data. Over the years, their own future aspirations appear to fade while their hopes as well as happiness are connected mainly to their children's wellbeing and prospects. Also, parts of Jacob's narration accord with Paul's. They both connected raising and caring for their children in the new context with challenges. Jacob talked about fathering and said:

Jacob: Fostering was easier in my home country compared to here. There, we had our traditions and culture, and there we had rules [for how children behave]. But here, everything has changed. Here, they [the children] mix, and adjust to new traditions and cultures – Somali, Afghani, all sorts, Swedish. Everyone is trying to teach them about their cultures, and then they [the children] get another culture.

Adjustment and adaptation come across as precarious processes that may cause inter-generational conflicts and negatively affect the parent-child relationship. The fathers did not

appear to be against adaptation, rather the contrary. They all referred to themselves as trying to adapt, and to adjustment as something that was necessary for the children to succeed in the new country. However, adaptation and the influence from ‘new cultures’ also seemed to cause stress and concerns about how the parent–child relationship would develop.

Jay

Jay was in his early 40s. He and his family had been granted residency two years prior to the first interview. Jay had a higher education degree in engineering, and good skills in English. After one year in Sweden, he was employed as an engineer. His wife was attending Swedish Tuition for Immigrants. Before arriving in Sweden, she had been a stay-at-home wife. Jay participated in three interviews (he did not take any diary notes).

In the interviews, Jay recurrently talked about everyday life as a father in Sweden, and how it differed from how he had fathered before. His current fathering involved household duties and caregiving, besides his full time, paid work. Time and energy was spent on helping out with the children’s homework, childcare and daily chores. Similar to other fathers, he mentioned wanting to build a good relationship with his children, and stressed the importance of the children succeeding at school. For instance, in the first interview he said:

Jay: I try to encourage them [in their school work], telling them that they are doing fine in this new country, ‘Look, my Swedish is not so good either’, and ‘You must tell me about your problems so that I can help you to become better and better at school’.

Jay talked about wanting to raise his children to become independent, so that with encouragement and support from him, they would develop and learn to accomplish things by themselves. He stressed the importance of school success, and raised concerns about some of his children not doing as well as he would wish for. Jay’s narrative was imbued with ambivalent positions regarding adjustment and adaptation. He talked about wanting the children to adapt to the Swedish society, but also brought up dilemmas that this may cause in his relationship to the children. In the second interview, the interviewer asked: ‘How do you find things working out here [in Sweden], with your family and your children?’ Jay’s answer accords to other fathers in the data in that he pictures himself as ‘falling behind’ his children in their adaptation to this new cultural context (i.e. reversed fathering).

Jay: It’s working out fine. Perhaps my children adapt to the Swedish culture faster than myself and my wife. They are rushing ahead.

Interviewer: How does that feel?

Jay: It’s good, but as I said to you [earlier], it makes me fear that they will take all their ideas and culture from Sweden, and leave out the culture from our home country.

Later in the interview, when asked about whether it was different to be a father in Sweden compared to his home country, Jay said: ‘[In my home country], I had friends, I had relatives, everyone else thought the same way as me. They thought the same about raising children, but here, it is not the same’. Also, Jay brought up how time for parenting is limited in Sweden. This is similar to how most of the fathers in the data reasoned, but particularly

those who were in paid employment. When Jay talked about this in the second interview, the interviewer asked:

- Interviewer: Do you feel that you have less time to be with your children here in Sweden?
Jay: Yes, here, there is not much time with the children. They have a job and I have a job. Like, they go to school all day, and I work, and we don't see each other much.

Jay continued to talk about his wife, who in Sweden had commitments outside the home, and thus less time for childcare and household chores: 'This changes things. I need to take on more responsibilities', Jay said. He referred to fathering in Sweden being tiring and demanding, requiring attention from morning to night:

- Jay: In the morning, I see that they [the children] get ready. Then [in the evening] there is homework. And she [the wife], she has not much time either. She needs to get them dressed and then run off to her school in the morning.

The fathering (and mothering) that surfaced in Jay's narrative was energy- and time-consuming. It was more about doing chores and parental nagging, compared to how it was prior migrating to Sweden. As an example, he said that in his home country he took the children out to restaurants and they had a good time. In Sweden, before going to a restaurant, he had to dress the children and nag at them to get ready, and thus the restaurant visit became less pleasant. In Jay's reflections about his new fathering practices, admiration for his wife appeared: 'Here in Sweden, I appreciate my wife more, because now I understand how much energy and time she spends [on domestic chores and caring for the children]'. Jay also connected the changed fathering with a closer relationship to his children.

- Jay: Just taking my children to school was a big thing [in my home country], but here, I realized, coming to Sweden, that I needed to do more because it wouldn't work otherwise. And I also notice that the children are as close to me as they are to their mum, here in Sweden, because they say things like 'Daddy, I want to sleep beside you'. There is no difference [between my wife and me], but there [in the home country], they did not ask such things [of me], there was more of a distance.

Concluding discussion

The present study illuminates refugee men from the Middle East as fathers who come to care for both home and children during resettlement in Sweden. In a given social and cultural milieu, some stories are more 'tellable' than others (Schiff, 2017) but also more probable (Riessman, 1993; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In Swedish society, where the present study is set, narratives that involve ideals of breadwinner husbands and stay-at-home wives are not common and are often positioned as being problematic since they deviate from the norm and established policies (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014). The fathers who participated in this study arrived in Sweden with experience of being breadwinners and of having stay-at-home wives. However, they quickly adapted and took on new household duties and caregiving practices out of necessity since their wives, as well as themselves, had daily occupations such as language studies and/or work in trainee positions. The Swedish social security system, family policies, and cultural norms formed the fathers'

fathering. The results of the study illustrate how being a father and a man is under constant change and adaptation; family practices, masculinities and care alter and are situated. In understanding these processes, the concepts *emerging masculinities* (Inhorn & Isidoros, 2018), and *caring masculinities* (Hanlon, 2012; Scambor et al., 2014) are apt. Used together, they here show that the ways men practice fatherhood (and manhood), and care for home and children, are prone to change and influenced by the societal and social context.

'Care has for long been a woman-specific concept' (Scambor et al., 2014, p. 560). The fathers in this study come across as committed fathers that provide much care and love, and spend much time with daily household chores, much in accordance with how native Swedish middle-class men refer to their fatherhood (Bergnehr, 2008; Forsberg, 2009). *Caring masculinities* (Hanlon, 2012; Scambor et al., 2014) stand out in the analysis. It has been suggested that research on (Muslim) Arab men often focuses on violence and patriarchal systems (Inhorn & Naguib, 2018). This study contributes by showing how Middle Eastern men attend to both household duties and caregiving on an everyday basis.

In many nations, such as Sweden, the ideal, good father contributes to childcare and household work.⁴ However, research 'confirms the provider function as a relentlessly central component of fatherhood throughout the world' (Wahlström Henriksson, 2019, p. 322). The present study suggests that long-term unemployed and welfare dependent fathers have to reinterpret their masculinity and fatherhood since the breadwinner function is no longer obtainable. This contributes, for some, to a sense of *reversed fathering*: the men described the children, and sometimes also the wife, as having 'passed them on the track', 'leaving them behind', in the 'race' towards adaptation to the new cultural and socioeconomic circumstances. The fathers described themselves to be more involved in caring for home and children than prior migration, but with diminished adult authority since that comes with employment and/or cultural know-how. Thus, altered household and caring practices may not be equivalent to psychological adjustment. Some of the men in this study indicated a growing despondence and frustration about their situation, and a sense of being somewhat at loss in their parenting.

The present study supports previous work that suggests that labour migrant fathers adjust to new circumstances and in the process redefine what masculinity and fatherhood entail (e.g. Kilkey et al., 2013; Pustułka et al., 2015; Santero & Naldini, 2017). The study makes an important contribution in that it analyses and illuminates refugee, Middle Eastern fathers' emerging masculinities and 'development of autobiography' (Bruner, 2004, p. 695) during resettlement. However, adaptation does not always come easily; it can be resisted and renegotiated when new practices are at odds with old traditions and ideals and the person's sense of self (Pease, 2009; Pustułka et al., 2015; Santero & Naldini, 2017). The fathers in the present study brought up difficulties with having to adapt, although, according to the narratives, over the years, they tried hard and worked hard to adjust their fatherhood and family life to what they deemed to be necessary and beneficial, as well as possible, for the new situation and context. The fathers raised positive aspects and welcomed the consequences of their new fathering: a more intimate father-child relationship had evolved, and some men expressed a greater appreciation of (and possibly dependence on) the wife. However, for those who faced long-term unemployment, despondence saturated their talk about how they tried to adapt but felt stuck on welfare dependence. Thus, we must be cautious not to describe migrant men

exclusively as being in constant processes of alteration and change, when reality can also involve experiences of immobility, of being stuck due to unforeseen migration outcomes, and of having limited future prospects.

The fatherhood that evolved in the analyses is what I here call *comprehensive fathering*, that is, fatherhood characterized by practices of care, intimacy and love that are the result of hard, straining (reproductive) work that takes place with limited financial and/or cultural resources. This study has explored refugee men's narratives on fathering and family life in Sweden during resettlement. All people live with change, but for people who are forced into international migration, change is acutely brought on with often drastic, life altering consequences. To better support refugee families, we need to understand and acknowledge the personal consequences of having to adapt – the possible stress and strains involved, but also the benefits, and how the pros and cons in different ways can affect wellbeing and the parent–child relationship. The present study contributes to such knowledge.

Notes

1. The study of masculinity, and fatherhood, is here connected to *practices* rather than to cultural ideals and norms, although norms and practices to a great extent are intertwined.
2. Mothers and adolescent children also participated in the project, and were asked similar questions, but the mothers were asked about their mothering and not their spouse's parenting. Analyses of the children's narratives are presented elsewhere (Bergnehr et al., 2020). The mothers' narratives are in part analyzed (Bergnehr, 2018), and other Middle Eastern refugee mothers' talk have been explored (Bergnehr, 2016a, 2016b, 2017).
3. In Sweden, a refugee is allowed to own a car the first two years after having been granted residency, when she or he is granted the, so-called, settlement benefit. If still unemployed after this time, she or he becomes dependent on the social assistance and is no longer allowed to have any financial and material assets.
4. For a discussion of the complex relationship between men's care and gender equality, see Scambor et al. (2014).

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