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# Fathering, Feminism(s), Gender, and Sexualities: Connections, Tensions, and New Pathways

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## Abstract

This article provides a critical overview of selected intersections of feminist theories and gender theories within fathering research and looks at a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to a diversity of fathering experiences, including differences of class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and family forms. Although there are many overlaps between feminist theories and gender theories, and most scholars who write about gender are feminist or profeminist scholars, there is one important distinction. Gender theories attend to multiple dimensions of gendered narratives, lives, practices, identities, and institutions. Feminism and feminist theories share all of these concerns; however, feminism and feminist theories are also directly connected to the

promotion of social change for diverse groups of women, especially disadvantaged women. This point is important because it can lead to potential conflicts between feminist concerns and fathering.

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More than 30 years ago, Sara Ruddick, the late feminist philosopher and author of the best-selling *Maternal Thinking* (1995; see also Ruddick, [1983](#) ), succinctly summarized the fit between feminism and gender change and fathering. She wrote:

It is argued that the most revolutionary change we can make in the institution of motherhood is to include men in every aspect of childcare.... Again and again, family power dramas are repeated in psychic, interpersonal, and professional dramas, while they are institutionalized in economic, political and international life. Radically recasting the power-gender roles in these dramas might just revolutionize social conscience ... and economic, political and international life. (Ruddick, [1983](#) , p. 89)

The scale of “revolutionary change” and the radical “recasting” needed to achieve such change is an important backdrop to our argument in this article that the fit between feminist and gender theories and fathering is a complicated one, with a plethora of exciting possibilities but also intermittent tensions. Feminist theories and gender theories constitute large bodies of transdisciplinary scholarship with extensive applications in family research (e.g., Deutsch, [2007](#) ; Ferree, [2010](#) ; Osmond & Thorne, [1993](#) ; Thompson & Walker, [1995](#) ; Walker & Thompson, [1984](#) ; Wills & Risman, [2006](#) ; Zinn, [2000](#) ). It is also the case, as this special issue reveals, that fathering is a highly heterogeneous field. Gender theories, for example, take different theoretical foci and make varied contributions depending on the fathering experience or household form being studied (e.g., single fathers, stay-at-home fathers, breadwinning fathers, resident and nonresident fathers, stepfathers, fathers on parental leave, vulnerable fathers, teen fathers, and shared or primary caregiving fathers). In this article, we provide a critical overview of selected intersections of feminist theories and gender theories within fathering research and look at varied theoretical and methodological approaches to a diversity of fathering experiences, including differences of class, ethnicity, race, sexualities, and family forms. We also draw attention to a distinction between feminist theories and gender theories. Although there are many overlaps between feminist theories and gender theories, and most scholars who write about gender are feminist or profeminist scholars, there is one important distinction. Gender theories attend to multiple dimensions of gendered narratives, lives, practices, identities, and institutions, and feminism and feminist theories share all of these concerns; however, feminism and feminist theories are also directly connected to the promotion of social change for diverse groups of women, especially disadvantaged women. This point is important because it can lead to potential conflicts between feminist concerns and fathering.

We write this article as a senior scholar who has been writing about fathering and feminism for more than 20 years (e.g., Doucet, [1995](#) , [2006](#) , [2013](#) ) and an emergent feminist scholar who has

written about embodiment, breast-feeding, and mothering and is now conducting research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) families, including gay fathers and trans (transgender, transsexual, and gender transitioning) fathers (Lee, 2012, 2013, 2014). This article is written in several parts. First, we lay out our version of a historical picture of how feminist theory and research began to include fathering as a field of study and concern, focusing on the fit between feminism and fathering as well as the lack of fit or tensions. Second, we provide a brief overview of selected gender theories and their direct or indirect uses within fathering research. In the third section, we explore gender divisions of domestic labor as a key site at which gender theories have directly influenced the development of a massive subfield within feminist research on families and fathering. Our fourth section lays out some of the investigations and explanations for the pace of change in gender differences in mothering and fathering; we draw on a diverse set of theorists here, pointing to some of the unique contributions of gendered theoretical lenses. Fifth, we point to new challenges for gender theories in relation to fathering, especially in the field of LGBTQ families and fathers, and we broaden our focus from feminist and gender theories to include sexualities as a connected set of theoretical lenses. Finally, in our conclusions, we point to key contributions of these feminist and gender theories, gaps that need further investigation, and directions for future work.

## Feminist Theories, Feminism(s), and Fathering

Feminist theory is a wide and diverse body of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological approaches. Feminist theories and paradigms have intersected with, have reconfigured, and have been reshaped by a wide set of theories, including postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonial studies, queer theories, cultural studies, Marxism(s), Foucauldianism(s), Bourdieusian concepts, psychoanalysis, and anti-racist theories. As the Canadian feminist scholar Roberta Hamilton (2006) noted, “Feminist theories encompass a wide range of (often competitive) contributions that have developed rapidly, and that are undergoing continuing critique, and proliferation. They constitute moving targets, captured only uneasily, incompletely, and inevitably controversially” (p. 44).

Feminist theories were initially viewed in categories such as liberal feminism, socialist feminist, and radical feminism (see Jaggar, 1990), but the past two decades have seen a move toward greater complexity, diversity, and specificity. Through the development of a wide array of intersectionality theories, attention has been given to multiple differences among women, such as race, class, ability, sexualities, and the interactions of different forms of oppression (Andersen & Collins, 1992/2012; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Collins, 2000, 2004; McCall, 2005). At the same time, feminist theoretical entanglements with poststructuralism, queer theories, transnational feminist theories, and a burgeoning field of new feminist materialisms have offered systemic deconstructions of gender, the sex–gender binary, and sexualities.

### *The Fit Between Feminist Theories and Fathering*

Feminist attention to both mothering and fathering has evolved gradually over time. Looking back to the 1970s and early 1980s, there were two notable theoretical developments that shifted feminist research on mothering and fathering. The first development was instigated mainly by the work of

feminist scholars who were researching mothering. Drawing on particular strands of feminism, including radical feminism and socialist feminism, early feminist scholars studied the meanings and practices of the daily unpaid work that women did and argued for applying serious scholarly attention to these largely invisible forms of work (Lopata, 1981 ; Luxton, 1980 ; Oakley, 1974 ). At the same time, there were related developments in the rise of scholarship on the feminist ethic of care, which constituted what Allison Jaggar termed a “minor academic industry” in the 1980s and 1990s (cited in Larrabee, 1993 , p. 4; see also Gilligan, 1982 ; Held, 1993 , Noddings, 1982 ). From the 1970s to the early 1990s, feminist theories had an ambivalent relationship with motherhood around questions of whether mothering empowered or disempowered women (for an overview, see Kinser, 2010 ; O'Reilly, 2008 ; Snitow, 1992 ). Part of this ambivalence was connected to feminism's complex relationship with men as fathers and parallel questions as to whether men in their roles as husbands and fathers oppressed women (see, e.g., Delphy & Leonard, 1992 ). By the late 1980s, however, feminist theories of care, social reproduction, and work and family issues were beginning to reconfigure theoretical relationships between feminist theories and mothering, focusing on reframing the strengths and benefits of relationships and relationalities while also being attentive to the costs of caring and the socioeconomic and political effects of different and unequal gender roles (e.g., Folbre, 1994 ; Ruddick, 1983 ). This attentiveness to both the costs and the benefits of parental caregiving spurred an interest in studying women, work, and family (e.g., Lamphere, 1987 ; Lewis, Porter, & Shrimpton, 1988 ; Zavella, 1987 ), which, in turn, slowly moved toward the study of men, work, and family. Specifically, there was a small chorus of feminist voices who argued that distinct gender roles for fathers and mothers would lead to adverse effects for both women and men.

This focus on the social costs of constrictive gender roles was well expressed in the work of leading feminist psychoanalytic scholars writing in the late 1970s. Classic works, such as Dorothy Dinnerstein's ( 1977 ) *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* and Nancy Chodorow's ( 1978 ) *The Reproduction of Mothering* , drew together the fundamental imbalances that occur in a society when one gender does most of the metaphoric rocking of the cradle while the other gender rules the world. Referring to “sexual arrangements” as the “division of responsibility, opportunity, and privilege that prevails between male and female humans, and the patterns of psychological interdependence that are implicit in this division,” Dinnerstein ( 1977 ) argued that a central “human malaise” thus “stems from a core fact that has so far been universal: the fact of primary female responsibility for the care of infants and young children” (p. 4; see also Chodorow, 1978 , p. 214).

While feminists called for men's involvement partly to ease the gendered costs of caring and as one route toward greater gender equality, fathering scholars began documenting the personal and relational losses that men incurred from not being fully involved in caring for children. In the years to follow, fathering scholars argued for the need to study and understand men's lives not only as breadwinning fathers but also as caregivers of children (e.g., Coltrane, 1996 ; Lamb, 1981 ); they also drew attention to the costs of stress caused by work-family conflicts, the burden of being a breadwinner, and the lack of opportunities for men who are distant or absent fathers to develop close emotional and relational attachments (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992 ; Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 1999 ; Milkie & Peltola, 1999 ; Pruett, 2000 ). Some of this scholarship can be characterized as profathering scholarship that coheres with feminist goals of gender equality and positive outcomes for men (Palkovitz, 2002 ; Snarey, 1993 ), for heterosexual couples (Cowan & Cowan, 1992 ; Hyeyoung & Raley, 2005 ; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003 ), and for children (Lamb, 2000 ; Pleck &

Masciadrelli, 2004 ). However, there was also a growing body of political and scholarly work by fathering scholars that was informed by a different set of gendered concerns that were at odds with feminist theories and goals.

### *Tensions Among Feminism, Feminist Theories, and Fathering Scholarship*

One area of scholarship that can divide feminist scholars into incompatible positions is the study of fatherhood, and more specifically, the study of single and divorced fathers. Although there are largely collegial scholarly and political conversations between feminist and fathering scholars about gender equality in parenting, it is notable that feminists are often in direct conflict with discourses and agendas of fathers' rights groups, particularly in the case of child custody (for an overview, see Clatterbaugh, 2000 ; Coltrane, 1997 , 2001 , 2004 ; Crowley, 2008 ; Flood, 2002 , 2004 ; Messner, 1998 ).

It may be broadly stated that fathers' rights groups arose out of a perception of absence or loss, but this loss is not always in conflict with feminist principles. Australian sociologist Michael Flood ( 2004 ) wrote that such groups “believe that men's right to a fair negotiation in child custody settlements, to a fair trial in domestic violence cases, and to fair treatment in the media have all been lost. Responsibility and blame for these problems is attributed to women, the women's movements and feminism” (p. 262). Fathers' rights groups are diverse; some of the more moderate groups promote discourses of equality and gender-neutral parenting to reinforce their claims in child-custody cases for greater access to children (see Boyd, 2003 , 2012 ; Mandell, 2002 ), and on the extremes of these discourses are men's rights groups and fathers' rights groups that are subtly or blatantly anti-woman or anti-feminist.

The cry for equality from feminists and, more recently, from fathers' groups, is not without its complexity, especially in the case of child custody. Eminent feminist legal and policy scholars find themselves shifting away from a focus on gender equality toward gender differences in order to rebalance the sociopolitical goals of women as mothers. Specifically, they argue that the different social locations of women and men have led to clear gender differences in parenting and thus demand gender differences in postdivorce parenting (see Boyd, 2003 ; Fehlberg, Millward, & Campo, 2009 ; Mandell, 2002 ; Rhoades, 2002 ). As Boyd ( 2012 ) wrote:

Early second wave feminists optimistically emphasized men's potential to share equally in parenting and care work, contributing to the liberal, formal equality discourse that influenced parenting law reforms in the 1970s and 1980s. Advocacy in favour of fathers' equal rights to children is also embedded in this approach.... While equal parenting norms can work well for some separated families, they can also generate very difficult scenarios for mothers and children in circumstances involving conflict, power dynamics or, worse still, abuse. (p. 232)

Feminists advocating this position are mindful that such a stance is caught in the “perils and pitfalls” of emphasizing women as primary caregivers (Boyd, 2003 , p. 4) and that it “seems to paint women into the very corner they have been trying to get out of” (Mandell, 2002 , p. 230). Nevertheless, many feminists view this position as the best possible strategy given current economic and social conditions

around caring and earning, combined with how child-custody battles can lead to an erasure of women's investment in child rearing (see also Fineman, [1992](#) , [1995](#) ; Smart, [1991](#) ).

Although it may at first seem that feminist theories and fathering exist in a complex set of conflict-ridden relations, it is also the case that feminist theories have placed sociopolitical goals that seek to engender social change first and foremost for women. Thus, feminists who study fathering can face sporadic tensions (see, e.g., Doucet, [2006](#) ; Doucet & Hawkins, [2012](#) ; Featherstone, [2009](#) ; Silverstein & Auerbach, [1999](#) ) in which social change for women can take precedence over feminist theories that attempt to achieve equality, specifically of caregiving, with men.

## Gender Theories: Brief Overview

The literature on gender and gender theories has been, for at least two decades, “a growth industry in the academy” (Risman, [2004](#) , p. 429) that explores, interrogates, and seeks to understand gendered relations, structures, identities, and institutions, including all of these in relation to both mothering and fathering. There are many concepts associated with the broader concept of gender, including gender relations (Doucet, [2012](#) ), gender as a social construction and social institution (Lorber, [1994](#) ), gender as a social structure (Martin, [2003](#) ; Risman, [2004](#) ), intersectionalities (Choo & Ferree, [2010](#) ; Collins, [2000](#) ; McCall, [2005](#) ), and the “gender regime” and “gender order” (Connell, [1987](#) , [2000](#) , [2005](#) ).

Myra Max Ferree ( [2010](#) ) provided a comprehensive overview of gender theories, which are useful to our thinking about fathering. She wrote:

At its core, the gender perspective rejects gender as a static norm or ideal (the so-called gender role), and instead defines gender as a social relation characterized by power inequalities that hierarchically produce, organize, and evaluate masculinities and femininities through the contested but controlling practices of individuals, organizations, and societies. The differences between and among women and men are thus not only seen as socially constructed but also as politically meaningful. Individual gendering activities are situated in larger structures that have their own institutionalized gender practices and meanings. (Ferree, [2010](#) , p. 424)

Further, we agree with Ferree ( [2010](#) ) that “the challenge feminist scholarship poses to family studies has been largely met through the incorporation of research on gender dynamics within families and intersectional differences among them” (p. 420). And we draw on her recent reflections to extend them to gender theories and fathering research around shared themes of multi-institutional relationships and intersectionalities.

With regard to multi-institutional relationships, Ferree ( [2010](#) ) and others have argued for the need to consider relationships “among families, states, and markets that are gendered in locally specific, temporally dynamic, and systemically meaningful patterns” (p. 421; see also Bowlby, McKie, Gregory, & Macpherson, [2010](#) ; McKie, Gregory, & Bowlby, [2002](#) ). Attention is thus given not only to the

family but also to how families are connected with a host of other institutions in which gendered identities, practices, and relationships are performed, displayed (Doucet, 2011 ; Finch, 2007 ), produced, reproduced, and reconfigured (Coontz, 2005 ; Ferree, 2010 ; Moen & Roehling, 2005 ; Presser, 2004 ). Stuart C. Aitken's ( 2009 ) work has similarly detailed the need to think about fathering, masculinities, and social space, and Andrea Doucet's ( 2006 , 2011 , 2013 ) work on fathering has argued for the need to conceptualize parental responsibilities as extending between and beyond households and into community settings and across multiple institutions of work, state policies, community, education, and health.

A second important theme that Ferree ( 2010 ) develops in relation to fathering and family scholarship is that of intersectionalities, a major theme both in feminist theories and gender theories. The focus of this theme is on the active interaction of the various relations of inequality, such as race, class, sexuality, gender, and age, within and across all the institutions of society (Anderson, 2005 ; McCall, 2005 ). Throughout the 1990s, feminists argued that gender was not the only axis that structures women's lives and social initiations. According to Patricia Hill Collins ( 2000 ), intersectionality “refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 18).

Early iterations of this new field of intersectionality theory focused on the need to move beyond additive models in which gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality were viewed as variables that could be tacked on, or added to, an analysis of women's oppression or disadvantage. Andersen and Collins ( 2012 ) argued that viewing gender, race, class, and sexualities in only additive terms obscures the diverse meaning, forms, and structured contexts of these categories; they propose an alternative approach developed from a “matrix of domination” model in which there are “multiple interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender relations [and] affect individual consciousness, group interactions, and group access to institutional power and privileges” (p. 7).

Since these first calls to action, intersectionality has become a major field within feminist and gender theories, with many versions (e.g., Choo & Ferree, 2010 ; McCall, 2005 ; Penner & Saperstein, 2013 ; Vespa, 2009 ). In terms of this article, intersectionality aids in the understandings of fathering, in that this theoretical attention arose partly from attending to differences among women, but also from the recognition of commonalities between women and men. For instance, the recognition that Black women shared with Black men common experiences of oppression that White women did not face led feminist theorist bell hooks ( 2004 ) to call for women and men to join together as comrades in the struggle for equality. In a similar way, Collins ( 2004 ) argued that “[t]alking about gender does not mean focusing solely on women's issues. Men's experiences are also deeply gendered” (p. 6).

Gender theories and gendered approaches to family and fathering constitute massive bodies of work; however, this brief overview provides the background to focus on some of the key research areas that link feminist theories, gender theories, and fathering. This includes the field of study called gender divisions of domestic labor, as well as research into explanations for change and continuity in gender divisions of domestic labor.

## Gender Divisions of Domestic Labor

A prime place for the meeting of gender theories and fathering is in the burgeoning field of cross-disciplinary family and feminist research, which is often referred to as gender divisions of domestic labor. This field evolved slowly, beginning with selected works in the 1960s and 1970s, before growing into a massive subfield of family and feminist sociologies. Some of the earliest studies were time-budget studies carried out in the 1970s in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (e.g., Meissner, Meis, Scheu, & Scheu, 1975 ; Walker & Woods, 1976 ). Some of the best-known work includes Ray Pahl's ( 1984 ) seminal *Divisions of Labour*, which examined gender divisions in a broad range of paid and unpaid work practices, and Sara Ferstenmaker Berk's ( 1985 ) *The Gender Factory: The Apportionment of Work in American Households*, which argued that the household is a "gender factory" in which gender is constructed and continually performed through the gender division of housework and child care. Arlie Hochschild ( 1989 ) later pointed to the "second shift" of gendered work and the "unfinished revolution" that had occurred in the home, and Lydia Morris's ( 1991 ) *Workings of the Household* focused on the renegotiations of gendered divisions of domestic labor in the context of male redundancy (see also Wheelock, 1990 ). All these studies focused on how men helped their wives. That is, divisions of labor remained gendered and conventional (Pahl, 1984 ), and although there was some blurring of responsibilities (Morris, 1985 ), there was not any fundamental change in the gender divisions of labor (see also Brannen & Moss, 1991 ; Luxton, 1980 ; Oakley, 1980 ; Warde & Hetherington, 1993 ).

In the past few decades, a diverse set of excellent studies carried out in many countries has produced detailed and complex measurements of household and care work (e.g., Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000 ; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006 ; Folbre & Bittman, 2004 ; Hook, 2006 ; Kan, Sullivan, & Gershuny, 2011 ; Sullivan, 2013 ; for overviews, see Coltrane, 2000 ; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010 ). The overwhelming consensus is that men's participation in housework and child care has increased gradually and that men's investment in fathering has become a more important or central part of men's lives. These findings are consistent, whether measurements are based on time (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2003 ; Hook, 2006 ; Kan et al., 2011 ; Sullivan, 1996 , 1997 , 2000 ) or tasks (Bianchi et al., 2006 ; O'Brien & Shemilt, 2003 ; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004 ). Indeed, a recent 16-country study found that gender change is occurring in the time spent in paid and unpaid work. Kan et al. ( 2011 ) wrote, "Cross-national trends in paid and unpaid work time over the last 40 years reveal a slow and incomplete convergence of women's and men's work patterns" (p. 234; see also Palkovitz, Fagan, & Hull, 2012 ). Yet despite this growing gender convergence, gender segregation is quite persistent over time in domestic work. According to Kan et al. ( 2011 ):

Men and women tend to undertake different types of domestic work. Women have been responsible for the bulk of routine housework and caring for others, while men tend to spend their domestic work time on non-routine domestic work. There is evidence to show that the gender gap in routine housework is narrowing gradually. Nevertheless, this narrowing is achieved mainly through a large reduction in women's routine housework time, as well as through a less substantial increase in men's. (p. 238)



Attention to differences and intersectionality was a slow but gradual process within research on gender divisions of domestic labor. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, most of the research on gender divisions of labor, as well as on role-reversed couples, was on varied combinations of White, middle-class, and heterosexual couples (Deutsch, 1999 ; Kimball, 1988 ; Russell, 1987 ). More recently, feminist and gender theories have pointed to how there has been a transfer of domestic work between women and much less between men; that is, women transfer domestic labor to other women, particularly racialized women, which may perpetuate gendered division of domestic labor (Duffy, 2011 ; but see Kilkey, 2010 ). However, there has also been significant attention paid to diverse groups of fathers and their involvement in divisions of labor (e.g., across class, race, and ethnicity) (Ball & Daly, 2012 ; Cha & Thébaud, 2009 ; Chuang & Moreno, 2008 ; Hamermesh & Lee, 2007 ; Helms, Supple, & Proulx, 2011 ; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010 ; Miller & Maiter, 2008 ; Sayer & Fine, 2011 ; Wight, Bianchi, & Hunt, 2013 ; Williams, 2010 ), and increasing attention to divisions of labor in a wide range of LGBTQ fathers and families (e.g., Benson, Silverstein, & Auerbach, 2005 ; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007 ; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010 ; Carrington, 1999 ; Goldberg, 2010 , 2013 ; Goldberg & Gianino, 2011 ; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012 ).

Attention to diversity has also been important in recognizing how different household forms can matter in assessing gender divisions of labor for fathers and mothers or for fathers and others. That is, the diversity of fathering forms (e.g., married, common law, divorced, widower, sole custody, joint custody, remarried with new children, remarried with stepchildren, parenting across different households, fathering of one or several children, number of hours in paid employment, eligibility for parental leave or not, LGBTQ families) means that it is very difficult to paint one clear picture of fathering and changing gender identities, practices, and commitments to fathering. Nevertheless, in spite of these difficulties, gender theories have guided many of the explanations for change or lack of change.

## Gender Theories and Accounting for Differences Between Mothering and Fathering

Because gender theories in this context are, at their core, theories of exploration and understanding of gendered mothering and fathering, they have, in the past 20 years, turned to defining and understanding key obstacles to greater father involvement in the family. Some of the obstacles that have been studied include “masculine norms” that “create workplace pressures that make men reluctant or unable to contribute significantly to family life” (Williams, 2010 , p. 149; see also Deutsch, 1999 ; Dowd, 2000 ; Pleck, 1985 ; Townsend, 2002 ); parental modeling after one's own father (Coltrane, 1996 ; Cowan & Cowan, 1992 ; Daly, 1993 ; Snarey, 1993 ); co-constructed processes of “doing gender” by both mothers and fathers (Berk, 1985 ; Coltrane, 1989 , 1996 ; Deutsch, 1999 , 2007 ); gender differences in community and social spaces (Aitken, 2009 ; Doucet, 2011 ; Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox 2005 ); embodiment in caregiving (Doucet, 2006 , 2009 , 2013 ; Kvande, 2005 ); maternal gatekeeping (Adamsons, 2010 ; Allen & Hawkins, 1999 ; Fagan & Barnett, 2003 ; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013 ); gender ideologies (Brannen & Moss, 1991 ; Deutsch, 1999 ; Greenstein, 1996 ; Hochschild & Machung, 1989 ); and discourses of fatherhood and motherhood (Dermott, 2008 ; Dienhart, 1998 ; Henwood & Procter, 2003 ; Lupton & Barclay, 1997 ; Mandell,

**2002** ). We will pick up on a few of these as explanations for the slow changes in gendered parenting practices, identities, and social institutions. In particular, we look at microlevel theories of doing gender; macrolevel theories of fathers and public policies, especially parental leave; and fathering and masculinities.

## *Doing Gender*

Building on social constructionist gender theory and theoretical perspectives on gender as a multilayered social structure (Risman, **2004** ), the “doing gender” theoretical approach has become a key explanation for ongoing gender differences in mothering and fathering (see Fenstermaker & West, **2002** ; West & Zimmerman, **1987** ; see also Berk, **1985** ; Blume & Blume, **2003** ; Deutsch, **2007** ; Risman, **1998** , **2004** , **2009** ). Attention has been on gender as an active social accomplishment, as well as the structural, material, ideological, and discursive resources that enable or constrain this doing and undoing of gender processes. Rooted in ethno-methodological analyses of gender relations (e.g., Garfinkel, **1967** ), this approach has examined the routine performance of housework and child care with the view that gender is something that is actively accomplished and negotiated in interactions within a heterosexual relationship. That is, when women and men do gender, they partake in activities and expressions that befit their gender (Thompson & Walker, **1995** ). This theoretical lens has also been used to explore how mothers and fathers together create and co-create gender (Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, & Kirkby, **2003** ; Deutsch, **1999** ), and others have explored how mothers and fathers actively work at undoing gender in care work and in mothering and fathering (Chesley, **2011** ; Crompton & Lyonette, **2010** ; Deutsch, **2007** ; Risman, **2009** ).

There is a performance element in doing gender, and thus a further variation on this theme is the display of gender, which can be seen in both quantitative and qualitative literature on gender roles and fathering (see Sullivan, **2011** ). The concept of gender display was first introduced into the quantitative literature on the domestic division of labor by Judith Brines ( **1994** ; but see Sullivan, **2010** ; see also England, **2010** , for a review of this concept in Brines). It has recently received renewed attention from the British sociologist Janet Finch ( **2007** ), who reworked the concept to look at how families display many kinds of performances, including gender. A recent edited volume by Esther Dermott and Julie Seymour ( **2011** ) built on Finch's research to examine a wide range of displays in families, including the display of gender by fathers in community settings (Doucet, **2011** ).

## *Fathering, Gender Equality, and Policy*

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of international focus on how policies affect opportunities for men to be active fathers. International researchers have pointed to how changes in gender roles may be best achieved through both macrolevel public and social policies that promote both gender equality in the workplace and the home, and more subtle national-level and cultural shifts in gender ideologies around work and care. Parental leave has been a critical focus for research on the intersections of fathering, gender, and policies, because the first year of parenting is one in which gender roles are especially pronounced (see Doucet, **2009** ; Fox, **2009** ). Parental-leave policies are thus one means of encouraging fathers of infants and young children to take time off to care for their children. The Nordic countries, especially Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, have come up with innovative ways of encouraging fathers' leave. Most notable is parental leave reserved exclusively for fathers

(Sweden and Norway) and the equal division of the parental leave periods for mother, father, and both parents (Iceland) (for an overview, see Kamerman & Moss, 2009 ; O'Brien, 2009 ; Sigle-Rushton, Goisis, & Keizer, 2013 ). However, in spite of policy measures directed specifically toward men, parental leave is still taken mainly by women, in terms of both numbers of women in comparison to men and amount of time mothers take. This has led to further investigations, guided by gender theories, as to why this is the case. Arguments have been made about the symbolic importance of male wages and how the highest paternal participation rates occur in countries where there are nontransferable leave programs combined with high wage-replacement rates (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Iceland, the Canadian province of Quebec; Kamerman & Moss, 2009 ). Conversely, countries with low wage-replacement wage rates have lower uptake by fathers (e.g., Belgium, Austria, France). In these countries, there have been variations in the uptake of paternal leave, with recent research from Sweden showing variations in fathers' leave patterns between rural and urban areas (Almqvist, Sandberg, & Dahlgren, 2011 ) and research in Canada showing variations in leave patterns between the province with nontransferable leave for fathers (Quebec) and those that allow for transfer (the rest of Canada) (see Doucet, McKay, & Tremblay, 2009 ; McKay & Doucet, 2010 ). These studies have led to discussion of how and why gendered responsibilities remain largely distinct and resilient to change, especially during the early months of child rearing, and how equality in parenting can be defined and measured in short- and long-term ways (see Doucet, 2009 , 2013 ). Although many argue that policies do make a difference in the slow shift and transformation of gender roles, most researchers have also argued that macrolevel policies cannot work alone; they are part of a larger configuration of ideological institutional change within and across homes, workplaces, and communities.

## *Men and Masculinities*

Connell's ( 2000 ) work in gender theory developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is defined as “the most honored or desired” form of masculinity (p. 10) and is often associated with being “the opposite of femininity” (p. 31; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 ). There is now an excellent body of work that argues that there is a clear connection between hegemonic masculinity and men's breadwinning (Dowd, 2000 ; Hodges & Budig, 2010 ; Thébaud, 2010 ). As Nicholas Townsend ( 2002 ) noted, the “contributing cultural primacy of providing for children means that men's time and energy are devoted to, and consumed by, their paid work” (p. 78; see also Dermott, 2008 ; Miller, 2010 , 2011 ).

For Townsend ( 2002 ) and many other 21st-century observers of changing fatherhood, there is a tension between the breadwinner ideology and new father ideals that emphasize how fathers should be emotionally present for their children. This tension plays out in varied ways. Some scholars have pointed to how even where primary caregiving fathers have rescinded a strong or full-time attachment to the labor market, they are still treated or judged as primary breadwinners within communities and workplaces (Doucet, 2006 ). Recent research on Russian immigrant and Sudanese refugee fathers living in Canada suggests that fathers experience disruption to the provider role as detrimental to their identities (Este & Tachble, 2009 ), and research on low-income teen fathers demonstrates that both breadwinning and nurturing are motivations to be good fathers (Devault et al., 2008 ; Edin & Nelson, 2013 ). Notably, there is research that demonstrates more movement toward ideals and practices of

gender equality in working-class fathers than in middle-class or professional men in both the United States (Hodges & Budig, 2010 ; Shows & Gerstel, 2009 ) and Japan (Ishii-Kunz, 2009 ).

The question of the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood is an important one, because hegemonic masculinity is largely associated with the devaluation of the feminine, and caring is often equated with feminine practice. A few authors have investigated these connections and have argued that fathering as a set of practices could be incorporated into hegemonic masculinity (Brandth & Kvande, 1998 ; Dryden, 1999 ) or, alternatively, exist in a complicit relationship with hegemonic masculinity, where fathers express support for equal parenting while also maintaining more traditional patterns of gender divisions of labor (see Plantin, Sven-Axel, & Kearney, 2003 ). Still others have argued that involved fathering neither reproduces nor challenges hegemonic masculinity but creates new forms of masculinity. That is, men's practices and identities of caregiving go beyond current conceptions of masculinities and femininities and may reflect philosophical and political concepts of self, identity, and subjectivity that embrace varied degrees of dependence, independence, and interdependence (see Doucet, 2006 ).

## Gender, Sexualities, and Moving Beyond Gender Theories

Gay and bisexual fathers and transgender and gender-fluid parents challenge assumptions about gender, sexualities, and families and highlight the need for theories that move beyond gender categories while retaining insights provided by feminist theory, including attention to multi-institutional relationships and intersectionality. There is a history of tension between feminist and queer theories, as well as between feminism and transgender issues (Elliot, 2010 ); for instance, influential feminists, such as Janice Raymond ( 1979 ) and Mary Daly ( 1990 ), have suggested that transgender and transsexual individuals reinforce and medicalize gender binaries.

Poststructuralist understandings of gender, especially the work of leading feminist theorists, provide some solutions to these conflicts. Judith Butler ( 1990 , 1993 ), for example, destabilized categories of sex and gender through an understanding of gender as performative, not something that exists prior to a subject but rather something achieved in and through its repetition. Similarly, Luce Irigaray ( 1993 ) viewed sexual difference as relational because it develops through relationships with the other who sexually differs from oneself. Unfortunately, Irigaray's work remains virtually absent from queer theory (Huffer, 2010 ) because it fails to account for a broader spectrum of sexual difference, including trans, genderqueer, intersex, and gender-fluid individuals—however, some queer theorists have used Irigaray's work recently to investigate the multiplicity of sexual difference (Alfonso, 2011 ; Poe, 2011 ).

Despite some alliances between feminist and queer and/or trans politics, tensions remain; for example, the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community sometimes has difficulty mobilizing around trans issues (Broad, 2002 ; Calafia, 2003 ; Feinberg, 1999 ). This is partly because gay men have had to work hard to combat stereotypes of gay fatherhood as strange or abnormal and to challenge ideas about women as primary caregivers (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007 ). As Stacey ( 2005 ) noted, gay men face barriers to biological parenthood and obstacles in parenting arising from a lack of formal

cultural socialization in care work that is traditionally gendered feminine, as well as the inability to rely on women to perform such work for them. In response to these pressures, some LGB parents deny or minimize the sexual aspects of their lives and distance themselves from the broader LGBTQ community in order to be seen as “normal” or similar to heterosexual parents, but this risks further pathologizing other members of the LGBTQ community. Consequently, queer theorists argue that instead of seeking acceptance by mainstream culture, the focus should be on subverting heteronormativity (Berkowitz, 2009).

As the field of LGBTQ families is a large, emergent field, we address two key areas: gay fathers and trans fathers.

## *Gay Fathering*

Gay fatherhood has received far less attention from researchers than lesbian motherhood, and research addressing the experiences of bisexual fathers is virtually nonexistent (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Current research on gay fathers indicates that they share similarities with lesbian mothers, including a lack of gender conformity in relation to parental identities and practices (Benson et al., 2005; Berkowitz, 2009, 2011; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Notably, however, conventional understandings of gender and parenting derive mainly from research on married mothers and fathers. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) argued that as these studies do not include same-sex parents, they are inadequate to the task of understanding the effects of gender in general. Further, Goldberg (2010) argued that it is not only gender but also the relational context (e.g., parenting with a same-sex partner) that affects parenting processes. Berkowitz's (2011) research suggests that gay fathers inhabit a new and original space without definitive models or guidelines. Indeed, the marginalized social location of gay fathers may allow for alternative masculinities and transformations of fathering to include the more intimate and nurturing characteristics associated with mothering (Benson et al., 2005), and this may lead to more equitable distributions of labor in families and provide models for equal parenting relationships (Benson et al., 2005; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). Berkowitz (2011) also argued that some gay fathers identify with maternal roles, framing their parenting experiences in terms including “maternal instincts,” “biological clocks,” and “soccer moms.” In attempting to frame their identities and experiences within established gendered and heterosexual parenting scripts, gay fathers thus create narrative hybrids of heterosexual men's family and parenting trajectories and discourses about women, femininity, and mothering.

In general, research shows that gay identity and kinship relations are fluid and provisional; Lewin (2006), for example, noted that gay men draw on a flexible set of meanings to construct their identities as gay men and as fathers, and Berkowitz (2009) wrote that because parents are generally assumed to be heterosexual, gay parents must engage in ongoing identity work to create new categories of families, new gender relations, and new social norms. As Foucault (1997) noted, affiliations between gay men produce new and creative possibilities, and homosexuality should be used to produce a multiplicity of kinds of relationships. In line with this position, Stacey (2005) suggested that gay fathers are able to create intimate relationships that are reflexive and experimental and demonstrate risks and new possibilities for all contemporary families.

## *Trans Fathering*

The visibility of trans fathers has been increasing since Thomas Beatie ( 2008 ) became the first publicly pregnant man, but trans fathers remain noticeably absent from research (Biblarz & Savci, 2010 ). Trans fathers face substantial obstacles to becoming parents, including transphobia and stigmatization, difficulty accessing health services, barriers to fertility treatments, and child-custody challenges (Biblarz & Savci, 2010 ; Ryan, 2009 ). Trans fathers challenge the role of gender categories in parenting, suggesting the need to go beyond categories of “mothers” and “fathers” to broader categories of gender-inclusive parenting (Hines, 2006 ). Some trans fathers positively affirm their challenge to gendered parenting norms, whereas others attempt to conform to those norms in order to avoid transphobia. In the same way, some trans men experience pregnancy positively, despite a lack of social acceptance; others grieve their inability to be a biological father; and some may experience pregnancy as undermining their gender identity (Ryan, 2009 ). Notably, whether trans men embrace pregnancy or struggle with it in their desire to challenge or conform to gendered parenting norms, their self-representation remains that they are men, even though society questions their masculinity in identifying pregnancy with femaleness (Riggs, 2013 ).

The field of trans identities and that of trans fathers in particular is still underdeveloped, as is the relationship between feminism and transgender issues, but this field can provide new insights into gender and social life, including our understandings of mothering and fathering. As Connell ( 2012 ) wrote:

Gender orders are formed and re-formed through time, as feminist historiography has abundantly shown.... The historicity of transsexuality arises within a larger dynamic of changing gender relations. Gender configurations within these structures are multiple, not binary, as feminist sociology has shown. (p. 865)

## Conclusions

Feminist theories, gender theories, and fathering exist in a complex relationship marked by complementarity and conflicts. On the one hand, feminists have argued that attention to equal fathering involvement, especially in mother-father households, is critical to achieving wider social relations of equality and increasing maternal empowerment. On the other hand, feminists who write about child custody and divorce have made arguments against shared parenting and gender equality on the grounds that they can undermine maternal autonomy and actually decrease maternal empowerment. Gender theories are also multilayered and still evolving in relation to the complexity and diversity of fathering experiences and forms. In this article, we have highlighted one of the largest subfields within feminist and gendered approaches to families and fathering: gender divisions of domestic labor. This field has harnessed the energies of leading researchers from around the globe, and new innovations in feminist and gender theories have arisen from these studies. We have also highlighted how most gender theory approaches are attentive to the need to consider structure and agency; micro and macro levels of analysis; multi-institutional relationships; and intersectionalities of gender, race, class, and sexualities.

Feminist and gender theories have been especially important in analyzing and understanding fathers as primary and shared primary caregivers and in efforts to encourage greater fathering involvement and more expansive work and state policies that recognize men as working fathers (Kaufman, 2013 ; Ranson, 2012 ). Gender theories have also contributed to the need to think about mothering and fathering identities and practices as relational sets of activities, processes, and institutions. Indeed, even where men parent without a central female presence, such as in some LGBTQ families, these men can still feel judged and surveilled by social assumptions about the primacy of maternal care. Similarly, when men try to lobby for more paternal time, either through parental leave or work flexibility, they are still held to hegemonic assumptions about male breadwinning and female caregiving. Gender theories have assisted in illuminating these processes.

The intersections of feminism, gender theories, and fathering constitute a rich field and are poised to remain important theories in assessing fathering, especially in many national contexts where there are increasing rates of breadwinning mothers (Statistics Canada, 2009 ; Sussman & Bonnell, 2006 ; Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2013 ) and increasing numbers of stay-at-home dads, single dads, gay father households, and fathers on parental leave (Livingston, 2013 ; Statistics Canada, 2012 ; US Census Bureau, 2012 ). Yet more work is needed in at least four areas. First, as Doucet's work highlights, there has been little attention to issues of the interplay of gender equality and gender differences and to social processes of embodiment, especially to unfolding relations of embodiment between carers and cared for (see Doucet, 2013 ). As Joan Williams ( 2010 ) explained:

People have thousands of “real differences” that lack social consequences. The question is not whether physical, social and psychological differences between women and men exist. It is *why* these particular differences become salient in a particular context and then are used to create and justify women's continuing economic disadvantage. (p. 128)

We would add here that we also need to consider how particular perceived differences, including embodied differences, about men are used to create and justify men's continuing disadvantages in parental responsibilities. Gaps in studying fathering and embodiment through intersectional lenses are also apparent in the sparseness of research on fathering and disability. There has been substantial feminist work done in the field of critical disability studies and the impact of disability on motherhood (Garland-Thomson, 2002 ; Scott, 2010 ); however, research remains to be done on the impact that disability has on fatherhood.

A second area that demands more attention is issues of social space (see Aitken, 2009 ; Marsiglio et al., 2005 ) and how intersectionality theories can assist in understanding how different groups of fathers experience integration or exclusion in particular spaces. Here we call for attention to “physical and spatial issues, as well as the social/symbolic processes associated with them” (Marsiglio et al., 2005 , p. 3).

Third, there is currently sparse but growing attention to transnational families, and although there is even sparser attention to fathering and transnational families, this is definitely an area for future research. Transnational feminism is integral to intersectional approaches (Choo, 2012 ; Mahalingam, Balan, & Molina, 2009 ; Patil, 2013 ) and includes attention to interrelations of colonialism, state

policies, racism, and class-based inequalities (Holvino, [2010](#) ; Swarr & Nagar, [2012](#) ; Thayer, [2009](#) ). Transnational families whose members live across national borders (Schmidt, [2011](#) ) are increasingly prevalent as a consequence of labor migration and processes of securitized globalization, under which globalization is seen not only in neoliberal economic terms but also in terms of national security agendas (Marchand & Runyan, [2011](#) ). Although more attention has been paid to transnational motherhood, responsibility for caregiving in transnational families can shift across genders and generations and be carried out at a distance (Baldassar & Merla, [2013](#) ), with the potential to both reify and transgress gender norms (Parreñas, [2005](#) ). With specific regard to fathering, Fresnoza-Flot ( [2013](#) ) explored how Filipino men are actively engaged in the local and transnational circulation of care, and Kilkey ( [2013](#) ) examined how fathering norms are transformed in the context of father migration and transnational fathering. Fathers play many different roles in transnational care, including providing material support, innovative communication strategies to keep in touch with distant children, and return visits (Fresnoza-Flot, [2013](#) ). Moreover, as a consequence of breadwinning transnational mothers, fathers sometimes assume primary caregiver responsibility for children for short- and long-term periods of time (Kilkey, [2013](#) ).

Finally, further theoretical work remains to be done on LGBTQ families, especially on gay, bisexual, and trans fathers. LGBTQ parenting research (Goldberg & Allen, [2013](#) ), including research on gay adoptive fathers (see Goldberg, [2012](#) ), can demonstrate how gendered parenting categories are increasingly being destabilized and new forms of families and fathers created. This evolving field of research attends to what it means, for example, to think outside of gender and to whether there should also be a space for thinking about parents who do not identify as being a mother or father but rather as a “mather,” a hybrid of the two words (Padavic & Butterfield, [2011](#) ). This new field highlights new possibilities for understanding fathering and families while also raising further challenges to feminist and gender theories that seek to fully address the complexity of family lives and a diversity of fathering practices and identities.

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