

**EMBRACING CHILDCARE:  
ACTIVE FATHERS IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARY**

By  
Dóra Dezső

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Department of Gender Studies*

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Supervisor: Éva Fodor  
Second reader: Judit Sándor

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis explores how active fathers practice parenting and how they relate to their parenting role in dual-earner households in contemporary Hungary. I use semi-structured interviews with 14 middle-class fathers in their late thirties, in Hungary's capital city, Budapest to investigate active fathers' lived experiences. I find that active fathers adopt stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work, in line with Western research which describes the "involved father" (Gerson 1993). The Western canon of family sociology can be applied to the Hungarian context, while using for example the notions of parents' interchangeability and fathers as "mothers' helpers" (e.g. Coltrane 1989). Yet, active fathers also feel ambivalent about their parenting role. Their stories expose their mixed feelings about their own practices and identities, and the ways in which they are related to the pervasive 'breadwinner – homemaker ideology' (Fraser 1997). Finally, active fathers challenge the 'hegemonic masculine ideal' (Connell 1995) by 'de-gendering' homemaking and childrearing as they develop an alternative masculinity, which finding complies with Coltrane's earlier research.*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Balancing the needs of children for nurture  
and the needs of women for independence without  
overloading women is the outstanding challenge of  
feminism.  
(Craig 2006: 260)*

In contemporary Hungary people tend to hold strong ‘traditional’ views on gender roles, whereby men are assigned the breadwinner role and women the homemaking one, even if economic pressures have not made for long this strong division possible. At the same time, egalitarian views are also apparent and reflected in daily family practices.

The unequal division of labour between men and women is in the focus of feminist research. However, we know little about men’s perception in this field. While Western sociological research has by now developed a strong interest in studying men in the family context, the same cannot be confirmed for Hungary (Pleck 1987, Jump and Haas 1987, Lupton and Barclay 1997, Hobson 2002). By researching this topic in present-day Hungary I wish to expose the overlooked issue of fatherhood and how it might have an impact on gender equality. Hence, I aim to contribute to Hungarian research on families and work-life balance, from the generally understudied perspective of men as ‘active fathers’.

This thesis explores how ‘active fathers’ practice parenting and how they relate to their parenting role in dual-earner households. I use the term ‘active father’ (aktív apa) as a tally to the English notion of “involved father” as an equal or primary caretaker described in Western literature (Gerson 1993), since I have found this term best signifying its substance in the Hungarian language.

I argue that active fathers adopt stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work. Yet, they also feel ambivalent about their parenting role.

I draw on theories and research findings from Western, mainly U.S., settings which critically analyse men's roles and practices as fathers, with an aim to see whether this body of research can be applied in a foreign, i.e. the Hungarian context. In the field of family research, concentrating on the sexual division of labour and care-work specifically, I examine whether shared parenting does in fact mean equal participation of both parents in the "second shift" (Hochschild 1989, Coltrane 1989, Bianchi et al. 2000, Craig 2006). Studying this type of fathering may also prove interesting and valuable in its relation to 'hegemonic masculinity' and alternative masculinities since fatherhood is constitutive of manhood (Connell 1995, Marsiglio and Pleck 2005).

In my research project I used qualitative research method to collect information on active fathers' lived experiences. Specifically, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 middle-class fathers in their late thirties, in Hungary's capital city, Budapest in the period of 21 April and 12 May 2009.

In Chapter One I review Western academic literature so that I can place my Hungarian project on the academic plane. I rely on masculinity studies and feminist literature on sociology of the family and the division of labour within, which use qualitative methods complemented with quantitative data.

In Chapter Two I present the qualitative research method in detail including how I selected and interviewed active fathers and how I interpreted their narrated stories. Here I also discuss potential limitations of my research. In contrast to quantitative time-use surveys I decided on semi-structured interviews with which method I can offer ample space to my subjects for telling their stories, and hence to give voice to this group of men.

In Chapter Three I provide a contextual frame for the individuals interviewed. Namely, I offer statistical evidence on the Hungarian context and I draw a profile from active

fathers' individual situations in which their parenting practices evolve. Introducing the Hungarian context is indispensable if study results are to be compared against Western research findings.

In Chapter Four I explore in-depth active fathers' lived experiences in two analytical subchapters. The analysis is based on the 14 semi-structured interviews' material which I synthesised and built my thesis argument from. Sub-chapter *Interchangeable Parenting Roles* deals with how active fathers go beyond stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work; followed by Sub-chapter *Ambivalence about the Parenting Role*, which examines active fathers' mixed feelings and the potential interplay between the hegemonic masculine ideal and active fathers' alternative masculine identity.

# I. MASCULINITIES, FATHERHOOD AND THE DIVISION OF LABOUR

*[Because] “gender is relational and not essential, creating and recreating ourselves as gendered persons involves not a little struggle and ambivalence.”  
(Hess cited in Ferree 1990: 869)*

Within the context of shared parenting I argue that active fathers adopt stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work. Yet, they also feel ambivalent about their parenting role.

By researching the topic of shared parenting from men’s perspectives in present-day Hungary I wish to expose the overlooked issue of fatherhood and its impact on gender equality. While I consider both ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ to be cultural inventions, aligning with Hobson’s definition of fatherhood as “the cultural coding of men as fathers” (Hobson 2002: 10-11), the overall hegemonic discourses naturalise parenting roles in almost all social settings, thus enabling as well as constraining fathers and mothers, that is to say, fathers can find it difficult to take up the ‘nurturing father’ role.

Social science research for long underestimated, if not completely disregarded, the significant role of men in the family and it tended to concentrate on women and their role conflict with respect to paid work and care-work (Jump and Haas 1987, Cazenave and Leon 1987). For example, Lupton and Barclay calculated that there were thirteen times more sociological articles on mothers than on fathers between the mid-1970s and mid-1990 (Lupton and Barclay 1997: 52). With regard to Central Eastern Europe and Hungary, the situation was

similar, the family tended to be a purely mothers' issue (Adamik 2000). Although Western research has by now developed a strong interest in researching men in the family and working life context, in Hungary qualitative research results are still not available on parenting practices focusing on men's roles in families.<sup>1</sup> Considering the recent transition period Hungary went through, and as a result of which many of the previous socialist era's solid economic, social and cultural structures collapsed, gender roles are in flux and because the family is often the place for "shock absorbing" (Hochschild 1989: xxi), roles and the division of labour within are worth examining. With the present small project, I wish to contribute to Hungarian research on families and work-life balance, from the generally understudied perspective of men as active fathers.

In the following I present why the issues of fatherhood and shared parenting are relevant to gender equality, by examining available theories and research findings from Western, mainly U.S., settings which critically analyse men's roles and practices as fathers. I rely on masculinity studies and feminist literature on sociology of the family and the division of labour within, which use qualitative methods complemented with quantitative data. Specifically, I address the following debates in the available academic literature: firstly, I look at masculinities and how they relate to one another, addressing also the issue of fatherhood. Secondly, while reviewing how men's identities are forged vis-à-vis paid work and care-work, I examine the question of the sexual division of labour, particularly considering dual-earner households and whether shared parenting does in fact mean equal participation of both parents in the 'second shift'.

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware however of an ongoing Hungarian research near completion titled "Az apaszerepek változásai" (Changing roles of fathers).



## **I. 1. MASCULINITIES AND FATHERHOOD**

### *Multiple masculinities*

Within the field of masculinities studies, I align myself with authors, such as Marsiglio and Pleck, who, while acknowledging the fact that academic literature which explicitly addresses the relation between masculinity and fatherhood is scarce, claim that “fathering can be studied in connection to hegemonic masculinity as well as alternative constructions of masculinities that give meaning to men’s everyday lives in diverse situations” (2005: 250). Connell (1995) in his groundbreaking work on masculinities in fact creates plural from the singular, and sets the “hegemonic masculinity” against other types. I work with Connell’s definition, i.e. “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 1995: 77), in my study insofar as I describe the hegemonic masculine ideal which is valid for my study subjects in the context of practicing fatherhood.

I wish to stress the notion of ‘ideal’ in order to mark that hegemonic masculinity is not easy to locate in any one’s particular behaviour and other displayed attributes, that it is not fixed but changing with time and context, and always being contested (Lupton and Barclay 1997, Hobson 2002). What is important for my study is the fact that attacks are directed not only from outside, for example, from women’s groups, but from inside, from other men. (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Connell (1995) identifies subordinated, complicit, and marginalised masculinities existing parallel to the hegemonic one. Especially in the case of complicity the author claims that men take their “patriarchal dividend” to various extents in the fields of marriage and fatherhood, nonetheless they can hardly be associated with hegemonic masculinity (ibid: 77-78).

### *Hegemonic masculinity vis-à-vis work, family and being a father*

Various studies, such as Nock, Marsiglio and Cohan, describe the hegemonic masculine identity, constituted of the following components: being a father, provider for the family, protector of the wife and children, and being involved in children's lives (cited in Marsiglio and Pleck 2005: 256, 259). Therefore, work and family are not mutually exclusive dichotomies for men, however, "becoming someone through working" tends to be the most important component for most men through economic means in paid labour (Cazenave and Leon 1987: 260). Men's provider role, i.e. the identity of the family breadwinner dominates and often results in conflicts between the role of the provider and that of the caregiver. Some fathers develop to be "challengers" while others remain as "conformers" (Ranson 2001). Moreover, initiatives such as paternity leave schemes, or simply sharing the provider role with the women, often receive negative feedback, partly because these are conceived as directly challenging, if not threatening, the hegemonic masculine breadwinner ideal (Pleck 1987: 95, Ferree 1990: 874). Consistent with these Western research findings, I have found that the active fathers who I examine in the present paper do display signs of inner conflicts and confusion as these men sometimes wish to drive towards their hegemonic masculine ideal, which is identified exclusively with the family provider through paid work.

The ideal of fatherhood underwent major changes during the past centuries and the culturally dominant father type today is in line with the above presented hegemonic masculinity which sees fathers as primary and often distant providers, originating from the late industrial era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ferree 1990, Pleck 1987, Lupton and Barclay 1997, Hobson 2002). Yet, in the American context in the early 1970s a new type of father emerges: the nurturing, caring father. Both Pleck (1987) and LaRossa (1988) warn though that these are only cultural ideals of the middle class white men and even this social group is far from its actual practicing, what they term as "androgynous fatherhood," i.e. involved father. Fathers'

guilt for not complying with the expected fatherhood image and their ambivalent feelings regarding their fathering practice are described as a result of the asynchronous change of cultural ideals and actual parenting conduct (La Rossa 1988). This research finding is indicative for my study in that it also describes and explains men's ambivalent feelings regarding their parenting practices. However, I have found an opposite direction giving way to disharmony between the expected cultural norm and the actual practice. In my research I concentrated on alternative masculinities, and I have found traces of hegemonic masculinity in the narratives of the interviewed men. Middle-class Hungarian fathers who opt for a more involved fathering practice may find themselves with ambivalent feelings as they do not adhere to the hegemonic norm. Thus, their alternative identity obviously is not solid, but in constant interplay with the hegemonic ideal.

In sum, I consider my target group, i.e. active fathers as one which is sorely in need of constructing a parallel masculine identity to the hegemonic one, so that they can make sense of their practices as fathers. Furthermore, I agree with Marsiglio and Pleck that my approach to the topic, i.e. fathers' involvement in child-care affects gender equality, is highly culturally contextualised and is open to multiple interpretations (see for example Popenoe 2000). Hence I follow the Western feminist agenda in that I fully subscribe to the opinion that "fatherhood is a key element in the 'gender politics of family time'" (Marsiglio and Pleck 2005: 257), that is, which parent spends how much time on child-care and family-related issues.

### *Doing gender – reinforcing and subverting hegemonic ideals*

When examining the active fathers in my study I focus on "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) which notion explains how the gender dichotomy is maintained: the "constant process of en-gendering behaviour as separate and unequal" (Ferree 1990: 869) the process of which is largely invisible unless it is being negotiated and actively challenged, i.e.

it happens in “out of place” and develops into a role conflict (West and Zimmerman 1987: 139-140). Some authors bring examples for ‘de-gendering’ emphasising the division of labour related to childcare: Connell, for example, calls for “re-embodiment” of the male body in showing it as the nurturing body which can “develop capacities” as well as “experience other pleasures” than the hegemonically prescribed ones (Connell 1995: 233), while Coltrane attests that fathers’ routinely doing childcare and housework can challenge and even transform the meaning of gender (Coltrane 1989). These men live in a transitional state and cannot detach themselves from the hegemonic masculinity norms, nonetheless they develop coping strategies so that they can pioneer in an uncharted territory without much social support and role models “in an unresponsive society” (Jump and Haas 1987: 111-112).

By doing gender one can reinforce as well as subvert the hegemonic norms and ideals through his or her individual activities and interactions with other members of society (West and Zimmerman 1987, Ferree 1990, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). I have found this concept to be true: in my study the active fathers ‘de-gender’ the stereotypical roles related to homemaking and childcare in a sphere which is reserved for women, thus start dismantling the rigid separation of the family home from the outside working space. I examined active fathers’ narrations with a view to focussing on their changing identity and their feelings in connection with this shift. My results confirm the indications of Coltrane (1989) and Jump and Haas (1987) in that by undertaking a stereotypically female role daily these active fathers challenge the prevailing social norms. Moreover, in line with Connell (1995) they also find satisfaction in doing care-work, thus have developed their capacities successfully.

At this point I connect my first focus, i.e. hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood and the second one, that is, the division of labour, since this is exactly the place where the active fathers of my study seem to be ‘out of place.’

## I. 2. UNEQUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

### *Separate spheres – divided labour*

As I discussed above by ‘doing gender’ the gender dichotomy is defended, and along with it the separate spheres ideology which prescribes the public domain for men with the breadwinning role and the private domain for women with the homemaking role since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the masculine breadwinner norm was invented. At the same time the connection and interdependency of paid work in the public and housework including care-work within the family domain are kept well hidden. Several writers urge researchers to move beyond the separate spheres by “shattering such artificial dichotomies as work and home” (Ferree 1990: 880) and hope to see “reintegration of spheres” (Kimmel 2000: 148) so that these two are not seen as mutually exclusive territories, which appear as hard choices in individuals’ lives: either work or family.

The rigid gendered division of the spheres is significant in my research as I interview working fathers who attempt to reconcile their work and family lives in a patriarchal system which reinforces this division and both structurally and also with use of ideology hinders men in entering women’s domain and contributing to homemaking.

### *How does unequal division of labour come about?*

While the strict division of labour never existed for the majority of society at any given time (Ferree 1990, Fraser 1997), the two-poled ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology’ nonetheless prevails based on the principle that men go outside to earn the family’s living while women stay inside to do homemaking, including housework and care-work. Women always contributed to family subsistence, yet in the Western context their share in economic maintenance of the family became apparent only when women in massive numbers joined the labour market in the 1950s. Hochschild, while conducting research on families, documents

partial changes in society, the result of which additionally burdens women who entered the labour market. In order to capture the phenomenon and its dynamics, Hochschild coins the phrase “stalled revolution” (Hochschild 1989: 12-13). In my opinion the phrase is a strikingly apt expression, reflecting the drastic change that started with a change in women’s lives, that is, their entering paid employment *en masse*, and also manifesting that the overall expected change is left unfinished. In general, I fully agree with Hochschild in her statement regarding what is still missing and should be ahead of our societies: “A stalled revolution *lacks social arrangements* [emphasis added] that ease life for working parents, and *lacks men* [emphasis added] who share the second shift.” Hochschild refers to the work to be done at home as “second shift” including both housework and childcare, claiming it is primarily women who take on this additional, unpaid workload (ibid.). In my reading there is a new type of woman, i.e. who works and cares, but there is no new type of man, who would equally share the load of family-related duties, and whose existence would be vital in triggering and completing the social revolution.

#### *Towards a ‘more equal’ division of labour in dual-earner households*

In response to Hochschild’s claim, and particularly in the post-socialist setting – where as part of the ideology women entered paid employment in the socialist regimes around the same time as in the U.S. – I focus on current practices of a group of men in dual-earner families who, in my opinion, satisfy the expectations of a new type of man. As I would logically expect, in a dual-earner family set-up where both parents are in the paid workforce both parents contribute to homemaking and childrearing as well. For this phenomenon of sharing, in my paper I use Ehrensaft’s definition of ‘shared parenting’ as a “*conscious* [emphasis added] decision to share both the daily tasks of raising the children and the economic support of the family” (cited in Ehrenberg et al. 2001: 143). Nonetheless, most

researchers who address the problem of shared parenting and the division of labour within the family agree that shared parenting does not automatically mean *equal* participation in the second shift, i.e. men do not get involved in housework and childrearing the same extent as their working wives do (Milkie et al. 2002). In fact, data from dual-earner couples do not show a significant difference when compared to single-earner families (Jump and Haas 1987, Hochschild 1989, Craig 2006, Bianchi et al. 2000). Concerning the division of labour in dual-earner families, Hochschild and Gilbert establish the following couple-types, reflecting the ideology of marital roles, and thus how they manage their households: traditional, transitional, and egalitarian (Hochschild 1989: 15).<sup>2</sup> According to Gilbert's findings one-third of dual-earner couples fit the category of the more egalitarian role-sharing group, which data in my opinion proves that there is a slow change happening in gender role transformation (cited in Ehrenberg et al. 2001: 143). Bianchi et al. also report some increase in men's contribution to housework and suggest "some degree of cultural change" (Bianchi et al. 2000: 219), however, two-third of the dual-earner families are still left in 'women's hands,' where women have to take on the second shift. In my study I have found that active fathers mostly belong to the egalitarian couple type, and I have presented that a significant portion of their parenting practices is a result of conscious decisions, which result supports Kimmel's belief according to which "men have to *want* [original emphasis] to do more" on their individual level (Kimmel 2000: 132). Moreover, I have found that most of the active fathers manage to achieve a 'fair' or even equal share of labour at home.

Various time-use studies (e.g. Ehrenberg et al. 2001, Yeung et al. 2001) focusing on dual-earner families are mostly in accord and conclude that mothers still spend not only considerably more time (two to three times as much as fathers) with their children, but also claim that the nature of the care-work done by men and women are different. Craig, for

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper I use Hochschild's labels, noting that Gilbert equally uses three categories for the same phenomenon, conventional, modern and role-sharing respectively covering Hochschild's categories.

example, argues that mothers bear the major burden of responsibility of care management, and they tend to do more of physical care-work than fathers. Fathers, in addition, are not likely to be alone with their children, and are not as time-constrained as mothers are in their childcare tasks (Craig 2006: 275). In line with most research, Lupton concludes that “motherhood is still charged with far more responsibility than fatherhood” (cited in Hand 2006: 72).

Although I have not conducted a detailed quantitative time-use study and can only rely on qualitative information, i.e. the interviewed active fathers’ narratives, I present my findings on egalitarian men’s involvement in childcare, both reflecting on the quantity as well as the quality aspects. I present that within the context of my research I have found, on the one hand, that active fathers spend relatively equal time with their children (when compared to their partners), including substantial ‘times alone.’ Moreover, the nature and types of tasks these active fathers perform are very similar to mothers’, thus there does not exist too much discretionary power for men (as opposed to Gerson’s findings 1993), which results do not comply with the above. On the other hand, even very egalitarian minded fathers leave the overall management of the household, including managing their children’s lives, to their working wives, which is in full accordance with the findings above: active fathers still mainly function as “mothers’ helpers” (in line with Coltrane 1989, Gerson 1993).

In the following two chapters I present my research method of interviewing and interpreting active fathers and the context within which active fathers emerge in present-day Hungary, providing more details of their characteristics both regarding their childcare involvement as well as their paid employment.



## II. INTERVIEWING AND INTERPRETING ACTIVE FATHERS

*[If one] chooses oral history, she must contend with the difficulties (and enjoy the delights) of writing about a living person in a way that satisfies both parties. (Reinharz 1992: 132)*

### **Identifying active fathers in dual-earner households**

The task in my small research project was to examine men in present-day Hungary who practice shared parenting in their homes, i.e. who are caring, nurturing fathers to their children next to contributing financially to the family sustenance. While identifying dual earner couples was relatively easy, identification of active fathers posed a particular problem. At the outset of the project I envisioned setting a short and easy set of criteria according to which I would define what practices, time allocation, etc. constitute active fathering for me. As I progressed with the project plan, I had to abandon this ‘objective’ selection as I was not able to design an objective definition that would encompass all the diverse features of the parenting experience. Additionally, I could not decide if I should concentrate on quantitative or qualitative components of childcare. Instead, I resorted to an absolutely subjective way of identifying active fathers, namely, I asked mothers’ opinion of their partners.

Interestingly, I was even compelled to get in touch with women first, as it turned out the phone-numbers I received from my personal contacts from two kindergartens, belonged to mothers, not fathers; with only one exception to the rule. These ‘contact lists’ also suggest that when it comes to official, emergency caregiver-contacts regarding children placed in kindergartens, it is predominantly women whose phone numbers populate such lists.

Whether the practice reflects the automatic response from parents' side or the automatism from the kindergarten management side is, of course, not clear. In addition to my initial contact making with some women, the 'snowball sampling technique' also worked well in my case: the women enthusiastic about the project offered their help and started *de facto* qualifying not just their own partners but other fathers too in their circles, which still dominantly meant the same two kindergartens.

### **Interviewing active fathers**

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 14 active fathers in dual earner couples, who have children under school age, in the period of 21 April and 12 May 2009. The fathers' average age was 39, they were between 31 and 42. Their partners' average age was a bit lower, 36, ranging from 31 to 40. All men were married except for one, who is now co-habiting with his partner after having divorced her. About half of my respondents, eight had two children, while four of them had three children and two of them had one child. The children were mostly of kindergarten age, only in four families (all with three children) was there a child already enrolled in primary school. Most of them had a child just about to enter primary school.

Regarding their profession, I had quite a diverse group: I had among my interviewees economists, teacher-artists, car mechanics, doctors, researchers, service industry-, administration- and finance people. Their partners' educational background was equally varied. However, the couples' level of education was dominantly secondary and tertiary level. They all lived in and around Budapest and were linked, except for one, to the capital city through their working places and job requirements. Considering both their education level and socio-economic status I would place them under the category of middle-class

families, noting though that some of the interviewees referred to financial constraints in their current situation.

The location of the interviews was sometimes problematic. The most desirable place for me would have been my interviewees' home locations, in accordance with Stake's point: "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world," (Stake 2003: 154) which in my case can be understood literally. Indeed, I conducted five of the interviews in the family homes; another six in cafes nearby the fathers' working places or daily routine points, such as sports centres and rail stations, and three in their workplaces. Thus, a third of my interviewees let me in their 'private spaces' for which I was truly grateful. In the other cases a compromise had to be reached on a location which best fitted both parties' schedules and daily travelling patterns. The interviews lasted between one hour and an hour and a half. Beforehand all respondents were promptly informed about the background of the research project, its aim and conditions. Confidentiality issues were also discussed and thus in order to ensure anonymity their names and occupations are not used in the material. I additionally offered a discussion opportunity to all of them after the project was finished so that I could brief them on my findings, especially considering that about half of my subjects cannot read English. Many of them were in fact enthusiastic and eager to learn about the outcome.

I grouped my interest around three main themes:<sup>3</sup> daily practice and division of labour at home; father models and perceptions; and meshing of the roles of the *father* and the *worker*. However, I did not always keep to my predefined questions as some of my

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<sup>3</sup> For compiling my own themes and related questions, I consulted with Judit Takács, Head of Research Group, Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her related research projects' interviews were my references:

1) a work-life balance (WLB) survey with working parents, in cooperation with Stockholm University within the RECOWOE (Reconciling Work and Welfare in Europe) FP6-2004-Citizens-4 European Network of Excellence (NoE) project (<http://www.recwowe.eu/>), and 2) "Az apaszerepek változásai" (Changing roles of fathers).

interviewees often anticipated my questions and answered them without being asked. After I started the interview with the request for a daily routine description, I let them speak rather freely only guiding them with the next question, and when the interviewees mentioned some information which I thought was worth elaborating I asked them to speak more about such points. I ended the conversation with the question whether my subject would consider exchange with his partner, both in terms of parenting and working engagements. Although I meant this question to be a relaxing one for closure, assuming that the interviewees already answered this during the conversation, some fathers got engaged in yet another five minutes of discussing the issue of ‘change or no-change.’ Thus, I learned interesting aspects of current working cultures as well as individual opinions influenced by gender ideologies. My approach, including the originally set themes and frame, remained the same all through the process. I recorded all but one interviews and analysed them after listening to the recordings and transcribing the discussions.

### **Interpreting active fathers’ lived experiences**

Regarding my overall position in the research project, I fully identify with Ginsburg who argues for calling her ‘informants’ ‘interpreters’, the individuals who “were helping [her] to understand what was going on in the community”, as this notion has more of a positive connotation and reflects the dialogical relation between the outsider researcher, the interviewees and the audience “back home” (cited in Reinharz 1992: 129-130).

Since I was working with individuals’ experiences, which are interpretations calling for interpretation, the final outcome is a double reflection of the parenting practices under examination, i.e. first that of the interviewee and second, mine, the researcher’s, hence the ‘final product’ is shared between the two sides. Additionally, I am of the opinion that feminist researchers do not necessarily have to be silent only let others be heard. Instead,

“any involvement at all by the oral historian is a de facto interpretation” and thus one should expressly seek to provide analysis which reflects the frame and perspective used (Reinharz 1992: 137-138). I think the researcher’s self-reflection must also fit in here in order to ensure respect for the subjects and to balance the “direct and forceful feminist critique” (Borland 1998: 322).

Finally, accepting the claim that experience itself is situated and conditioned (Scott, 1992), I hoped to gain exactly these experiences’ background, the underlying, even if less dominant ideologies and norms at play, which result in specific parenting practices and change, if any. I treat my interview data as proof that there are less dominant and less visible practices existing, which are worth exposing through applying interviews with men, which technique is hardly ever used when exploring men’s subjectivity in the context of fatherhood (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 6).

### **Limitations of interviewing active fathers ‘only’**

My study is a collective case study, which Stake defines as “instrumental study extended to several cases” (Stake 2003: 138). I have a chosen phenomenon, i.e. shared parenting, to which I looked for supportive cases and examined how pre-selected issues were manifested in the selected cases, acknowledging that “the cases are opportunities to study the phenomena” (ibid: 152). As obvious from the above, this type of study compelled me to choose the cases carefully. My limitation lies in the small sample since I cannot justifiably draw “grand generalizations” from a couple of cases (ibid: 156). I was not be able to interview just any fathers or any men, for instance as Gerson did, who built on three-hour long in-depth life-history interviews with 138 men, and drew up a typology of men, one category being of the “involved orientation,” who became equal or primary caretakers (Gerson 1993: x-xi). Since my study subjects are 14 active fathers, I was not able to identify

other types of fathers myself, and as such I must remain content with a bipolar ‘two-extreme-categorisation’: active versus inactive fathers. (This might prove problematic insofar as I may fall victim to essentialising within the category of ‘men,’ instead of laying stress on diversity within the group.) Nonetheless, I likewise consider the argument according to which a few case studies can be indicative of “suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability” (Stake 2003: 156).

The other potential limitation is that by only interviewing fathers, I gained only a ‘one-sided story.’ Had I included their partners to be interviewed separately in order to gain access to the ‘full picture’, I would have been able to better reflect on the current shared parenting practices by analysing the information gained from the mothers. In this respect I think that Reinharz’s notion of “paired histories” is applicable to my study’s context in that it aims at juxtaposing the individual’s account about his or her relation with the other, and thus can shed light on their relationships and the wider social context (Reinharz 1992: 129). I missed this pairing opportunity by listening to fathers only. Yet, I trust that I gave some voice to their partners as well insofar as I actively engaged them in the selection process.

### III. CONTEXTUALISING

## ACTIVE FATHERS IN HUNGARY

*You cannot solve the management of a family  
with software backup. You cannot know,  
everything is unpredictable, and then one  
cannot go to work in the morning. . . . There is  
no workplace, engagement with which you  
can implement this . . . unless someone is a  
freelancer and can work at home.  
(Géza)*

In this chapter I present the context in which shared parenting evolves in present-day Hungary, and active father as a type emerges. First, I depict the country setting within which these men were raised and practice parenting today. Secondly, I describe the individual situations in which active fathers are likely to develop as I conclude from my interview data the various aspects and conditions at play in my subjects' economic, social and cultural background.

#### III. 1. THE HUNGARIAN CONTEXT

In today's Hungary the active fathers whom I interviewed tend to be 'rare species.' While dual-earner households well represent Hungarian society, men doing housework and engaging in childcare definitely not. In the presented below I cite data supporting my argument from Hungarian time-use statistics pertaining to the division of household labour and research findings from international attitude surveys relating to gender roles.

With regard to the number of earners per household, after the transition period the one-earner family model's ratio increased compared to the previously widespread two-earner one. However, two-earner households still dominate among Hungarian families making up 48% of all households, while one-earner households represent 40% and three- or more-earner ones 12% (Blaskó 2006, Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [KSH] 2005). Furthermore, there are at least two earners in more than half of the active households with children (KSH 2006: 18). In sum, the interviewed fathers represent the majority of Hungarian families in that there are at least two earners in their households.

When examining labour and time-use statistics it is evident that average Hungarian women, when focusing on domestic labour, work almost twice as much than men: in paid labour women work 65% compared to men's time, but they work 179% compared to men's participation in housework. Overall, women 'outscore' men with 115%. Considering cooking, since I bring this task as an example in the following chapter, women spend six times as much on it than men, with only two other chores having higher percentages than cooking: washing-up and doing the laundry with ironing. With regard to childcare, women spend 230% more time on it than men, within which category 'attending to the physical needs of children' means 416% more time for women (Falussy cited in Koncz 2008). In short, according to statistics men spend on average 2.4 hours per day on housework and family-provisioning. In contrast, most of the interviewed active fathers report that they usually spend four hours with their children daily, thus I can conclude that my study subjects contribute to a great extent to 'levelling' Hungarian statistics.

Concerning the legal and institutional framework, since 1985 men can equally take parental leave, however, the percentage of men benefiting from this provision is insignificant: 2.4% of all parents (KSH 2005). Moreover, government-subsidised childcare facilities are available to a vast majority of children of kindergarten age. Privately, engaging



‘additional caregivers’ are a widespread practice in the country; these are often the grandparents and less frequently paid baby-sitters.

Besides hard figures reflecting the actual positions of men and women in the households, reference must be made to the Hungarian population’s attitudes towards gender roles and the division of labour. Hungarian people are characterised as being rather ‘traditional’ whereby 70% of the population do not reject altogether the role-division of ‘male breadwinner and female homemaker’. Furthermore, Hungarians are most supportive, among 24 European countries, of the opinion that men should enjoy priority on the labour market if opportunities are scarce, suggesting the norm that men’s role equals with breadwinning. Well reflecting the practice outlined above in statistics, the unequal division of labour is largely accepted by Hungarian women. In dual-earner households women consider their ‘double time’ spent on housework acceptable, while in homemakers’ case (where the man is the only earner), the ratio was four times as much workload for women (Blaskó 2006, Takács 2008). Lastly, research attests to the fact that there is a considerable discrepancy between the actual practices of Hungarian families, of which little is known, and the ‘normative’ political views regarding the family, which heavily impact on public opinion (Neményi and Takács 2005).

### **III. 2. PROFILING ACTIVE FATHERS**

When examining interviewed fathers’ individual situations with the aim to sketch a profile for active fathers, I first discuss the numerous characteristics and diverse meanings of ‘active’. Secondly, I present active fathers’ relation to their paid work: the specificities I found in this context. And lastly, I consider what negotiations might take place in the couple’s lives while shared parenting evolves.

*“Active” means a variety of attributes*

The men interviewed were all qualified beforehand as ‘active’ by their partners. Still, I found quite a variation among them whereby on a spectrum one end would represent limited “mother’s helpers”, the middle equal sharers and the other end primary caregivers. In terms of percentages there are few cases where men do, according to their own estimates, 20 percent of the homemaking, and there is at least one who does 80 percent of it, if not more.

All but one agrees to the label ‘active father.’ Tibor is the only one that terms himself different for the time being, calling himself an ‘observing father’ waiting for his children to start schooling when he plans to get more involved. In line with his categorisation I place him, along with Árpád, in the least involved group, not contributing more than 20 percent. The difference, nonetheless between the two, is that Árpád displays a bit of guilt about not spending enough time with his children, and states that sometimes he envies his wife for being with them. On the other end of the spectrum, there is Géza who, in my opinion, qualifies for the primary caregiver title, whose wife works very long hours and can take her share mainly on the weekends. Based on fathers’ narratives, four couples manage an equal share of paid- and care-work in their daily practice, including sharing the coordination, too. Half my subjects, seven fathers belong to the so-called “mother’s helper” category (Gerson 1993, Coltrane 1989), three of whom function as ‘fathers with a slip of paper’ who receive the to-do-list from their partners, evidently showing that the overall management is the women’s responsibility. Some use the expression itself, “I help [her, i.e. the wife] with whatever I am able to do,” while some find various excuses as to why they are not capable of coordinating the bits and pieces of family life, in line with what is called ‘fathers’ discretionary power’, i.e. men can choose when, to what extent and in which tasks they contribute to shared parenting (Gerson 1993). Nonetheless, all these men seem child-centred and having a close relation with their children, as for example, Mihály, describes himself,

Basically I feel good. So, I am fully involved in my kids' lives, so there are no moments of which I had no knowledge, let it be operational, emotional or intellectual. So, it feels so good that they relate to me the same way as to their mother.

### *Active fathers and their paid work*

While there seems to be some variation with respect to childcare, active fathers share a number of characteristics in the field of labour relations. Particularly important seems to be the notion of flexible work and working time among the active fathers. While in four couples mothers and fathers are similarly flexible in terms of jobs, in four couples the father has a flexible schedule, in two the mother, and in four couples both parents have strictly set working hours. Hence in most families at least one parent has a more or less flexible schedule so that the couple can juggle between their paid work requirements and their children's needs. In line with this, the bulk of the fathers cannot conceive my question whether they work eight, six or four hours. This question reflects my bias for the norm of the office employee working '9 to 5.' The point arising from this bias is the notion that every day is the same and there are regular working days; if it is different, it is the weekend. In the shared parenting practice, however, there are no regular days, rather regular weeks, which system allows for the parents to take care of the children in shifts. Indeed, most of the couples have developed a weekly schedule which clearly tasks each parent for specific, and often the same things during the week, but on different days. This means a lot of hours spent alone while active fathers are in full charge of their children and the household. This shift-work practice is sometimes the cause for men's complaints about not seeing their partners. The concept of weekend exists, at least the ideal of it, and the strong principle of 'together', i.e. whatever is the activity on the weekend, couples try to spend time together and with their children.

In connection to paid work, hardly any active fathers mention the word 'career' in their narration. It seems that they have either no career aspiration at all or for the time being

they put their career on the back-burner. Or, as two of the fathers moreover state, they have already achieved a status in their profession: have their academic standing or already in top management positions, thus they can afford challenging the ‘work system’ and the working culture it maintains. The bulk of the fathers report that the issue of travel is a primary consideration: they are not willing to take jobs which include a lot of travel or they try to delegate these assignments to other colleagues as much as they can. Furthermore, active fathers voice their strong determination not to neglect their children vis-à-vis their job. For instance, Balázs states,

In a certain way I am an ‘achiever careerist,’ I am interested in what I do. ...[But] if this thing [the job] reaches a certain limit, ... then I will not stay here. Because it is not worth it for me: that I am stuck here and not able to see my kids.

Balázs sets limits on how much time he is willing to engage in his paid work and sets against it another priority, his children. However, he also claims that he is not afraid of not receiving another job offer should he decide to change. This is a clear sign of professional establishment in the specific trade area he is committed to, which status offers the possibility for him to choose the most suitable job.

#### *Active fathers’ negotiation and compromise within the couple*

It is difficult to decide how much of shared parenting develops as a result of the parents’ inner drives, as ‘self-take’ and how much of this choice is a result of ‘a must’, due to in-couple tough negotiations and outside factors, such as economic pressures. Most of the interviewed fathers claim their practice has developed rather unconsciously, they did not specifically discuss it with their partners and do not mention specific external elements. Yet, Géza provides his observation of the current situation in Hungary and the change he notices with regard to care- and paid work allocation in families.

The role of women changed tremendously, so did the world of workplaces and who the managers are. [...] The number of active fathers rose drastically, simply because the life

actualities demand it. So, this is not in all cases a free choice, but because wives and mothers became active workers with all the negative features of emancipation appearing in families. This in fact makes it unavoidable that fathers become active.

His perception and his use of “negative” make me believe that he is not at ease with his current situation and that he lives his life as if he had lost something he had before. I wonder perhaps this father actually refers to the fact that while women were considered ‘working mothers’ in socialism and often treated differently from men, today women are seen as ‘workers’ only. Thus, they have to work ‘more’ in the contemporary working culture, which Géza codes as a negative consequence of emancipation, due to which men are forced to get more involved in the private sphere.

While portraying the situation in which he has to make hard decisions, Gyula plays on a proverb, “Exigency is a great master,” explaining one moment in their life. When his wife had an opportunity: “a big project, big money, big career move” which matched with his not liking his job, and there he found himself one morning being at home with a six-month-old baby. He states that it was not even a question what would be the family decision in that specific situation.

In sum, within the framework of this small research project, I can describe active fathers in present-day Hungary as follows: they are likely to be mother’s helpers in that it rarely happens that active fathers take on the demanding task of coordinating homemaking and childcare. Active fathers in many cases take up jobs, such as in sales, where working time is flexible, thus it allows for undertaking other commitments, namely childcare. In addition, active fathers are not openly career-oriented: in their narration it is not featured so strongly with which they identify themselves, or they have already established their professional standing. Moreover, in a number of cases active fathers have partners whose work schedule is less flexible than theirs, and who work in multinational corporations, which

demand long hours and full commitment from women workers, hence leaving fathers fully trusted with their children.

In the following chapter I present how these active fathers in such settings recount their lives, how they feel about their juggling between their roles, especially considering the worker/breadwinner and the father/carer sides. I analyse the 14 active fathers' narration and synthesise the material in order to build my argument on their interchangeable parent roles as well as mixed feelings about their parenting role.

## IV. ACTIVE FATHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

*I think the kids treat us quite the same... so it is not typical that "ooh... this cannot be done because we would need Mum for this."  
(Mihály)*

*After all, I think in an ideal situation the man is the breadwinner; not the woman earns more. Although in our case I don't think ... [hesitating], there is no conflict from this.  
(Pál)*

This chapter explores active fathers' lived experiences, how they narrate their lives in connection with their breadwinning and childcare engagements. I argue that active fathers adopt stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work. Yet, they also feel ambivalent about their parenting role. While being fully aware of the term's ambiguous nature, by 'adoption' I mean a personal inner value and choice, which might not be wholly conscious and pre-meditated and I cannot be sure that adoption indeed means 'happiness' for example. However, in my reading 'adoption' is a notion which is definitely free from most external conditions and pressures given the fact that there could be other 'solutions' available as well at men's disposal in the situations described below.

#### IV. 1. INTERCHANGEABLE PARENTING ROLES

In this sub-chapter I present how active fathers go beyond stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work. I argue that active fathers readily adapt to the new situation, in which they parent small children successfully and develop a gender-neutral notion of ‘interchangeable parent-couple’.

In active fathers’ narratives I often found the following descriptions referring to their actual care-work: “I don’t mind doing this”, “it is not a problem”, “I can do this” and “I want to do this.” For example, Balázs summarises his view on his abilities and attitude as follows: “In my opinion, I can do anything with either of the kids, and I know it and I want it, too.” The ways in which my respondents spoke about their involvement with their children reflect in a couple of instances not only on the fact that they (passively) accept doing the stereotypical roles, and thus ‘de-gendering’ them, but also hints that it is a firm individual decision on their part: “I want to be there,” and also suggests that these men oftentimes enjoy care-related undertakings.

I argue that the issues below best describe how active fathers can adopt and in some cases even enjoy and take pride in their care-work. Most importantly, active fathers reject the stereotypical division of household labour in general, claiming that in their family either both parents do all kinds of work, or if roles are divided, it is done according to their characters, likes and dislikes. In order to demonstrate the case in specific contexts I take two examples of ‘typical female tasks’: cooking and nappy-changing. Furthermore, I present additional features of these men’s shared parenting practices which suggest their adoption of the caring and nurturing functions. Namely, they often stress relieving each other, a notion of flexibility in their everyday practice. The second characteristics is their will “to be there,”



which in most cases serves to develop a strong relationship with their children. Thirdly, they are proud of being able to manage care-work all alone on a regular basis and in some instances for longer periods. Throughout the interviews active fathers speak with much affection and with a good amount of humour about their lived experiences with their children, recounting both the difficulties and the rewards originating from this type of engagement.

#### **IV. 1. a. Rejecting stereotypical division of household labour**

Most active fathers claim that they do not differentiate among the various tasks that need to be done in the home and with the children. They function on the premise that ‘whoever is right there and then’ needs to handle what comes up or what it is time to do. As a result they often develop a strong sense of interchangeability, as in Mihály’s case:

... neither of us has such an exclusive task, so there is nothing I would not able to do. It is possible that I do it differently, what’s more, I surely do it differently because the stresses are elsewhere. [...] technically speaking I could raise my children alone. Obviously I would not be able to give as much as two parents...

This approach is characteristic of couples who reached or almost reached a fair, if not equal, sharing of parenting and breadwinning. Moreover, Pál seems to be caught by surprise by my question:

Mother or father role... I think it already ceased to exist, that it is the mother’s role to cook, clean and do the laundry and taking care of the children... well, perhaps it works where, lets say, the father works from morning till night and the mother stays at home as a ‘full-time mother,’ there are some families, there yes, I say, it is OK. ... but otherwise, I think it does not exist separately, I think whoever is available deals with the children.

I found it very interesting that this active father is so immersed in his own small reality that he has to think for a moment to find a case where he could still envision such a strong gender division between the father and the mother in the parenting context. It might also suggest that in his circles shared parenting became more of a normal practice than an exception, at least when speaking of the surface level. This father also claims that they are so proportionately

divided and so similar in their parenting tasks, that there is nothing to be changed with the partner. Another changeable couple-parent, Béla likewise meditates on potentially changing with his partner concluding that it would be the same:

The effective division of labour? From this respect in fact it would be the same situation. She in fact does the same as I do. Sometimes she is with the children, sometimes she teaches. The same place as me. This would only mean that I go to teach on different days...

Béla's perception is indeed equal on their sharing the care and paid work commitments in the family insofar as visible quantity and work pattern issues are concerned. Balázs also approaches the question from the strict quantitative point of view,

Well, there are some things that one does more than the other, but I think that... well, if strictly speaking our aim is to achieve equal-equal opportunities a 100 percent, even then we could catch up with each other fairly soon. ... but I don't waste energies on checking this out, but when I am at home when I have a day off during the week, then I start cooking because I am at home. So we don't have the thing that I am at home the whole day reading papers and when the wife comes home she has to prepare some food...

From this account it is evident that he strongly rejects stereotyping household chores, and is content with the division of labour as being fair. Moreover, it is also clear that Balázs sees no point in measuring the partners' contribution on a scale, but instead stresses the flexibility and availability notions when it comes to doing household labour. Mihály, at the same time, prefers to describe his children as a sort of proof in order to show what relations there are between the father and his children:

She [the daughter] knows how much I take part in the home issues and she comes to with plenty of questions and requests, such as ... she knows she wants to wear what, she goes and looks for it among the ready laundry waiting to be ironed, and she brings it to me asking me to iron it, because she knows it fits, or one of her buttons falls off then she puts it out for me to sew it up.

Mihály uses examples of his daughter's actions to explain in his household that it really does not matter for the children which parent to approach with what request. He further explains that the interchangeable relation with his son is even more obvious because he could spend much more time with him when he was born.

Yet, other fathers believe that there are motherly and fatherly tasks, however are not able to provide examples from their own families. When I try to elicit some more information, instead, I am provided with examples for the opposite:

Hhmm... I would say yes, there are. ... but no, in our home this is not how it works, because I do the same, the so-called motherly or womanly tasks, I do clean the toilet too, but V [wife] also does things, for example we have a small wooden shack in the garden and she painted it with this wood-protection stuff, which is typically rather a man's job.

Miklós keeps on contemplating on what is or what used to be a woman's job and finally concludes that in his home this works absolutely different. Listening to his example is equally enlightening to me in that it sheds light on the fact that some of these fathers might have become active not by consideration, but by taken by the tide. This happens, for example, when children arrived 'too quickly' or 'in bigger numbers', which is his case, having three, including twins.

"Technically speaking," some active fathers develop to be primary caregivers, for instance, Géza whose wife works 10-12 hours a day and thus he has to take on 90 percent of the childcare and housework, sums up his feelings as follows, when asked whether he felt good in this role

So, I would rather say, I don't mind doing it, I don't have psychic problems because I spend more time with the children and that I do the household chores. It does not matter at all if it means painting, screwing, which let's say are fatherly, or washing the dishes for that matter. ... I don't have stereotypes on what is father task and what is mother task, etc, etc. ... and because of this I live in peace with myself.

His case is perhaps the one where the couple exceeds equal parenting at the father's expense and thus he becomes the *de facto* primary caregiver for his children. Although he does not sound to be utterly happy about the current situation, he accepts that he has to do everything around the home regardless whether the particular task is more fatherly or more motherly.

Some couples maintain that role-division is desirable; however, they make the selection according to individual likes and dislikes and not according to gender stereotypes:

There were no roles before, that is why our marriage went bad. Everything was washed together concerning the division of labour. Now we try more to have better defined roles and I am not trying to pretend that I am not only myself but someone else, too. For example I iron my own shirts, but the rest is Janka's [the wife's] because she wants it, it belongs to the mother role. Plus the cooking. ... in our family these can be divided like this, according to our characters, attitudes. This works well now, it is fair.

From András' account it is clear that they try to devise a new set of roles which does not follow the gender roles, including some exceptions to the rules. He goes on emphasising the division:

Yes, I like doing this and this is my task... somehow this has become determined. And it is not [an issue] that I do expect the other that if I did the washing up twice, then you have to do the washing up twice. ....

Concerning the current set-up he concludes that

Now everyone gets what he or she likes plus he or she also gets things which are a bit more difficult, but I don't mind [doing them].

András' practice still suggests that one has to take on things which are not necessarily his or her favourite ones, accepting the fact that this is a necessary nuisance that comes with children and managing a home. Another father, Sándor who has strong equality consciousness believes that

We work one, we do one, we drive towards one, then I have the same tasks, too that she does [the wife]. So, it does not exist in me that 'you are the woman, and you have to do this, that and that'...so that I am left out of the housework, no.

Nonetheless, the same man goes on saying that he does not like the laundry, the washing up, etc.:

No, not that one. Well, I do the washing up if I really have to, but I told Mária [the wife] this is your task, me, I don't like this. I cannot. In the meantime I do the floors, mopping, sweeping, and the like.

His account in my opinion reflects that active fathers still have some discretion over what they want to do in the house, they pick and choose in line with their likes and the rest remains for

the mothers to deal with. Active fathers might divide roles to a certain extent which benefits primarily them, but it seems to me that these couples are also close to fairly (though not equally) sharing the burdens of cash and care when judged by the weekly routine as narrated by the fathers.

*Two stereotypical examples: nappy-changing and cooking*

While the above examples represent what fathers think of the division of household labour in general, I also kept two specific examples in my mind during the interviews which I consider typical female jobs either because there is a mother myth around it, namely changing nappies or traditionally it is a woman's job in the home, i.e. cooking. I directly asked my interviewees, "so how about ....?," and often received a facial and verbal incomprehension as if I was asking something funny or totally out of the context.

The issue of nappy-changing did not come up in almost any accounts, only when I specifically asked, thus active fathers do not feel they should mention it, if it had any importance. Most of them claim they did it right from the beginning and saw it more as a task that needs to be done that comes with the child. Mihály expresses his incomprehension to a certain extent, as to why I am asking this:

I did nappy-changing very well. Awesome. Yes. So, nappy-changing is not brain-surgery. So... yes, there it is, one wipes the bottom, tosses the nappy underneath....

Mihály tries to convince me that it is an easy thing to do, there is nothing mysterious about it: it has more of a mechanical nature than a sophisticated one, while Miklós also returns the question back to me:

Changing nappies? You don't need such big knowledge to it. In my opinion if someone criticises it, not because of the fact that it is nappy-changing but because of what might be inside. But then it is a different question!

Regarding the cooking issue, some fathers seem to be 'master chefs' in his kids' eyes, not just doing the unavoidable daily routine, but in fact finding some personal

satisfaction in it, which worked both towards the fathers and towards the children. What to have for dinner is a standard conversation topic in the afternoons between the children and their fathers in at least a third of the interviewed fathers' cases, which often results in a joint, 'then let's buy the ingredients' sessions at the supermarket on the way home. Sándor acknowledges that he cannot cook, but he is the one who usually makes sweet things. As his daughter loves *his* pancakes, she often asks her father to make something. They try to master doughnuts too, always considering the shared element in these attempts, that is, the sweet preparation is fun together and probably this is why the child loves whatever sweet things come out of his father's, and her own, hands. In a somewhat different fashion, Mihály explains that there is no full 'wish program' when it comes to eating, he does not accept the "today I hate tomorrow I love it" from his children, but often he caves in to them and agrees to stop by at the shop to buy cottage-cheese and to prepare dumplings on request as he is an expert in it and the kids love it. Dénes reports that he loves to concoct, prefers baking, and details at length and in minuscule details what sort of pasta dishes he prepares depending on ingredients availability and time. His kids, naturally, like what he prepares, and eat it up.

Recently I prepared cannelloni, for instance, you know what cannelloni is, right? I mixed ricotta with spinach, filled it in the cannelloni, poured on top lots of tomato juice, in the oven, parmesan on top.... The kids loved it, gobbled it. They like spinach, cottage cheese, pasta. And on other occasions the only thing I do is that I grate or slice up courgettes, simmer on oil, season it, then put tomato sauce on it, and onto the pasta, with parmesan. And then... just recently it happened that Bence [one of the kids] wants pasta, at seven in the evening! [showing strong indignation] so what? Quickly get some pasta, throw it in hot water, grate some cheese, with some sour-cream and that's it, he ate it up.

In his case, it seems that his existing interest of 'loving concocting' meets with the needs of his children, who on a daily basis need some edible food quickly. The enthusiasm with which Dénes speaks about his food preparation practices shows that he enjoys the task itself, the reward he gets in his children 'eating it up' and in his being able to solve a sudden, annoying

seven pm request from his child with such ease. Géza, who claims to cook 80-85% of the time, makes a joke out of the question if his kids actually eat his cooking or not:

Of course. Well, we can say that that is the reason why *I* cook. [laughs] if my wife cooks, then she conducts a creative session in the kitchen, she always puts things together in a rather questionable way ... [laughs]

He takes some reward in the fact that his cooking passes his children's scrutiny, unlike their mother's, and his production is deemed edible.

While discussing division of labour at home, Zsolt shakes his head and asks me in connection with doing the laundry and general housework, as I was from Mars,

Now, honestly, is there anything cosmic in it? So, ... I do not understand ... I am not saying that I love it, but well, evidently there is no problem with it.

He speaks to me in a sort of astonishment, or better put it as if I was lost in space and asked him about obvious issues in his world of affairs. He is one father who often uses the term "no problem" suggesting that this is a standard situation and practice for him which is happening with his consent: "I don't see any problem in it, if I did, I would make mention of it."

These practices show that most of the fathers reject the idea of dividing household tasks according to gender stereotypes. They either do it all together or make a character division. In either case, they accept the stereotypical tasks readily, as 'there is nothing cosmic about them' and as it is shown in the examples of cooking and nappy-changing active fathers can also find personal as well as parental satisfaction in doing these chores. I trust had I chosen other examples of 'women's jobs' to bring up with them, I would have received similar responses and small signs of actual enjoyment.

#### IV. 1. b. Additional features of shared parenting

In the following I portray three additional features of shared parenting practices which often feature in active fathers' stories and which reflect their embracing their parental involvement and attachment to it. These characteristics are their readiness to relieve their partner, their will to engage in and their ability to handle alone the child-care related duties.

##### *Relieving each other*

Active fathers' practices might be based on the principle that everybody does everything or on the concept of basic character division of tasks, they nonetheless all emphasise the idea of flexibility, i.e. that they mutually relieve the other partner if one side feels the other has reached its maximum tolerance level for the day or simply just had a bad day. All this is done in order for the family not to lose its "energy-balance" as is explained by Tibor, acknowledging that the work with children is "quite brutal,"

It 'floats' quite well between the two of us [him and his wife]. If she sees that I am tense, though it happens rarely that I go home upset because I can switch from one to another, but it happens. If she is very tense, then I do everything from dinner onwards, but she is also a mule-type, it is very rare that she hits the ceiling, but it happens. Or, for example, last week I did not get enough sleep and Barna's [child] behaviour really irritated me and then Erzsébet [wife] detached me from him and tried hard not to let me in a conflict [with the child]. It works both ways.

Béla also refers to 'balancing' and describes it as "a continuous struggle" to maintain,

There exists this 'pull-it – let-it-go' game [between the parents]. When I am more tired she yields and does something more, and when she is more tired, I take on more. This works for both sides, but evidently sometimes it works better, sometimes less effectively.

While accepting the fact that this is a necessary maintenance task which forms part of the shared parenting and homemaking balance, it is visible from the tone and style of this description that parenting is indeed a draining exercise, which really needs constant fine-tuning between the caregivers, always requiring additional energy, stamina and spirits. Sándor, a naturally cheerful and smiling person, seems to be able to keep his spirits high,



Well, when I see that she [the wife] is really tired, I ‘jump at it’ and I do it. [the job] ... and you know, ‘everything for the children’, we make energy, so that we have enough for [managing the kids].

*“I want to do this”*

Oftentimes active fathers make it clear that not only do they accept it but it is their will to engage in childcare. When it comes to free choice, it is clear that baby-bath is a task that even not-so-involved fathers demand to be theirs. Some claim they did it more, earlier or better, because the mother was not so comfortable doing it. Mihály speaks about the situation and decision regarding child-bath in a funny way:

Well, I did child-bathing earlier than Borbála [wife]. So we brought them home from the hospital and I did the child-bath, I was not afraid. Because as you know I was in at birth and then I saw when she was taken away and then I saw how the nurse did the bath. Well, I said to myself, ‘compared to that, me ... only... better’ [laughs] She scratched her with the brush, and the way she grabbed her... It was good to see, and I only said this is awesome. And I was not afraid at all. [laughs]

For Mihály the experience of watching ‘the expert’ do the first bath with his child helped him understand the nature of the task and he could individually confirm that he could only do it better than the professional nurse, hence his fear was swept away at once giving way to capability and will. Sándor also reports that the bath is usually his task stressing that the child likes it with him, from the early age. He recounts that his wife was afraid of touching the baby when she was so small, though he does not understand why. Sándor says he just took the child alone and then started to bath her. He was not afraid, though she was really so small she fitted into his palm. He explains perhaps he wanted and waited for the child so much and so long that he could hardly wait to touch her, which feeling overcame his potential fear.

Zsolt informs me about the very same situation,

At birth I did not lift my eyes off her [the child], she was first in *my* hands. I bathed her first. For a long time I bathed her. My wife had to get used to it. She was more apprehensive of it as if she had bigger inhibition, or I don’t know. Then she got into it, too. For me it was somehow natural that I do the same things because I wanted to be part of it.

It is interesting to see in Zsolt's case that he links 'natural' to his will and choice, as if these two notions were compatible with each other. Neither of the men can explain the reason why their wives, being women, felt less comfortable touching a small baby than they were, being men. I sense that stereotypes have no place in these fathers' worlds as long as they feel good about the things they do themselves or wish to contribute to.

Bathing the baby is typically seen by many as the only thing a working father can do after his daily paid work engagement, and hence the only way a father can develop a personal relation with a small child. Indeed, many of my interviewees state that when the child was born the most important goal of the day was to get home by baby-bath time, that is, seven in the evening. Nonetheless, there are other ways and times for active fathers to develop links to their children. For instance, Dénes explains his involvement as a conscious decision in order to develop a strong connection between his children and himself:

You have to start it now... so that there is such a relationship between the children and me that they know they can come to me and talk to me if they have whatever concerns.

Other than starting fathers' involvement at an early age, András reports why he wants 'travelling together', as part of the daily routine, with the children:

[I don't spend] too much time with the children, but in an intensive way, often and important things. I take part in important parts of their lives, starting from the daily routine, picking them up, for instance. This is not simply a logistics question, but I want it. I take part in their lives on a daily basis this way or the other. We always discuss what happened in the kindergarten, and then what is coming up and what the others said, what is happening on the weekend, what is with Mum, and what is happening to me today, and that I go to X next week and then they say, 'Oh, bring us this and that, please'...

András uses the routine travelling time as a good opportunity to get updated in both directions, namely to elicit information from his children as well as to provide details about the parents' lives and even try to plan ahead in a way involving his children, too. Thus, he transforms a tiring daily logistical time-loss gap into a fruitful discussion space. He

subsequently stresses how important it is for him what people his sons will grow to be and he considers sharing his life's experience with them a part of his strategy, even while driving to and fro the kindergarten and home:

If I share with them, teach them, raise them by this means too, then I can have a hold on their fate, their upbringing.

Other fathers also detail how much they can gain from the 'driving together time' and not consider it as lost or wasted, because they sit in the car and chat about the day, about the child's problems, about weekend plans and simple wishes for dinner. Zsolt claims he would not give this 'transporting engagement' up, because he would lose this precious time with his daughter, and instead he could only be sitting in the office, which obviously does not energise him as much as a chat with the child.

*"I can handle this alone"*

It is not only flexibility in terms of taking on the caring tasks when the partner is tired, that active fathers can be characterised by, as was detailed above. They also employ another strategy in many cases, namely, they send the other away from the home to have some rest while they stay at home with the children. Dénes often sends away his wife when he sees that his wife has really had enough of everything.

I told her to get out, to get some exercise, to do shopping, whatever, go away for an afternoon, for a whole day, to go with your friends, just get out. ... and then I really enjoyed it, even changing the nappies. Because it was then only mine, there was nobody else to share it with. Then it was *only mine*, he burped *to me*, he broke wind *to me*, I had to change him.... And in general it was like that: as soon as Mariann [the wife] stepped out of the door, within half an hour he pooped such a big one [laughs] and both kids always managed it for me, always! [laughs]. So, this has become a routine thing that daddy brings the nappy automatically [as soon as Mariann steps out of the house].

Dénes' case presents that what probably started as a nice gesture and practice of providing help to her partner developed into a fulfilling experience for the father which he codes as something special. During the time when he is alone, he can monopolise his children and he

feels honoured by whatever happens during ‘his time,’ including the onerous task of nappy-changing.

Others have a weekly routine schedule when the mother goes to the gym one evening and those afternoons and evenings are solely the fathers’ responsibility,

On Mondays Borbála [the wife] does exercises, and then the standard set-up is that I pick them up from the kindergarten, we play, we spend the afternoon together, than I feed, I bathe, I put them into bed and, lets say, Borbála arrives the for bedtime story, or if she does not arrive then she does not arrive...

Mihály does not consider these evenings as something extra, but rather something that is ‘due,’ a thing that he can easily squeeze in into his days, but not his partner: given the fact that his wife cannot afford taking time off during the day, there is no other alternative,

I don’t do this because I am a hero, but because Borbála [the wife] cannot do it during the working day, she is an employee, she has there a set working time. ... but doing sports is important.

So, Mihály accepts the nature of the job his wife pursues and shares values with his wife in regard to doing physical exercises, and the related consequences which impact on him an additional burden, that is to say, more time to be managed alone with the children. He makes it clear that it is fine if his wife arrives on time to tell the story to the kids, and it is equally fine if she cannot make it, then he handles it. No worries.

Other than taking care of children on a daily basis in a shared set-up, often being alone for a couple of hours, four fathers report that they can manage their kids alone for a couple of days from time to time, since it does happen that their partners are out of town and they are left behind with the children. In their narration they boast about their abilities using informal expressions, such as “I easily take it” and “I push it without difficulty,” and state it does not cause them any problems.

I easily take the three kids anywhere alone. And for example when my wife left for a week with the bigger one, I took leave and easily managed it with the six-month-old twins. And there I was, feeding, changing nappies, walking them, I don’t know. And yes, it did not cause me any problems. Well, yes, it does happen that I really get tired of the three boys when alone... (András)

From their speech it comes across that they are indeed proud of themselves being able to handle small children all alone for longer periods. Still, they admit that it is tiresome after some time.

Miklós having also three sons, makes fun of the issue why he does not take all three of the boys to various places alone, although he encounters no problem managing them at home:

I take them to the doctor's office alone, but if everybody is sick then we go all five [that is, the three children and the two parents]. Because if three boys enter somewhere ... [laugh] it can happen that you need to repaint the premises [laugh].

In a way I am amazed at listening to his narration and style, wondering how come he can still smile and take things so easily. It might as well be the case though that he is frustrated and the laugh and the joke are signs of distress in a tight situation rather than the enjoyment of it. Nevertheless, referring to the difficult sides of their experiences in my view fills active fathers' stories with more credibility, as proof that they indeed live these days as depicted and see both the bright as well as the despairing side of it, taking on and accepting both.

In this sub-chapter I argued that active fathers adopt the stereotypical roles in the private domain in connection to their children and homemaking. In many instances they display signs of enjoyment, personal fulfilment and joy and on some occasions, clear pride in being able to provide caring to small children all alone. Through their parenting practices they strongly deny stereotypical division of labour, and make care-work gender-neutral by doing it all together or dividing tasks according to their personal characters. Moreover, they also claim by strong verbal emphasis that it is their will and choice to be involved and it does not just happen to them by chance that they are found practicing as active fathers. In addition, the way they speak about their parenting also underlines their loving and affectionate involvement in caring for their children while they also present a good sense of humour when

recounting their stories and their evolution towards active fathering. Overall, I am positive that these men, as active fathers enjoy the situations which they ‘earned’ by doing typical ‘maternal’ work. While active fathers can definitely see the bright side of the child-rearing enterprise, and are ready to adjust to a shared parenting practice, there seem to be some societal pressures, which also make them be aware of their situation and protect their fortresses, i.e. their family circles.

## IV. 2. AMBIVALENCE ABOUT THE PARENTING ROLE

In this sub-chapter I argue that active fathers feel ambivalent about their parenting role. I present why they cannot fully free themselves from the ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology’ discourse of the patriarchal society, which strictly separates the roles of the masculine breadwinner and the feminine homemaker. I portray that there seems to be a disharmony between the pervasive societal ideology and their actual practice, i.e. actively being engaged in childrearing and sharing the workload of household duties, which fits more the ‘Universal Caregiver’ model (Fraser 1997) as is discussed in the previous subchapter. This tension subsequently leads onto a blocking effect and relative isolation from other parenting practices, such as how solo mothers and gay couples rear children, and other masculine identities. Nonetheless, active fathers develop an individually adjusted alternative identity against the hegemonic masculine one.

As active fathers reflect on their own shared parenting practices and other contemporary father types, what unfolds is that although these men feel fine about being active fathers, they still evoke a conforming wish to a norm which does not fit their daily practices and current situation. As a result there is a slight conflict within themselves, as if they hesitated about the two roles, i.e. breadwinning or homemaking separately, or both at the same time. In their stories active fathers often refer to the norm family model, what I term the ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology’, as ‘classical’, ‘traditional’, ‘normal’ and rarely as ‘typical’. I found various ways through which their ambivalence is manifested in their speech.

I argue that active fathers’ ambivalent feelings are traceable, first by rhetoric signs: the hesitating, broken speech when they are asked about qualifying and perception of

themselves and other fathers. Second, their unease is also visible through their citing stereotypical gender references, especially in connection to small babies' needs for the mother and the main provider task. Third, behavioural signs are apparent in their coping strategies on how to manage their difference from the rest. These strategies are also indicative insofar as these suggest an isolating element.

Finally, I argue that besides active fathers' ambivalent feelings, an alternative masculine identity develops through their 'de-gendering' childcare in their daily routine. Their alternative masculine identity is apparent in their narration on how others perceive them and how active fathers critically examine other father types. Given the fact that individual subjects are always situated and conditioned, there is a mutual causal effect between their ambivalent feelings and the adjusted masculine identity, which is an alternative one set against the hegemonic masculine ideal.

#### **IV. 2. a. Rhetoric signs of ambivalence**

One of the issues that best reflects active fathers' ambivalent feelings is their speech. Active fathers speak at ease about their actual practices, daily routine and their speech flows without breaks and silences in it. However, when it comes to qualifying practice-related issues, especially roles within their families and references about themselves, they often seem to be at a loss. One main issue is that there does not exist a specific Hungarian term for this father type, so even categorising themselves is often problematic. I use the Hungarian expression 'aktív apa' and translated it into English as 'active fathers' in the present paper while during the interviews I also used 'törődő,' which would translate as 'caring,' based on Takács' term devised as 'aktívan törődő apa' for 'involved father.'<sup>4</sup> Some

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<sup>4</sup> Judit Takács uses 'aktívan törődő apa' in her ongoing research project "Az apaszerepek változásai" (Changing roles of fathers).



also use ‘involált,’ which sounds foreign, and I find difficult to understand in the Hungarian language. The interviewees often qualify themselves as ‘ott vagyok’ which I would translate as ‘I am there,’ meaning ‘I am available [to the spouse and to the child/ren]’, ‘I am involved in it.’

For how hesitation and inner confusion break one’s speech, the following is a telling example, from Zsolt, whose line of thought starts off from the question whether there are ‘motherly’ and ‘fatherly’ tasks in his family, for which he answers with a clear yes, but is not able to give examples:

On the one hand I don’t think we are a typical family. On the other hand, I don’t think that we have to keep to this [i.e. norms]. Because perhaps a typical ... today’s typical ... or today, ... but today potentially we are a typical family. Today unfortunately this is the typical.

Other than the hesitation and breaks in his speech, he also has a contradicting remark, that is, once saying one needs not keep the norms, then claiming it is sad that his is most likely the typical family. This example reflects a strong underlying current in his thinking, which is much in conflict with his actual parenting practice and can cause identity challenges. Later on Zsolt tries to bring an example from the past, he touches upon the previous generation,

20 or 30 years ago I would have said, that daddy works and mummy is at home with the two kids. ... but perhaps I cannot even say this for my own parents. Because they also worked both. ...

Drawing on the previous generation’s practice as a norm is not much of a success, only to quickly realise that his parents do not fit the ideal profile either. Finally Zsolt resorts to share with me what he would like to see without any reference, not excluding that the father can, or should if working arrangements permit, get involved with the children,

Probably I would consider it normal if the father worked and the mother raised the children. ... Perhaps because then there would be more time allowed for the children. ... Well, it is not necessarily certain that only one parent would deal with the children, because if I could work eight to four, then I would have more than enough time for the children.

His account clearly shows how pervasive the ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology’, representing an elusive norm, currently is in Hungary among young fathers, and what confusion it might cause even in a simple conversation. His hesitation and broken speech whether his family is being typical also suggest that there is a general uncertainty as to what actual family models look like and what parenting practices are common in present-day Hungary. Hence he can quickly get entangled in the pervasive standards, norms and his actual parenting practice.

#### **IV. 2. b. Stereotypical references as signs of ambivalence**

The second point that manifests ambivalent feelings in the interviewed fathers’ narratives is their use of stereotypical images. In the sample of the 14 fathers interviewed only five manage not to make stereotypical references with regard to homemaking and parenting. Starting with playing on stereotypical references in a funny manner, such as “...as a normal male-man”, or “For being a girl, she is not *that* domesticated,” Miklós openly recounts a conflict emanating from a non-domesticated wife, since there were different models seen in the parents’ homes, in which a traditional and a more egalitarian model clash:

Well, there are conflicts and tensions, as, lets say, sometimes the housecleaning is behind, and it disturbs me. ... Hanna [the wife] did not see it at home that her Mum was doing the cleaning stuff and kept things in order, and at us it was exactly the opposite, the normal is that the wife cleans. Well, ‘it is still with me’... yes, I do it [if she does not] but I also make a casual remark about it.

Another example when Balázs, an otherwise very active and independent father explains a more serious expectation is as follows,

[Laugh] well, I could not get it in eight years that there is a slip of paper hanging on the fridge-door listing what I have to buy... of course, somewhere I would expect but no, I don’t think I would expect, only I think that she is ‘more in the picture’ she cooks more and knows more the stock.

Even if made in an amusing way, as it is clearly stated, specific things are expected from the woman, which fit better the stereotypical gender division of labour at home. I may ignore these references, as ‘normal’, everyday occurrences, yet, these for me are equally indicative of the fact how innate certain ideological notions can become. For example, what does one mean with the claim, “For being a girl, she is not *that* domesticated”? Perhaps this man is disappointed by the fact that he married a woman who does not meet the expectations. Still, the question remains, whose expectations? His or does the wife not fit into a larger social context? Also, why does it create problems if two opposing family model heritage meets and there is a new one emerging? I think it is important to note the importance of such incidences and give some thought as to why these stereotypical jokes are frequent even in the speech of men who otherwise are very egalitarian.

Other than the division of labour in household management, almost half of the group, six fathers are pre-occupied with what I term ‘the mother myth’, i.e. women are better at parenting due to essentialist reasons, especially when it comes to caring for small babies. Although fathers are not sure as to why exactly it is their opinion, they tend to be rather solid in their views, as is Gyula:

To give the child the security and comfort feeling, this is mostly the mother, it is kind of instinctive, and perhaps it is in emotions.

András while discussing general childcare adds,

I don’t know how it is with women, they have something in them, to a certain extent, somehow they know it better.

And Dénes on whether he would take parental leave, explains,

First I would give the choice to Mariann [the wife], definitely. If she did not want it, then it would not bother me. .. still, I feel that the first year for the child [is] rather the mother, even the second one. I think this is rather the child’s needs, don’t know why, if this is biology or psychology... I feel this way.

None of them uses the notion of ‘women are better at children’ as an excuse in any way, for example, not to do certain tasks, such as nappy-changing, and yet, it is mentioned as a general statement, suggesting that child-rearing is seen as a women’s domain and men can be but guests in it. Furthermore, Mihály tries to form an explanation to why, in his opinion, his children caused the real joy to him only after the age of six months:

I don’t feel that I could have turned toward a two-month old baby with the same charge of emotions as its mother. ... We have to accept it, maybe I am wrong, but anyhow she gave birth to it, and with the breastfeeding there is physical attachment which I could not have substituted for. This is a more intimate thing, when a mother is together with [the child] than with me. It is different. To tell the truth I could have missed it, although today I absolutely consider myself this active father.

Mihály claims he does not even want these early months with the babies, definitely not while being breastfed, and airs his observation, according to which this time period is really suitable for mothers,

Had I had to do it, probably I could have done it, but it would have been more of a task-like than a joy-like thing. While with women, as I see it, this is more a pleasure thing than a task. So, I would have done it, as a good soldier. Yes, command, I do it, and perhaps I would have liked it too, but it would have been different, than how Borbála [the wife] turned toward [the baby].

Interestingly enough, Mihály is of the opinion that he is not able to provide as much emotion as the mother, and he is different from her, nonetheless, he goes on lamenting that he might have liked and enjoyed these days. While there is a small spark for his will to see what it might be like, the mother myth professes that men are different and can never be as good as women in the nurturing, parenting role.

The last obvious gender reference I see in active fathers’ narration is linked to breadwinning, and whose roles it is to be the primary provider for the family. Miklós affirms with satisfaction who brings the cash in, adding his uneasy feelings about what if it were the opposite,

The [financial] foundation, yes, it is my task to provide. ... So, it would be more difficult if she were the [main] provider;

while Pál admits that before the children “she [the wife] earned more, not me, as *the* man, earned more...” continuing explaining why he would change with his partner regarding the paid work:

On the whole, regarding paid work, I would change with her. So that the situation would be the opposite, so that I will be the one at the desk and working, if need be, from morning till night.

He claims there are no problems arising from the earnings issue, yet, he thinks it is important that he, as the man, brings more money home. Upon my request for elaboration why he thinks it is the ideal scenario, he gives a rather stereotypical answer linking into the mother myth as detailed above:

Well, it can be that this was the established custom or what. After all, she is the mother, she is the woman, let her be more free, let her play the mother role. ... let her nurse, caress ... well, if she has enough time, well then there is no problem [doing paid job].

From Pál's narration it is not clear where this ‘custom’ originates from, but what is evident from all these examples is that there is still a rather sharp division, considering ideological notions and discourse, between the private domain, which is still seen as women's place, including childcare and –rearing, and the public domain, which is where the cash is earned and which should be primarily men's responsibility. These active fathers follow a practice which does not at all fit this ideal image of breadwinning and homemaking as separated spheres, and from time to time the breadwinner ideal ‘haunts’ them in their thinking, even if on the discursive level only.

#### **IV. 2. c. Behavioural signs of ambivalence**

The third sign of active fathers' mixed feelings is how they in effect act as a response to their perception of the outer world, that is, how they handle their ‘difference,’ if

felt at all, in everyday life. I found that there is a certain element, that is to say, men do not speak about child-rearing, which makes it problematic to gain information on how these active fathers view other fathers and how they are looked at by others, especially men. Most of my interviewees simply can not speak about it, claiming mainly that this is strictly a family issue and that men do not speak about such issues, often closing this topic rather quickly:

How other men see me? Well, I have no idea, because.... it is rather women who speak about this topic. More. ... Me, with men, not that much, we speak more about football than children. Child-rearing is not typically a women's thing, but speaking about it definitely is!

Although Dénes claims children is not only a women's issue, nonetheless men do not discuss it and it does not form part of a standard 'manly' conversation, as if it were sort of taboo topic and thus constraining men in public. Few fathers retreat into a more defensive tone when speaking about their practices and perceptions of the outer world:

I am not interested in how the neighbour or the brother or whoever else raises their children. What is important to *me* is that *we* parent the way *we* think is good, so that *we* follow what *we* would like and what vision *we* developed with respect to the children.

Pál's use of asserting 'we-s' again shows that it is seen as an issue within the private sphere which is not taken outside to be discussed at length, thus a notion of isolating and isolated parenting practices develop in light of Pál's speech.

With regard to how these active fathers actually live through and develop their caring experience, one example is narrated by Gyula, the only father in the sample, who took parental leave for a year and a half, and speaks about his experiences in a female dominated sphere, where he felt all alone. His biggest problem was that the role he performed then and still practices is not generally accepted. He recounts that he was the "adornment" in the doctor's office, or people stared at him when he appeared in public, mostly in health institutions: father and a small child alone – "this is not happening" was written on people's faces. At the beginning he felt a bit jittery as this was not 'proper' for a man.

You do not see this, it is not around you, this is not typical.

As time passed by everything became more natural for him:

I could speak about this, since this was my life, what I was doing then. I became a mother... and the final result was success and positive feedback from all sides.

Gyula is very proud of himself that he managed to go through this alone. He gives an example of a garden party where he was the only one that felt that the fussy tired child needed carbohydrate: "I felt then and there that everybody acknowledged me." His case shows how he, the lone male, struggled through from shame to pride in a sphere which is dominated by women. He is full of the 'childcare experience' and entertaining anecdotes, yet, he was the one most reluctant to accept my request for an interview. Stating that this is past in his life and he is at another stage in his life now and does not know what to say about that specific experience. For me he represents one case which did not manage to fully identify with this practice and the adjusted gender identity of 'becoming a mother.' Consequently, he strives to distance himself from the years on parental leave while still continuing actively, though silently, being involved in the childrearing process at home admitting that "once at home you cannot just wander around, but you have to step in and do the things."

Sándor, an active father who 'loves all the children around him' as he himself puts it, reports how he scales down his nurturing character, somehow concealing who he really is in public. While he states that he does not care about what others say when they see him rolling about in the grass with children, he recounts the following examples which made him wonder:

Well there are, for example, two kids at the neighbours, they practically don't want to go home. They said they wanted to live here, at us. And then I started to think, that I played too much with him [other kid], I should not have done it. Because it is very embarrassing now that he doesn't want to go home. And at such occasions I usually stop, I don't invite him or don't let Magda [own kid], over. And this is how I can work it out a bit ... because it is uncomfortable for me, too. Really it is.

This incident signalled to him that he must be doing something extra or in a different way than the other father and hence the children react in this way. At the same time he also feels that it is not right and he feels bad about this. The only thing he can do in such a situation is that he cuts off or minimises what he shows towards others' children, which is against his character and identity as a man who loves children. The other example he provides is equally embarrassing for him:

Or, once when I went to the kindergarten and we arrived the same time with the father of another small boy: "Sándor, Sándor" [narrator's name] and then he jumped on me. And I say 'Yup!...' so he ran to me and not his father. It is really embarrassing to me.

Evidently, he is at a loss how to react in a situation like this, and what sort of link he can establish to other men's children so that it does not get closely bound as is the case described above. Besides the deeply felt embarrassing experience he has in connection with other children, Sándor also airs some frustration when visiting the playground,

So, just wait a second! Here comes the gist of it. No matter where I go with Magda [own kid] to the playground, there is never a father, not one. What I see that kids play in the sand – here, women are grouped up – there, and chatting. And that's it. So, I go with Magda, I try to play with Magda, because she is my child, that's why I went, to play with her. And then all parents chat with each other and no-one deals with the children. Then I group them [the kids], so, 'come, lets play a bit!'

As is obvious from his story, the situation he usually finds at the playgrounds does not satisfy him, first he does not see any men, so he is the lone male in a field dominated by women and their children. Second, the women do not play with the children, though he somehow shifts from 'women' to 'parents' in his speech, still, bringing a rather critical statement. Perhaps he does not want to direct his criticism against women only. He is the specialty and his character compels him to involve all the kids, even if he intends to play only with his own one, and through his uniqueness he secludes himself bitterly from the rest of the parents who are exclusively women.



#### **IV. 2. d. Ambivalence versus alternative masculine identity**

Despite the various traces of ambivalent feelings described above I argue here that active fathers de-gender the hegemonic masculine ideal by adopting care-work and hence these men develop an alternative masculine identity to the hegemonic one. How the various masculinities clash in the context of fatherhood are displayed in my interviewees' recounts on how they perceive mixed messages from other men, and at the same time how they look at other fathers through a critical lens, attaching higher qualities to themselves.

Dénes reports that, on the one hand, some successful businessmen envy him for the children as these men have zero contact and relationship with their children. These men start getting to know and realise they have children at their age of eight to ten years. On the other hand, my respondent also claims that by another group of men he is considered to be 'a loser', because he admits that parenting is as important for him as the career, if not more important, whereas these other men see career and breadwinning as their primary aims. In general, my interviewee is of the opinion that today success, as far as men are considered, is associated with the working career and financial means, and not with parenting. According to this perception, there are various groups representing clashing identities of 'the father' or the man: 1) the actual active father, balancing between children and career, 2) the want-to-be active father – who envies the active fathers, but cannot change due to outside factors, e.g. a breadwinner mindset or the working culture's pressure, and 3) the do-not-want-to-be active father – who looks down on the active fathers as 'losers' for not choosing the 'manly' career and breadwinning options. This example suggests that even though there are various 'manly practices' forming different masculine identities, these tend to be set in a hierarchical structure, with the breadwinner father as the man identified with his working career topping the chart. The hierarchical categorisation seems to prevent the above-detailed types from being placed horizontally in a more equalised position.

While this father reflects on how he is perceived, Gyula makes an attempt to categorise ‘other fathers’ as follows, in some points overlapping with the grouping above: one group being the ‘working-class macho’ and the other the ‘top-manager.’ However, both groups share the label of ‘weekend fathers with shop-window activities’ and the characteristics that

They cannot go down to the level of the children thus these fathers are not able to empathise with and understand their children, because they do not engage with the children for such a long time and not in that way.

According to my interviewee these fathers likely take their children, for example to a car show, which would not fit the level of the children, while sports and having a beer with the pals remain more important for these men at their children’s expense. This respondent even volunteers to claim that he knows fathers who would rather take extra work just so that they do not have to be at home with their small children. Although it is not made clear how influential these other father types are, for instance in relation to my interviewee’s active father type, it comes across from these remarks that he approaches these others with criticism, while keeping the children and his involvement a high priority in his own view, adding that his partner in fact expects him ‘to be there’, i.e. at home and involved. Similarly, Géza while stating that he receives mixed feedback which he does not detail, recounts an incident about which he had funny, and at the same time, critical feelings,

There are still a lot of men who live the old classical male role like our parents... So, there are absolutely many-many fathers like this, whom I have never seen that he would have played with his children, here, there, wherever. The maximum they do for instance, he tells the mother that..., I had a good laugh about this, ‘prepare *us* [him and the children] together! and then we go for a walk to the woods.’ I think..., no, I am positive that this is the absolute majority.

This active father is sure that he is in minority among all fathers, nonetheless, assesses less involved or, less independent fathers with a critical look. Their practices he cannot accept and the not-involved fathers generate smiling reactions in him thus he places himself above the other type.

It is clear from these examples that one type is critical towards another type of fathering in both directions, often qualifying it and hence setting a constantly measuring, hierarchical structure. Additionally, the overall social norm, though portraying a hardly existent and more elusive ideal, is still pervasive enough to have an influence on various father types and prevent them from developing into full. Active fathers, nonetheless, challenge the hegemonic ideal by ‘de-gendering’ homemaking and childrearing and develop an alternative masculinity that fully embraces care-work. Yet, in my opinion, this competition among the various masculinities together with the ruling ideal do not create a conducive environment for other, less dominant or emerging types of masculine identities to get accepted widely by all and to get internalised speedily by those who feel comfortable with them. In sum, in this confusion in an ever-changing environment some active fathers ‘lose it altogether’ and cannot openly identify with an alternative masculine identity, while some active fathers can come to terms with their adjusted roles, with care-work equally constitutive of them, and live in peace.

In this sub-chapter I presented how interviewed fathers cannot fully free themselves from the ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology’ through the traces of broken hesitant speech, stereotypical gender references, and their behaviour reflecting the strategies how active fathers live with their perceived difference. Their narration is often marked with references made to ideal family norms and small contradictory points reflecting their inner confusion and ‘norm-search.’ Their stories, thus, expose their ambivalent feelings about their own practices and identities, and the ways in which they are related to the pervasive ‘breadwinner – homemaker ideology.’ There seems to be a disconnection between their actual practice and the ruling societal ideology, as there are no available and accepted categories, even vocabulary items, for other family- and father types. Moreover, their ideas

suggest that there is a competition among the various masculine identities and a hierarchical setup, in which the dominant type seems to be the successful career-oriented worker. On the one hand, the interviewed active fathers are not overtly career oriented, yet, the working and breadwinning 'conforming drive' can be traced in their speech. On the other hand, active fathers tend to fully embrace their caregiver role, which might propel them to challenge the hegemonic masculine ideal and develop an alternative masculine identity to it.

## CONCLUSIONS

*[The Universal Caregiver vision is] to make it possible for both men and women to combine parenthood and gainful employment, a new view of the male role and a radical change in the organisation of working life are required. (Fraser 1997: 62)*

In this thesis paper I have explored the issue of shared parenting, specifically how active fathers practice it and how they feel about their parenting role. I opted to examine this topic from men's perspectives, i.e. I selected active fathers to be my study subjects and interpreted their lived experiences by applying interviewing. I have found that active fathers adopt stereotypical gender roles and enjoy doing care-work. Yet, they also feel ambivalent about their parenting role.

Given the fact that neither detailed time-use studies nor qualitative research results on parenting practices, and specifically on active fathering, are yet available in Hungary, I have applied Western literature on masculinities and on the sociology of the family in my thesis. I have presented a disconnection between the expected cultural norm, i.e. the hegemonic masculine ideal, which is identified exclusively with the family provider through paid work, and the actual practices which are much more egalitarian with deep involvement in childcare. In my research I concentrated on alternative masculinities, and I have found traces of hegemonic masculinity in the narratives of the interviewed men. Middle-class Hungarian fathers who opt for a more involved fathering practice may find themselves with ambivalent feelings as they do not adhere to the hegemonic norm. Thus, their alternative identity

obviously is not solid, but in constant interplay with the hegemonic ideal. These findings fully correspond to Connell's (1995) theory on hegemonic masculinity.

At the same time, the active fathers also pioneer in an uncharted territory and manage to challenge the hegemonic norm. In my study the active fathers 'de-gender' the stereotypical roles related to homemaking and childcare in a sphere which is reserved for women, thus start dismantling the rigid separation of the family home from the outside working space. I examined active fathers' narrations with a view to focussing on their changing identity and their feelings in connection with this shift. My results have confirmed the indications of Coltrane (1989) and Jump and Haas (1987) in that by undertaking a stereotypically female role daily these active fathers subvert the prevailing social norms. Moreover, in line with Connell (1995) they also find satisfaction in doing care-work, thus develop their capacities successfully.

Partly as a result, active fathers develop an alternative masculine identity which fully embraces care-work. Their identity is characterised by interchangeable parent roles, which they develop by rejecting the stereotypical division of labour. This strong attribute suggests a full sharing of tasks, hence this research result is not consistent with Gerson's (1993) findings on men's discretionary power in household chores- and childcare tasks' selection. Additionally, active fathers want to be involved in childrearing and proudly manage care-work alone, even for longer periods of time. Again, this outcome is not in accord with some research, e.g. Craig (2006), which reflects that most fathers are not likely to spend time alone with their children. Nevertheless, even the most egalitarian minded fathers in my study leave the overall management of the household, including managing their children's lives, to their working wives, which is in full accordance with most other research

findings: active fathers mainly function as “mothers’ helpers,” which result perfectly corresponds with Coltrane’s (1989) and Gerson’s (1993).

My research scope was evidently limited to men only, thus to one side of the story. A potential area for further elaboration on the issue of shared parenting, is examining ‘paired histories’ (Reinharz 1992), i.e. interviewing both mothers and fathers of the same couple. Other than accessing a ‘fuller picture’, including both men and women might expose more nuanced features of negotiations and working dynamics between parents and reflections on the social inter-connections at play between the family circles and the wider social context.

With regard to masculinity studies, an obvious point of my research is that men tend not to speak about parenting practices among themselves, as if this topic was completely excluded from men’s discourse. Since discourse and experience mutually reinforce each other, it would be an interesting topic to explore, with a larger scope, what discourses on fatherhood currently compete in Hungary and how they relate to actual fathering practices, in addition, how these reinforce or subvert the hegemonic masculine identity. Available Western research may equally provide directions, and thus could be applied to such an Eastern-focussed study on men.

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