

## **Trends in fatherhood patterns - the Danish model**

Mogens Nygaard Christoffersen

### **Abstract**

The paper will deal with several questions and paradoxes about fatherhood and interrelated motherhood.

On one hand the changes in the family pattern to a more symmetrical family during the last generation, where both parents work outside the home, have changed the conditions for parenthood, but on the other hand it can be questioned whether the symmetrical family really are symmetrical? Or will there still exist differences between the occupational bonds of the parents? Will the social distance between social classes still be maintained in marriages nowadays?

The new generation of men and women have the same length of occupational qualifications, and still we find that most of the new families are asymmetrical regarding to the occupational bonds. We will try to solve this paradox.

Mothers with babies work full-time more often than mothers whose youngest child is of school age. Mothers with infants express the wish for part-time work, but why does the change occur when the family can afford it - not when they need it most? What are the consequences of parents' stressful work life for the children? Could an overwhelming work load for the parents result in a stressful childhood?

The women's contribution to the economy is underestimated, when we exclude the household production from the ordinary measures of production. But will results from time-budget-surveys on large probability samples disclose that fathers with young children work less than mothers, if work, transportation, child care, and house work are included?

In the nordic countries some part of the parental leave are reserved for the mothers, while other parts could be divided between the parents according to their desires. Only few fathers take parental leave. The question 'Why?' has troubled politicians and researchers.

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## **Trends in fatherhood patterns - the Danish model**

Historically, family patterns have changed dramatically in certain areas. Rhona Rapoport (1989) and other sociologists have described the trend in the family area towards a greater tolerance of new family forms, where the individual is less bound by traditional norms. When all is said and done in what way has the roles of mothers and fathers really changed?

Roles of fathers and mothers are inseparably bound up with each other, as a result changes of families influence both the fatherhood and the motherhood as well. The changed role of fatherhood cannot be studied in a meaningful way without examining the alterations which the motherhood undergoes.

Changes in family patterns give grounds for revising a number of sociological assumptions. The present paper deals with the assumption that it has been generally accepted that there is increased mobility in modern society, both geographically and between different social levels. This increased mobility should have the result that a relatively larger proportion of families than in the past will consist of adults from different social backgrounds. The paper will deal with the question of whether the social distance between social classes is still maintained in marriages. There are indications that there is still a barrier to starting a family across social divides. It has been argued that the family pattern has changed in to a more symmetrical family during the last generation, where both parents work outside the home, but has fatherhood and motherhood approached each other in a symmetrical way?

Information from a number of Danish studies will be used to elucidate some of the changes that have occurred in last half of the 20th century.

### **Development of the symmetrical family?**

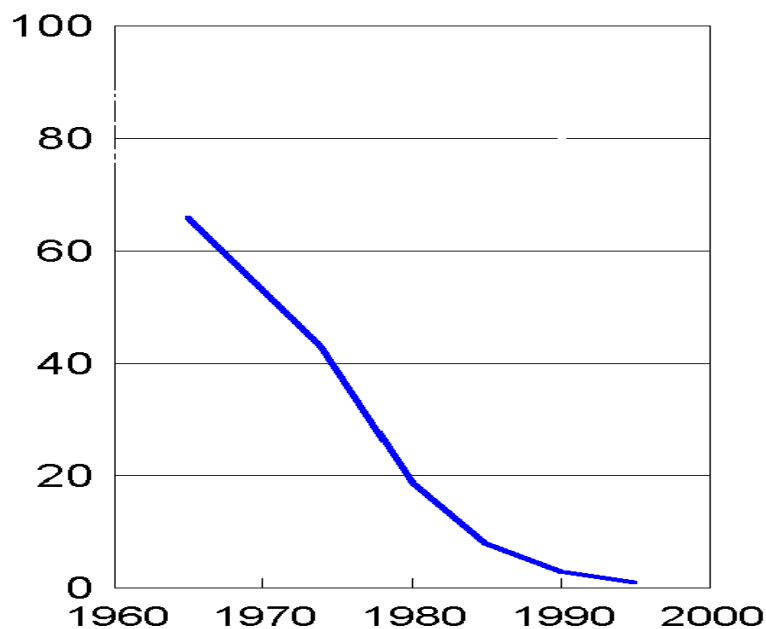
During the most recent generations, the occupational structure has continuously changed from a mainly agricultural society to an industrialised society, which today is characterised by a large service sector (i.e. transport, trade, administration and professions) and a public sector with schools, health service and social institutions. The expansion of the service sector has meant a demand for workers, which has given employment for women in particular. These social changes have brought about major changes in the social landscape of childhood. One of the results is the changed roles of the parents.

The way in which the individual family in post-war Denmark could improve its living standards was by expanding the extent of the mother's gainful employment. The expansion of the welfare state, with economic security for the elderly (by looking after the old people who need help) as well as public day-care facilities, has helped

to make women's working power available. At the same time, the reduction of negotiated working hours means that the fathers reduce their occupational work. The role of housewife, where mothers with small children abstained from having occupational employment, disappeared almost completely (figure 1).

When unemployment began in the middle of the 1970s after a period with a shortage of labour, the individual family chose to maintain, and as far as possible expand, the amount of gainful employment. The possibility that had existed during the boom, when the mothers of infants could freely return to the labour market after the birth and work for the number of hours they wanted, had disappeared with high unemployment. The risk of being permanently expelled from the labour market thus came to affect some families' daily life.

**Figure 1. Percentage of full-time housewives among mothers with preschool-children.**



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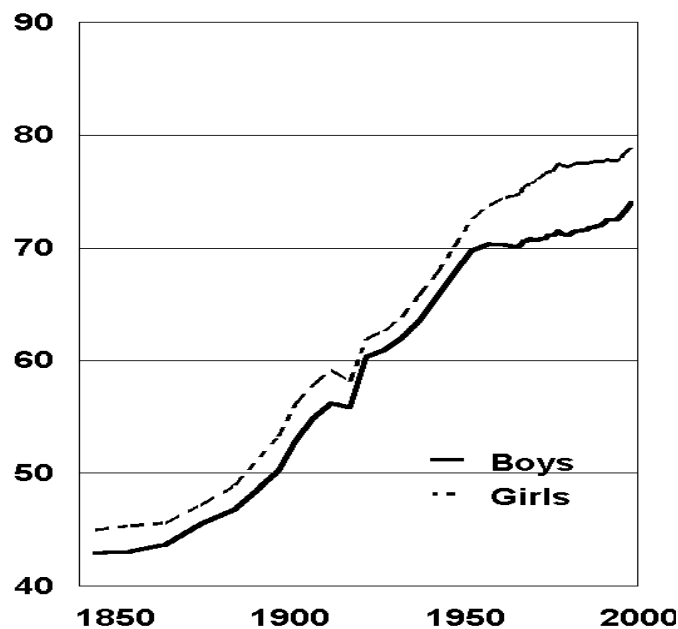
(Source: Christoffersen, 1993; 1998 a).

The changes in the family pattern to a more symmetrical family during the last generation, where both parents work outside the home, have changed the conditions for parenthood. Young & Willmott (1973) thus designate the present-day family form as *the symmetrical family*, because both parents, through their gainful employment, have financial responsibility for the family's economy, despite the fact that there are still considerable differences between the occupational bonds of the parents, which can be important for the family's real freedom of choice.

### Men's and women's life expectancy during the transmission period

In spite of one's knowledge to the contrary it has been proclaimed that Danish women's life expectancy has aggravated compared with trends of men's life expectancy during the transmission period (figure 2). Contrary to the general expectation the difference between men's and women's life expectancy has widen during the transmission period. Until 1950s only a slight difference could be observed while the gap was expanded in 1960s and 1970s because men's life expectancy only showed prospect of minor improvement, contrary to experiences during the previous 100 years.

*Figure 2. Men's and women's life expectancy. 1840 to 1998.*



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(Source: Danmarks Statistics: Vitals statistics).

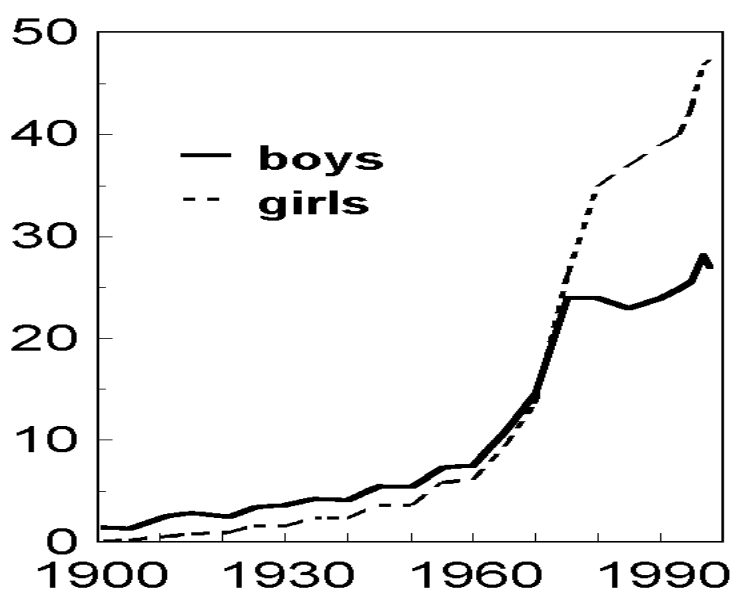
A Danish commission has made several reports on the development of life expectancy for men and women, but still one unanswered question stares you in the face: Why has men's life expectancy showed comparatively minor improvement in the second half of the 20th century. It is for future research to examine the changes of living conditions for men and women in order to answer this question.

### The education explosion

During recent decades, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of women who get long school and vocational education. Foreign estimates (for example from U.K.) show, like Danish studies (Hansen, 1995a), that what is popularly called the educational explosion has particularly benefited the generation of women who become mothers at present (Haralambos & Holborn, 1996).

On the one hand, *women* in particular have improved their occupational qualifications (figure 3), but on the other hand - as will appear from the following - a number of differences in the occupational bonds of the *parents* can still be observed. For example, this is obvious with regard to the extent of unemployment, occupational position, management functions and other socio-economic differences.

*Figure 3. Number of boys and girls passing secondary school per 100 19-years-old adolescents.*



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(Source: Ørum & Fridberg, 1973; unpublished material).

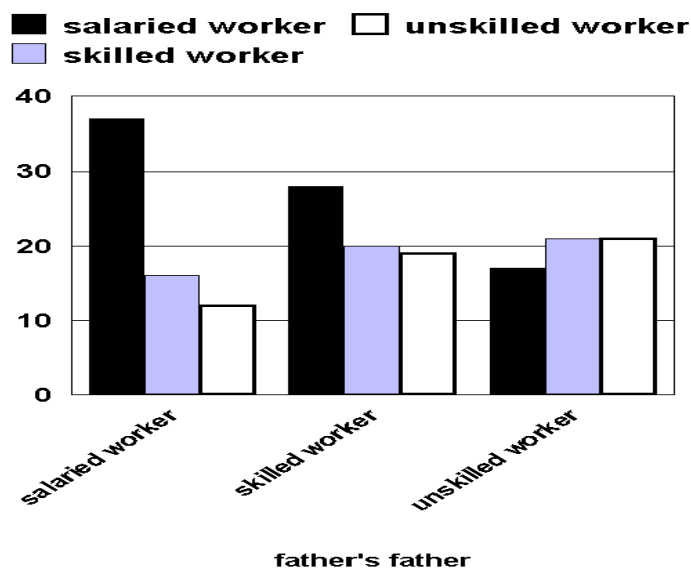
The new generation of men and women have the same length of occupational qualifications, and still we find that most of the new families are asymmetrical regarding to the occupational bonds. We will try to solve this paradox.

### The Romeo and Juliet barrier

In many European and Asian societies, one of the ways of maintaining the distance between the social classes is by restrictions on marriage. Even though there is formal freedom, there are often effective social barriers between the status groups, which in practice stand in the way of marriages across the social boundaries (Goody, 1976).

Both older and more recent British studies show a pronounced marriage homogeneity, where there is a significant statistical tendency to marry someone on one's own social level (Goldthorpe, 1987).

**Figure 4. Occupational type of employment for grandfathers to children born (autumn) 1995.**



Note: It is a case of a *symmetrical* pair-forming pattern. If the paternal grandfather, for example, was a salaried worker with extra responsibilities, then the likelihood that the maternal grandfather was an unskilled worker is about 11%. The same holds true in the reciprocal situation. That is, if the maternal grandfather was a salaried worker with extra responsibilities, then the likelihood that the paternal grandfather was an unskilled worker was a similar figure (12%). This symmetrical situation was evident, with few exceptions, in the other occupational categories of the grandparents (Source: Christoffersen, 1998 a).

Danish studies have similar findings. The parents who had a child in 1995 are thus homogeneous with regard to the parents' own social childhood background.

For example, if the paternal grandfather was a self-employed farmer or tradesman, the maternal grandfather relatively often had this occupational background too (figure 4). If one of the grandfathers was a salaried worker with at least a 3-year training period, or with at least one subordinate, there is a relatively great probability

that the other grandparent had the same occupational type of employment (Christoffersen, 1998 a).

If, for example, the maternal grandfather was an unskilled worker, there was relatively little probability that the paternal grandfather was a salaried worker with extra responsibilities. So it seems that today, too, there are some invisible social and cultural ties from conditions in childhood that somehow play a role when a partner is chosen.

This situation, that a partner is not chosen haphazardly, but in close agreement with the partner's social and cultural background, could be called the "*Romeo and Juliet barrier*", as there evidently proves to be some barrier against starting a family across social dividing lines. But it must be remembered that these barriers are visible in statistics, as they are only revealed in large, representative, study material.

A little popularly, it can perhaps be said that there is no great cause to worry when a newly formed young couple are to introduce their parents and parents-in-law to each other for the first time. If the couple had found each other by drawing lots, there would far more often be cause to worry that social barriers would arise between parents-in-law and one's own parents.

There are thus strong indications that the parents' social background - and with that the parents' own childhood situation - has somehow played a not unimportant role when they found each other. This of course is also of consequence for the current child's ordinary daily life. Seen with the child's eyes, there is relatively rarely a question of great social difference between being looked after at the one or the other set of grandparents.

Parsons (1949 b) for example assumed that the nuclear family had been isolated from, and independent of, the grandparents and the rest of the family. Nevertheless, a clear connection can be seen between the parents' social and occupational background and choice of partner. According to Goode (1963), this could be because the parties move in the same social circles. Young people more often meet young people with the same social background as themselves and less often other young people. A contributory explanation is that the same social background gives a greater probability that their friends and family will approve of and support the relationship if the partner has the qualities that are appreciated in the respective social circles.

The fact that young people marry with people of the same social background as themselves can give rise to a misunderstanding that new families are symmetrical with regard to the parties' occupational bonds. But is the symmetrical family really symmetrical?

## Are the symmetrical family really symmetrical?

### - Differences between the occupational bonds of the parents

Differences in the length of vocational training can also mean differences in the occupational bonds, because a feeling of personal identity is developed with vocational training, which bonds the person to the occupation. In accordance with this idea, relatively long vocational training means a stronger bond to the occupation than short vocational training or no vocational training at all.

However, there are still some remarkable differences with regard to the length of vocational training, the extent of employment and earnings between the *fathers and the mothers* in the new families who have just had a baby (table 1).

In general, the fathers have a longer vocational training than the mothers. This could be called the *traditional family constellation*.

**Table 1. Occupational differences between fathers and mothers with children born 1995.**

	fathers	mothers
Number of working hours weekly	42,3	36,2
Income per year < 150.000 Dkr	11%	43%
Unemployed more than 25% during 1993-1995	4%	10%
Length of vocational training more than 4 years	29%	15%
Employment with subordinates	42%	26%

(Source: Christoffersen, 1998 a)

On the face of it, one would think that these educational differences were because the average vocational training level for men was higher than for women.<sup>1)</sup>

But closer analysis reveals that this can only be a minor part of the explanation. A large part is because there are great *differences between the level of vocational training for single men and men who are married or live with a woman*. The single men have relatively more often a short vocational training or no vocational training at all, while the married and co-habiting men relatively more often have a long vocational training. A similar difference cannot be seen between single and married or co-habiting women. In other words, it is easier for men to have a family and children, the longer the vocational training they have (Christoffersen, 1993).

### Marginalised men do not become fathers

Part of a study of starting a family is also a description of those who *do not* become parents. Are the people who become parents representative of those who never have children? Are there some social and financial barriers that apply to starting a family? And do the same “sorting mechanisms” apply for men and women?

Studies show that some of the great occupational and earnings differences found between fathers and mothers in the families with babies can be regarded as a result of the fact that the men who do well on the labour market have a family and children, while a large group of marginalised men do not have a family and children. Roughly speaking, the opposite tendency can be seen among women (figure 5).

*Figure 5. Percentage of childless men and women aged 44 years in 1993 by socio-economic status.*



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(Source: Danmarks Statistics, 1997)

Recent figures based on The Fertility Database in Danmarks Statistik (1997) show a clear connection between men’s socio-economic group and their childlessness at the age of 44. Reliable and systematic figures for the age of new *fathers* have been lacking<sup>2)</sup>. It is only in recent years that this information could be provided in Denmark with the help of The Fertility Database <sup>3)</sup> (Knudsen, 1993).

This striking connection between socioeconomic group and the incidence of childlessness among the 44-year-old men is in particularly strong contrast to the 44-year-old women’s situation: childlessness is almost twice as widespread among men as among women and for the most numerous groups of women, there is a *converse*

*connection between socio-economic group and childlessness*, if one disregards the relatively few women who are in the outer groups (figure 5).

If the rather few self-employed and directors among the 44-year-old women are disregarded, childlessness among women in this age group is most prevalent among those who have salaried employment with extra responsibilities and management functions, with childlessness decreasing down through the socio-economic groups, so that the non-skilled group and the group of “others” have the lowest percentage of childless women. In the group of women who are no longer employed or who are on early retirement benefit, the percentage of childless is only half as large as among the men in the same socio-economic group, but there are, though, relatively many childless compared with the average for women aged 44. Even though, biologically, men can have children until they are quite old, this is seldom the case in practice<sup>4</sup>.

All things considered, we stand holding a feeling that this selection process may be a heavy burden not only on adult men but also on boys trying to compete and socialise to be chosen and have a family. This theory sounds very intriguing but it may be only one of several ways of explaining these results.

### **The theory of the asymmetric choice of partner**

These results are in accordance with a number of foreign studies. The American sociologist Jessie Bernard (1972) reviewed a number of studies that show overwhelming social, economic and health differences between single men and married men, even when the comparisons are made within the same age groups. The married men have greater luck with their career, higher income and more high-status jobs than the unmarried men. The married men’s mental and physical health is significantly better - and they have a greater chance of living longer. A Swedish study has similar results (Hallberg, 1991).

There are two competing hypotheses to explain these circumstances. First is Jessie Bernard’s hypothesis (1972). She is convinced that it is marriage that has this effect on men’s mental and physical health and on their occupational career, and that it is not their vocational training, for example, that gives them access to the more prestige-type jobs.

A large number of foreign studies have found a statistical relationship between marriage and men’s income: men with high incomes have a relatively greater likelihood of being married than men who earn little (see, e.g. Kalacheck & Raines, 1976; Hill, 1979; Pfeffer & Ross, 1982). According to Jessie Bernard’s hypothesis, this is because the women in the relationship increase their husband’s productivity.

Another hypothesis is that the woman primarily chooses the man who is to be father of her children according to his position on the social ladder. This could be

called the *theory of the asymmetric choice of partner*. Susan McRae (1986) expresses it thus after a review of British studies: "It is the norm for women to marry men, if not above them on the social scale, then at least of equal standing." According to this theory, men who have power and who earn a lot will thus easily find a partner.

The men who have resources and who can thereby give social protection, according to the theory, will relatively more often have family and children than is the case for poor, long-term unemployed and marginalised men. Out of 6.000 children born in 1995 it turns out to be a result of a planned pregnancy for 87 per cent, according to interview with the mothers. The odds were extra high if the father had a longer vocational training than the mother (Odds ratio: 1.3) or if he earned more than 150.000 Dkr yearly (Odds ratio: 1.8) standardised for other significant factors e.g. age, duration of partnership. In any case, it can be concluded that the analyses mentioned above to a certain extent corroborate these theoretical assumptions. One of the consequences of the theory is that income differences between the coming parents would be further increased on account of the *asymmetrical choice of partner*, because the earnings profile is "steeper" for a number of jobs with long vocational training than for jobs with short training.

### **For richer for poorer...**

Family separations are not equally spread among the families. According to the theory of the asymmetric choice of partner, divorces seems to be a consequence of downward mobility for fathers and upward mobility for mothers. The dissolution of families seems to be under influence of the duration of unemployment according to a longitudinal survey based on large national representative samples. A 10 per cent sample among two birth cohorts born in 1966 and 1973 were followed throughout 15 registers in order to follow consequences of the parents' unemployment during the period 1979-93.

Family dissolution - which include cohabiting parents who separate - were more frequent *after* a year with unemployment. The greater the duration of unemployment the greater the risk. In particular, the fathers' unemployment were influential, even if other factors of importance were taken into account (e.g. vocational training, income, blue-collar workers). Unemployment among the mothers seems to influence the risk for family dissolution, in itself, but especially the fathers' unemployment enlarged the risk, other things being equal. Fathers with low income had a greater risk, and blue-collar workers had a greater risk, while other things being held equal (Christoffersen, 1996 a).

On the other hand mothers with a vocational training had a higher risk of family dissolution than mothers without education. This speak in favour of the assumption that up-ward mobility of women could be a risk of marriage stability.

From the study it turns out that families who *return* to paid employment reduced the risk in comparison to families who continued unemployed. Therefore the bonds to paid employment are found to be informative in predicting family dissolution the following year. In particular, the fathers' authority as a bread winner seems to be important for the survival of the family.

Children's access to their father after divorce seems to depend on their fathers' socioeconomic resources. The well-off fathers had a higher probability of being resident parents and as non-resident parents having an extended visitation arrangement with the child than fathers with fewer resources (Heide Ottosen, 1997; 2000; 2001). The stepfather, if any, will more often have a longer education than the father and the stepfather will have a better employment status compared to the child's father (Heide Ottosen, 1997). These selection processes - both the asymmetric choice of partner and the selective family-dissolution-process - have the same consequence that children are raised in asymmetrical families.

Perhaps it is too early to say anything about how the changed educational pattern, which has changed women's situation in particular, will come to affect the pattern of pair formation and thereby the pattern of fertility in the society of the future. But the family changing process could be studied by looking at some of the, although relatively few, so-called family pattern breakers. They have a non-traditional sex-role pattern, where the mother for example has a career job, while the father has a menial job. Pattern breakers could be families in which the father takes parental leave, or in case of family dissolution it could be families in which the children remain with the fathers.

### **The non-traditional families**

Women in male occupations have been studied in a number of reports, and women who start semi-skilled worker courses and apprenticeships have been in focus in recent years as examples of pattern breakers in the sex-role area (Holt, 1988a, 1988b; Mærkedahl, 1989; Skinhøj, 1989; Rosdahl, 1990).

Families where the father takes parental leave are compared for example with the other families where only the mother takes maternity leave (Christoffersen, 1990; 1998 a). Finally, a study of families can be mentioned where both the fathers and mothers of infants have done something unusual, namely, letting the child live with the father when the parents split up. These families were compared with the families that chose the traditional solution (Christoffersen 1996 b).

Studies of such non-traditional family patterns shed light on the social background factors that distinguish these families from families with more traditional patterns. This can perhaps give insight into the sex-role barriers that apply when the families try to realise their non-traditional wishes.

The non-traditional families diverge from the prevalent norm and are therefore confronted with the reactions of the surrounding community to this break with the norm. The norms of society are brought to light precisely when some families break the prevalent rules.

“Through cross-class families it is possible to see the strength and perseverance of cultural norms governing marriage; to see the harm such norms can do if accepted unexamined, if broken without understanding. And here, perhaps, lies the ultimate importance of the study of cross-class families - by deviating from cultural norms, they render explicit the enduring nature of those norms.” (Susan McRae, 1986).

Some of the earliest sociological reflections on this phenomenon were Talcott Parsons' analyses of the USA around 1943. He believed that marriages across the class divide, where it is the mother who has a career job while the father has a menial job, would have an inbuilt instability (Parsons, 1949 a). The interesting question raised by Talcott Parsons is whether in the non-traditional families where the mother has a “career” or a stronger occupational bond than the father, more conflicts can be seen than in the more traditional or the symmetrical families.

Susan McRae (1986) studied 30 families where the woman had the occupational superiority in the relationship - without this study giving an unambiguous answer to the question raised by Parsons. These families were delimited by the fact that the father was employed as a manual worker (skilled and unskilled work), while the mother either had a leading position within a non-manual occupation or long, third-level education<sup>5</sup>). On the basis of national data (1971), she estimated that the proportion of these “cross-class” families was about 10% in United Kingdom.

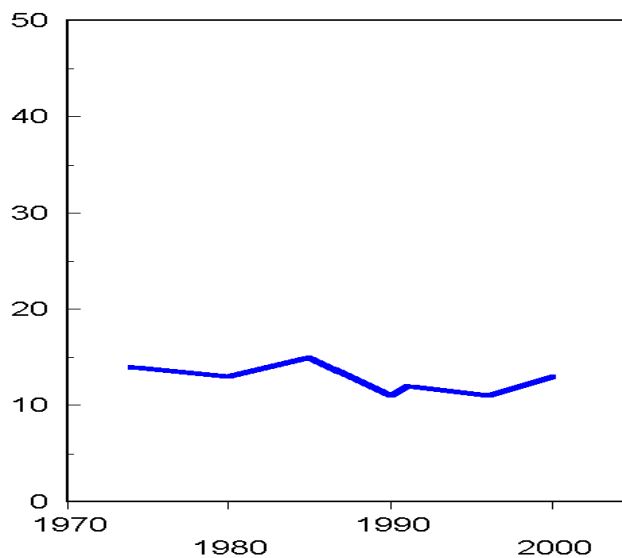
### **Are mothers always the best parent?**

In the on-going debate about the care of children there are two contradictory theoretical perspectives: the individualistic view which claims the personality traits that enable mothers to take care of their children are learned during her childhood.

According to this perspective adult men have neither the capacity, the ability nor the motivation to take care of young children. The other theoretical perspective is more structuralistic according to Barbara Risman (1986).

The structural approach rejects the claim that sex roles are internalized as personality traits. In this perspective, fathers are able to adapt and develop the necessary abilities to look after children in an on-going interactive process.

**Figure 6. Percentage of 0 to 18-years-old children with separated parents living with the father.**



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(Source: Omnibus-surveys and Danmarks Statistics: Vital statistics).

These two contradictory theories are confronted with results from a study of children aged three to five years old living with their mother or their father. Normally, after their parents' separation, children live with their mothers (figure 6) in particular the young children are most often living with the mothers. About 6 per cent of children aged between three and five years old in Denmark live with their fathers while 94 percent live with their mothers. But in this study two probability samples with an equal number of fathers and mothers were selected in order to make a comparison of the living conditions of the children (table 2).

The research results revealed a close association between strains on parents and the well-being of their children. Appreciation at work and probably also work which was engaging gave parents extra strength to solve problems at home. Unemployed parents were more likely to have conflicts with their children which developed into situations in which the parents found themselves compelled to use a variety of ways to punish the small children.

Although one third of the fathers had care of their children because of the mother's death or because the mother was unable to take care of the children (e.g. alcoholism, psychiatric illness, imprisonment, etc) the fathers in the study had better jobs, less unemployment and fewer psychological problems. As a consequence they were less severe with the small children than the mothers.

**Table 2. Separated fathers and mothers living with a child aged 3-5.**

	fathers %	mothers %	P <
<b>A) Social background</b>			
1. The other parent is dead . . . . .	14	2	0.0001
2. The other parent is unable to care for the child (disappeared, ill, in prison, brutal, or mentally ill) . . . . .	19	20	-
3. Parent has no professional training	34	42	0.008
4. Parent has yearly income < 200.000 Dkr	46	83	0.0001
5. Parent is unemployed . . . . .	20	30	0.0003
<b>B) Personal Problems</b>			
6. Lacking self-esteem . . . . .	9	17	0.0001
7. Psychiatric problems <sup>6</sup> . . . . .	40	52	0.0001
8. Psychosomatic stress symptoms <sup>5</sup>	37	54	0.0001
<b>C) Conflict / Co-operation</b>			
9. Parental relations burdened by conflict <sup>1</sup>	19	19	-
10. Child has joint-visiting (14-16 nights per month) <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	16	4	0.0001
11. Joint custody <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	59	38	0.0001
12. Child has no contact with other parent <sup>2</sup>	6	14	0.0001
13. No contact with ex-parents in-law . . . . .	17	26	0.002
<b>D) Well-being of the Child</b>			
14. Child has been corporally punished at least once <sup>3</sup> . . . . .	61	73	0.0001
15. Weekly punishments <sup>4</sup> . . . . .	17	24	0.015
16. Child often bursts into rages . . . . .	24	34	0.0009
<b>E) Reactions of the surroundings</b>			
17. Negative reactions . . . . .	8	20	0.0001
18. Positive reactions . . . . .	71	33	0.0001
Number of parents interviewed . . . . .	478	532	1,010

- 1) Only parents with contact
  - 2) Widowers not included
  - 3) The child was rapped on the knuckles, was smacked at the bottom, or boxed on the ear.
  - 4) One or more of the following happen weekly or more often: the child was physically chastised (see 3); the child was sent to their room; or the child was shaken.
  - 5) The measures of parental psychosomatic stress were daily or weekly problems with one or more of the following symptoms: burning pressing pains in the upper belly, headaches, feelings of being overwhelmed, feeling nervous and unbalanced, often feeling depressed, sad or edgy with no apparent reason.
  - 6) The parent has had professional help for psychiatric problems from their own doctor, psychiatrist, or in hospital etc.
- (Source: Christoffersen, 1996 b).

Parents and grandparents comprise a social network which is of great importance in the formation of a child's identity. Unfortunately, this network suffers when families dissolve. These kin networks are more intact when children are living with their fathers than in cases where children are living with their mothers.

Concerning professional training, income level and job security, fathers were in a relatively better position than mothers. If the factors behind psychosomatic stress or the factors behind frequent punishment of the children are considered then children living with their fathers were in a better position than living with their mother. Children's social network were more likely to be intact when they lived with their father. They were more likely to be in joint custody, had more frequent contact with the non-residential parent and were less likely to have lost contact with grandparents.

Since fathers are not randomly allocated to be residential or non-residential fathers when families dissolve there will always be some selectional bias. A cross-sectional survey of single fathers, such as the present study will encounter difficulties in generalizing this results to non-residential fathers. We cannot know - and we will never know - how the non-residential fathers would have coped if they had been living with their children as single fathers<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless it can be concluded that, the fathers in question were able to adapt and develop the necessary abilities to look after their children. Besides the results showed that single fathers are more likely to receive positive reactions from people whom they meet for the first time. This forms a glaring contrast to the reactions which follow when single mothers explain that they are a single parent. Most of the fathers (71 per cent) have experienced such positive reaction not once but in several occasions, while only 33 per cent of the mothers have had such an experience.

This also reflects the role-expectations of women and men in society. The positive reactions discloses that people do not expect fathers to be able to take care of their children. In this way prejudices against fathers in general are revealed.

### **The dilemma about the family's occupational working hours - and possibilities for equality**

One of the choices that is more or less consciously made in the family is the extent of the occupational work and how it should be shared. Some of the differences in income between the parents are due to differences in the length of the working hours.

But even though, on the face of it, it seems that the individual family makes an independent choice, the studies show some obvious paradoxes between what the families want with regard to this division of labour and their actual behaviour.

**Table 3. Extent of gainful employment for fathers of young children. 1974-1990/91 and 1996. Percentages**

	1974	1980	1985	1990/91	1996
Fathers of young children					
Under 25 hours a week	1	1	1	1	1
25-35 hours a week	3	3	2	3	3
36 hours or more	96	96	97	95	95
Total	100	100	100	99	99
Average weekly working hours					
for those employed	45	44	43	41	42
Number interviewed	1.128	1.259	685	812	3.893

Note: Fathers of young children are fathers whose youngest child at home is 0-6 years old at the time of the studies 1974-91 (Christoffersen, 1993), while 1996 includes only the families who had a baby in 1995 (Christoffersen, 1998 a). For the fathers who were not employed at the time of the interview, the working hours in their last job were used. People who stated they had a working week of more than 90 hours have been left out of the calculation, as this is assumed to be an unrealistic average over a long period.

A separate study of attitudes among people aged 20-49 with young children (0-6 years of age) confirmed that a reduction in working hours was a popular policy (Andersen, 1991). But it should be remarked here that only a very few of the families with young children actually realised, on their own initiative, the “ideal” family type, the symmetrical family where both parents have reduced their working hours. Only a very few of the fathers had and have part-time work (table 3).

Throughout the surveyed period (1970, 1975, 1989, 1999), it can be observed that more than one-third (31%, 38%, 42% and 42%, respectively) *preferred a model* where the mother worked part-time while the father worked full-time (Christensen, 2000). Recent studies confirm that it is a widespread wish to be able to reduce working hours - especially among women, but with the possibility of returning to full-time employment when the children get older (Holt & Thaulow, 1995; 1996 a; 1996 b). However, in practice, the most widespread type in practice is two full-time working parents (table 4). But this is the solution that is the most *unpopular* among parents with babies. Over the years, 1, 2, 3 and 3%, respectively, preferred this solution as the most ideal (Christensen, 2000).

Families with children do not necessarily work more than families in the same age group without children. But several other Danish studies (Andersen, 1991; Andersen & Holt, 1990) show that, paradoxically, mothers with babies work full-time more often than mothers whose youngest child is of school age. Mothers with infants (0-6 years old) express the wish for part-time work, but seemingly the newly established families have difficulty affording it. Two out of three mothers with children under the age of 3 want to change from full-time work to part-time work. The change

does not occur until the family can afford it - not when they need it most (Andersen & Holt, 1990).

One of the explanations for this paradox could be that the prices in the part of the housing market which the newly established families move to have gradually become adapted to two full-time incomes. It can be said that part of the increase in value that is created by both parents working full-time, even when the children are young, has been capitalised in higher housing prices. When the young families have to find a family home, they are faced with this housing market, which then “forces” them both to work full-time - even though they do not want to.

**Table 4. Occupational employment for mothers of infants. 1974-1990/91 and 1996. Percentage**

Mothers of infants	1974	1980	1985	1990/91	1996
Under 25 hours a week	35	26	18	12	5
25-35 hours a week	24	29	29	27	20
36 hours and over	41	44	53	60	75
Total	100	99	100	99	100
Average weekly work hours for those employed	31	–	34	34	36
Number of interviewed	1.234	1.280	732	832	4.763

Note: Mothers of infants are mothers whose youngest child at home is 0-6 years old at the time of studies 1974-91 (Christoffersen 1993) while 1996 includes only the families who had a baby in 1995 (Christoffersen, 1998 a). For mothers who were on leave etc. at the time of the interview, the working hours before the leave are used. Since for 42% of the mothers it was the first baby at the time of the study in 1996, this can mean a relative over-assessment of the extent of their employment, compared with the other figures.

An older study of families with infants showed that when the family changed their occupational working hours, it was most often the mothers who reduced their working hours, while the fathers increased their working hours (Christoffersen, 1988). An explanation for this pattern could be that the fathers’ increased working hours made it possible to reduce the working hours for the mothers. Another explanation could be that the fathers have been able to live up to some expectations and demands in the workplace by taking on more work, because the mothers have reduced their occupational working hours and taken on a greater share of the domestic duties.

The same pattern is revealed for the families who had a baby in 1995. In general, the occupationally employed fathers had a longer working week than the mothers. Thus the fathers had on average 42.3 hours a week, while the mothers had 36.2 hours a week (Christoffersen, 1998 a).

The families who had moved together within the past year were characterised by the fact that the fathers worked *less* than the average for fathers in general - and that the mothers had a longer working week than the average for mothers. The study shows that the longer the parents have lived together, the greater are the differences between the parents' working hours. The fathers have in general an even longer working week, while the mothers have a shorter working week than was otherwise the case for the new mothers.

In order to understand these differences between mothers and fathers, the amount of housework has to be taken into account.

### **Division of housework has changed**

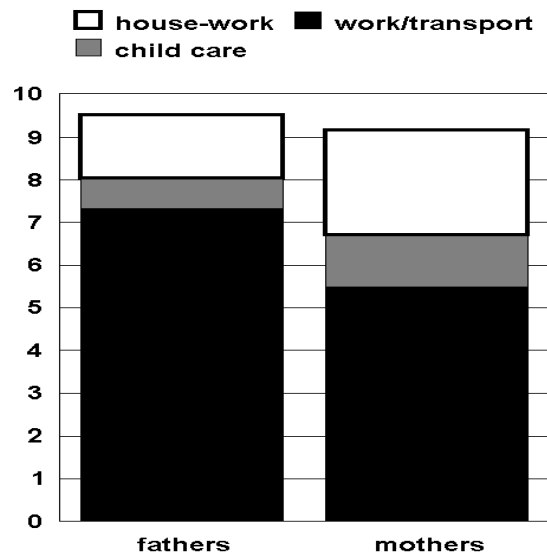
#### **- Do fathers work as much as mothers?**

The women's contribution to the economy is underestimated, when we exclude the household production from the ordinary measures of production. Time budget surveys based on personal interview with large nation wide representative samples have made it possible to illuminate the changes in housekeeping work (Bonke, 1995; 1996).

Women work twice as much as men in household production. There has been some progress during the last 25 years (1964-87), because of more work done by men and less done by women. The distribution of the household work has become less unequal in this period. The greatest progress is found in families with young children. The household work done by men are also affected by the women's amount of working hours. The higher the education for women the less household work and the more work in the labour market (Bonke, 1995; 1996).

The fact that women contribute more housework than men do, could seduce somebody into the belief that fathers in the modern family are lazy and mothers are hard-working. But time budget surveys on large probability samples disclose that fathers with young children work harder than mothers if work, transportation, child care, and house work are included (figure 7).

**Figure 7. Work, transportation, child care and housework 24-hours time budget survey 1987.**




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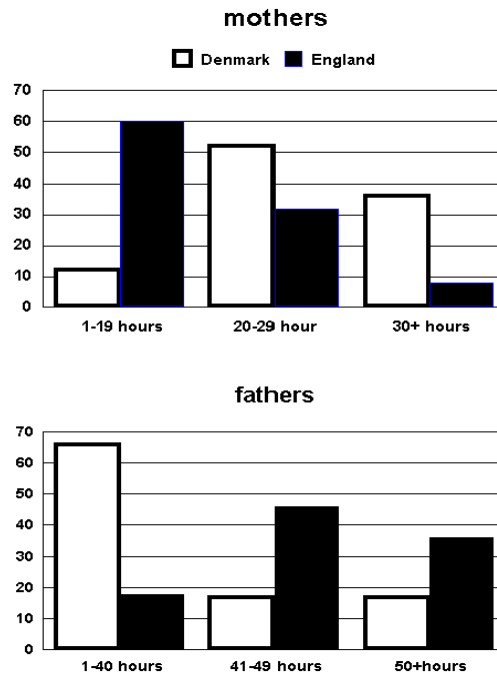
(Source: Andersen, 1988).

**Parent's part-time work are relatively rare - international comparisons**

Unlike Britain, however, employed mothers of children under 10 years in DK are likely to work long part-time or full-time hours (European Commission, 1993). This trend can be related to changes of the *fathers'* employment patterns. Danish fathers do not work the long hours that British fathers do. In the UK, 36 per cent of fathers work more than 50 hours per week, while the figure for Danish fathers is only 17 per cent (figure 8).

Correspondingly *mothers'* working hours of paid work in UK are shorter, while the reduced working hours for fathers had open up for mothers' full time work in Denmark. About 60 per cent of mothers with children less than 10 years of age worked less than 20 hours per week in the UK. In Denmark this was the case for only 12 per cent of employed mothers (European Commission, 1993).

*Figure 8. Employed mothers and fathers working hours. Denmark and UK.*



(Source: European Commission, 1993).

In Denmark, the system of collective bargaining between trade unions and employers' associations had reduced working hours. In 1964 the working hours by agreement was 45 hours per week. Today the negotiated maximum threshold is 37 working hours per week. This has contributed to reducing the working hours of the fathers and at the same time open the options for mothers to work long part-time or full time while having young children.

### **Parental leave and other leave arrangements**

Policy for equal opportunities have often an underlying assumption that sex roles are cemented when the first child is born. Therefore it is a cardinal point that both parents are equally engaged in upbringing the children.

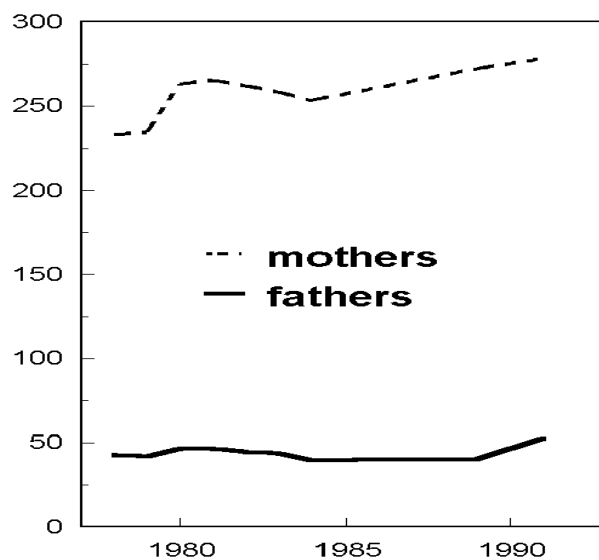
In a recent study of parental leave, it was found that the division of work in the family has been changed as a result of the leave arrangement (Andersen et al, 1996). For obvious reasons, an expansion of the parental leave, which is primarily taken by women in continuation of their maternity leave, will revert to earlier forms of division

of labour in the families. That is why there is every good reason to study families who decide to let the father take parental leave instead of the mother.

In the nordic countries some part of the parental leave are reserved for the mothers, while other parts could be divided between the parents according to their desires. Only few fathers take parental leave. The question 'Why ?' has troubled politicians and researchers.

In Sweden the parental leave have been a year or more for many years combined with “information campaigns” promotion for fathers leave with brochures addressed to fathers in order to increase men’s interest in parental leave (Haas, 1992). Steamers on the busses with slogans: “Your child needs you” or “Come home dad” seemed to be without any importance whatever. In 1980 the parental leave was expanded more and still not leading to the desired result. Instead mothers expanded their share of the parental leave (figure 9).

**Figure 9. Number of days parental leave during the first year. Sweden**



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(Source: Riksförsäkringsverket, 1985; 1986; 1989; 1990; 1994; Christoffersen, 1998 a).

The mother's attachment to paid work seems to be a pivotal factor when the families are going to decide who should have parental leave, reveal several nordic studies in Norway and Sweden (Kaul & Brandth, 1988; Haas, 1986; Grönvik et al, 1988).

Two Danish studies based on a nation wide random sample among families, who actual had chosen the paternity leave, comparisons were made to another random sample of families with maternity leave. At the time of the study the first 15 weeks were reserved for the mothers, while the last 10 weeks could be divided between the

parents, at their own option. Only about 3 per cent of the families had chosen the father to have the parental leave for a shorter or longer period.

In both these studies characteristics between the two samples were analysed. It made a remarkable difference if the mother had a long vocational training, and particularly if she had a longer vocational training than he. Under these circumstances the rare solution with paternity leave were more frequently chosen (Christoffersen, 1990; 1998 a).

**Table 5. Working conditions and social background among families, with fathers taken parental leave (last part of parental leave (15. -24. week), and among remaining families. 1996. Percentage.**

	Families with paternal leave	Remaining families	Total	P<
Father is a public servant	50	17	19	0,0001
Mother works in private sector, while father is a public servant	14	5	5	0,0001
Mother has a vocational training longer than the father	30	23	23	0,02
Mother has a vocational training of 3½ year or more	31	23	24	0,008
Father is in the private sector while the mother is in the public sector	14	27	26	0,0001
Father's income is 100.000 DKr. or more higher than mother's income	36	45	44	0,005
Father has a longer vocational training than the mother	34	43	42	0,009
Number	244	3.847	4.091	

Source: Christoffersen, 1998 a. Only families with a father as well as a mother as informant.

Other factors were also decisive (table 5). If the father worked at a female dominated workplace, or if he was a public servant the probability of paternity leave increased. Compared to the mothers on leave the fathers far more often had to argue for the decision, and they experienced far more often snide remarks from superiors or colleagues, when they informed about the approaching paternity leave (Christoffersen, 1990).

Similar conclusions were results from an interview survey among superiors in enterprises which recently have had experiences of parental leave. Public enterprises had a more positive attitude to parental leave than private enterprises. About 40 per cent of the private enterprises state that, as a principle, they find it more reasonable

for women than for men to take parental leave. Further more, information given by the persons on leave seems to suggest that male superiors have a more negative attitude toward male employees' wish to take leave than in case of female employees (Andersen et al, 1996).

But then it is not difficult to imagine that a period of leave leads to a better quality of family life and therefore be better employees for the enterprise. However, only a small percentage of the enterprises seem to be of this opinion. In particular, the private enterprises are reluctant (Andersen et al, 1996).

These results suggest that the workplace culture might be one important factor among others when the families decide about the parental leave. The length of education and vocational training might be an indicator of the parents' attachment to paid employment. An obvious suggestion is that such differences are also decisive when the question of parental leave is determined.

Agreements between trade unions and employers organizations about leave schemes had in some fields guaranteed wages without reduction. One example (large) is the public employees. This has made it *easy* for many families to decide, because relatively many of the mothers are public servants while relatively many of the fathers work in private enterprises (Christoffersen, 1990).

If the priority is to increase the number of fathers taking parental leave in order to make equal opportunities for men and women then this goal might be achieved by the following means: a) Protection against dismissal in connection with parental leave; b) Expanding the period reserved for fathers (i.e. a father's quota); c) Sufficient economic compensation during the leave; d) Information about legal rights as well as additional arrangement achieved through collective bargaining. A long term policy to secure equal opportunities might involve investment in women's vocational training. This will support mothers in gaining more equal employment and strengthen their position when decisions are to be made in the family about leave taking.

### **Will parental work or unemployment influence children's stress reactions?**

Fear of job loss or overwork with increasing work hours in the 1990s are deeply impacting family life, according to columnist and journalists in some American newspapers (Ryan, 1999). These kinds of reorganization of work will hit the homes either as a constant stress factor on the families or as unemployment in families who do not have the energy. However, studies have not yet supported that this development is also taken place in Denmark.

There have been many warning against the changes and reorganization of work in the families during the last 50 years: What are the consequences of parents' stressful work life for the children? Could an overwhelming work load for the parents result in a stressful childhood?

It stands to reason that it is difficult to obtain knowledge of three years old toddlers' well-being. An attempt was made (Christoffersen, 2000) to catch some of children's stress reactions imaginable (being bullied, restless and unconcentrated, hysterical or choleric, sad or gloomy, having sleeping problems, psychosomatic stress reactions). If the child have had at least one from three of the mentioned six spheres it was assumed that the well-being was relatively impaired.

An analysis was made to determine whether these children had different living conditions than their contemporaries (table 6). It was found that being the first child (or only child) as well as not living with the father elevated the risk for reduced well-being. Likewise, maternal long-term unemployment during the last three years and short (or none) vocational training seemed to indicate reduced child-well-being. As should be expected occurrence of maternal psychosomatic stress symptoms, frequently conflicts and punishment of the child, and physically chastised (rapped on the knuckles, was smacked on the bottom or boxed on the ear) in particular seems to indicate an elevated risk for reduced well-being of children, also when controlled for other risk factors.

Parents working long hours (both >40 hours per week), being in day-care for more than 40 hours per week did not rise the risk for reduced well-being of children. Furthermore, long-term unemployment in 1993-95 did not seem to indicate reduced well-being especially not if mother's unemployment were replaced by stable employment. The actual unemployment and family poverty was only associated with reduced well-being if these risk factors were combined with harsh conflicts and frequent punishments of the children. One may conclude that it is not poverty or unemployment in itself but parental changes in behaviour towards their children that are influencing the well-being of children.

**Table 6****Risk factors for children's stress reactions. Children born in 1995 (age 3 years old).**

	Single risk factors one by one:				Stepwise model:		
	Number of cases	P % of population	Odds ratio	95% limits	Odds Ratio	95% limits	AF %
First child	755	42.5	1.2	1.1-1.4	1.2	1.1-1.4	7.8
Mother was a teenager	76	3.4	1.7	1.2-3.2			
Mother not living with the father	228	10.6	1.6	1.3-1.9	1.4	1.2-1.7	4.1
Child in daycare > 40 hours/week	172	9.5	1.2	1.0-1.4	ns		
Both parents works > 40 hours	45	3	0.9	0.6-1.3	ns		
Mother unemployed > 40 w 93-95	188	10.3	1.2	1.0-1.4	ns		
Mother unemployed > 40 w 96-98	214	10.5	1.5	1.2-1.8	1.2	1.0-1.5	2.1
Mother is unemployed	207	9.8	1.6	1.3-1.9			
Mother is pensioner	15	0.7	1.8	0.9-3.5	ns		
Mother's vocational training <3½	1333	76	1.5	1.3-1.7	1.3	1.1-1.5	18.6
Family finances is bad (poor)	77	3.3	1.8	1.3-2.4			
Mother psychosomatic stress symp-	507	24.1	1.7	1.5-1.9	1.6	1.4-1.8	12.6
Child beaten	613	29.1	1.7	1.5-2.0	1.4	1.2-1.6	10.4
Often conflicts (weekly at least)	574	23.4	2.5	2.2-2.8	2.2	1.9-2.5	21.9
Mother single and poor	31	1.1	2.6	1.5-4.4			

*Note.: Only children participating in both surveys 1996 and 1999. A relatively high correlation were found between unemployment in 1993-1995 and unemployment in 1996-98. Besides a high correlation were found between being unemployed when interviewed and a high unemployment incidence the previous three years. A relatively high correlation were found between being a teenage-mother and not living with the father of the child. Test of the model: Hosmer & Lemeshow (P=0,52). The mentioned disadvantages included in the stepwise model may count for about 78 per cent of the child stress reactions according to calculated attributable fractions (A.F.).*

The studies find no support to the commonly held assumption that parents, who work long hours, are less supportive, having more often conflicts, and their children's well-being are at risk. However, the present studies using cross-sectional and follow up methods cannot be conclusive but only generates some corroborated assumptions. Another explanations of the non-correlation between longer working hours and frequent conflict is, that parents who are affected unfavourably may be in a position to change the time-schedule relatively quickly before the child-parent-relationship is really affected.

The dual-earner-families may arrange to work in shift to prevent their children from unnecessary long hours in day-care. Further more, it should be mentioned that studies show that parents with long vocational training normally have in power to change their working hours when needed (Christoffersen, 1996 b), while the feeling of being out of control is more frequent in case of layoffs.

This being so, the present study does not give rise to reach a final conclusion whether long working hours have a harmful influence on parent-child relationship. At the same time, it seems more evident that unemployment or loose association to employment without vocational training may deeply impact family life and influence parent-child relationship negatively and therefore cause some extra conflict and harmful punishment.

The study clearly showed that the mother's loose association to work (e.g. short (or none) vocational training, no stable jobs) was significantly associated to various psychological problems or disorders (Christoffersen, 1996 b; 1998 b). But this association may be a consequence of selection.

Even though, using cross-sectional studies gives no possibility of making firm conclusions on consequences of poor work conditions and unemployment. The presented cross-sectional studies give support to several theoretical assumptions about how unemployment may reduce children's well-being (Christoffersen, in print; Christoffersen, 1994; 1996 a).

Unemployment could be understood by the unemployed himself and others as a consequence of not being able to produce something which others are willing to pay for. It is obvious that unemployment could have consequences in different areas e.g. social, psychological, and economical (Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Pearlin et al, 1981): Compulsory unemployment may lead to i) decreased social status, ii) disruption of roles (e.g. in the family), iii) feeling of personal failure, and iv) increased financial strain and economic insecurity. All these changes may have consequences for the mental health. If the parents suffer from these constraints they may be less supportive and sensitive to the children's needs.

One of the assumptions of the present study is that children are dependent of the state of parents' feelings. Even relatively small children must try to establish a system or build a frame of reference in order to predict and understand the parents' feelings - both the expressed and the hidden feelings. The children will develop expertise on how to decode the climate of feelings in their own family (Harris, 1994). In this social process children's perception of their parents is an important part of building the child's personal identity. Even relatively small children are able to distinguish between feeling as shame, pride, or guilt (Harris, 1994) - these feelings are the very thing at stake with compulsory unemployment. As the children are highly sensitive

to their parents' emotional state, unemployment can indirectly affect the lives of the children.

## **Discussion**

Summing up, it has to be concluded that many of the assumptions advanced about family development in the Nordic countries do not stand up to more detailed study.

On the one hand, we are returning to the late marriages of previous times. It was often necessary that a relatively large amount of capital had been accumulated, possibly in the form of land or other means of production, before one could get married. The situation today, where the rising educational requirements for young people mean a postponement of family formation has the same consequences.

On the other hand, the Danish studies indicate that there are still traces of a *Romeo and Juliet barrier* against forming a family across social divides. Partners are not chosen at random but in close accordance with the partner's social and cultural childhood background. Thus there is still, statistically speaking, a uniform social background for the child's paternal and maternal grandfathers. But this must not give rise to misunderstanding that modern families are symmetrical with regard to occupational bonds.

Just as in the traditional agricultural and industrial societies, it can be shown that, in modern society, occupationally marginalised men less often become the fathers of families. The man's occupational security is still crucial for women's choice of partner. Even though families today are symmetrical because both parents are responsible for the family economy because of their occupational employment, men do not choose a partner according to the woman's ability to ensure the family's livelihood. In this way, there are still significant differences in families with children between the parents' occupational affiliation. The studies thus confirm *the theory of the asymmetrical choice of partner*.

Jessie Bernard's opposing hypothesis that it is marriage that creates the background for the men's occupational career and that it is not their vocational training that gives access to the prestigious jobs cannot be confirmed in the Danish studies.

But greater equalisation between the parties seems to have occurred, probably because women today have longer training and education than in former times. About 10 years ago, only about 15% of children had a mother who had a longer vocational training than the father. In 1995, the proportion of such *non-traditional families* was almost doubled (29%).

Still, it is a reasonable assumption that the fathers - in general - through a relatively longer vocational training have stronger occupational bonds than the mothers. But because of the trend in recent years, the differences are being equalised,

because more women have had vocational training, and more often third-level education too, than was previously the case. However there are still significant differences between the length of the fathers' and mothers' vocational training in the families with babies.

However, there are some families (perhaps a growing number) that are so-called pattern breakers in the sex-role area, where for example the mother has a career job while the father has a menial job.

However, there are areas where circumstances in society make an impact, as it were, behind the backs of families with children. Many families with children want reduced working hours while the children are small. The families who get the chance to change these conditions do not get it until the family can afford it - and not when they need it most.

On the other hand did some early findings suggest that children's well-being heavily depend on parental work and employment, but somehow, in another way than should be expected. It was then concluded that the pivotal point was not whether she was a home maker or full-time worker, but the point was whether she felt comfortable and flourished. Amato & Ochiltree (1986) finds for example that children could derive an advantage from mothers employment.

The immediate intuition was that parental engagement in work could make parents feel split up between respect for the job and consideration for the children. Though the studies would, if anything, tell in favour of an assumption that parents who have an appreciation in work-life would have an extra reserves of energy (Knoop, 1995; Thaulow, 1994) when being together with the children in contrast to parents who do not feel appreciated at work or being without work.

To no surprise it was found that parental warmth and engagement is first and foremost of importance for child development and general well-being (Bremberg, 1998). But the ability to care for the children may be under influenced from their work-life, either throughout stressful work or a tiresome and tedious work. Greenberger et al. (1994) found that the complexity of work, a challenging and stimulating - work had influence on parenting.

These studies call attention to parental work-conditions and industrial relations among other things (the fear of job loss, or the threat of layoffs) and the consequences for child development and well-being. This make one lean to the assumption that mothers in dual earner families are not less sensitive towards their children or have less warmth and engagement in their children (Clarke-Stewart & Fein, 1983). The pivotal point may be the stress upon the parents. In families, where mothers who were dissatisfied with their role, a reduced involvement and sensitivity towards their children, may be observed.

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## Notes

- 1) A study of “the first welfare generation” born around 1954 showed that in general men and women had the same educational level. Only among the third-level education levels were men over-represented (Hansen, 1995a). Women’s education today, in broad terms, is just as good as men’s, and it must be expected that the educational differences will be further diminished (Bonke, 1995).
- 2) The average age of fatherhood increased from 29.6 years in 1982 to 31.0 years in 1992. This trend is exactly parallel with the trend for women. The age difference between the parents is - as is also shown in the figure - fairly constant at about 2½ years during the period. In 1995, the average age of men becoming fathers was 31.8 years (Christoffersen, 1998 a).  
One of the explanations of why there is a trend to postpone childbirth within the past generation could be the wish to ensure a socially and financially secure framework for the children’s childhood and adolescence. To achieve this, young people today are relatively longer in the educational process than was the case formerly. In addition to this, the housing market has become organised for families with two full-time incomes, which the young people discover when they look for a place to live.
- 3) Incidentally it should be noted that even though more boys than girls are born each year, the higher mortality for boys and men in all age groups means that in the fertile age groups there are approximately the same number of men and women. For example, it can be mentioned that on 1 January 1995, there were 41,876 women aged 29 while the number for the corresponding age (i.e. 32 years) for men was 40,306 (Danmarks Statistik: Befolkningens bevægelse).
- 4) Only 2% of the fathers were over 45 years old when they had their child in 1995. Only 2% of the mothers were over 40. The trend in the age of when the fathers have children thus closely follows the trend for the age when women give birth, which of course merely reflects the fact that the age structure for married couples and those living together has not changed noticeably in the past 25 years.
- 5) Susan McRae (1986) found that in the non-traditional families, it is the mother who has the greater job security, higher income and possibilities for promotion. As could be expected, it is also the woman who gets most out of taking extra work, and who has a greater mental involvement in her work situation. In addition, Susan McRae’s study shows examples that in these families, disagreements can occur about the time the mothers spend at work, because the fathers then have to put other things aside to meet the families’ immediate needs.
- 6) An insufficient method is to study the fathers who became single fathers by necessity e.g. because of the mother’s death or because the mother was unable to take care of their child because of alcoholism, psychiatric illness, imprisonment, etc. Fathers who became single fathers for these tragic reasons managed to take care of their children just as well as the other single fathers and generally better than single mothers in the same situation. The study found no income differences between the single fathers and the non-residential fathers in the sample (Christoffersen, 1996 b).