

BECOMING A FATHER Psychosocial challenges for Greek men

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Although the concept of fatherhood has been widely investigated, transition to fatherhood, as such, has received little empirical attention. Much more is known about transition to motherhood and this knowledge has often been used to inform our thinking about the way fathers experience the shift to parenthood. Will Jordan (1996) and Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) in their comprehensive reviews on the process of becoming a father quote studies on the emergent experiences of fatherhood, cutting across academic disciplines: sociologists studying how the structure of married and unmarried dyads is transformed into a triad with the addition of a new member as well as the consequent redefinition of roles and values; psychologists investigating the developmental aspects of the transition to fatherhood as well as the impact of pregnancy and childbirth on fathers' emotional well-being and mental health; social workers and public health researchers being interested in issues such as parental leave and measures balancing work-and-family and promoting active fathering; other social scientists studying perceptions of marriage, family and children. Yet, as is the case with more general research on fathers, the literature focusing specifically on the transition to fatherhood is similarly seldom guided by theory (Doherty, 2004).

Becoming a father brings about more profound changes than any other developmental stage in a man's life (Deave and Johnson, 2008). Meanings and practices of fatherhood are far from being simple or constant; they are rather multiple, complex, fluid, contextually dependent and contested (Goodsell et al., 2010). Becoming a father is a nodal point in the life cycle that can be best described as a complex set of experiences and adjustments that males undergo upon fathering a child, determined equally by social and cultural processes as well as by relational dynamics and unconscious processes. It is a *par excellence* point where subjectivity meets the social, a point of articulation between elements whose contribution to the production of the human subject is usually theorized separately, and an opportunity of the insertion of psychoanalysis into the social sciences trying to explain how the "out-there" gets "in-here" and vice versa. The approach used to understand Greek men's experiences of transition to fatherhood in the present study is placed within the concern of psychosocial studies with the interplay between what are conventionally thought as "external" social and "internal" psychic formations. This approach has re-emerged as a favoured, if fought-over element in social theory (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008).

A basic concept used in our exploration of the transition to fatherhood, is informed by the French psychoanalyst Claude Revault d'Allonnes (1991), that of the called "paternal space" (*champs paternel*). This concept combines Lacan's classical definition with the relational aspect of fatherhood as determined by the multi-layered interaction within the couple. In other words, the "paternal space"

refers to the Lacanian notion of the father representing the law and the recognition of his name in the discourse of the mother, the function of the father thus directed against the union between mother and child (Lacan, 1991). But at the same time in terms of object relational thinking, it indicates that the experience of fatherhood is determined by the man's capacity to manage the relationship with his partner and child.

The ability to occupy the paternal space presupposes adequate management of the conflicts between the two sexes as shaped by often-conflicting social constraints and personal desires. There is evidence that the more empathic men are with their partners, the more aware of their own feelings and the advent of their first child (*ibid.*). In Modern Greek society, the construction of the "conjugal space" at first and subsequently "the paternal" one, is integrally connected with the dynamics of the young parents' disengagement from the family of origin.

Perceptions of becoming a father and family of origin experiences have been examined in the Anglo-Saxon literature by using mostly various quantitative or some qualitative methodologies. Researchers have found that the quality of family of origin experiences as well as current relationships with parents are reflected in the transition to parenthood for both men and women (Feldman, 1987; Lane, Wilcoxon and Cecil, 1988). Shaped by his parents' attitudes and other life experiences, attitudes toward pregnancy and fatherhood have an impact on how a man reacts emotionally at the wake of becoming a father, on perceptions of himself as an adult and as a father, and on his relationship with his partner (Scott-Heyes, 1982). Men who reported positive relations with their own mothers were more playful with their babies (Feldman, Nash and Aschenbrenner, 1983) while Beaton, Doherty and Rueter (2003) showed that family of origin closeness has both a linear and curvilinear association with expectant fathers' attitudes about father involvement, implying that fathers both model their positive family of origin experiences and compensate for their negative ones. Cox et al. (1985) found that new father's observed parenting skills were predicted by how much he perceived his own father to be supportive of his autonomy and how much he perceived his mother to be sensitive to his needs. The quality of men's relationship with their father, as reported during pregnancy, was the most important predictor of subsequent parenting skill, measured as sensitivity towards the baby and appropriateness of responses to it.

Looked at from a psychosocial point of view the disengagement process from the family of origin is intricately related to the separation-individuation unresolved issues. This process of detachment is analysed further down both psychologically and socially, granting fathers internality as well as agency.

Revival of separation-individuation unresolved issues

As deftly formulated by Margaret Mahler (1968) conflicts around separation and individuation are never completely mastered and they tend to resurface and get dramatically re-experienced during significant phases of adulthood.

Usually the early months of pregnancy are frequently characterized by the beginnings of the prospective father's developmental challenge or crisis — signified by the initiation of a major reworking of past and/or current relationships with his partner, parents, siblings, along with a shift in his sense of self (Diamond, 1986). Transition to fatherhood is likely to bring up unfinished psychological tasks such as unresolved intra-psychic conflicts with the parents of one's childhood. Inner splits, in relation to the expectant father's own parents and their role, as parental models, begin to surface (Herzog, 1982).

There is an attempt to re-establish connections with one's own father, particularly the "good father" of the past as represented by the pre-oedipal or the oedipal father or the mentor of a later stage. The more attuned prospective fathers consciously realize that they have to settle old conflicts with their own fathers and that their fathering will be affected by unresolved difficulties in their relationship with them. Men who are driven by more primitive strivings are much less aware of how fearful they are of inhibiting or preventing their fatherhood, in order to keep from being exposed to their repressed unresolved oedipal aggression toward their own fathers. Those men who are in a "state of father hunger" and thus unable to revive contact with the "good father" of one's childhood, may face serious difficulties during the transition to fatherhood. These expectant fathers are most intolerant of their own feminine identifications. On the contrary, men who can cope with transition to fatherhood allow their nurturing feelings to surface and feel more "maternal" (Diamond, 1986).

Commitment to a partner, marriage and transition to fatherhood mark a significant rite of passage for the adult male as he further separates-individuates from his family of origin. By acquiring offspring, a generational change occurs and hence the father's position in the family line moves one step down. Both his father and mother are aging and the never-ending scenario of separation-individuation is re-enacted. The guilt experienced by the prospective father when he was an individuating boy is often recapitulated during this period of adulthood. Like envy, guilt can inspire creative, healing, and pro-social acts but it may as well stir destructive, harmful and antisocial tendencies. Reparative drives serve to heal the pains of separation-individuation and can take various forms. Man's desire for a child may well serve as a reparative wish, a desire to give to one's own father and/or mother the child that the individuated adult male can no longer be (Colarusso and Nemiroff, 1982).

The first steps into awareness of separateness and individuation start very early in life — from about seven to ten months up to fifteen to sixteenth months of age as Mahler (1968) has pointed out. Yet one could regard the entire life cycle as constituting a more or less successful process of distancing from the objects of dependency. Separation-individuation is re-experienced many times in one's life-time, each time obviously under very different terms. During this never ending developmental process two equally strong intertwined needs are felt: breaking away from the lost symbiotic mother and the eternal longing for the actual or fantasized "all good" symbiotic mother, who was at one time part of the self in a blissful state of well-being. During transition to parenthood the dialectic between these divergent needs is

accentuated. Striking the balance between an autonomous self and a totally interconnected one is an essential developmental task for the young adults who become parents. Achieving autonomy through differentiation within the family of origin is considered important in achieving true intimacy (Bowen, 1978).

When mothers raise sons: a psychosocial experience

As is clear from the above, in order for contemporary individuals to build their own family they need to have mastered those psychosocial tasks that would allow them to function as autonomous, self-bounded open systems. Adequate working through presupposes that the new father disengages from his family of origin without neither cutting-off, nor replicating the parent-child relationship with one's partner. In other words, for getting ready to share one's life with another person one needs to have addressed issues of independence and identity development.

In the traditional Greek family, as in all traditional pre-modern societies there was no room for such identity development. In the socio-cultural context where marriage and having children was just an episode in the family continuum aiming at furthering collective wellbeing, the search for one's self would have been harmful both for the individual and for one's extended family group. The ideology of the couple was non-existent. Men and women enacted their roles independently in the context of their own gender group. Reproduction was the main reason for marriage (Dragona and Tseliou, 2009).

Research evidence on the Greek family during the late 60s shows that the least close of all family relations is the one between spouses. Women were found to "politely avoid their husband". On the contrary, the most charged relationship is the one between mother and son. Apart from the "admiration" and "love" mothers attach to this relationship, they were systematically found to claim that their sons are in need of their support (Triandis, Vassiliou and Nassiakou, 1968). This highly charged relationship has deep cultural roots and important psychological consequences.

In a context within which prevails this preferential treatment of the son by the mother who exercises domestic power within the structure of the household, father tends to remain distant and authoritative. He exhibits his male prestige and esteem in the public sphere (Friedl, 1986). Moreover, breaking away from mother's arms that are tighter for the son than for the spouse and promise exclusivity, is not an easy task. "Won't a nurturant but seductive mother become castrating?"¹ wonders Garner (1982) who studied similar mother-son relations in the Mediterranean Algiers. Her words sound very familiar. She refers to a socio-cultural context where marriage is an expression of collective living, a rite that seals family cohesion and adherence to shared values and norms. In such societies there is no room for the couple. Its sole aim is reproduction.

1 Mère bonne nourrice mais séductrice ne deviendrait elle castratrice?

Lacoste-Dujardin (1985) who has written a book with the very provocative title *Des Mères contre les Femmes. Maternité et Patriarcat au Maghreb*, describes very convincingly the difficulty of the young boys in such a traditional socio-cultural setting, as is the Maghreb, to separate from a closely knit relationship with the mother who does not draw emotional satisfaction from her husband and whose libidinal investment is in her son (or her sons). Father's distancing from the mother-son relationship traps the entire family into processes that short-circuit the development of autonomy. How could it be otherwise when there is no couple ideology, wonders Garnero once more.

As we know from the Freudian analysis on the Oedipal phase the child forms, through unconscious processes, identifications with the primary images of mother and father. As Freud stressed, the father's presence blocks access to the symbiotic satisfaction the child naturally seeks with the mother, and in doing so, it inseparably links desire and the law. For the child, the father represents an initial prohibition: the incest taboo. This taboo is decisive at the psychological level because it structures the boy's psychological universe. By putting an end to the complete fusion between mother and child, the father obstructs the identification between desire and the object of desire. This means that the child can become aware of desire as a psychological fact that exists on its own, independent of the desire's satisfaction or not in external reality. This frustration creates, as it were, an internal space, that gives birth to the young boy's inner world. The fusion between the Ego and the unconscious is thus broken. When a man remains identified with his mother, he remains fused with his unconscious: he *is* his own desires, his own impulses, his own ideas. He has no sense of them as internal objects that do not necessarily have to be obeyed (Corneau, 1991).

The frustration of the child's incestuous desire also allows nature to be separated from culture. A man who lives in symbiosis with his inner world, says Corneau (*ibid.*), is also in symbiosis with the outer world. He becomes his culture and finds himself identified with its prevailing stereotypes. If being a man means being macho, he will be macho. If it means being gentle, he will be gentle. In other words, a man who is principally identified with his mother has no access to his own individuality. He remains subject to his unconscious and to the whims of social fashion. In technical terms, he will be dominated internally by a mother complex. Since the mother is virtually the only reference point for such a son, she will also loom large in his psyche. The son's Ego thus runs the risk of remaining a little boy in relation to the overly powerful mother complex.

In order to evolve, a man has to identify both with his mother and his father. The father-mother-son triangle must replace the mother-son dyad. If however the father is absent or distant, there is no transfer of identification from the mother to the father, and the son remains imprisoned in his identification with the mother. Father's absence automatically increases the influence of the mother who is thus burdened with a responsibility that will become too heavy for her to bear. Thus the triangle never gets a chance to form properly, and with regard to their sexual identity, sons develop, as claims Corneau, into "giants with feet of clay".

Boys who do not manage to break away from the maternal hold remain emotionally immature and often express a sadistic reaction towards the mother who has enslaved them with her affection. The “love story” between the mother and the son turns into a power struggle, and sons begin their war against women. The all-consuming mother-son relationship results into fear of women, fear for everything that is feminine, fear of bodies — women’s bodies and their own. And men who fear their bodies will be even more frightened of their hearts. We have to keep in mind that in our Western culture being a man means “not expressing emotion”. The big question thus is, what kind of relationship will men who have not managed to identify with their fathers, build with the women they will fall in love and eventually marry?

The current Greek socio-cultural context

The process described in psychosocial terms will be examined in the present Greek socio-cultural framework. Identifying the modernising process is not an easy task. The difficulty lies in that social life goes through rapid transformations and the pace of development is not the same for all, not even for the population of the same community. The degree of transformation of each particular family depends on the degree of adjustment to the new “modern” social reality. As regards fathering there is an asymmetry between the cultural ideals and actual everyday paternal behaviour. There is not one dominant model but several different ones of Greek father involvement. Fathering seems to be shaped by personal biography and circumstance rather than being modeled on “traditional” or “new” ideal types of fatherhood (Arhontidou, 2010).

Distinguishing “traditional” behaviours from “modern” ones on the basis of strictly geographical terms (i.e. rural versus urban) is inadequate. In both urban and rural settings gender identity may be prescribed on the basis of domestic roles. In both urban and rural settings, extended family ties may be equally strong. In both urban and rural settings, choices and needs may be tied to the interests of the family rather than being a result of individuation.

Thus a more successful way to describe modernity in psychosocial terms is to identify the boundary processes characterising the particular family system. Boundaries refer to the values, the goals, the information processing and the decision-making practices characterizing each specific system (Vassiliou and Vassiliou, 1980). Traditional families are self-bounded systems.

In the modern family, boundaries change. The individual breaks away from the family group; one’s individual rights are more important than the obligations towards one’s group; information processing and decision-making are individual concerns. The individual is involved in drawing one’s boundaries. Marriage instead of being an episode in the long life of the family acquires its own self-contained existence. Nuclear families are based on marriage and strive to acquire their autonomy. Building strong personal relationships within the bounds of the conjugal pair and “becoming a couple” is not only desirable but is also essential. Necessary presuppositions for that is

disengaging from the family of origin, and achieving independence leading to psychological and social maturity.

“New” families are faced with the task of negotiating the public and the private. Women, mainly via entering the labour market, are increasingly participating in the public sphere which a few decades ago was men’s territory while they try to lure men in the private sphere and involve them in domestic responsibilities and child care.

Modernity is characterised by increased complexity, fluidity and contradictions. The process of individualization noted by theorists of globalization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 2003) has created new spaces for the experience of subjectivity. What worked in human relations in the past and guaranteed smooth functioning, today results in intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. Deconstruction and reconstruction of gender identity is inevitable. As the individual can no longer rely on prescribed norms and values is faced with the challenge to “construct his/her own biography”, as Anthony Giddens says or as formulated by Ulrich Beck “to construct a life of one’s own”. Thus young people are faced with a difficult, albeit challenging endeavour: establish new family boundaries and differentiate from the family of origin, choose a partner and build their own family on the basis of their needs and priorities, and negotiate their own meaningful relationships through functional dyads and triads.

Obviously, as mentioned, these states are ideal types because Greek families may exhibit, at the same time, values and behaviours that have traditional, modern or late modern features. For example, while youths in their transition process into adulthood are engaging in a distancing process from their family of origin, they tend, as is the case with other Mediterranean countries such as Portugal (Guerreiro, Torres and Capucha, 2009), to stay on with parents much longer than do youths in other European societies.

The study

The past decade has witnessed an increase in studies using qualitative methodologies investigating various interpretations of fathering and being critical of quantitative approaches that study the effect of single psychological, social and cultural variables (Lewis and Lamb, 2007; Goodsell, Bates and Andrew, 2011). Similarly, the objective of the present study was not to examine in a quantitative way correlations between isolated variables, determinants of the experience of the transition to fatherhood. Since the aim was to understand the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal subjective experience of men at this critical period of fatherhood, a qualitative, psychoanalytically inspired methodology was employed.²

2 Almost all current psychosocial research concentrates on the use of interviews guided in some sense by psychoanalytic methods: they use very open styles of interview, sometimes several interviews with one person, sometimes with feedback or interpretation (Walkerdine, 2008). For a description of psychoanalytically inspired methodology see Hollway and Jefferson (2000).

Twenty-three men who were becoming fathers for the first time were approached. As regards size of sample the criterion of data saturation was used whereby no new information was produced. As mentioned earlier we were interested in exploring transition to fatherhood in relation to the modernising process and we claimed that the geographical context is an insufficient factor determining “traditional” or “modern” behaviour. However, we chose to include in our sample two different populations in terms of geographical background. Thus nine men were city dwellers and fourteen men were living in a distant island of the Dodecanese. The sample included men who were involved in a variety of professions thus covering a wide spectrum from lawyers and doctors to electricians and taxi drivers. Never the less this group was not chosen to represent some part of the larger world. The purpose was to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which men in our sample construe transition to fatherhood.

Men were interviewed with open style interviews thrice: during pregnancy, a few days after their baby’s birth and six months later. Field notes were also taken following ethnographic techniques (Dragona and Naziri, 1995).

Each interview was taped recorded and transcribed. The analysis was based on writing brief case descriptions for each interview. As suggested by von der Lippe (2010) these descriptions served as a fixed point for all consecutive interpretations ensuring validity of the following interpretations. For each interview a meaning making, sentence-by-sentence, analysis was performed by hand yielding six broad descriptive categories related to experiences of becoming a father: (a) rising sense of responsibility; (b) process of growth and maturity; (c) challenging, opening up new horizons; (d) positive and negative changes in the conjugal relations; (e) personal achievement; (f) stress and anxiety. These categories were manifested in three themes that cut across all interviews: (a) choice of child’s name; (b) engagement with and disengagement from the family of origin; (c) dynamics within the conjugal space (Dragona and Naziri, 1995).

The two case studies presented further down draw from the discursive material that focuses on the engagement with and disengagement from the family of origin (Dragona, 1999). Mitsos and Leonidas represent two diametrically different trajectories of breaking away from their family of origin. Mitsos is in great difficulty of separating from his mother and is unable to make personal choices while Leonidas tries through meaning making processes to differentiate, create boundaries and define the conjugal and paternal space.

Mitsos

Mitsos is a medical doctor, 30 years old. His wife Katerina has the same age and they met when they were students. She is a biologist and works at a research centre. During the first interview Mitsos claims that he is excluded from his wife’s pregnancy both as a man and as a doctor.

The change brought about by pregnancy creates some problems for our relation... in coexistence... I have experienced my wife all along this period as more cold towards

some things; more closed to herself. On the one hand, she does not allow me to know and possess at every single moment the particular state my wife is in so that I can adjust my behaviour accordingly and on the other, I am not given the possibility to intervene, either to help or facilitate some things.

Yet while Katerina, according to his words is “closed to herself” in all the three interviews that lasted several hours, it is he who systematically avoids to talk about his feelings and his relationship with her. There are no references to Katerina as a lover or as a mother.

He extensively refers to the moment of conception as a very exceptional one. Yet the description is not placed within the relationship of the couple. A certain omnipotence characterises his words that in the context of his narrative makes me think that he may be trying to cover up a limited desire for a child but at the same time confirm his fertility. In his discourse he associates the moment of conception with another big event in his life — the moment he found out he had passed the entrance exams at the Medical School. “These are moments that have stayed with me and I can describe every minute”, he says. Both these incidents affirm power reinforcing his male identity.

It is the question on the child’s name that triggers him to reveal his difficulty to disentangle from his family of origin. He very emphatically describes his crystal clear wish to give his parents’ name to the prospective child.

We have discussed it with my wife several times and it is a sore point of contention. I want to give the child my parents’ name — irrespectively if it is a boy or a girl. My wife has a widely different opinion. If I were to think of gender equality... yes I understand it, but I am not emotionally ready to distance myself and accept another name.

His attachment to his family of origin is presented as inevitably competitive to his relationship with his wife. This rivalry crystallizes on the choice of the child’s name and acquires much bigger proportions in the second interview. Mitsos describes how, without discussing it with Katerina, announces to his mother the birth of her granddaughter who has her name. Mitsos in a long and detailed narration describes his self as being pulled by the two women — mother and spouse — and unable to please them both, he either gives in to the wishes of the one or the other.

There are times I feel I am in the middle not knowing what to do. Whose rights should I serve? You cannot always function on the basis of who is right and who is wrong. The reasons behind it are purely sentimental.

He sounds guilty but at the same time I sense he is narcissistically pleased being both women’s object of desire.

Thus taking Katerina’s side he says:

Katerina did not want to give my mother’s name, firstly because my mother’s behaviour towards her was not good. It was objectively not good. I appreciate this. Secondly,

because she doesn't really like the name very much. She is not wrong in that either, i.e. I appreciate this as well.

Then he takes his mother's side:

Well, I understand that we deprive her from the joy to help us. The second reason is that we deprive her from participating in the agony of the birth. We deprive her from the joy of being there when the child was born... Well, coming out of the birth room and feeling that we had somewhat discussed it and well... I thought that may be Katerina had been convinced that I will react traditionally and I will give my parents' name to the child... in coming out of the birth room — well I thought that is that, since so many other things have taken place... — in order to cajole her I said: "Panagoula was born..." [i.e. the mother's name given to his daughter]

Mitsos' father who has recently died has had a labour accident when Mitsos was a very young boy. This accident forced him to stay at home and he "occupied himself with completely secondary matters", as he says. In his discourse I sense guilt towards the father and feelings of shame. "I was surely feeling embarrassed. Well to say as a young child that your father is retired because of an accident is rather annoying". The mother "someone quite selfish... domineering... bossy is what describes her well" seems to have always had the upper hand at home.

A little aggressive towards us in the sense that she imposed certain things... but deep down when you come closer, well I think she loves you very, very much... she would sacrifice herself for something you may want. But she may also at times take back what she has given you or completely cut it off [sic].³

She is obviously depicted as a castrating mother who gives rise to very ambivalent feelings. "I get angry and fight with her many times". A little later in the interview when I raise the question whom he has taken after, he says: "I have taken after my mother as regards selfishness."

Mother is described as intervening greatly in his conjugal life and he is unable to set her boundaries:

Well you may set some limits but to people who are less selfish. In the case of my mother who is very selfish, I believe rules are more difficult to set and at any time there may be conflict or some misunderstanding.

Fights with Katerina seem non negotiable and difficult to manage. Every critical stage in their relationship, marriage at first and then the advent of the child, is a source of stress, tension and frustration leading them to an impasse. He seems to

3 Note that the literal meaning in Greek is "cut it off" but in this context it may also mean that she "would withdraw".

push aside the problems in a “wait and see” fashion as he literally says. “I believe that there is always time until...” But Katerina presses for solutions. The result is “tension in their relationship” as he describes it.

There is intense confrontation between Katerina and his mother: “My mother was entirely negative when I met Katerina.” Yet while Katerina seems to occupy a position that is antagonistic to that of the mother, on a deeper level there are points of identification between mother and spouse. This follows from the characteristics that Mitsos attributes to his wife. She is described as “energetic” and “dynamic”. “I do not want a wife that says ‘yes’ to everything”, “I want her to have her own personality irrespective of whether this is to my benefit or no”, says Mitsos.

In his narration both mother and Katerina relate to him in the same way. They are demanding and probably depriving. In other words, strong influences from the family of origin have led Mitsos, to choose a partner as “prescribed” by his mother.

Mitsos’ relationship with his mother as constructed on the basis of the presence/absence of the invalid father has probably led to an unresolved Oedipal conflict that seems to resurface with the child’s birth. The presence of the invalid father seems to have deprived him from identifying with the strong father of one’s childhood and has forced him to remain attached and dependent on the powerful mother. The primary unresolved conflicts as regards identification with the parental images prevent him from defining the conjugal and the paternal space. In his narration the focus on the ambivalent relations with the images of the parents, raise questions as to the extent Mitsos is ready to adopt the paternal function and as to the deeper meaning the presence of his child has in his life.

Leonidas

Leonidas is 28 years old and he is a secondary school teacher. He extensively refers to the process of autonomy building and disengaging from the family of origin, as he is becoming a father. His discourse is very sophisticated. He refers in depth to his relationship to his parents; he tries to define his perceptions of his father and mother analysing the dynamics of their relationship. This scrutiny seems to correspond to his own vital need to self-define as a prospective father.

My mother must have questioned herself if she made the right choice, something my father never answered. A deal between them that was unclear right from the beginning. As she used to say, it was *she* who was responsible for not letting my father fall in love with her. I feel sorry that as a child I was unable to understand my father. It is not my father who failed; it is my mother who did not let him show his real self. I am currently trying to come closer to my father bypassing my mother.

With a lot of empathy he places his parents’ relationship, and consequently his own relationship with them, in the socio-historical context of the time he was growing up:

It was around 1950 or 1953 the time I am trying to bring to light. It is extremely difficult but I have in front of my eyes the type of woman who comes out of a traditional

society and tries to emulate the European model. Everything is full of contradictions and conflict. Children get double messages about everything.

Detaching from the family of origin triggers all sorts of thoughts regarding his identifications with his parents and with boundary setting:

I do not possess, but I am trying hard to build some boundaries, some guidelines... I can see mistakes in the way I was raised. It may have been ignorance, or who knows... They are inevitable. I am critical but I do not blame anyone... So many thoughts I have made during this year I have distanced myself from home. So many thoughts that had never crossed my mind all those years I was there.

Leonidas wants to believe that he has managed to develop an autonomous self and he has come to terms with his parents. Yet his criticism of them, a *sine qua non* condition for achieving autonomy, frightens him immensely and is perceived as an act of violence:

There are times I am proud of myself because well... I do not know to what extent I am identifying, but I see that at least in some things I am not. And the proof is not the lack of criticism. I have other proofs. I do not fight with them anymore. I have understood who they are and who I am. I do not any more pay so much attention to all my mother's "musts". And I was the only who knew that this was not the right thing to do but I did it. And please do not think that this which up to now was all theory... I am now sure that it has to take roots.

Transition to fatherhood stirs in Leonidas a lot of anxiety as to his efficiency in becoming a good father. His being hard on himself and on his parents indicates the high expectations he holds of himself. His strict superego triggers endless internal conflicts.

The need to take a position towards my parents was always there — in me. The child that is on the way is motivating me to make as few mistakes as possible. And now I have to move fast, real fast in order to catch up, because the person who is on the way will expose me... So much more that I am convinced that the child at its present embryonic state receives everything. That is, I am sure that when the child is born it will already have developed an opinion as to what family it has been born into and what kind of relationship it has emerged from.

In his long and some times convoluted narration there is very little mention of his wife's contribution in raising the prospective child. He refers again to his mother: "My mother will want to intervene. I know I will face a problem there."

Six months later he is accepting of his mother's-in-law involvement in the care of his child because he sees it as "temporary solution" in view of the difficulty of dealing with the conflicts he experiences with his mother. Raising the child seems to multiply the fields of conflict with her, since on the one hand he feels guilty for excluding her and on the other he is afraid of her interventions.

Leonidas narrative during the three long interviews creates an impression that transition to fatherhood is characterized by an intricate process of individuation that is part of the course of disengagement from the family of origin. In a reflexive fashion he is trying to understand more deeply his parents, to accept their weaknesses, to place them within the particular socio-cultural characteristics of the Greek society, to identify his own desires and needs and to define his priorities. He seems to know that these achievements are part and parcel of assuming the paternal function and adopting the father's role. Yet, Leonidas trajectory is an internal dialogue where the negotiation of his relationship with his partner is absent. Jointly working through their relationship and the difficulties of parenthood seems to be a pending matter.

Conclusion

In both men's discourse the process of identification with mother initially and father later on, defines the course of disengagement from the family of origin.

It is clear that men who remain trapped in unresolved conflicts with their parents face difficulties in enacting the paternal function and in adopting the father's role. A cyclical process takes place. The construction of the paternal space presupposes the construction of the conjugal space that in turn presupposes autonomy building and disengagement from the family of origin.

In order to self-define as fathers, men have to have established successful identifications with their own fathers. As claimed in the beginning of this paper, transition to fatherhood revives the need of re-connecting with the "good father" of the pre-oedipal or the Oedipal phase, or the mentor that has guided his son in the world of masculinity. Leonidas is a self-reflexive man who is aware that the degree to which he will function as a father is intricately connected with the unresolved difficulties in his relation to his own father. The same holds true for Mitsos who, while he may be not directly acknowledging it, refers extensively to the invalid and weak father of his childhood and to the ambivalent feelings he held for him. The challenge that both men face is to accept their parents for what they are without trying to make them into something they are not or blame them for what they cannot be. They both struggle to accept that they need not adjust to the desires and wishes of their parents to the detriment of their own needs and wishes.

Men's craving to settle their differences with their family of origin and to re-connect the "good father" of one's childhood has been noted by several researchers who have studied men that were becoming fathers (Herzog, 1982; Shapiro, 1985) and certainly by therapists that have worked with male clients (Diamond, 1986). Herzog (1982) remarks that men who participated in his study and were unable to deal with these feelings were less and less in a position to move towards what Deutsher (1971) calls a "pregnancy alliance". Moreover men who were "father hungry" and could not connect with the "good father of old times" were not able to handle their female identifications. While men who managed

these challenges could connect with the affectionate and nurturing feelings they had suppressed in favour of a “macho” masculinity (Herzog, 1982).

For a man to develop he has to identify both with mother and father. The triangle father-mother-son is the one that replaces the dyad mother-son. Yet, if father remains distant or absent, this transfer of identification with mother to identification with father remains incomplete and the son finds himself trapped in exclusively identifying with mother. While mother’s effect on her son has been extensively described in the literature, the powerful presence of mother owing to father’s absence has been less analysed. Behind the domineering, over protective, oppressive mothers described by the men in this study, there is a present/absent father. Mother acquires huge proportions in the son’s internal world from the moment she becomes the central point of reference for him. And thus the son finds it very hard to establish a strong Ego and “become a man”. This difficulty emerged from both Mitsos and Leonidas words, despite the fact they are handling it differently; the first one not being able to disengage from his mother, the latter trying in more successful, self-reflective fashion to gain perspective, come to terms with his parents and identify his own needs and desires.

Satisfactory identifications with mother and father, autonomy building, disengagement from the family of origin and construction of a paternal space, as defined by Revault d’Allonnes, are all processes that are intricately tied to the specific socio-cultural context. In cultures where mother was traditionally dominant and which are in the process of transformation such as Italy (Fernandez, 1965) or the Maghreb (Lacoste-Dujardin, 1985) or Greece for that matter, the task of young men to achieve both their personal autonomy and close affectionate relationships with their partner and child is a hard one. This was clear in the men’s discourse.

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Resumo/ abstract/ résumé/ resumen

Ser pai: desafios psicossociais para os homens gregos

O presente estudo analisa a transição dos homens gregos para a paternidade e, em particular, o início de uma relação a par com a separação da família de origem, fase decisiva das suas vidas. Para ilustrar este processo o artigo foi estruturado a partir de dois estudos de caso diametralmente diferentes em termos de rutura com a separação da família de origem. Num deles, o indivíduo não é capaz de se libertar de uma mãe dominadora, enquanto no outro tenta, de uma forma autorreflexiva, adquirir uma perspetiva, identificar as suas próprias necessidades e chegar a um acordo com os pais. O estudo utiliza uma metodologia qualitativa e situa-se no âmbito da pesquisa psicossocial com a interação entre as formações “externas” sociais e “internas” psicológicas.

Palavras-chave pais gregos, transição para a paternidade, separação da família de origem, estudo psicossocial

Becoming a father: psychosocial challenges for Greek men

The present study examines Greek men's transition to fatherhood and more particularly engagement with and disengagement from the family of origin at this critical stage of their life. To illustrate this process material is drawn from two diametrically different case studies in terms of breaking away from their family of origin. The one is not able to disengage from a domineering mother while the other tries in a self-reflective way to gain perspective, identify his own needs and come to terms with his parents. The study uses a qualitative methodology and is placed within the concern of psychosocial research with the interplay between “external” social and “internal” psychic formations.

Keywords Greek fathers, transition to fatherhood, separation from the family of origin, psychosocial study.

Devenir père: défis psychosociaux pour les hommes grecs

Cette étude analyse le passage des hommes grecs à la paternité et, en particulier, le début d'une relation en même temps qu'une séparation de la famille d'origine, étape décisive de leurs vies. Pour illustrer ce processus, l'article a été structuré à partir de deux études de cas diamétralement différentes en termes de séparation

de la famille d'origine. Dans un cas, l'individu n'est pas capable de se libérer d'une mère dominatrice, tandis que dans l'autre, il essaie d'une façon autoréflexive de se forger un point de vue, d'identifier ses propres besoins et d'arriver à un accord avec ses parents. L'étude utilise une méthodologie qualitative et est placée dans la préoccupation de la recherche psychosociale avec l'interaction entre les formations "extérieures" sociales et "intérieures" psychologiques.

Mots-clés pères grecs, passage à la paternité, séparation de la famille d'origine, étude psychosociale.

Volviéndose un padre: desafíos psicosociales para los hombres griegos

El presente estudio analiza la transición de los hombres griegos hacia la paternidad y, más particularmente, el inicio de una relación y la separación de la familia de origen, fase decisiva de sus vidas. Para ilustrar este proceso el artículo fue estructurado a partir de dos estudios de caso diametralmente diferentes en términos de ruptura con la/separación de la familia de origen. En el primer caso, el individuo no es capaz de liberarse de una madre dominante, mientras que en el segundo caso intenta, de una forma auto-reflexiva, adquirir una perspectiva, identificar sus propias necesidades y llegar a un acuerdo con los padres. El estudio utiliza una metodología cualitativa y es colocado dentro de la preocupación de la investigación psicosocial con la interacción entre las formaciones "externas" sociales e "internas" psicológicas.

Palabras-clave padres griegos, transición para la paternidad, separación de la familia de origen, estudio psicosocial.