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Doing being a father in Côte d'Ivoire:

Intimate fathering, performances of care and paternal determinism

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze fathering/fatherhood as performative practices. I suggest that both "fatherhood" (emic conceptualizations of the social role of being a father) and "fathering" (the practices associated with being a father) should be discussed together in order to better understand how discourses and practices of intimacy, care and paternal determinism provide fathers with building bricks for their individual self-choreographies as men and fathers. Despite a dominant discourse of the responsible father as "provider", imaginaries of caring intimate fatherhood were produced and shared through social media and in narrative interviews with middle-class fathers in Côte d'Ivoire. For many of my interlocutors, intensive fathering offered an alternative and attractive way of living and was used to renegotiate and reevaluate gender roles, the relations between the nuclear and the extended family and to craft imaginaries of a proper childhood that largely differed from their own. By imagining and with ostentation performing being a particular kind of father, men used fatherhood as a means of aspirational identity work. I will further argue that intimate fatherhood and emic theories of parental determinism are in fact a reinterpretation of "hegemonic masculinities" rather than its opposite. My paper thus addresses a two-parted blind spot in social sciences: first it focuses on paternal performances of care, which still are often neglected in favor of mothering and second it argues against the dominant discourse of fatherhood in crisis by highlighting a more nuanced view of engaged fatherhood. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork and narrative interviews with fathers and parenting experts as well as father's self-choreographies of intimate fatherhood in social media.

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Introduction

In March 2018 I met Jean-Robert, a public servant at the prefecture of Bongounaou, for an interview.[1] He was living with his girlfriend Juliette and their three-year-old daughter Émilie in a two-room row house. Jean-Robert had scheduled our interview on a Saturday afternoon. Juliette was busy preparing for university exams the following month and was therefore not present. Émilie was playing in the living room and in the courtyard of the house. Samantha, the young girl helping Jean-Robert with the household, was busy doing laundry and more or less ignoring the child, who ran to and fro making a lot of noise. After introducing the topics of interest of my study, I asked Jean-Robert what being a good father meant to him.

> Jean-Robert: Alright. Leave it, sweetie, don't touch the door. Ouf [he laughs]. This is a really vast topic, there's so many things to talk about. […] For me, a good father is first of all someone with a sense of responsibility. […] When you are young, you can allow yourself… you can go out, eat and drink with friends, come home in the morning hours. […] But once I dedicated myself to a relationship with that young mademoiselle [pointing to his daughter], I told myself: Ah, I am no longer alone. When you are alone, you can do a lot of things. But once there is a child, there is this sense of responsibility. You have to be responsible. If I have 100,000 CFA francs [salary] at the end of the month, I can buy a new pair of jeans, shoes, a T-shirt. But what if the child falls ill?! You have to budget for that! You no longer live only for yourself. Once you become a parent, you no longer live for yourself alone. You live for your wife, but more than that for your child, taking into account their needs, budgeting for their future, open a bank account for them. Here in Africa, they say life expectancy is around 45 years. We don't last forever. Thus, you have to use the time when you are still young to budget and plan your child's future. It is this: sense of responsibility. You have to make provisions for your child's future.

Only six months after that interview, Jean-Robert died of pneumonia at the age of 32, totally unexpectedly for his family and friends. Listening to the recording of the interview, I shiver at the apparent clairvoyance of his statement about life expectancy. Back then, I remember

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thinking: "Well, it is not your kind to whom the life expectancy of 45 years applies. You are a well-off, educated middle-class public servant, you can afford treatment in hospital, you even have private health insurance." His sudden death, far too early, found his girlfriend and child unprepared. As Juliette was attending university in Abidjan and only came home for the weekends, Jean-Robert was practically a single dad. Indeed, whereas in the interview excerpt cited above paternal responsibility appears first of all in the form of financial provision, Jean-Robert performed being responsible and taking care of his child's future as encompassing other dimensions of care, as I came to understand passing time with him and his family. Paternal responsibility for him obviously meant more than just "providing." It meant acknowledging that what one did as a father (and what one failed to do) was causally linked to the development of the child and whether or not they would turn out "well" – a philosophy that has recently been dubbed "paternal determinism" (Furedi 2002).

In our interview, Jean-Robert not only talked about what it meant to be a good father; he also performed being a caring father in quite an ostentatious way. He neither yelled at his daughter when she repeatedly disrupted our interview and continually made noise nor called upon Samantha to make her stay quiet. Instead, he called her by sweet nicknames, took her on his lap, explained patiently what he was doing and the functioning of the tape recorder I had put on the living room table. After the interview, he asked me to accompany him to the market to buy a new pair of shoes for Émilie. The trip to the market, which was within walking distance of his house, turned into a fun promenade with his daughter, who would comment on every stone and bug that we came across, with Jean-Robert always providing an explanation in response to her questions.

Being a responsible father also encompassed living family life in a particular way and making conscious decisions about that. After the birth of their child, the family had lived in the compound of Juliette's family; but once Jean-Robert had been promoted and his salary increased, he found it better suited his ideas of family to find them a place of their own, even if that meant they had to do without the support of his in-laws in providing childcare. Initially, when they moved to their own house, he had employed a young girl from a nearby village as

nounou[2] to take care of the child while he was at work, but he felt that her lack of formal education posed a threat to his child's intellectual and social development. Since then, Samantha had started to come by to help with washing and cleaning, but she was not employed as a *nounou*; she did not live with the family and provide a 24-hour service, as was usual among other middle-class families I got to know. Since her second birthday, Émilie had attended a private crèche, where graduate pre-school teachers took care of her. Jean-Robert personally took her there in the morning, fetched her at noon to have lunch together at their home and, after a nap, took her back to the crèche before returning to collect her in the evening. When duties outside of that schedule required him to work longer hour, his girlfriend's mother took care of the child, even though – as he confided to me – he made use of that service only grudgingly, because at the compound the child was exposed to manners he disliked. In turn, his mother-in-law did not understand why they had exchanged daily care for the child in the family compound for the crèche in the first place. The monthly fees for the crèche were many times more than the monthly salary of the *nounou* (especially as he still had to hire household help to do the cooking, washing, etc.). Still, Jean-Robert felt that it was his responsibility as a father not only to cater for the basic needs of his daughter but to provide her with the best he could offer to smooth her path and increase her opportunities in life. After Jean-Robert's sudden death, Juliette and Émilie moved back to Juliette's mother's family compound and Émilie no longer attended the crèche but was cared for by her grandmother, while Juliette continued her studies in Abidjan.

I suggest conceptualizing fatherly responsibilities as "provider" and the performing of daily care practices as two complementary aspects of "doing being a father": "fatherhood" (the emic conceptualizations of the social role of being a father) and "fathering" (the practices associated with being a father). This largely corresponds to hegemonic conceptions of what a father ought

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[2] A *nounou* is usually a live-in nanny, who not only takes care of the children but also undertakes household chores such as preparing food for the children, washing their clothes, etc. It is mostly unmarried girls between the ages of 16 and 25 from rural areas or impoverished quarters of Abidjan who work as *nounous* in better-off households. In some cases, families call upon their own kin from the village for this work, often in some kind of temporary child-fostering arrangement, granting the girl free living and providing for the opportunity of schooling or other further education. In other cases, (especially in Abidjan) these young women are hired through a placement agency and paid regularly. It was more common for families in Abidjan to have a *nounou*, as families in peri-urban areas such as Bongouanou found it difficult to find a girl from the village to come to Bongouanou. Most girls would want to go to Abidjan, they complained.

to do, on the one hand, and the discussion of fatherly duties in the literature on the other (see, for example, Heron 2018 for similar observations in Dominica). Yet, despite a dominant discourse of the responsible father as "provider," imaginaries of caring, intimate fatherhood were produced and shared through social media and in narrative interviews I conducted with middle-class fathers such as Jean-Robert in Abidjan, Bouaké and Bongouanou. Oftentimes, accounts of intimate fatherhood were related in a manner that contrasted with men's memories of their own fathers. For many of my interlocutors, intensive fathering offered an alternative and attractive way of living; it was used to renegotiate and reevaluate gender roles and the relations between the nuclear and the extended family, and to craft imaginaries of a proper childhood that greatly differed from their own. By imagining and, with ostentation, performing being a particular kind of father, men used fatherhood as a means of aspirational identity work. In the following I therefore suggest that both fatherhood and fathering should be discussed together in order to better understand how discourses and practices of intimacy, care and paternal determinism provide fathers with building blocks for their individual self-determination.

In this paper, I will look at these two dimensions of fatherhood and fathering as performative practices. After briefly summarizing the anthropology of fatherhood and fathering, I will describe scenes and narratives of intimate fatherhood and demonstrate the ways in which Ivorian fathers break "silences around intimate fatherhood" (Heron 2018) that are imposed upon them by dominant norms of masculinity and, especially, by the "provider" imaginary of fatherhood. I will further argue that intimate fatherhood and emic theories of parental determinism are in fact a reinterpretation of "hegemonic masculinities" rather than their opposite. The data the paper is built upon consists of participant observation and interviews with fathers and parenting experts, as well as fathers' self-choreographies of intimate fatherhood on social media. After a short field trip alone, I later brought my own children to the field and tried to share as much as possible with my informants the emotional and bodily labor involved in taking care of children, teaching them, feeding them, making sure they lacked nothing. Many intimate insights into self-reflective and critical conceptions of parenthood were born out of this particularly demanding way of doing fieldwork.

Fatherhood and fathering in anthropology

Ever since Meyer Fortes famously stated that "parenthood is regarded as sine qua non for the attainment of the full development of the person to which all aspire" (1978: 125),[3] anthropology has looked at fatherhood in Africa predominantly with reference to kinship and social organization. As anthropologists have recognized the distinction between the biological genitor and the social pater, early anthropological analysis focused on how men established and maintained social relationships with their kin (see, e.g., Müller 1979). Fatherhood was often discussed as part of social organization and exchange, e.g., for the Nuer of Sudan or the Wodaabe of Niger, where fatherhood is constituted through the exchange of cattle (Hutchinson 1980; Schareika 2010); or through fulfilling fatherly responsibilities such as paying bridewealth, as is the case among the Gusii of Kenya (Håkansson 1988). The notorious mother's brother (avunculate) as substitute father appeared in anthropology as the local solution to the problem of insecure fatherhood (Malinowski 1929). Classic anthropological works on fatherhood in Africa mistook the fact that in many societies there were the same classificatory terms for father and father's brother as proof that there was no distinct social role played by the father (Müller 1979: 97). Indeed, much of this early literature on fatherhood – mockingly described by Malinowski (1930) as kinship algebra – was predominantly occupied with classification, typology and the politics of social organization, and it teaches us little about the actual practices of fatherly care. Still, observing Trobriand men, Malinowski stated as early as 1927 that "the father is always interested in the children, sometimes passionately so, and performs all his duties eagerly and fondly" (1927: 23), even if the idea of physical fatherhood was not central to this relationship (Malinowski 1916: 410). Moreover, Müller closed his paper about the complex relationships between pater, genitor, firstborn sons and classificatory fathers in Africa with the comment that in Africa, as elsewhere, relationships between fathers and their children varied according to individually volatile affective ties (1979: 107). Why, then, has anthropological analysis not delved into these passionate and intimate relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and children?

In the anthropological literature on kinship, childcare and parenting, there is a clear motherhood bias (Thelen and Haukanes 2010: 16). Whereas numerous publications in the

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[3] Parenthood in West Africa remains highly socially valued and voluntary childlessness is practically nonexistent (see Riesman 1992: 51ff.; Larsen 1996; van Balen 2000).

context of a renewed interest in the praxeological dimensions of kinship and care have provided answers to the question of how parenthood and parenting may be considered important mirrors and models of social change, most of these works have focused on mothers rather than fathers (see, e.g., the works of Alber 2014; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; 2016; Drotbohm 2015). Why is this so? On the one hand, fathers are in some ways rendered invisible or absent by local discourses, especially in matricentric societies, such as Cape Verde (Drotbohm 2015; Åkesson, Carling and Drotbohm 2012). On the other hand, lack of anthropological interest in fathers (apart from algebraic exercises) had more to do with Western stereotypes of parenting than with the ethnographic reality. This not only corresponded with a certain father-blindness among social scientists working in that field, but also reflected the focus of the mother-child dyad in programs monitoring parent-child behavior, which almost always addressed mothers. From the 1980s onwards – when the social ills of poverty and crime among black youths in the USA (see Smith et al. 2005), as well as psychological issues and declining academic performance of boys, were accredited to the fact that "men were fathering children but they failed to be fathers to them" (Han 2018: 3) – the "absent" father became a topic of scholarly interest. Not only in media accounts but also in the literature, African American fathers in particular were portrayed as financially irresponsible, hyper-masculine, dysfunctional and deviant, and as having little or no presence in their children's lives (Smith et al. 2005). Whereas feminist scholarship has increasingly shed light on reproduction and parenting and deconstructed the meaning of motherhood, fatherhood was only hesitantly addressed with the same rigor (see Coltrane 1996; Townsend 2002; Dermott 2008).

The recent renewed sociological and anthropological interest in fathering has to do with socio-political developments. On the one hand, a growing movement of men advocating fatherhood as an essential ingredient of male identity has searched for and found academic support for its claims and arguments, which are often rooted in cross-cultural psychology and anthropology (see, e.g., Lamb 1987; Gray and Anderson 2012; Williams 2019). Fathers' rights organizations in South Africa, for example, claim that feminism is the source of the damaging neglect of fathers in both academia and society (see Richter and Morrell 2006: 2). On the other hand, gender equality movements have also sought to reposition fathers as equally important caregivers. Family policies in Europe have therefore started to promote paternity leave and

explicitly address fathers in parenting classes (see Ambrose-Miller and Maiter 2008; Curran and Adams 2000). Correspondingly, in her review of fathers and fathering in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), Barone (2019: 8) comes to the conclusion that

> fathers are not merely "secondary" parents or financial providers distanced from their families by work obligations. Fathers are very much invested in their children's lives and the maintenance of a happy and productive household. Like mothers, they develop strong bonds and relationships with their children. They can be loving, supportive, and affectionate.

What is it, then, that makes *some* men invest in intimate fatherhood (Dermott 2008)? Following Dermott (2008 127ff.), I define intimate fatherhood as actively constructing and living being a father first of all, as an emotional relationship with one's offspring and consciously reflecting about what it means to be a father. What do men gain from intimate fathering? Indeed, it is quite surprisingly that the changing valuation of the father's role in the development of children has not led to a more nuanced and detailed socio-anthropological interest in how fathers perform fatherhood and what their relationship with their children looks like.

Comparing and contrasting fatherhood worldwide, works such as Lamb (1987) and Shwalb, Shwalb and Lamb (2013) highlight the variation in practices of fathering and put these differences in cultural context. Cross-cultural comparison of fatherhood and fathering may thus serve to situate and contextualize practices and ideals of fatherhood not as static but rather as fluid and diverse. What it means to be a father has thus been contextualized not only culturally but also historically and in terms of individual agency.

New forms of fatherhood and "new modes of fathering that are more diverse and complex than in the past" (Shwalb, Shwalb and Lamb 2013: 3) have emerged not only in the so-called Global North. Shwalb, Shwalb and Lamb make clear that, even though the structure of their book is organized in relation to regional or "cultural" units, there is a high level of local variation and some fathers are more involved than others (2013: 6-7). One of the reasons for that variation lies in immigration as a source of the negotiation of cultural differences (ibid.). For example, in their study of Mexican American fathers, Coltrane et al. (2004) state that, compared with American white men, Mexican American fathers are more involved in father-child-related activities, whether stemming from the stereotypically "masculine" realm (such

as sports or games) or from the stereotypically "feminine" realm (e.g., shopping or reading): "Mexican men are labelled by the majority culture as macho and uninvolved in family life when, in fact, they often exhibit high levels of commitment to family and spend considerable time interacting with their children in nurturing and emotional ways" (Coltrane et al. 2004: 185). Pribilsky (2012) has looked at the transnational fathering of Ecuadorian fathers in the USA and asked how consumption provides them with new models of fatherhood – perhaps the only ones they are in control of. Another explanation for internal variation and change is the spreading of "Western" normativities of "proper" parenthood via popular and commodity culture. Indeed, looking at billboards in the city of Abidjan, I was always struck by the dominance of the Western ideal of a nuclear family of four (father, mother, boy, girl), which seemed to be in stark contrast with realities of family life for most Ivorians. Inhorn (2012) has recently suggested that "emerging" masculinities of love, trust and intimacy have come to shape imaginaries of Arab manhood and have spread globally through popular culture (Inhorn et al. 2014).

Apart from popular and commodity culture, another important agent of change in men's conceptions of good fatherhood in Africa are Pentecostal churches that advocate monogamy and nuclear family organization and provide people with legitimacy to reduce or even break ties with their extended families under the banner of neoliberal and individualistic prosperity gospel (Smith 2014: 324f.). They seek to impact society through a new Christian morality that covers all spheres of social life, from the private and domestic to the public and political. Pentecostalism, thus, has been considered a particularly potent form of masculinity politics in contemporary African societies (see Soothill 2007; Chitando and Biri 2013; van Klinken 2013; Lindhardt 2015). Against this background, research has interpreted the Pentecostal "domestification of men" as a "major social transformation" (Brusco 2010: 87). Not surprisingly, Pentecostal churches are among the most active non-government agents in promoting particular parenting ideals through workshops or parenting classes. The scholarly obsession with African Pentecostal masculinities in a way mirrors the "absent fathers" discourse concerning black fatherhood in the United States and the Caribbean: Men are held responsible for "the social and moral crisis in African family life" (Soothill 2007: 186) and Pentecostal masculinities seem to offer welcome changes. By promoting a "rupture" with the

culture of their fathers (particularly polygamy), these churches encourage men to adopt new attitudes towards their wives and children and to become engaged and caring fathers.

> The converted Pentecostal/charismatic man is […] drawn into the private sphere and becomes more committed to nuclear ideals and to his role as breadwinner. According to hegemonic cultural standards, male prestige is largely gained through participation in the public sphere. By contrast, within Pentecostal-charismatic communities a man mainly gains prestige and respect by being a responsible father and husband. (Lindhardt 2015: 256)

Pentecostal masculinities, thus, display a more balanced view of the dominant imaginary of the disruptive side of masculinities, such as absent, violent or irresponsible fathers (see also McLean 2021; Amman and Staudacher 2020). My paper will add to this emergent literature on fatherhood as an alternative self-identification. It addresses fatherhood and fathering through the following questions: How do men perform being a father? What do practices of "doing being a father" involve today? What form does "intimate fathering" take in Côte d'Ivoire? Who are the addressees of the performance of intimate fatherhood? What do men "gain" from being a father and caring for their children? And how do men use fatherhood as a means of positioning themselves in a heterogeneous society?

Intimate fathering

In October 2018, I spent a few days with Ousmane and his family. Together with his wife Maryam, six-year-old Rayan and two-year-old Naima, he lived in a spacious house in a gated community of Abidjan. Both parents worked a lot, Ousmane as a senior employee of a thriving IT company and Maryam as a sales officer of a large brewery. Both children attended a private pre-school/school situated within the gated community. Each morning they were taken there by a driver of Ousmane's company, who, after dropping off Ousmane at work, returned to the house to pick up the children and take them to school. Support in handling the daily routines of a working family came also from three young women aged between 18 and 25 who were responsible for all household chores and catered for the children when Ousmane and Maryam were not present. Even though, from an organizational view, the children were always cared for by someone, Ousmane deemed it important to spend as much time as he could with his

children and used the liberty his senior position in the company offered him to do a great deal of his work at home or to regularly come home from work over lunchtime in order to spend quality time with his children. As a father, he wanted to be close to his children, know what mattered to them and what they liked or disliked, and make sure his relationship with them was intimate and caring. In conversations with me he demonstrated this, for example, by disclosing his children's sleep patterns and nap times. Two-year-old Naima was a stomach sleeper, he said; she did not like to be covered by a sheet or blanket, which is why she usually slept together with Ousmane in a room that was not air-conditioned. She would not fall asleep without body contact and she preferred Ousmane over her mother and the *nounou*, who would help out when Ousmane was not present. More than once, he told me, Maryam would call him at work to come home because Naima refused to sleep. With six-year-old Rayan they had tried to implement a sleep regime, because they found he was old enough to sleep in his own room, but he often came in during the night, joining either Ousmane and Naima or his mother in their bedroom.

Ousmane also intensely engaged in role-play or educative play with the children – something that I had found extraordinarily rare in most other families I had lived with. He read books to Naima and let her "examine" him with the instruments in her toy doctor's bag. He enjoyed playing and constructing Lego with Rayan and often took him along when he had to travel through town in order to spend time with him and chat. He would encourage and playfully tease him to argue with him and to make logical arguments, even if it meant that he proved his father wrong. At times he would also integrate other adults (such as the driver) into these verbal disputes. However, it was difficult and not without risk, as he admitted once, to raise a child "Western-style" as a self-confident individual, when the rather gerontocratic societal context did not appreciate children who speak up against adults.

If contrasted with the dominant imaginary of the "provider," Ousmane certainly was an exceptional father in many ways. However, there were many of his like in the sample of families I had put together for my research on parenting among middle-class families in urban Côte d'Ivoire. Other fathers also actively enlarged their responsibilities beyond the essential taking care of school fees and providing food, clothes, medicine and other necessities for the physical wellbeing of their children. They would engage in role-play and cuddle with their children, and take them on outings to the mall, the glacier, the zoo or one of the playgrounds

liable to admission fees. Playing with their children or, more generally, responding to their emotional needs was a way of actively shaping a relationship with them and of being an intimate, caring father. When I asked fathers what it meant to be a good father, I got answers such as this one by Hugo:

> Most importantly, I think, a good father has to be close to his children. That is important! He has to know his children, what they like, what they don't like, what they do, what they don't do. When they are not well, he has to *know/feel* [sentir] that really quickly. […] He also has to show them his love and affection. He has to be close to them, so that they will *know/feel* [sentir] that their father loves them.

Explaining the relationship between fathers and their children, Hugo used the verb "sentir," which may be translated as "feeling" or "knowing" – it relates to an intimate, emotional way of knowing that may not be achieved by someone who doesn't invest a large amount of time in the relationship. Further on, Hugo used the expression "chaleur parentale" to explain why it did make a difference whether a father was only fulfilling his duties (e.g., catering for his children's physical health, feeding, clothing them, paying their school fees) or whether he was really "performing" being a father.

> Thus, it is this warmth, this presence, of which they [the children] are in need. It doesn't cost a penny. It is nothing you can pay for. Voilà. It doesn't cost anything. It is just allowing oneself to spend time at home with one's children.

Taking care of their children, for many of these fathers, meant much more than just being liable for catering for their needs in the form of financial support. They actively took on supposedly "female" tasks of childcare such as feeding, diaper-changing, bathing, clothing or, in one case, even carrying their children on their backs. For example, Hugo's wife Lélia admitted that she never really learned how to properly attach a baby to her back with a cloth, because Hugo was always present to carry or rock the baby when it got tired.

> Lélia: He would make the children fall asleep, he would rock them, and the child would fall asleep. […] That is why I don't really know how to put a child on my back.

Konstanze (surprised): Really? It is Hugo who would put the children on his back?[4]

Lélia: No, he wouldn't tie them on his back, he carried them around like this. I don't know how to tie a *pagne*. If I do, I feel choked, it tires me because I am not used to it. I didn't have to [put them on my back regularly] because Papa was always there to carry them around, make them sleep, rock them, lulling them to sleep. Only when he was busy otherwise would I do it. I would take the child and lull it to sleep. But he was always better at it than me.

Showing one's paternal love to older children meant listening to their worries, always having time and an open ear for them, and making sure they succeeded at school. When I asked Serge, a father of four children aged between 18 months and 15 years, how exactly he made sure that his children felt his paternal love, he explained:

Well, not long ago we went out with the children, to a restaurant. […] This is a way for me to show my love, to show that I am close to them, that there is no barrier. We can sit together around a table and eat together. That is what I do frequently, take the children out, to share food, to exchange. And we chat. That is how I please them, to show them my fatherly love and affection. And also, concerning their studies… when they come home from school, I will inquire so that they know/feel that I care about what they do, I show them my interest in their affairs. So they know/feel that their father understands and is proud of what they are doing. To say: "I care about what you! I care about your school! I care about your life!" So I ask them a lot of questions, to approach them, so they feel they can share their ideas and worries with me.

Serge, just like most of the fathers I talked to, was well aware that his way of parenting differed substantially from the parenting style of neighbors and relatives, and, moreover, from the way he had been brought up himself. Hugo, who had himself grown up in Youpougon, a popular quarter of Abidjan, remembered that whereas his sisters stayed in the confines of the

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[4] Lélia uses the expression "Mettre un enfant au dos," which means to tie a small child with a cloth [*pagne*] wrapped around wrist and back. My surprised query stems from the fact that while it is probably still the most common way of carrying a child around across all social classes in West Africa, I hardly ever saw a man carrying a baby in a cloth on his back. A man would rather use a manufactured imported baby carrier, and use it to carry the baby on his stomach, not his back. There is a stunning photograph portrait series by Marta Moreiras demonstrating the exceptionality of men carrying babies in a cloth: www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47922717.

household to help their mother with the daily work, he and his brothers and their male cousins and neighborhood friends would stroll around in the afternoons, making the quarter their village and living a "boys' life." His father, he told me, was rather absent. The women in the house – most importantly his mother and several maternal aunts – as well as older boys took care of him when he was young. And he had consciously decided that he wanted to be a different kind of father, a more present one. Similarly, Yannick explained that for him – with his own childhood memories of a largely absent father – actively participating in the daily routines of his one-year-old son was of the utmost importance and gave him pleasure and a reason to carry on with his job. He would, for example, come home for lunch almost every day, even though that cost him valuable time (given the chronically jammed traffic in Abidjan), in order to see, feed and play with his son.

> If you don't find the time for your children, no one else will. No one else will spend time with your children! Whatever it is you have on your agenda, you always have to find time to play with your children, chat with them. Children have to laugh with their parents. Voilà. That is important!

The same is true for Alain,[5] who intensely interacted with his two kids when he was at home. "A father is someone who reaches out to his children. […] A good father is someone who is always attentive, vigilant and who cares about the well-being of his child." While I was doing the interview with Alain, his two sons were present and he would continuously perform being a caring father while talking about it. He patiently asked his older son to calm down and explained to him the functioning of my tape recorder in order to make sure he understood why he had to stay quiet if he wanted to assist with our interview. Later on, when the younger son woke up from his nap, Alain asked the *nounou* to prepare his bottle so he could feed him himself. When she gave him the baby bottle, he first checked the temperature of the milk and asked her to add cold water, because he deemed it too hot for his baby son to drink. He used the interview situation as a moment of self-choreography, to perform his fathering skills and thus prove the truth of the words he spoke through performative action.

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[5] Alain and Yannick were brothers, who had grown up with their mother because their father was married to another woman. He only visited them once in a while and paid their school fees. Both said they had never known what it was like to have a truly caring father when they were children and therefore had made a conscious choice to be a different kind of dad themselves.

Many of my research partners reflected on this performative dimension of intimate fathering as positioning against dominant norms and normativities. In contrast to Heron's (2018) findings, Ivorian fathers were far from silent about their intimate fathering practices. Indeed, compared with most mothers I talked to, they displayed a high degree of reflexivity and eagerly shared their ideas about what it meant to be a caring father. In a later interview, Serge explicitly positioned himself against the societal norms of fathering.

> In Africa, generally, children are closer to their mamas, because the fathers are always away. But slowly, with modernity and with educated families like ours, we [the fathers] have learnt to also be close to our children. […] me, for example, sometimes I would bath my younger son. I didn't do that with the two firstborn ones, but Yoël, I would bath him. My little one, I even change her diapers, eh! I take care of her when my wife is busy. But in Africa, we didn't do that before! The father didn't have time for that! He would say: "The diapers have to be changed." And then his wife would take care of it. […] This is, in poor villages, how it is done. The papa does not have particular intimacy with his child. It is rather the mother, because she is with the child all the time. And children would rather go to their mothers than to their fathers.

Serge's account reiterates a kind of "modernist" narrative, which is also employed in the literature on fathering and fatherhood in Africa. African fathers have often been described as "big men" or "providers" and "protectors," a good father being one who is able to secure life opportunities for his children (Cornwall 2002; Hunter 2006). Fatherhood – like other social identities in former colonies – has largely been shaped by the hegemonic normative models of the metropoles, e.g., through mission work (see Allman 1994 for a historical analysis of Akan motherhood during colonialism). The "breadwinner model" of a responsible father is also such a colonial invention, whereas prior to the colonial era there was no such clear-cut assignment of economic provision to the male sphere (see, e.g., Evans 2016; for Côte d'Ivoire see Etienne 1979; Toungara 1994).

The reputation of being a big man as a result of having several wives and children goes hand in hand with being able to cater for their needs. If a man fails to perform his paternal duties, he is considered not only a bad father but also a bad man. Under the notion of "masculinities in crisis," the inability to "provide" has recently dominated the discussion of African men as disempowered and violent, particularly in post-conflict societies (Miescher and Lindsay 2003).

Research has thus focused on the changes in fatherhood and particularly on the "crisis" of fatherhood or masculinities in general, depicting men and fathers as irresponsible, violent, and unable or unwilling to provide for their families (on Côte d'Ivoire see Assy 2003; for a critique see Ammann and Staudacher 2021: 760f.) Indeed, the inability to procreate because one is not economically able to cater for a potential wife and children almost inevitably has the effect that a man is seen socially as a "small boy" unable to make his voice heard (Smith 2014: 320ff). The African masculinity-in-crisis narrative has been criticized for focusing too narrowly on the provider role and being blind to more dynamic and complex forms of masculinity (see, e.g., Wyrod 2016; and recently McLean 2021).

Being a caring, competent and "good father," thus, not only involves being a "good man" and provider but also necessitates a caring and engaged commitment through fathering practices. These positions are neither mutually exclusive nor to be understood in an evolutionary manner. Looking at Igbo men in southeastern Nigeria, Smith (2014) also comes to the conclusion that normativities of good fatherhood have changed considerably in recent years. Companionate marriage has not only changed the nature of relationships and expectations of what it means to be a good spouse but also caused Igbo men to exhibit greater intimacy with their children. This is linked to globally diffused ideas of romantic love and family harmony as well as to Pentecostal imaginaries of modern masculinities (Smith 2014: 315ff.). According to Smith, fatherhood provides Igbo men with a stage on which to perform their masculinity, but simultaneously poses a burden for performing manhood as changing ideals of fatherhood are connected with anxieties about how this will affect men's masculine identity (2014: 316-7).

Whereas both the conception of the father as provider and practices of intimate care are not at all new in Côte d'Ivoire (see Gottlieb 2004: 19; 75), fatherhood as a matter of identity is linked to comparably new conceptions of parenting that have emerged only recently in the country. The rupture, thus, lies not in the practices of intimate fatherhood but in the reflexive reframing of these practices as "doing being a father." Being a father through sharing a supportive relationship with one's partner and children is verbalized as breaking with the culture of one's own father and, thus, as enacting a generational rupture in a context where participation in many realms of life is still fenced off or at least very much limited by a gerontocratic culture. In this context, fatherhood is used as an empowering tool – as providing a space in which to negotiate and live a different life and embark on a self-determined trajectory of being. Thus,

even if fathers have always fed, bathed and played with their children, these practices are now reframed as expressions of modern intimate fatherhood. Childhood memories serve as landmarks in the self-reflective positioning of one's own parenting practices within a wider realm of possibilities of how to raise a child (and how not to). Verbalizing intimate fatherhood as an identity project is thus linked to aspirational identity projects in other social domains, particularly middle-classness and charismatic Christianity (see also Smith 2014; van Klinken 2013). Hence, we can say that "doing being a father" has become a means of acting out middle-classness, "modernity" or a rupture with supposedly backward religious traditions. Indeed, a closer look reveals that there are slight changes in intimate and nurturing fatherly practices that are connected to "doing being a father". Fathers, for example, would normally not carry a baby tied to their back in a cloth, but rather would make use of the Baby Björn or Manduca kind of baby carriers that arrived via the second-hand clothing industry in all corners of the country, to carry their babies on their front. Similarly, when I announced my return for a second field trip to Serge, who had just recently had his fourth child, he asked me to bring a stroller for his baby daughter – an accessory that turned out to be used only by him and his older sons and not by his wife, who would habitually tie her baby girl in a *pagne* on her back. Fathers also more frequently made use of special children's food such as yogurt and fruit puree in "suckies" (plastic containers with a tube through which liquid foods can be squeezed) that had only been recently introduced to the Ivorian market.

Recently, and increasingly so for the emerging middle-classes, normativities of good fatherhood have been expanded to include not only a "provider" role but also the role of the caring and demonstrably loving father (see Morrell 2006: 22).[6] According to Morrell, this includes a kind of fatherhood "in which one's children become part of one's identity – 'I am my children'" (2006: 23). Intimate fathering, thus, in a way offers a possibility to escape the "provider masculinity" (Hunter 2006) that measures one's capacity as a good father in terms of being able to provide. Even though most of my interlocutors still listed the necessity of providing financially for their children (feeding them, clothing them, taking care of their health and education) in the first place, they all cited it as equally important that fathers show love

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[6] The fathers in my sample were predominantly middle-class urban fathers. McLean's work on Sierra Leonean fathers, however, shows that notions of love and care in conceptualizing fatherhood are also employed by marginalized fathers struggling with the very task of providing for their families, who are only sporadically employed if at all and eke out a living on small means.

and care through daily performances of fatherhood. One could provide all the child needed materially and still be a bad father for lack of showing interest and being close.

Paternal determinism

The term "parental determinism" was coined by British sociologist Frank Furedi (2002) to describe and analyze the dominant discourse of accrediting the success or failures of children to their parents' parenting work. In the following section I will use the concept, to shed light on emic conceptions of how to grasp the relationship between parents, especially fathers, and their children.

When I asked him what the responsibilities of a good father were and how one could judge if someone was a good father, Serge told me:

> [A good father] has to guide his children in the right direction. And when your child succeeds, they will say: "Yes, you have had a good father. Your father really has been a good man." That you yourself are good. Thus, they will say that the child mirrors the image of the father. A good father therefore has to make sure that his child will turn out good. He has to be a model for his child. But he also has to struggle so his children will succeed.

The child appears as "proof" or mirror of fatherly competence. A good father is one who makes sure that his child turns out well, by providing a model to copy and by showing interest and engagement in the education of the child, not leaving this important task to his partner. If you fail as a father, your child will necessarily fail and people will accredit your child's failure to your failure as father. As father and child are explicitly understood as mutually constitutive, a "spoiled" child may in turn "spoil" the reputation of the father. If we grasp these emic conceptions of the correlation of caring and the development of the child in more analytic terms, we can assume that this form of fathering is more than just "bringing up children." It is a distinct skill assuring the development of character traits necessary for a successful life. Faircloth (2013: 33), for instance, states that

> Parenting is not merely about how adults react to children, then; it is also about how adults make statements about themselves. In deciding how to dress, feed, put to sleep,

and transport their children, adults do not simply live their lives through children but, in part, develop themselves through them.

Ivorian fathers also expressed ideas of paternal determinism by stating a causal link between fathering and the child's character.

> Serge: Here in Africa, the name is very important […] The family name, which refers to the ancestor, the patriarch. That is the father of the family. It is his name, his good name, which turns his children into good people. Because he is good, he makes good children. Thus, if you look at his children, how they thrive, you will say: "Yes, this man has been a good man in society, in his village. So his children, too, are good." […] When they say: "This is the son of Tanoh," automatically you think: "Ah, yes, Tanoh is a good man, a noble man. I see why his son is like that. He is as good and noble as his father." Thus already, the way you live as a child, the way you behave, mirrors and is framed by the qualities of your father. Consequently, as a father you have the duty to be good, to be a model, because the way you are will be accredited to your children. And it also means you have a responsibility towards your children. If you don't reach out to your children, you don't follow up on their education, if you just leave your children like that, naturally people will look at your children, will judge your child, who has turned out to become a thief, as the product of your failure as a father: "This one has not been a good father. He was bad. Voilà, look at his child. He was bad, voilà his child." This is how people will talk and it will happen very quickly. […] I even take it further. They will even transfer what the child does to the father's character. If the child turns out a thief, they will say: "Certainly his father was a thief, too." That's how it is. So, your image, who you are, is mirrored in the life of your children.

> Roland: A good father is also someone who chooses the family into which his child will marry. Because he knows the mentalities of the different families of the village, eh? He knows for example, that the family of Monsieur Tanoh is good. It is a good family, they have their qualities, they are hard-working […] and so he will choose a girl from that family for his son. Because if the family is good, it means their children will be good too. This is what makes a good father!

In this quote we find the entanglement of Western child development theory and parental determinism with "traditional" West African ideas about character formation and substance, as portrayed by Riesman (1992). Among the intriguing insights of classic ethnographic texts on parenting in West Africa are emic concepts of child development that accredit a child's character to "substance" or "destiny" rather than regarding it as shaped by culture or parental behavior. If a child turns out "bad," it is because they have been nursed with the "milk of a bad mother" (Riesman 1992: 163) – which is why the most important thing a future father has to do is "to find your child a good mother," as the title of Riesman's book suggests.

Akan groups such as the Baoulé and the Agni, to whom most of my interlocutors belonged, are traditionally matrilineal with virilocal residence patterns. This means that a structural ambiguity existed between paternal authority over children and the mother's brother's authority over his sister's children (see Weiskel 1978: 529ff.; see also Boutilier 1969). Whereas young children usually grew up with their mother in the household of their father's kin, they inherited from and belonged to the lineage of their mother, and boys especially would move in and learn from their maternal uncles from the age of seven or so. Fathers, therefore, traditionally had little occasion to exercise fathering care over their own offspring. Among the Akan of the Ashanti heartland, this worked best under conditions of densely populated and relatively stable towns, because here children would be geographically and socially close to both lineages. The Baoulé and Agni Akan social organization, however, has to face different circumstances, as both lived in rather mobile frontier situations due to successive waves of westward migration. Consequently, these groups lived as rather dispersed minority settlements among other people; thus, land for cultivation was plentiful but the workforce one controlled was scarce. Under these conditions, instead of the traditional Akan matrilineage *abusuan*, the localized household led by a male head, the *aoulo bo*, became the primary reference of social organization. Each *aulo bo* began as a localized descent group composed of a senior male and his siblings, their wives and their children. To this group were added captive slaves, who were assimilated within the household as fictive kin with the status of children. Hence, in practice the kinship organization of the Baoulé became increasingly cognatic and integrated numerous strangers into the kin group, who all traced their belonging back to a particular head of household. In this way, Baoulé kinship, including Baoulé patronyms, was later also given to Muslim migrants from the north who worked on Baoulé plantations. As cognatic

descent groups, the *aulo bo* were groups with overlapping membership, perpetually competing with one another to some extent for the effective adherence of the same mutually eligible personnel. Individual choice of belonging through residence and cultivating land together was thus an essential ingredient of Baoulé kinship. Fathers, therefore, had a structural interest in providing their children with their "good name" and in binding them to their own household through practices of care and economic "provision." Instead of "nature" it was "nurture" that was mobilized in order to describe and rationalize bonds between a father and his children.

These emic conceptions of the nature vs. nurture debate fit nicely with rather "modern" conceptions of paternal responsibility in the form of concerned and caring fathers as promoted through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and state actors. Paternal determinism appears as new clothes for a rather old "problem" – namely, how to "claim" one's children in a context of matrilineality and potentially uncertain fatherhood. The dissemination of parenting intervention programs (see, e.g., Morelli et al. 2018; Zilberstein 2016), policies regarding family planning and children's rights (see Howell 2003), and, not least, middle-class aspirational modernities has challenged these views and led to an increased awareness of a mother's and a father's job in parenting children. In Serge's and Roland's theorizing, the two concepts merge in a philosophy of intimate fathering that turns any choice – from the choice of the mother-to-be to the choice of the right school – into determinants of the (future) child's wellbeing. Paternal practice shapes and determines the (future) children's success and as such is overtly important.

This point was taken up in an interview with Théophile, who explained to me why it was important that parents reflect upon their approach to raising children. "You have to know to listen to your child," he explained. If a child cried, it was not helpful to shout at him, "Shut up!" Instead one should understand crying as the child's way of communicating. "It is not because the child is small that what he has to say has no importance." Here, he said, parents were often too authoritative. Instead, it was important that parents talk to their children and find a common language with them. This was about more than just words; it was about a particular kind of relationship between children and parents – one based on cooperation and affect instead of unquestioned authority and fear.

> If you commit yourself to communication with your child, it doesn't mean that you
> will always be right, nor that the child will always be right. It means that you will

exchange and discuss and together you will go on and advance […] it means also to accept that you may be wrong, and it means being able to excuse yourself and ask for your child's pardon.

Giving a child the possibility to express their opinion will turn them into a future leader instead of someone who sheepishly follows the orders of others. In Théophile's opinion, fathers who were not ready to think about how their behavior shaped and determined the relationship with their children, and in turn their children's development, were not much different from those who failed to provide for their children's basic needs.

The idea of paternal determinism and fatherly care as essential for the child's wellbeing and development was also promoted by parenting experts. Among social welfare officers in Bongouanou, problems with fathers who did not care for their children (financially as well as emotionally) were still explained by that dominance of the matrilineage. In many cases of family disputes, the father's kin was trying to refute responsibility for the children, Konan, the social welfare officer who dealt with family conflicts explained, but he would always remind them that "today, we have left behind our traditional customs, and if your child tomorrow becomes doctor, professor, if they migrate and succeed in Europe, because you as a father have nourished the child and paid their school fees, they will not forget their father who has done them well!"

Indeed, a dominant discourse surrounding fatherhood and fathering in Côte d'Ivoire centered on aspects of crisis and conflict. I literally stumbled over this discourse in the social sciences when discussing my research project with Ivorian colleagues in education science, sociology or pedagogy (who immediately expected that my research was addressing the crisis of parenthood and childcare in Côte d'Ivoire; see, for example, the works of Assy 2003, Dédy and Tapé 1995 or Akindès 2016).[7] But I also encountered it among educators and teachers (who all found that contemporary parents no longer sufficiently catered for their children's education but expected schools and kindergartens to do their job) and among parents themselves (who claimed that it was more difficult to raise children in today's society than it had been before:

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[7] The topic of the absent or dysfunctional father that has been prominent in discussion of African American fatherhood has also dominated the scholarly research on fathers in South Africa (see Richter and Morrell 2006: 6ff.; Denis and Ntsimane 2006). Racial segregation and labor migration often resulted in men not being able to share the daily routine of bringing up children with their partners (see Wilson 2006; Ramphele and Richter 2006, Salo 2018: 193-209).

while the trust in their capacities had decreased, at the same time they felt that their responsibilities as parents had increased). Partly, this came along with a more general crisis discourse in Côte d'Ivoire, which stated that the past twenty years, marked by social insecurity, economic crisis, political instability, civil war and, lately, neoliberal politics had contributed to a deep social crisis and that the accompanying downfall of morals had also affected families. According to this narrative, families no longer constituted a solid backbone of Ivorian society but rather mirrored more general disruptive tendencies in society. This discourse of parenting in crisis and particularly fatherly absence seemingly contradicted the affective daily practice of fatherly care I encountered during my fieldwork. Whereas "experts" tended to see competing norms of good parenting and childcare – such as those that came along with the African Charter of Children's Rights and the policies connected to it – as symptoms of a larger crisis, in their daily practices men seemed to embrace these competing norms and use them as empowering tools to position themselves in society. Experts frequently lamented that "tradition" was defunct and other normative orders had not yet been able to replace it. The fact that parents could "choose" – something I have highlighted as a feature of responsible fatherhood – here was rather understood as a problem.

Self-choreographies of fatherhood

To a large extent, identity work as a parent is acted out as some kind of performance, addressed towards fellow parents, local experts and parenting professionals of different kinds, neighbors, and family members. It is also directed inwards, in a self-reflective move that critically evaluates the child's (mis)behavior, successes or failures as the result of parenting practices. Narrative interviews and participant observations among fathers revealed some aspects of intimate caring fatherhood and emic conceptions of paternal determinism. However, in order to grasp these as potent expressions of fatherly identity work, I had to take into account more "public" moments of "doing being a father" – the self-choreographies of fatherhood that had, at least potentially, a wider audience than just the ethnographer.

But how could I get closer to such forms of self-(re)presentation? A local practice of self-choreography offered a nice solution: It was common to engage a photographer to cover

important family events, such as children's birthday parties.[8] The photographer would then take pictures of "signal" moments, such as the cutting of the cake, the buffet or the dancing competition, and they would usually take a number of portraits of the birthday child and of the family. Along with selfies and portraits taken with smartphones, these pictures often featured prominently not only in photo albums proudly presented to visitors but also on social media. Taking up these established practices of self-choreography, I asked some of the families to position their family as they saw each other and as they wanted to present themselves as a family. I invited them to choose the setting of the family picture (in the living room at home, or in church, for example), to decide upon who belonged to the "family" thus depicted and to make use of props if they wished so. I not only took pictures but also paid close attention to the choreography work, which fathers usually took upon themselves. Théophile, for example, asked me to take the pictures in his living room and carefully arranged his wife and his three children in order to display the love and intimacy that he deemed central to his understanding of what a/his family looked like. His wife's firstborn daughter, who usually attended a boarding school and only came home to live with her mother and stepfather during holidays, was not present and not summoned to be included in the pictures.[9]
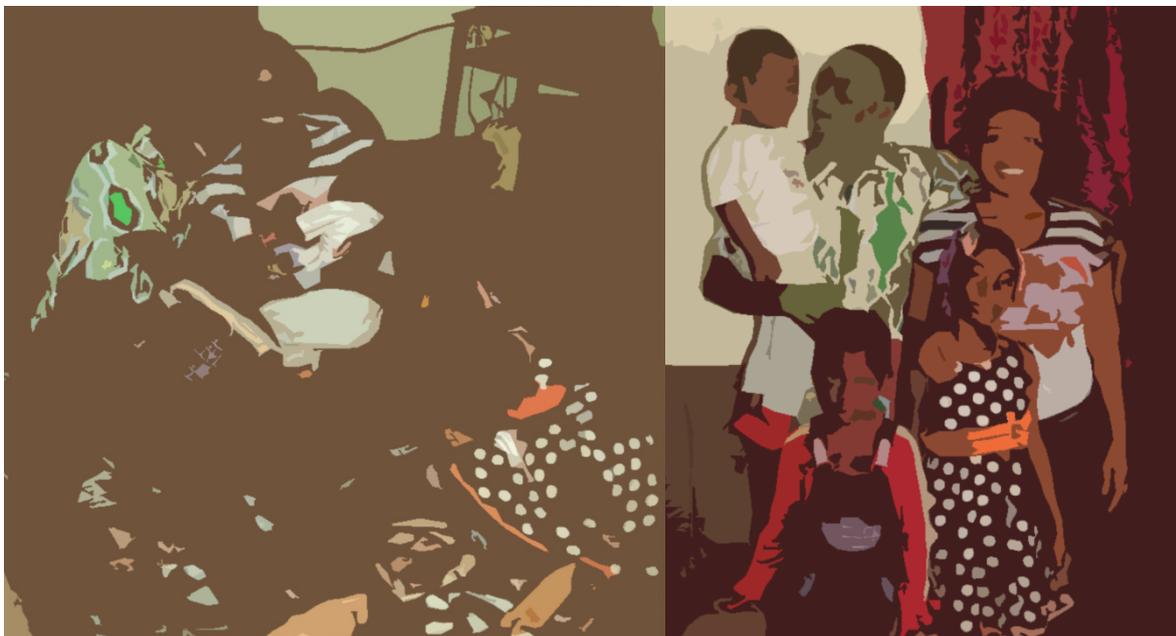
The Bissoumans: Family Portraits, Bongouanou, September 2018

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[8] Children's birthday parties offer themselves as a good example of parenting as identity work (see, e.g., Feldman-Savelsberg 2020; or Danielsen and Bendixsen 2020).

[9] All photos have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Facebook: Love and Protection; Feeding

This practice of self-choreography of fatherhood has gained a new public dimension in the context of social media. Fathers now proudly display their being a father on Facebook and (rarely) Instagram. These self-choreographies of "doing being a father" partly contradict and partly complement the hegemonic discourse around fathering in Africa. Fathers present themselves as playful, caring and nurturing fathers, often displaying great intimacy.

In these radically "public" and yet intimate spaces of social media, fathers apparently found ways to express and perform an intimate fatherhood that was not yet ripe for public display in offline environments. A closer look at the pictures reveals that these images entail other aspects of (aspirational) identity work as well. They display cosmopolitanism (e.g., through showcasing connections to migrant life-worlds in form of the German T-shirt print, for instance) and elite or upper middle-class leisure time lifestyles (e.g., by displaying pictures from family excursions to the zoo, the beach, the glacier or the mall, or through technical and fashionable accessories such as sneakers, caps, TVs, etc.). Togetherness and father–child bonds were expressed, e.g., through meme-like comments that were attached to a picture expressing "love" and mutual closeness or through matching clothes, matching hairstyles, etc.
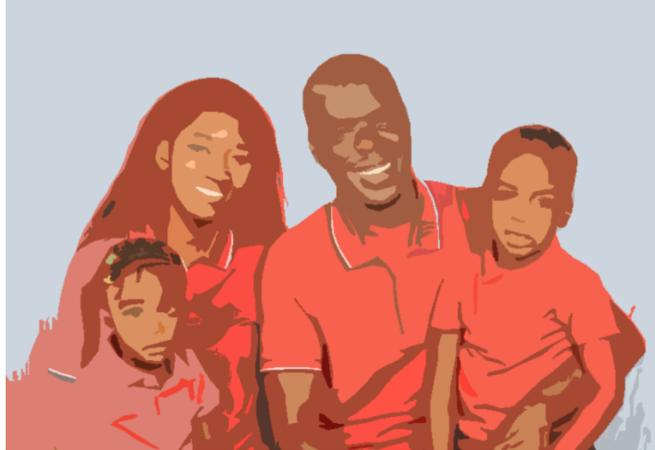
Facebook: Imaginary Father–Child Conversation; Lookalikes

Other pictures in a humorous and yet self-conscious way fragmented the dominant imagery of the strict and severe father who demands respect at all times, by displaying scenes of wild play. Comments that accompanied these pictures accredited the father role the pleasures of play and amusement that adult life too often did not provide and, thus, gave fathers the possibility of "trying out" and taking on the roles of superheros and potent providers that they might not be able to fulfill in real life. Other pictures showed scenes of play as part of educative routines, such as reading books, playing Scrabble or teaching children to ride a bicycle.

Facebook: Engaging in Role Play; Romping Games

Building on the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), I suggest taking these self-choreographies of fatherhood seriously, as expressions and performances of "doing being a father". Hegemonic masculinities may only be achieved by a small minority but still constitute the normative frame of reference for others (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). While the "provider imaginary" might constitute the hegemonic ideal of a good father – which is why men talk about being providers – they may find other ways of "fulfilling" that normative expectation, e.g., by (re)presenting themselves as caring, loving and intimate fathers on social media. Indeed, the ideal of the provider-father, who first had to make an economic living in order to be able to get married and provide for his family, here was played off against the youthful and affectionate father. Yannick, for example, explained his family planning despite the fact that he was not yet married to his girlfriend and could only afford a one-bedroom apartment, with the words: "When you are too old, you cannot play with them [your children]."

Conclusion

The fact that this paper deals with fatherhood/fathering rather than motherhood/mothering certainly – at least partly – can be accredited to the academic logic of "filling the gap" or "challenging bias." But there is also empirical substance to the choice. Skipping through my field notes half way through the research, I realized I had done comparably few narrative

interviews with mothers – and those I had were comparably "flat," i.e., they did not offer nuanced or well-developed theories or ideas of what it meant to be a mother. In contrast, however, I had been able to conduct several interviews with fathers in which they not only elaborated at length about what it meant to be a father but also linked these personal experiences and negotiations to autobiographical reflections and amateur sociological diagnosis. The same is true for utterances and statements documented in participant observations. More than once, my interviews and conversations with mothers were interrupted by mothering practices (cooking, washing clothes and children, negotiating sibling rivalry, etc.). Mothers seemed simply to "mother," but fathers apparently seemed to "do being a father". One could counter that fathers were less present in the daily routines of taking care of children and thus had more time to talk about it. But this would be only a very partial truth. Indeed, in most cases (Jean-Robert is a clear exception) it was still mothers who did the bulk of care work with children, but the fathers' performance of intimacy and care I have focused on in this paper at the same time bore witness to more than just "showing off" in front of the ethnographer. Rather, the interviews revealed that fathers were in a way reproducing "rehearsed" statements: It was definitely not the first time that they had been asked to put into words their thoughts and ideas about fatherhood as consisting of, first of all, entertaining a loving, intimate and caring relationship with their children. They seemed to have "practiced" these kinds of statements elsewhere.

In fact, I remember that the very first impulse for this research project came during earlier fieldwork: One night, sitting in a bar with a group of friends and fieldwork acquaintances, suddenly the topic of our jovial conversations turned from the usual politics and local gossip to comparing one's children and childcare practices. Back then, I was stunned not only that it was the men who brought up the topic but also that they happily shared with each other things such as education tips and how they planned their children's birthday parties. The highly self-reflexive and analytically nuanced ideas about fathering that I came across in my interviews were also part of male exchange and socializing among friends. Mothers, too, undoubtedly did exchange ideas and support each other by discussing daily problems and challenges of childcare, but these exchanges seemingly did not feed into a more general reflexive and intellectually grounded self-analysis or ideology of mothering. Their reflections were much

more "hands-on," and my invitations to "narrate" were more than once met with silence or stammering. How can this be explained?

Compared with motherhood, which is always also a biological fact, fatherhood is a social invention (Mead 1949: 1) and as such much more urgently in need of social or cultural framing. How exactly fatherhood is conceptualized, tied to certain responsibilities and duties but also privileges, and how it is being "done" may differ, but all societies in one way or another know and name a father and associate this role with particular tasks and appropriation. In Africa, in particular, through children, men can become "big men" and therefore politically and economically gain power and influence. In my paper I have rather focused on individual positionality and questions of class and religious belonging in order to frame and understand different approaches to and practices of intimate fatherhood. Actors' theories about intimate fathering actually seem to merge "Western" theories of child development and psychology and West African "ethno-theories" of character formation and the performative power of "names" and "lineages," and display them publicly as part of their identity work on social media. The "social invention" of the father, therefore, is less fixed through "biological facts" and as such more open to accommodating different identity projects and aspirational practices of positioning. "Doing being a father" involves self-reflective practices and constitutes an integral element of living and shaping hegemonic masculinities and fatherhood in Africa and elsewhere. The deficiency-centered approach that prevails in parenting classes, for instance, and also in much of the social research on fatherhood fails to see these nuances, as Amman and Staudacher (2020) and McLean (2021) have recently argued. Intimate fathering is displayed not only through ostentatiously performing practices of daily care but also by proudly presenting oneself as a caring father on social media and by "using" the semi-publicity of the ethnographic encounter as a stage upon which to perform one's "doing being a father."

Most fathers I talked to during my research were well aware that their way of fathering differed from the hegemonic norms of masculinities. Yet the ambiguity of being a provider and failing to provide was part of more general debates about what it meant to be a good father, as is expressed in this joke that was told in a jolly afternoon session in a maquis:

> Papa, what is a man?

A man is someone, who takes care of the family, the house, who guards the security of his family and makes sure that they don't lack anything.

Aaaah, I understand. Papa, when I am grown up, I want to be a man, like Mummy!

The notoriously failing provider-father had turned into a joke, precisely because it was so difficult to achieve while still representing the ideal of masculinity and responsible fatherhood. A conceptual approach to fatherhood and fathering as intertwined performance, as proposed in this paper, helps to uncover these ambiguities.

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