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Egalitarian Fatherhood – a Present and Engaged Father
Egalitarne ojcostwo – ojciec uobecniony i zaangażowany

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this article is to provide a scholarly reflection on egalitarian (partnership-based) fatherhood and the factors that condition and constitute it.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The study aims to answer two key questions: What defines egalitarian fatherhood? What experiences prepare boys and men to embrace this model of fatherhood? The research is based on a review of existing studies and an analysis and synthesis of relevant literature.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The paper examines shifting paradigms of masculinity and concepts of fatherhood. It discusses the notion of egalitarian parenthood, which is rooted in the principles of equality and shared parental responsibility between mothers and fathers. The argument then turns to the role of upbringing and socialization in developing caring masculinities that support the development of egalitarian fatherhood.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Contemporary society embraces multiple concepts of masculinity and fatherhood. As fatherhood eludes unambiguous definitions, expectations surrounding it remain inconsistent, shaped by the interplay between ingrained stereotypes and evolving socio-cultural realities. Increasingly, academic discourse points to the concept of egalitarian fatherhood as a response to these changes and emphasizes the importance of the father's active presence and engagement in family life.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: Advancing a model of partnership-based fatherhood requires countering traditional stereotypes, including gendered patterns of socialization and social pressures that reinforce culturally ingrained conceptions of masculinity. Education plays a crucial role in this transformation by equipping men with the knowledge and skills necessary to confidently step into social roles and address emerging

dilemmas. Additionally, continued scientific research is essential to understanding the conditions and factors that shape fatherhood in an era of rapidly evolving social change.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **FATHERHOOD, EGALITARIAN FATHERHOOD, PARTNERSHIP PARENTING, MASCULINITY, CARING MASCULINITIES**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest naukowy namysł nad egalitarnym (partnerskim) ojcostwem oraz czynnikami, które go warunkują i konstytuują.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Postawiono problemy badawcze: Na czym polega egalitarne ojcostwo i jakie działania przygotowują chłopców/mężczyzn do realizowania tego modelu ojcostwa? Zastosowano metodę analizy i syntezy literatury przedmiotu, dokonano przeglądu badań.

PROCES WYWODU: Przedstawiono w zarysie przeobrażenia paradygmatów męskości oraz wizji ojcostwa. Omówiono kategorię egalitarnego rodzicielstwa, u którego podstaw znajdują się równość oraz współudział matki i ojca w rodzicielstwie. Następnie podjęto refleksję nad procesem wychowania i socjalizacji do realizowania męskości opiekuńczych, sprzyjających rozwijaniu egalitarnego ojcostwa.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Współcześnie funkcjonują w społeczeństwie różnorodne koncepcje męskości i ojcostwa. Ojcostwo wymyka się jednoznacznym ujęciom, gdyż oczekiwania są niespójne, wynikają z konfrontacji obecnej sytuacji społeczno-kulturowej ze stereotypami. W dyskursie naukowym w coraz większym stopniu akcentuje się koncepcję egalitarnego ojcostwa, które zdaje się odpowiedzią na zmieniające się warunki życia i potrzeby, gdyż jego podstawą jest obecność i zaangażowanie w życie rodzinne mężczyzny.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Budowanie partnerskiego ojcostwa wymaga przeciwstawienia się stereotypom, w tym stereotypowej socjalizacji rodzajowej, oraz społecznym presjom przekonań dotyczących cech przypisanych kulturowo męskości. Ważnym elementem zmiany jest tutaj edukacja wzbogacająca człowieka, jego wiedzę i rozwój, doskonaląca jego umiejętności realizowania ról społecznych i poczucia pewności życiowej czy rozwiązywania pojawiających się dylematów. Istotne jest również prowadzenie badań naukowych dotyczących uwarunkowań i okoliczności realizacji roli rodzicielskiej w zmieniających się dynamicznie warunkach życia.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **OJCOSTWO, EGALITARNE OJCOSTWO, PARTNERSKIE RODZICIELSTWO, MĘSKOŚĆ, MĘSKOŚCI OPIEKUŃCZE**

Introduction

Fatherhood is increasingly becoming a focal point in academic, political, and media discourse. This growing interest reflects broader social changes, particularly the changing expectations around what it means to be a father. The traditional model of fatherhood is undergoing a process of detraditionalization, as it moves away from the patriarchal model and becomes influenced by emancipation movements. Yet, despite the increasing focus on parenting studies, fatherhood remains much less explored compared to motherhood and general parenting research (Błasiak, 2019).

As the traditional notions of masculinity and patriarchal authority are losing ground in the changing social landscape, the ideals of fatherhood vary widely and are often contradictory. There is a gap between cultural expectations of fatherhood – including values, norms, and ideals – and the reality of how fatherhood is practiced – behaviour and actions in everyday life. The cultural concept of fatherhood is changing much faster than real-life practice. Studies show a vast disparity between what fathers say they do and what they actually do (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2017). On one hand, an increasing number of fathers are actively seeking to break free from rigid gender norms and find fulfilment in the role of involved and nurturing caregivers (Dudak, 2017). On the other hand, many fathers experience ambivalence, guilt, and conflicting emotions about their roles, while some become distant or entirely absent figures in their children's lives (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2017).

Contemporary family life is also changing, with both parents now equally engaged in professional work and other aspects of social life. As a result, there is a growing need for parenting models that acknowledge both mothers and fathers as equally worthy and competent caregivers. This vision is consistent with the concept of the egalitarian or democratic family (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013). As Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska (2022) notes, "Fatherhood is being liberated from its former rigidity and strictness; it becomes a source of support and care… The father is involved in his child's life – not as their peer, but as their companion" (p. 52).

This article examines the idea of egalitarian fatherhood and the factors that determine and constitute it. Given the scope of this study, we will focus on how parenting and socialization to a new paradigm of masculinity can help boys and men discover and develop their caregiving non-dominant potential, embrace equality and build balanced, mutually respectful relationships in their families.

Paradigms of Masculinity and the Vision of Fatherhood

Recent discussions reveal major shifts in how fatherhood is defined and experienced. The evolution of this concept is closely linked with male identity and maturity as a man's understanding and practice of fatherhood are inseparable from his sense of self. Thus, any analysis of fatherhood must consider prevailing paradigms of masculinity. As noted by Lucyna Bakiera (2013), the role of the father has transformed over centuries, historically

oscillating between two dominant models: the traditional and the modern. Though this distinction oversimplifies a more complex reality, it reflects an important transition – from fatherhood as a social construct to a more relationship-building role. Today, fatherhood is increasingly seen as a personal choice and an expression of individual lifestyle and values rather than a social duty.

Masculinity, as described in the literature, consists of specific traits, behaviors, and roles typically associated with men (Pankowska, 2005). Social sciences distinguish between biological sex, which refers to anatomical and physiological differences, and socio-cultural gender, which is related to psychological, social and cultural differences resulting from the "social construction of gender" (Giddens, 2004, p. 128). Since masculinity and femininity are not fixed categories, but are performed and experienced in specific historical, cultural, and social contexts, contemporary scholarship recognizes the plurality of masculinities and femininities instead of a singular, universal model (Skoczylas, 2011, p. 13). As Eugenia Mandal (2004, p. 28) observes, individuals are born into a culture that shapes their identity through gendered expectations. Through upbringing and socialization, men and women internalize gender-specific traits, behaviors, and roles that define their social identities.

One of the prominent traditional approaches in contemporary academic discourse on masculinity is Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (Skoczylas, 2011). This theory supports and sustains patriarchy, legitimizes male dominance and positions men as responsible for exercising authority. In this perspective, masculinity is characterized by resilience, competitiveness, control, dominance, strength, speed, and heterosexuality (Melosik, 2021). Hegemonic masculinity also maintains a strict dualism of gender roles and an asymmetry between masculine and feminine traits (Arcimowicz, 2010). Fatherhood, in this context, is understood as the fulfilment of duties dictated by a rigid, gendered division of labour in both the family and the workplace. The father assumes the role of the head of the household, provider, and strict disciplinarian, while emotional bonding with his children is given little priority. He is expected to be firm, consistent, and resourceful, to carry out instrumental and supervisory functions, in contrast to the mother, who is responsible for meeting children's emotional and caregiving needs. This sharp distinction between male and female attributes is crucial for the development of the child's personality, which rules out the possibility of parents exchanging their roles (Dudak, 2017). Mateusz Skucha (2012) notes that "hegemonic masculinity is sanctioned and perpetuated by various institutions … as well as by a complex system of legislative, legal, political, and economic mechanisms" (p. 8). Connell's concept represents a classical understanding of masculinity – one that has been expanded upon over time but has also faced criticism (Dąbrowski, 2024).

In contrast to traditional conceptions of masculinity – and, by extension, fatherhood – the theory of caring masculinities[1] redefines manhood through the rejection of domi-

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[1] The concept of caring masculinities is intentionally formulated in the plural, as there are multiple ways to embody this form of masculinity. Consequently, men's experiences of care should not be homogenized into a single, uniform model (Suwada, 2017, p. 80).

nance and the embrace of values such as care, emotional connection, mutual dependence, and deep personal relationships. Historically, these traits have been associated with women, yet they offer men an opportunity to expand their repertoire of roles and express emotions and desires more freely. Embracing caring masculinities contributes to greater gender equality, particularly by reimagining the ways men engage with fatherhood. Central to this concept is the primacy of practice – true transformation occurs through active participation in caregiving, which in turn reconstructs men's identities and the cultural models of masculinity that they follow (Suwada, 2017). In this framework, the father is seen as a loving, nurturing, and affectionate caregiver who is unafraid to express his tenderness. He remains consistent and responsible, yet does not display the stereotypical traits of paternal strictness or severity (Dudak, 2017). The image of this "new father" is strongly associated with ideals of equality and partnership, and thus with the principles of egalitarian parenting – a topic that warrants further discussion given its significance in contemporary society.

Egalitarian Parenthood (Motherhood and Fatherhood) – an Outline of the Concept

The changing roles of parents and the evolving status of children within the family set the stage for greater mutual understanding and partnership. These changes are embodied in the concept of egalitarian parenting, which emerges as a response to contemporary social transformations (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013). This model of parenting corresponds to "processes of democratisation and promotion of gender equality in the family" (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2022, p. 49). At its core, egalitarian – or democratic – parenting is based on the principle of equality. It entails a division of responsibilities between partners that is not only fair, but also challenges traditional notions of "masculine" and "feminine" roles (Duch-Krzystoszek, 2007). Both mothers and fathers share duties and privileges through a negotiated consensus that takes into account the needs of the child, the life cycle of the family, and the parents' commitments in other areas of life.

Due to this balanced distribution of responsibilities and flexibility of roles, both parents have equal opportunities for self-fulfilment. By sharing both the burdens and rewards of parenting, women experience lower levels of stress and frustration, whereas men develop deeper emotional connections with their children. Crucially, this model requires the willingness and active participation of fathers in caregiving and the consent of mothers. It challenges ingrained stereotypes that view mothers as "inherently superior and naturally suited caregivers". Ultimately, egalitarian parenting is built on open communication, mutual satisfaction, strong emotional bonds, compromise, fairness, and trust (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013, 2022).

In egalitarian families, the concept of the "child at the center" is fundamental. However, it is understood and practiced differently than in traditional families, where the focus is often on the sheer amount of time spent with children. In contrast, partnership-based families

emphasize the quality of time, as well as the intentionality and meaningfulness of interactions. Parents in these families draw clear boundaries between work and family time and carefully plan their moments with their children to create enriching daily experiences, such as shared meals, walks, playtime, conversations, enjoyable weekends, and participation in their children's activities. Additionally, children are seen as equal members of the family and are involved in age-appropriate domestic chores (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013).

With parents embracing egalitarian parenting, children grow up immersed in a democratic family environment and naturally internalize a culture of partnership. Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska (2013) notes that such upbringing strengthens emotional bonds with both parents but also helps children develop robust and adaptive social competencies, recognize and fulfill their own needs, and form relationships with the opposite sex that are free from prejudice and discrimination. Studies indicate that children raised in egalitarian families tend to be more independent, creative, and self-confident, and have a notably higher self-esteem compared to their peers from more traditionally structured households. Moreover, both boys and girls demonstrate greater moral maturity, emotional intelligence, and higher satisfaction with relationships in adulthood (Chmura-Rutkowska & Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2018; Slany & Ratecka, 2018).

Egalitarian parenting is closely tied to actions that promote equality, challenge traditional gender roles, and expand the range of behaviors considered appropriate within them. Parenthood is one of the many responsibilities that come with being a member of a particular gender, and as a result, preparing for fatherhood often involves adopting values traditionally associated with masculinity. This article explores these themes further by examining the role of upbringing and socialization in caring masculinities – as the values underpinning this concept are closely linked to egalitarian fatherhood.

Key Aspects of Shaping Egalitarian Fatherhood

Constructing masculinity is a process that lasts a lifetime. From early childhood, first within the family of origin and later through wider social interactions, boys – and eventually men – gradually prepare for gendered social roles, including fatherhood. The family of origin plays a crucial role in this process, as it is the first and most formative social environment in which a child develops. It is within this space that individuals build strong emotional ties, shape their identity, and internalize the values, attitudes, and behavioral patterns modeled by family members (Tyszka, 1993). The process of raising and socializing boys into caring masculinities, and by extension, egalitarian fatherhood, requires instilling values of care, rejecting dominance, and embracing gender equality. It is oriented towards building deep, compassionate relationships and treating others with respect and dignity. To lay the foundation for this, parents – and later other adults – must actively introduce these values into boys' lives from an early age.

Today, gender equality is widely discussed in the workplace, personal relationships, and social life. On the surface, it may seem that men and women are treated as equals.

However, children are exposed to countless influences that reinforce gender inequalities from an early age. As Marzena Buchnat and Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska (2013) point out, this begins with something as simple as toy selection, which mirrors ingrained gender stereotypes. Boys are encouraged to play with swords, toy guns, and superhero figures, while girls receive kitchen sets, cleaning tools, and dolls. When a boy enjoys playing with toys traditionally intended for girls, parents or other adults often discourage him by labeling his behavior as "feminine". As a result, boys feel pressured to conform to external expectations rather than lean into their personal preferences, which in turn molds their understanding of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, these early experiences contribute to the internalization of emotional distance and detachment – qualities traditionally linked to masculinity and fatherhood (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2016).

To nurture caring masculinities, parents and caregivers must take an inclusive approach, actively rethinking and reshaping traditional notions of masculinity and gender roles. They should reduce emotional distance in favor of building closeness and open communication in their relationship with their sons. Interactions with sons should emphasize dialog, emotional sensitivity, and social connections. Beyond affectionate gestures and verbal expressions of love, parents of boys must know how to talk to them and how to listen. Maria Braun-Gałkowska (2010, p. 164) notes that "conversation strengthens family cohesion, deepens mutual bonds, and provides a sense of closeness and security". These moments can occur naturally during daily activities such as walks, grocery shopping, or shared household tasks. Open and sincere communication, quality time together, and the expression of positive emotions and interest all teach children that they can trust and rely on their parents (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013).

Preparing boys for a caring masculinities means allowing them to fully participate in family life and treating them as equal members with both rights and age-appropriate responsibilities, rather than shielding them from everyday obligations and household chores. Boys should not only assist their parents but also take on their own responsibilities. It is also important that they are treated as partners in the parent-child relationship – given a voice in family discussions, decision-making, and planning leisure time. Striking a balance between authority and partnership nurtures prosocial values, respect, trust, and kindness (Jankowska, 2015).

Children are keen observers of the adult world, and the foundation they receive in their families significantly influences how they will build their own family lives in the future. Therefore, it is particularly important that both the mother and the father are equally involved in raising their son to exercise a caring masculinity. Initially, a young boy identifies strongly with his mother and views her as the source of physiological gratification. Over time, however, he begins to associate more with his father. Grażyna Wyszyńska (1996, p. 3) explains that "a boy's identity develops through the interplay of opposing forces: a maternal core and male behaviors. How he resolves this tension will shape both his gender identity and his future role as a father". This process can result in either a rigid rejection of traditionally feminine traits – leading to a stereotypical "macho" persona – or an integration of both influences, leading to a nurturing, engaged approach to

fatherhood. When parents model partnership and equality, they create an environment of equity and cooperation where boys experience a democratic family structure – which is an essential foundation for future egalitarian fatherhood (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2013).

Conclusion

An egalitarian father is, above all, a present father – fully engaged in his child's and family's life, both physically and emotionally. He listens to the child and often talks to them, understands his child's dreams and interests, and loves unconditionally. He treats his child as an equal in their relationship, showing respect as a form of freedom. He also supports the mother, with whom he shares the responsibilities of being a parent as a true partner. Instead of clinging to outdated ideas of dominance, he embraces equality and partnership in his relationship. In Poland, more men aspire to be involved fathers and equal partners in caregiving. However, they often face a number of obstacles and internal conflicts. Deeply ingrained stereotypes and traditional upbringing continue to shape societal expectations, which makes it difficult for men to step into a more nurturing role without fear of judgment. As Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska (2022) points out,

> Men must undergo a resocialization of their gender identity and develop traits culturally considered feminine. […] To achieve this, they often have to relearn how to be fathers and partners – because no one ever talked to them about it, or they themselves acutely feel the gaps left from their own childhoods (p. 52).

While the family plays a crucial role in preparing boys for fatherhood, it is not the only influence. Schools, peer groups, and other social institutions also reinforce their understanding of gender roles. Yet, as Agnieszka Łagoda (2015) observes,

> Polish schools continue to, and will likely for a long time, raise children within a patriarchal and nationalist framework – where male dominance is seen as natural. […] Girls, even in kindergarten, are already made aware that they are expected to take on lesser social roles and conditioned to and view motherhood as their inevitable destiny, whereas boys are made to believe that they are destined for leadership, prestige, and adventure (pp. 181–182).

To create a more inclusive society, educational programs in different age groups must adapt to the changing realities of social life. They should promote gender equality by challenging rigid stereotypes and expanding traditional definitions of culturally bound personality traits and gender roles. Additionally, further research is needed to identify the factors that either encourage or hinder men's involvement in parenting. Studies should not only document how fatherhood is practiced today but also examine its far-reaching influence on child development and family dynamics. Keeping knowledge up to date with rapidly changing social conditions can help parents perform their roles with greater confidence. However, impactful change requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates the perspectives and experiences of both fathers and mothers.

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