I. Introduction

This essay is about the change in fathers’ roles in contemporary Germany and about how such a change can be fostered in order to achieve progress in work life balance, gender equality and child wellbeing. First, I will present some insights from practice of working with fathers at the Berlin Fathers’ Centre. Then, I will present some material from research & discourse on the Gender Equality/Gender Role development in Germany, focusing on the business world as well as on gender roles and division of work between fathers and mothers in the household, is discussed. The author suggests a shift towards a systemic view of gender/work balance analysis.

The main point of the essay is that fathers should be seen and addressed as an autonomous caregiver and attachment figure for his children. The essay concludes with suggestions for governmental and non-governmental policies and institutional/professional practices towards gender in general and fathers in particular.
and institutional/professional practices towards gender in general and fathers in special. The point here is that gender equality policies should include fathers into the mainstream of gender (change) oriented policies from the very beginning in order to achieve more gender equality and child wellbeing: in other words, applying a systemic approach to gender politics. We earlier called this father-inclusive approach “daddy mainstreaming” (Huber and Schaefer 2012). Much more attention needs to be drawn towards the resources that fathers provide for the good development of the child and for gender equality both in the family/household and in the business world.

II. Working with Fathers at the Berlin Fathers’ Centre

1. Background

The Berlin Fathers’ Centre is an NGO and charity organisation founded in 2007 (2017 will be our 10th anniversary). The Berlin Fathers’ Centre addresses fathers in all family settings and in all situations. For example, fathers can be married or unmarried, they can live in mainstream family situation, in or after separation, in patchwork/second families, and so on. The Berlin Fathers’ Centre is meant to serve as a space and place for fathers to promote “good”, active fatherhood and to strengthen the idea of caring fatherhood. In all, 3,500 people (including fathers, children and mothers) per year would participate in all programmes. Founded as an NGO from “grassroots movements”, the Berlin Fathers’ Centre is still an independent NGO, but with its work with fathers, it is integrated into the infrastructure of family education by the federal state of Berlin. Our work is, therefore, funded by the regional government of Berlin. Our annual budget is about 150,000 EUR. Evaluation has shown that the Berlin Fathers’ Centre is seen as an example of best practice for work with fathers nationwide (Reuyß et al. 2014). (For a discussion of special aspects of work with fathers, see Section II below.)

2. Work with fathers: Impressions from practice

1) Antenatal classes for fathers-to-be (Schaefer 2007)

In Germany, like in most modern western societies, 90 percent of all new fathers are present at birth (in the delivery room) when their baby is born. This figure has increased from around 10 percent to the current 90 percent within one generation. Given this background, when we initiated work with fathers 10 years ago, we found that it would be a good idea to start right at the starting point—when men are going to be fathers (“Fathers-to-be”).

The best place to reach fathers-to-be in Germany are obstetric units in hospitals, where babies are delivered. Couples who will be parents usually inform themselves about services surrounding birth in these hospitals. That means that men quite often accompany their partners in this situation. Fathers-to-be are therefore present. Here, they are being informed about Antenatal classes for fathers-to-be.

From this strategic point, we started to work with four hospitals in Berlin. We run monthly classes in all these four hospitals. Through 5 to 10 years of practice, we have had more than 1,000 participants. However, there has not been much social scientific research on the outcomes of fathers-to-be who have taken these classes.

The classes are a single three-hour meeting. This one-meeting three hours design suits the fathers’ schedules well. It is an easy-access, low-threshold design. The basic content of the class includes the following:

- The father’s presence in the delivery room
- Shared experience of birth
- Do’s and don’ts
- The role of the father shortly after birth, and within the first days and weeks in the baby’s life
in bonding with the newborn baby, and how to establish attachment
- Couple and family dynamics after birth: Becoming a family while staying a couple.

Our practice in antenatal classes yields the following major findings (Woeckel et al. 2007; Schaefer 2008):

i) When becoming a father, men think about the anticipated change in their lives once the child is born. Many fathers-to-be feel as if they are torn between the “old” father role (the “breadwinner role”) and the new “caring” fathers role. They anticipate that the caregiver role is very much favoured by partners, supported by the media, and from debate in the society. On the other hand, they feel quite familiar with the breadwinner role, which they experience, for example, with their own father or in the business world.

ii) During the pregnancy of their partner, men are silent. They think a lot, but they do not speak about their thoughts. Couples do not communicate much about these “men’s issues”, “before-after” matters or the division of family and household/child work, and work family balance for both partners, and so on.

iii) Fathers-to-be think a lot about responsibility and about change. Men anticipate being responsible for a family. This is meant as financial responsibility first. Their partner will interrupt professional work for a year or more. The young mother’s income will be missing, and the parental allowance will not fully compensate this loss. For the new father, this means more financial responsibility.

iv) At the same time, the role of the caring father is being asked for—by his partner, and by popular discourse. He himself will often want to fulfil the role of the “caring father” who spends a lot of time with his child. (Couples quite often have the picture of shared parental responsibility in mind when thinking about family life with a small child). In class, many participants say they want to be the best possible assistant at birth and during the first few days and weeks.

v) Many fathers are surprised when they learn that they can bond with their child as well as mothers can. Many participants are surprised that their ability to attach is as good as that of the mothers.

vi) Sharing among fathers-to-be about these topics is highly valued by participants. It is new to see becoming a father, father–baby-relationship, and so on as a topic for men.

The important messages for participants through these classes are:

i) Do not conceal your thoughts. Talk with your partner over and over again. Make your partner understand that birth and becoming a family affects you too, as a man and father.

ii) Just being there in the delivery room has proven to be helpful (Callister et al. 2003), and there is no need to fulfil special “tasks”. “Condemned for doing nothing” as a stereotype of the male gender role is challenged.

Many participants state that they appreciate having the opportunity to share about these topics with other men.

Many findings from this practice are confirmed by an Australian practice evaluation (Friedewald and Fletcher 2005). For an earlier practice report from our work in English language, see Schaefer (2007).

2) “Daddy Café” or fathers taking parental leave
(Schaefer and Schulte 2012)

Another important part of the regular programme
from the Berlin Fathers’ Centre is the “Daddy Café” which aims at fathers who take a parental leave. The background to this programme lies in the fact that about 40 percent of all new fathers in Germany take a share of the parental leave. Most of these fathers take as much as two or three months of the parental leave. German parental leave legislation allows for 14 months paid leave for a couple. Parents can share these 14 months as they wish. The most common share is “12 plus 2”, meaning that the young mother takes 12 months and her partner takes 2 months, or “11 plus 3”. Symmetrical share is not common, but some couples choose this option.

The Daddy Café opens once a week (Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.). Regularly, between 8 and 12 fathers attend together with their children. Children would be between 4 and 14 months of age. There are no “lessons” or teaching programmes at this “Daddy Café”. Fathers can have coffee and a small breakfast from a buffet. Children can crawl on a mat (used for gymnastics) and play. Fathers would supervise them, or interact with them. Many feed their babies while visiting the Daddy Café.

The main idea for the Daddy Café is just be there and spend time with your kid, and see more fathers and kids. Share experiences, exchange ideas, observe how others take care of their babies, and so on. In this informal setting, “informal learning” occurs. Here, fathers share the experience that being a father is normal, caring for a child is usual, and that a father is able to be responsible for his baby. Caring for a baby is not “exotic”. Care, in this case, means both direct responsibility, including interaction (play, talk, and so on), and care activities (feed, change diapers, and so on). The situation in the Daddy Café encourages “daddy talk”. In this way, the Daddy Café informally teaches that being a caring father is an integral part of being a contemporary man.

We do not know of similar examples of a programme that brings together fathers and their babies in this kind of informal setting. Evaluation (Reuyß et al. 2014) suggests that this approach is effective and can be seen as “best practice” for the work with fathers.

3) **Counselling and fathers’ groups** (Schaefer and Schulte 2015)

Separation and divorce is a part of social reality. In Germany, more than one third of all children under 18 will experience separation or divorce of their parents, amounting to some 200,000 children per year. Similar evidence can be found in other western societies. Thus, “the family after the family” (Fthenakis 2008) must be taken into account in the work with families. The change in the role of the father is also visible in the context of separation and divorce, including the context of the “family after the family”. More and more fathers want to keep a close relationship with their children after separation or divorce. Since in most cases, children after separation stay with their mothers, more and more fathers seek to find ways to see their children more than only, say, two weekends in a month, which used to be the usual practice in the past decades. In this context, the Berlin Fathers’ Centre offers counseling appointments for fathers.

Counselling aims at working for good solutions in terms of the best interest of the child. The key is to have two parents who cooperate for the best interest of their children. Solutions preferred by both parents are being favoured. The Berlin Fathers’ Centre conducts approximately 600 counselling sessions per year. Four hundred of these are legal advice sessions about custody/joint custody, visitation hours and times, and so on. In addition, more than 200 appointments per year are related to solution-oriented advice beyond legal matters, and are more about communication between parents. Additionally, we have been running fathers’ groups for mutual counselling and discussion for a number of years. Five years ago, we had 2 group pro-
grammes per year, doubling to 4 per year in the last 2 years. Eight to ten fathers would participate in each group programme.

Fathers in separation who ask for counselling and/or joining a group programme find themselves in a situation in which they feel lost, to a great extent. As seen above in the section surrounding birth, fathers find institutional settings around separation and divorce and after as designed only for the situation and welfare of mothers and children, leaving fathers out of the picture. They even leave out fathers who want to continue being “caring dads” after separation. They find that the system contributes only to an “old” picture of the father—the father as breadwinner, i.e., the fathers who provide financial contribution for his children by paying alimonies, but beyond which he would or should not care for his children. In this situation, many fathers try to find ways to stay caring fathers after divorce. Quite many know only the way through the courts. They anticipate counselling in youth departments or family counselling institutions as “mothers-first” oriented. This notion applies to some extent, but the legal/institutional situation is undergoing changes as well.

From oral and written (evaluation) feedback we know that fathers feel strengthened in their wish and ways to maintain or obtain better solutions to keep in touch with their children. Our programmes provide innovative approaches towards caring fatherhood beyond the resources through the court. The best interests of the child are much more considered here. More evaluation and/or research should focus on mediation-related ways to establish more desirable “family after the family” situations.

3. Insight from practice

1) The "Fathers’ Centre"—I beg your pardon?!

As practitioners and members of the Fathers’ Centre team, we are quite often confronted with misunderstandings in regard to what a “Fathers’ Centre” is all about. First time contacts on the telephone often have to clarify basic information.

First, there is phonetics: If you answer the phone by saying “Hi, this is the Fathers’ Centre”, which in German is “Väterzentrum”, a word that is phonetically close to “Feta” or “cheese from sheep milk”, the person at the other end would think he is connected with a Centre for sheep cheese. (Nobody would know what this should be, either.) So sometimes we have to explain from phonetics that “Väterzentrum” is not a Centre for sheep cheese but instead some place for fathers. (Similar phonetic irritation is with the word “Feder” meaning “feather”, not “father.”) These misunderstandings are much more than only funny glimpses. Not only phonetically but generally it seems difficult to understand what a fathers’ centre is all about.

We are quite frequently asked (be it usual clients, female or male, or be it professionals) what the Fathers’ Centre might be. Specifically, we are asked whether it is

- A Centre for the lone parent/father;
- An organisation of “militant combatants” for fathers’ rights;
- A shelter home for battered men;
- A sperm bank;
and so on and so forth.

Obviously, our Berlin Fathers’ Centre is designed for supporting fathers. Support for fathers, however, is totally unusual. The idea of “support,” or even more, “help” is not elicited when thinking of men, or of the male role. If a man needs support or help, he will do his best to solve the problem by himself—without support or help from others, and without institutional support. This part of the definition of the male gender role, or masculinity—men do not need help—has often been described in connection to health issues. For example:
We know that the life expectancy of men is about five years lower than that of women.
We know that men tend to see a doctor later and less frequently than women do.
We know that men see psychotherapist, or counsellors, far less than women do.
We know that there are many times more homeless men than homeless women.
All these phenomena have to do with the picture of the man who does not need support or help. This picture works within individual men, but it also works within institutions. Most institutions (of professional fields) have not yet developed approaches to reaching men when men need (or deserve) support or help. This situation also applies to policies, institutions and professional systems/programmes that offer support for families or parents. Men, including fathers, are hardly in the focus of most of these institutions or their programmes. The Berlin Fathers’ Centre has, in this respect, developed an approach that focuses on men, and offers support for men as fathers. In other words, we see support, or the need for support, as a part of a male gender role that is changing.

What we have to take into account is that we often have to act, in a way, undercover. We offer support, but men and fathers should not notice that they are receiving support. We have to rename the terms “support” or “help”. For example, our counselling is called “strategy development”. Here lies the story behind the misunderstandings described above. If we create a place for fathers that is meant to support fathers, or if we set up programmes to support fathers, this policy/practice is part of a strategy to redefining, or extending, the picture of the male role. Caring fatherhood is one part of this extension, and ability and acceptance to receive support is another. Both these extensions will contribute to gender equality and child wellbeing. This is one example for an integrative view to gender equality and child wellbeing policies: men and fathers should be integrated, for better outcomes.

2) Conclusions from practice

To repeat, support is essential for fathers, but men tend to not ask for “support”. Consequently, in order to achieve gender equality and better outcome for child wellbeing, we should offer support to men, viz. those who do not ask for support. This paradoxical situation is the prime challenge for the work with fathers.

There are practical steps to take towards solving this paradox. In practice of work with fathers,

i) We should preach the message: Caring fatherhood is fun!
Men like to have fun, and they do have the notion that being a father has many aspects of fun. Playing, gaming, spending time with your children is fun.

ii) We should provide a space for fathers for sharing on fatherhood. From experience, we know that fathers like to gather and share with other fathers.

iii) Caring fatherhood is generated best by providing support so that the father can develop a strong and independent relationship with his child. Fathers like to be important for their children.

iv) Always think and work “solution-oriented”, rather than “problem-oriented”.

Working with fathers is still marginal as a field of practice, even though it is highly valued among professionals and in politics, and also presented most favourably in the media. The marginality is due to the fact that, as stated above, support or help is not connected with what most of us define as the “male gender role”.

Professionals involved in working with fathers need to continuously explain the objectives of their work, and what work with fathers is good for. This is an important part of the work with fathers. The above points will be important to move work with fathers forward,
for the sake of child wellbeing and gender equality.

I will now leave the field of practice of work with fathers and proceed to discussing some aspects of care, gender roles and change of gender roles, views towards gender dynamics and perspectives for success in gender equality and child wellbeing policies.

III. Fathers and Care

A large body of research has been conducted and there also has been much discussion around the issue of care work. From my point of view, the concept of care needs some redefining, or extension, in order to achieve an appropriate integration of men (or fathers) into the concept of care. For example, Lueck (2015), in a research conducted by the National Institute for Population Research, has shown fathers’ and mothers’ share of child oriented (care) work.

Lueck (2015) differentiates between attachment/parent–child oriented activities, such as play, bathing the child, bedtime (care) ritual, playing on the playground, and going out for a walk. Time usage diaries found that fathers’ share in these activities is relatively high.

However, these activities are not referred to as “attachment” or “parent–child” oriented activities, but rather as “pleasure”. This naming suggests that the activities described are “only” pleasure, leisure, or fun activities. My point is that these activities might be pleasure or fun, but they are essential for supporting child development and for fostering child–parent attachment. In other words, these are essential care activities.

This analysis suggests that fathers prefer pleasure activities with their children, while they neglect “real” care activities. This is not to refuse the notion, backed by findings from time usage diaries and other sources, that fathers take a much smaller share of care work such as household chores, washing clothes, and so on. However, fathers’ contribution for child wellbeing should not be neglected when talking about care. The activities named “pleasure” here are essential for child wellbeing and parent–child relation building, whereas household chores sometimes can wait until tomorrow.

Gender biased classification and interpretation of care work should be overcome. There should be an extension of care classification. Attachment/parent child oriented activities should always be included in the definition of care. By doing this, fathers’ contributions would become more visible and more highly valued.

IV. Work-Life Balance, Gender Roles/Gender(ed) Dynamics and a Systemic View

I will now illustrate some arenas of work-life balance or gendered division of labour, and then turn to some discussion of gender dynamics within couple relations. My point is that we should turn to a systemic view of gender/couple relations to better understand gendered couple dynamics.

1. Fathers and work-life balance: Parental leave legislation

The parental leave/parental allowance system in Germany was introduced in 2007. It is often seen as a success story in regard to fathers’ rising participation. In the former system of parental leave that only offered a flat compensation of about 150 Euros per month, only between 1.5 and 3.5 percent of new fathers participated in this system. In other words, more than 95 percent of new fathers did not interrupt their professional work when a child was born. By 2012, under the new system that offers a 65 percent wage compensation for up to 12 months, the share of new fathers participated rose to 29 percent. In 2015, more than 30 percent of new fathers participated.

However, throughout the country, many regional differences can be found. Where unemployment rate is low and jobs are relatively secure, the parental leave figures for fathers would be high. In regions with rath-
er traditional gender role patterns, the duration of fathers’ share would be rather short. Figures in Bavaria, are surprisingly high due to a very healthy economic situation. In Bavaria, in 2013, 41 percent of new fathers took a share of parental leave. Looking at cities, there is a big variation. In Jena in Thuringia, 50.3 percent of new fathers took a share of parental leave in 2015. On the other end, in Gelsenkirchen in the declining industrial Ruhr Region, only 10.5 percent of new fathers took parental leave.

These figures illustrate the dynamics in parental leave usage by fathers.

2. Work-life balance at the workplace (Pfähl et al. 2014)

Fathers taking 2 to 3 months’ parental leave is standard in companies now. Overall, research has found no crucial career or workplace disadvantages for fathers who have taken a parental leave. In contrast, in some cases fathers who took a parental leave experienced a prestige enhancement. However, no standards or guidelines for fathers’ work life balance in companies have been found. Nationwide, few “best practice” examples in companies were found. Executives’ attitudes towards fathers’ (caring) role are key with respect to fathers’ chances and development when they announce parental leave.

With respect to fathers and work life balance at the workplace, a survey among fathers about workplace has shown that work life promotion is attractive for fathers, if the company provides measures/instruments for improving work life balance of fathers (Vaeter gGmbH 2014). With respect to the statement “I like my company better”, 93% of the fathers agreed. In addition, 93% of fathers agreed to “I feel more motivated to work”, 90.1% “I feel more satisfied at work”, 85.2% “I would continue working for this company”. Further, 86.0% agreed that “Work-life is a success factor for any company”.

What is more interesting regarding the point I want to make is the leave duration that fathers choose. The average usage (2012) was 3.3 months. Most fathers took two or three months of parental leave, which is not much. They are entitled to take up to 12 months, and a couple with a baby can share their 13-months’ entitlement as they wish, meaning that an equal share would be seven months for either parent. However, not many parents share equally.

3. Fathers and work life balance at home/in the family

In families we find the following pattern. In 38% of the families, father works full time, and mother part time; in 14% of the families, both parents work full-time; and in only 6% of the families does the father work part time. Taking into account that we have a gender pay gap of 8 to 14 percent (depending on method of calculation), these differences between fathers and mothers can be explained by economic necessities or options. But we can also find another important factor that is often neglected. This factor can be called the “retraditionalisation pitfall” (Fthenakis et al. 2002).

If we hear many fathers-to-be talking, we will often hear that in their couple relation there is quite an agreement that the female partner will take 12 months of parental leave. The male partner will take only 2 months (these two months are often called “daddy’s months”).

In many cases we will find a certain pattern of decision making in regard to parental leave.

The female partner/mother-to be claims her share, which she will call “the baby year”.

The male partner/father-to-be will say, OK, that is just fine, I will take my two “daddy’s months”. Traditional gender role beliefs stand behind these values and decisions. There is not much discussion about this in most cases. In practice, we have heard this as a common pattern of decision-making in regard to parental
leave and part time work. This observation is backed by research (Fthenakis et al. 2002; Meuser et al. 2015). The point that I want to make is that it takes two partners in a couple relation to come to a decision. It is not only a father who says, “I do not want to take more than 2 months of parental leave. I do not want to work part time”.

It is his wife, who most often comes first saying, “I’m gonna take my baby year. After that, I will go back to work, but I will work part time. I feel I am so close to the baby—I must be close to her or him. I feel I am more and more closely attached to the baby than you are.”

Her male partner will, in most cases, confirm this point of view.

This pattern of decision-making is a part of a phenomenon that has been named “maternal gatekeeping”. This term suggests that mothers can be the key figure when it comes to decisions within the home, family, or work/life matters. I want to point out that maternal gatekeeping comes not only from one person (the mother) who sets the rules independently. My point is that—not two actors are involved in this process. One who formulates her thoughts and wishes, and the other who confirms them, with or without words. More recent social science findings also back this view (see Fthenakis et al. 2002; Meuser et al. 2015).

My conclusion here is that if we want to understand (and perhaps change) fathers, we should not leave out mothers or their female partners. Putting this more academically, a systemic view towards the interdependence of fathers and mothers’ attitudes and behaviour will provide a lot of insight into fathers, viz. change or persistence, gender role openness or conservatism, and so on. The phenomenon, or systemic process, of gatekeeping is a key factor for persistence of the “old” father role. “Gatekeeping” beliefs and decisions help keep the father away from developing towards the figure of the other primary caregiver and attachment person for his child.

The overall conclusions from this assessment are that work with families, counselling, professional services around birth, and so on, should encourage their clients to do the following:

Fathers: Be more self-confident! Speak out what you think!

Mothers: Let your partners be caring fathers! Be confident that your partner will do OK as a father!

Couples: Communicate your ideas, wishes, and plans. Keep talking.

4. A brief digression: Why balancing work and life is impossible

In 2015, a book by two journalists on fathers has been extensively debated in the media (Brost and Wefing 2015). They argue about the contemporary picture of the father as a “Swiss army knife”: they argue that balancing work, couple relation, children will not be possible whatsoever due to the all-embracing demands from the business world. The main problem seen here is universal presence of work accessibility, pushed by information technology.

“We want to be the most loving and caring father who takes time for his children, play etc.; we want to be the best loving and caring partner ever, who, of course, irons his shirts, does the laundry, sets a sensational breakfast table, etc.; we have to be a successful professional doing a great job and making good money to feed the family. Forget it—no one will ever be able to fulfil these three tasks.” (Brost and Wefing 2015: 83–4)

5. Summary

Altogether, we can here state an ambiguity towards the desired father’s role in Germany. This ambiguity can be detected in any dimensions: in society, in institutions, in the business world, in governance, in couple relations, and in men and women! The picture in Ger-
many may be painted as follows:

The father is seen as the breadwinner “plus”. “Plus” means “mother’s best assistant” at home.

Mothers like the idea, and they know many role models. Fathers like the idea, and they know many role models. Most couples agree to this idea of family work/life arrangement. Most couples do not ever talk about this and they do not talk about alternatives. My future outlook is that this phenomenon will stay an issue in Germany for the next one or two generations.

However, for future progress in gender equality, work life balance and, not to forget, the improvement of child wellbeing, practice, policy and social research should shift their focus towards fathers as prime actors as well as to couple dynamics (i.e. adopt the systemic approach). Caring fatherhood should be much more an issue in practice, policy and research than it is up to now.

V. Conclusion

There are four steps with respect to fathers’ moving towards gender equality, work life balance, and child wellbeing.

1. Public policy: Support fathers even if they do not ask for support. The agenda is to promote parental leave and part time work opportunities for fathers, and create opportunities for fathers to share experience of caring fatherhood.

2. Policies for child wellbeing/good raising of children: Consider and address fathers as “No. 1 caregivers with potential for childraising/child wellbeing equal to that of mothers!

3. Business world: Make fathers’ work life balance wishes an issue. Identify business leaders/executives as role models; identify and support “best practice” employers.

4. At home/couple relation: Mothers/female partners: Welcome caring fatherhood unambiguously. Open the door for caring fatherhood! Fathers: Commit yourself to be “the other No. 1 carer”. Couples: Talk about these issues! Professionals: Encourage couples (mothers and fathers) to communicate about these issues.

In a nutshell, an extended view towards gender mainstreaming is needed. Men as fathers have to be integrated into gender equality policy concepts and strategies. We have named this strategy “daddy mainstreaming” (Huber and Schaefer 2012). A systemic approach in research and practice is key.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his deepest gratitude to the “Work Family Balance in the Era of Globalization” Research Team: Mieko Takahashi (Osaka University), Saori Kamano (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research), Tomoko Matsuda (Bukkyo University), Setsuko Onode (Kyoto Kacho University) and Kyoko Yoshizumi (Otemon Gakuin University).

I was so honored being invited to present from my work at the Berlin Fathers’ Centre at three symposiums in the fall of 2015, at the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, at Otemon Gakuin University (The Annual Meeting of the Japan Society of Family Sociology) and at Hosei University, and to writing this paper for publication in the Japanese Journal of Family Sociology. I would be happy if my contributions can enhance academic, professional and political discourse on fathers, gender, families and child wellbeing in Japan.

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