

Aarsand, Liselott

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peDOCS
Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung (DIPF)
Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
Schloßstr. 29, D-60486 Frankfurt am Main
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Parental self-work: governing enactments in family life

Liselott Aarsand

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

(liselott.aarsand@svt.ntnu.no)

Abstract

Discourses on lifelong and lifewide learning portray everyday life as a pedagogical space where requirements for how to preferably improve oneself through learning are highly significant. Drawing upon the notion of governmentality, it could be argued that techniques operate within a range of practices to shape, foster and stabilize the assumed adequate ways to perform. Using that particular lens, the case of parenting was investigated to accentuate selves and self-work in narrations on family life in Norway. The analysis illustrates how the techniques of activation and comparison are at work to define, fashion and develop the responsible, involved and attentive parental self, thereby signifying pedagogical claims one should aspire to. However, how this is accomplished differs slightly within the social contexts of family life. Parenting, then, may be discussed as a powerful educative practice for fabricating capable and well-behaved citizens of contemporary times.

Keywords: governing; lifelong learning; parenting; self-work

Introduction

Today family life and parenting seem informed by rationales of learning that define and explain *what happens* within such practices in terms of competence, knowledge and skills (e.g. Gillies, 2011; Suissa & Ramaekers, 2011; Aarsand & Aarsand, 2012). What parents do obviously involves pedagogy in a wide sense, yet it could be argued that the highly prescribed societal expectations and range of actors eager to assume a pedagogical role rather address the adult as the learning subject. In various sites – through support groups, counselling and education – activities are labelled, advice is given and behaviour is corrected. Parents are targeted, and are invited to and located within learning spaces where how to develop adequate conduct is the main issue depicted as significant for a well-functioning family life. Even the media assume a similar position by passing judgment on what counts as well-behaved parenting

(Maudlin, Sandlin & Thaller, 2012; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013). In this format, dialogue, coaching and expertise are seen as decisive for attaining successful performances (Assarsson Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2013). Parental learning, then, emerges as a social norm that is established and promoted within and across settings.

Some researchers argue that this should be seen as a neo-liberal mode of governing, where subjects are shaped, fostered and fabricated by themselves and others (e.g. Rose, 1999; Popkewitz, 2003, 2008; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008). How techniques and practices are activated and operate to encourage and discipline people to assume desirable ways of thinking, speaking and behaving are accentuated. Such governing acts of subject formation have also been called attempts 'to define and develop a way of life' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 138). Taking my point of departure in an interest in how selves are created and constituted in present time, I argue that parenting is a particularly intriguing case. It represents a site of adult everyday life that is usually thought of as a personal, private sphere beyond formal education and public domains. Within the intimate dynamic site of family, how to be and become a specific person is a main aspect of social interaction, and as such it may also contribute to our understanding of lifelong and lifewide learning.

Located within discourses on lifelong and lifewide learning, adults are positioned as continuously facing requirements to be active, responsible and willing to improve themselves. The autonomous individual is a prominent figure, and this is combined with the assumption that everyone has the capacity to become more competent (e.g. Usher & Edwards, 2007; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Edwards, 2010). Framed in that manner, there is reason to attach importance to the participants' perspective and in the present article I turn to the adults themselves and their activities in parenting to investigate *how* they are positioned and position themselves, and, also, to ascertain *what* practices are activated to shape and foster them to become particular parental subjects.

Governing techniques, power and the self

The notion of *governmentality* provides useful tools for analysing educative processes and self-work, and as Foucault (1993, p. 203) carefully, yet convincingly, explains 'the contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government'. It focuses on the ideas, ideals and preferences that regulate and establish particular modes of conduct where individuals take an active role in shaping, fostering and moderating themselves, and each other, to assume acceptable ways of behaviour. Distinctive *techniques* operate where "techniques of domination" refer to the self as distributed, integrated and evaluated according to particular structures and practices of coercion, while "techniques of the self" highlight how people create, moderate and foster themselves as selves with respect to what is held to be adequate in social settings (Foucault 1991, 1993). Assuming certain ways of life is never about forcing people to adjust to what is desired (Foucault, 1991, 1997b, 1997c). Rather, there 'is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself' (Foucault, 1993, p. 204).

Governmentality, then, is about how practices and activities create and maintain social order through more or less deliberate attempts to fabricate oneself and others in certain directions. Techniques and tactics used to govern the way people make sense, talk and act are discursively produced and reproduced in and through social interaction that defines, establishes and distributes what is considered to be correct, good and

proper, and what is not. By offering, encouraging, assuming, but also resisting positions, a dominant pattern of subjectivities is fabricated and re-fabricated (Foucault, 1997b). What holds for being true makes some positions available and provides repertoires of how selves may be adequately displayed, thereby demonstrating what persons, groups and even organisations are expected to strive for. This highlights how certain modes of behaviour are cultivated, and how we foster each other and ourselves with respect to what is held to be normal in practices where we participate. Self-work in terms of guidance, regulation and discipline is accentuated because such exercises on the self are assumed to sculpt, maintain and stabilise (Foucault, 1993).

Thus, since some actions modify others, *power* is always present in mobile, reversible and unstable networks that structure and constitute rather fixed patterns of behaviour. What is normal and improper is fashioned, categorised and legitimised by the creation of social order that people aspire to follow and maintain (Foucault, 1991). Certainly such activities have restricting ambitions and regulatory effects, however, they also facilitate, enable and encourage people to fashion themselves as particular selves. The focus is on the dynamic, which means that even though certain patterns of social interaction invite people to assume the required positions, there are always possibilities to defy, oppose and refuse. Power is seen as relational, productive and even necessary to ensure that everyday life practices work.

Some research notes on governing contemporary parents

From the governmentality stance, the norms and values produced and promoted are of great importance since they are assumed to have something to say for selves and self-work. In the Nordic context, where this study was conducted, there appears to be no doubt as to which parenting ideas and ideals are preferred. Policymakers strongly support the shared model where women and men who enter the position of parent should have equal possibilities to actively engage in transitions to parenthood (e.g. Bergnéhr, 2008). Research shows how the norms of equality operate, particularly in middle-class families, where both parents are expected to and get involved in housework, homework and leisure activities (Bekkengen, 2002; Gottzén, 2009; Vuori, 2009; Klinth & Johansson, 2010).

Some researchers argue that what has been considered a hegemonic structure of masculinity appears to loosen up to include requirements for men to be child oriented and adjust to the ideal of gender equality (e.g. Johansson & Kuosmanen, 2003). Thus, again, other studies show how gendered patterns of parenting are maintained, albeit in a slightly different way than before. In private spaces, for example at home, women still seem to be the primary caregivers while in public spaces, such as sports, men seem to dominate (Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Gottzén, 2012). Furthermore, it has been claimed that social class is made relevant (e.g. Gillies, 2008) by producing and reproducing a distinction where the targets for professional intervention are 'working-class and minority families' rather than 'white-middle class, heterosexual families'. While the former parents may be subjected to service and intervention positioning them as 'clients', the latter are seen as able to govern themselves through discourses that make them appear as 'consumers' (Edwards & Gillies, 2012, p. 67). While the former parents may be subjected to service and intervention positioning them as clients, the latter are seen as able to govern themselves through discourses that make them appear as consumers.

Along the line of governmentality, several studies on parenting have been conducted that illustrate how contemporary adults are subjected to particular requirements, for instance, being responsible, autonomous, collaborative (Rose, 1999; Popkewitz, 2003, 2008), reflective, communicative (Moqvist, 2003), responsible, informed (Millei & Lee 2007; Baez & Talburt, 2008), flexible (McGowan, 2005) and involved (Dahlstedt, 2009; Gottzén 2009). The relationships between home and education are often in focus, implying that parents should provide children with appropriate activities to reinforce and rationalise school. Adults are also disciplined to be active and responsible community members who thus support important governmental objectives. Stereotypically stated, then, at the intersection of parenting, gender and social class, the involved, informed, caring and equal subjectivity is promoted as the ideal to strive for, and is presented as a legitimate position that is both institutionally and culturally supported.

The outlined expectations placed on adults are here to be seen as pedagogical claims signifying self-work, which is the focus in the present paper. Whether parents adjust to or oppose these expectations, they are at any rate exposed to particular requirements they have to deal with in some way. I use qualitative interviews to situate parenting within people's everyday lives and highlight learning in terms of how to define, fashion and develop selves.

Interviewing parents

Research that aims at investigating identity and selves, or how people create themselves and are created, often takes its point of departure in the narrative (e.g. Bamberg, 2004, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Spector-Mersel, 2010). When people tell, create and revise stories by legitimising their choices, and discuss and explain their own and others' actions, they also perform subjectivities. Dialogues on the on-going living life are considered to have a defining character, where people plot themselves into time and space in particular ways similar to, or different from, other actors. For my purposes here, with the aim of providing rather detailed empirical accounts of what will be analysed in terms of parental selves and self-work, narration is first and foremost defined as activity (Bamberg, 2011; Evans, 2013).

In addition, the situated, dynamic and relational character of talk is accentuated, where it could be claimed that narratives are always co-constructed in interactive practices rather than "told" in a clear-cut way (e.g. Goffman, 1981). Taking a discursive stance, to explore the shaping of particular subjectivities according to how people make certain positions, activities and practices relevant is an important concern. The local, situated language use is also emphasised by highlighting how the participants articulate, perform and display themselves when narrating parenting experiences in spoken interaction (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Accordingly, I extensively use the participants' own words and verbalisations to illustrate the mechanisms of adopting, modifying and negotiating the subject positions available in dominating discourses, or what also has been called master narratives (Davies & Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 2004).

Bearing the above-mentioned research in mind, to better understand governing enactments in family life and, more specifically, how self-work is really carried out, there seems to be reason to focus on middle-class parents. To find parents to interview I used my personal contacts, and asked friends as well as colleagues to spread information about and invitations to participate in the research project in their own networks. I was delighted by the response from many, to me, unfamiliar adults willing

to share their stories on family life. Twelve adults were chosen, all university graduates and mostly full-time employees, and by taking their professional positions into account they might in broad terms be labelled middle-class. It could be claimed that the self-selecting strategy of the interviewees most likely has something to say for the research findings. In particular, it could be assumed that they position themselves as acceptable, and perhaps even contribute to what may be considered one-sided “fairy tales”. Although this might be the case, I argue that it would be naïve to confuse this with the absence of a struggle for validation. Seen through the lens of governmentality, the interviews also reveal doubt, failure, defeat, conflict, worry and insufficiency (see Aarsand, 2014). Thus, for the purposes here, the analytical focus is on the emerging patterns of selves, and how self-work is carried out by making certain positions, activities and practices available.

Several open themes on family life and parenting were discussed in the interviews, and each interview lasted from approximately one and a half to two hours. They were recorded, reviewed repeatedly and transcribed verbatim. In the analysis, I returned to particular sections in the interviews to transcribe the dialogue in detail. Looking at the material from the governmentality perspective, the subject is considered reflexive, and, furthermore, it has a relation to itself that is like a self that can be worked on, modified and improved (Foucault 1991, 1993). With this in mind, I focused on what were considered to be truths, norms and “evidence” of normal (and pathologised) parenting, including what positions, actions and practices were enabled (and ignored, disallowed) and what was emphasised (and omitted). A dominant pattern that emerged in the complete material was the narrative of the responsible, involved and attentive parent. However, it turned out that this was accomplished in a slightly different way. First, the interviewees displayed themselves in reference to what appears to be main or shared parenting, respectively. Second, the interviewees defined significant parenting practices differently in private and/or public arenas (children’s schoolwork, playing, organised leisure time, household work and so on). Third, the interviewees made distinct resources relevant for working on themselves, where striving to be like role models, or, on the contrary, avoiding counter positions reoccurred.

In the present article two participants that represent a jigsaw puzzle of the above-described pattern were selected to portray parenting. The master narrative (e.g. Bamberg, 2004) of how to become responsible, involved and attentive is discursively produced by drawing upon the different resources previously described: according to main versus shared parenting, in private versus public arenas, and, according to role models versus counter positions. In addition, bearing in mind that the interviewees probably consider themselves as belonging to an acceptable group of parents, perhaps sometimes even sense themselves as exceeding what holds for being “average”, rather elaborate, distinct and reflected narratives were constructed. In the interactional event of the interview they also willingly shared their family life with me without explicitly considering anything as exceptional, provocative or deviant. In that sense they have fashioned themselves as “ordinary” or at least as part of practices that “we” seemingly shared. However, there seems to have been enough differences at work to make visible and explore values, norms and routines rather than take things for granted.

The act of portraying situates parenting within the local, particular and social contexts of two persons’ lives and makes it possible to point at similarities as well as differences, thus still staying close to the interviewees’ – or narrator’s – own voices and words (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). In the analysis, individualities are highlighted, but also transcended to illustrate the pattern of subjectivities and practices appearing in the complete material. One may of course call into question that Jonathan and Julian are

middle-class, white, heterosexual men of a similar age living in Norway. However, I would argue that although this is the case, *how* such social categories are made relevant or intersect with parenting within the social contexts of personal lives is certainly a question for empirical exploration. Due to research ethics, some personal data have been changed, and, moreover, the quotations in the following text have been translated into English.

Portraying parental selves: practices, activities and positions

In the following section we will delve into the interview material and first meet Jonathan, and then turn to Julian, two parents displaying similarities as well as differences. By portraying parental selves, thus highlighting the practices, activities and positions made relevant, the existing norms and values will be exposed. Furthermore, some key techniques initiated both by themselves and others that seem significant for accomplishing self-work in governing enactments will be depicted. However, located in distinct family lives this is discursively styled, negotiated and accomplished in a slightly different way.

Jonathan

Sharing the parental responsibilities

Jonathan is 35 years old and works fulltime as a project manager. He has been living with Hannah for ten years and is now a father of four, from a new-born baby to a child nine years old. Jonathan positions himself as an adult who shares his parenting in the sense that he and Hannah take similar responsibility. This is depicted as conditioned by the fact that they both consider work to be a main part of life. At the time of the interview Hannah is on parental leave with the new-born baby. Jonathan describes the situation as ‘exceptional’ since it makes it easier for him to fully engage in his work. Just a year ago the situation was reversed where first and foremost he was the one responsible for the family’s everyday life. Back then Hannah, who is an entrepreneur, was focused on finishing a huge project at work. Jonathan explains: ‘I took the kids to preschool and school and picked them up every day, and I cooked dinner and she came home at nine o’clock every evening. It’s tough but you get used to it’. The years with children, then, are characterised by shifting periods of intense focus on family and intense periods of heavy workload.

According to Jonathan, their parenting responsibilities usually follow a rather stable pattern. Yet, they are more or less interchangeable and continuously negotiated since both he and Hannah have to acknowledge the general workload and booked appointments, and, in addition, what is considered to be best for the whole family. Jonathan says ‘we often decide from day to day, for instance I often get them [the children] to childcare and school, but today the youngest one slept in and we let him do that since he gets so grumpy when he’s tired’. Even though Jonathan is fully committed to his job, his family comes first. However, there is no doubt that tensions accompany such a priority as he from time to time is unable to adjust to the requirements from work. Work also easily transmits to family time and leisure, ‘that’s what I don’t like when it comes to my work, there’s always something that needs to be finished that you spend your time thinking about’. Jonathan maintains that such balancing acts are

‘challenging’, yet common for all people who are combining family life with fulltime work.

Engaging with the children

Jonathan claims that the shared parenting probably relates to slightly different domains. He elaborates on the subject by comparing his parenting practices to Hannah’s and states ‘I’m more playful, at least that’s how I see it’, and adds ‘often we all get kicked out of the house [laughs], then we tumble around on the lawn, play soccer, jump on the trampoline, just be together with the kids you know’. Jonathan thereby positions himself as the children’s co-player as he emphasises their similarities when engaged in game and play. However, everyday activities like that are not just connected to leisure and entertainment. Rather, he often returns to the importance of ‘experiencing things together’ and portrays being focused on the children and being fully present as main aspects of parenting that he prioritises. That means, for instance, ‘putting the cell phone away’, as well as talking and listening to whatever interests the children.

Jonathan also makes parenting relevant in terms of ‘getting the kids involved’. Such activities are distinct from playing since they concern educative aspects, as he explains it, ‘not necessarily to play, but to let them learn things they care about’. Jonathan, then, points out that he systematically tries to acknowledge the children’s experiences, such as ‘things they notice in their everyday life, like the trees growing, stars in the sky and things that interest them’. Hence, ‘to teach them different things’ appears to be a main concern. Jonathan displays himself as knowledgeable who, moreover, works on maintaining the children’s curiosity by ‘telling stories in interesting ways’. He really enjoys being fully involved in the children’s presentations of the surrounding world, ‘I think that’s fun’.

Struggling with leisure time obligations

Jonathan definitely struggles when the priorities for spending time with his children are challenged by the requirement to be a loyal and hard-working employee. Even though for the moment he has Hannah’s acceptance for not being present all the time, he is ambivalent and depicts the situation as ‘incredibly stressful’. Moreover, in a long-term perspective Jonathan is definitely doubtful about having two parallel careers in the same family. He anticipates the upcoming tension where coping with the children’s commitment to leisure activities will compete with the adults’ work priorities. Jonathan shakes his head and states ‘in my world it’s not possible’, and has no idea how such things will be dealt with successfully. He elaborates on the subject by saying ‘I don’t get it, I mean later on when they [the children] begin to play soccer, it starts at five o’clock, which means dinner has to be at four. I mean you can’t work fulltime, at least definitely both can’t’. In a dramatic, determined voice he pretends that he will display zero tolerance for organised activities as he says ‘there shall be no activities’ [laughs].

Nevertheless, Jonathan has already resigned himself to this inevitability as ‘the boys have joined a gym class and they have swimming lessons and things like that’. As she is on parental leave, the responsibility for such activities now rests on Hannah, ‘she is first and foremost the one taking care of that’. Jonathan states that the situation is unfortunate since he would like to make other priorities than what appears to be possible, ‘I try to join the gym class, I really enjoy it, to be present when they tumble around’. The inconvenient time makes this difficult as the children’s activities start when he is still at work, something he claims is more or less impossible to change, ‘I’m not sure I can be home at that time’. However, to seriously think that ‘there shall be no

activities' for the children is not a realistic option. It seems to be taken for granted that good parenting is to let the kids commit to various activities. They have to adjust to that fact somehow, at least if they are to position themselves in desirable ways. It seems self-evident that family life and children's activities may affect adult's work situations, and perhaps even radically change them.

Making empathic abilities matter

Jonathan says that when it comes to parenting his father is the ideal to strive for, 'he's definitely my role model when it comes to being a father, I have to admit that'. He elaborates on this by telling us his father has been 'very decent all the time'. Although his father was a hard-working man, 'he went to work at seven thirty every morning and came home at four o'clock', he definitely spent time together with Jonathan and his siblings. While Jonathan describes his mother as 'orderly and strict' and 'the one going on about school and homework', he depicts his father as 'playful' and 'the one who took part in our leisure time'. Furthermore, his father 'knew the importance of taking us out to activities, going outdoors, doing things and teaching us things' and 'he was smart and said wise things'. In addition, Jonathan states 'my father is very patient and empathic, shows empathy, he knows, he understands people'. He displays himself as similar by saying 'I have the same ability'. Such competence makes him able to 'read the kids' behaviour, I know how they feel, I know what they want and enjoy'. Jonathan calls this a useful resource since 'you can anticipate many situations when you know they're going to start crying and you know why they're going to cry. Then you just take them away and let them know that now we do it like this'.

Jonathan depicts himself as rather knowledgeable on this matter, 'I have that ability more than her [Hannah]'. He explains that actions and behaviour have consequences for how the children discriminate between the parents. Jonathan elaborates on the subject and adds that 'maybe dad seems a bit "smarter" since he knows the reason for it [the child's reactions], at least that's how I think'. In this way he displays himself as having close, intimate relationships to the children. Moreover, this is assumed to be skilful, where Jonathan also seems aware of his resourceful childhood experience. At the same time, he is eager to not appear as superior, as he adds 'but I must not boast too much'. Positioning oneself and being positioned as empathic is surely a good thing in parenting practices. Nonetheless, having an admired role model to aspire to means that some self-work still needs to be done.

Julian

Being the main responsible parent

Julian is 39 years old and works fulltime as a physiotherapist. He has been married to Stella, who is an interpreter, for almost fifteen years and they have three teenagers. Julian positions himself as the main responsible parent, organising and coordinating the family. In the interview he points to his cell-phone and states 'the whole family is in there' referring to different commitments and activities. He keeps track of his own and his children's schedules, including extracurricular and other activities, to make sure that they are where they are supposed to be at the right time. Julian compares himself to his wife and lets us know that 'Stella has gotten used to me keeping up with everything and taking responsibility for everything, you see, I have to plan my own weeks anyway so I just take care of the kids' activities too'. While laughing, he states that parenting appears to be an all-embracing activity sneaking itself into almost everything. When, for instance, struggling with something at work, Julian can find himself thinking about what to make for dinner, something he illustrates by saying 'hmmm, no not lasagne today, not again, what about pasta, perhaps pasta, or maybe not'. He adds that it is obvious he is not the only one thinking like this as he claims the lunch conversations at work are often about various aspects of family life. Julian, then, portrays his own behaviour as ordinary and explains it to be natural since 'we're all so caught up in family stuff'.

When Julian elaborates on what is considered to be parenting practices some of them seem to be taken for granted. This refers to primary responsibilities, 'basic things', like ensuring that the children get enough sleep, eat healthy food and have clean clothes to wear. Yet, Julian portrays such things as very important as they are necessary if the children are going to gain respect and acceptance from other people. Moreover, he still claims to be an important part of the children's everyday lives even though they manage to take care of many things themselves. He is definitely 'busy talking to the kids about how they experienced their day' and tries to pay attention, talk about and listen carefully to whatever appears relevant to them. Julian says 'I really focus on things like that, I think they are valuable in a family'. Nevertheless, socialising with the teenagers can sometimes be a bit challenging, where you can find yourself having 'to listen to that very funny joke again', said ironically. In addition, Julian displays himself as also responsible for keeping tensions and trouble out of the family by, as he puts it, 'letting the kids know when it's time for bed to avoid a conflict with mum'. Expressed like that, Julian depicts his wife and children as rather equal while he clearly has another position in the family.

Getting involved in school activities

Julian argues that parenting also includes relations to public spaces in the children's everyday lives, and that mainly means school. When it comes to educational matters he describes himself as 'the more experienced' and 'successful' compared to his wife. Being the knowledgeable one makes him responsible for the children's school activities. This refers to being involved in the ordinary homework 'I'm the one taking care of those things', but also the one to be aware of and in charge of each child's weekly schedule. Julian says that he usually is 'the one remembering that one of them [the children] is going skiing, another one needs to collect candles or bottles or whatever for a competition or some other school project, and the oldest one needs to take ingredients to school since they are going to be cooking, and will also be late today as the class will be taking part in a concert'.

Furthermore, the parenting practice related to education is expansive and manifold. It also includes the children's approach to school in its widest sense and what Julian calls 'motivational stuff'. He describes some challenging experiences during one of his children's primary school years. Already after the first day, their child came home from school very disappointed and stated: 'Do you know what we were supposed to do? We just drew pictures of ourselves! And I thought that we were going to learn something important!' Julian explains that their child 'had really been looking forward to starting school'. Even though being a bit confused, Julian tried to motivate their child to adjust to the situation and despite the shattered expectations to think that school was nevertheless okay. Many times he asked himself if they as parents were the ones to blame, 'did we do anything wrong?'

Although they seemed to have managed, there is no doubt that 'it was clearly a big challenge'. Julian, then, signals that some heavy family responsibilities rest upon his shoulders. Yet, it does not seem realistic to alter the situation, and he further argues that he finds it hard to initiate a discussion with his wife on this subject. Julian asks himself 'how on earth can you really bring something like that up?' To just blatantly suggest that 'perhaps you could take care of that from now on' also seems out of the question. Actually, Julian is not convinced that he wants things to change. Rather, by stating 'that's my role', he depicts a fixed pattern where Stella and Julian have acted differently for many years and are thus expected to continue in the same way.

Enabling an active leisure time

In the context of parenting Julian emphasises that his job is 'flexible', which means he can combine it with comprehensive leisure time. Family life is intense since he and the children are committed to various organised activities in the evenings and at the weekends. Julian is the one accompanying the children to such activities, and, in addition, he is coaching a teenage sports team. Being able to give children in general something relevant outside of the family is considered to be a good thing, 'that's the nice part of being a coach'. He elaborates on the subject and says that 'what may be impossible to offer the kids at home as a parent, can actually be found at some other places. Taken together I think that society and the whole wide world is a rather great place'.

From time to time Julian finds himself defending his involvement in several activities to his wife Stella. In contrast to Julian, she prefers to stay at home 'and thinks that's very important'. He refers to their differences with a smile and says 'you can of course disagree over how many hours you have to stay at home to watch television together'. To some extent Julian agrees with Stella, and even he complains sometimes, mostly about the huge amount of time he invests in the teenage sports team. Julian says 'of course I could have spent those hours differently', at least when it is raining cats and dogs and he still has to spend long hours outdoors. Yet, he considers his involvement to be part of a bigger whole, like taking collective responsibility for young people in society. In Julian's own words, it is 'because of other people I push myself to do it'.

Making communicative abilities matter

Julian grew up in a family that he portrays as common for his generation. His mother was a housewife and his father 'worked and travelled a lot, and when he came home there were many things that needed to be repaired'. Julian emphasises that 'childhood was good', yet neither of his parents were easy to talk to, at least not from the children's point of view. He elaborates on the subject and says 'you couldn't just talk to them

about things that were on your mind, you were not expected to talk about such things'. Julian is keenly aware of this background and emphasises that he systematically strives for the opposite, 'I have really worked on that'. The stance taken is the opposite of what he calls 'the Homer Simpson method', the well-known cartoon character who, according to Julian, tells his daughter Lisa that to deal with problems and feelings she should 'just push them down your throat into your stomach, you'll always find some more space'.

Hence, Julian needs to pay attention to his own behaviour 'if they [the children] ask me if I'm okay and I'm not, it's better to say "no" and be honest', or perhaps explain to them that 'well something at work is bothering me, but I'm okay'. Acting like a role model in front of the children by practising communicative skills is important, but not enough. Julian rather transforms this into an explicit ideal where no one seems left behind, as he puts it, 'I want to teach my kids to do that'. Continuing to work on himself and, in addition, positioning himself as knowledgeable and able to ensure that the children avoid such a non-preferred position seem to be main concerns in his parenting practices.

Governing the adult in and through parenting

The portraits of parenting reveal a particular pattern that signifies what is determined to be an adequate self, and, accordingly, what is supposed to be learnt when becoming and being a parent. The positions where one is responsible, involved and attentive reoccur, and are thus created and maintained across practices. A similar ideal is fabricated and re-fabricated, cultivating a standard, seemingly taken for granted, that easily marginalises other kinds of selves. Although tensions do appear, they do not really destabilise what holds for being the preferred subjectivity, a fact that legitimises how to accomplish a socially acceptable position while being exposed to everyone and no one (Foucault, 1997b, 1997c). The parental subjectivity and self-work displayed, then, may be depicted as a regime of knowledge and truth where a uniform, hegemonic ideal is being produced and reproduced over and over again.

However, a closer look at the portraits illustrates some notable nuances. First, the claim of being *responsible* is a key issue that emerges in multiple practices and activities. It is made relevant in reference to the main parental position where displaying oneself as in charge of almost any activity where the child is involved is significant. Being able to perform as the main responsible parent requires an available representation of a less responsible position. Thus, to fashion oneself as responsible is also prevalent in the shared parental position. If the former positioning highlights some quantitative differences, the latter one rather attends to qualitative differences of engaging oneself in varied activities and practices, yet, to the same extent. As such, it could be argued that the main and shared parenting in fact reveal the similar responsible self, a positioning that rather starts to make sense if contrasted to the opposite – the irresponsible parent. By presenting oneself as taking a major part in the family's everyday life there is a connection to dominant discourses, for instance on gender equality (e.g. Bergnéhr, 2008). Both private and public spaces are made relevant when positioning oneself as responsible, involved and attentive in and through household work, child rearing, school and leisure time. It could then be argued that parenting is undergoing changes (e.g. Klinth & Johansson, 2010), where the dominant ideal of what is considered good for the child, but also the parent and society, remains unquestioned (Foucault, 1991, 1993, 1997a).

Second, the requirements for *involvement* operate throughout distinct activities and practices where, in particular, education and organised leisure time appear to be important. There is no doubt that the norms for being involved are identified and legitimised, which is evidenced by ambitions to adjust to what holds for being adequate (Foucault, 1993). In spite of compulsory or optional participation, it could be noted how displays of the present sometimes even indispensable self are made relevant, which in some arenas may be seen as gendered patterns of being playful and sporty (e.g. Gottzén, 2012). Moreover, organising one's own working life in a way that enables extensive involvement accentuates the parent as a professional subjectivity, which probably also explains the constant struggle to get everyday life to work. Even though one apparently does not always succeed, the ideal to strive for still seems self-evident. Apparently, the public arenas where children participate do not only shape and foster them in particular ways, but also their parents.

Third, the claim of being *attentive*, by making empathy and communicative abilities matter, is displayed somewhat differently. It rather manifests itself as a conscious, deliberate commitment to improve oneself and systematically work on becoming more skilful. It could thus be noted how such self-work is accomplished in various ways; one may use role models to achieve particular performances or, on the contrary, one may identify counter positions to avoid. This strategy notwithstanding, the knowledgeable and capable subject is accentuated, excluding itself from public sites of intervention by demonstrating that what holds for being adequate parenting is already recognised in the private sphere (Gillies, 2008; Edwards & Gillies, 2012).

The present study illustrates how multiple spaces are defined as parenting practices, even though this may not be self-evident (Doucet, 2009). Available in social contexts, the adults equip themselves to engage in parental self-work and to display acceptable performances, even to improve the same. Bearing this in mind, it could be argued that *activation* emerges as a technique of the self (Foucault, 1991, 1993; Fejes & Nicoll, 2011). By inviting oneself and making oneself responsible, in manifold practices and at all times, governing enactments of shaping and fostering are continuously at work. In fact, the blurred scenario of activities and practices referred to as parenting is useful since the activation in itself is the most interesting point. Almost any aspect of what is considered to be the opposite of responsible, involved and attentive is denoted as improper and deviant. What really matters, then, is to engage in parenting, which also works as an important identity marker.

Furthermore, *comparing* oneself, thereby making visible and evaluating parenting practices, for instance with respect to spouses, own parents or any identified role model also appears as a key technique in self-work (Foucault, 1991, 1993). Such acts highlight sameness and difference to others in the similar subject position, and are prominent in considering oneself as capable of modifying and improving. In fact, the comparative activity makes it possible to position oneself as skilful and competent, for instance, by displaying oneself as similar or even superior to others with regard to the taken-for-granted standard. Particular fabrications and re-fabrications of parenting are conditioned and enabled, by themselves and others, according to what appears to be adequate and normal (Foucault, 1991, 1997a). Within that realm, the identified techniques work as valuable resources for how to sculpt and regulate desirable selves. Taken together, by embracing the idea of parental learning as governing enactments in and through family life, diverse interest in and discursive resources for cultivating responsible, involved and attentive selves seem to interconnect, which dissolves a clear-cut distribution of private versus public, coercion versus choice and change versus stabilisation.

Finally, moving beyond the case of parenting, how to shape and maintain particular contemporary selves may be connected to wider discourses, which reveal certain relations, nodes and networks of power (Foucault, 1991). The workings of power condition and enable what are found to be adequate ways to perform, and accentuate the present regimes of knowledge and truth. Bearing this in mind, there is reason to once again point out that tactics and techniques for activating subjects to be capable of taking responsibility, making choices and improving also exist elsewhere, in a range of other practices. We appear to be witness to dynamic power relations through which by consolidating particular domains adults are governed to attain what is held to be preferred ways of living (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b). Distributed and mobilised through several channels, they all announce that there is always some aspect of ourselves that probably needs to be improved, preferably by learning, at least if we are to achieve an even better and more well-functioning life. Indeed, when different spheres and interests intersect, turning preferences into truths, the techniques and power relations that operate need to be exposed. Such critical approaches may also interrupt the dominating discourses of the present time, which hopefully opens for a wider diversity in how to cultivate meaningful ways of life.

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