Men at Home: The Work of Fathers in the House and the Nursery

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Like other couples eager to make their new house a home, Audra and George chose paint colors, arranged their furniture, and displayed pictures from their wedding on shelves.[1] Audra moved her desk and computer into the extra bedroom, to use as her home office, but otherwise left it unchanged. A crayon-shaped light fixture brightened the room, which had belonged to a child. Audra told me she had kept it with the hope of having a child herself. Now, with her due date weeks away, she showed me the room with a shine in her eye. There were boxes of files still to be stored elsewhere, but already, this was the baby's room, with a crib to be assembled, and bags of baby clothes to be laundered and folded.

In the United States today, pregnancy represents a period of anticipation of, and preparation for, the arrival of a child. A significant focus of preparation has been on the house and in particular, the nursery. Historically, both house and nursery have been treated and regarded as "female" space, in part because women have been expected to create and maintain them. In addition, women also engage in work considered special to the space of house and nursery – that is, the care of families and the rearing of children. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard likened the house itself to cradle, womb, and the bosom or breast. Describing the house as "the human being's first world," he wrote: "It is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits" (Bachelard 1994[1964]:7).

The experiences that American middle-class women and men describe, however, suggest the important and meaningful involvements of men today in house and nursery. As a cultural anthropologist engaged in taking seriously what people do, say, and think in their everyday lives, what I saw and heard during 15 months of ethnographic research with pregnant women and their partners led me to reconsider the roles and responsibilities of men in reproduction. In my study, American middle-class women, and men themselves, described the engagement of men in house and nursery "projects" during pregnancy. Their participation in such projects can be understood as men enacting what Americans today regard as "traditional" notions of men as breadwinners and fathers as providers. I suggest here, however, that this perspective blinds us to shifts in ideas and practices concerning the roles and responsibilities of men in the house and the nursery – and by extension, fatherhood and fathering.

This paper draws from an anthropological study of pregnancy as a cultural and social experience in the United States and in particular of the practices of everyday life that contribute to the making of babies, mothers, families and kinship.[2] It is based on ethnographic research that I conducted with pregnant women and their male partners in and around Ann Arbor, Michigan, between October 2002 and January 2004. Working primarily with a core group

of sixteen women who were expecting a first child, I recorded more than eighty hours of repeated, in-depth interviews. The women with whom I recorded interviews represented both commonalities as educated, professional American middle-class women, and differences as individuals. Except for one woman, Audra, who identified herself as African-American or black, the interviewees were white women, and most were married to men. I interviewed eleven expectant fathers together with their pregnant spouses at least once; two of these men were interviewed regularly with their spouses.[3] To complement the interviews, I accompanied pregnant women and their partners on prenatal care visits and shopping trips, attended baby showers, and spent time with them in their workplaces and in their homes. Although not "representative" of *all* American middle-class experience, the women and men in my study represent *an* American middle-class experience that as an anthropologist, I consider significant in understanding reproduction in the United States today.

House as nest and nest egg

In cultural anthropology, the house has been both a site and a subject of study. "The house," archaeologist Rosemary Joyce notes, "offers a useful alternative to other ways of talking about the social relations usually subsumed under the term kinship". It has been recognized both as a symbol of kinship and as "the material grounding for relationship" (Joyce 2000:190). From the perspective of cultural anthropology, kinship and family depend upon not blood and genetics, but upon social processes, such as the giving of care, which can be expressed materially in cultural practices like the sharing of food (Weismantel 1995, Carsten 1997). Kinship also is made from the activities and artifacts of house and home. "The birth of a baby most often signals a change in the makeup of the home in terms of its social relations and physicality," social anthropologist Alison Clarke observes in her study of women's provisioning for infants and children in North London. "This most frequently manifests itself in the rearrangement or redecoration of the home as an explicit expression of a pending shift in the composition of the household" (2004:56). For the American middle-class women and men in my study, house and home and the things contained in them are not only symbols of kinship, but contribute materially to the making of a baby, the remaking of women and men as mothers and fathers, and their embodiment as a family.

While observing prenatal consultations with Faith and Radha, local midwives who attended births at home, I noted that almost every client was either hunting for a new house, remodeling the home where they lived already, or at least rearranging their rooms. As women (and men) committed to home births, they seemed especially articulate on the symbolic importance and meaning of the house as "shelter," "refuge," "environment," and "womb," but other expectant parents, preparing for birth in a hospital, described similar ideas and practices. "Babies bring houses," Radha declared.

When I met Brett, she and her husband, Michael, were starting preparations to sell their small, city townhouse and move "out to the country" where they could afford a bigger house with room for their family to grow. Like other women and men whom I met in my fieldwork, they explained the "need" for a new house in terms of the closeness of quarters, number of rooms, and lack of outdoor area for play – all of which they found inadequate or inconvenient for raising the child that they were expecting and the family (including other children in the future) that they were imagining.

Most women with whom I spoke described their decisions to move house or improve the home as made jointly with their spouses or partners. Sharon and her husband, Pete, spent their weekends house-hunting. Pete had particular ideas about the kind of home he wanted – at least three bedrooms and a fenced-in yard where he imagined playing catch. They were living in a two-bedroom condominium with a deck, well suited for a couple that liked to entertain friends, but not what they considered appropriate for a family. Both Sharon and Brett lived in condominium developments that they – particularly their husbands – considered not especially "child friendly" or "family friendly." They hoped to find homes in a "community" or "neighborhood" that was.

The concern with having, and in fact buying, a house and home that Pete and Michael share with other American middle-class men reflects expectations surrounding men as breadwinners and fathers as providers for the family. Of the 16 women with whom I regularly recorded interviews, 12 owned their homes, which they associated with success, but more importantly, with security, especially in times that they regarded as politically, economically, and socially uncertain. A house represented not only "nest," but also "nest egg." Not only do Americans today spend billions on building, remodeling, furnishing, and decorating their houses, which they have regarded as financial investment in their homes, but in fact, economic policy in the United States long has been directed toward home ownership. The global financial crisis of 2008 revealed the deep faith maintained in the house and home. Even when backed by what bankers themselves called subprime mortgages, investments and investment "houses" themselves (like Lehman Brothers) were considered safe and sound because of their association with the home.

In the United States, a house of one's own defines membership in the middle class. Anthropologists James Carrier and Josiah Heymann emphasized that "housing is much more expensive and consequential than almost anything else that American households consume" (1997:12). Houses signify more than status and identity. Whether or not an individual owns his or her home, where he or she lives, what kind of schooling and other education and economic opportunities are available to his or her children – these can be traced significantly to the continuing segregation by race of housing in the United States. When men like Pete and Michael express concerns about "neighborhood"

and lifestyle, they tacitly refer to houses as "goods that have reproductive consequences" (Carrier and Heymann 1997:9). As the banking crisis of 2008 has led to the shuttering of businesses and the laying off of workers, the number of mortgage defaults and foreclosures on homes has risen to record numbers (Merle 2009). The cultural and social (as well as economic and political) impacts of these losses are likely to be felt in the coming decades.

As a good with reproductive consequences, home ownership fits into "traditional" notions of men as breadwinners and fathers as providers and protectors. Along with work, marriage, and children, the home has become part of the "package deal" that defines manhood in the United States, as anthropologist Nicholas Townsend (2002) observes. House and home represent men's ability to provide materially for wife and children, protect them, endow them with social value, and instill in them emotional closeness. At the same time that home ownership has come to define manhood, however, American men's earnings alone cannot enable or ensure it today. Studies of deindustrialization and downsizing remind us that American men's real earnings have stagnated since the 1970's, and that American women's incomes have softened the blow to households (Coontz 1992, Ehrenreich 1989, Sennett 1998, Newman 1999). Not only do women today comprise more than half of the paid workforce, but 4 in 10 mothers are the primary breadwinners for their families (Pollitt 2009). "Increasingly expensive and culturally valued home ownership puts great and increasing pressure on men's earnings," Towsend suggests. "Men deal with this increased tension with four strategies: turning to kin, increasing their hours of employment, commuting fathers, and relying on their wives' incomes" (2002:139). Women and men in my study employed these strategies. Elizabeth and Ethan bought their house with the assistance of Ethan's mother, who moved in with them. Audra's husband, George, took a second (part-time) job. Sharon and Pete as well as Brett and Michael hunted for houses in areas more distant from work, but also more affordable. Greta and Adam discussed whether or not they could afford for her to take a temporary leave from her job as a special education teacher because they relied primarily on her income. Adam, skilled in building, began to work on their house, removing carpet and refinishing floors.

This last, I suggest, has become a significant fifth "strategy," which involves shifts in ideas and practices concerning the roles and responsibilities of men in the house and the nursery. As men no longer can regard themselves solely as providing for their households through their earnings, the house itself becomes an important and meaningful space where masculinity becomes reconstructed from a "traditional" gendered division of labor: Women choose paint colors and compare fabric swatches for curtains and bedding, and men sand windowsills, refurbish cabinets, and undertake a range of "projects" within the house and home.

"Homes are worked for and worked on – they are both valuable and valued," Townsend writes, "but home ownership also ties people into a system of

employment and consumption that has profound contradictions" (Townsend 2002:138). House and home represent both money and love, nuclear and extended family, and "traditional" and renegotiated roles and responsibilities for women and men.

House projects

Faith and Radha, the home birth midwives, laughed knowingly when pregnant women, typically around their third trimester, described the bustle of activity around and about their houses commonly called "nesting." Women who admitted that they had never washed their windows now found themselves vacuuming corners that they previously avoided, washing and ironing curtains, organizing closets and garages, scouring sinks, and even re-grouting bathtubs. In the weeks before her estimated due date, Betsy, who was planning a home birth with Faith and Radha, told me that she had been "obsessively" cleaning her apartment in addition to rearranging furniture and laundering baby clothes. Nicole, who was planning a birth at home with other midwives, had begun stocking supplies such as gauzes and pads for the birth, receiving blankets and diapers for the baby, and a plastic basin for the placenta. These she neatly arranged on plastic shelves that she had assembled in the small bedroom that had been designated as the baby's room. She also told me that she had embarked on a cooking "spree," stocking her freezer with lasagna and other meals that required only reheating. Faith and Radha saw nesting as a kind of "instinct" and a sign of a pregnant woman's physical, spiritual, and social readiness for childbirth.

Men in my study did not "nest", but in the months and weeks leading to the due date, they undertook a range of "projects" within the house and home. Each time I visited Greta at her house, I noticed that walls had been repainted, floors refinished, and furniture re-arranged – all the work of her husband, Adam. Every time I visited Elizabeth and Ethan at their home, they showed me the progress that Ethan had made on constructing an art studio for Elizabeth, planting an organic vegetable garden, or building a front porch. At first, the couple had directed their energies toward house projects not related directly to the baby in part due to Jewish tradition. Although Elizabeth and Ethan described themselves as "only cultural Jews" who did not practice Judaism, they found meaningful the custom of awaiting the birth before preparing a nursery or provisioning for the child. Around the house, however, the couple had begun to take note of electric outlets that required safety covers, bookcases that should be anchored into the walls, and tables with sharp corners that could be sanded. "Suddenly, I see too many sharp corners," Ethan told me. Although "baby-proofing" the house would not become necessary for many months, when the child started to crawl and walk, Ethan joked that he and Elizabeth already were developing a "baby's eye view" of their house.

House projects represented the transformation of the lives that women and men in my study imagined for themselves. For Rebecca and Tim, installing new doors, painting the kitchen, and replacing the cabinets also represented a kind of closure. These were projects that the couple had been planning when they were married. If they were unable to do them now, Rebecca reasoned, then the opportunity might pass. They anticipated different priorities after the birth of their child. They also worried about exposing a new baby to solvents and other chemicals used to paint rooms and refinish furniture. In fact, avoiding risk to the pregnant woman and to the child was one reason why Tim, like other men in my study, undertook house projects as his particular responsibility during pregnancy. While another couple, Bridget and her husband, could have made do with their house as it was, they expected that any house project would become only more difficult to undertake with the presence of a child. For this reason, they expected to spend their first days with their new baby "camping out" in Bridget's brother-in-law's house, next door, while an addition was built onto their own home. It would be worth the inconvenience, Bridget told me, for the baby to have her own room.

The nursery

Of all the house projects that women and men in my study undertook – whether they hunted for a new house, rearranged rooms in the home where they lived already, or added new space – none seemed more important and meaningful for them than the creation of a baby's room or nursery. "Popular childcare consumer magazines, recommending nursery styles ranging from the Scandinavian 'natural look' to the cheery primary-colored 'modern look,'" Clarke notes, "promote the idea that a major project of pregnancy is the construction of this child-centered space" (2004:61). All of the expectant parents in my study prepared a place for the baby, even if they anticipated not using it immediately. (They planned for the newborn infants to sleep either in bassinets adjacent to their own beds or to co-sleep or share beds.) Typically, a second (or third) bedroom that had been used as a home office and/or guest room became "converted" into the baby's room or nursery. Even women like Betsy and Martina who lived in small rental apartments cleared and decorated a special space for a crib and changing table or dresser.

From the perspective of anthropology, the baby's room is a material expression of parental expectation and imagination. It reflects the perceived needs and wants of the child, and the aspirations and hopes of mothers and fathers, all inextricably bound together. Creating a baby's room or nursery involved decorating the space, furnishing it, and arranging the things in it, like clothing, books, and toys. It involved choices and decisions about the color or "theme" for the décor and the items to be purchased. Expectant parents, however, regarded their task as not merely decorating a room, but also constructing an environment for the development and growth of their child. Although nobody referred to the room as a greenhouse or hothouse, I noted that

both women and men in my study frequently remarked upon the number or placement of windows and the exposure of the room. "Sunny" or "light" and "cozy" or "warm" were terms that they used to describe the nurseries they were preparing.

Other metaphors of nature were used to describe the baby's room or nursery, which some women and men likened to a "nest." Heather described her nursery as a kind of "cocoon." Interestingly, she had decorated a ceiling fan in it with colorful fabric butterflies that she had bought at a dollar store. Elizabeth emphasized the "womb" like qualities of the baby's room that she and Ethan eventually decided to prepare (although they initially had planned not to decorate the nursery until after the birth, following Jewish custom.) A gauzy, rainbow-dyed square of silk was draped over the baby's bassinet to simulate the dim, rose-hued light that Elizabeth imagined her child might have "seen" or experienced in utero. Other women and men in my study also attended to the nuances of color in creating the environment in the baby's room. Some selected pastel pinks, blues, greens, or yellows that they considered soft and soothing. Others opted for primary colors for their boldness and brightness. Sometimes, I heard discussion of the merits of blue or green, which are the colors of the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, reflecting their own allegiances or aspirations for their children.

It is true that the women in my study seemed to have the most to do – and the most say – concerning the preparation of the nursery. For couples in my study, however, the rule rather than the exception appeared to be making decisions *together* in planning the nursery or baby room, such as choosing a color or theme for the decor. Expectant parents chose their themes with care, considering their meanings. Stars evoked night, quiet, peace, and slumber; it also represented an interest in science for one couple I met, themselves not scientists, but intent on cultivating broad interests in their child. Animals were particularly popular. Teddy bears and rubber ducks stood for children themselves. Farm and zoo animals, like human infants, represent nature that can be domesticated or needs protection. The names of farm and zoo animals (and the sounds they make) also are among the first lessons that parents themselves teach children, along with colors, shapes, letters, and numbers.

Jamie and Martin, whom I met at a childbirth education class, explained that they chose Noah's Ark as the theme for their baby's room because it connected both to nature and to the Bible. They hoped that incorporating animals as a motif in their décor might encourage their daughter's interest in nature, especially an understanding that she herself is a "part of life." Jamie and Martin told me also that as believers in, and practitioners of, Christianity, they had considered what themes drawn from the Bible might be appropriate for decorating the nursery. They wished for their daughter to be "surrounded" literally with Christian ideas and practices. There was a children's Bible on a shelf. In a

corner of the baby's room, Jamie had hung a small plaque that had been mounted in her own childhood room. It featured a poem called "Children Learn What They Live," which ended with the lines: "If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them. If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live." The care with which Jamie and Martin prepared their nursery demonstrates this sentiment, which other women and men in my study shared.

Often, women and men also undertook practical tasks together, like painting or papering the walls, but some men took charge of house and home projects as their spouses coped with the bodily challenges of pregnancy or in some cases worked longer hours to meet deadlines ahead of their maternity leaves. Men typically took charge of assembling cribs and even crafting new furniture. Nicole's husband, Joshua, taught himself woodworking from books that he borrowed from the library, and built a hardwood dresser for the child.

Preparing the nursery and provisioning for the child are important commercial activities. To furnish their nurseries with cribs and changing tables, and to provision their children with other material accommodations, like car seats and strollers, the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association estimates that Americans in 2004 spent more than $7 billion. Preparing and provisioning the baby's room, constructed as activities of consumption, have been assumed primarily to be the work of women, who long have been regarded as the shoppers of the family. Shopping itself has come to be regarded a form of mothering (Cook 1995, Miller 1998, Taylor 2004). "The nursery, a room given over to the nurturing of infants and the housing of their related material culture," Clarke notes, "has evolved as a key site of desire and fantasy in the context of mothering in contemporary consumer culture" (Clarke 2004:60).

In my study, however, I learned that both women and men spent considerable time shopping, reading reviews in magazines and online, and soliciting advice from friends and occasionally strangers whose baby carriers they admired at the mall. Like the creation and maintenance of the house and the nursery, shopping involved a gendered division of labor. Women shopped for baby "stuff" like clothing and accessories (especially made from cloth) for the baby and the baby's room. Men shopped for "gear" – that is, the more expensive, more durable, and more technological items, like car seats, cribs, and especially strollers. These seemed branded and advertised to appeal to fathers as male consumers – for example, the automobile maker Jeep licensed its name to a line of strollers, and other manufacturers of strollers urge parents to take their products for a test drive.

Historian Gary Cross suggests that consumption has become a significant practice of American middle-class parenting today. "Earlier beliefs in the child's capacity for seeing the delights of nature took on new meanings when those delights became the pleasures of encountering a fantastic world of new goods and entertainments," he writes. "Inevitably, childhood wonder and

spending on kids became the same thing". In addition, Cross claims that American middle-class parents today have become interested in participating, themselves, in their children's wonder and play. "Many adults admire the freedom of youth," he writes, "and turn it into a lifestyle rather than a life stage" (Cross 2004:15). Interestingly, recapturing the freedom of youth through consumption has become an appeal made to *men*. A recent television commercial for Disney World, for example, portrayed the transformation of a middle-aged businessman, neglectful of wife and children, into an overgrown boy romping and splashing with his family in the Magic Kingdom. A shift seems to be underway to redefine consumption on behalf of children as a form of fathering.

It ought to be remembered that the emphasis on consumption is in part a response to the fact that the work of providing (or production) no longer can be seen as determining men's roles and responsibilities. Paradoxically, father-consumers also must be father-producers, or at least be able and willing to depend upon mother-providers. In a study of men laid off from work at a Maytag refrigerator factory, anthropologists Chad Broughton and Tom Walton note: "Maytag fathers conveyed an understanding of paternal duty as being partially comprised of providing material goods for the family, whether they are necessities or 'extras.' Informants spoke fondly of the sorts of things their wages enabled them to provide and do for their families" (2006:4). The closing of the factory and the loss of their jobs significantly represented cutting back on extras like special vacations and necessities like children's clothing for school. The new father-consumer seems to be part of the same new package deal of post-industrial America, in which Broughton and Walton include individual orientation, free markets, and retraining (versus community, union, and experience). "As deindustrialization hits home, a chapter closes on the forms of masculine identity that carefully intertwined work and fatherhood," Broughton and Walton suggest, "but new strategies and adaptations point to the historical fluidity of what constitutes a gendered identity" (2006:10).

Examining the engagement of men in a range of projects to prepare and provision the home and the nursery suggests fresh directions for the study of fatherhood and fathering in addition to motherhood and mothering. To date, kin work – a term that feminist anthropologist Micaela Di Leonardo (1987) introduced has been used primarily to describe the unacknowledged and unrecognized work that women perform to create and maintain ties of kinship and family, like the writing of Christmas cards and the celebration of family occasions. It seems worth asking what kinds of kin work might men, too, perform.

End Notes

1. In order to protect their identities and respect their privacy, I have changed the names of all of the women and men in my study.
2. A version of this material appears in a book manuscript, *Making Babies in America: An Ethnography of Pregnancy Practice*, which is under review currently.

3. The remaining five women were not interviewed with partners for various reasons. There were difficulties with scheduling interviews with the spouses of three of the women because of their job situations – for example, one man had been working in Iraq as a civilian contractor, returning not even two weeks before the baby arrived. The other two women were single mothers—one was no longer involved with her child's father, and the other had conceived her child using donor insemination.

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