GROWING INTO CARING FATHERHOOD AND OUT OF CARE-FREE IMMATURITY - A SALUTOGENIC APPROACH ON MATURITY, HEALTH AND FATHERHOOD IN IRELAND

BY FELICIA GARCIA

Abstract: This article explores the positive health effects among Irish fathers who take an active part in taking care of their children by exploring the links between health, ill-health and maturity, immaturity. Findings from various disciplines are discussed including the author's previous ethnographic research to demonstrate that a salutogenic perspective on men's health, looking at the origins of health rather than ill-health, is an important complement to the now dominant pathological focus on men's ill-health. The article concludes that involved fathering and caring masculinity are important keys to the links between salutogenesis, men's psychosocial maturity and wellbeing.

Correspondence: *felicia.garcia@oru.se*

Introduction: Suicide and Immaturity amongst 'the Lads'

The initial arguments are based on the findings presented in the recent publication "Coping and Suicide Amongst 'the Lads' –Expectations of Masculinity in Post-traditional Ireland" (Garcia 2016), a four-year field study that explained the underlying causes behind the overrepresentation of suicide among Ireland's young male working class population. This initial segment provides a summary of the findings and key concepts in the book. This is followed by a presentation of six dimensions that frame the psychological mechanisms of psychological positive functioning, and, an outline of two additional concepts; salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence (SOC). Salutogenesis looks at the origins of health rather than ill-health. SOC is the determining component of salutogenesis and consists of three dimensions that deter stimuli from becoming stressors; comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. The article concludes with an update on 'the lads': the informants from the fieldwork on which the book was based, six years after its completion, and suggests that inclusive fathering is an important key to the links between SOC, maturity and wellbeing.

Between 2008 and 2012 a field study was conducted to explore the over-representation of male suicide in Ireland (Garcia 2016). The

research was initiated just before the global recession punctured the Irish economy, deflated the over-expanded housing market that had been the catalyst of the so called Celtic Tiger, and just as the manufacturing and construction sectors collapsed and drastically decreased the availability of work for a generation of Irish young men. During this time male suicide in Ireland was considered 'a national crisis'. The gender gap in suicide in Ireland stood at 5:1 (meaning five male suicides per every female suicide). In the age bracket 20-24 the suicide gender gap was 7:1. Informants consisted of a network of forty young men adhering to a strict heterosexual norm and working class ethos who lived in and around Cork, Ireland's second largest city. The pseudonyms 'one of the lads' or 'one of the girls' were used to assure anonymity. I spent two out of four years cohabiting with some of the lads to observe and participate in the daily workings of Irish lad culture and the painful reality made up by the frequent anecdotes of local suicides: all of them young men. Whereas the girls were more than willing to discuss about male suicides openly and in groups all the young men insisted that they be interviewed individually and anonymously because of their own admitted concerns about being exposed, mainly to each other. This was the logical outcome of the inherent characteristics of Irish lad culture based on social surveillance, mockery, homophobic bullying and a fear to reveal anything deemed 'effeminate' or weak.

In the book, 'ladhood' is defined as a liminal phase and distinct social status. It is a status that by traditional standards ended after adolescence, when boys became men. However, "as adolescence extends into adulthood, the status of ladhood becomes a more permanent position" (Garcia 2016:10). The study addressed public concern in Ireland and internationally, of problematic, anti-social, white, working class, heterosexual males

continuously depicted as "backward," homophobic, sexist, racist, inherently *immature* and too *mentally frail* to mind others, themselves, or their general wellbeing. The book argued against the misleading misuse of Émile Durkheim's anomie theory and the unfortunate translation 'normlessness' used among Irish suicide prevention services that was continuously applied to a logic that seemed to indicate the opposite to 'loosened norms': namely, a normative violence among Irish young lads that the informants, male and female, recognised to have adverse effects on mental health and to contribute to young men's vulnerability to suicide.

In their 1985 publication, Meštrovic and Brown argued that the unfortunate translation from the Greek term *a-nomos* to 'without laws' fails to consider the link made in Ancient Greece between law and distribution (Meštrovic and Brown 1985). As the authors argued: "the dispensation of land, law, and reason are all conceived as sacred tasks; thus, the 'mismanagement' of any of these is understood as a form of sacrilege" (1985:83). *Dérèglement*, the only synonym used in French by Durkheim would have better reflected the mismanagement of state finances in Ireland followed by massive job losses, homelessness, suicide, and the absolute collapse in public morale. The failure to recognise the needs of Ireland's younger demographic on lower incomes is part of the same anomic trend in social planning which hampered the possibility to acquire mundane but important life skills and for growing out of immaturity.

Because the over-expanded housing market during the so-called 'boom years' had catered almost exclusively for middle-aged, high-earning couples with enough capital at the height of the property bubble, it was extremely difficult for young people on lower incomes to set up independent living

arrangements outside the family home. An affordable alternative for many young men was to set up home with their peers in the over-supplied, semi-detached four-to-five bedroom houses in the suburbs. This setting became the basis for various theories on the social functions of 'the drink' and of alcohol as both a means for coping and a gateway to suicide (alcohol is implicated in half of all Irish suicides). Furthermore, the notion that 'modern drinking' is an anti-social and anomic act which is many times assumed (O'Brien 2009) opened up for scrutiny for which I argued: "The lads do not binge because social norms have become impaired. To the contrary, binge is socially dictated. Adhering to the strict norms within marginalized group constellations, the lads drink more, not less." (Garcia 2016:202-3)

The weekend drinking sessions in the lads' house were a much anticipated activity. Come Friday, the coming together to start the weekend 'session', and with no commitments or responsibilities other than the occasional local soccer matches, drinking becomes almost a euphoric state for those involved. Addressing the warm bonding features of 'laddishness' became an important complement to the otherwise dominant discourse that focus exclusively on young men's anti-social behaviours. However, it also became clear that when this liminal passage of ceremonial drinking (which often included drugs) extends into adulthood and far beyond what the mind and body could endure, the experience becomes perilous and draining. One of the lads concluded:

> *X: It is a nice way to live for a year or two but for many years . . . It's a terrible way to live. You have no control over your nights, see if I knew (one of the lads) was going out on a Saturday and I would have a match the next day, I know he would be coming back with all the lads and just party away and you can't even tell them not to.*
> *F: How many years did you live like that?*

> *X: . . . Seven . . . seven or eight . . . There lies my twenties . . . that I can't remember (laughs) (Garcia 2016:195)*

The lads walked a fine line between extreme norm regulation and escapism making the best and worst out of available coping mechanisms. The above quote reflects one of many occasions when binge and bravado becomes self-defeating rather than self-expanding. Although this living arrangement many times serves as comfort zone among peers and a buffer against suicide, it also cements a state of immaturity; a lack in personal growth, a sense of control, responsibility and an autonomous self. The book thus concludes that Irish lad culture, along with specific structural and cultural conditions, produces masculine identities characterized by *recklessness, learned helplessness, immaturity and poor mental health.* The lads' strict normative regulation was enforced through social surveillance, humour, mocking, and homophobic bullying. This way, a long list of life skills and coping mechanisms –sources for maturity- that were available to 'the girls', became inaccessible to 'the lads'. Clearly, the work was framed by a distinctly pathological focus. To complement this pathological perspective it is useful to look at masculinities and men's health from a salutogenic perspective. First, the links between maturity/immaturity and health/ill-health will be addressed.

Maturity and psychological positive functioning

There appears to be some significant links between socio-psychological maturity, health and wellbeing. Psychologist Carol Ryff argues: "The definition of maturity ... emphasizes a clear comprehension of life's purpose, a sense of directedness, and intentionality. The lifespan developmental theories refer to a variety of changing purposes or goals in life ... --- all of which contribute to the feeling that life

is meaningful" (Ryff 1989:1071). Although the signifying contents depend on context, immaturity is a phase dedicated to extensive exploration of the limits on one's ability. In contrast, maturity is defined by the achieved ability to respond to the environment in a contextually adequate manner. To be sure, this entails *living up* to the expectations in any given context and not *down* to the expectations of the environment which is often the case when discussing young, particularly working-class men who are many times expected to be poor economic and social contributors. A state of maturity is also the ability to cater to the adult individual's self-maintenance, personal growth and relative independence (quite the opposite to the learned helplessness addressed above).

As in the ethnographic case study presented here, the field of Psychology tends to pay much more attention "to human unhappiness and suffering than to the causes and consequences of positive functioning" (Ryff 1989:1069). In Ryff's article she attempts to operationalize theory-based, positive functioning dimensions in order to make sense of the mechanisms of psychological wellbeing. Ryff points out yet another regrettable mistranslation from Ancient Greece that have has had unfortunate consequences for the understanding of wellbeing and hence, the measurements of the same. Aristotle's *Eudaimonia,* its proximity to hedonism and short-term happiness translated as 'happiness' is according to Ryff:

contrary to the important distinction made by the Greeks between the gratification of right desires and wrong desires. From this alternative perspective, eudaimonia is more precisely defined as "the feelings accompanying behaviour in the direction of, and consistent with, one's true potential" --- Had Aristotle's view of Eudaimonia as the highest of all good been translated as realization of one's true potential rather than

as happiness, the past 20 years of research on psychological well-being might well have taken different directions. (Ryff 1989:1070)

Ryff examines six dimensions, all closely linked to a state of maturity that she argues, come closest to Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*. The six dimensions are: self-acceptance, positive relations to others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Here, the six dimensions are applied to the findings presented in the fieldwork summarised above.

Self-acceptance is "defined as a central feature of mental health as well as a characteristic of self-actualization, optimal functioning, and maturity" (Ryff 1989:1071). A low scorer on self-acceptance feels critical towards certain personal qualities and wishes they were different, a self-evaluation most noticeable when 'the lads' expressed thoughts of young men's 'weak' psychological 'nature' compared to the levels of emotional strength enjoyed by girls.

Positive relations to others is defined as "warm, trusting interpersonal relations", "posed as a criterion of maturity". (ibid) A low scorer has few close, trusting relationships with others and finds it difficult to be warm and open within those relationships resulting in a sense of isolation and frustration. Although Irish lad culture has many warm bonding aspects, the mocking and regulatory jargon that underpins these social networks fail to provide the kind of close, warm and open relationships described here. Instead, drink, oblivion, avoidance and escapism are the means by which the lads offer friendly support as they try to 'ignore away' problems or distract a friend in distress rather than to address and enquire into personal difficulties when they do appear before them.

Autonomy is defined by high levels of self-determination, independence, and the ability to regulate behaviour from within rather than

to look to others for approval. A high level of autonomy is the ability and confidence to evaluate oneself by one's own standards, a sense of individuation "in which the person no longer clings to the collective fears, beliefs, and laws of the masses" –"a sense of freedom from the norms governing everyday life" (Ryff 1989:1071) The normative violence performed repeatedly amongst the lads increases the need to look for approval by peers making it imperative that they conform to these repeated scripts and codes for appropriate male behaviour which only cements and prolongs a state of immaturity.

Environmental mastery: A high scorer of environmental mastery is defined as having a "sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values" (Ryff 1989:1072). In contrast, a low scorer: "Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; lacks sense of control of the external world" (ibid). In addition to the lack of everyday control reflected in the above quote from 'one of the lads' as he tries to remember and summarize his twenties in 'the lads' house', the lads also displayed a lack of mundane life skills that made it difficult to navigate amongst the demands of adult life. Two of 'the girls' explain how seemingly mundane 'effeminate' tasks in reality extends into other dimensions in public life:

> *Y: For some reason, they [mothers] are tougher on the girls than they are on the boys! My mam will fucking lift me and tell me what is what but when it comes to the boys she is so sensitive to their feelings cos she doesn't wanna hurt them. And when it comes to cleaning the house or picking up after themselves or washing their own bed clothes and washing their own clothes, she does that for them because she doesn't like to see them stressed out because, when they*

> *get stressed out they go way worse than we do, for some reason. Girls are able to handle it! Fellas are not. And now I know it shouldn't come down to washing your own bed clothes and stuff like that and that but in some cases it does.*
> *X: Well that's where it starts 'cos you know, if they can't wash their own bed clothes then how the hell can they go and sign on the dole [apply for social welfare] for themselves?*
> *(Garcia 2016:111-12)*

Purpose in Life is according to Ryff's definition closely linked to maturity and entails a clear comprehension of purpose in life "a sense of directedness, and intentionality" (Ryff 1989:1071). It is clear from these findings that the encapsulating structures surrounding the lads make it difficult to hold more long-term goals and that short-term happiness, contrary to the important distinction made by the Greeks between the gratification of right desires and wrong desires, better describes the orientation of many young Irish lads and that incentives to alter this orientation are limited.

Personal Growth: A high scorer of personal growth is defined as having a "feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has a sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behaviour over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness" (Ryff 1989:1072). A low scorer experiences a sense of personal stagnation; lacks a sense of improvement over time and a feels that one is unable to develop new attitudes or behaviours which leads to feelings of boredom and disinterest in life (ibid). Stagnation, lack of control and long-term goals mirrors the lads' liminal life situation better than feelings that accompany behaviours that are consistent with one's true potential.

Ryff's arguments are important in order to understand the more deep-seated elements of wellbeing. Yet, even life-satisfaction indexes

and components indicative of a long-term quality of realizing one's true potential rather than 'feeling good at the moment', has according to Ryff, for a long time "failed to monitor such features of well-being as autonomy, personal growth, and positive relations to others" (1989:1077).

A common discussion within gender theory is about the relationship between power and responsibility where men have power and women responsibility. However, in theorising boys and young men in particular, we "may be overestimating individual agency by foreclosing analysis of the power structures within which most boys are, in reality, immersed" (Ging 2005:48). This includes the strict regulation of gender appropriate spheres and the acquisition of everyday life skills. Of equal importance is the internalization and embodiment of damaging discourses around 'ladhood' and the low expectations of young working class men's social and economic contributions and value. Dolby and Dimitriadis suggest that deindustrialization has created a crisis in white working-class forms of masculinity and that the "responses of the macho lads to the new ethos of schooling involves celebrating alternative sources of gender power" (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004:33). The defensive and sometimes reactionary ethos amongst working class lads provides a sense of dignity perceived to be under threat. The disavowal of "women's nagging" become power struggles that emerge to compensate for a lack in both autonomy and sense of responsibility:

> In a social world structured by gender appropriate spheres (and immediate sanctions when these are transgressed), the boys' and young men's stake in domestic responsibilities are all but non-existent and little or no value is attached to gender "inappropriate" tasks or responsibilities. In this situation, the lads are merely "reluctantly" "made to" take part in and responsibility for gender inappropriate tasks (Garcia 2016:110).

In the discussions on their male peers and family members, the girls in my fieldwork made it clear that in their experience, young lads performed few if any domestic tasks and that this lacking investment in domestic work became an even greater burden for them instead.

> X: So who's gonna go out and buy dish washer tablets you know? No one. And who's gonna…
> Researcher: And why aren't they doing these simple things?
> X: Because in this case it has been done for them for so long.
> Researcher: They bring the washing up to their mam's don't they?
> Y: Let me tell you something that really pisses me off. I go through the cupboards there, I pay rent to my mam and I go and do a shop every two weeks, she'll do it one week and I'll do it the next. If I'm on form I'll do it two weeks but, not for a while now . . . [deep breath] What I do is, I go through the cupboards and I look, there's an empty big bag of Taytos [crisps] in there, there are empty cartons of milk in the fridge, there's empty, cos they don't know what the fuck to do with them!!! So I come back, and I'm after buying all of that and they're all empty and I'm like, and for years and years and years: "please don't put the empty stuff back in the cupboard!" "Please don't put the empty stuff back in the cupboard!" But for some fucking reason, imagine putting an empty carton of milk back in the fridge!!!
> X: They don't care if there is stuff on the counter, they didn't clean it! They didn't stock the fridge, why would they care if there's stuff that is empty in there? You, know, they're not going shopping, why would they care, if there is empty stuff inside there?

The key issue here is that the girls *comprehended* what needed doing, were able to *manage* it, and contrary to the lads, did not see these everyday basic chores as *meaningless*. In an interview that I conducted

with Carmen Kuhling, co-author of the 2004 publication *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland* she suggested that the disavowal of dependence was that which happened "at the level of gender, particularly in those sorts of painful, vulnerable moments . . . where that dependence of another, whether it be a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or the State, the nation, the job, is disavowed in that moment of pain or trauma". (Interview with Carmen Kuhling November 2010) 'The lads' found themselves in a disempowering position where they held no significant positions of power, nor where they depicted in public debate or by their female peers as respectable, dependable, able or responsible.

Salutogenesis, Sense of Coherence and the health enhancing aspects of fatherhood

A 2008 report by the Irish Government (Department for Health and Children 2008) expresses concerns that "For men in their prime years of work and fatherhood, there are still more than twice as many men dying as women" (2008:8). Not surprisingly, much of the focus in the debate on men's health has a pathologising perspective yet the report also refers to Australian Professor John MacDonald from Western Sydney University who "calls for a 'salutogenic' approach to men's health" and a "move away from the pathology-orientated, deficiency and disease-based model of medicine" (2008:7).

Salutogenesis looks at the origins of health rather than disease. The principle determinant is the individual's endurance towards life stressors referred to as Sense of Coherence (SOC) and the health implications are significant; psychologically and physiologically. Both concepts were coined by the late medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1987). According to Antonovsky, the resources selected to cope with life stressors are bound by culture yet the health advantages achieved

through a successful "selection of culturally appropriate and situational efficacious resources and behaviour" are universal (1987:12). SOC is thus a rationalization process that occurs out of culturally and structurally bound patterns of life experiences making gender, and, for the current discussion masculinity, an important factor.

The salutogenic approach essentially asks; what makes people healthy, and more specifically, what are the determining components in people's endurance and resilience towards life stressors? Antonovsky understood health and ill-health as the ends of a continuum and SOC as the 'pendulum' that runs between these ends. The three key fundaments of SOC are; **Comprehensibility** (a stable ability to assess and explain reality), **Manageability** (the perception that there are resources at one's disposal to manage stimuli and stop them from becoming stressors) and, **Meaningfulness** (the motivational component that suggests that the stimuli matters, emotionally and cognitively, and is worthy of investment). Antonovsky understood this last component to be the most essential to SOC since without a sense of meaningfulness high levels of comprehensibility and manageability are not likely to last long term (1987). It is clear that SOC also relates to maturity, life skills, and positive functioning as described by Ryff (1989): manageability (environmental mastery) and purpose in life (meaningfulness). Comprehensibility is comparable to autonomy and the ability to independently evaluate oneself and to regulate behaviours by one's own standards. It also seems to overlap with manageability in the sense that there is a perception that there are available resources to manage stressors.

SOC is established in the most formative years: childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. It is, says Antonovsky, less likely that any drastic changes to SOC occur later in life unless the

stimulus contributes to *different*, *long term life experiences* marked by *new levels of predictability, strain-resource balance* and *participation in socially valued decision-making*. As a new emotionally driven responsibility, the experience of becoming a parent should qualify as such a stimulus and it is one that most young people can expect to experience over the life course. However, whether or not the experience of the caring period enhances SOC depends on the structural conditions and cultural expectations of both men and women as fathers and mothers. Factors to consider are thus the length and quality of the caring period, and for fathers, whether the role as father is that of a back-up figure or, as recent trends in Ireland indicate, sole day-time caregiver. Of interest is thus whether the life altering experience of becoming a care giving father is able to strengthen SOC and under what conditions this is more or less likely to be the case.

The vast amount of Irish home and caregivers are still women. Figures presented by the Central Statistics Office (2016) show that 455 500 of people in Ireland who care for home and children are women and 9 200 are men. (CSO 2016) What is worth noting however is that the number of men assuming this role has nearly doubled from 4 900 in the last ten years. (ibid) As Ireland is slowly recovering from the economic recession that nearly stopped the availability of jobs in the traditional male work sectors, a number of unemployed fathers are beginning to stay home as sole daytime caregivers to their children for the first time. Furthermore, Irish fathers, who have had no previous legal entitlements to paid leave under Irish law, are from September 2016 allowed two weeks paid leave for the first time. In this new emerging situation, a salutogenic perspective of men adhering to either progressive, *caring masculinity* (Elliott, K. 2016) or a more traditional, *care-free masculinity* (Hanlon N. 2012) becomes highly relevant. Much like Antonovsky's SOC, different constructions of

masculinity are also rationalization processes bound by culture and patterns of life experiences. And, there seems to be a similar 'pendulum' running between the health benefits of caring (expansive) masculinity and destructive health patterns of care-free (restrictive) masculinity.

To make visible how the structural conditions of fatherhood impact on SOC it is useful to contrast the experiences of fathers in Ireland with fathers in Sweden, a countries that ranks high in institutionalised gender equal childcare. Research from Karolinska Institute in Sweden (Månsdotter 2009) suggest that staying home to take care of one's child is a transformative experience that alters men's practices and carries important health benefits, mainly through reductions in risky alcohol consumption and better self-care. Widarsson's recent study has a clear salutogenic perspective and concludes that "Fathers who engage with their children and share domestic tasks equally with their spouses develop less negative health behaviour and have lower risks for ill health and death" (2015:11). Widarsson asserts further: "During early parenthood, fathers have a higher SOC than mothers: mothers need several years to become comfortable in the parental role and continue showing lower levels of SOC than fathers". (17)

Ferguson argues that dominant constructions of masculinity in Ireland "is perhaps best illustrated in relation to men's relationship to children and care work" (Ferguson, N. 2006:145). However, Ferguson also concludes that despite recent developments in (relatively) shifting traditional gender roles in Ireland, "If anything, the hegemonic construction of Irish masculinity emphasizes the 'good family man' as a hard working man more intensely than ever" (144). Hanlon and Lynch (2011) have argued from their research in Ireland that care work, especially for one's

children, can awaken nurturing and caring sensibilities that are otherwise suppressed in men who are socialised into restrictive hyper-masculinised identities. However, they found "that experiencing the work of caring does not necessarily make it desirable, at least for the Irish men we studied" (2011:51). A possible explanation was that men experienced rejection from peers when letting go of a carefree masculine identity but also from the experience of becoming economically vulnerable which is inimical to hegemonic male norms. The authors also found in some of their interviews with Irish men, that care work was deemed abnormal or dysfunctional for men, "allowing them to rationalize their own incapability and avoidance" (49). Ferguson (2006) argues further, that although Irish men in general are complicit in these developments, the men that resist dominant notions of masculinity do so "in a culture which does little or nothing to support them as carers" (2006:146). It seems however that in post-recession Irish society, men's attitudes and investments in domestic, and family life are shifting yet what the implications are for health, wellbeing and maturity among young men needs to be further explored. The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 2012 suggests for example, that 41.7 per cent of male respondents in Ireland agreed or strongly agreed that 'watching children grow up was the greatest joy' (ISSP 2012).

Other than the aforementioned pieces of research, studies on the situation of Ireland's expanding cohort of stay-at-home fathers are undergraduate papers yet they include some valuable ethnographic materials. The tentative findings are that Irish men in child caring situations many times feel that they are looked upon as "wasters" or that they are being laughed at (Fitzpatrick 2014). Another such study describes the emotional impact on male primary care givers in Ireland and "the complete lack of awareness of the role prior to undertaking it" (O'Brien 2012:1). However, these new ethnographic data also indicates

that something much more encouraging is emerging. Recent sociocultural shifts are already forming pioneering social bonds that will undoubtedly create new "role definitions, cultural beliefs, and individual life histories" (Abraham et al. 2014:9796): "Much further research and conceptual effort is required to understand how these profound and rapid social changes shape brain, behavior, social relationships, the capacity for nurturance, and the larger social climate in which we live." (ibid)

Contrastive perspectives on the structural and normative conditions of fatherhood

Current research findings combined suggest that a male pioneer in gender equal childcare in a context dominated by a highly stereotyped notion of masculinity, with little or no traditions or previous experience of care work, is likely to have a different experience than a father who goes on leave in a country like Sweden, where parents share a total of 480 days of paid parental leave out of which 90 days are non-transferrable between parents. As an increasing number of Irish fathers start to accumulate their experiences as sole daytime caregivers, a different scenario may arise compared to the Swedish context where men take out 28% of parental leave days and where men are encouraged and praised to do so.

Mocking by peers and family, a sense of humiliation, increased stress levels, social isolation and depression, are some of the possible outcomes for an Irish man who is not only doing something which contradicts dominant notions of masculinity, but who in the aftermath of the recession often face time at home due to unemployment and financial restraints rather than paid leave. However, a vulnerable state is not exclusively negative or constitutively 'bad'. An expanding research field (Engaging Vulnerability, Uppsala

University) suggests instead that vulnerability is a position or moment where 'something happens'. In it, lies an inherent potential of creativity and expansion: "Vulnerability makes demands: about accountability, responsibility, ethics, engagement. Seeing vulnerability as productive changes the focus of research, awareness and engagement." [1] Indeed, the reflections from an informant in Fitzparick's study (2014) suggests that dominant notions of masculinity are being called into question as a direct result of the increasing numbers of caring fathers in Ireland where a new image of masculinity is beginning to present itself:

> *I remember even ten years ago a lot of fellas wouldn't push a pram. It doesn't seem that big a deal anymore. I was with my son in the playgroup one day and he kept playing with a small buggy for dolls. Three different women tried to stop him, not in a bad way but kept saying, "Oh that's not for you" etc. I let him play with what he wants so I was letting him do it. It seemed to bother those women. He has seen me push his buggy since he was born; I pushed his buggy on the way to the playgroup. In his eyes that's what men do, he didn't think anything of it and just wanted to have fun. I suppose for him, being a man means something different now. (2014:31)*

Indeed, it wold be interesting to explore whether such a moment of vulnerability (masculinity called into question) is altered through the presence of, and bond to the child, perhaps offering a sense of meaningfulness. To be sure, Antonovsky's work was written in the 1970's and 80's and thus, stay-at-home-dads did not present any exemplary case for the SOC hypothesis. Instead Antonovsky made reference to the position of housewives: "Even though she has herself chosen to enter the role (but it is often not a matter of choice) she receives a clear message that says that what she does is not particularly important. In a work-oriented society she does not 'work'" (1987:131). Despite the fact that the housewife receives limited financial and social reward, Antonovsky makes one reservation: that the value attributed by a sub-group or those closest to the individual may just be enough to create a sense of meaningfulness. But, Antonovsky asserts, *some amount of social appreciation is always required*. It is apparent from a cultural perspective that the levels comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness are determined by what is culturally legitimate and socially desirable. It is likely, given the example above, that the appreciation from the child in one's care is more significant than one would assume. This calls for a thorough investigation into the important links between different notions of masculinity and how changes in the welfare structure affect the health and life patterns among fathers who, for different reasons, end up 'staying home' as daytime caregivers to their children.

In contrast to Ireland, Sweden, and the rest of the Nordic countries, have made significant advances towards a dual earner/dual carer model. "Gender equality politics, parental leave and a well-established child care system have not just resulted in an improvement in women's position in the labor market. It has also meant that men in Sweden have become able to combine work and family life in a way that stands out in international comparison" (SOU 2014:68 trans. by author). The quality of the experience among care-taking men which has been empirically documented (Backhans et al. 2007, Gullvåg Holter 2011, Månsdotter 2009, Kearney 2001, Sörlin et al. 2011) could very well be the main explanation behind the development of caring masculinity in the Nordic countries. In this Swedish case, one important shift was the idea that spread among fathers-to-be in the 1970's: that it was important to be present at the birth of their children. The increasing availability of pre-natal classes targeting both parents also enhanced the father position into what had been considered an exclusively female

domain. "The idea that the fathers' presence and function was important in child birth was extended thereafter to include their relationship to infants. A new era had begun and an increasing number of men embraced these new ideals" (Plantin 2000:36 trans. by author). According to Plantin (et al. 2000), this caring masculinity had become mainstream by the 1980's when the weekly and monthly press began to depict men "buying groceries, commenting on milk prices, and suggesting practical interior design solutions for modern family living" (2000:36 trans. by author). In Ireland, it is the collapse of the building and manufacturing sectors that has led a new cohort of Irish men to become stay-at-home fathers. Accounts of more detailed effects of this change have yet to be revealed. There are some modest but indicative signs of an emerging shift in traditional expectations of masculinity and fatherhood in Irish society and the 'stay-at-home-lads' are themselves an important part of this change.

Biobehavioural evidence

As stated earlier Hanlon and Lynch (2011) found in some of their interviews with Irish men, that care work was deemed abnormal or dysfunctional for men. Clearly the notion that women are biologically dispositioned to care for children is still a dominant cultural narrative in Ireland. However, findings in biobehavioural research could prove to be an important complement to this understanding of gender and care. Psychologist Shelley E. Taylor (2006) is yet another researcher who tries to move away from pathological orientations in health research, namely, biobehavioural responses to stress, or the so called 'fight-or-flight' response. She argues that this analysis is incomplete from the standpoint of human beings since the characteristics of humans also entails the capacity and need to affiliate when under stress. To highlight the human tendency to affiliate under stress Taylor and her colleagues

use the metaphor "tend and befriend": "Our position is that under conditions of stress, tending to offspring and affiliating with others ("befriending") are at least as common responses to stress in humans as fight-or-flight" (Taylor 2006:273). Her model builds primarily on the affiliative hormone oxytocin which, in conjunction with dopaminergic and opioid systems, attenuates stress responses that may occur as response to social threats. However, the majority of previous evidence comes mainly from animals. Studies on oxytocin in 'tending' studies tend to focus almost exclusively on animals, women, lactating women and maternal behavior. Taylor concludes that "evidence that oxytocin plays an important role in male social relationships is less plentiful" (2006:275) and that "estrogen strongly enhances the effects of oxytocin". (ibid) However this could very well be different from men who tend for offspring in situations where they, as sole day-time caregivers, are the only tending parent for extended periods of time.

Evidence contrary to Taylor's findings are to be found in neuroscientists Ruth Feldman's and Eyal Abraham's work (2014). They argue that contemporary socio-cultural changes and shifting gender structures allow us to see what happens to the paternal brain when assuming traditionally maternal caretaking activities. The findings are groundbreaking. Feldman, Abraham and colleagues aim to fill the vast knowledge gap on "the brain basis of human fatherhood, its comparability with the maternal brain, and its sensitivity to caregiving experiences" and infant stimuli (2014). The study suggests that whereas mothers' neurobiological processes are to a large extent triggered by pregnancy and labour, the human father's brain "adapts to the parental role through active involvement in childcare" (2014:9792). The study, which is the first of its kind, identifies a "global parental caregiving brain network that was mainly consistent across parents and involved brain structures implicated in vigilance, salience, reward,

motivation, social understanding, and cognitive empathy" (2014:9795). Although the study found variations in how the caregiving brain network operates and that other pathways for adaptation to the parental role have developed in human fathers, it concludes, that the caregiving brain network was linked with oxytocin and, there were no differences in oxytocin between mothers and fathers. The alternative pathways among fathers, the authors conclude, come with practice and day-by-day caregiving, which suggests, in line with the current article, that the structural conditions and cultural expectations of both men and women as fathers and mothers, is a more fundamental determinant for SOC than evolutionary biology.

Whereas structural alterations during pregnancy and childbirth affects the amygdala, amygdala sensitivity was linked to the primary-caregiving role rather than maternal care. However, the superior temporal sulcus (STS) which is located in the temporal lobe of the brain "is a central region of the mentalizing network, playing a vital role in social cognition, biological motion, social goal interpretation, prediction making, and updating regarding others' behavior" (2014:9795). STS is interconnected with the amygdala yet it is not dependent on pregnancy and childbirth but on caregiving experiences. STS is mediated via a path which increases oxytocin, and is consistent it seems, with the SOC hypothesis here referred to in the terms of social cognition, social goal interpretation, and prediction making. What these neuroscientists have found should certainly be of interest in cross-disciplinary research that engage in issues regarding men's health and could also serve as neurological evidence for SOC. If paid proper attention these findings may also provide a less essentialist perception of fatherhood.

Conclusion and update: revisiting 'the lads'

A few of the informants from Cork were already fathers during the time of the fieldwork and a few more have become fathers since. A few of them have had the opportunity to stay at home with their children during unemployment but one of them became one of the first fathers in Ireland who have stayed home during the two weeks paid leave that are now granted Irish fathers. This new father chose to spend those two weeks at home as soon as the baby was born. During this time I paid him a visit and got to spend some time with him, his wife and their new baby. He was in the midst of serving a lasagne that he had prepared before he was to venture out with the lads to 'wet the baby's head'. In Ireland, wetting the baby's head is a tradition where the new father goes out to drink with his peers to celebrate the arrival of the baby. As he fed the baby he assured his wife that he would be back by ten o'clock to feed the baby again before bed. Never during my time with the lads had I seen such a delighted and satisfied facial expression at the thought of *returning* from the pub. I had previously asked whether or not he would take the two weeks paid leave he was now entitled to. His response was: "Chalk it down![2] Two weeks off work?!" However, it was evident in his amorous and fixated attention towards his new-born baby that these two weeks meant much more than time off work. I also asked how his colleagues and peers had reacted to the fact that he would go on leave when the baby was born. The response by some older male colleagues had been that in their days, "men were well able to do without that". Undoubtedly, the new baby, trumped that critique but most likely, it is easier to legitimize availing of two weeks paternity leave as merely "time off work".

During an earlier revisit to Cork in 2015 I spent some time at the lads' new house, a similar set up as the one I used to share with them some years earlier. As I navigated through the

clothes, toilet rolls and cigarette butts on the living room floor and made it in to the kitchen I caught a glimpse of a shopping list scrabbled down on the back of a Centra (local shop) receipt that I was rude enough to take home as a memento (the owner now knows and approves of my theft). The list of groceries is as follows:

- 2 Red Bull
- 4 pack cans
- 7up
- 3 brown hulu hoops
- Rancheros 6 pack
- Cookies

The limited amount of 'drink' suggests that this and the following day was a work day. It is also indicative of the (stereo)typical culinary habits among 'the lads' and makes an interesting contrast to the new eating habits that are required by stay-at-home dads. The gap in health behaviours between the lads who have become fathers and those who have not are important indicators of the role of fatherhood as a means to move away from a care-free masculine identity. Whereas entering a relationship provides a situation where caring and care-free masculinity can be combined, becoming a father rather becomes a situation where the latter is re-prioritised and de-emphasised to a greater extent.

Psychological positive functioning (Ryff 1989), salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1987) and biobehavioural studies (Abraham et al. 2014) are highly relevant to studies of masculinity and men's health. The ethnographic materials presented here, and an added salutogenic perspective on men's health, are also an important complement to the dominant pathological focus on practices of Irish masculinity. An alternative approach to vulnerability also leaves many still unexplored routes for theorising the inherent potentials in the demands of life that are imposed upon young men whether they choose to grow up or

not. In particular, it sheds new light on what actually happens in the self-reflexive moment of becoming a father and, in this vulnerable state of 'staying home', the meaningfulness gained from the emotionally driven responsibility, strong emotional bond and infant stimuli that the caring period demands and the hormonal responses they induce.

It may be useful to look at one last etymology - of the term 'care'. Indeed, it derives from 'grief', 'sorrow' and 'worry'[3] but also from 'accountability', 'concern' and 'responsibility'. The health implications differ between care-free immature masculinity and caring mature masculinity, the latter indicative of higher levels of SOC (Widarsson 2015). 'Care-free' may be understood as short-term happiness but not real *Eudaimonia.* Further empirical evidence is needed yet it appears that nation-states have a great responsibility to provide economic incentives and attribute social value to men who become more involved fathers in order to promote men's health. This would perhaps entail a structural design of engaged fatherhood similar to the Nordic model that offers the sense autonomy, responsibility, personal growth, purpose of life and maturity that could enhance SOC among new generations of men. In a country that struggles to promote wellbeing among a male population suffering from poor mental health and a suicide crisis these issues must not go unexplored.

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[1] http://www.engagingvulnerability.se/about-ev/about-engaging-vulnerability/ (accessed 26/11/2018)

[2] Irish expression for 'Obviously'

[3] For a more extensive analysis of 'worry', see --- 2016 (the gift of worry).