

Caring Masculinities among Millennial Fathers in Medan City: A Phenomenological Study of Parenting Role Negotiation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how millennial fathers in Medan City construct caring masculinities through childcare involvement and family role negotiation. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected millennial fathers. The findings show that fatherhood is understood not only as breadwinning but also as emotional presence, domestic participation, and shared responsibility with a spouse. The participants' experiences indicate that caring masculinities emerge through reflection on personal history, active engagement with children, and ongoing negotiation against patriarchal expectations. The study concludes that fatherhood can become a space for reconstructing masculinity into a more relational and egalitarian form.

INTRODUCTION

Gender roles in family life have long placed caregiving in the domain of women, while men are expected to act as providers and family authorities. This division is rooted in patriarchal structures that position men in the public sphere and women in the domestic sphere (Walby, 1990; Connell, 1995). In this framework, fathers are often imagined as emotionally distant figures whose main duty is economic support rather than direct participation in childcare. However, recent social change has opened space for men to redefine fatherhood through more involved and emotionally present practices (Elliott, 2016; Cabrera et al., 2018).

These shifts are not merely behavioral adjustments but also reflect broader transformations in the social meaning of masculinity. As family life becomes increasingly shaped by changing gender expectations, fatherhood can no longer be understood solely through the lens of breadwinning and authority. Instead, it is increasingly recognized as a relational role that involves emotional presence, practical support, and participation in children's everyday development. This repositioning of fatherhood is important because it challenges the assumption that caregiving is naturally feminine and highlights the possibility that masculinity itself is socially reconstructed through family practice.

This issue is important in Indonesia because caregiving remains strongly maternal in many families. The thesis notes that children's daily care is still largely carried by mothers, while many fathers remain physically present but emotionally and practically limited in their involvement. National discourse on fatherlessness has also intensified, and the government has responded through the Gerakan Ayah Teladan Indonesia (GATI), which encourages fathers to take a more active role in parenting and family life. In this context, father involvement is not only a family matter but also a social and policy issue.

Fatherhood is increasingly recognized as a socially significant role that goes beyond economic provision. In contemporary family life, fathers are expected not only to support their households financially but also to contribute emotionally, practically, and relationally to child development. This shift reflects broader changes in gender relations, family expectations, and the meaning of responsible masculinity. As a result, studying father involvement becomes important for understanding how men adapt to changing social norms within the private sphere.

This issue is especially relevant in urban Indonesia, where traditional patriarchal values continue to shape family life while modern parenting ideals are also gaining visibility. Many fathers still grow up with the expectation that their primary duty is to provide, while caregiving is seen as a maternal responsibility. However, increasing attention to active fatherhood shows that some men are beginning to negotiate these expectations by participating more directly in childcare and domestic life. This creates an important research gap on how fathers themselves understand and experience this transformation.

The thesis also shows that this transformation is visible in everyday practices, such as taking children to school, attending parenting classes, helping with housework, and supporting spouses in domestic routines. These practices

indicate that fatherhood is not a static role but a process of negotiation shaped by experience, family needs, and social interaction. In this sense, fathers are not simply adapting to external demands; they are actively reconstructing what it means to be a man and a father in the contemporary family setting.

Medan City is a particularly relevant setting because it combines urban modernization with strong patriarchal and patrilineal traditions, creating tension between inherited masculine expectations and newer family ideals. The thesis shows that fathers in Medan negotiate identity through everyday practices such as taking children to school, attending parenting classes, helping with housework, and supporting their spouses. This article asks how millennial fathers in Medan City interpret masculine identity, how they practice caring masculinities in parenting, and how they negotiate their roles within family life.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Connell's theory understands masculinity as a social construction shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and processes of socialization rather than as a biological characteristic. Masculine identity is produced and reproduced through families, schools, workplaces, religious institutions, media, peer groups, and other social environments. Therefore, masculinity is not universal or fixed; it is relational, historically situated, and shaped by the specific social and cultural contexts in which men live (Connell, 1995).

Connell further argues that masculinities exist within a hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant and socially legitimized model of manhood, although it is not necessarily practiced by most men. This model commonly associates men with leadership, rationality, independence, courage, emotional control, authority, and breadwinner responsibility. Within family life, it often positions fathers as economic providers and decision-makers, while childcare and domestic labor are socially constructed as women's responsibilities (Connell, 1995).

Connell identifies other positions within the hierarchy, including subordinate, complicit, and marginalized masculinities. Subordinate masculinity refers to forms of masculinity that are devalued because they are perceived as insufficiently masculine, including men who openly express vulnerability, emotional sensitivity, or dependence. Complicit masculinity refers to men who may not fully embody hegemonic ideals but still benefit from patriarchal arrangements. Marginalized masculinity highlights how social class, ethnicity, race, and economic conditions shape men's access to the culturally dominant ideal of masculinity. These categories illustrate that masculinity is diverse and structured by unequal power relations rather than expressed in a single universal form (Connell, 1995).

Hegemonic masculinity provides an important framework for understanding why caregiving has historically been separated from masculinity. When the ideal man is expected to be emotionally restrained, economically productive, independent, and authoritative, domestic participation and nurturing behavior may be viewed as feminine. As a result, fathers who engage in childcare, housework, or emotional communication with children may face

social judgments that question their masculine identity. These expectations may be particularly strong in patriarchal family settings where men are primarily expected to provide financially and women are expected to manage domestic and caregiving work.

Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity is not static. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity is historically changeable, socially negotiated, and continuously reconstructed through everyday practices. Changes in family structure, women's participation in paid work, urbanization, education, digital media, and public discourse on gender equality have created new conditions for men to reinterpret their role as husbands and fathers. Men may continue to identify as providers and family protectors while simultaneously becoming more active in domestic work, childcare, and emotional support.

Caring masculinities extend this perspective by explaining how masculinity can be reconstructed through care, empathy, and relational responsibility. Developed by Karla Elliott (2016), caring masculinities refer to forms of masculinity that integrate emotional openness, caregiving, interdependence, and concern for others into masculine identity. Rather than treating care as incompatible with masculinity, this perspective recognizes caregiving as a meaningful expression of responsibility and ethical commitment in men's everyday lives.

Care in this perspective is not limited to practical activities such as bathing children, preparing meals, taking children to school, or cleaning the house. Care also includes emotional attention, responsiveness, listening, communication, affection, patience, and responsibility for the well-being of others. A father who listens to his child, supports his spouse, participates in domestic work, makes time for family needs, and takes responsibility for children's education and health is practicing care as part of his identity as a father and husband.

Caring masculinities do not imply the feminization of men or the rejection of masculinity. Instead, they represent a reconstruction of masculinity from an orientation toward dominance, emotional distance, and control toward an orientation centered on care, cooperation, emotional presence, and relational responsibility. Men can remain socially recognized as men while redefining masculine strength through patience, empathy, consistency, and the ability to maintain close relationships with family members (Elliott, 2016).

In this study, caring masculinities are examined through five interrelated indicators: the meaning of fatherhood beyond breadwinner responsibility; fathers' emotional presence in relationships with children; practical involvement in childcare and domestic activities; reflexivity and negotiation of gender roles; and a more equal caregiving relationship with spouses. These indicators are not expected to appear uniformly in every participant. Fathers may show strong emotional involvement but limited domestic participation, or they may be active in practical care while still maintaining traditional assumptions about male breadwinner responsibility. Such variations demonstrate that caring masculinities are contextual, partial, and continuously negotiated in everyday family life.

This perspective is particularly relevant in Medan City, where contemporary urban family life intersects with diverse cultural traditions and patriarchal values. In communities influenced by patrilineal and patriarchal norms, men may still be expected to serve as providers, protectors, and decision-makers. At the same time, increasing women's labor-force participation, changing parenting expectations, education, and urban lifestyles have encouraged fathers to become more involved in everyday childcare and domestic responsibilities. This situation creates a space in which fathers negotiate traditional masculine expectations alongside more egalitarian family practices. Father involvement theory further strengthens the analysis by explaining how care is enacted in everyday parenting. Lamb et al. (1987) identify three key dimensions of father involvement: *engagement*, *accessibility*, and *responsibility*. Engagement refers to direct interaction between fathers and children, including playing, accompanying children while studying, discussing daily experiences, and participating in routine childcare. Accessibility refers to fathers' physical and psychological availability, enabling children to experience their presence, attention, and emotional support. Responsibility refers to fathers' role in ensuring that children's educational, health, developmental, and general welfare needs are fulfilled.

These dimensions show that father involvement should not be measured solely by the amount of time fathers spend with their children. Meaningful involvement also concerns the quality of interaction, emotional availability, consistency of support, and willingness to take responsibility for children's welfare. Fatherhood, therefore, is not merely occasional participation in childcare or assistance to mothers; it is an ongoing relational commitment that involves active engagement in children's everyday lives.

Contemporary discussions of father involvement also emphasize the importance of *co-parenting*. Cabrera et al. (2018) argue that father involvement should be understood as part of a collaborative relationship between fathers and mothers in managing family responsibilities. Parenting involves communication, shared decision-making, mutual support, and the distribution of domestic and caregiving work. This approach shifts attention from individual fathering practices to the broader relational structure of family life, where fathers' involvement can contribute to more balanced and egalitarian gender relations.

Father involvement is also shaped by structural conditions rather than individual willingness alone. Workplace demands, organizational culture, family expectations, social stigma, local cultural values, and institutional policies can either constrain or support fathers' participation in caregiving. Fathers who adjust their work schedules, take time off to care for sick children, or engage in domestic work may encounter social responses suggesting that such actions are inconsistent with masculinity. These experiences indicate that caregiving is negotiated not only within the household but also in workplaces, neighborhoods, extended-family networks, and wider communities.

Previous studies indicate that father involvement contributes to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development while also reflecting broader changes in family gender relations. However, the transformation of fatherhood

remains uneven. Some fathers participate actively in play, school activities, and emotional interaction but remain less involved in routine domestic work. Others contribute to household tasks while continuing to maintain traditional assumptions about men's primary responsibility as breadwinners. These patterns show that caring masculinities should be understood as an ongoing and varied process rather than a fixed or complete identity.

The research gap lies in the limited number of studies that examine how fathers themselves negotiate masculine identity through caregiving in an urban Indonesian setting. Existing studies often focus on the developmental outcomes of father involvement, the division of domestic labor, or specific parenting practices. Less attention has been given to how millennial fathers interpret emotional presence, domestic participation, shared parenting, and social pressure as part of a broader reconstruction of masculinity.

Accordingly, this study combines Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, Elliott's concept of caring masculinities, and Lamb's father involvement framework. Connell explains the gendered norms and power relations that separate masculinity from care; Elliott explains the reconstruction of masculinity through empathy, emotional involvement, and relational responsibility; and Lamb identifies how these values are enacted through engagement, accessibility, and responsibility in everyday parenting. Together, these perspectives provide an analytical framework for examining how millennial fathers in Medan City negotiate and reconstruct masculinity through family life and caregiving practices.

METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative phenomenological design to interpret the lived experiences of millennial fathers in Medan City. The thesis states that the study followed an interpretative phenomenological approach, which is appropriate for exploring how individuals make meaning from personal experience (Smith et al., 2009). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected fathers who were actively involved in childcare and family life.

This interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen because the study seeks to explore not only what fathers do, but also how they make meaning of their experiences. The focus is on the lived experience of fatherhood, particularly how millennial fathers interpret their roles, responsibilities, and emotional involvement within the family. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns in the participants' narratives regarding masculinity, caregiving, and negotiation with social expectations.

This method makes it possible to capture the subjective and contextual dimensions of fatherhood. It also allows the researcher to understand how personal experience, family background, and cultural norms shape the way men define themselves as fathers.

The analysis focused on recurring themes across the interview narratives, especially those related to masculine identity, emotional presence, domestic participation, and negotiation with cultural expectations. This method allows the

study to interpret not just what fathers do, but how they understand what they do. The article therefore treats fatherhood as a lived social experience shaped by memory, reflexivity, and interaction with family and social norms.

RESULTS

The findings show that millennial fathers in Medan City do not define fatherhood only through the provider role. They understand being a father as involving emotional presence, communication, domestic participation, and shared responsibility with the spouse. Many participants described caregiving as a learned process shaped by earlier family experiences, including being raised by mothers, observing domestic labor, or caring for sick relatives before marriage.

A second theme is emotional presence. Fathers emphasized listening to children, being available for conversations, and building warmth in daily relationships rather than maintaining emotional distance. This challenges the traditional view that masculinity requires restraint and detachment (Connell, 1995). The thesis shows that these fathers see emotional closeness as part of responsibility, not a loss of masculine identity.

A third theme is role negotiation. Fathers reported balancing work demands, household obligations, and social judgments from neighbors or coworkers when they did domestic work or adjusted work schedules for their children. Despite these pressures, they continued to participate in childcare and housework, suggesting that caregiving is becoming more normalized as part of fatherhood in this urban setting. Their role negotiation also reflects a shift from individualistic masculinity toward a more relational fathering style that values cooperation with a spouse.

The findings also indicate that fatherhood is experienced as a process of identity formation rather than a fixed social role. Several participants explained that their understanding of being a father changed after marriage and after having children, especially when they began to encounter the practical and emotional demands of everyday family life. This suggests that fatherhood is not only learned through formal expectations, but also through lived experience, reflection, and repeated interaction with children and spouses.

Another important point is that caregiving was often described as a moral commitment rather than a temporary task. The participants did not frame domestic involvement as help for their wives alone, but as part of their own responsibility as fathers and husbands. In this sense, participation in childcare, housework, and emotional support became a way of expressing care, trust, and accountability within the family. Such practices show that fathering in Medan City is increasingly understood as relational and collaborative rather than merely provider-oriented.

The study further shows that some fathers redefined strength in ways that differ from traditional masculine norms. Instead of associating strength with emotional distance or authority, they began to understand strength as patience, consistency, and the ability to remain present in difficult family situations. This indicates that emotional warmth and practical care are not seen by these fathers as signs of weakness, but as integral parts of responsible masculinity. Through

this process, fatherhood becomes a space where masculine identity is continuously revised through everyday care practices.

The findings also show that several participants understood active fatherhood as a meaningful part of their identity as men. For them, being a good father was not limited to providing financial support, but also included being present in children's daily lives. Activities such as taking children to school, helping with homework, and spending time in conversation were described as important expressions of responsibility and affection.

Another important theme is the transformation of masculine identity through parenting experience. Some participants stated that becoming a father changed the way they understood strength, discipline, and emotional expression. Instead of seeing care as a weakness, they began to view patience, listening, and emotional warmth as important qualities of a responsible man. This suggests that fatherhood can become a space where masculinity is gradually reconstructed through everyday family practice.

DISCUSSION

These findings support the idea that masculinity is continuously negotiated rather than fixed (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In Medan City, fathers remain influenced by patriarchal expectations, but they are also shaped by changing family needs and urban social norms. This produces a hybrid pattern in which breadwinning remains important, yet caregiving increasingly becomes part of "good fathering".

The data also align with Elliott's caring masculinities because participants connect masculinity with empathy, care, and relational responsibility rather than domination alone (Elliott, 2016). Their caregiving practices show that masculinity can be reconstructed through everyday acts such as helping with housework, listening to children, and supporting a spouse. In this sense, care is not a feminine monopoly; it becomes a masculine practice when men redefine responsibility in family life.

The study also confirms the usefulness of father involvement theory. The fathers' engagement, accessibility, and responsibility reflect a shift from symbolic fatherhood toward active co-parenting (Lamb et al., 1987; Cabrera et al., 2018). The Medan case is important because it shows that this shift occurs in a local environment where patrilineal and patriarchal values remain influential. As a result, change is gradual, negotiated, and context dependent.

These findings indicate that masculinity is not fixed, but continuously negotiated through social practice. In the context of millennial fathers in Medan City, traditional expectations of men as breadwinners remain influential, yet they are no longer sufficient to define fatherhood. The participants' experiences show that care, emotional presence, and domestic participation are increasingly recognized as legitimate parts of being a father.

This pattern is significant because it demonstrates that caring masculinities do not simply reject hegemonic masculinity, but rather challenge and reshape it from within. The fathers in this study continue to operate within a patriarchal social environment, but they actively reinterpret what masculine responsibility

means in family life. As a result, fatherhood becomes a site where gender norms are both reproduced and transformed.

The findings further suggest that the transformation of masculinity is not linear. Some fathers are more comfortable with emotional care than domestic labor, while others contribute more in practical work than in emotional communication. This variation supports the view that caring masculinities should be understood as a process, not as a fixed identity category. The Medan fathers therefore represent different entry points into care, all of which challenge the assumption that masculinity must be detached from parenting.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Millennial fathers in Medan City are reconstructing fatherhood through caring masculinities by combining emotional presence, domestic participation, and shared responsibility. Their experiences show that masculinity can move from a dominance-centered model toward a more relational and egalitarian form without losing its masculine meaning. In the context of this study, fatherhood is not a static social position but a process of identity formation that continues to evolve through lived experience, family interaction, and changing social expectations.

The findings show that the meaning of being a father has expanded beyond the breadwinner role. For many participants, a good father is not only someone who provides economically, but also someone who listens, accompanies, teaches, and is emotionally available to children. This broader understanding of fatherhood emerged from their daily practices, such as taking children to school, helping with homework, participating in household tasks, supporting spouses, and maintaining open communication with children. These activities reflect the way fatherhood is reconstructed through everyday care and relational involvement.

The study also shows that this transformation is not free from tension. Fathers still face pressure from patriarchal norms, social expectations, and cultural assumptions that position domestic work and caregiving as women's responsibilities. Some participants described moments when their caregiving actions were questioned by neighbors, coworkers, or even by the broader social environment. Nevertheless, they continued to negotiate these expectations through practical action, emotional commitment, and cooperation with their spouses. This indicates that caring masculinities emerge not as an effortless change, but as a negotiated response to persistent patriarchal structures.

Another important finding is that fatherhood in this study is closely linked to personal reflection and learning from experience. Several participants explained that their approach to parenting was shaped by their own childhood experiences, including being raised by mothers, observing family caregiving patterns, or caring for ill relatives before marriage. These experiences became an important foundation for their later understanding of responsibility, empathy, and emotional presence. In this sense, fatherhood operates as a space of self-revision, where men reinterpret what it means to be strong, responsible, and present within the family.

The study also suggests that caring masculinities are expressed differently across fathers, depending on their personal histories, work conditions, family

arrangements, and social context. Some fathers felt more comfortable with emotional care than domestic labor, while others contributed more through practical work than verbal communication. This variation shows that caring masculinities should not be understood as a fixed identity or a single behavioral model, but as a process that develops in different ways across individual lives. The Medan case therefore demonstrates that there are multiple pathways into care, all of which challenge the assumption that masculinity must be detached from parenting.

Overall, this study suggests that millennial fathers in Medan City are reconstructing fatherhood through a more caring and relational form of masculinity. Their experiences show that involved fatherhood is not a departure from masculinity, but a redefinition of it. This makes caring masculinities a useful framework for understanding contemporary fatherhood in urban Indonesian families. At the same time, the study affirms that transformation is gradual, context dependent, and shaped by the interaction between personal agency and social structure. Tesis_CameLia-Nasution_Revisi-Semhas.docx

Recommendations

Future research should examine fatherhood in other regional and social contexts in Indonesia to see whether similar patterns of caring masculinities emerge. Comparative studies involving fathers from rural settings, other ethnic communities, or different class backgrounds would help show how local culture shapes the experience of fatherhood. It would also be useful to include the perspectives of spouses, children, and extended family members so that father involvement can be understood more relationally and more comprehensively.

In addition, future studies could explore how workplace demands, digital parenting practices, and religious values influence men's caregiving roles and masculine identities. Because fatherhood is shaped by both family life and broader social structures, further research would benefit from approaches that can capture change over time, including longitudinal or mixed-method designs. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how caring masculinities continue to develop within contemporary Indonesian society

FURTHER STUDY

This study has limitations because it uses a qualitative phenomenological approach with a small number of participants. Future research may compare fathers in Medan with fathers in other regions and include the perspectives of spouses and children to provide a more complete understanding of fatherhood

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