



(Extra)Ordinary Swedish Dads: Branding the ‘Exceptional’ Swedish Nation through Visual Representations of ‘Everyday Fatherhood’

By
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Abstract

From 2016 to 2019, the Swedish Institute circulated a photo exhibition entitled ‘Swedish Dads’ to approximately 50 countries where it was seen by tens of thousands of people. This state-funded and state-sanctioned exhibition was intended to represent the Swedish state in the international arena. The exhibition was adapted based on the Swedish Dads photobook produced by Swedish photographer, Johan Bävman. The question is what happens when an artistic photobook is transformed into a narrative about Swedish fatherhood and how this narrative changes as it comes to represent the Swedish state in the international arena.

The aim of this article is to contribute interdisciplinary knowledge in terms of how particular representations of fatherhood are constructed and used in the marketing of certain norms and values in the international arena. This interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to address broader kinds of questions and to extend knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries (Strang and McLeish 2015). To do this, I examine how representations of what I call ‘everyday fatherhood’ are used to brand the Swedish nation as ‘exceptional’. Thematic analysis and visual discourse analysis were combined in analyzing the material, which consisted of the photographs and texts used in the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition, as well as key informant interviews.

The analysis highlights that while the Swedish Dads photobook emphasized that Swedish Dads are not so special, the Swedish Dads exhibition conveyed the opposite message, i.e., that Swedish Dads – and by extension, the Swedish state – are in fact exceptional. By showing how images of the ordinary and the everyday can be used to achieve larger political objectives in the international arena,

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the article makes visible connections between the micro and the macro levels. Ultimately, the article also shows the complex ways in which representations of the 'ordinary' (Swedish father) and the 'exceptional' (Swedish state) can be strategically constructed and deployed in relation to nation branding practices.

Introduction

In a globalized context, modern nation states use nation branding techniques to promote their position in the global social order. This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine a specific nation branding project, viewing it as a means through which the Swedish nation is 'imagined' through representations of Swedish fathers. Indeed, the image of progressive Swedish fathers on parental leave has become an important aspect of Swedish nation branding. From 2016 to 2019, the Swedish state circulated a photo exhibition entitled 'Swedish Dads' to approximately 50 countries. This exhibition was based on an artistic photobook by Swedish photographer, Johan Bävman and was adapted for international circulation by the Swedish Institute. The question is what happens when an artistic photobook is transformed into a narrative about Swedish fatherhood and how this narrative changes as it comes to represent the Swedish state in the international arena.

This article takes its starting point in the field of visual culture, asking questions such as "Who or what represents what to whom with what, and where and why?" (Mitchell 1994: 420). From this starting point, the article intersects with several fields – examining how representations of 'good fatherhood' and 'good parenthood' (cf. Lindgren 2015; Earley, Fairbrother and Curtis, 2019) are constructed and taking a critical, cultural approach (cf. Kaneva, 2011) to examine how such representations are used in a nation branding context. While nation branding purports to represent the non-political truth about the nation, it is an inherently political intervention (Glover 2011). Indeed, because representations can have great normative and ideological power in terms of the discourses which they may (re)produce, it is crucial to ask *how* they are socially constructed and to what end (Phoenix, Howarth and Philogène 2017). Therefore, the analysis examines how the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition were socially constructed and how the meaning of these visual stories may change as the context shifts to the international arena. The focus is thus on images, narratives, and texts, as well as the relationship between them.

The Swedish Dads exhibition was widely circulated by the Swedish Institute -- a public agency with an official mission to promote interest and trust in Sweden around the world (Swedish Institute, n.d.). The Swedish Institute disseminated the Swedish Dads exhibition via Swedish embassies, with the exhibition being shown

at multiple venues in 54 countries over a period of four years. This means that tens of thousands of people would have seen the exhibition. The circulation of the Swedish Dads exhibition can be seen as a continuation of the work the Swedish Institute has been doing since the 1960s, where it first started disseminating representations of Swedish men that serve to connect the Swedish nation brand to notions of gender equality (Klinth 2019).

As far back as the World's Fairs and Expositions of the nineteenth century, exhibitions have functioned as stages on which nations display "strategic and ideological" versions of their national identity (Smits and Jansen, 2012: 173). In this way, international exhibitions have acted – and continue to act – as sites for the construction and display of national identities "in an explicitly and normatively global context" (ibid.). While exhibitions are often presented to the public as self-evident statements, they could instead be seen as "the outcome of particular processes and contexts" (Macdonald, 1998: 1). By making visible these processes and context, it becomes possible to examine what is communicated through an exhibition like the Swedish Dads exhibition – as I do in this article.

The Swedish Dads exhibition started with the Swedish Dads photobook which was produced by the Swedish photographer, Johan Bävman (2015). Bävman recruited fathers who had shared parental leave equally¹ with their partners and photographed these fathers at home on parental leave with their young children. Bävman also exhibited the photographs and accompanying texts from the Swedish Dads photobook. However, his exhibitions were identical to the photobook and were hosted by Bävman in his capacity as a photographer. The Swedish Institute became interested in the Swedish Dads photobook and – in collaboration with Bävman – developed an adapted photo exhibition intended for international circulation via the Swedish Institute and Swedish embassies. Since exhibitions communicate information and knowledge through visualizing and verbalizing particular types of stories, it is important to analyse the processes involved in producing these constructions. In this sense, the Swedish Dads exhibition provides an ideal opportunity to examine the processes and interest groups involved in constructing a widely circulated, state-funded and state-sanctioned exhibition in terms of what gets displayed, silenced or ironed out, who decides and how these choices can influence public understandings of certain topics (cf. Macdonald 1998).

Previously, scholars have mapped the discursive territory covered through these images in relation to notions of 'involved fatherhood', as well as showing how images from the Swedish Dads photobook were "appropriated" as part of a marketing campaign for 'Brand Sweden' (Molander, Kleppe and Ostberg 2018: 19). In this way, the exhibition has strengthened the associations between the

¹ In this case, defined as fathers who took six months or more parental leave with their child

Swedish nation brand and images of involved fathers – reinforcing the image of Sweden as a progressive and gender equal country (Jeziarska and Towns 2018; Klinth 2019). However, to date, no scholars have examined the process through which the Swedish Dads photobook was transformed into the widely circulated, state-sanctioned and state-funded Swedish Dads exhibition. Therefore, combining analysis of different kinds of material – including images, texts, and interviews – the current article seeks to contribute an interdisciplinary understanding of the process through which these representations of Swedish fathers and – by extension, the Swedish nation – were constructed.

The Swedish Context

In 1974, Sweden became the first country in the world to replace ‘maternity leave’ with ‘parental leave’ (Jeziarska and Towns 2018). Two years later, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency launched a nationwide campaign to encourage fathers to take parental leave (Klinth 2008). The campaign featured the photograph of a famous weightlifter with bulging muscles tenderly holding a baby in his arms – an image which arguably maintained traditional notions of masculinity (Klinth 2008). However, it was an early step towards the care-oriented vision of masculinity and fatherhood which has increasingly come to epitomize the Swedish ideal, as influenced by the “ideology of gender equality” (Johansson and Klinth, 2008: 43). In this sense, the image of the ‘new man’ who “actively and publicly engages in child-care and child responsibilities” (Morgan 2001: 228) is an image which has existed in Sweden for many decades – and which remains connected to notions of modernity, enlightenment and democracy (Klinth 2008).

While men in Sweden hardly took any parental leave in 1974, by 2015 they were using 26% of the parental allowance (Statistics Sweden 2016). Today, the Swedish state offers both mothers and fathers a share of 480 days of paid parental leave per child. Part of what makes this parental leave system unique is a high level of flexibility whereby parents can divide up leave days or use parental leave to reduce their work hours until the child turns 12 (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2019b). As of 2016, each parent has an exclusive individual right to 90 of those days – a policy which has contributed to a more equitable division of parental leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2019b).

According to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan), most fathers in Sweden make use of at least some parental leave (Duvander 2008), and on average, fathers in Sweden now use 79 days of the 480 paid parental leave days (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2019a). However, the extent to which fathers use parental leave tends to vary, with men in the lower education and income category taking less parental leave than men in higher education and income categories

(Persson 2019). These differences may partly be due to financial considerations, but could also be due to varying “values and behavioural norms” (Persson 2019: 10). For example, working-class fathers in Sweden tend to have different ways of constructing their fatherhood compared to middle-class fathers and are more likely to uphold more traditional gender patterns in their households (Plantin 2007).

Indeed, norms, values and ideals have a strong influence on how fatherhood is constructed. Generally speaking, Swedish fatherhood is constructed in relation to the strong cultural ideal found in many western, post-industrial societies – i.e., that ‘good fathers’ should display that they are ‘intimately involved’ in their child’s everyday life (cf. Earley, Fairbrother, and Curtis 2019). Research on Swedish middle-class families has highlighted the norm of ‘involved parenthood’, defined as “the cultural norm prescribing that parents are to be responsible for their children, spend as much time as possible with them, and try to develop close relations to them” (Forsberg, 2009: 11). This norm is actively promoted by institutions such as schools and the Swedish welfare state (ibid.). This middle-class parenting model has been connected with the notion of ‘child centeredness’, i.e. where most of parents’ “time outside work is spent on their children and the children’s leisure-time activities” (ibid., 13). In this sense, Swedish fathers have increasingly been expected to conform to ideals of ‘good parenthood’ (cf. Lind et al., 2017) which are often connected to notions of ‘child-centered’ parenting (Lindgren 2015) and ‘involved parenthood’ (Forsberg 2009).

Since the early 2000s, the Swedish Institute has used images of intimate and involved Swedish fathers as a means of connecting the Swedish nation brand to notions of gender equality and progressiveness (Jeziarska and Towns 2018; Klinth 2019). Indeed ‘Brand Sweden’ is based on four values that are intended to encapsulate Sweden’s “progressive self-image”, i.e. open, authentic, caring and innovation (Pamment, 2012: 100). However, modern nation states such as Sweden are increasingly characterized by multiculturalism and multiple identities (cf. Lundström and Teitelbaum, 2017) which can present a challenge in terms of presenting a unified national image (cf. Widler 2007). Indeed, Sweden’s image abroad is still influenced by deep-rooted clichés – such as the idea of blond hair and blue eyes (Pamment, 2012: 108). However in 2018, approximately one-sixth of the Swedish population was born outside Sweden (Malmberg et al. 2018). Since the 1980s, an increasing proportion of migrant populations in Sweden originate from non-European countries and these migrants tend to face high levels of residential segregation (ibid.). The challenges of multiculturalism and diversity become particularly pertinent in the context of Nordic countries like Sweden which have been relatively culturally homogenous historically, and where notions of Nordicness and whiteness often remain closely intertwined (cf. Lundström and Teitelbaum, 2017). Therefore, the transformation of the Swedish Dads photobook

into the Swedish Dads exhibition circulated by a government agency provides an ideal opportunity to examine how the image of the 'ordinary' Swedish father is constructed in relation to the construction of an exceptional and unified national image.

The 'Ordinary' and the 'Exceptional' in Nation Branding

Nation branding is "a method of distinction" whereby nations use marketing techniques to show that their brand is "uniquely authentic" (Valaskivi 2016: 139) – in other words, positioning it as exceptional. From an international perspective, Sweden's parental leave policies have been seen as "unique and radical" (Plantin 2007: 94). This feeds into discourses of Nordic exceptionalism – i.e., that there are uniquely Nordic ways of doing things and that Nordic countries can act as a model for other countries to follow (cf. Browning, 2007). One area in which Nordic states have been seen as exceptional is through the use of the welfare state as a means of creating an equal society – with a particular focus on gender equality (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006). Like its Nordic neighbours, the Swedish state promotes egalitarian values through policy reforms, for example related to paid parental leave (ibid.).

Although nation branding could be seen as a way of representing a nation as 'exceptional', states increasingly use 'ordinary citizens' to do this (cf. Fauve, 2015). This has also been the case in Sweden – where 'ordinary' Swedish citizens have been tasked with representing and promoting their nation in relation to an international audience. For example, 'random Swedes' were given control over the official @Sweden Twitter account for a period of time (Christensen 2013) and as of 2016, international travellers could 'call a Swede' on the 'Swedish number' to talk to an ordinary citizen and find out more about the country (Pamment and Cassinger 2018).

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to contribute interdisciplinary knowledge in terms of how particular representations of fatherhood are constructed and used in the marketing of certain norms and values in the international arena. To achieve this, I firstly examine how what I call 'everyday fatherhood' is constructed and represented in the Swedish Dads photobook; secondly, I examine how this photobook was transformed into the Swedish Dads exhibition circulated by the Swedish Institute. Finally, I reflect critically on what these constructions of fatherhood (in the first instance) and this transformation process (in the second instance) can tell us about how the Swedish state uses representations of Swedish fatherhood to represent and market itself in relation to an international audience.

Method and Materials

Methodologically, I take a social constructionist approach whereby I view images and texts as being mutually constitutive. I am mindful that the material can be interpreted and reinterpreted in several ways – an approach which has informed the analysis process. I approach representations as ‘ways of world-making’ which, in turn, have implications for how social realities are constructed (Moscovici 1998; Phoenix, Howarth and Philogène 2017). Importantly, I am not concerned with the truth or falsity of the representations constructed by either the Swedish Dads photobook or the Swedish Dads exhibition. Instead, I focus on the ways in which they *construct* particular kinds of representations of both Swedish fathers and the Swedish nation and what is conveyed through these representations.

The material includes the 45 photographs and texts in the Swedish Dads photobook (Bävman 2015) and the 25 photographs and texts in the Swedish Dads exhibition circulated by Swedish Institute. I also analyze material from two key informant interviews. Interviewees were selected based on their unique knowledge of the subject and included the photographer Johan Bävman and a representative from the Swedish Institute who was responsible for the Swedish Dads exhibition. I interviewed Bävman at his studio in Malmö and the representative at the headquarters of the Swedish Institute in Stockholm. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, lasting approximately two-hours each. I audio-recorded and later transcribed the interviews. For this article I translated excerpts of these interviews from Swedish to English.

In analyzing the material, I used a combination of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019) and visual discourse analysis (Rose 2016). Thematic analysis is a reflexive process whereby themes do not passively “emerge” from the data but can instead be understood as “creative and interpretive stories about the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). Visual discourse analysis (Rose 2016) makes it possible to study the image itself as well as to consider the image in relation to institutional practices and contexts (Rose 2016). It also makes it possible to examine images individually and collectively, and to view images critically, while allowing for different possible interpretations. I examine the images in relation to the captions because texts can influence how visual content is understood (cf. Mitchell, 2002; Sjöberg, 2012).

Throughout the analysis process, I worked iteratively between the interview material, and the images and texts – continually going back and forth and refining the themes and discourses identified. During these repeated rounds of analysis, the material was examined from several different angles with a focus on what the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition were intended to convey and how this was achieved. The analysis was guided by the research questions and is therefore presented in two sections.

The first section examines how Bävman constructed and represented ‘everyday fatherhood’ in the Swedish Dads photobook. I began by identifying key themes and discourses in terms of how Bävman constructed the notion of ‘everyday fatherhood’ during the interview. These themes related to how Bävman wanted to construct representations of Swedish fathers on parental leave as *not* so special and how he wanted to capture the messy, un-staged ‘reality’ of everyday fatherhood. I then connected these themes to the photographs and captions in the Swedish Dads photobook.

In the second section I examine what was added, removed, or altered when transforming the Swedish Dads photobook into the Swedish Dads exhibition that was circulated by the Swedish Institute. This was done by creating a table with the first column containing photographs, quotes, and captions from the Swedish Dads photobook. I then added corresponding columns to include the version of these photographs, quotes and captions that were included in the Swedish Dads exhibition. In the next columns I highlighted what had been changed and then analyzed the effect produced by these changes. Here, key themes related to the addition of diversity and integration, as well as changes which served to ‘generalize’ the Swedish Dads exhibition. In this way, I was able to identify the different messages conveyed by the Swedish Dads exhibition when compared to the Swedish Dads photobook. The results of this analysis will now be presented.

Constructing Representations of Everyday Fatherhood in the Swedish Dads Photobook

In this part of the analysis, I examine how the notion of ‘everyday fatherhood’ was constructed and represented by Bävman – both in the interview and in the photographs in the Swedish Dads photobook. The two main themes I identified relate to how Bävman constructed and represented ‘everyday fatherhood’ as:

1. *not* so special, unremarkable and mundane
2. an un-staged, and messy, reality

Constructing ‘Everyday Fatherhood’ as a Not So Special, Unremarkable and Mundane

In the Swedish Dads photobook, Bävman writes that “Only fourteen per cent of [Swedish] parents share the [parental leave] days equally” and that the photobook is “...based on portraits of dads who belong to that small percentage who stay home for at least six months” (Bävman 2015, no pagination). In this sense, Bävman positions the fathers featured in the photobook as special or exceptional in that they are part of a “small percentage”. However, during the interview, Bävman described his objectives with the Swedish Dads photobook as follows:

I didn't mean to praise these fathers [for sharing parental leave] – they're actually *not* special fathers. The intention was actually to raise a discussion about *why* we see these fathers as special [when they are] doing what women have always done and no one ever made a photobook about them! [...] Even if it is important to create role models so that more men dare to take [...parental leave], it's also to show that it's not that special being home [as a man] (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*).

Here, Bävman highlights two objectives: firstly, to challenge the idea that (Swedish) fathers who take parental leave are “special” and secondly, to create role models to encourage more men to take parental leave. In this quote, Bävman is critical of the idea that Swedish fathers who take parental leave should be praised for “doing what women have always done” without being praised. In this sense, Bävman's efforts are intended to show that “it's not that special being at home” on parental leave. This could be interpreted as a critique of the image of Sweden as a gender equal country considering that men are praised for doing “what women have always done” without being praised. In this sense, Bävman wanted to show that Swedish Dads who take parental leave are “actually *not* special fathers”.

When recruiting fathers for the project, Bävman describes how he intentionally avoided fathers who saw themselves as special:

Some of the fathers who wanted to participate in the project [...] had an image that they wanted to present of themselves – they wanted to show themselves as if they were perfect [...] So, they weren't quite as good as the fathers who hadn't really reflected over the fact that they chose to stay home with their child [on parental leave] – where it was *obvious* that they would do so (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*).

Here Bävman constructs the notion of ‘everyday fatherhood’ in relation to fathers *who didn't think* it was remarkable or special that they took parental leave. He contrasts these fathers against fathers who *did want* to participate in the project in order to “show themselves as if they were perfect”. Here, ‘everydayness’ could also be understood as ‘every day fatherhood’ – i.e., fathers who are involved with their children ‘every day’ rather than just when there is a photographer around to witness this. As Bävman noted,

All the pictures of Swedish fathers that I had seen were [...] so beautiful. I was tired of not being able to recognize myself and my parenthood in any of those photographs [...] Because it's not just about the happy moments – often the pictures you see would be of parents at like some

playpark, swinging with their kids and looking very happy. And they never showed any of the vulnerability, the tiredness and frustration and that *hard work* – that *unpaid work* – that is an important part of all this (Bävman Interview, June 2018).

In this quote, Bävman positions his photographs as providing an alternative, more nuanced image when compared to existing photographs of Swedish fathers which, according to him, tend to emphasize the happy and leisurely side of being a parent. Bävman notes that he could not identify with these photographs because they do not show the “hard work” or the “tiredness” and “frustration” that are also part of being a parent and a father. Bävman continues,

Because what does it really entail being at home [on parental leave]? Yeah, it means doing the laundry, cleaning, doing the dishes *and* taking care of the child (Bävman Interview, June 2018).

Here, Bävman constructs his notion of ‘everyday fatherhood’ in relation to representations of fathers doing mundane, everyday chores such as laundry and cleaning. However, he emphasizes that all of these routine, repetitive chores are only part of the “hard work” – and that they are things that need to get done *in addition to* “taking care of the child”. The following two examples from the Swedish Dads photobook can be seen as visual representations of the “hard work” of being a parent on parental leave with young child/ren.



Figure 1 Ola with Gustave
(Copyright: Johan Bävman)



Figure 2 Alfred with Zack and Mira
(Copyright: Johan Bävman)

In the first photograph, a father is on his knees vacuuming with his son in a baby carrier on his back (Figure 1). In the second photograph the father literally has his hands full as he stands stoically in front of a rack of drying laundry carrying one child on his hip while the other is climbing his body and hanging onto his shirt (Figure 2). While these images can indeed be understood in relation to the “hard work” of doing the mundane chores of everyday fatherhood, they also point to a key theme in many of the photographs in the Swedish Dads photobook – i.e., that the child’s needs are central even when other things are happening. For example, in the case of the father who is vacuuming, the child is kept safe and close to the father by having the child on his back (Figure 1). In the case of the picture of the father with the laundry, the fact that the laundry is behind them gives the impression that this chore is something that happens *in the background* and is secondary to the most important task – i.e., caring for the children (Figure 2).

In this way, ‘everyday fatherhood’ is constructed through representations of fathers doing ordinary, household chores – but always while treating the child’s needs as a top priority. In this sense, these photographs can be seen as a manifestation of the discourse of child-centred parenting – an approach that is favoured in the Swedish context (Lindgren, 2015). However, Bävman also (re)produces an image of the gender equal Swedish man through visualizations of a father simultaneously performing childcare and household duties (cf. Sjöberg 2012). In this way, Bävman hoped to create a relatable, unpolished image of everyday fatherhood that shows that these fathers are actually *not* so special.

Constructing Representations of ‘Everyday Fatherhood’ as an Un-staged, and Messy reality

During the interview, Bävman constructed the photographs in the Swedish Dads photobook as “describing the reality that many parents can identify with” (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*). He also noted:

These are documentary photographs in the sense that I didn’t try to influence the situation... As a documentary photographer, I was part of the everyday. I do influence the everyday by my presence there – that’s inevitable (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*).

In justifying the reference to “documentary photographs”, Bävman notes that he “didn’t try to influence the situation” – with this idea of “influence” being connected to staged photographs. In this way, Bävman implies that the photographs were not staged. By positioning himself as being “part of the everyday”, he implies that his photographs give a fly-on-the-wall perspective on the everyday life of the families he was photographing. These quotes highlight how Bävman connected

his photographs to notions of 'reality', 'documentary photographs', 'everydayness', and a lack of interference or staging. In line with this documentary approach, Bävman noted:

[...] When I spoke to [the fathers] on the phone [before taking the photographs], I said, 'You're not allowed to clean, you're not allowed to dress up... Everything should be completely normal... Just do what you would normally do. But then I'd arrive and once, the table was set up with a tablecloth and coffee and biscuits laid out for me. And I was like, 'No! This is not what I wanted!', type of thing. Or sometimes the partner would have vacuumed before I arrived (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*).

In this excerpt, Bävman constructs his notion of everyday fatherhood in relation to an idea of *messiness as reality* – with the implication that if the families had prepared for his visit, this made it somehow *less real*. However, considering the efforts Bävman had to make to access this *messy reality*, one could argue that this too required a form of *staging*. In this sense, the notions of 'staged' or 'unstaged' are equally socially constructed.

When Bävman did succeed in accessing this everyday messiness, he still struggled to get the families to accept the photograph he wanted to use in the Swedish Dads photobook. Bävman explained that he started with fifty fathers but in the end, he had to exclude five fathers from the photobook. These fathers did not like the photograph that he wanted to use of them because "they wanted to present themselves in a different way" (*Bävman interview, June 2018*). Bävman provided an example where the photograph he chose to include in the photobook had been a contentious issue:

Bävman: I have loads of pictures of each father. And there have been big discussions around which picture I had planned to use – that they didn't think... Well, they thought I had made a strange choice. Like, take [father's name] for example [points to picture in photobook]. We had a lot of discussion around this image [...]

Interviewer: So, what did he say when you chose this photograph?

Bävman: [...] he was like, 'Can't you choose another picture?' And I was like, 'No, I can't – this picture is *so damn good!* This is really important! [...]

Interviewer: Why do you think they didn't like this picture [...]?

Bävman: [...] it's a bit dirty there [pointing to image].

An example of the everyday messiness that Bävman wanted to portray can be seen in the following image (Figure 3) which was included in the Swedish Dads photobook.



Figure 3 Sacha with Julian and Noor
(Copyright: Johan Bävman)

“Everyone should commit equally to parenthood, regardless of gender [...] At the same time as it’s really physically challenging to be with my kids, I also get totally overwhelmed with this indescribably massive feeling of love”

(Excerpt from caption accompanying Figure 3 in the Swedish Dads photobook)

In this photograph (Figure 3), the father and children appear to be in the entrance to the home - potentially about to go out or perhaps they have just come home? The father is on his knees and appears to be helping his older child to put on/remove their shoes as the child lies sprawled on the floor. In the background, a younger child cries in a stroller. In this way, the image captures a sense of the everyday messiness that Bävman uses to visually constitute everyday fatherhood. The father is looking up – meeting the gaze of the photographer/viewer and giving the impression that this is a candid photograph and that we have walked in on this scene of everyday fatherhood. The caption accompanying this image implies that although it is “really physically challenging” being with his kids, it is also emotionally rewarding, giving an “incredibly massive feeling of love”. In this sense, these representations of the messiness of everyday fatherhood provides a literal snapshot into how the more challenging and pleasurable aspects of parenthood can coexist in a single moment.

This analysis has shown how Bävman constructed the notion of what I call ‘everyday fatherhood’ as an alternative to the more polished images of Swedish fathers which tend to represent these fathers as special, happy and at leisure. Instead, Bävman wanted to construct a more nuanced and potentially more relatable image of fatherhood – including making visible the “hard work” of being home on parental leave. This includes doing ordinary, mundane, and routine

household chores – while simultaneously taking care of the child and prioritizing their needs.

In order to construct these representations of everyday fatherhood, Bävman recruited fathers who did not see themselves as special and when he photographed them, he encouraged them to do what they would normally do. Bävman described his photographs as un-staged, ‘documentary’ photographs which portray the mundane, messy reality of everyday fatherhood. In this way, Bävman’s representations were intended to show that even the most *exceptional* Swedish fathers (i.e., the ‘small percentage’ who take six months of parental leave) are “actually not special fathers”.

Transforming an Artistic Photobook into a Nation Branding Exhibition

In this part of the analysis, I examine what was added, removed, or altered when transforming the Swedish Dads photobook into the Swedish Dads exhibition. In order to contextualize these changes, I also use excerpts from the interview conducted with Johan Bävman and with the representative from the Swedish Institute. Two important changes I identified relate to:

1. adding diversity and integration
2. generalizing the Swedish Dads exhibition

Adding Diversity and Integration

Of the 45 photographs in the Swedish Dads photobook, 24 were used in the Swedish Dads exhibition. However, one new photograph was added to the Swedish Dads exhibition that was not part of the Swedish Dads photobook. This photograph features a father and his two daughters (Figure 4). The father has one arm around each daughter, both of whom are smiling. Visually, the inclusion of a photograph where the father and the children are smiling and laughing is noteworthy considering that Bävman constructed everyday fatherhood as *not* just being about the “happy moments” (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*). It is therefore interesting that the Swedish Institute chose to include a photograph that *did* show a “happy moment”.

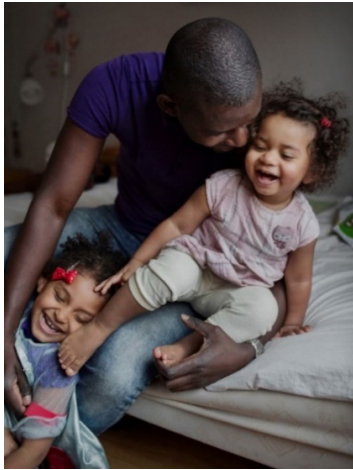


Figure 4 Ibra with daughters, Alice, and Ebba (Copyright: Johan Bävman)

“I think it’s important to look at this from the child’s perspective. I am convinced that our children benefit from being raised by both parents. My family has become even more important to me since I’ve been on paternity leave [...]”

(Excerpt from caption accompanying Figure 4 in the Swedish Dads exhibition)

When I asked the representative from the Swedish Institute about this photograph (Figure 4), he noted that the fathers included in the Swedish Dads photobook were not recruited in a way that was geographically representative of Sweden. Therefore, he explained, it was important for the Swedish Institute to make some changes in order “to give a fair image of what Sweden looks like today” (*SI Interview, April 2018*). He also noted that it was “important to work with diversity” and “to incorporate Afro-Swedish representation” (*SI Interview, April 2018*). According to Bävman, this Afro-Swedish representation was important because “there were so many African states that had shown an interest in exhibiting these photographs” (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*). In this way, Bävman legitimizes the addition of this photograph by mentioning African states’ interest and by constructing the father in this photograph (Figure 4) as being an image that African fathers could potentially identify with. According to Bävman, “there was someone from the Swedish Institute who knew Ibra, so we invited him to join the project” (*Bävman Interview, June 2018*). Bävman interviewed and photographed this father in the same way he had previously done with the other fathers. Interestingly, the interview excerpts used in the caption for this photograph do not make any special mention of his identity as an ‘Afro-Swede’. Rather, it positions him as a family man who values his relationships with his children and who tries to see things “from the child’s perspective”. In this sense, the interview excerpts emphasize his identity as a father rather than emphasizing any of the other aspects of his identity.

Continuing the theme of diversity, it is noteworthy that most of the fathers in the Swedish Dads exhibition and the Swedish Dads photobook appear to represent white, middle-class fathers. However, there were two photographs of fathers of Middle-Eastern origin in the Swedish Dads photobook – both of which

were included in the Swedish Dads exhibition. One of these photographs shows a father brushing his daughter's hair (Figure 5). Interestingly, some important changes were made to the caption accompanying this photograph in the Swedish Dads exhibition (Table 1).

	The Swedish Dads photobook	The Swedish Dads exhibition
 <p>Figure 5 Said and Amana (Copyright: Johan Bävman)</p>	<p>"[...] As a Swedish Muslim, living in an area with lots of immigrants, it can feel lonely being a stay-at-home dad [...]"</p>	<p>"[...] I'm a Swedish Muslim and live in an ethnically diverse community [...]"</p>

Table 1: the photograph and texts accompanying the photograph of Said as they appeared in the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition (respectively).

The captions included in the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition both imply that the father in the photograph self-identifies as a 'Swedish Muslim'. However, in the photobook, the interview excerpt described the father as living in "an area with lots of immigrants" while in the Swedish Dads exhibition, this phrase was changed to "an ethnically diverse community". The phrase "an area with lots of immigrants" could potentially be associated with the negative discourses around immigrants in Sweden, often associated with the 'discourse of the problematic area' or neighbourhood (Castro and Lindbladh 2004). It could also allude to the relatively high degree of residential ethnic segregation in Sweden (Malmberg et al. 2018). In contrast to these potentially negative connotations, the phrase "an ethnically diverse community" has far more positive connotations, being associated with the discourse of cultural diversity (cf. Horsti and Hultén 2011) and implying cultural integration. Through this alteration, a narrative of Sweden as a segregated country with areas with lots of immigrants was transformed into a narrative of Sweden as a country that has "ethnically diverse" and thus, implicitly integrated, communities.

Generalizing the Swedish Dads Exhibition

Another difference is that in the Swedish Dads photobook, the fathers' first and last name was included while in the Swedish Dads exhibition, only the fathers' first name was included (i.e., their last names were removed). For example, Andreas Bergström became just 'Andreas'. At one level, it may seem simpler to have just the first name of each father without including his last name. However, this seemingly small change could influence an audience's perception of the fathers in the photographs by removing the sense that these are specific, individual fathers with first and last names – instead, transforming them into generic 'Swedish Dads'. This contributed to the shift in the exhibition from representing the small *minority* of Swedish dads who share parental leave equally (as Bävman described the project in the photobook), to giving the impression of representing the *average* Swedish Dad. This created the sense that one could pick any 'Andreas' or 'Said' and they would probably be like the fathers in the photographs – giving the impression that the fathers in the photographs are *typical* rather than *exceptional* Swedish Dads. This change can be understood in relation to the Swedish Institute's goal of promoting Sweden abroad. Because the Swedish Dads exhibition was circulated under the auspices of the Swedish state, it needed to tell a story about Swedish fathers in general rather than just the few, exceptional fathers.

Other changes which contributed to this sense of 'generalizing' the Swedish Dads exhibition can be seen in the changes made to the texts accompanying the photograph of a father feeding his two children (Figure 6).


	The Swedish Dads photobook	The Swedish Dads exhibition
 <p>Figure 6 Juan with Ivo and Alma (Copyright: Johan Bävman)</p>	<p>"My Spanish family asked a lot of questions when I told them I was going to take time off to be with my children. My Spanish friends who are parents admitted they were envious, as they don't have the option to stay at home with their children in that way in Spain. My older relatives expressed doubts as to whether I would be able to handle the children myself [...]"</p>	<p>"My friends in Spain were jealous of me being able to stay home with my children for several months. My family was skeptical and asked me a lot of questions; they weren't sure I could manage [...]"</p>

Table 2: the photograph and text accompanying the photograph of Juan as they appeared in the Swedish Dads photobook and the Swedish Dads exhibition (respectively).

The texts accompanying this photograph (Table 2) relate to how the father's family and friends in Spain reacted to his decision to take parental leave. In the Swedish Dads photobook, the text describes that his Spanish friends were jealous that he was able to take parental leave as a father in Sweden. However, it also describes that he received a lot of questions from his Spanish family – especially his older relatives who “expressed doubts as to whether I would be able to handle the children myself”. The fact that it is specifically his *older relatives* who doubt his decision implies that their doubt may be connected to their being part of an older generation that is less familiar with the idea of fathers caring for their children on their own. The fact that the text mentions that his “Spanish friends” were jealous that he could take parental leave implies that younger generations in Spain may be more comfortable and familiar with the idea of fathers taking parental leave and looking after their children on their own.

However, this text was altered in the Swedish Dads exhibition, with the phrase “my older relatives” being replaced with “my family” so that it reads: “My [Spanish] family was skeptical and asked me a lot of questions; they weren't sure I could manage.” In this altered version, the text implied that his *Spanish family* doubted his ability to manage being on parental leave on his own. Here, the implication is that there are different norms and attitudes towards men taking parental leave *between countries* rather than *between generations*. In this sense, by changing “my older relatives” to “my family”, the meaning of the text changed to imply general country differences between Spain and Sweden rather than between younger and older generations and implying that Swedes generally – and Sweden as a nation – are more progressive than in Spain.

These examples highlight how in transforming the Swedish Dads photobook into the Swedish Dads exhibition, changes were made which had a powerful impact on the narrative produced. For example, the addition of a photograph of an Afro-Swedish father contributed to a narrative of diversity and inclusivity – that one does not have to be a blond, blue-eyed Swede (cf. Pamment 2012) to be included in an exhibition of ‘Swedish Dads’. Similarly, by rephrasing the interview excerpt (Table 1), the narrative shifted from drawing on the more negative discourses around immigrants in Sweden to drawing on the more positive discourses of diversity, integration, and multiculturalism. Changes were also made to the fathers' names which gave the impression that the photographs in the exhibition represent the average rather than the exceptional Swedish father. Finally, changes were made which gave the impression that the Swedish Dads exhibition not only constructed *Swedish fathers* as exceptional, but that the exhibition was adapted to say something about the *Swedish state* (Table 2). In this sense, the changes made in the Swedish Dads exhibition did not only give a *fair* image of what Sweden looks

like today but were adjusted to give a more *desirable* image of what Sweden looks like today – i.e., as an ethnically diverse and culturally integrated country where the average – rather than the exceptional – Swedish father takes extended periods of parental leave – thanks to the unique conditions provided by the Swedish state.

Discussion

The analysis highlighted how notions of the ordinary and the everyday intersect with notions of the special and the exceptional in interesting ways. Through the Swedish Dads photobook, Bävman intentionally constructed representations of what I call ‘everyday fatherhood’ – whereby he wanted to show that even these ‘exceptional’ Swedish fathers who share their parental leave equally with their partners are “actually not special fathers”. Bävman represented this idea of “not special” by emphasizing the mundane, messy, un-polished aspects of being at home on parental leave with a young child. This included doing ordinary household chores (such as vacuuming or laundry). These chores were represented as being secondary to the main focus – i.e., the everyday needs of the child. What is important to note here is the basis of comparison. In the case of the Swedish Dads photobook, the *Swedish fathers* who are represented in the photographs are constructed as being “not special” – implicitly when compared to (*Swedish*) *mothers*. Instead, they are constructed and represented as being ordinary, gender equal, Swedish parents who – just like Swedish mothers who take parental leave – spend much of their day doing ordinary things like household chores and taking a child-centred approach to parenting.

However, when the Swedish Dads exhibition was internationally disseminated under the auspices of the Swedish Institute, the basis of comparison shifted. As the analysis highlighted, changes were made in adapting the Swedish Dads photobook which gave the impression that the Swedish Dads exhibition represented something about Swedish fathers in general – and also about the Swedish state. Here, Swedish fathers were no longer being compared to Swedish mothers but were instead compared to fathers in other nations. Likewise, this shift in context meant that the Swedish nation state was implicitly being compared to other nation states in the international arena. Thus, while the Swedish Dads photobook emphasized that Swedish Dads are *not* so special, the Swedish Dads exhibition conveyed the opposite message, i.e., that Swedish Dads – and by extension, the Swedish state – are in fact, *exceptional*.

Indeed, when compared to fathers in an international context, Swedish fathers *are* quite special. Part of this ‘specialness’ is that they live in a country that offers paid parental leave to mothers *and* fathers and where the image of the ‘involved’ father has been actively promoted by the state since the 1970s (Klinth 2008). In

this sense, Swedish fathers are special in an international context, since they have the political and economic support of the state which makes it possible to take extended periods of paid parental leave until their child turns 12. Furthermore, Swedish fathers live in a society where they are socially encouraged and even expected to be involved with their children and to be ‘caring fathers’ who adhere to the ‘ideology of gender equality’ (Johansson and Klinth 2008) – something which is not the case in all countries. In this sense, the Swedish state is constructed as ‘exceptional’ in an international context because it is the Swedish welfare state that makes it possible for Swedish fathers to be actively involved with their children in a way that may be very difficult for fathers (and mothers) in countries that lack such generous parental leave policies.

The use of representations of ‘ordinary’ Swedish fathers in relation to ‘everyday fatherhood’ can also be understood in relation to existing forms of Swedish nation branding which also make use of ‘ordinary people’ (cf. Christensen, 2013; Pamment and Cassinger, 2018). What is particularly interesting in this case is the way in which this ‘ordinariness’ is ultimately used to position the Swedish state as unique and exceptional in an international context – reinforcing existing notions of Nordic exceptionalism (cf. Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012). Ultimately, the representations of ‘everyday fatherhood’ in the Swedish Dads exhibition serve to construct the image of *the average* Swedish father as being routinely involved with the everyday needs of his child – to the extent that such a father is considered ordinary, unremarkable, and mundane in the Swedish context. In this way, these representations of Swedish fathers could give the impression that gender equality has already been achieved. Such representations have been dubbed ‘postfeminist fatherhood’ in other contexts (cf. Hamad 2013) and postfeminist representations have also been identified in a Swedish context (cf. Goedecke 2020).

Previous studies have highlighted how the Swedish Dads exhibition has contributed to branding the Swedish nation as ‘progressive’ by reinforcing the connections between ‘Brand Sweden’ and ‘gender equality’ (Jeziarska and Towns 2018; Klinth 2019). The current study highlights how the Swedish Dads exhibition also reinforces these connections to progressiveness by constructing the Swedish Brand in relation to discourses of diversity and multiculturalism. In this way, the Swedish Dads exhibition constructs a representation of the Swedish state as ‘exceptional’ and yet simultaneously diverse and inclusive. This was seen in the changes made when transforming the Swedish Dads photobook into the Swedish Dads exhibition. In some ways, adding a representation of an Afro-Swedish father, and including the representations of a Muslim father and a father of Middle-Eastern origin in the Swedish Dads exhibition served to diversify the image of Swedish society and to challenge the connections between notions of Nordicness and whiteness (cf. Lundström and Teitelbaum, 2017). However,

these changes can also be understood in relation to the intended target group of the Swedish Dads exhibition – i.e., an international audience which might find it easier to identify with a father of African or Middle-Eastern origin or a father who identifies as a Muslim.

This article highlighted some seemingly *minor changes* that were made in producing the Swedish Dads exhibition – where one new photograph was added, and some changes were made to the accompanying texts. However, as the analysis and discussion have shown, these changes had *major implications* for the overall narrative that was communicated. In this way, this article highlights some of the communicative possibilities and limitations of images and texts– and particularly how the same images can tell a very different story when used in different contexts. In this way, this study contributes towards a better understanding of how images and exhibitions work in communicative contexts. Furthermore, these findings highlight the complex ways in which notions of *the ordinary* and *the everyday* and notions of *the special* and *the exceptional* can be strategically deployed in relation to nation branding practices. Specifically, the analysis shows how desirable images of child-centered fatherhood can be used in the construction of a desirable image of a nation state – which in turn is constructed as diverse, inclusive, and supportive of gender equality. In this way, the article highlights connections between the micro and the macro levels – showing how images of the ordinary and the everyday can be used to achieve larger political objectives connected to nation branding in the context of globalization and international competition between states.

Author

Sarah Jane Mitchell completed her PhD at the Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. Her thesis examines the construction and circulation of images and ideals of fatherhood and draws theoretical inspiration from parenthood studies, visual culture studies, and nation branding studies.

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