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Fathers of children with autism negotiating parenting roles in Indonesia: (un)masking hegemonic masculinity?

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ABSTRACT

Located at the intersection of family, gender, and disability studies in the Global South, this research engages with the ways fathers of neurodivergent children in Indonesia negotiates traditional masculinity and gender roles in their parenting. It contributes to scholarship in two areas: (1) family research on parents of neurodivergent children which hitherto mainly represent mothers' experience instead of fathers', and (2) gender studies on parenting which often overlook specific local conditions and contextual discourses to advance gender equality in the Global South. Using qualitative data from 14 fathers of neurodivergent children, our analysis reveals three discourses drawn upon by participants to contest traditional gender norms in their role as fathers, namely, a discourse of an exceptional situation, a discourse of the child's future, and a discourse of benevolent sexism. While these discourses might not fundamentally subvert wider patriarchal parenting norms; nevertheless, they are viable for these Indonesian fathers to adopt more equal roles.

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Introduction

Existing academic research at the intersection of family, gender and disability studies is hitherto dominated by researchers and data from the Global North (Makino et al., 2021; Moodley & Graham, 2015). There is still a lack of diversity of perspectives, data, and geographical contexts in this field, especially from non-Western countries. Different contexts might have different dynamics of familial, cultural, gender, and ableist norms; so the advancement of social inclusion, functional family life, and gender justice may not necessarily follow the trajectory of the Global North countries (Brocco, 2024; Frank et al., 2024; Mazzuca et al., 2024). Drawing upon data from Indonesia, the current study seeks to complement existing international family research in this field and contribute new insights from a less-researched, non-Western context. Indonesia is a Southeast Asian country with the population of more than 270 million people which has recently moved up from the category of lower to upper middle-income country. With steady economic growth, ongoing education reforms, increasing international exchanges, and growing middle classes since the 1998 democratic reformation, progressive discourses

vis-à-vis gender equality, modern family, and disability rights have begun to gain currency in the Indonesian academia, social activism, and even national policies/law (Cameron, 2023; INOVASI, 2020; KOMPAK & Bappenas, 2022).

Situated at the intersection of the family studies, gender studies, and disability studies in the Global South, this research examines how fathers of neurodivergent children (or children with autism) in Indonesia negotiate traditional masculinity and gender roles within the context of their parenting. Previous studies have demonstrated how the parenting of neurodivergent children is relatively more challenging as compared to neurotypical children (Davis & Carter, 2008; Karst & van Hecke, 2012; Pisula & Porębowicz-Dörsmann, 2017; Seymour et al., 2020); the involvement of both the mother and the father in parenting and care is, most of the time, inevitable. In many Global South contexts, equality in parenting roles has been hindered by traditional masculinity and gender norms (more in the Literature Review section below). Little is known how these norms are (re)negotiated, disrupted, and even subverted beyond the existing Global North-based studies. Further, research on parents of neurodivergent children is still largely conducted among mothers; there is a glaring gap in the academic literature about the experience of fathers (more below). Responding to this gap, the question guiding this research is: What are the contextual discourses drawn upon by participants in their ways of being a more involved father, which might have disrupted traditional gender and ableist norms dominant in their Indonesian cultural settings?

It is important to note that in this article we might appear to use the term neurodiversity and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) interchangeably, while in fact we use them specifically to convey different meanings. The term ASD comes from clinical settings, referring to difficulties in social interaction and communication, and restricted, repetitive and/or sensory behaviours or interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In contrast, neurodiversity comes from a more emancipatory background where autism and other neurologically-based conditions such as ADHD are considered as one aspect of human variations in brain functioning and behavioural traits which must be accepted, accommodated, and their rights protected in an inclusive society (Goldberg, 2023; Schuck et al., 2022; Shah & Holmes, 2023). While we as researchers advocate for more emancipatory approaches to autism spectrum disorder, we are also cognizant that the term neurodiversity might not accurately represent the way participants talk about their child in the Indonesian context, where clinical understanding of autism spectrum disorder is still predominant.

Theoretically, the current study is informed by a feminist poststructuralist framework in understanding gendered power relations, discourse, and social change (Davies, 1991; Weedon, 1987). The ways parents think about and do childcare are always enabled by a set of interrelated ideas (i.e. discourse) through which individuals in a given context understand their lifeworlds. A dominant discourse of (traditional) masculinity, for example, offers a way to understand a father's involvement in parenting as feminine and contradicting his masculine identity. However, discursive resources are always multiple and shifting; dominant discourses can be disrupted or replaced by alternative discourses (Foucault, 1982). The more individuals draw upon an alternative discourse, the more that discourse gains currency, and might become a dominant discourse. Discourses surrounding disability in some countries, for example, have begun to shift from deficit and shameful to emancipatory and entitled to support (Goldberg, 2023;

Shah & Holmes, 2023; Woods et al., 2018). It is through these processes of discursive contestation that social change occurs. Here, the identification, circulation, and taking up of alternative discourses are of paramount importance vis-à-vis social transformation, including in advancing more equal parenting roles in various social contexts such as neurodiversity parenting. Informed by this feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework, the current study seeks to identify contextual discourses drawn upon by fathers of children with autism towards more equal parenting roles pertinent to Indonesian contemporary contexts.

We begin our article by reviewing relevant contemporary family research on parenting at the intersection of gender studies and disability studies, particularly parents of neurodivergent children. Subsequently, we explain the methodology of this research through which qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Three themes representing our key findings are then presented, namely, a discourse of exceptional situation, a discourse of the child's future, and a discourse of benevolent sexism. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings in terms of theoretical insights and practical recommendations.

Literature review: neurodiversity, parenting, and hegemonic masculinity

This research seeks to contribute new insights to the existing academic knowledge in at least two areas. The first area is family research on parents of neurodivergent children. Studies in this area have reported that parents of children with autism are more prone to mental health conditions compared to parents of children with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (Ilias et al., 2018; Karra et al., 2024; Scherer et al., 2019). These parents experience greater parenting stress due to significant challenges; ranging from the process of obtaining a diagnosis, treatments or interventions, the child's behavioural problems, concerns about lifelong conditions, and parental expectations for the child's future (Ang & Loh, 2019; Brewton et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2023). In addition, having children with autism may also impact on the relationship between father and mother as a spouses, affecting the quality and stability of their marriage (Gur & Golan Bayazy, 2024; He et al., 2022; Losada-Puente et al., 2022). Families often face multifaceted challenges that include both daily life and broader social domains. For instance, at the individual level, children's rigid routines and heightened sensory sensitivities frequently constrain everyday activities, as parents must avoid sudden changes and often refrain from participating in public settings to prevent sensory overload. These restrictions disrupt family routines and curtail opportunities for spontaneity and engagement beyond the home. At the community level, families encounter stigmatization, misjudgment, and limited understanding of their child's behaviours, resulting in reduced social inclusion. In response, parents may choose to isolate their child to minimize negative encounters, a strategy that inadvertently deepens the family's own social marginalization. Beyond these psychosocial strains, the demands of specialized education, therapeutic interventions, and dietary adjustments impose substantial financial pressures. Taken together, the intersection of behavioural characteristics, specialized needs, economic burdens, and community responses creates a reinforcing cycle of limitation and isolation that profoundly shapes the lived experiences of families raising children with ASD (Gur & Golan Bayazy, 2024; Losada-Puente et al.,

2022; Rfat et al., 2023; Sánchez Amate & Luque de la Rosa, 2024). This condition is even more challenging for families with traditional gender roles, where mothers are often exhausted with caregiving, and fathers tend to have low attachments with their children; this situation often resulted in difficulties to understand and accept the child's condition (Khougar et al., 2024; Rafferty et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2022).

One notable pattern among studies in this field is that fathers' experiences and voices were generally less represented than mothers' (Jones et al., 2022; Potter, 2017). Reviews on international research show that only a small fraction of studies in this area focused on fathers of neurodivergent children. Early research (1984–1991) showed only 1% of studies focused on fathers, while 48% involved only mothers (Phares & Compas, 1992). Reviews from 1992 to 2004 and 2005 to 2015 indicated minimal improvement, with father-specific studies remaining below 2%. This persistent trend highlights the underrepresentation of fathers in this field over the past few decades (Cheuk & Lasiewicz, 2016; Parent et al., 2017). This is not surprising considering that the wider scholarship on parenting (of neurotypical children) has shown how fathers are still considered as 'secondary caregivers' (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019; Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2018). The term 'secondary' suggests a lack of importance or skills compared to the 'primary caregiver', relegating them to a complementary role rather than an equal one.

This discursive positioning may have detrimental impacts for fathers in both research and professional practices. Some scholars in parenting studies have labelled fathers as 'hard to reach', 'invisible', or 'shadow' (Kangas et al., 2019; Potter, 2017; Samadi & Samadi, 2020). Fabiano (2007) and Braunstein et al. (2013) documented that some professionals relied more on mothers in seeking information about their child(ren) and were less willing to collect information from fathers. Some fathers of neurodivergent children felt that they were not being believed by childcare professionals when talking about their child(ren) (Burrell et al., 2017). Consequently, available professional supports for fathers of neurodivergent children were often based on the characteristics of mothers (Dewey & Hodgkinson, 2022; Meadan et al., 2015; Perzoli et al., 2021). While lacking in support and understanding, ironically, these fathers were expected to skillfully control their child's behaviour in public, to the point that they felt judged or blamed when they were unable to do so (Giannotti et al., 2023; May et al., 2022). As a result, the anger and frustration followed by guilty feelings impacted their self-efficacy in child-rearing and made them perceive that their partner was the better parent.

In summary, academic studies to date have focused on the challenges faced by fathers of neurodivergent children, which include increased demand for involvement and availability, lack of parenting skills, greater responsibility to take more part in interventions for the child's progress, vulnerability to stress due to the child's behaviour, the need for additional funding for treatment or intervention, and instability within their marriages with spouses (Gur & Golan Bayazy, 2024; Karst & van Hecke, 2012; Lashewicz et al., 2018; Pisula & Porębowicz-Dörsmann, 2017). However, there is a lack of study examining how fathers of children with autism eventually manage to get more involved in parenting. More importantly, little is known about the discursive resources drawn upon by these fathers (through which they understood their own parenting role and experience) in being a more involved parent – which is a gap the current study will fill.

The second area the current research seeks to contribute is gender studies on parenting, particularly the role of fathers. Scholars in fatherhood research indicate that the new form of fatherhood – namely, egalitarian fathers who are highly involved in parenting, engaged as equitable spouse or co-parent, and share significant time in housework – is a promising and potentially a better approach to parenting than the traditional, patriarchal model. Such claims are supported by studies suggesting that a shift towards a more equitable distribution of parental roles yields benefit not only for fathers but also for families as a whole (Estevan-Reina et al., 2020; Habib, 2012; Magaraggia, 2013; Petts et al., 2018;). To date, the advantages of heightened paternal engagement in domestic and childcare responsibilities have been widely recognized, including improved social and educational outcomes for children, enhanced life satisfaction for actively involved fathers, and greater stability in intimate relationship (Camilleri, 2022; Opoku et al., 2024; Rudelli et al., 2021; Yogman & Eppel, 2021).

The transition from traditional to egalitarian roles, however, can be challenging as it requires significant adjustments. Previous studies on father's role in the family (Hunter et al., 2017; Quinain, 2015) have identified at least two major areas of adjustments: (1) fathers' masculine identity and (2) gender-based parenting roles; both are inextricably intertwined and socially constructed. For instance, while conventional fathers were often characterized as strong, disciplined, emotionless, and less involved in parenting (Kuo et al., 2018; Perales et al., 2023), egalitarian fathers are expected to display greater emotional sensitivity, express their feelings towards their children, also actively participate in household chores (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Gurkan et al., 2021). Childcare and housework are often associated with femininity, so these new responsibilities may be embarrassing for men, especially if the social environment is unsupportive and judges them as men without superiority at home (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Lazar, 2005; Petts et al., 2018). Previous research has demonstrated that stay-at-home fathers may encounter negative social reactions when they deviate from traditional gender roles and assume greater responsibility for caring for their children (Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017; Doucet, 2006; Rushing & Sparks, 2017; Stevens, 2015). These new care responsibilities may also disrupt their sense of masculinity and make them appear feminine (Magaraggia, 2013; Medved, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity – a dominant form of masculinity that legitimates the superior position of men and subordination of women (Connell, 2005; Jones et al., 2021; Nayak, 2023; Wedgwood, 2009) – have long been an important component of a man's identity in patriarchal societies (Barbeta-Viñas & Cano, 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Yang, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity is closely tied to the traditional model of parenting, where men tend to prioritize their role as breadwinners or workers outside of the house (Berdahl et al., 2018; Ladge & Humberd, 2022). Gender-based parenting norms were also often reflected in workplace policies that do not take working fathers' care responsibilities into account. Addressing this condition, over the past three decades governments in most developed economies have implemented policy changes aimed at encouraging working fathers to dedicate more time and effort to their parental roles (Bueno & Oh, 2022; Koslowski & O'Brien, 2021). However, this might not necessarily be the case in many Global South countries where fathers are not necessarily expected to be involved in parenting. More specifically in Indonesia, the policy landscape includes formal recognition of paternal involvement through the

Law on Maternal and Child Welfare during the First 1,000 Days of Life (2024) or UU KIA. The law grants mothers maternity leave of three months, extendable up to six months under certain conditions (Article 4, Paragraph 3). Fathers are entitled to paternity leave of two days, which can be extended up to five days with employer approval (Article 6, Paragraph 2). While this provision acknowledges the father's role in early childcare, the comparatively shorter duration of paternal leave also reflects enduring traditional norms where caregiving responsibilities predominantly rest and focus on mothers. This highlights ongoing challenges in balancing caregiving responsibilities between mothers and fathers within Indonesia's family welfare policies. Our current study seeks to explore the understudied condition where fathers of neurodivergent child(ren) in a Global South context, Indonesia, are involved in parenting and childcare, despite the dominance of traditional gender norms, hegemonic masculinity, and lack of support from workplaces and the government.

Further, cultural contexts play a role in shaping parenting styles, expectations, and children's behaviours that parents encourage or discourage. For instance, Chinese families may encourage children to be sensitive to others' emotions while suppressing their own, whereas American counterparts focus on promoting autonomy and discussions to express feelings (Yixuan Wu, 2023). In contrast with Western modern contexts, the responsibility of caring for children in various traditional cultures is not only for the nuclear family but shared among extended family members, including siblings. These cultural variations in parenting styles and expectations can influence when and how parents recognize and deal with atypical development in their children. Although symptoms of the disorders may be similar across cultures, symptom descriptions, interpretations, and diagnostic acceptance can vary tremendously, for example, differences in the time it takes to seek a diagnosis and cultural beliefs about social behaviour. Cultural factors also affect the family's ability to accept the child and provide necessary resources to promote the child's development. In many traditional cultures, families often feel ashamed of having a child with a mental disability, thinking that it is a punishment for the parents' past behaviour, particularly the mother (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2021; Tait et al., 2016). In these contexts, ableism – discrimination favouring able-bodied and able-minded persons – is a dominant discourse in understanding disability. It is important for research in this area to explore both macro-level socio-cultural factors as well as micro-level factors at the family level that affect response to diagnosis or treatment choice, and how both levels are interconnected (Bernier et al., 2010; de Leeuw et al., 2020; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). In order to add new contextuality to the existing research on parenting of neurodivergent children, the current research on Indonesian fathers seeks to contribute new insights by taking into account the cultural contexts of their parenting roles, including the dominant hegemonic masculinity, traditional gender roles, and ableist norms.

In the collectivist context of Indonesia, the significance placed on collective well-being and interdependence profoundly influence parenting approaches, since one of the distinctive features of collectivist societies is prioritizing societal opinion over personal choice. This cultural perspective shapes how parents in Indonesia raise their children, fostering values of social harmony and respecting authority figures (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020; Maulana et al., 2018). Collectivist cultures are also often described as guilt cultures or shame cultures, where individuals who violate group rules or

have an opinion that deviates from that of the community may feel ashamed or guilty (Her & Joo, 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010; Neumann, 2022). Further, children hold a significant role as a source of familial pride and are expected to bring happiness and prosperity to the family. Boys, in particular, are seen as continuing the male kinship line (Riany et al., 2017; Simanjuntak et al., 2018). In this context, misunderstandings and stigma related to neurodiversity could lead to negative emotions in parents. For instance, Tucker's research (2013) on parents of neurodivergent children in Javanese culture in Indonesia found that traditional cultural beliefs often resulted in stigmatizing attitudes from the community so that the family feels embarrassed if it is publicly known.

Some cultural beliefs regarding the origins of autism in Indonesia include pregnancy and/or infancy complications, breaking the pregnancy taboos, karma, and divine predestination, with autism often viewed not negatively but as a consequence of past actions, an interpretation rooted in cultural traditions rather than blame. While this belief might not always be inherently and directly harmful, it may unintentionally lead to social stigma or exclusion, as the child's condition is perceived as a reflection of past moral or spiritual faults, potentially increasing parental stress and adversely affecting the child's well-being (Daulay, 2018; Handayani & Paramita, 2020; Riany et al., 2017). Aligned with these beliefs, the phrase 'gifts from God' frequently appears in studies on children with autism, illustrating how religious convictions shape parents' acceptance of their child's condition. Many parents perceive autism as part of divine will, which fosters patience, gratitude, and emotional strength in caregiving (Daulay, 2018). Thus, while religion and culture both offer important frameworks for understanding, they can also shape family experiences in complex ways, especially when cultural interpretations are misunderstood or misapplied.

Further, Indonesia's state-autism care system is shaped by a dynamic interplay of institutions and policies that impact families differently across regions. The national health insurance provider, BPJS Kesehatan (n.d.) or Indonesian Health Social Security Agency, facilitates access to diagnostic and therapeutic services for children with autism, though detailed information on autism therapy is not always clearly presented on its official platform. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has taken steps to disseminate awareness and educational materials to improve early detection and intervention for autism (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2023). This system is supported by the legal framework provided by Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which guarantees rights and services for individuals with disabilities, including those with autism (Government of Indonesia, 2016). Furthermore, to strengthen these regulations, the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (RAN PD) has been established. This strategic framework aims to guide planning and budgeting processes to ensure respect, protection, and fulfilment of the rights of people with disabilities (Kemenko PMK, 2022). However, despite this comprehensive legal foundation, the implementation and availability of services vary widely across regions due to differences in infrastructure, availability of trained professionals, and local government priorities. Consequently, fathers of children with autism often face a complex and uneven journey in navigating care, requiring persistent engagement with multiple governmental bodies and adaptive strategies to secure adequate support. It is against this socio-cultural backdrop and regulatory complexity that the current research is conducted, where

Indonesian fathers of neurodivergent children negotiate gendered, religious, and ableist cultural norms in their parenting.

Method

Methodological framework

The methodological framework of this research is critical discourse analysis (CDA), that is, a qualitative analytical approach which critically describes, interprets, and explains how a discourse constructs, maintains, and legitimizes certain configurations of power dynamics (Mullet, 2018; Bhattarai, 2020). Discourse is understood as a set of interrelated ideas through which a person gives meaning to their experience (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Discourse enables as well as limits what the subject can think or speak and guides their actions. Discourse is always multiple, shifting, and related to the operation of power (Mullet, 2018). A dominant discourse of ableism, for example, enables/limits what an individual can think about disability, and guide their actions when it comes to dealing with a disabled person. Ableism positions a disabled person in certain power relations that tend to disempower rather than empower them. Discourse is not static, but continuously contested; the dominant discourses can be destabilized, and alternative discourse can gain more currency. Therefore, the goal of CDA in this study is to offer insights that may empower individuals by identifying alternative discourses which might disrupt the dominant ones and are viable to be drawn upon in a given context.

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were Indonesian fathers in families with children with autism, without limitations based on background factors such as age, profession, number of children, or the gender of children (Table 1). As many as 14 fathers of a child(ren) with autism in Indonesia were recruited from various ethnic groups, the majority were

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Participant (pseudonym)	Age	Socio-economic class	Education	Location	Cultural background	Religion	Occupation
Surya	47	Upper-middle	Bachelor	Surabaya	Chinese	Catholic	Businessman
Guntur	39	Upper-middle	Bachelor	Surabaya	Javanese	Islam	Entrepreneur
Damar	35	Upper-middle	Bachelor	Depok	Chinese	Christian	Office worker
Rian	33	Middle	Bachelor	Karawang	Minangkabau	Islam	Teacher
Arya	33	Middle	Bachelor	Bogor	Javanese	Islam	Office worker
Erwin	39	Middle	Bachelor	Karawang	Chinese	Catholic	Part time teacher
Jaya	52	Lower-middle	Bachelor	Surabaya	Javanese	Catholic	Stay-at-home father
Ridwan	40	Middle	Bachelor	Tarakan	Javanese	Islam	Secondary-school teacher
Irfan	34	Lower-middle	Bachelor	Pemalang	Javanese	Islam	Employee
Wawan	47	Upper-middle	Master	Surabaya	Chinese	Christian	Businessman
Yudi	41	Middle	Master	Bandung	Javanese	Islam	Lecturer
Zaki	40	Middle	Bachelor	Surabaya	Javanese	Islam	Employee
Bima	61	Middle class	Bachelor	Malang	Javanese	Islam	Retiree
Umar	55	Upper-middle	PhD	Surabaya	Javanese	Islam	Lecturer-Dentist

dominated by Javanese ($n = 9$), Chinese ($n = 4$), and Minangkabau ($n = 1$). The age range of the fathers who participated in the study was between 33 and 61 years old, with various employment statuses, including full-time employees ($n = 10$), entrepreneurs ($n = 3$), and a retiree ($n = 1$). Two fathers reported having more than one child with autism. Only one participant's child is a girl, while the others are boys. All fathers live with their spouses, except for one who is a widower. It is important to note that the small sample is not intended to be representative; instead, the analysis focuses on what discourses giving rise to participants' way of understanding their parenting role which are relevant in the contexts of contemporary Indonesia.

Procedure

Following the approval of ethics from the researchers' university, 14 participants were recruited using flyers distributed through social media and community groups. Participants who were willing to be interviewed contacted the first author via the provided phone number. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Indonesian language by the first author in October–November 2023 in various formats (i.e. face-to-face, through video call, or by phone) offering flexibility and convenience for participants to accommodate their busy schedules. The questions revolved around their views and experience as fathers of a child(ren) with autism in Indonesia particularly their parenting roles, for example 'What is your perspective on a father's role in the family?' and 'How does this role change when raising a child with autism?'. Fathers were also inquired about the dynamics of their relationships with their children and partners within the context of their parenting roles. For instance, they were asked, 'How do you describe your relationship with your child and your partner in the context of parenting?' and 'What are your specific contributions to the child's care?'. As a token of appreciation, the researchers provided IDR 100,000 (USD 0.65) as compensation for transportation cost, data quotas, and the time they dedicated; this was informed in the flyer.

During the data collection, data saturation was continuously assessed using two distinct strategies. The first involved a code frequency approach, which quantified how often specific codes appeared in the data. The second strategy focused on the interpretation of code meaning, shifting the emphasis from mere frequency to evaluating whether each new participant's narrative provided additional insights or revealed previously unexplored dimensions. Data collection in the current study was concluded when no reasonably new significant meanings or insights emerged (Ahmed, 2025; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Ethics

The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study before the semi-structured interviews. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, all identifying details were eliminated from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used to refer to them. This study was granted an Ethical Clearance Certificate by the Institutional Ethical Committee of the (concealed for review purposes).

Data analysis

The data analysis in this study followed a Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (FCDA) technique suggested by Willig (2013). We first determined the notion of fathers' roles as the discursive object. Willig (2013) noted that FCDA seeks to explore various discursive constructions of the object through which participants explained their experiences. We focused on discourses that enabled certain actions or offered subject positions that may advance more equal roles in parenting; which are the next steps in Willig's FCDA technique. Finally, we considered ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being (i.e. subjectivity) that are made available by these discourses, particularly the involved father (in parenting). Key discourses identified during the analysis were then discussed as the findings of the current study. The data excerpts presented in this article were translated to English by the authors themselves who are native Indonesian speakers.

Researcher's characteristics and reflexivity

This study draws on both insider and outsider perspectives based on the authors' unique backgrounds. The first and the third authors, both female psychologists with extensive experience working with neurodivergent children and families (including autism and ADHD), provide a professional understanding of neurodivergence. The second author, a researcher who is also a father of a neurodivergent child (autism), offers an insider perspective grounded in personal and theoretical reflexivity. Together, their combined perspectives – professional expertise and personal experience – create a balanced approach to exploring neurodivergence, with careful reflection to manage potential personal biases.

Results

Our analysis revealed there are at least three alternative discourses drawn upon by participants in understanding their role as an involved father of a child with autism which disrupted traditional parenting roles. They are a discourse of an exceptional situation, a discourse of the child's future, and a discourse of benevolent sexism. It is important to note that these discourses are not intended to be exhaustive nor generalizable, but rather, contextual in this specific social location and illustrative of possible ways to disrupt patriarchal ways of parenting. Each discourse will be presented in the following subsections, and then discussed together in the next section.

'... because these children have special needs [sic]': a discourse of an exceptional situation

The first discourse we identified is a discourse of an exceptional situation, where participants took up a relatively more equal, partnership-based parenting because their condition as parents of a child on the autism spectrum is considered an exceptional circumstance. This condition is seen as highly exceptional to the extent that modification of parenting roles was not only needed, but also understood as a necessary sacrifice especially for fathers. In this section, we argue that drawing upon this discourse

enables participating fathers to be a more involved parent, but without challenging traditional gender norms in wider Indonesian contexts.

Indonesian fathers in this study have undergone considerable transformation in their parenting roles, moving from their previous roles as supporters or complements to actively engaging in a collaborative role in caregiving. This shift indicates that, whereas caregiving responsibilities were previously primarily the mothers, they are now equally shared between fathers and mothers because the caregiving workload is understood as exceptionally higher than typical families. These fathers are now involved in tasks such as bathing the children, changing diapers, engaging in playtime, and contributing to household chores such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning, despite the dominant norms in Indonesian societies where fathers do not usually do these tasks.

As soon as our child was diagnosed, I began sharing (domestic) tasks with my wife because she also works, so we support each other. (Arya, 33 years old, Office worker)

I cook *because my (autistic) child is on a diet*, I tidy up the house, do all the laundry, everything is done by me. (Erwin, 39 years old, Part-time teacher)

Yes, because these children *have special needs [sic]*, there are additional responsibilities in terms of caregiving that need (my) assistance as well. (Jaya, 52 years old, Stay-at-home father)

Jaya used to work full-time in an office but then he quit to take care of his two children with autism. In an Indonesian context where buying cooked food is easy, convenient, and cheap, Erwin explained that he cooks because of the special diet of his child; indicating that he might not have to cook if his child is not on a special diet. Their recognition of the additional caregiving responsibilities that come with having children with autism spectrum demonstrates an acknowledgement of the practical challenges involved in such special caregiving conditions. During the interview these fathers did not show any expressions of shame or embarrassment with their caregiving role, and some even showed an undertone of pride in their new parenting roles. As Arya, Erwin, and Father Jaya's quotes above showed, their proud involvement was quickly followed by a '*because*', that is, because of the exceptional condition of children with autism.

A pattern observed among these fathers is a shift from prioritizing providing for the family to taking care of their children. Like Jaya, some other participating fathers have left full-time jobs to stay at home and care for their child, leading them to take on a larger share of childcare responsibilities compared to their wives, especially when the wife works full-time. For instance, Guntur (39 years old, Entrepreneur) claimed that he took a larger portion of childcare responsibilities than his wife: 'My job can be handled from home, so as a result, I take care of my first child almost 80% of the time.' Some fathers spoke about their decisions to work less and care for the child more using the notion of sacrifice, where they abandoned their role as primary breadwinner and having less time for themselves; all because their child's situation is exceptionally different:

In fact, there are many sensitive factors, such as when the wife works and the husband's income is less than hers, making the wife the primary breadwinner. This creates a particular burden for the father. Thus, while the father has the responsibility of taking care of the children, he may feel under-appreciated by his wife for his daily sacrifices in child-rearing. This

situation is quite sensitive for fathers whose wife works. (Erwin, 39 years old, Part-time teacher)

There are many (sacrifices), maybe many, maybe in terms of time as well because I happen to be taking care of two children and their characters also *require very, very extra understanding*, it feels like time is always lacking. (Surya, 47 years old, Businessman)

During the interview, Erwin explicitly stated that his child is non-verbal and has lower cognitive ability, which led to difficulties in attending mainstream school. Therefore, he took this childcare responsibility for the benefit of the children, prioritizing their well-being over his 'personal ego as a man'. Surya reiterated the word 'very' twice, on top of the word 'extra', to describe the level of understanding needed to take care of his two children with autism. These examples represent a significant shift in gender role transformation in an Indonesian context, reflecting changes from rigidly defined gender roles to a more inclusive understanding of parenting practice. This transformation challenges traditional gender norms and signifies a broader cultural shift towards a fairer distribution of family responsibilities between both genders, but it was justified using the rhetoric of their exceptional situation – implicitly stating that it might not necessarily apply in typical situations. In this way, their involvement in childcare is justified, but isolated to their specific context of autism. Here, the dominant gender-based parenting roles in wider contexts might have gone uncontested.

'We don't know how long we'll live': A Discourse Of The Child's Future.

The second discourse identified in the data analysis is a discourse of the child's future, in which concerns about the future survival of their neurodivergent child in the ableist world made these fathers took up more roles in caring and parenting. This concern for future survival manifests in efforts to improve the child's self-help skills and independence in everyday life, of which these fathers were highly involved. We argue that, in the ways these fathers spoke about their own experience, this discourse is powerful enough to contest traditional gender-based parenting roles currently dominant in their Indonesian contexts.

In typical families, increased involvement of fathers is proven to benefit their children by enhancing self-esteem, academic achievements, social-emotional well-being, and other positive behaviours (Aleman et al., 2020; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Wang & Chen, 2024). Different from those typical families, fathers of children with autism in the current study exhibit heightened engagement in caregiving which was mainly driven by an intention to foster their child's independence. When asked what they want for their autistic child, Yudi, a 41-year-old lecturer, concisely expressed this motivation: 'Basically, I want to ensure that my special needs [sic] child can be independent'. Surya (47 years old, businessman) also expressed the same sentiment: 'Well, first, that they can be independent. Second, that they can be accepted well by the surrounding community.' This emphasis on independence aligns with societal expectations that autonomy signifies capability and self-reliance in adulthood. To achieve these expectations, fathers in this study strive to foster independence in their children by teaching practical life skills such as toilet training, self-feeding, engaging in physical exercise, and, for older children, ensuring they can safely return home independently after going outside:

He can already urinate in the bathroom, so when he wants to pee, his diaper is dry, and he starts touching his pants. We take him to the bathroom, remove his diaper, and he pees right

away. However, he hasn't mastered bowel movements yet. He still can't give a signal, so if we're not paying attention, he might poop anywhere. (Ridwan, 40 years old, Teacher)

Yes, their independence is very important, for example, Kiran can return home on his own after going outside, whereas Kamal is not yet able to do so. (Jaya, 52 years old, Stay-at-home father)

These concerns around the child's independence imply that dependent individuals may be perceived as a burden in a society that prioritizes and values independence, which unfortunately might lead to the marginalization or exclusion of individuals who rely more on support or have different needs. This suggests the existence of a societal hierarchy where independent individuals are perceived as capable of making positive contributions while those who rely on others or are less independent may be viewed as challenging or unable to meet societal expectations. Based on the goals fathers in this study aim to achieve, it is evident that these fathers consider independence crucial for their child, plays a significant role in how individuals are perceived and valued in society. For people with autism or other disabilities in an ableist and collectivist context like this, their level of independence may significantly influence their social standing and how others perceive them; or in Surya's words, 'can be accepted well by the surrounding community'. Another father, Damar (35 years old, office worker), expressed how his child's independence is difficult to achieve because the society still consider neurodivergent persons as dangerous:

There are still many who feel that having a child with autism is a threat to them or even to their own children. They might feel disturbed, even if they don't say anything. I can see their reactions, and not only do they react this way, but I also feel uncomfortable around them. We need to have a special space for this special child. There's a fear that, although the child doesn't mean to cause trouble, an accident—even a minor one—might happen. To avoid this, we need to have a solution before going out. (Damar, 35 years old, Office worker)

As in many other Global South countries, there is still no state-funded, lifelong care system for disabled persons in Indonesia; instead, the parents and families are tasked with taking care disabled persons, and worse, think about how to continue the care after themselves passed away. As Ridwan (40 years old, teacher) narrated: 'That's why I teach independence, because as long as we have the opportunity, we should teach independence because we don't know how long we'll live.' This narrative portrays fathers' involvement in childcare and parenting as a fundamental parental duty, emphasizing the importance of cultivating independence for the sake of the child's future. The phrase 'we don't know how long we'll live' reflects a sense of helplessness, striving to ensure their children can achieve independence, preparing for situations where they may be unable to provide ongoing assistance.

This reality underscores the challenges faced by families of children with autism in many Global South countries, which might differ significantly from those encountered by families in Global North or in typical family settings. Here, the dire reality of uncertain future care for neurodivergent persons has become powerful enough to challenge traditional parenting norms in Indonesia, to the extent that these fathers got involved in childcare and parenting beyond the usual roles, for the sake of their child's future survival by teaching them self-help skills and independence in everyday life.

'... because sometimes women are emotional': a discourse of benevolent sexism

The third discourse identified among the participants is benevolent sexism, where the involvement of fathers in parenting is understood as an act of benevolence. Despite seemingly supporting equal, partnership-based parenting, these fathers' involvement might be underpinned by beliefs in traditional masculinity and gender roles – specifically, the belief that men are stronger, more rational, and better decision-makers and leaders – in the context of dealing with the challenges of parenting neurodivergent children. We argue that this discourse perpetuates hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles under the guise of equality.

Conceptually, benevolent sexism reproduces traditional gender roles through the belief that women are more suited for domestic responsibilities, thereby limiting the recognition of diverse capabilities and interests in both genders. It undermines women's autonomy and decision-making power by positioning them as needing protection and care, which restricts their career opportunities and reinforces gender inequality. Men, influenced by these stereotypes, often offer assistance that fosters dependency rather than empowering women for independent coping, while women may seek help that reinforces this dependency (Shnabel et al., 2016). Benevolent sexism, though often perceived as protective or chivalrous, can have several detrimental effects on individuals and society, especially as we strive towards a more inclusive society. Glick and Fiske (1997) identified two coexisting forms of sexism: hostile sexism, characterized by negative attitudes toward women, and benevolent sexism which expresses positive sentiments while assuming that women need protection. They proposed that maintaining inequality is more effectively achieved through benevolence rather than hostility, however these two forms reinforce each other (Bonilla-Algovia et al., 2024; Estevan-Reina et al., 2020; Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Benevolent sexism can be seen in the participants' narratives about the changing roles of men in families with children on the autism spectrum. Fathers are not necessarily the main provider anymore, but they are leaders or primary decision makers in the family because men are 'naturally' stronger and more rational so that he can protect and lead the family to a better future.

The role of a father, as the head of the family, naturally involves decision-making and determining the direction of the family... (that is why) father's role in taking care his special needs [sic] child is very crucial. If it's just the mother, she is *kalah tenaga* (weaker or having less energy), it will be a problem. (Erwin, 39 years old, Part time teacher)

Like a captain. Fathers should lead the family towards the future. As a parent, fathers need to condition our wives, our children, like that. (Bima, 61 years old, Retiree)

A more compelling example of fathers as better decision makers can be found in Wawan's (47 years old, businessman) narrative. He boldly decided to withdraw his child from regular junior high school and then provided competent tutors for his child to pursue painting – aligning with his child's special interest – despite the disagreement from his wife. He stated, 'Because as a father, you know, you know the direction. This child needs to be directed somewhere, so it can't be 100 percent left to mom'. At the time of the interview, his 20-year-old son with autism had successfully participated in art

exhibitions, including overseas, with the paintings valued at tens of millions of rupiah. This reinforces Wawan's conviction that his decisions, made in his capacity as the head of the family, were justified and appropriate: 'Because, you know, we *men think systematically and smart*, right? We have to see this way, *sometimes women are emotional*, but men can see things differently' (emphasis added). The statement reveals a stereotypical gender expression, where Wawan asserts his superiority in systematic and intelligent thinking compared to women, who are perceived as more emotional. His narrative reflects hegemonic masculinity, positioning men as authoritative and rational decision-makers in family matters, while women are positioned as emotional and irrational.

Another participant demonstrates how a discourse of benevolent sexism positions working mothers as responsible to take care of the children, including emotional care. Drawing upon this discourse, the use of force by the father is considered legitimized and even benevolent:

I don't hold my wife back from working, but every night or on holidays, I always encourage her to play with the children. No matter how tired she is, I don't care, just play with your children. When she comes home, I force her to play with our children, and she never complains, even if she's tired, even if she's sick, I don't care, just play with the children, no matter how busy you are, you still must bond with the children. (Guntur, 39 years, Entrepreneur)

The sentence 'I don't hold my wife back from working' might seem emancipatory by giving her the freedom to work, but the statement implicitly suggests a power hierarchy. The freedom given to the wife to work is based on the husband's decision or determined by the husband rather than her own autonomy. Decision to work based on the permission from the husband, not based on the spouse ability, reflects power inequality. He also consistently encourages his wife to interact with the children, regardless of her fatigue condition. In this way, he put pressure on the mother to use her limited free time for childcare, disregarding her own needs for rest and personal time. This reveals how Guntur utilized hierarchical power relations to reinforce traditional gender norms, where caregiving responsibilities are predominantly assigned to mothers, regardless of their physical or emotional state.

These narratives from Indonesian fathers participating in the current study demonstrate how their involvement in parenting – in some ways – is underpinned by a discourse of benevolent sexism, where men's role in childcare is understood as an act of benevolence because of their superior qualities as leaders, protectors, and decision makers. Here, under the guise of equal involvement in parenting, hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal gender roles might have been partially re-established.

Discussion

In this article we have presented our findings about how Indonesian fathers of neurodivergent children negotiated traditional gender-based parenting norms. These fathers have undertaken considerable changes in their parenting roles as compared to the dominant norms in Indonesia, that is, becoming a more involved parent, taking more responsibility for house chores, and even quitting their full-time jobs. It is evident that these

fathers have experienced different parenting role dynamics that exert considerable pressure on them to move away from traditional gender roles. The evolving role dynamics signal a shift from the traditional, hegemonic-masculinity-based role as the breadwinner to becoming primary decision-makers, serving as leaders to guide the family's direction, and taking responsibility for their children's future independence. The changing dynamics of a father's roles reflect a notable shift from a narrow emphasis solely on financial provision to a more comprehensive understanding of responsibilities within the family.

Our analysis reveals that there are at least three key discourses participants draw upon in understanding themselves as an involved parent. Firstly, a discourse of an exceptional situation in which these fathers consider their family situation, namely, having a child(ren) with autism, as an exceptionally unique condition as compared to typical families to the extent that modifications of parenting roles are deemed necessary. Secondly, a discourse of the child's future survival, where the absence of state-based care support for children with autism (particularly after the parents passed away) means parents and their child are on their own to make sure the child's future survival. This serious concern manifested in the efforts to teach independence and life skills to their neurodivergent child(ren), which often required fathers to be more involved as opposed to traditional gender norms of childcare and parenting. The third is a discourse of benevolent sexism where participants understand their significant involvement in parenting and childcare as a necessary act of male benevolence in order to protect and direct the family through leadership and decision making, because the mother is understood as unable to do so on her own. We consider these discursive dynamics relevant in an Indonesian context, given the cultural norms and government policies and systems that have not been fully supportive of gender equality, disability rights, and inclusive education and workplaces. Nevertheless, amidst these conditions, the presence of neurodivergent children in a family is proven to be a powerful force to redefine traditional gender norms and parenting practices in this social context of contemporary Indonesia.

By unearthing these three key discourses, this article contributes new insights to the existing academic literature in at least three ways. Firstly, the current study gives voice to fathers of neurodivergent children which hitherto often positioned as 'secondary' caregivers (Braunstein et al., 2013; Manor-Binyamini, 2019; Puppa & Miele, 2015; Schmitz, 2016). As participants in this study demonstrated, these fathers do not necessarily function as 'secondary' caregivers, instead, they can be a highly involved parent and even some of them took more childcare and domestic responsibilities than their wife. Secondly, while previous studies have mainly discussed challenges of fathers of a neurodivergent child(ren) (Brown et al., 2021; Karst & van Hecke, 2012; Lichtlé et al., 2019; Pisula & Porębowicz-Dörsmann, 2017; Rankin et al., 2019) the analysis in this study identified discursive mechanisms in the transitions from traditional, hegemonic masculinity to more egalitarian parenting among these fathers. While the key discourses found might not fundamentally subvert wider patriarchal parenting norms, this study explores viable discursive changes which can be a little step towards a more equal gender relationship in parenting. Thirdly, the current research adds a new contextuality to studies in this field, namely, an Indonesian context, which might – to a degree – resonate with other Global South contexts.

The implications of this study are as follows. Participants in this study have expressed hopes for a better work-life balance, more meaningful interactions with their children, difficulties dealing with high stress level, and a wish for a more relaxed and fulfilling family life. The evolving meanings of fatherhood in neurodiversity contexts, therefore, must highlight the needs for greater support and understanding as these fathers work to integrate their professional and parenting roles effectively within the cultural contexts of their life. Balancing work and family responsibilities, previously thought to be primarily the concern for women (Cavagnis et al., 2023; Li & Zerle-Elsäßer, 2023; Weiss et al., 2012) now has become relevant for men as well.

Limitations and future directions

While this context is unique, a key limitation of this study is its small, qualitative nature and the source of the study sample. However, we believe that individuals in Global South contexts may find the socio-cultural dynamics presented in this study more relatable and relevant compared to studies based in the Global North, particularly regarding the widespread absence of state-based care systems for disabled persons. Future studies are needed to explore further these various contextual conditions among different contexts such as Global South countries vis-à-vis gender, family, and disability.

A further limitation of this study concerns the socioeconomic composition of the sample, which was predominantly middle class. Although this distribution was not intentional, it may reflect the greater likelihood of middle-class families to volunteer for research participation, given their comparatively higher access to information, time, and resources. It should be noted that the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of working-class and economically disadvantaged families, whose parenting practices and gender-related beliefs are often shaped by distinct material constraints and social positioning. Future studies are needed with more socioeconomically diverse samples to reflect the broader intersections between class, gender, and parenting.

Conclusions

Overcoming barriers to gender equality in parenting of neurodivergent children requires challenging stereotypes and fostering a more comprehensive view of gender roles to promote fairness and equality in society. To move towards a more inclusive society, it is crucial to address and challenge benevolent sexism by promoting equal opportunities and responsibilities for all genders in both professional and domestic spheres. Encouraging men to actively participate in caregiving and domestic duties, educating about the subtle and pervasive nature of benevolent sexism, and supporting policies that foster gender equality and inclusivity are essential steps. This may include initiatives such as parental leave for both parents, flexible working hours, or inclusive childcare facilities for male workers too. Creating environments where individuals can express themselves freely without being confined by traditional gender norms is also vital. By recognizing and dismantling patriarchal gender norms, hegemonic masculinity, and benevolent sexism, families can make significant strides towards building a society that values and includes everyone equally and inclusively.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval and informed consent statements


This study was granted an Ethical Clearance Certificate by the Institutional Ethical Committee of the Universitas Surabaya. Approval Number: 239/KE/IX/2023. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

Data availability statement

The participants in this study did not consent for their data to be shared publicly, due to the sensitive nature of the research.

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