ABSTRACT

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SESSION VI: ROLES AND BIOGRAPHIES

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THE SEQUENCES OF INVOLVEMENT STYLES AT THE TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD

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Studies on father involvement show that a growing number of fathers opts for involvement in childcare. However, the transition to parenthood still goes along with a retraditionalisation of gender roles and division of labour. To understand this ambivalence, we argue that it is fruitful to take a closer look at the sequence of practices fathers are involved in during the transition to parenthood. The presented qualitative study focuses on fathering during pregnancy and after the first half-year post-birth. Based on qualitative interviews with men and women during pregnancy and after delivery, it is shown that fathers’ involvement can comprise sequences of various involvement styles, each defined by a specific set of practices. Furthermore, we illustrate how fathers do not just adopt one of these involvement styles, but switch between several styles during the given period of time. The results extend previous findings and provide an in-depth analysis of fathers’ journey through several involvement styles during the transition to parenthood. This also allows to display a differentiated picture of retraditionalisation processes.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on a practice theory approach (Morgan 2011; Hörling & Reuter 2004). Accordingly, the transition to parenthood is defined as a set of practices (Schadler 2013), and involvement styles are defined as a set of specific practices.
Previous research on father involvement draws on several factors to conceptualize different fathering practices. According to the influential concept provided by Lamb et al. (1985), father involvement consists of the following three components: (1) interaction, referring to the father’s direct contact with his child; (2) availability, concerning the father being available for the child for potential interaction; and (3) responsibility, meaning that the father feels accountable for the child’s needs, e.g. being in charge of childcare arrangements. Doucet (2009) emphasizes that childcare responsibility needs to be specified in greater detail, proposing a differentiation between emotional responsibility, community responsibility and moral responsibility. Palkovitz (1997) presents numerous practices of parenting in order to describe parental involvement. These practices are summarized into three main domains of involvement: cognitive involvement, affective involvement and behavioral involvement.

Data and Research Methods

The presented findings derive from a qualitative longitudinal study on processes at the transition to parenthood, conducted at the University of Vienna, Austria\(^1\). We conducted individual interviews with couples during their transition to parenthood. Women and men who were expecting their first child were interviewed during pregnancy and six to seven months after the birth of the child (40 interviews in total). The sample includes couples living in Vienna who are married, cohabiting or separated. Respondents’ age ranges from 25 to 42 years, and they have different educational levels.

Following an interview guide, pre- and post-birth data were gathered on the following topics: preparations for pregnancy and birth, preconditions for parenthood, announcement of pregnancy and birth, delivery, information procurement, medical attendance (mother and child), breast feeding, bodily transformations, communication with the unborn resp. the baby, purchases for the baby, bureaucracy after delivery, first days at home with the newborn, daily routine and time management after delivery, activities regarding the baby, housing situation, maternity protection, maternal and paternal leave, work, work-family-balance, division of labour, childcare arrangements, definition of family, as well as expectations and perceptions of fatherhood and motherhood.

Main Findings

We reconstructed the pre- and post-birth practices of fathers and were able to condensate sets of practices into involvement styles, which are comparable with involvement styles cited in the literature (e.g. Marsiglio et al. 2000; Doucet 2009; Rehel 2014). These styles are: the helper/supporter, the co-parent, and the main caretaker. Based on the longitudinal research design, it is shown that father involvement is a matter of concern not only post-birth, but also pre-birth. Different styles of father involvement already evolve during pregnancy and not only after the birth of the child. Hence, we identified sets of practices that signified an involvement style during a certain phase of the transition, e.g. specific main caretaker practices within the first months of pregnancy or specific main caretaker practices during parental leave.

Based on this in-depth analysis of the sequence of practices, it is shown that a father-to-be resp. a father does not match one involvement style exclusively, but can pass through several forms of involvement at the transition to fatherhood. This process of passing-through involvement styles is not homogeneous throughout the cases, but takes place in different ways, in interdependence with individual and structural determinants (e.g. attitudes toward gender equality, career plan, work structure, possibility to take parental leave like the so-called “daddy month”, public discourses etc.). The data also reveal turning points – like taking parental leave, returning to work, or unexpected sickness – that trigger transitions between involvement styles.

The following example illustrates the ways in which different involvement styles are interwoven over time: One male respondent was the main caretaker during early pregnancy, i.e. collecting information about pregnancy and birth, taking care of his pregnant partner and buying things for the

\(^1\) The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement no. 320116 for the research project FamiliesAndSocieties.
baby, while his pregnant partner was too busy with work issues and therefore only got involved with these processes to a minimum extent. During the period of maternity protection, the respondent became a helper to his pregnant partner who used this time to prepare for delivery and for the post-birth period. The respondent supported his partner in housework etc., because bodily transformations prevented her from doing this by herself. After delivery, the father took his holiday and additionally took paternal leave in the framework of the “daddy month”, and was co-parenting with the mother. Both parents took care of the child on equal terms. After his return to full-time work, the respondent became the helper again, when he – coming home from work in the evening – supported his partner who was staying at home with the child. Taking paternal leave a few months later, the father returned to the main caretaker involvement style, whereas the mother returned to full-time work.

**Conclusion**

The styles of father involvement evolving from the presented analysis are comparable with those found in the literature. However, our findings advance existing studies by illuminating fathers’ journeys through several sets of fathering practices. Drawing on the transition process during pregnancy and after the birth of the first child, the factors that amplify or mitigate fathers’ involvement into caretaking become more visible and clear. For instance, it becomes evident how turning points can influence fathering practices. However, the direction of influence (an increase or decrease in father’s involvement leading to more or less gender equality) is related to a variety of determinants (values, discourses, structures at work, peer group etc.). This implies that it is fruitful to conceptualize father involvement as a process which is fluid in nature.

Furthermore, the focus on these processes indicates that policy efforts with the aim of promoting equality between mothers and fathers would be well advised to widen their focus on a) the transition process as a whole, starting at early pregnancy, b) the turning points during the transition process, and c) the complex interplay of a variety of determinants which amplify and mitigate retraditionalisation processes.

**References**


