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Turning points in the transition to parenthood: Variability of father involvement over time

Wendepunkte am Übergang zur Elternschaft: Variabilität väterlicher Beteiligung

Abstract:
Although fathers’ involvement in care work has increased, the transition to parenthood still implies a gendered division of labour. In order to gain more knowledge of this ambivalence, we focus on the variability of father involvement at this transition. Based on an Austrian qualitative longitudinal study with couples experiencing the transition to first-time parenthood, we examined how fathers’ affective, cognitive and behavioural involvement varies across the transition process. Changes in fathers’ involvement culminated at particular points in time, conceptualised as turning points. Results show that the transition to fatherhood is characterised by a variety of pre-pregnancy, prenatal and postnatal turning points at which father involvement undergoes crucial transformations. Father involvement varies not only between fathers, but also within individual transitions. The study indicates that turning points contribute to the dynamics and fluidity of the transition process.

Key words: care work, father involvement, qualitative longitudinal data, transition to parenthood, turning points

Zusammenfassung:

Schlagwörter: Betreuungsarbeit, qualitative Längsschnittdaten, Übergang zur Elternschaft, väterliche Beteiligung, Wendepunkte
1. Introduction

For a long time, childcare was predominantly studied as a domain of mothers, while the growing scientific interest in fathers and their involvement in care work is more recent (Day et al. 2005; Ostner 2005; Seward/Richter 2008). Alongside with changing cultural norms, also the scholarly perceptions of fathers have changed over time. While fathers have been primarily regarded as providers of financial support for their families for a long time, they are now expected to be actively involved in care work (Milkie/Denny 2014; Williams 2008; Dermott 2008; Lamb 2000). Men’s enhanced involvement in the family is seen as one part of the ongoing ‘gender revolution’, going hand in hand with women’s increased participation in the labour market (Goldscheider et al. 2015). However, women’s labour force participation has not yet caught up with men’s, and women still do the largest part of family work. This becomes evident when exploring the transition to parenthood, which still goes along with a retraditionalisation of gender roles and a gendered division of labour. Childbirth affects women’s time use much more than men’s as the bulk of child-related work is usually done by women, even if couples shared household tasks equally before pregnancy (Dribe/Stanfors 2009; Kotila et al. 2013; Yavorsky et al. 2015; Klaus/Steinbach 2002). As a result, parenthood reinforces inequality between mothers and fathers.

In an innovative attempt to comprehend the ambivalence between fathers’ new roles and persisting retraditionalisation tendencies, we pay special attention to individual life courses and the inherent variations in fathers’ involvement across the transition to parenthood. Though scholars have provided empirical evidence for the variability of father involvement over time (e.g. Lang et al. 2014; Coltart/Henwood 2012; Shirani/Henwood 2011), so far, research has lacked systematic and profound insights into the changes of father involvement during this crucial transition. Against this background, we examine in an explorative manner how father involvement changes across the transition to parenthood and draw on Palkovitz’s (1997) conception of cognitive, affective and behavioural involvement. We use a longitudinal and multiple perspectives approach (pre- and postnatal interviews with first-time parents in Austria). After a thorough reconstruction of fathers’ practices, we developed the concept of turning points in father involvement. Turning points are specific events at certain points in time across the transition to parenthood that induce changes in at least one of Palkovitz’s (1997) three domains of involvement.

This paper pursues two aims: first, to elucidate the conception of turning points that occurred in the analysis of father involvement at the transition to parenthood, and second, to delineate and exemplify changes in father involvement at particular turning points with empirical examples. By concentrating on such events throughout the transition process, we contribute to a more detailed understanding of father involvement at this particular transition period of the life course. We show that the transition to parenthood is characterised by a variety of turning points at which father involvement exhibits a crucial transformation.