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Transition to fatherhood – results of a longitudinal study

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Dear colleagues,

first of all let me express my thanks to Prof. Fthenakis for the invitation to this symposium.

The following contribution I am going to present now is based on data from a research project conducted in Austria, which is very similar to the one from Munich we have just heard about.

The social changes of the last decades, within the last generation, have had a lot of consequences on the family, the relationship between the partners, and between parents and their children – for instance the abandonment of traditional conceptions of roles, new role patterns for fathers as well as for mothers, especially the concept of the “new father” with changes of paternal roles and behaviour, a rise in the age of marriage, a decrease in the number of children, an increase in women’s employment, facilitation of divorce, delegation of care and child-rearing functions to institutions, and many other things.

This was the background for our study, which had originally been conceived as part of an intercultural research project initiated by Horst Nickel and his team at the end of the nineteen-eighties.

First of all we wanted to examine how families organise their lives in such a changed world and what influence the definitions of roles as husbands and wives have had on how they cope with the transition to parenthood, especially to fatherhood.

For that purpose we comprehensively investigated 175 Austrian couples expecting their 1st, 2nd or 3rd children three times: first, when the expectant mother

was in her 6th month of pregnancy, and then 3 months and 3 years after the child's birth. A fourth investigation is currently carried out, now that the children are about 7 to 8 years old.

☞ **Table 1 (design of the project)**

We tried to find as many families, where the mother was younger than thirty years when having the child as families with mothers older than thirty.

☞ **Table 2 (participation rates of the project)**

The participation rates after three years were quite satisfactory, we have still got 147 of the original 175 fathers to investigate.

Inventories used were the Parental Role Questionnaire by Nickel, Grant and Vetter (1990), investigating parental attitudes, the Questionnaire of the Quality of Partnership by Hahlweg (1979), and questionnaires dealing with the division of labour, the distribution of child-rearing duties between fathers and mothers, the relationship to the original family, the number of social contacts of both parents, the presence of fathers at child's birth, claim to parental leave, socio-economic variables, and so on.

Now I want to give you a short overview of selected results, especially concerning the situation of the fathers and the changes of the situations, respectively.

The first interesting topic are the fathers' attitudes – towards the traditional division of roles between fathers and mothers, the subjective importance of children in people's lives, if they consider children a burden, and so on.

☞ **Figure 1 (attitudes of the fathers)**

In the parental Role Questionnaire we found a total of eight scales for fathers.

The absolutely highest scores were found in the scale "subjective importance of children", which shows how fathers appreciate the value of children, for example for their own lives, and in the scale "evenness", which reveals the opinion, that fathers and mothers basically do have the same competences in child-rearing and also should share the housework.

If you look at the *changes* in fathers' attitudes during the whole period of investigation, you will see that first of all there is a significant increase in the scale "children as a burden". Besides, there is also an increase in the scale "responsibility", which focuses on the feelings of stress through the responsibility for a child.

The next step was to subdivide fathers into three groups clusteranalytically according to their assessments in the eight scales of attitudes 3 months before the birth of the child:

- 1) “new fathers”, about 13 % of the sample, above all characterised by their rejection of the traditional role concept;
- 2) “family-oriented fathers” (32 %) mainly with high scores in the scale “*pater familias*” and
- 3) “independent fathers” (56 %), whose “subjective importance of the family” is very low.

Regarding the *changes* from 3 months before to 3 years after the birth of the child interesting shifts in the classifications of these three groups of fathers could be observed.

👉 **Figure 2 (shifts of the father clusters)**

Above all the increase of the group of the “independent fathers” from 56 % to 66 % seems remarkable, which can be interpreted as an increasing distance of the fathers from their families during the first three years after the birth of the child. Beside this, there is a decrease of the cluster of the “new fathers” from 13 % to 7 % three months, and to 9 % three *years* after the child’s birth.

So our data confirm that the birth of a child leads to a more traditional role conception of the fathers.

Nevertheless there are signs that *on the whole* the attitudes of the fathers do have changed: Most of the fathers we investigated support an extensive division of housework and of child-rearing work *on principle*, even though there is still a gap between attitudes and real work-sharing in everyday routine, of course. But this gap slowly seems to become smaller.

Results of another part of our questionnaires state that fathers regard spending time with their families as being more important than job matters. This could be interpreted as a trend that for fathers family values seem to gain priority whereas for many mothers job values become more and more important soon after the child’s birth.

One field where remarkable changes not only of fathers’ attitudes, but also of fathers’ *behaviours* could be observed is, for example, the willingness of fathers to be present at the child’s birth. About 85 % of the fathers experienced this event together with their partner. Asked for the reason of doing so, about 90 % of the fathers are convinced, that being present at the child’s birth means an enrichment for the parental partnership and 73 % believe that it is important for the beginning father-child relationship.

As for parental leave, the majority of fathers still do *not* take it (in Austria only about 1½ % take it). But regarding this fact we have to consider that 56 % of all

fathers would be willing to take parental leave, on principle. Asked for the reasons why not taking it, the fathers mention financial (53 %) and occupational (47 %) considerations in the first place. So the decision if fathers take parental leave or not depends a lot on political and structural conditions.

According to our results, the *problems* of the fathers during the transition to fatherhood are found mainly in two fields: decreasing *social contacts* and the decreasing *quality of the partnership*:

Three years after the birth of the child only 57 % of the fathers are satisfied with the number of their friends and colleagues – in contrast to 68 % three years before. Corresponding to this increasing dissatisfaction, many fathers feel hampered 3 years after the child's birth, and want more social contacts outside their families.

But probably the most unambiguous result concerns the field of parental partnership:

☞ **Figure 3 (quality of partnership)**

An analysis of variance of first-time, second-time and third-time fathers with regard to the quality of the paternal partnership has shown that *first-time fathers* perceived their partners as considerably more loving and having more common goals and interests.

Conflict behaviour was generally low, but it seemed an interesting detail that husbands felt that their wives criticized them more than vice versa, no difference if they had one, two, or three children.

☞ **Figure 4 (quality of partnership / longitudinal comparison)**

If we compare the three testing dates, we see a clear decrease in the “loving relationship” and also in the “common goals” of the parents. Conflict behaviour increases, especially from 3 months to 3 years after the birth of the child.

☞ **Figure 5 (overall quality of partnership)**

A comparison of the overall quality of the partnership (ascertained through the question: “How would you assess your partnership at the moment?”) between the three testing dates revealed that fathers as well as mothers rated their partnership as having significantly deteriorated.

So to sum up this short overview, the results of our research project once again showed that the transition to fatherhood implies a major adaptation in the sense of a new definition of both the roles as fathers and as partners.

Maybe at our next conference, in Uppsala, I will extend this presentation by results of our running follow-up. Thank you.