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Fathers in Europe: Policies, constructions and practices. Introduction to the Special Collection

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Abstract

Objective: To introduce the readers to the Journal of Family Research's Special Collection about fatherhood-related political frameworks, social constructions of fatherhood and masculinity, and practices of fathers in Europe.

Background: Fatherhood research has proliferated in recent decades and reflects that paternal involvement is closely linked to national policies, to prevailing social normative understandings of fatherhood, and also varies in practice.

Method: Except for the review article, the contributions of this Special Collection draw on empirical data, including quantitative analyses of large-scale data, such as the European Social Survey, the QUIDAN-Survey, and the DJI "Growing up in Germany" survey, and qualitative analyses of in-depth interviews.

Results: The six contributions vary in focus and illustrate a wide range of approaches to the understanding of fatherhood constructions and practices as well as the political frameworks that shape contemporary fatherhood in Europe. The contributions study fatherhood in the context of the transition to parenthood, parenting practices, the composition of working environments as well as in social work practice.

Conclusion: The discussion of fatherhood constructions and practices as well as related political frameworks is crucial to understanding which social conditions facilitate and hinder father involvement in Europe.

Key words: fatherhood, gender, family policies, paternal care practices



1. Introduction

This Special Collection was initially inspired by an International Father Research Conference funded by the German Research Foundation, which was held in January 2020 at the University of Applied Sciences in Landshut, Germany. It brought together 60 experts from 20 countries covering three continents. Using an impressive array of fatherhood-related research topics, these scholars observed that fathers' rights to family leave have expanded over the last twenty years in most advanced societies. An example of this change at the policy level is the Directive of the European Union on balancing working and private life (EU 2019/1158) that mandated paid paternity leave and paid non-transferable parental leave for all member states by 2022. Various family policies that support involved fatherhood have been introduced in numerous OECD countries (Kosłowski et al., 2022). These policies aim to promote gender egalitarianism by encouraging fathers' involvement in caregiving for their young children. Simultaneously, as reflected in the 2020 conference, they have inspired increasingly diverse foci and methodological approaches in fatherhood research, which this collection wants to showcase. In particular, the factors surrounding the relatively modest increase in fathers' actual involvement in childcare activities (e.g. Henz, 2019) and low uptake of leave in response to statutory entitlements (Eurofound, 2019) have prompted a lot of research interest based on the idea of an 'incomplete gender revolution' (Esping-Anderson, 2009). Clearly leave policies at the state and organizational level continue to have gender inequalities built in, which result in differential access, participation, and consequences in terms of work-life balance in increasingly dual worker families. Disparities between women and men prevail also in terms of payment as recent research documents (European Commission, 2023). Both the fatherhood premium and the motherhood penalty in income is enduring across national contexts, as Kosłowski is able to demonstrate in her review article on current research in this Special Collection.

However, these policies occur in the context of a complex family-work-culture nexus, often conflicting with the multiple and contradictory normative and practical realities experienced by contemporary fathers. On the one hand, egalitarian values expect fathers to be actively involved in childcare, framed both as an obligation and as an opportunity to participate in the upbringing of children, to build strong bonds with them, and to benefit from the multiple layered experiences of fatherhood. On the other hand, prevailing constructions of masculinity and traditional workplace structures consider fathers to be "disembodied" workers (Hobson & Fahlén, 2012) and free of family obligations, thereby often prohibiting their active care giving (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Moreover, fathers who make use of their entitlements are facing discrimination and prejudice (see Kosłowski, p. 6, in this Special Collection). This is not without consequences: While mothers are increasingly closing the gender gap in employment, fathers still show a 'care deficit' in family life (Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2002). The disjuncture between values and practices and between policies and fathers' capabilities to exercise them (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009) results in 'agency inequalities,' which prevent fathers from claiming their entitlement to spend time with their children. Adler and Lenz (2016) were able to show that the gap between fathers' wishes to be involved with their children and their every-day realities vary across countries, and that the intersections of family policy, workplace cultures, and gender expectations are reflected in care practices of fathers in different national contexts.

On a conceptual level, these findings address different dimensions of father involvement, encompassing gender regimes, family policies, and workplace cultures that shape cultural expectations of fathers and their everyday practices (Adler & Lenz, 2016). Therefore, this Special Collection presents a set of diverse contributions that exemplify selected aspects and methodologies of fatherhood research in various cultural contexts. After the first article provides an overview of the broad currents in international fatherhood research in general, the questions posed by the five research articles in this collection center on specific aspects or problems related to becoming and being a father: (1) What are similarities and differences in individuals' perceptions of the ideal age and pathways to become a father in various European countries? (2) How are work and family demands and resources related to fathers' perceived work-family conflicts? (3) How do gendered constructions of parenthood, i.e., "mothers" vs. "fathers," in social work practice affect the involvement of fathers in interventions? (4) How is care and intimacy of contemporary fatherhood entangled and balanced with partnership and additional responsibilities external to the familial sphere? (5) What impact does fathers' involvement in childcare have on paternal regret, when considering occupational and socio-economic factors?

The five original research articles cover a range of countries from Southern, Central, Eastern, and Western Europe and entail a trans-European comparative perspective. Except for the review article, the

contributions draw on empirical data. Some rely on quantitative analyses of large-scale data, e.g., the European Social Survey, the QUIDAN-Survey and the German Youth Institute's "Growing up in Germany" survey. Others apply a qualitative research design and conducted in-depth interviews.

2. Content of this Special Collection

This Special Collection is introduced by a review article by Alison Koslowski, who provides an overview on the state of policy-related fatherhood research in high income countries. The article focuses on four main currents of multi-disciplinary policy-related fatherhood research. These include studies of national parenting leaves, research involving organizational and workplace policies, research on policies around male health and fatherhood practices, and current analyses of the impact of COVID-19 related policies on fathers.

In the following article, Teresa Martín-García, Marta Seiz and Teresa Castro-Martín explore cross-country similarities and differences in individuals' perceptions of the pathways to becoming a father as related to social norms and ideals. Based on data from the 2018/19 wave of the European Social Survey from five European countries (Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK), the authors found signs of convergence across the countries regarding the "normalization" of postponed fatherhood as well as increased detachment from traditional gender attitudes. The authors differentiate between forerunner and laggard countries and identify various incentives and possibilities for the establishment of new family models based on the gender cultures and the welfare regimes in the countries. This study is an important contribution because it uses internationally comparable data to show Europe's increasing openness towards non-traditional fatherhood constructions and practices.

While most previous studies on the work-family interface focus on mothers and examine work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict separately, Xuan Li and Claudia Zerle-Elsäßer's article entitled "Modern fathers' dilemma of work-family reconciliation" identifies the sources of work-family conflicts among German fathers. Using data from the Growing up in Germany: Everyday Life (AID:A 2014) survey, their research examines the specific factors contributing to fathers' conflicts. Results of multinomial logistic regression analyses suggest that long work hours, intrusive work demands, and long commutes were associated with fathers' experiences of both types of work-family conflicts.

In the fourth paper, which introduces an East-European (Czech) perspective, Barbora Gřundělová, Jakub Černý, Alice Gojová, Suzana Stanková, and Jan Lisník explore the barriers to father involvement in family social work practice at the personal, cultural, and structural levels, as well as their interconnectedness. Using the example of social services for families with children in the Czech Republic, the authors ask how gendered constructions of motherhood and fatherhood affect fathers' involvement in social work interventions. To answer this question, in-depth interviews with social workers, mothers, and fathers and focus groups with social workers were conducted. The results show that mothers and fathers are treated differently in social work practice: 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are perceived as diametrically opposed concepts. This hinders fathers to be included and involved in family services, and assigns the responsibility for solving family problems to mothers.

From an individualization theory perspective, Allan Westerling's contribution approaches the multiple dilemmas of fathers today in the broader context of social change and family life. He focuses on the conditions of fatherhood in contemporary Danish society by exploring men's everyday efforts to balance multiple ambitions with the necessities, constraints, and obligations of family life. The empirical results of his mixed-method longitudinal study suggest that the complex web of relationships and the demands of everyday family life do not necessarily oppose fathers' aspirations for autonomy and self-fulfillment.

While in the past decade the feeling of regretting motherhood (Donath, 2015) has emerged as a new topic in the literature, research on regretting fatherhood is generally lacking. Gerardo Meil, Dafne Muntanyola-Saura, and Pedro Romero-Balsas' article compares the scope of regretting parenthood among both mothers and fathers in young Spanish families. Specifically, they ask to what extent this feeling of regret is related to parenthood penalties in terms of pay and promotion at work and the distribution of care responsibilities in the family. The data analysis is based on a 2021 online survey involving 3,100 respondents with children under 7 years of age residing in Spain. The results show that not only mothers, but also fathers can regret parenthood. In the case of Spain, no statistically significant differences were found in regret between the mothers and fathers. The likelihood of regretting fatherhood increased when

fathers perceive parenthood to have adverse consequences for their careers or when they feel overburdened with childcare.

3. Conclusion

The goal of this Special Collection is to provide an overview on current European fatherhood research and center specific key issues to illustrate the importance of societal constructions of fatherhood and father-related policies and practices. In order to accomplish these aims, the contributions address some important gaps in the comparative fatherhood literature, such as father-related norms in European comparison, work-family-conflicts experienced by fathers, the effects of gendered constructions of “good parenthood” on father-related social work interventions, as well as the new research area of regretting fatherhood. While these topics have been examined extensively with respect to motherhood and mothering, primarily because they were classified as “women’s issues,” fathers have been largely excluded, especially in international contexts. In addition, it can be noted that the methodologically varied articles illuminate important father-specific issues rather than elaborating on the national or welfare state contexts in which they occur.

With the rise of new conceptualizations and practices of fatherhood and the expansion of family policies aimed specifically at fathers, fathers also have increasingly become the subject of research in these areas. The articles in this Special Collection show that norms related to fathers’ engagement in care work are shifting, just as societal norms had to adjust when mothers rapidly entered the workforce decades ago. The recognition of the importance of balancing family and work responsibilities, the question of what constitutes “good parenthood,” and even potentially regretting parenthood, are central to these social dynamics.

The contributions raise questions for future research, e.g. where and how research on parenthood should be gendered or de-gendered. Because parenting and care work are not essentially aligned with one gender, more studies should examine how and why differences in the norms surrounding ‘doing parenthood’ are maintained. Clearly, societies, mothers, and fathers themselves still struggle considerably about what can be expected of fathers today. In addition, the Special Collection shows that fatherhood research in the different European countries reflects common concerns, which might stimulate increased cross-national discussions in this field. Initiated by the fruitful exchange of ideas among scholars and practitioners at the 2020 conference, the studies included here share the assumption that fatherhood concepts and practices are both culturally and historically malleable, and therefore can be socially de- and re-constructed. Hence, it is very important to foster international exchanges on fatherhood- and parenting-related topics – both in research as well as for policy makers and practitioners.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Väter in Europa: Politiken, Konstruktionen und Praktiken. Einführung in die Special Collection

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Der Beitrag führt in die Sonderausgabe des Journal of Family Research zu politischen Rahmenbedingungen für Väter, soziale Konstruktionen von Vaterschaft und Männlichkeit und Praktiken von Vätern in Europa.

Hintergrund: Die Forschung zu Vätern und Vaterschaft hat sich in den letzten Jahrzehnten stark ausgeweitet und zeigt, dass die väterliche Beteiligung eng mit der nationalen Politik und dem vorherrschenden sozial-normativen Verständnis von Vaterschaft verbunden ist und auch in der Praxis variiert.

Methode: Mit Ausnahme des Übersichtsartikels stützen sich die Beiträge dieses Sonderheftes auf empirische Daten, einschließlich quantitativer Analysen groß angelegter Daten wie der Europäischen Sozialerhebung, des QUIDAN-Surveys und der DJI-Erhebung "Aufwachsen in Deutschland" sowie qualitativer Analysen von Tiefeninterviews.

Ergebnisse: Die sechs Beiträge haben unterschiedliche Schwerpunkte und illustrieren ein breites Spektrum an Ansätzen zum Verständnis von Vaterschaftskonstruktionen und -praktiken sowie der politischen Rahmenbedingungen, die heutige Vaterschaft in Europa prägen. Die Beiträge untersuchen Vaterschaft im Kontext des Übergangs zur Elternschaft, der elterlichen Praktiken, der Zusammensetzung des Arbeitsumfelds sowie der Praxis der Sozialarbeit.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Diskussion von Vaterschaftskonstruktionen und -praktiken sowie der damit verbundenen politischen Rahmenbedingungen ist von entscheidender Bedeutung, um zu verstehen, welche gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen die Beteiligung von Vätern in Europa erleichtern und behindern.

Schlagwörter: Vaterschaft, Geschlecht, Familienpolitik, väterliche Betreuungspraktiken

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