

Starting a Family and Childlessness in Men

The Preconditions of Fatherhood Today

Between Traditional and New Norms of Masculinity

Results from the research project¹

***Forming a Family or Remaining Childless – The Conditions of Fatherhood Today
between Traditional and New Norms of Masculinity.***

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<http://genderstudies.unibas.ch/forschung/forschungsprojekte/vaterschaft-heute>

Publications:

Kassner, Karsten; Wehner, Nina & Baumgarten, Diana (2013): *Vater sein: Fast genauso gut wie Mütter oder anders?* In: Grisard, Dominique; Jäger Ulle & König, Tomke (Hrsg.): Verschieden sein. Nachdenken über Geschlecht und Differenz. Sulzbach/Taunus: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 257-265.
(Translation: *Being a father. Almost as good as mothers or different?*)

Baumgarten, Diana; Kassner, Karsten; Maihofer, Andrea & Wehner, Nina (2012): *Warum werden manche Männer Väter, andere nicht? Männlichkeit und Kinderwunsch.* In: Walter, Heinz & Eickhorst, Andreas (Hrsg.): Das Väter-Handbuch. Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 415-443.
(Translation: *Why do some men become fathers and others not? Masculinity and the desire for children.*)

Wehner, Nina; Maihofer, Andrea; Kassner, Karsten & Baumgarten, Diana: *Männlichkeit und Familiengründung zwischen Persistenz und Wandel.* FamPra – Die Praxis des Familienrechts. Bern, 2/2010, 295-314
(Translation: *Masculinity and starting a family, between persistence and change.*)

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Background to the project

For a long time, research on starting a family and childlessness focused exclusively on women. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in men's roles in this context. Our research project asked which biographical and social conditions influence men's decisions to start a family. We were also interested in the value patterns and self-images associated with these kinds of choices.

The study was based on a qualitative-research design. In total, we conducted sixty biographically oriented narrative interviews with German-speaking Swiss academics in three age groups.² Half were fathers and half childless. For the interview analysis, we used Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann's reconstructive hermeneutical framework (2002). We deliberately focused on academically qualified men and their individual life contexts because we expected them to experience the challenges of fatherhood intensely due to a number of common characteristics of the academic profession and academics such as: the long phase of vocational training and thus smaller, postponed time frame for starting a family; highly professionally oriented (potential) partners; intense deliberations about starting a family and the division of labour; and an increased likelihood of potential age-related infertility. Our results thus relate to a particular social class. Nevertheless, they are generalizable in the sense that we identified overarching patterns and relationships from the specifics of the single cases. By using a qualitative design, we had the opportunity to gain detailed insights into the complexity of starting a family. In addition, we were able to focus on the preconditions for paternity today. During the analysis, we particularly focused on the conceptions and practices of masculinity and fatherhood. Furthermore, we discovered in the course of the project that having children is of prime importance to the men we interviewed.

Results

1. Starting a family is an extremely complex process

The initial conditions for starting a family are complex and cannot be reduced to a single cause. Rather, men see themselves as confronted with a whole set of factors. First, all men bring individually different initial conditions with them that contribute to whether or not they will start a family: biographical experiences from their original family; their particular ages and current stages in life; and their particular professional and socio-economic situations. Second, their ideas and practices of masculinity and fatherhood may become important in different ways when starting a family, both in their professional and personal lives. Third, and most importantly,

² The age groups divide the interviewees into university-aged men (between twenty and thirty years old), early-career men (between thirty and forty-five years old), and men with many years of participation in the labour force (aged 45 years and older).

starting a family depends on whether and to what extent a personal desire for children is present. Fourth, they have to find a ‘matching’ wife or partner who also wants to have children.³ And, fifth, those wives or partners also bring individual sets of preconditions and ideas about life plans with them. Clarifying the desire, timing, and conditions for having children is thus necessary, and it has become more complex with the increasing autonomy and economic independence of women.

2. To ‘get ready’ is an essential prerequisite for fatherhood

The interviews showed that men do not just become fathers overnight. A crucial prerequisite for fatherhood is “to get ready”, as one interviewee aptly phrased it. This refers to gradually developing an internal and external willingness to engage in fatherhood. This process does not begin with the birth of a child, but rather often long before procreation. An essential part of getting ready, as reflected in the interviews, is the analysis of their own expectations, fears, insecurities, hopes, and desires related to fatherhood. This includes their view of their own caring and pedagogical competencies and the role they want to play in the child’s development. It is with regard to this question that men often feel insecure. Furthermore, men reflect on their current life and professional situations, and consider to what extent and in what ways their lives would change or would have to change to start a family. Finally, the issue of being responsible for the financial needs of the family can be a problem. What biographical and professional states make a man feel ready for that responsibility? This question especially concerns men who have a more traditional notion of themselves as breadwinners for the family. For some, an inability to take sole responsibility for the family income means that they do not consider themselves ready for fatherhood. Overall, it seems that there is a necessary and complex process of internal and external preparation for fatherhood, in which an examination of the forthcoming new phase of life as a father takes place. This process may be comparatively simple, but it may also be very difficult, and it does not need to be fully conscious. It can ultimately also lead to a decision to rule out fatherhood altogether. In the case of an unplanned pregnancy, the need arises to get ready after procreation.

3. There is a distinction between the desire for children and the desire for a family

According to our empirical data the desire for children has an important role in the process of starting a family. What came as a surprise to us was that we found a clear demarcation between men who independently wanted to have children and men who wanted to have a family. Indeed, several of the interviewees had no independent desire to have children but wanted to have a family. What has so far been adopted in the literature as ‘a man’s desire for children’ can actually refer to two different things. For some men, the desire to have children and a

³ For the gay man we interviewed, the question of starting a family is again different. For him, finding a surrogate mother who would agree to the caretaking roles that he and his partner desired was the primary problem.

relationship to their children is meant in the literal sense. For those men, that desire exists independently from an existing relationship to a prospective partner. For other men, the desire is more for a ‘typical familial form of life’, which includes a wife and children. This desire relates more to the status of being a father as part of a normal masculine biography and less to the child as an individual being with whom he wants to develop a close relationship.

4. A more explicit desire for a child or a family makes starting a family less complicated

Not surprisingly, we found that a more explicit desire for a child or a family makes the questions about potential fatherhood less complicated. This is relatively independent of whether fatherhood is associated with traditional or new ideas of masculinity. But if the desire to have children does not exist or is unclear and inconsistent in its history, then the process of starting a family is much more difficult and conflicted. The presence and quality of a desire for a child obviously has a major impact on how men deal with the fears and uncertainties that may be associated with the process of starting a family. For example, it gives them confidence in their ability to build a stable father-child relationship. This leads to further questions, such as: Is a clear and constant desire for children accompanied by stronger notions about how children can improve and enrich life? Or could they also be accompanied by a fear of the loss of mobility or of the burden of responsibility? Does an existing desire for a child facilitate the integration of ideas about fatherhood into the practices of masculinity? Or is it not necessary to reconcile the two since representations of fatherhood and practices of masculinity do not exclude each other in this case?

5. The role of the absent breadwinner is rejected, an engaged father is the new ideal

All of our interviewees reject the figure of the absent (breadwinner) father – usually in explicit distinction to their own fathers. Interestingly, this is even the case when the couple’s division of labour is broadly in line with a traditional arrangement (where the man is the primary breadwinner and the woman is primarily responsible for the family and the household). The difference to a traditional image of fatherhood is in the expectation for a more intense relationship with their own children and in a fundamentally different presence in and emotional awareness of the family. This corresponds to the much-cited significant change of the ideal of a ‘good’ father – (at least) at the level of attitudes. Although the specific ideas and practices of new fatherhood sometimes differ dramatically, what they all have in common is the ideal of being *engaged* in the everyday lives of the children. It is noteworthy that we found such notions of new fatherhood not only in men with an independent desire for children but also in men with a rather unspecific desire for a family. This shows, in our opinion, the degree to which the engaged father is becoming increasingly part of a new hegemonic norm. The desire for a family, however, does not necessarily result in an engaged father in *practice*. Perhaps this is due to the lack of an intrinsic desire to have children.

6. Employment remains the central reference point for masculinity

Despite a strong change in attitude to the norm of the sole breadwinner and the new ideal of the engaged father, the normative force of the main-breadwinner model still exists. A male lifestyle which is related to employment is not only demanded by society but also usually desired by the men themselves. It is still an essential part of the dominant image of masculinity and produces the tendency of feeling responsible for the family's financial well-being. Together the two responsibilities of earning the family income and being physically and emotionally present in the everyday activities of the children can lead to conflicting demands on fatherhood. The current prevailing ideal of fatherhood can be described as the *emotionally involved breadwinner*.

7. Engaged fathers and new forms of masculinity can be found in practice

Fatherhood and masculinity are not only changing in men's imaginations, but also in many cases in practice. A specific type of new fatherhood is explicitly associated with a new understanding of masculinity, which can result in different familial and professional arrangements, such as a fair division of family work and employment. This creates new ideas and practices of masculinity, like a shared responsibility for the family's income or reduced working hours for men. Being present and caring for the family as well as a changed relationship to employment are not merely wishes or rhetoric without any claim or chance of realization. We found examples in which the desire to live as an engaged father formed an intrinsic motive for becoming a father. Contrary to the assumption that the increased demands on fatherhood stand in the way of forming a family, a desire to fulfil some of these demands is even a catalyst for self-admittance to fatherhood. Some of our interviewees only wanted to become a father on the condition that they would be able to take over an equal share of the care for the child and would not be solely responsible for the family income. So far, such requests encounter considerable structural obstacles in everyday life – such as in operational and welfare-state conditions as well as in the continuing power of traditional gender norms. Consequently, men also have to deal increasingly with the problem of work-life balance. Unlike women who have to combine family with work, men are faced with the reverse problem combining *work with family*.

8. The simultaneous and often contradictory demands of fatherhood and masculinity have complex effects on starting a family

In general, we found that certain notions of masculinity are not automatically associated with specific understandings of fatherhood. The relationship between masculinity, fatherhood, and the process of starting a family is characterized by a rather complex concurrency of change and persistence. Old and new norms and practices are combined and modified in various ways. Nevertheless, ideas and practices of fatherhood and masculinity have a significant influence on the potential for starting a family. This influence is complex and by no means clear. We have found different typical situations among our interviewees. On the one hand, fatherhood and

becoming a father are still often connected to the claim of being the main breadwinner of the family. This may be a reason for refraining from starting a family because some men do not want to live under this norm but also see no way of escaping from it if they became a father. On the other hand, a man may believe in the ideal of being an engaged father, but this might hinder starting a family if active involvement is seen as incompatible with his employment-centred life. The amount of time that these men want to spend as fathers conflicts with the time they must or want to work.

But there are also situations in which there is no contradiction between an employment-centred life as the breadwinner and the self-image of the engaged father. Although employed (nearly) full-time, these men still see themselves as engaged fathers. They are simply limited to being an engaged father in their remaining time in the evenings and on the weekends. Finally, the desire to implement engaged fatherhood in practice can also become a prerequisite for starting a family, as already described above.

9. Freedom and independence as important topics during the transition into fatherhood

Beyond evidencing the changing norms of fatherhood, our empirical data reflects the importance of freedom and independence for men. Having a family is associated with assuming responsibility, defining oneself, and accepting restrictions to free time. The transition from an unbound masculinity to the bondage of fatherhood and the fear of the associated changes is a central issue for many men. This shows how much these aspects are associated with traditional ideas and images of masculinity. The importance of the loss of freedom and independence in the transition to fatherhood differs, however, according to how much it kindles uncertainties, fears, and resistance. Again, both old and new notions of masculinity and fatherhood play a complex role. First, the requirements associated with the norm of the breadwinner – the burden of financial responsibility and the need for a successful career despite increasingly precarious working conditions – can have unsettling effects. This may be accompanied by a sense of inappropriate restriction to one's freedom and could thus become an obstacle to fatherhood. Second, the new demands of an engaged father may also create a fear of losing one's independence and having hardly any time for one's self – even more so when a man simultaneously adheres to a traditional breadwinner model and career. This can lead to a decision not to start a family. But fears of one kind or another can also be irrelevant and do not necessarily stand in the way of realizing fatherhood, even if fatherhood entails more restrictions and the renegotiation of work, family, and leisure time.

10. Men's changed relation to generativity

In our analysis of the process of starting a family, we found evidence for an altered relationship between men and generativity.⁴ New ideas and practices of masculinity – especially new expectations of ‘good fatherhood’ – are associated with an altered form of dealing with generativity that is characterized by a greater degree of awareness and immediacy. Generativity is increasingly becoming a pressing topic for men. So far, generativity primarily resonates with femininity. For men, both a strong normative professional orientation and having a family are part of the image of a grown man as a father, but this does not necessarily involve an independent need for children. Having children does not appear to be constitutive of traditional notions of masculinity. A specifically masculine desire for children most commonly occurs in a *mediated* form: as a desire for a family without a desire for a strong position in the internal family structure. This position is instead primarily occupied by the mother. Men’s concern with generativity is thus mediated through women and their desire to have children.

If the relationship between generativity and masculinity should change in the direction of more awareness and immediacy, it is uncertain how the new relationship would actually appear and what the consequences would be.

Our empirical results suggest, however, that this does not necessarily lead to greater clarity with regard to the individual’s desire to have children. Rather, it can also mean an increasing polarization: if men deal with generativity more consciously, then this could entail both an increase in the explicit desire in men to have children (and increasingly in gay men, too) and an increase in consciously chosen childlessness. The consequence would conceivably be a further growing division of society between men (and women) with and without children. Yet this would make disentangling the notion of caring for children or others from femininity increasingly possible. In the future, reproduction could become a socio-political topic on society’s agenda instead of remaining a topic of gender politics.

⁴ We have a broad understanding of the concept of generativity which includes fertility in the narrower sense as well as the general potential to have children. This also raises questions about how to deal with sexuality and contraceptive practices. It furthermore encompasses the intergenerational context in which a person – initially as a child and later as a potential parent – cares and accepts responsibility for others.

Conclusion and consequences

In general, gender relations can currently be described as a complex simultaneity of change and persistence. This is particularly evident in the contradictory mélange of old and new norms and practices of masculinity and fatherhood, which leads to new challenges in the processes of starting a family or refraining from doing so.

On the one hand, the continuing importance of freedom and leisure time as part of traditional notions of masculinity were surprising to us. Especially when it comes to the question of founding a family, there is a significant fear of having to give up the traditional zones of (male) autonomy. Equally surprising to us, on the other hand, was the practically unbroken continuation of employment as a central normative reference point for male identity. This is all the more surprising because men at the same time clearly reject the conventional image of the absent family breadwinner – mostly in explicit distinction to their own fathers. All the interviewed men had – more or less clearly – the idea of wanting to be an engaged and caring father who develops an independent and emotionally intense relationship with his children. This demonstrates, moreover, the growing importance of caring for and raising children. Both are increasing social demands on parents, are now increasingly addressed to men, and are also increasingly felt as an individual need by men. This contradicts the often repeated claim of a decreasing importance of family and emotionally stable relationships.

The discrepancy between the new (self-imposed) requirements of fatherhood on the one hand and the traditional idea of a full-time breadwinner on the other leads to a rather complex and tense situation that puts many men under pressure. They often do not see how they can reconcile these conflicting old and new norms of masculinity and fatherhood in a productive way. This pressure is exacerbated by the fact that having a family is viewed socially as a natural way of life for men, and is, strictly speaking, part of the hegemonic image of adult masculinity. The realization of an autonomous desire for children is not (yet) part of this ideal. In this sense, it is still expected that the mother primarily takes care of the children. In contrast, fathers who have an independent desire for children and want to have an intense daily relationship with them, and also want to take care of their own parents or parents-in-law, appear only rarely in the social imagination.

One certainly quite momentous implication of these developments is that now even men increasingly have a compatibility problem. Unlike most women, however, they do not face the question of how to combine family with a job, but how to combine (full-time) work with their new ideas about fatherhood and family. This could cause the increasing concern among men about personal and social conditions for compatibility and increasingly common decision not to have children because they do not want to be considered inadequate fathers.

The direction these developments will take depends most fundamentally on whether the professional world continues to see the traditional image of the male full-time employee as a normative ideal, or whether businesses and companies are able to adapt to changing ideas and practices. This would require, among other things, the introduction of more flexible working hours, appropriate career models, targeted offers for the care of children, and, in particular, a corporate culture in which the quality of a male or female worker is not measured primarily through the hours they are present in office. It will also be important for society, the state, and municipalities to provide the necessary infrastructure and institutions so that a work-life balance is equally achievable for both sexes. In addition to social welfare adjustments, this implies the creation of adequate day-care centres and day schools, where a high quality of care is guaranteed. Last but not least, a lot will also depend on whether and how much men encourage the necessary developments, considering their changing ideas about work and life. This could lead to growing socio-political efforts, pursued mutually by men and women who want to have children. At the same time, however, the gap between people with and without children could open further. The emergence of a new type of hegemonic masculinity is always possible due to these developments.

With regard to gender relations, this developments could, first, challenge the traditional pattern of hegemonic masculinity; second, increase the demands on parents to reconcile various educational and child-care needs; and, third, lead to a paradoxical simultaneity of change and persistence in gender relations. That is, change and persistence exist not only in the relationship between the sexes and between individuals, but also within individuals, their practices, and the (gender) norms they refer to.