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Parental constructions of masculinity at the transition to parenthood: the division of parental leave among Austrian couples

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Men and masculinity are considered a key factor in changing gender inequality at the transition to parenthood. Prior research on gendered division of parental leave concentrated on fathers’ perspectives. This paper includes perspectives of fathers and mothers who make use of parental leave in different ways and asks how masculinity is jointly constructed, how these constructions are linked to the use of parental leave, and if and how they are oriented towards hegemonic masculinity. The analysis is based on 44 qualitative interviews with 11 Austrian couples before and after birth when decisions concerning parental leave were made. Our case reconstructions reveal that parents considered parental leave a central element of masculinity as long as it suited fathers’ needs and circumstances permitted. The decisions for sharing parental leave were father-centred as both partners valued father’s leave higher than mother’s.

Keywords: Parental leave; gendered division of labour; fatherhood; joint constructions of masculinity; hegemonic masculinity; multiple perspectives

1. Introduction

Similar to other European countries, in Austria mothers have increasingly joined the labour market since the 1970s, albeit predominantly on a part-time basis. On the contrary, fathers’ contributions to unpaid family work have not undergone a similar degree of increase (Berghammer 2013). After the transition to parenthood, the distribution of family and income-generating work tends to become highly gendered. Previous research indicates that this transition evokes or strengthens an unequal division of family work to a greater extent than other family transitions such as marriage or having more children (Kuehhirt 2012, Yavorsky et al. 2015).

Understood as a result of negotiations between fathers and mothers (Brandth and Kvande 1998), international research points to several factors that contribute to couples’ division of work, including mothers’ employment situation (Bygren and Duvander 2006), fathers’ socialization (Yoshida 2012), external support and assistance (Quek et al. 2011) as well as parental leave policies (Brandth and Kvande 2012). In particular, sharing parental leave is assumed to foster a more equal division of family work and shared parenting in the long term (Haas and Rostgaard 2011,

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Almqvist and Duvander 2014). However, the majority of fathers in Austria, even when they took parental leave for some months experienced no serious shifts or breaks in their career (Reidl and Schiffbänker 2013, Statistics Austria 2014).

A wide range of factors have been identified to influence parents’ decision on sharing leave (e.g. Haas et al. 2002, Bygren and Duvander 2006, Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2011, Reich 2011), including parents’ gender ideology towards parenting and care work (Lammi-Taskula 2008, Vogt and Pull 2010). As men and masculinity are a driving force in changing gender relations (Connell 2005, Elliott 2015), ideas of masculinity are a key factor when exploring gender inequality at the transition to parenthood. So far, little attention has been paid to the joint constructions of masculinity of both fathers and mothers, even though women are seen as a relevant part of the analysis (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Thus, we pursue the following two questions: First, what constructions of masculinity appear on a parental level and how are they linked to the couples’ division of parental leave? Second, how do those constructions challenge hegemonic masculinity, if at all? We aim to identify couples’ constructions of masculinity, bringing into focus the perspectives of both mothers and fathers who jointly legitimate those constructions within their relationship. Drawing on pre- and postnatal qualitative interviews with couples living in Vienna/Austria (conducted in 2013 and 2014) who make use of Austria’s parental leave system in different ways, this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the underlying processes of dividing and sharing work after the birth of their first child. By reconstructing typical cases with hermeneutic techniques, we show how implicit views on masculinity are related to parental decision-making concerning the division of responsibilities right at the moment when it is a negotiating point.1 Our results provide insights into parental constructions of masculinity and reveal that the parents’ decision for (not) sharing leave, even if displayed as a joint one, was, in fact, father-centred.

After introducing the background regarding masculinities, fathering and gender equality, we explain the Austrian parental leave system. We then explicate our methodological approach. The results section, first, presents the contrasting and typical cases and, second, illustrates how the couples’ joint constructions of masculinity are linked to the couples’ division of parental leave. Finally, we discuss if and how they challenge hegemonic masculinity.

2. Background: masculinities, fathering and equality

In this study, we distinguish between the conception of hegemonic masculinity which is defined as a historically dynamic pattern of gendered practices (Connell 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and the jointly constructed notions of masculinity in a specific parental relationship. On the one hand, hegemonic masculinity allows men’s dominance over women and, on the other hand, it stands on the top of power relations within the group of men. In the Western world, currently, a white, heterosexual, full-time working, family providing, healthy man with an orientation to power, career and autonomy fits hegemonic ideas of masculinity best (Connell and Wood 2005). Being an ideal typical form rather than a fixed existing character type, hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily correspond closely to the real lives of actual men. In fact, it has to be distinguished from various masculinities ‘as actual ways that real people construct and understand themselves in terms of how they “do” boy/men’ (Paechter 2006, p. 261f). We conceptualize this construction of
masculinities in everyday life as a reciprocal process of social construction and expressed in men’s and women’s practices. Consequently, not only men and their practices, but also women and their practices are related to an understanding of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Further, not only the practices need to be observed in order to understand the gendered consequences for men and women but also the constantly and intersubjectively constructed, produced and reproduced typifications (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and notions of masculinity, which are shared in a conjunctive realm of experience and lead those practices (Mannheim 1982). Thus, we understand the use of parental leave as a gendered practice and the shared and conjunctive knowledge of masculinity as leading this practice.

A substantial part of previous research investigates the question of how fathering and caring is connected to masculinity since aspects of traditional femininity and hence caregiving are not included in hegemonic masculinity. Nonetheless, as the social construction of masculinities also includes change and difference among men and masculinity (Connell 2005), empirical evidence showed alternative constructions of masculinities with regard to caring (e.g. Buschmeyer 2013). In particular, fatherhood has the potential to develop alternative masculinities when fathers privilege caring (Enderstein and Boonzaier 2013), enjoy their involvement with children (Williams 2009), and accommodate paid work to family responsibilities (Ranson 2012). However, masculinity is defined as absent from the private sphere and rather in relation to paid work than to caregiving (Magaraggia 2013). There seems to be a difference between a ‘public’ and a ‘private’ fatherhood (Shows and Gerstel 2009) and modes of caring (Fisher and Tronto 1990), and between private and public displays of fatherhood and masculinity (Doucet 2011). Moreover, fatherhood is seen as a matter of individual choice, of the father’s willingness and as an individual right, whereas motherhood is mostly understood as a social duty (Vuori 2009, Brandth and Kvande 2012).

Research on the perspective of men who took parental leave or stayed at home with their children demonstrated that masculinities are constructed by combining traditional masculine and feminine elements in a new way: In a child-oriented masculinity (Almqvist 2008), a good father then is constructed as having close contact with his child and not emphasizing the providing role. However, in contrast to mothering, masculine care includes side-by-side activities of being together and doing things together away from home and encouraging child’s independence (Brandth and Kvande 1998). Fathers who share parental leave have also been found to present a gender-equal masculinity by stressing their ambition to live gender-equal relationships and a gender-neutral parenthood (Holzinger et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that these fathers’ alternative masculine position and practices are not enough to challenge hegemonic masculinity (Johansson 2011). As caregivers, they have to actively and simultaneously reject and embrace hegemonic masculinity as well as femininity. They create new kinds of masculinities and move constantly between different forms of masculinities but still have to do this within the framework of hegemonic masculinity that does not include primary caregiving (Doucet 2006).

Elliott (2015) reflected recent evidence for caring masculinities across Europe (Scambor et al. 2014) in her theoretical work and argues that caring masculinities are conceived as a form of men’s engagement in gender equality by rejecting dominance while integrating values of care into masculine identities. Further, it is precisely
care work that has the potential for changing men and gender. A change in hegemonic masculinity might lead to changing gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Keeping in mind that gender equality in a household or a relationship is extremely difficult to define and measure (Doucet 2013, 2015), we concentrated on a specific definition of equality by adducing whether and how parental leave was shared equally, i.e. each parent assumes family-related tasks for a similar period of time and correspondingly withdraws from his or her paid work during this time.

3. The Austrian parental leave system

In Austria, parents who are employed are entitled to take job-protected parental leave up to the child’s second birthday. Only one parent at a time is permitted to be on leave and only one month can be shared, reducing the overall duration of leave by this month. The parents are free to switch parental leave twice between them, and every parent must take at least two consecutive months. Male civil servants are entitled to unpaid paternal leave of up to four weeks right after birth.

In addition, all parents living in Austria are provided with a flexible childcare allowance system and can choose between five different options which are illustrated in Table 1. In four of the models, fixed monthly rates are paid for certain durations after birth: 12(+2), 15(+3), 20(+4) and 30(+6) months, where numbers in brackets indicate the additional months if both parents share the leave (albeit not necessarily with this splitting). Although the monthly rates are lower in the longer options, in total, the longest model is paid the highest. The fifth option is income-dependent with a replacement rate of 80% of the previous income for 12(+2) months and may result in a total sum of up to twice as much than the first four options. Parents who receive childcare allowance may be, at the same time, actively employed up to a certain earnings threshold.2

Of all parents in Austria who completed the receipt of childcare allowance for one child, the majority of 44% opted for the 30(+6) programme, 24% for 20(+4) months, 15% chose the income-related option, 7% 12(+2) months, and 6% opted for 15(+3) months. These calculations on the basis of completed cases of childcare allowance further show that in Austria, in 18% of the cases the fathers had been part of consuming childcare allowance for at least two months (28% in Vienna) (figures from March

Table 1. The Austrian parental leave system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For all parents in Austria: Childcare allowance (in months)</th>
<th>For employed parents in Austria: Right for job-protected parental leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>only one parent</td>
<td>both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>+2 = 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>+3 = 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>+4 = 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>+6 = 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (income-related)</td>
<td>+2 = 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calculations on a daily basis indicate that of all consumed days of childcare benefit only 4.2% were consumed by fathers (Reidl and Schiffbänker 2013). This stems from the fact that the most popular option is the longest one, whereas fathers tend to participate in receiving childcare benefit most often in the shorter options and with a duration as short as possible (2 or 3 months). To conclude, these figures demonstrate the unequal distribution of childcare allowance between mothers and fathers and reaffirm that the models further gendered stratification (Leibetseder 2013).

4. Data and methods

The findings are based on a qualitative longitudinal study carried out in Vienna, in 2013 and 2014. We conducted 44 individual problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000) with 11 heterosexual couples during their transition to first-time parenthood, once during pregnancy and once about 6 months after delivery. We recruited the interviewees through three different channels: we made contact with parents-to-be in prenatal classes, spread leaflets at information and advice centres for parents-to-be as well as medical practices of gynaecologists.

At the time of the first interviews, the respondents were between 25 and 42 years old with qualification levels ranging from upper secondary to tertiary education (cf. Eurostat 2013). Eighteen respondents were from Austria and four originally from other European Union countries; all of them were living in Vienna, Austria’s capital. Table 2 describes the sample and informs about the respondents’ planned allocation of parental leave.

We conducted the data analysis in two main steps. First, all verbatim transcribed interviews of the 11 couples were subject to a thematic analysis with the aim to get an overview of the content and to cluster the variety of topics. Second, in order to reconstruct and describe ideas of masculinity which are constructed in the narrations of mothers and fathers during the transition to parenthood, we applied an in-depth sequential analysis following a hermeneutic approach (Oevermann 2002). Based on the thematic analysis and guided by theoretical sampling considerations (Strauss and Corbin 1996), we selected three contrasting cases with regard to the way the couples divided parental leave. These cases represent traditional allocation (mother takes leave exclusively; couple 9), egalitarian allocation (mother and father take leave in equal terms; couple 1), and non-traditional allocation (father takes leave exclusively; couple 11). Within the hermeneutic analysis, we conducted a sequential analysis of latent structures as well as a system analysis (Froschauer and Lueger 2003). These two parts of analysis resulted in case reconstructions on a couple level in order to extract the jointly constructed notions of masculinity. Third, we compared these cases in order to identify similarities and differences in the constructions and their connection to the reconciliation of care work and paid work.

This in-depth comparative analysis of three cases out of the original sample of 11 couples enables us to describe, understand and explain connections between parental constructions of masculinity around the birth of their first child. Following the described qualitative approach, we intended to extract case-specific constructions and dynamics within particular relationships. As most of the interviewed couples applied for the shortest option of child care allowance, they do not represent the most common way Austrian parents use parental leave. Furthermore, the sample
consists only of heterosexual couples. The results do not cover the whole duration of parental leave, nor do they reflect on the phase after parental leave. As a matter of course, representativity or generalization is no objective of this qualitative study.

5. Results

In the following sections, first, we present the contrasting cases in order to depict the couples’ joint constructions of masculinity. Second, we illustrate how the couples’ joint constructions of masculinity are linked to the couples’ division of parental leave. Finally, we explore if and how they challenge hegemonic masculinity.

5.1. Parental constructions of masculinities

A typical case for a traditional division of parental leave was represented by Case 1. John and Maria were both 25 years old and married for some years when they decided to have a baby. Maria had finished her studies right after their marriage and was employed as a research assistant at the time of the first interview. John had started his studies right after their marriage and planned to finish soon in order to shift from an occasional occupation to full time employment. John’s change towards full time work was the reason why both of them assessed the situation as ideal to have a child. The use of parental leave was ascribed to Maria who stayed at home for 12 months. However, at the time of the second interview, both still considered the possibility that John would take two months of parental leave as well.

John and Maria constructed masculinity as naturally and primarily being oriented towards employment and career, as being at work and not being affected by the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Union status pre-birth</th>
<th>Couple’s employment pre-birth</th>
<th>Parental leave (in months)</th>
<th>Childcare allowance (in months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>cohabiting</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 + 2 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>cohabiting</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>separated</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 + 8 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner (man taking his A-levels)</td>
<td>20 (4)</td>
<td>20(+4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 + 2 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 + 2 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 + 2 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12 + 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner (man studying at university)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>cohabiting</td>
<td>dual-earner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 + 2 income-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>dual-earner (woman on vocational training)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 income-related</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some cases parts of parental leave were not yet decided for certain. This is marked with brackets.
pregnancy, the birth or the everyday care for the child. As John put it, ‘The main point for us was that I wouldn’t have to study anymore but was able to work.’ Masculinity was connected with the responsibility for all financial concerns of the family. This was legitimated by John’s objective to work for the sake of the family and linked to different forms of valuation of income: his income was valued as the family income even though Maria’s income had been higher and more stable before birth. Rather, her higher income was adduced to legitimate her exclusive use of income-based parental leave.  

Both interview partners constructed a notion of masculinity which included at least his latent wish to take parental leave, seen as primarily benefiting the father. It was not possible – neither for John nor for Maria – to state that he did not want to go on parental leave but simultaneously, it did not cause any problems if he had not expressed his wish. The couple resolved this ambiguity by regarding a father’s parental leave as an additional bonus to the mother’s unquestioned time on leave and by repeatedly attributing his impossibility to take leave to external circumstances and structural factors like his temporary employment contract, their income levels, bureaucratic barriers and the childcare benefit system. Both presented themselves as having no influence on realizing his latent wish for parental leave and did not claim responsibility for their way of distributing family responsibilities. Maria said, ‘I would be very glad for him and I think he would do it with pleasure.’ John’s parental leave time was constructed not as a matter of not wanting, but rather as a matter of not being able to do it.

Paul and Linda represented Case 2 as a typical case of a planned equal division of parental leave time. They were 29 and 30 years old when their wish for a child came true they had delayed until both had full-time employment and stable income after completing law studies. During pregnancy, they had planned to adjust the duration of parental leave to his and her employment situation, concluding that ‘first, I will take twelve months leave and then he twelve months too.’ (Linda)

The case of Paul and Linda showed that the decoupling of family responsibilities from gender was a precondition that enabled them to share parental leave time equally. As Paul stated, ‘we agreed that one of us stays at home and does the caring and then at some point we switch.’ They did not automatically ascribe the longer part to the mother and the shorter to the father and saw both of them as equally capable of doing the tasks that go along with parental leave. Both displayed a strong orientation towards their professional careers and both were regarded as responsible for earning the family income. In contrast to Linda, Paul planned to stay in contact with his employer and colleagues during leave.

Nevertheless, it was the man’s position which thwarted the couple in constructing a gender-equal masculinity. First, compared to other fathers and men, taking parental leave might have reduced Paul’s career opportunities. But, at the same time, it was socially beneficial for him as a man to do the care work for some time. Therefore, he was the only one who could agree to his reduction of career opportunities, whereas Linda was constructed as not being in the position to demand this. Second, there was a clear-cut distinction between the mother’s and the father’s willingness. Linda was supposed to relinquish parental leave time to her partner; not necessarily because she was willing to return to work soon, but because his willingness to take parental leave was awarded higher value than hers which was not called into question. Six months before returning to work, Linda said, ‘sometimes I catch myself thinking that I don’t feel like it, but then again, I certainly don’t begrudge my partner going on
parental leave either and because I know that he is really looking forward to it. Third, it was constructed as natural that a man who ‘consents’ to sharing parental leave with his partner should enjoy and profit from his leave as much as possible. In contrast to the mother’s parental leave, Paul wanted his leave to be at a certain point of time that was ‘particularly good’, and Linda did not want paternal leave to be seen as a waste of time but as time ‘that really benefits them’. Fourth, the recognition by Linda as well as male and female relatives, peers and other actors of Paul’s willingness to take parental leave was a central driving force in this decision process. Ideally, employers should acknowledge fathers’ parental leave time as ‘extremely valuable’ (Linda).

Case 3 was a typical case of a non-traditional division of parental leave time. After Tom and Rita got married, they concentrated on getting pregnant and experienced several negative pregnancy tests. Rita then decided to undergo additional training as a physical therapist in order to get her mind off becoming pregnant while Tom continued to work as a sales manager. One year later, when they realized that ‘We are pregnant!’ (Tom), Tom was 42 and Rita 33 years old. With the help of an official adviser from the Austrian chamber of labour, they decided that Tom would take the entire feasible income-based parental leave. Rita continued her vocational training on a part-time basis; thus, they spent most of the time together, and she was strongly involved in daily caring.

Both partners were perceived as being eligible to care for their baby and to undertake all arising tasks. They presented it as nearly irrelevant who did it in the end. However, their latent constructions of masculinity were not alternative ones and counteracted their presented naturalness of degendering: First, only his wish and willingness was emphasized and could be realized due to the ideal, fortunate and ‘coincidental’ (Rita) external conditions (e.g. unpleasant discussions with Tom’s employer and the impending insolvency of the company). This construction strongly corresponded to her feeling obliged and grateful and to her latent conviction that she did not deserve this situation of being able to pursue her educational training. Tom was convinced that the leave was a time that ‘nobody could give me anymore’ and was ‘set on taking it.’ His wish was based on the conviction that taking parental leave was for his personal benefit. They both created the notion of a man profiting from parental leave, when e.g. Rita stated that ‘he wouldn’t witness so much if he was away.’ Second, the construction of the perpetuated connection of masculinity to employment (e.g. by stressing that Tom’s leave was not a permanent stage but only a temporary exception) countered their degendering. In line with this, they agreed that his leave would be terminated if they found a good job for him during this time, which both of them tried to do. Third, their way of dividing the care work was constructed as an unusual one: ‘again a rare father who has the courage and adheres to going on parental leave.’ (Tom). Hence, they were convinced that it requires and deserves external support and recognition, describing their male and female friends and family, the adviser at the public institution and even the legislator as being supportive. Rita also acknowledged Tom as being innovative, positive and an example worth following.

5.2. Contingent masculinities?

The illustrated cases differed in the way the couples allocated parental leave but not necessarily in their joint constructions of masculinity. Two central facets of masculinity emerged from the analysis, which will be elaborated below. They illustrate how
masculinity was constructed case-specifically in a relational and contingent way: aspects of caring were included only as far as possible and if considered necessary depending on conditions, circumstances and requirements.

First, the delineated parental constructions of masculinity incorporate a father’s parental leave or at least the wish for it. However, this leave always has to conform to external conditions and therefore its realization is tied to different levels of external accountability. In Case 1, unmanageable external constraints were held responsible for preventing the father from taking parental leave. The couple in Case 2 also held external structures accountable but accused them for not being able to share parental leave easily and struggled against. In Case 3, external opportunity structures allowed for the father’s parental leave, even though they had to meet the fertile ground of his strong wish to take leave. Thus, to construct parental leave as inherent in masculinity seems to entail avoiding autonomous and personal responsibility – whether for taking or not taking parental leave.

Second, the constructions of masculinity focus on employment and income-generating work in all three cases, even in the case of the father’s full leave uptake: Tom was still working on Saturdays and both parents would not mind if he found a new job terminating his leave. Paul shared the parental leave equally with his partner and stressed that he – in contrast to Linda – would be available for his colleagues during leave. A slightly different orientation towards employment is represented by John who had to renounce parental leave because of his employment situation which he sought to improve in order to provide for the family. Moreover, the focus on employment was reflected in the double-edged valuation of income: the income generated by the father’s employment was adduced to legitimate that he kept working instead of taking parental leave although it was lower than the mother’s. All three cases showed that a father’s (potential) parental leave has to be adjusted to his orientation towards employment.

6. Discussion: masculinity on the road to change?

Notions of masculinity – shared and constructed within parental relationships and thus being case-specific and relational – are different from, but refer to, hegemonic masculinity which is conceptualized as an ideal-typical form of masculinity (Connell 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Paechter 2006). In this paper, we theoretically distinguished between these two levels of masculinity. As caring masculinities (Elliott 2015) have the potential to change hegemonic masculinity and ‘no one is an innocent bystander in this arena of change’ (Connell 2005, p. 86), we analysed parents’ jointly constructed knowledge of masculinity at the time when they decide on the allocation of parental leave. On the parental level, results show the well-orchestrated interweaving of mothers’ and fathers’ constructions of masculinity.

The relationality of parental responsibilities (Doucet 2015) was well-reflected in the results which point to constructions of contingent masculinities. Although the inclusion of a father’s wish for parental leave and the focus on the father’s income-generating work are two aspects of masculinity which were observed in all presented cases, they were jointly constructed as depending on external conditions and as being realized as needed.

Connecting these results to hegemonic masculinity and the hegemonic gender order, masculinity was jointly constructed as superior when it comes to care work.
and parental leave. Care work in the context of parental leave was naturally connected to mothers. Men did it only as an additional bonus when external circumstances and conditions were adequate and allowed for it and when it was jointly constructed as being as beneficial as possible for them. Both mothers and fathers assumed that parental leave is valuable for the father himself and valued his (potential) parental leave time higher than the mother’s.

The in-depth analysis made evident that the decisions for or against sharing the leave, even if displayed as a joint decision, were father-centred. They were oriented towards his wish and his willingness as central driving forces even in cases where his wish might be prevented to be fulfilled (as in Case 1). These results were in contrast to research from Canada which found that the decision for a father’s leave uptake is mother-led (Doucet 2006, McKay and Doucet 2010). The woman was constructed as not being in a central position, neither to claim for the partner’s parental leave nor to prevent it. Although constructed as a non-autonomous choice, bound by external opportunity structures, taking parental leave can be conceptualized as a highly masculine act to interrupt a career temporarily, because it is based on a man’s individual willpower (reflected in the emphasis of the father’s personal willingness, see also Vuori 2009) and – as his benefit is emphasized – on a masculine ego (see Connell 2005). Furthermore, the joint focus on fathers’ paid work and career when deciding for or against fathers’ parental leave is in line with hegemonic masculinity. Against this background, only the man was deemed to be in the position to agree to the interruption of his career, to claim for system changes in order to boost gender equality (as Paul did) and to claim for and receive external recognition for taking leave (as Tom did). This, again, strongly corresponds with a woman who was constructed as not being in the position to call for this, who supported his claims for external recognition and who gratefully presented her partner as an exceptional example of a good father (as Rita did). This goes hand in hand with constructing a father’s leave uptake as courageous which again points to hegemonic masculinity: as taking parental leave and doing childcare per se contradict hegemonic masculinity, this has to be compensated by the construction of a father’s leave uptake as a highly masculine act of being courageous.

To sum up, the couples in our sample constructed fathers on parental leave as being in a subordinate position and simultaneously endeavour to maintain and reassure their still superior position. Consequently, and consistent with prior results from Norway (Brandth and Kvande 1998), our findings indicate that among these three contrasting cases of Austrian couples, regardless of how they share (or not share at all) parental leave, masculinity remains hegemonic in being superior to femininity, even if incorporating feminine aspects of caring.

By simultaneously including the father’s wish for parental leave as a central element of masculinity, the constructions represent what Johansson and Klinth (2008) call caring fathers, but do not represent what Elliott (2015) calls caring masculinity and, hence, do not challenge but rather enhance hegemonic masculinity: the father’s (wish for) parental leave is included but only as far as it can be adjusted to his needs and to external circumstances. Consequently, we may assume that if external conditions strongly supported men to take (longer) parental leave periods, this would change hegemonic masculinity and gender relations. Men would then have to automatically bear parental leave in mind when they decide to have a child (as women do already), and it would not be regarded as a courageous act anymore.
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Notes
1. To date, research has concentrated on retrospective data on the decision for (sharing) parental leave.
2. For more detailed information see Austrian Federal Chancellery (2015).
3. At the time of the second interviews, yet only parts of parental leave were consumed.
4. A case is constituted by four interviews (father and mother each interviewed pre- and postnatal).
5. This is in stark contrast to cases in our sample where the father’s higher income is used to legitimate that he is not able to make use of parental leave.

Notes on contributors
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