

'Little children are not for dad's?' Challenging and undoing hegemonic masculinity

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Studies on work and organizations state that traditional gendered cultures support hegemonic masculinity and obstruct an engaged form of 'new' fathering. Not only do employers hinder fathers in sharing equally in childcare, but the dynamics within the couple also matter. An examination of the negotiations within couples regarding paid and unpaid work reveals the need to revise conceptualizations of masculinity, with a focus on *undoing masculinity*. Based on in-depth interviews with couples in Germany, I argue that social change at the interactional level encompasses at least the possibility that gender, as a resource of the differentiation and hierarchization of masculinities and femininities within the realm of paid and unpaid labour, can be fragile or can even be episodically undone. Hence, more empirical and theoretical work within and beyond the context of fathering is crucial to further theoretical approaches to undoing masculinity.

KEYWORDS

fathering, gendered division of labour, un/doing gender, un/doing masculinity, un/paid work

1 | INTRODUCTION

And then one had to tackle the question, where do we go from there when the child is born? The decision, then, who stays at home ... and cares for the child. (Lars, 37 years old)

As this brief interview statement indicates, parental leave can be a matter of negotiation within couples. *Who cares for our child?* is the crucial question that, implicitly or explicitly, parents-to-be must answer. With the separation of unpaid family work and paid labour wrought by industrialization and capitalism, breadwinning responsibilities have been ideal-typically ascribed to fathers, whereas family work has been ascribed to mothers. However, in recent decades, we have observed the appearance of so-called 'new' fathers. Social scientists have started to investigate this

phenomenon, focusing their studies on welfare state policies (Hobson, 2002) and (gendered) organizations (Possinger, 2013) or societal discourses and narratives about fathering (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2010).

In recent decades, Germany and several other western European countries have implemented welfare state policies – in particular, reforms of parental leave – that have accompanied and stimulated the societal discourse of involved fathering (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Peukert, 2015). However, studies on work and organizations state that traditional gendered cultures and structures act as barriers to an engaged form of fathering (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Liebig & Oechsle, 2017; Romero-Balsas, Muntanyola-Saura, & Rogero-García, 2013). Drawing on qualitative research data from a German study, I argue that despite the importance of work and organizations as explanations for lasting gender inequality, on the interactional level, ‘undoing masculinity’ in negotiations within a couple with regard to an un/equal share of paid work and family care matters. While full-time employment, career commitment and homosocial games within groups of men (Bourdieu, 1997; Kimmel, 1996) are ideal-typically seen as fundamental in (re)producing hegemonic masculinity in western societies, the realm of care is constructed in relation to femininity and mothering (for a geographically and culturally broader perspective on fathering, cf. Shwalb, Shwalb, & Lamb, 2012).

In 1985, Berk termed house and family work as a ‘gender factory’. Three decades later, care can still be viewed as a ‘gender factory’, and what occurs if parents decide to share parental leave equally? Is this decision a possible terrain on which to interrogate hegemonic masculinity through alternative masculinities or even undoing masculinity?

The very idea of this article is to examine the co-construction of gender binaries and the division of labour as the non/contested arena of (hegemonic) masculinities. Therefore, this article first outlines the relationship between masculinities and fathering. In the subsequent section, I elaborate on doing masculinity within heterosexual couples regarding their division of labour. Focusing on symbolic and interactional construction of masculinity while couples negotiate their parental leave reveals alternative concepts of masculinity and forms of undoing gender. This argument is empirically grounded in qualitative interview data, and the findings are expounded along the dimensions of career and conceptions of ‘breadwinning’ as well as negotiations regarding the share of parental leave.

2 | CONCEPTUALIZING MASCULINITIES AND FATHERING

While most studies on masculinity in recent decades have focused on ‘hegemonic masculinity’ or other materializations of masculinity, in this article, I draw on research that sheds light on ‘alternative’, non-hegemonic masculinities. The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, as proposed by Connell (1987), functions as a reference point (ironically, a hegemonic one). This concept is useful for analysing the dominant masculinity practices in organizations (e.g., Murgia & Poggio, 2013) and in families and intimate relationships (e.g., Miller, 2010).

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), at any given time, there is one form of masculinity – namely, *hegemonic masculinity* – that is culturally exalted and has a hegemonic position in relation to *subordinated*, *complicit* and *marginalized* masculinities. This hegemony is socially negotiated and based on three dimensions: (i) power, namely, women’s subordination to men; (ii) (re)production, that is, the gendered division of labour; and (iii) emotional relations and cathexis, which concern the dominant model of desire (Connell, 1987). The first two dimensions offer several analytical starting points: the dichotomization and hierarchization of the productive over the reproductive sphere correspond to the socially negotiated differentiation of human beings into gendered subjects. Through power structures, femininity is subordinated and hierarchized under masculinity. Taking the interweaving of re/productive spheres and the gender binary into account reveals the co-construction and mutual support of the dichotomization and hierarchization in both dimensions. As Berk (1985, p. 201) outlines in her book *The Gender Factory*, which explores doing gender and the division of labour, we observe ‘two production processes: the production of goods and services and what we might call the production of gender. Simultaneously, household members “do” gender, as they “do” housework and childcare.’

In keeping with the metaphor, the 'gender factory' opened during industrialization; thus, the prevalent discursive figure of the 'missing' father (cf. Lupton & Barclay, 1997, p. 53) must be contextualized as a historical phenomenon: care – albeit not automatically including housework – was broadly acknowledged as part of early bourgeois paternal masculinity (Francis, 2002). Until the middle of the 19th century, bourgeois fathers were present in their families, emotionally engaged with their children and involved in the upbringing and education of children (Martschukat & Stieglitz, 2005, p. 115). This type of fathering is different from the contemporary 'new' fathering, which emphasizes hands-on care on a daily basis. Nevertheless, this comparison is instructive, as it reveals that some – rather than all – aspects of involved fathering were regarded as a legitimate part of masculinity before bourgeois society, with its gendered division of labour, was established.

Whereas *breadwinning* in western societies has been firmly attached to cultural ideals of masculinity since the 20th century (LaRossa, 1997), current conceptions have been increasingly broadened and can include hands-on caregiving and emotional labour. Empirical manifestations of this trend are asserted in recent research on the narrated masculinities of stay-at-home fathers in Canada (Doucet, 2006) and Belgium (Merla, 2008), fathers taking parental leave in Germany (Behnke & Meuser, 2013), gendered parenting by first-time fathers in Great Britain (Miller, 2010) and Finland (Eerola & Mykkanen, 2015), and 'masculine care' by fathers taking parental leave in Norway (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). A central finding of all these studies is the father's need for boundary work through distinguishing between 'mothering' and 'fathering'. Brandth and Kvande (1998) discuss 'masculine care' in the father and child being together and engaging in activities together, which the authors situate as equivalent to the 'traditional' masculine organization of homosocial friendships. While emphasizing the compatibility of care work and masculinity, the fathers separate care and housework to mark a distance from mothering. Furthermore, Halrynjo (2009) argues that the career patterns of men are increasingly influenced by care work. The caregiving fathers in this study are responsible for most of the household chores and childcare, they work part-time in low-skilled occupations and they earn less than their partners.

However, according to Yarwood (2011) and Ranson (2001), *breadwinning* persists as a culturally hegemonic aspect of paternal care. Myers and Demantas (2016, p. 1120) point to the persistence of the 'breadwinner ideology' with the coupling of masculinity, work and *breadwinning*. The remaining relevance of this ideology becomes evident if fathers want to reduce (or, in fact, *do* reduce) their working time to care for their children. Working-time reductions by mothers remain (in Germany) unquestioned, whereas fathers must legitimize their part-time work within their organization, and employers often devalue their family engagement as low career commitment (e.g., for the German context, Possinger, 2013). However, research findings suggest that although caregiving is still entangled with gender production and is strongly connected to femininity and mothering (Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2010), emotional labour and hands-on caregiving are playing an increasing role in fathers' lives. Focusing on the relation between parental leave and paid labour, Brandth and Kvande (1998, p. 311) conclude that most caring fathers in their study are 'representatives of hegemonic masculinity as they have strong ties to the labour market and as their identities are strongly rooted in income generating work'. They deduce that this configuration of hegemonic masculinity might be a 'precondition for being able to construct a successful integration of masculinity and fathering' (p. 310), whereas those with ambivalent feelings towards their paid work have difficulty managing their parental leave. Based on the results of several Swedish studies, Hearn et al. (2012, p. 39) similarly summarize that "'involved fathering" has become incorporated into hegemonic masculinity'. These authors identify two strands of argument: first, incorporating fathering into hegemonic masculinity maintains patriarchal relations because it does not question the gendered division of labour or interrelated inequalities in the labour market; second, by contrast, the claim that there is fundamental change implies the reformulation of hegemonic masculinity to integrate an orientation towards engagement in childcare.

Focusing on *involved fathering* as an outstanding example of social change in masculinities makes sense, as the cornerstone of institutionalized gender relations – the gendered division of labour within the family – is called into question (Meuser, 2014, p. 160). Thus, I propose to shift the focus from homosocial games as the main aspect of doing hegemonic masculinity (Bourdieu, 1997; Kimmel, 1996) to the negotiations of (heterosexual) couples with

regard to who cares for the child: parental leave and, more generally, *care* become a non/contested arena for undoing hegemonic masculinity.

3 | NEGOTIATING MASCULINITIES WITHIN HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES

Focusing on negotiations within heterosexual couples as a site of the production and the (re)assurance of masculinity has several implications. First, Kimmel (1996, p. 7) highlights the idea that 'masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment', and Bourdieu (1997, p. 203) emphasizes that within homosocial spaces, (only) men play the serious games of competition. However, within the heterosexual family, the construction of masculinity depends on the female partner, who is societally attributed as being more competent at childcare and who hence becomes more relevant within the construction of masculinity in cases of involved fathering.

Regarding the division of labour within relationships, two results are important: on the one hand, social scientists identify increasing gender equality; on the other hand, we observe that after the birth of a child, the majority of couples fall back into a more unequal division of labour (cf. Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). As one powerful process, several studies highlight 'maternal gatekeeping' (cf. Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Peukert, 2015): the mother attributes (mainly in an unintentional way) the main care responsibility to herself and tries to minimize (equal) sharing with the father.

Second, we must clarify the theoretical assumptions underlying the concept of masculinity. Following the interactional approach, the conceptualization of gender as a sociocultural practice and as a system of meaning attribution highlights that we all 'do' gender routinely in our everyday interactions (Gildemeister, 2008; Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The implication is the end of a univocal concept of masculinity: in thinking of masculinities and femininities as plural, a relational and historical phenomenon opens up the focus on processes of doing difference. If gender is understood as a practice, then masculinity must also be understood as such, namely, doing masculinity.

According to several authors (cf. Deutsch, 2007; Hirschauer, 2001; Pullen & Knights, 2007; Risman, 2009), we must interrogate the omnirelevance thesis of West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 137) regarding the question 'can we ever *not* do gender?' These authors claim that the relevance of gender must be understood as a continuum. In some situations, it can be anything from irrelevant (empirically, we find an undoing of gender) to highly relevant (here, we find the doing of gender). Understanding masculinities as a product of doing gender reveals the opportunity to analyse the undoing of hegemonic masculinity within interactions and negotiations (for the undoing of gender within the discursive production of subject positions, cf. Butler, 2004; for the theoretical differences between a post-structuralist approach and the applied interactional approach, cf. Kelan, 2010). Following this argument points to a shortcoming in Connell's approach: social change can be thought of only by adding new or revising (empirical) types of masculinity, although the possibility of episodically *not* doing masculinity requires theoretical and empirical rethinking.

Third, in institutionalizing the interactional perspective on doing and undoing masculinity while examining couples, we must clarify our understanding of *negotiation*. A great deal of research treats it as being similar to interaction (cf. Evertsson & Nyman, 2009), reflexive conversations and, in some cases, conflicts (cf. Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Meuser, 2014). Taking into account the theoretical considerations of Strauss, a symbolic interactionist of the Chicago School, strengthens the concept of negotiation. In his work on 'negotiated order', Strauss (1978, p. 234) defines *negotiation* as 'one of the possible means of "getting things accomplished" when parties need to deal with each other to get those things done'. Regarding the analysis of negotiations within intimate relationships, it is important to focus on the 'nomic transformation', the construction of a joint (and hence negotiated) perspective of the world (Berger & Kellner, 1994).

Situating negotiations within the structural context (cf. Clarke, 2005), the legal framework of family policy in Germany, especially regarding parental leave and parental allowances, must be taken into account. More fundamentally, the institutionalization of hegemonic masculinities and subordinated femininities in concurrence with paid and unpaid work has to be borne in mind. Working as a matter of course, it covers the inherent power relations (re-)

producing the gendered division of labour not only through societal norms and values but also through family policies and organizations. The negotiated order approach recognizes that negotiations are contingent to a certain extent, although constraints and the 'exterior reality' bracket them (Fine, 1991). For the empirical approach, this recognition implies analysing the boundaries on couples' negotiation of parental leave, which points to 'features that are not of the situation, but that act as constraints and exteriorities [...] in the situation' (Fine, 1991; Nadai & Maeder, 2008, para. 47). In comparing the couples' accounts, I ask how structural constraints such as gender differentiation and notions of hegemonic masculinity impose boundaries on the couple's negotiations by shaping care and breadwinning attributions.

4 | CONTEXT, DATA AND METHODS

In this study, I am particularly interested in how 'alternative' yet non-hegemonic masculinities are constituted and mobilized in stories of couples who refer to negotiations regarding their share of parental leave as well as how this process might encompass an undoing of gender. The two concepts of *challenging* and *undoing hegemonic masculinity* examined in this article are empirically grounded in and built on a larger sample obtained in Germany that was part of a research project on couples' negotiations regarding parental leave (Peukert, 2015).

The relevant research steps, including data collection, theoretical sampling, data analysis and the theorization of empirical results, are informed by grounded theory (Strauss, 1987) and its development as situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) as well as the constructivist version (Charmaz, 2014). All the interview data were anonymized and the names used are pseudonyms.

The country case is Germany, where the opportunity for parental leave with dismissal protection has been established in law for many years. In 2007, a paradigm shift towards the Nordic model of family policy occurred with the introduction of the parental allowance, whereby parents can share 14 months of parental leave while receiving a parental benefit of 65–67 per cent of their monthly net income. The minimum allowance amounts to 300 euros; the maximum, 1800 euros. Under the use-it-or-lose-it system, at least two months are reserved for the other parent, usually the father. One visible result since the implementation of the family policy reform is that the take-up rates among fathers increased sharply from 3.5 per cent in 2006 to 35.7 per cent in 2015 (Federal Statistical Office, 2017). Approximately two-thirds of fathers took this opportunity for a period of two months, which are often called 'daddy months', whereas many mothers take 12 months.

I interviewed nine couples in Germany between June 2010 and May 2012, each of the partners alone and the couple together. As leading sample criteria, I searched for dual-earner couples who shared parental leave and had (statistically) unconventional sharing quotas. The pool of interviewees was constructed through snowball sampling. Starting from mediated contacts by colleagues, (non/academic) friends and family throughout Germany, I asked the first interviewees for contacts matching the sample criteria. These techniques are often used in hidden populations that are difficult for researchers to access, such as couples who share parental leave, including fathers who take more than two months of time off to care for their children.

Guided by the theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987), the sample differs regarding the level of education, vocational characteristics, the period and share of parental leave, and the ratio of the spouses' incomes. All the interviewees are European, non-migrants and white. The sample comprises eight heterosexual couples and one lesbian couple, all of them 'middle-class' dual-earner and dual-career couples who have one or two children and shared parental leave. The sharing quotas of the couples range from 12 months by the mother and two by the father/co-mother to four months by the mother and ten months by the father. Aside from one mother, all the interviewees have at least one vocational training, and ten of 18 have undertaken university studies. The sample represents the heterogeneity of work contracts and sectors, from limited to permanent working contracts and from full-time to part-time arrangements, and the sample includes the private and public sectors as well as two self-employed parents: in one case, the mother became unemployed after her parental leave for her first child.

Within the larger research project on couples' negotiations regarding parental leave, one main result is that not the (mostly) higher income of the father but different self-attributions and partner attributions of care responsibilities elucidate the share of un/paid work (Peukert, 2015, 2017). Continuing with the relevance of negotiations of care attributions, my analysis in this article is guided by the desire to explore the intertwining of un/doing hegemonic masculinity and negotiating the share of un/paid work. Out of the whole sample, I focus on the narratives of three heterosexual couples. These couples were chosen because the accounts of both parents were remarkable examples of the different ways in which hegemonic masculinity practices are challenged.

While most empirical studies on masculinities and fathering are based on interviews with fathers, my findings are grounded in both separate interviews and couple interviews. The research project employed the narrative interview technique, beginning with broad questions intended to encourage the interviewees to tell stories about their everyday life, starting with the couple's shared history, family formation processes and daily routines of doing and managing paid and family work as well as their experiences of and feelings towards parental leave. In-depth interviews with couples make it possible to reconstruct their *negotiations in situ* about who will start and how they (jointly) tell their story as well as how they interrupt or complement each other. These dynamics are crucial data and reveal the merit of interviewing couples together. I supplemented these joint interviews with separate interviews with both parents to obtain narratives about their professional career development and their experiences of taking parental leave within the context of their organization. Moreover, to reduce the limitation of couple interviews, that is, the partner cannot articulate perspectives that might conflict with the negotiated couple presentation, through interviewing them alone, I give them the opportunity to articulate a perspective that might be silenced within the couple context.

To ensure the quality, transparency and accountability of the analysis, crucial segments of the interviews were analysed within an interdisciplinary group. Starting with the hermeneutic interpretation of the entrance narrative and thematic relevant sequences, I developed thorough memo-writing codes. In particular, comparing the narratives focusing on consensual and conflicting negotiations of questions of career, breadwinning and parental leave enabled me to understand how the couples do (or undo) masculinity while retrospectively making sense of their division of labour.

5 | FINDINGS

Hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary western world embraces the ideal of breadwinning, career orientation and (white) heterosexual coupledness and family life. Starting from this viewpoint, I discuss two empirically grounded concepts of *challenging hegemonic masculinity* and *undoing hegemonic masculinity* by examining three dimensions: the career concept, the breadwinning concept and family/care work, especially parental leave.

5.1 | Challenging hegemonic masculinity

Within the concept of *challenging hegemonic masculinity*, parental leave and family work are a contested arena between partners. Both partners (want to) share paid and unpaid work, although the mother attributes the main care responsibility to herself and tries to minimize sharing with the father, who considers himself an *equal* parent. *Challenging hegemonic masculinity* is characterized by flexible concepts of career, tensions between the male breadwinner and dual careers, and conflicting demands on parental leave.

5.1.1 | Flexible concept of career

Birgit (41 years old) and Lars (37 years old) had a one-year-old child at the time of the interviews. Birgit has a doctorate and works as a natural scientist at a research institute, and Lars works as a legal expert in a federal administration. Regarding parental leave, Birgit took four months and Lars took eight months. Starting with the story of his

career development with different (international) positions in ministries until now, Lars continues with the classification of his parental leave within his career path. He labels his parental leave a 'sabbatical' that was useful after a highly intensive work phase during which he had to commute for half a year between the city of his usual workplace and the couple's home as well as travel to the city where his foreign assignment occurred. During this time, he had no possibility of taking vacation time.

I find it actually very pleasant so far, if every two, three years I somehow have a kind of change. When you start to establish too many routines, the work no longer motivates me in this way.... Then, of course, the work is more relaxed, but it is also not so thrilling anymore.... In this respect, I find it pleasant if you can somehow do something new, and at this time, I had the feeling that this kind of international cooperation, that it is enough; I can manage a change now and then, and it was fine by me that it was a change into private life; in general, that was a very exciting new experience with the child.... I really enjoyed this change. I even could have done it for a longer period.

While Lars prefers a change in his work context every two or three years to avoid routine and to maintain the 'thrilling' aspect of work, he takes into account the possibility of new challenges not only in his career but also within his private life. For him, the career and being a carer are equal in terms of their potential for him to 'do something new'. This concept of career presupposes the equality of paid and unpaid work because otherwise, Lars could have imagined a change only within his career context and would not have considered parental leave to be an appropriate change. In contrast to the western ideal of hegemonic masculinity, for Lars, change and new challenges are not necessarily intertwined with professional advancement. The flexible concept of career illustrated by the claim of 'do[ing] something new', as Lars notes, does not exclude professional advancement; instead, it is open to shifts into family work through taking parental leave.

Birgit's concept of career is different from that of Lars. Asked for the significance of her current job, she presupposes that the career and paid work should be fun and that if this is no longer the case, then she thinks about giving up waged work: 'If I don't enjoy work enough, I can even imagine quitting it.' Birgit is ambivalent about her career, stating a little later,

Of course, I now have the feeling that I have now invested so much that I maybe want to stay on at the moment because otherwise, I would regret my investments.

Birgit's 'investments' are related to not quitting her job. She questions her career, implying that her concept of career is a matter of perceived investments and outcomes that are measured against her perceived contentedness.

5.1.2 | Tensions between the male breadwinner and dual careers

The career concept inherent in Birgit's narratives has one important precondition that Birgit herself articulates in direct relation to her statement that work should be enjoyable: 'I am certainly in a situation where I do not have to [work].' Birgit believes that she is sufficiently financially supported by her partner. Consequently, she understands her career not as a main or even necessary part of the family income but more as voluntary work that she can quit if she is dissatisfied. This perception implicitly refers to Lars' breadwinning work as a matter of course and a duty.

By contrast, Lars does not position himself as the breadwinner (unlike some other fathers in the whole sample). After being asked if he has any wishes regarding things that his partner could change, he underscores the merits of a dual-career situation. He hesitates and subsequently answers with no concrete agenda regarding what Birgit does but with a detailed argument for the merits of dual careers and the losses if one person quits his or her job. This response does not violate his loyalty to Birgit or break down the couple's façade; instead, it opens the possibility of discussing an imminent conflict between the partners. As though presenting a well-prepared, rhetorically convincing strategy, he first elaborates on the disadvantages of dual careers and the exertions that the partners must make, for example, in coordinating time together as a family when they both regularly travel for business. Next, he emphasizes the

advantages of dual careers and the losses if one person quits his or her job – and, in this context, it is more likely to be *her* career:

... Anyway, we both cannot imagine that one is practically the breadwinner and the other is at home and cares for the house and family. It is good for the balance within the relationship if everybody has their own leg to stand on and has their own world of experience beyond the family.

Lars argues from a 'we' perspective while implicitly addressing *his* wishes regarding what Birgit might change. This perspective means that the couple discuss pursuing their dual careers and have a negotiated (fragile) consensus that Birgit will not quit her career (or that this was the case at the time of the interview).

5.1.3 | Conflicting demands related to parental leave

The negotiations about family and care work – especially regarding parental leave – have two main characteristics: the couple accept *without question* that they will share parental leave. In contrast, this is not the case for couples where it is a matter of course that the mother is primarily responsible for child rearing and that 'appropriate mothering' implies a child-centred, emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive process, which is discussed as 'hegemonic mothering' (Peukert, 2015) or the ideology of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996). Additionally, their negotiations embody an ambivalent concurrence in equal and gendered care attributions.

The following is an excerpt from the couple interview with Birgit and Lars in which they talk about the question of how they managed parental leave after the birth of their child:

Birgit: *If you think about how this decision arose, I would say there are plenty of levels.... I think you felt like doing this? That played a role as well....*

Lars: *Well, I think both of us were ultimately interested.*

In questioning Lars, Birgit cites *his* interest as one reason for their share of parental leave. Lars confirms and opens the focus, indicating that both of them – thus including Birgit – had apparent roles as potential caregivers for their child. He expresses Birgit's tacit assumption of her own interest in taking parental leave and reasons for two equal caregivers.

However, this case shows that it is not sufficient for only the father to assume that both parents are equal caregivers. Rather, the mother can try to minimize the (equal) paternal care work through 'maternal gatekeeping' by rhetorically and practically demonstrating herself to be the primary caregiver and neglecting mutual responsibility, for instance, by taking charge of tasks or redoing tasks to her standard (cf. Peukert, 2015). For example, Birgit talks in detail about how she views Lars' parental leave in regard to the question of how they each experienced their own parental leave.

Birgit: *Well, in the beginning, it was very hard for me, going away for the first time. Worrying, naturally ... I did not worry about whether things would work out at home. Rather, I had more practical worries.*

Lars: *You are actually talking more about the time when you started to work, aren't you?*

Birgit: *Yes, all right, I'm starting just now. First of all, I talked about the time before (laughing); now, as it started, I actually didn't worry so much....*

Lars: *Hang on, we're talking about your parental leave now (laughing).*

Birgit: *Ah, I thought ... Okay, then I will finish this for now.*

Lars: *Well, it's more the view that I took parental leave and you didn't.*

What is happening here? The couple had decided that Birgit would take four months of parental leave and Lars eight months afterwards, and the interviews occurred after Lars' parental leave. Thus, even though Lars has cared for the child for eight months, Birgit retains her initial 'practical worries' and updates them in her narrative while Lars is sitting beside her. Birgit attributes the main care responsibility to herself and tries to minimize (equal) sharing with Lars

by highlighting her concerns over his care engagement. While this attitude is not reflected in the division of the parental leave itself, it is in Birgit's retrospective narrative and in her considering possibly quitting her job as a highly qualified scientist and taking 12 months of parental leave if they have a second child.

In this context, couples are *challenging hegemonic masculinity while negotiating parental leave* because the father considers himself to be a parent with equal childcare responsibilities and he pursues a flexible concept of career while successfully managing his parental leave. However, it is the mother who attributes the main care responsibility to herself while presupposing that the breadwinner obligations belong to the father and who tries to minimize (equal) sharing with the father. A conflict is imminent if the father resists the 'maternal gatekeeping' by sharing childcare and paid work equally with the mother. Hence, the father must fight for his rights not only with his employer but also within his relationship, where tensions between pursuing a male breadwinner model or a dual-career model must be negotiated.

5.2 | Undoing hegemonic masculinity

Within the concept of *undoing hegemonic masculinity*, family work is a less contested arena: both partners (are willing to) share paid *and* unpaid work, and both *avoid* gendered care attributions. The empirical phenomenon of undoing is methodologically challenging: how can we reconstruct something that has not occurred? In this section, I combine two approaches to the empirical reconstruction of undoing. First, based on systematic comparisons with other couples from the whole sample (Peukert, 2015), I discuss the negotiations of two couples that allow expectations of gendered differentiations and hierarchizations. However, the couples do not use their income/career situation as resources for a gendered management of un/paid work. Instead, they question 'traditional' (male) career concepts and frame breadwinning as a joint venture. Second, I choose interview accounts in which the couples explicitly negotiate their equality in the context of sharing parental leave.

5.2.1 | Questioning 'traditional' (male) career concepts

Klara (34 years old) and Stefan (37 years old) have two children, a four-year-old and a one-year-old. Klara works as a human resources manager for a global supplier of technology and services, and Stefan works as a physiotherapist in a hospital. Stefan shows an 'alternative' career orientation, meaning that he does not pursue a 'traditional' career with constant professional advancement but, rather, pursues long-term advanced specialization and plans to transition to freelance activity if – and this aspect is important – the family situation allows it. His professional training can be described as fragmented: he started a number of different vocational traineeships until he finished the 'right' one as a physiotherapist. In his view, this training completed his search for a fulfilling occupation. He distances himself from men who study engineering simply to earn money, with no interest in the work. The analysis of his interview shows that he defines himself not merely by his paid work but also as having an intensive interest in non-paid work, a light-hearted and highly family-oriented engagement. He distances himself from the ideal of the full-time, career-oriented man and seeks to combine his career, family life and personal interests. This attitude implies contempt for paid engagement, which he uses as a starting point to legitimize his engagement within the family. In addition, the couple *compare* the career and income situation of both partners and take into account this comparison during decisions regarding their time involvement in paid work. Stefan explains their plans of sharing paid and unpaid work as follows:

... Because Klara simply has more opportunities at the moment to establish a career, we have decided that I will reduce to 75 per cent or reduce my working time and she will work 100 per cent because she has considerably more prospects of promotion there than I do, and now, I am reducing [my hours].

Stefan frames the reduction of his working time not as a relinquishment of something but more as a thoughtful decision. He implicitly refers to – and distances himself from – the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, in which paternal hands-on involvement on a daily basis is incompatible with a committed full-time career. Taking into account the

societal background of gendered norms, Stefan's framework of legitimation is not surprising. In Germany (as in other western countries), caregiving, parental leave and working-time reductions are less typical for fathers than for mothers (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). Thus, Stefan must argue against an empirical 'normality' that offers no unquestioned space for fathers to take parental leave and/or reduce their working hours without legitimizing these choices in relation to career engagements.

Klara frames her career engagement in a diametrically opposite but functionally equivalent manner. While she finished her university degree with a 'let's see what happens' approach, she has increased her work engagement, and at the time of the interview, her career commitments were combined with concrete plans to pursue a career:

At some stage, I would like to gain a leadership position. So, I have already put the requirement on myself that at some stage, I will lead a team with managerial responsibility. That is my goal, which I am really working towards and that I am already pursuing.

Thus, Klara clarifies her career plans and underlines her concrete efforts to pursue them. While, from her perspective, her current department does not further her career, she takes appropriate actions to change this situation and applies for a more suitable position in another department in the same organization.

She briefly articulates the balance between work and family when providing her statistical data after the interviews: 'With every child, I work longer.' Considering the empirical background in Germany, it is clearly reasonable for Klara to articulate her intensified working hours after the second child because 'normally', mothers reduce their working hours and fathers intensify their work engagement.

5.2.2 | Breadwinning as a joint venture

For these couples, breadwinning is a joint venture, even if both partners do not contribute the same amount of money to their family income. What is relevant is not the amount; rather, the fact that both are contributing is unquestioned. This attitude implies that for both partners, paid work is a matter of course, apart from the time of parental leave during which they receive the parental allowance. The case of Anne (35 years old) and Tobias (39 years old) is remarkable because financially, they represent the traditional breadwinner family, although it is Anne who earns the family income. Anne works as a team leader in a global company and Tobias is a carpenter who builds sets in a theatre. They have a one-year-old child. Anne discusses their sharing of parental leave (she took six months and Tobias eight months) and offers several reasons for it:

Certainly, what also played a small role was that at that time, things were a bit strange with my employer. One heard strange stories from women who were on parental leave who suddenly did not get their job back, and in our case, I am the main breadwinner, and therefore, the fear of losing my position also played a role [in the decision].

In explaining their share of parental leave, Anne mentions that she is the main breadwinner. However, this role does not necessarily imply a dominant position within their relationship, as might be the case (ideally) in the case of hegemonic masculinity. In the narratives of Anne and Tobias, the main breadwinner position is marginal, although where it is mentioned, it functions systematically in combination with the argument of maintaining Anne's job position to leverage her six-month parental leave, which is statistically the exception in Germany. While a 12-month parental leave by the mother is socially 'normal', a shorter period and thus an 'unconventional' share of the leave must often be legitimized. A socially acceptable explanation is that the mother wishes to retain (perceived) professional and financial advantages, whereas in many situations, a couple saying that they simply want to share the leave raises questions and is not perceived as a satisfying answer. However, legitimizing the 'unconventional' sharing of leave in terms of professional and financial necessity is accepted as a convincing argument. Notably, the breadwinner position is not used as a *dominant* resource within negotiations between the couple with regard to their share of parental leave. In this case, one could argue that Anne is unable to exploit the fact that she is in a 'better' position to 'delegate'

more family work to Tobias. However, I argue that while both appreciate family work and paid work equally, they undo hegemonic masculinity because they do not use their different career and earning situations as a resource to unequally divide paid and unpaid work. To strengthen this argument, if Anne imposed more (or, ideally, all) family work on Tobias by highlighting her breadwinning position, we would observe the hierarchization of paid and unpaid work, with the supremacy of paid work as one aspect of doing hegemonic masculinity. The only difference would be that the gender of the person who is doing hegemonic masculinity and that of the person who is accepting it would be contrary (in a heteronormative world) to the 'traditional' arrangement. Understanding the concept of masculinity in a constructivist way does not mean 'attaching' masculinity to men without question. This perspective makes the concept much more complex but opens new approaches to related phenomena.

5.2.3 | Equal sharing of parental leave

The final dimension is the negotiation of parental leave. This negotiation is characterized by sharing the caring responsibility equally in a way that does not presuppose the caring responsibility of the mother and then add the responsibility of the father (cf. Deutsch, 1999). Klara explains their chosen share of parental leave as follows:

We wanted to play fair; everybody can stay at home, and everybody can stay at home for the same time.

Klara understands the question of care responsibility similarly to the rules of a game that apply to all players regardless of age, income, career situation or gender. Thus, both parents view themselves as equal caregivers who are entitled to take parental leave, with one implicit assumption being that they both *want* to use parental leave. In their narratives, implicit or explicit gendered care attributions are avoided and in-existent. In contrast to *challenging hegemonic masculinity*, here, the self-attribution and the partner's attribution of care responsibilities match. Consequently, these couples have less cause for conflict over sharing parental leave.

Either the couples share their responsibilities half and half, with both parents taking seven months of parental leave, or the career and income situation of *both parents* is taken into account. In this case, the couples negotiate the significance of their careers as well as the potential consequences for career development and the long-term development of their incomes (e.g., Anne and Tobias). However, at the forefront is the couples' underlying negotiated assumption that they want to share (equally) parental leave. This assumption means that they take their career and financial situations into account but do not grant them the sole decisive position in their negotiations and justifications for sharing parental leave.

Anne: *Well, anyway, for me, that was these six months ... I don't remember exactly how one came to that ... six months is half a year; anyway, that is a round number. Well, and I think for you, the eight months were a result of that...*

Tobias: *This was the rest, then, well.*

Anne: *If you share, then you get two months more, which, of course, we took advantage of.*

Tobias: *We [took] it all.*

It is remarkable that the couple explain and legitimize Anne's 'shorter' parental leave but not the 'long' parental leave taken by Tobias. Tobias' share simply *results* from the time negotiated for Anne.

Similar to the rules of a game noted by Klara above, Tobias explains their 'rules' for hands-on care:

The person ... who has to go out for work puts her to bed in the evening. The person who has parental leave gets up with her in the morning. Then, she has something from both parents.

The logic of dividing family work is observed in relation to their presence at home through paid work or parental leave. However, their gendered positions as 'mother' or 'father' are irrelevant. In contrast to several empirical studies (e.g., Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Miller, 2005, 2010), in these cases, a positioning of one partner as the 'primary' or

'secondary' caregiver cannot be found. Moreover, this pattern can be described as a 'situated forgetting of gender' (Hirschauer, 2001) within the self-attribution and the partner's attribution of care responsibilities. These couples organize their parental leave and division of labour *without* using gender as a resource and system of meaning attribution. However, they do not undo gender permanently; their situation is more of an *episodic* switching between doing gender and undoing gender. For instance, in the case of Klara and Stefan, the couple are doing gender while framing the length of parental leave differently: whereas a seven-month parental leave is perceived as 'short' for the mother, it is understood as 'long' for the father. Importantly, this approach to making sense of experience is *without consequence* for their equal share of parental leave. Their choice must be understood in the societal context, in which these couples must explain their 'unconventionality' in regard to the norm of hegemonic masculinity and intensive mothering. Regarding the division of labour within the couples, this differentiation constitutes making 'a difference that makes no difference' (Hirschauer, 2001, p. 217, referring to Bateson, 1972).

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: CARE AS AN ARENA OF CHALLENGING AND UNDOING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

In contemporary western capitalist society, hegemonic masculinity is strongly associated with whiteness, the middle class, heterosexual coupledom, income-generating work and competition for leadership positions as a career commitment, which entails ideas of power, success and assertiveness (Brandth & Kvande, 1998, p. 295). In the 'golden age' of the nuclear family, fatherhood meant being a good provider for the family, namely, the male breadwinner. Conceptually, doing masculinity implies the production of differences with the dissociation from femininity. As Rubin (1975) highlights with the term 'sameness taboo', men and women must be different in contemporary society, and the gendered division of labour, with its hierarchies between male-dominated paid work and female-dominated family work, re/produces this difference.

Within the concept of *challenging hegemonic masculinity*, parental leave and family work are a contested arena between the partners with ambivalent attributions. On the one hand, both partners (want to) share paid and unpaid work; on the other hand, the mother attributes the main care responsibility to herself and tries to minimize *equal* sharing with the father. This 'maternal gatekeeping' (performed by the mother) is based on gendered assumptions about who primarily cares for the child. She refers in part to hegemonic masculinity by assigning breadwinning to the father to minimize his *equal* engagement in family work. By contrast, the father considers both himself and his partner to be parents with equal responsibility for childcare and breadwinning, and he repudiates the 'maternal gatekeeping'. This mismatch in the attribution of care within the couple implies conflict regarding the division of labour. *Challenging hegemonic masculinity* indicates the paradox that the negotiations of the couple embody an ambivalent concurrence of questioning and re/producing gendered care attributions.

Within the concept of *undoing hegemonic masculinity*, family work is a less contested arena: both partners are willing to share paid and unpaid work, and both avoid gendered care attributions. This situation is characterized by a distant and reflective approach to 'traditional' (male) career concepts, first by the father. Thus, the couples undo hegemonic masculinity while sharing paid and unpaid work equally. Furthermore, they contest the dominance of paid work (and the public sphere) by negotiating the share of parental leave in a way that is not predominantly driven by income and career situations. Although they take professional and financial situations into account, these situations function as a point of orientation, while an equal sharing of family work is much more emphasized. In summary, *undoing hegemonic masculinity* indicates that *both* parents view themselves as being equally responsible for childcare and breadwinning. The recognition and division of paid and unpaid work are no longer organized by binary gendered assumptions. Hence, these parents challenge their employers by claiming for themselves appropriate time schedules, parental leave and family-friendly work opportunities. *Undoing hegemonic masculinity* is more lasting because both partners agree on their division of labour.

The empirically grounded concepts of *challenging hegemonic masculinity* and *undoing hegemonic masculinity* while negotiating parental leave are characterized by different modes of (non-)boundary work. By contrast, the notion that 'little children are not for dads' (a statement made by a father from the larger sample) polarizes heterosexual parents through doing gender as 'mothers' and 'fathers' with different care responsibilities. Both concepts discussed in this article question this gendered assumption, although in a different way. This study highlights the fact that the interviewed couples – especially the fathers – do *not* distinguish between 'paternal' and 'maternal' care, as Grunow and Evertsson (2016) discuss in different national contexts. Furthermore, following Strauss (1978, p. 235), who claims that negotiations are at the heart of social change, the presented concepts provide an intimation of social change at the micro level with regard to the question of 'who cares for the child?' Whereas, on a structural level, the gendered division of labour seems to be relatively persistent, we observe social change in power relations within couples based on (more) equal income and career options and the dissolution of gendered care and breadwinning attributions. Although these negotiations are historically, culturally and socioeconomically situated, they signify a contextual challenge to 'traditional' gender relations on the structural level.

Following these insights, I argue that in focusing only on how *fathers* express (hegemonic or alternative) masculinities through fathering, we must systematically take into account the negotiations within the couple; otherwise, the idea of 'gender' as *social practice* does not obtain (cf. Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Furthermore, I argue that the concept of (hegemonic) masculinity, as well as contemporary broader conceptualizations of masculinities as an analytical approach within the context of fathering, has shortcomings. Social change in parenting practices, such as 'involved' fathering, has been analysed either as being integrated into hegemonic masculinity or as an 'alternative' or 'side-track' (Brandth & Kvande, 1998, p. 295) subordinated form of it. The second strand is characterized by conceptualizing 'new' types of masculinities, such as 'masculine care' or 'caring masculinities'. However, I argue that social change at the interactional level encompasses the notion (or at least the possibility) that gender, as a structural powerful resource of the differentiation and hierarchization of and between masculinities and femininities within the division of paid and unpaid labour, can be fragile or can even be episodically undone.

Expressed with the metaphor of the 'gender factory' (Berk, 1985), contemporary research on fathering and masculinities has added 'new' or revised 'old' production departments and their relations to each other within the factory. By contrast, I argue that we must strengthen approaches that allow us to better understand how the 'gender factory' is episodically closed (undoing) or at least how serious attempts are being made to close it (challenging). The decoupling of the co-constitution of work and gender has fundamental consequences for the division of paid and unpaid labour in intimate relationships and, in a broader sense, for social in/equality. As I have shown in some cases, negotiations within heterosexual, well-educated, employed, middle-class couples with regard to parental leave can be one empirical example of undoing masculinity. Care *can* (even if it is not compelling) become an arena of challenging and undoing hegemonic masculinity.

More research within and beyond the context of fathering is crucial, at least to address three major issues. First, empirical research with more diverse samples would enrich and deepen the discussion; for instance, the gender compositions in the couple, 'race', education, employment status, income and the welfare state context could be varied. Second, while established methods in the social sciences, such as interviews, documents and observation, are suitable for reconstructing something that has occurred, methodological reflections on empirical ways to reconstruct something that is avoided, forgotten or undone are needed. Third, more theoretical discussions about different concepts of undoing masculinity – empirical manifestations and the implications for social in/equality – are needed if gender, as one major mode of differentiating and hierarchizing people, is to become fragile in some areas of society.

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