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Remnant “Family”:  
the role of women in the media discourse on families

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**Abstract:** How does gender affect discourse processes, particularly regarding the coverage of family issues? In order to explore this question, we focus on media representations of women in their roles as mothers on the one hand and journalists on the other and we compare the reporting of male and female journalists covering families. We refer to gender theory to examine processes of gender construction by different actors in the media and we draw on journalism theory to explain different reporting styles and strategies by male and female authors regarding discourse strategies, framing, and gender-stereotyping. Our methodological approaches include quantitative and qualitative content analyses and 14 semi-structured interviews with journalists, family researchers, and lobbyists. The sample includes coverage of families in general and that of large families in particular in German print media in the years 2011 and 2012, for a total of 1,100 texts. One of the key findings, not surprisingly, is that most of the journalists reporting on families are female. Similar to male journalists, however, they focus on the traditional family type despite the fact that various alternative forms of family life are now a social reality.

**Keywords:** gender, family, large family, print media, discourse strategies

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*La famille rémanente: le rôle des femmes dans le discours des médias  
sur les familles*

**Résumé :** Quel rôle joue le genre dans les discours, spécialement dans ceux sur la famille ? Afin d’y apporter des éléments de réponse, nous nous focaliserons dans cet article sur la représentation des femmes dans les médias, sur leur rôle en tant que mères et journalistes. Nous allons comparer la couverture médiatique sur le sujet de la famille par les journalistes hommes et les journalistes féminins. Nous allons nous appuyer sur la théorie du journalisme pour expliquer les différents styles de reportage et les différentes stratégies des journalistes hommes et femmes en interrogeant les stratégies de discours, de « framing » et les stéréotypes du genre. L’analyse quantitative et qualitative du contenu sera notre appuie méthodologique. Nous avons réalisé 14 entretiens semi-structurés avec les journalistes, les chercheurs en matière des familles et les lobbyistes. Nous avons analysé 1100 articles de la presse allemande entre 2011 et 2012, articles qui s’intéressent aux familles et tout particulièrement aux grandes familles. La plupart des journalistes qui reportent sur le sujet des familles est féminine. Mais tout comme les journalistes hommes, les journalistes femmes se concentrent sur le type de famille traditionnelle quoique la réalité sociale nous montre une autre face, celle de la variété des typologies de familles.

**Mots-clés :** genre, famille, grande famille, presse écrite, stratégies de discours

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In autumn 2007, the German journalism specialist publication “Message” titled on their frontpage: “Der Journalismus wird weiblich” (“Journalism Becomes Female”) asked whether content would change if women were included to a greater extent (see Haller 2007, p. 10-15). And seven years later, in the first issue of 2014, women in journalism were a main topic again. As reported, women are no longer in the second row within the newsrooms’ hierarchy and that they are successfully reconciling work and family (Keil 2014, p. 51-53). Furthermore, fathers have become a topic – as well in their paternal role. Two examples: Wolfgang Buechner, chief editor of “Der Spiegel,” took a one month family leave from his job; the special interest magazine “Eltern” published a series about fathers. In most families, however, fathers are only helpers at home; mothers bear most of the responsibility for child care and domestic tasks. Such first impressions lead to the core question: How do German print media illustrate the topic “family”? Which results does a systematic analyses and reflection of the coverage on families show? Is “family” as an overall subject still a remnant? Finally, is a balanced discourse on “family” as a topic becoming increasingly relevant against the background of the demographic trend of an ageing society, a society, in which people are living longer and fewer children are born?

Women, family, and the balance between family life and professional life are some of the hot topics in European politics and society. This is especially true during political campaigns. For example, before the elections of the European Parliament in May 2014, it was very clear that mothers, and families in general, were a fiercely fought over group of voters. The topics of these campaigns range from the definition of family itself to the institution of marriage and whether homosexual partners shall be granted the same rights as heterosexuals. Political discussions also focus on women and especially mothers in management positions, new models of maternal and paternal leave, child care system financing, and the future role that family itself should play in a highly competitive and work-oriented society in which there is no longer a clear border between professional and private sphere. Many countries look with envy at Scandinavian family politics, trying to adopt their innovative models of equal parental leave and successful balancing of work and family life (Beste-Fopma, 2014). With women at the centre of national and European politics, it is no surprise that the media coverage of these topics has been of interest to journalists as well as researchers. While it has mostly been female journalists who have taken a closer look at how women and especially mothers have been talked about in public debate (Prinzing et al. 2013, p. 92), the question over who is it that initiates and dominates the media discourse on family issues has rarely been addressed. Most research about gender stereotyping and construction has been focused on women in politics or public figures and is usually intertwined with typical contexts of reporting and attribution of specific skills (e.g., Meeks, 2012; Jalalzai, 2006; Eie, 1998; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). These studies find that topics such as education, health, environment, women-centered issues, and social care-giving are most often associated with women – in other words: they are mainly female connoted, whereas economics and business, foreign politics, defence and the military, and crime are most often are connoted with a male gender. This constructed division of topics and gender recurs with the stereotyping of traditional male and female features (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). Although today gender is less thematically located in specific sections, there are still different constructions apparent in society (Bode & Hennings, 2012; Jalalzai, 2006; Koch & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Meeks, 2012).

This paper will add to the discussion regarding how gender matters in the media by specifically referring to the print coverage of family issues in Germany. We focus on concepts that women represent as actors in texts about family and large families (i.e., families with three or more children) in particular, while examining whether or not there are differences in the way male and female journalists report on families. We take a closer look at the imbalances in media content and at the way this media content is set up. Which concepts do women represent as actors in texts about family in general and about large families (i.e., families with three or more children) in particular? Which stereotypes and clichés, discourse strategies, and frames do male and female journalists use when reporting on families? The “family topic” in German print media, which we explore in this paper, is just an example to illustrate such discourse processes that add to socio-cultural gender constructions. We

compare whether there are differences between the coverage on families in general and different types of families. In particular, we have a closer look at the coverage on one of those types, the specific type of a “large family”. Furthermore, we investigate how to classify our findings under the premises of gender and journalism theory. Finally, we take a look at possible online tools that might help raise awareness of institutional biases and point out an imbalance between male and female voices at the author’s and the actor’s level.

### **1. Current status of research on family images in German media**

This study helps to bridge a major gap. Studies on families in the media are rare. There are many studies or theses that focus on images of women in various media, countries, films, broadcasts, print publications, periods of art, the former GDR (German Democratic Republic), or the period of National Socialism. In sociology, the topic of “family” has a rich research tradition centered around gender studies. Family is also discussed in media education, where much research has been done, for example, on the use of media in the family. However, the perception of families in the media is hardly given any importance. Until now, no known scientific study investigated the perception of families in the German print media; the coverage of large families has never been investigated, according to our research. There is just one analysis of the way families are portrayed and family topics in 2004/2005 in fictional and non-fictional TV shows in Germany which deserves particular mention (Hannover & Birkenstock, 2005). One key finding is that while family itself is rarely covered in non-fiction, it is highly present in fiction (for example, on shows and family series as well as in prime-time movies). Hannover and Birkenstock deduce from this finding that family is a “soft topic” that specifically targets a female audience (2005, p. 135). Whether the depiction of family is positively or negatively conveyed depends on the genre: in non-fictional formats family is mostly mentioned in a negative context, while in fictional formats the storytelling on families often evolves on a happy ending path. The authors conclude that the social reality of family life in Germany tends to be portrayed negatively whereas fiction depicts harmonic ideals (Hannover & Birkenstock, 2005, p. 139). Another finding is that the middle-class family dominates German TV productions. Working families are barely represented and when they are represented, negative aspects are the focus. Singles are overly represented in fictional formats when compared to social reality, followed by couples without children. Single parents are portrayed almost twice as often as couples with children. Movies very often show highly independent children with complicated personalities (Hannover & Birkenstock, 2005, p. 137). At the same time, children are never depicted as a burden; instead, they are always shown as providing enrichment to their parents’ lives.

The traditional family model of the married couple with one or two children barely finds its way into fiction but makes up most of the non-fictional coverage. Furthermore, in non-fiction formats, the lives of couples without children tend to be

shown as more harmonious than the lives of couples with one or more children. Although topics such as the compatibility of work and family life or child care were already dominating debates about family politics, they were rarely subjects in fictional and non-fictional TV formats. Aside from such debates questions of child rearing can mainly be found in “documentaries”. Thus, the authors conclude that the real life problems of families in Germany that are also the subject of political debate are left out of TV (Hannover & Birkenstock, 2005, p. 140).

## **2. Theoretical basis for gender constructions, stereotyping, and frames**

There are several theories and perspectives offering explanations for gender constructions in the media. Social-psychological theories emphasize that gender is constructed within the social context; they do not neglect the difference of gender understood as sex, but their focus is on the flexibility and variability of gender-typical behaviour in various, concrete social situations. Gender-stereotypes are not mere descriptions of behaviour, but rather cognitive structures that contain shared social knowledge of characteristic features of both sexes (Eckes, 2008, p. 178). Individuals (e.g., journalists) as well as specific groups (e.g., an entire newsroom staff) share such knowledge. Social role theory explains this socially shared knowledge with humans’ preference for ascribing those features to men and women that are typical for their specific social roles, particularly family and professional roles (Eagly et al., 2000). Studies employing this theory analyse whether changing social roles within society lead to adapted gender stereotypes.

Studies in the U.S. and Germany have shown that in their societies women are increasingly being ascribed more masculine features, such as competence and dominance. At the same time, there has not been a corresponding decline in ascribing them feminine features, such as empathy and willingness to help others (Wilde & Diekmann, 2005; Sczesny et al., 2007). Referring to these findings we explore if and to what extent these attributed features can also be found in media representations and in mediated gender constructions within journalistic coverage. Although there is some scientific proof that gender-related attribution has been partially dissolved within the media (Magin & Stark, 2010), there remains still plenty of criticism and doubt whether gender-neutral coverage is taking place actually (Maier & Luenenborg, 2012, p. 72).

Gender theory in communication science offers three different paradigms explaining the evolution of gender associations and stereotypes (Klaus, 2005, p. 14ff):

The Equality/representation theory analyses the social and individual mechanisms through which discrimination and socialisation processes prevent women from developing their skills (Klaus 2005, p. 46). Empirical findings explain inequalities in media content through quantitative underrepresentation of women (1)

compared to men on the one hand and (2) compared to their actual presence in social reality on the other.

The Differentiation theory focuses on the different social realities of men and women. Regarding media content, this means analysing changes in the representation of women over time or whether social change of female reality is also depicted as such in the media (Klaus 2005, p. 51).

The Constructivism/deconstruction theory deconstructs the male-female dichotomy and focuses on the way how dualistic and hierarchical cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity are built up. At the centre of this theory is a differentiation between biological gender (sex) and social gender. The latter is thereby described as a social construction and a result of behaviour and attributions. It involves a process of constant self-reflection or observation by others (Klaus, 2005, p. 19-21). Therefore, the media does not depict actual social gender relations, but instead constructs its own gender-specific media reality (Röser, 2006). This perspective differs from that of differentiation: It does not question typical male and female features or their differences in general; instead it analyses processes of gender-construction and the way media are part of it.

Differentiation theory causes us to take a closer look at the differences between male and female reporting styles and strategies regarding family-related coverage. We are aware that these differences are based on a "gender difference" that assumes a male-female dichotomy. Along with this theoretical perspective, we question the effects of such a gender difference within the journalistic profession and within the practice of communication: Does it make a difference, whether the author is male or female? Is there a causal link between the gender of the authors and the representation of gender in their texts? The assumption of differences in reporting styles (e.g., in the form of different topics and genre-employment) is thereby based on socio-cultural constructions of gender (versus biological sex) and the result of different social realities of male and female journalists. This assumption leads us on the one hand to the question of whether schemata in reporting, such as frames, discourse strategies, gender-related stereotypes, and moral judgments of specific family situations, contribute to these construction processes. Although thus far research has found no proof to confirm journalistic gender role expectations and the systematic influence of gender on media content (Klaus, 2005, p. 187ff), it is not possible to simply dismiss the impression that men and women do experience different social realities and live different everyday lives, which affect their journalistic practices. These differences find their way into reporting styles and thematic preferences. For example, female journalists tend to prefer "everyday topics" that are relevant to the general public. They define personalisation as well as reporting about topics that are similar to their own biography as indicators of journalistic quality (Klaus, 2005, p. 198-199),.

Journalism theory poses the question, which attributes and criteria affect a reporter's (or a "communicator's") coverage on families. These influential factors,

such as education, political ideology, work experience, ethnicity or gender, can vary and they might depend upon each other (e.g., Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). We focus our analysis on the sex of the journalists reporting on families, the publication type for which they write, the genres of their articles, and the sections under which they are published.

In recent years, research has questioned the extent to which the sex of a journalist influences his or her media coverage of politicians. One of the assumptions has been that structural gender relations within a newsroom influence its media content (Scholl, 2008). Results have shown that there is little correlation between the sex of an author and the features an author attributes to a politician (Luenenborg, 2009; Scholl, 2008, p. 218). One of the reasons for this, according to Scholl, is that sex is only one of the factors influencing journalistic output. Other research has found that the professional role of journalists outweighs their gender-related role (Keuneke et al., 1997). Luenenborg (1997) argues that gender-sensitive coverage is only relevant to a small fraction of female journalists. Therefore, change in the structure of gender relations in newsrooms might only be implemented indirectly and as a part of structural change in journalism and its long-term effects (Scholl, 2008, p. 217). Scholl concludes his findings on reasons for structural change in journalism by stating that such change mainly takes place due to audience expectations (of gender constructions) instead of journalistic role interpretations (Scholl, 2008, p. 218-223). Considering that stereotype discourses on families are not limited to the contrast between the sexes, our theoretical approach (Prinzing et al. 2013, p. 33-51) includes four additional perspectives: insights into family pictures (Gruendler et al., 2013; Keddi et al., 2010; Nave-Herz, 2012; Peuckert, 2012; Trueltzsch, 2009; Villa, 2009); discourse analysis and framing (Dahinden, 2006; Schemer, 2013; Scheufele, 2003; Potthoff, 2012); journalism theories (Burkart, 2002, Beck, 2013); and conceptions of the public (Fraser, 2008; Habermas, 1990; Luenenborg, 2009). Following Fraser's line of logic, we refer to those models of the civic public, which require that each person participate. From this follows the need to break the male dominance in hegemonic publics. A consequence might be that women assume leading positions in newsrooms in order to shape better processes of political communication – but of course, such a consequence is no silver bullet.

### **3. Methodology**

In our study about family images in German print media, we applied a multi-method research design in order to combine content research with key findings of studies on media content as well as with estimates from experts and with their experiences with media and media coverage. First, we conducted quantitative and qualitative content analyses, the latter of which focussed on discourse analysis. Second, we continued with semi-structured interviews.



At this point, it must be emphasised that the discourse is analysed in two respects. First, the media actors are brought into focus: how do they construct the theme of "family," which kinds of statements can be identified in the articles, what are the differences related to whether a female journalist or a male journalist was working on the topic? Therefore, on the empirical level, for example, the formal category of the author's sex is evaluated in connection with substantial statements related to the family issue given in his text. Second, the roles of actors within the discourse on the family issue for example are evaluated according to various stereotypes; for example, how women appear as mothers in the texts.

The samples for the content analysis include the coverage of families (n1=635) and that of large families (three or more children) (n2=549) in German print media in particular. We include regional newspapers (Hamburger Abendblatt, Schweriner Volkszeitung, Berliner Morgenpost, Leipziger Volkszeitung, Rheinische Post, Rhein Zeitung, Stuttgarter Nachrichten, and Passauer Neue Presse) and national newspapers (Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Bild), weekly newspapers (Die Zeit) and news magazines (Der Spiegel and Focus) and special interest magazines on family and women (Eltern, Nido, Brigitte, Freundin, and Neon).<sup>1</sup> The sample was selected from all print articles of these publications in the years 2011 and 2012. The total amount of articles in the sample is 1,184<sup>2</sup>.

The material was divided into four levels of analysis:

The formal level, which contained quantitative measures such as lengths, intensity, form of the article, departments, genres, information about the author(s), and whether the text is an editorial piece or a text from a news agency.

The actors' level, which contained qualitative measures such as protagonists, author and protagonist evaluation of (large) families, specific types of families reported on, and stereotypes attached to them.

The thematic level, which contained measures for context, frames, news values, and thematic structure of the article.

The discourse level, which analyses details of the discourse such as quality of arguments and sources, structure, participation and involvement of those reported on, schemata associated with different family types, and whether problematic family topics were made public or publically discussed, and by whom.

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<sup>1</sup> The publications in the sample are the leading papers in Germany constituting and influencing societal communication as well as the general public opinion (see Wilke, 1999); in particular, the magazines are those with the highest publication rates and most readers (see MA Pressemedien, I/2013) covering family and female topics.

<sup>2</sup> After two separate testing phases with the coders, the categories were sharpened in further detail. The intercoder reliability and researcher-coder reliability were tested in two pre-tests with 124 codings. The average reliability coefficient for the second pre-test was .82, the minimum score .77, the maximum .87.

The second method applied involved semi-structured interviews (Brosius et al., 2012) to interpret the findings of the content analysis. We conducted 14 expert interviews with male and female journalists, family researchers, and lobbyists. The journalists we consulted were mainly recruited from the pool of the authors of the articles in the sample. The interviews shed light on the authors' socialization (general and journalistic), on the authors' individual role expectations, interpretations, and self-image. In order to strengthen the findings of the content analysis, the interview questions were designed along the levels and categories applied in the codebook but without suggesting the concrete results of the content results. The results of the interviews were compared to those of the content analysis and evaluated in combination. Afterwards, qualitative interpretations of the results let us draw conclusions on details of family reporting.

In the following section, we present findings related to our research questions (RQ) referring to gender differentiation theory:

(RQ1) What is the role of female authors in the coverage of families?

(RQ2) How are women represented as actors in the articles, in particular in their role as mothers?

(RQ3) To what extent does a journalist's gender influence his or her reporting on families?

#### **4. Results**

##### *Content Analysis: Reporting on Families and on Large Families*

One of the key findings was that, not surprisingly, most of the journalists reporting on families are female. Like male journalists, however, they focus on the traditional family type, despite the fact that social reality draws a different picture with various alternative forms of family life. Mothers or other relevant actors rarely have a voice in reports about their situation. Both, male and female reporters use clichés and stereotypes, but the way they frame discourses is different. It is worth noting that with regard to family policy, male reporters handle the majority of national and local news coverage on family policy. While female reporting on family topics is mostly found in "soft" departments such as society and social life.

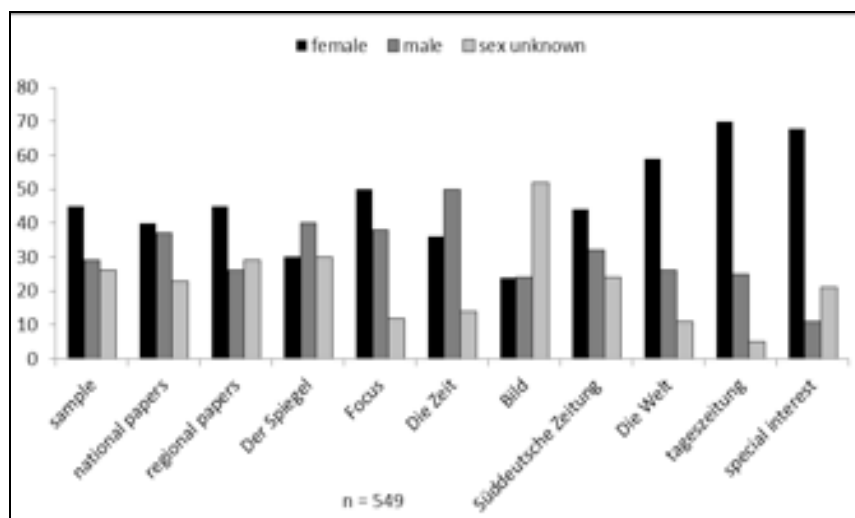
##### *RQ1: What is the role of female authors in the coverage of families?*

Referring to articles covering general family topics, overall (n1=635), 40% are written by women, 29% are written by men, and 30% are written by either more than one author or by an anonymous author. The only newspaper with more men covering family topics is the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, with 51% of their articles written by men and 31% written by women. In all other publications, women handle the majority of the coverage on family topics. The *tageszeitung*, with a female dominated newsroom, has the most female authors (65%) and the fewest male

authors (9%). Even clearer is the difference in special interest magazines on families, which employ 75% female and 10% male authors. Another striking finding is that the only tabloid newspaper in the sample, the Bild, shows an overly high percentage of articles covering family topics where the author is unknown (68%).

When looking at the second sample (see Figure 1) that includes articles specifically covering large families with three or more children ( $n=549$ ), we find that 45% of all articles are written by women, 29% by men, and 26% by more than one or an anonymous author. These numbers are similar for all regional newspapers, whereas in the weekly publications Der Spiegel and Die Zeit, the proportion of male journalists is higher.

In both samples, the percentage of family topics covered by female authors in Die Welt, the tageszeitung, and in special interest magazines is 59%, 70%, and 69%, respectively; in other words, a clear majority.



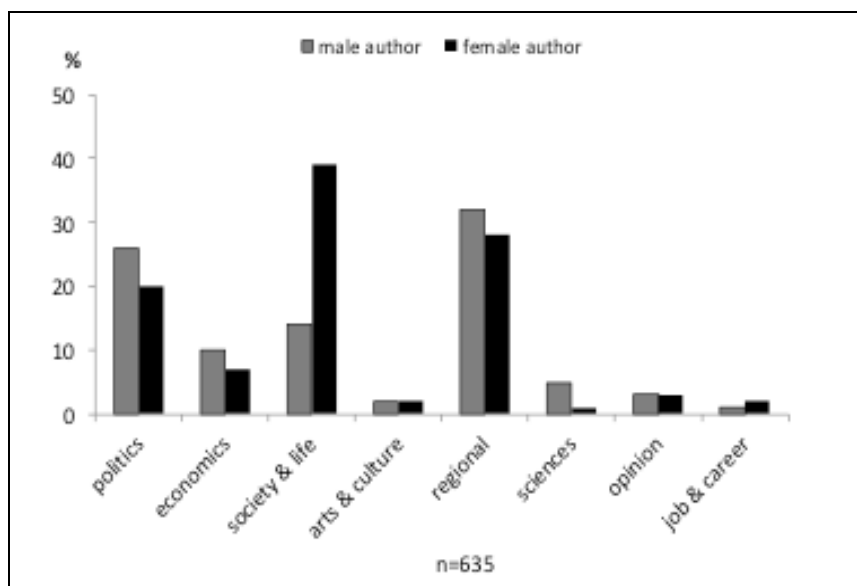
**Figure 1.** Sex of authors covering large families

Most articles written by men on general family topics cover regional hard news (31%) or can be found in the main politics section (26%) (see Figure 2). Articles by women, on the other hand, are mainly published in the society section (39%) or in the regional section (29%). Articles on families are rarely published in the science, arts and culture, opinion, or jobs and career sections.

The entire coverage of large families is mainly found in the regional section (49%). Most of all male and female authors publish in the local section (52% and 45%), 29% of all women and 15% of all men write in the society section. Ten

percent of both sexes publish in the main politics section when covering large families.

The clearest divisions between the sex of authors into sections when covering large family topics can be found in the *tageszeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. In the *tageszeitung*, articles written by men can only be found in the society (60%), economy (20%), and politics (20%) sections – whereas in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, there are the most female authors (out of all publications) who write in the politics (27%) and opinion sections (13%). Seven percent of female authors appear on the front page. Most male authors of this publication write about large families in the regional section (30%).



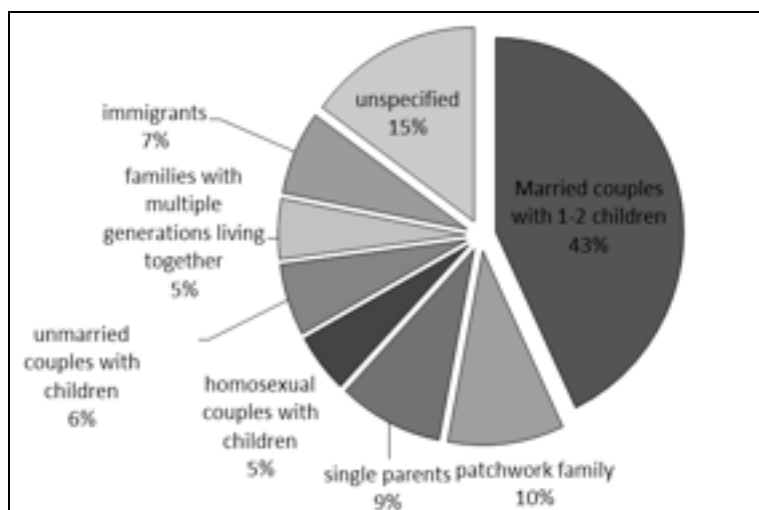
**Figure 2.** Sections, general family topics and sex of authors

When looking at male and female authors and comparing the genres of their articles covering general family topics as well as large family topics, we find that men’s shares are higher in the news and opinion genres (n1: 83%, n2: 59%), whereas women mostly write interviews and features (n1: 46%, n2: 54%). Generally speaking, there are relatively few articles that fall under the genre opinion (n1: 39%, n2: 31%).

In the special interest magazine coverage of especially large families, 50% of all male authors write in the opinion genre versus only 18% of all female authors. Female authors mostly write features (51%) and interviews (26%).

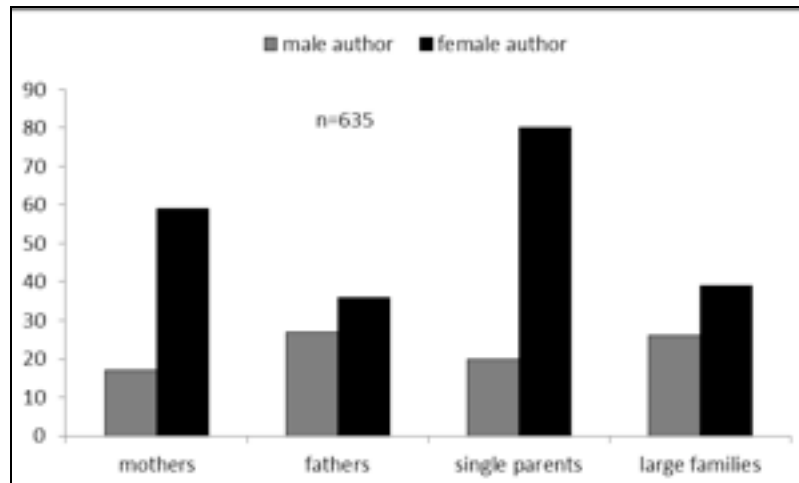
RQ2: How are women represented as actors in the articles, in particular in their role as mothers?

When looking at the different family forms (see figure 3) that are portrayed in articles about general family topics (n1), we find that the traditional family image is the focus in 43% of all articles. This type is here defined as a married heterosexual couple with one or two children. Ten percent of articles focus on patchwork families (families with at least one child from a former relationship of one partner), 9% on single parents, 7% on immigrant families, 6% on unmarried couples with children, and 5% each on homosexual couples with children and families where multiple generations (minimum of three) live together.



**Figure 3.** *Form of family*

Male and female authors use different main actors (protagonists) in their coverage of large families (n2) (see figure 4). Women make up 80% of the coverage that focuses on single parents and 60% of that which focuses on mothers. Men tend not to personalize their stories as much, but only a comparatively small share (17%) of male authors' stories focus on key family protagonists such as mothers. Compared to articles written by female journalists, male authors make the fathers of large families (27%) or multiple family members (26%) the focus of their articles. In general, female authors quote mothers and single parents the most, whereas male authors most often quote fathers.



**Figure 4.** *Protagonists in articles about families and large families*

RQ3: To what extent does a journalist’s gender influence his or her reporting on families?

Both male (62%) and female (52%) journalists barely formulate an opinion on different family forms. The reporting of both sexes remains mostly neutral in terms of evaluating specifically large families. Female authors describe large family life as positive in 36% of their articles, whereas male authors do so in 29% of their articles. If mothers are the main actors in an article, they themselves express ambivalence towards large family life in general (14%). The living situation of large families is often characterized as negative by authors of both sexes (both 21%).

When it comes to describing the inner-family relations of a specific family portrayed in an article, many female authors label such relations as being harmonious (29%), while male authors tend to not mention them at all (71%). And mothers as main actors describe their inner-family atmosphere mostly as being harmonious (45%) or as being prone to conflict (26%).

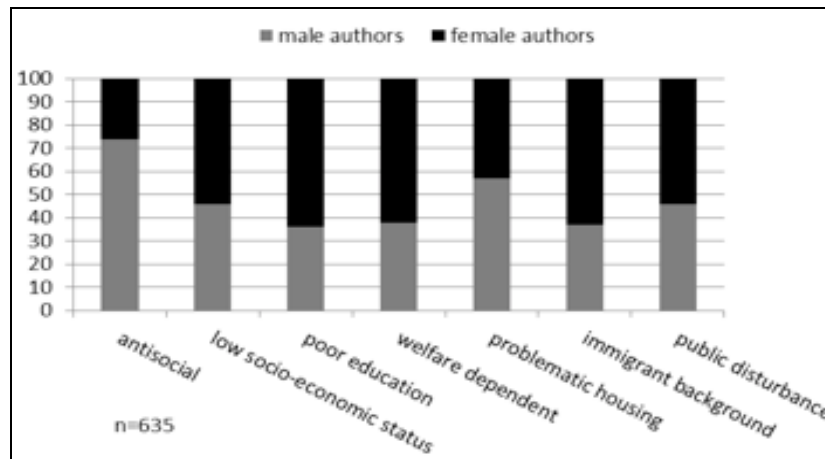
While female journalists (32%) and mothers (34 %) as protagonists generally rate external influences as ambivalent, particularly as they relate to large families, male journalists (28%) seem to stress negative external influences. These external influences can be of a political, social, or economic nature.

Male and female authors are equally prone to making moral judgments about large families in general or about those families situation when looking at the whole sample (in about half their articles). When taking a closer look, however, we find that male and female journalists working for different publications judge differently: in special interest magazines, for instance, male authors always make moral

judgments, while female authors do so in just 69% of their articles. These moral judgments can be either positive or negative and refer to different aspects of large family life. In regional papers, both sexes mostly abstain from stating moral judgments (64% of females and 61% of males), whereas in weekly news magazines (Der Spiegel and Focus), both sexes often pass moral judgement on the situation of large families (70% of females and 88% of males). In addition, in Die Zeit and the tageszeitung, moral judgement from the authors is given very often (79% of females and 85% of males). The publications in which authors judge the least are the tabloid Bild (64%) and the quality paper Sueddeutsche Zeitung (58%).

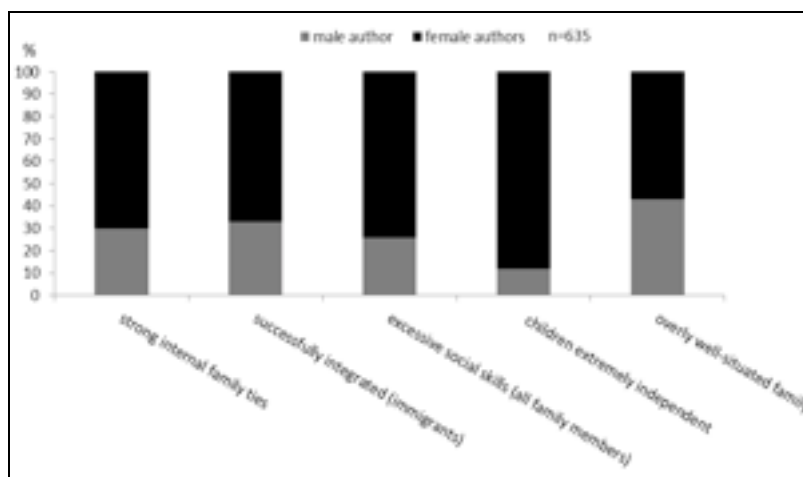
When looking at the stereotyping of families in general, we find that female authors state stereotypes more often than male authors throughout all publications. For example, 70% of all female authors and 13% of all male authors mention the stereotype “problematic housing situation”. In addition, 78% of all females and 11% of all males state that families might possibly be a disturbance to their environment when in public. The only stereotype that male authors use more often than females in their articles is that families with an immigrant background face some sort of problems (38% of males, 28% of females).

In their articles about large families, journalists of both sexes generally use more negative than positive stereotypes (71% of male authors and 53% of female authors, to be exact). When looking at particular stereotypes and how often male and female authors use them, we find that more male authors than female authors mention that large families are antisocial (74%, and 26%, respectively) (see Figure 5). Female authors more often than their male colleagues associate large families with the negative stereotypes of being poorly educated (64%), being dependant on welfare, or having an immigrational background (both 62%).



**Figure 5.** Negative stereotypes attached to large families (3+ children)

Overall, 23% of all male authors and 37% of all female authors employ positive stereotypes in association with large families. From all authors using positive associations a higher percentage is female: children in large families are highly independent (88% versus 12%, respectively) and show high social competence when interacting with others (74% versus 26%, respectively) (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** *Positive stereotypes attached to large families (3+ children)*

When looking at the different discourse strategies of male and female authors reporting on large families in particular, we find that 56% of females and 38% of males let their subjects speak out in their articles to an extent where they can state their opinions about different aspects and arguments regarding an issue or problem. While only 28% of females fail to give voice to the subjects, almost half (46%) of all males exclude their subjects from the discourse about their issues. In order to differentiate between different types of publications, we explore these discourse strategies for reporting on large families by taking a closer look at special interest magazines for women and families on the one hand and regional newspapers on the other hand. In special interest magazines, 77% of female authors include the subjects of their articles to an appropriate extent and only 8% exclude them. While 50% of male authors include their subjects appropriately, 33% of all articles written by men exclude their subjects' voices entirely. At the same time, 17% of male and 15% of female authored articles use too many direct quotations from the subjects. In other words, quotations are used to such an extent that the actual context or background of the story becomes unclear to the reader. In regional newspapers, the situation is similar: 49% of all male journalists and 63% of female journalists let people involved in the story speak up, while 48% of males and 31% of females do not.

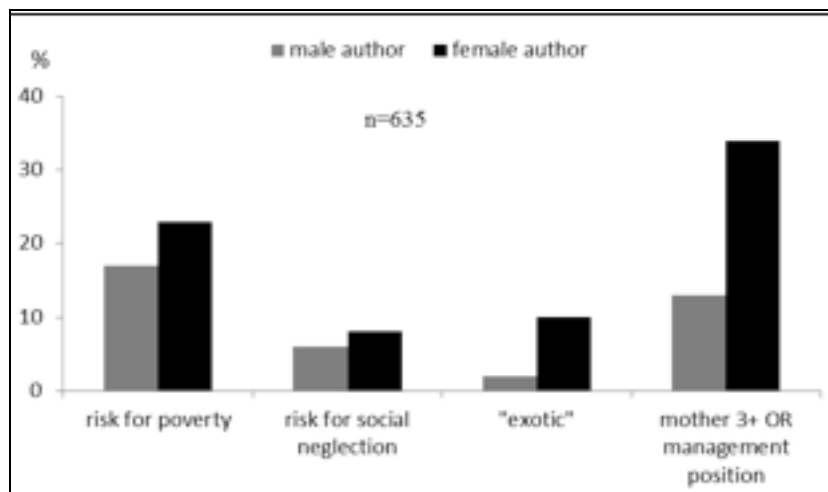


Another aspect of journalists' discourse strategies is the portrayal of a family's daily life and whether or not the reader gets an inside point of view. Regarding this aspect, we identify different findings: in the entire sample, 58% of all female journalists and 35% of all male journalists depict the daily life of large families from an insider's perspective (i.e., they provide detailed description from one or more family members). In special interest magazines, 85% of all female journalists and 50% of male journalists do the same.

Taking a look at the framing strategies of male and female authors in different publications, we find that in general, females frame family topics within the contexts of personalisation (90%), lack of appropriate housing (75%), or successful initiatives that support families in different matters (61%). Male journalists stress the contexts of problematic family situations (60%) and the value of family within society (56%). About equally often, male and female authors frame family topics according to demographic changes and incompatibility of work and family life. When looking at large families in particular, the results show that female authors again most often use the frame personalisation (47% of all female journalists versus 27% of all male journalists), while their male colleagues focus on the social conflicts within/of large families (31% of all male journalists versus 18% of all female journalists). We also find that throughout all publications (quality papers, news magazines, regional papers and tabloid press) except for *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, women in particular stress the importance of personal aspects, meaning most stories about large families centre around mothers or women. In the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *tageszeitung*, female authors mainly focus their coverage on the social conflicts that large families face. Very few women write about different types of progress of/within large families or economic, financial, and political aspects of large family life. These topics are mainly covered by male journalists.

At least let us look at male and female authors' addressing of family topics that are difficult to discuss in public as well as differences in usage of schemata connected with families with three or more children. In general, very few authors (of both sexes) make difficult topics such as overburdened mothers, abortions, intersexuality, or children with disabilities the subject of their articles. Out of 549 articles about large families, only 49 address the issue of overburdened mothers. Of these 49 articles, 39 are written by females and eleven by male authors. Only ten articles by women draw attention to abortion (none by men). Seven articles by women address families with disabled children or prenatal diagnosis. Two texts written by male journalists address the intersexuality of children (none by females). In terms of schemata usage, we find that 34% of all female authors believe that women cannot simultaneously fulfil both the role of being a mother of three or more children and holding a high position (e.g., management) at the workplace. These articles written by female authors suggest that women have to choose to be one or the other. Male authors, however, don't seem to pay as much attention to this problem (only 13% of all male authors have addressed it). The second biggest

concern of women writing about large families (23%) is that three or more children pose the threat of poverty. Ten percent of female authors connect large family life with extraordinary lifestyles (“exotic”). Eight percent of females and 6% of males connect large families with social neglect and mistreatment of children.



**Figure 7.** *Schemata associated with 3+children*

*Semi-structured Interviews: Experts about Media Coverage on Families*

RQ1 (I): What is the role of female authors in the coverage of families?

All of the interviewed journalists believe – as the findings of the study confirm – that it is mostly female authors who write about general family topics and large families in particular and. they assume that this is because female journalists are generally more interested in social and especially family topics. Only some of the journalists answered that they are under the impression that female authors are being asked directly to cover social and family topics more often than male authors. One male journalist voiced the opinion that in the newsroom, the traditional picture of male and female roles still exists.

RQ2 (I): How are women represented as actors in the articles, in particular in their role as mothers?

Referring to this question, male and female journalists have quite different assumptions. Male authors believe that mothers as well as families in general mainly appear in the media coverage whenever they face some sort of problems. The female journalists state that mothers rarely dare to voice their problems because they fear to be stereotyped and they believe that mothers in particular prefer not having to justify their decisions, such as having multiple children and a career..

RQ3 (I): To what extent does a journalist's gender influence his or her reporting on families?

Both male and female journalists assume that there is not much stereotyping towards families in daily reporting. Concerning large families, they mention only one of the stereotypes identified in the analysis: large families are often associated with low socio-economic status. Adding to that, female experts point out the extreme contrast between stereotypes: large families are either considered as being very poor, which has a negative connotation, or overly wealthy. When asked about stereotypical family pictures in the media, the male journalists explained the traditional portraits by pointing out that most journalists presume from their own experiences, lifestyles, or wishes and they suggest that the profession of journalism demands a traditional model of family life where the mother (of one or two children) works part-time or stays home and the father provides for the main source of income. For male journalists, a large family or a modern family model (e.g., working mother, stay-at-home father) is usually far from their reality. When asked about opinion and bias towards the one or the other family form, male experts state that family is still a very private topic and that it is not considered appropriate to judge somebody else's private life. Female authors state that they would like to see an increased public debate about family, but add that female journalists in particular don't report on difficult topics because they don't want to make other women the subject of controversial public discussion about personal matters.

### **Conclusion**

Women as authors of journalistic work still mainly shape soft news and social topics. When reporting on family-related topics, they often take on stories in the society section, employ non-news genres, and centre their reporting on a specific person (i.e., their frame is personalisation). The findings from the interviews concur with research results under the premises of journalism theory (e.g., Klaus, 2005): different social realities of men and women do impact their journalistic practices, such as reporting styles (e.g., framing) and thematic preferences ("everyday topics"). It can be positively noted that female authors (more than men) give voice to women, mothers, and other people involved in a story.

Surprisingly, female journalists rarely draw different images of modern family life than male journalists: the traditional family with one or two children, with a part-time working mother and a father who is the main source of income, is equally present in female-written articles as in those written by men. Women do not report on unconventional family models such as single-parents, patchwork families, or homosexual couples with children any more than men – although more women demand tolerance from society and flexibility from employers regarding such families or untraditional role division between men and women. This confirms earlier research findings that the professional role of journalists outweighs their gender-related role (Keuneke et al., 1997) and that sex is only one of many factors

influencing media output (e.g., Scholl, 2008). This also confirms earlier findings on German TV (Hannover & Birkenstock, 2005): despite social reality, the middle class family dominates TV productions and the traditional family model seldom finds its way into fiction (but dominates most of the non-fictional coverage). Another unexpected result is that in articles written by women, almost the same stereotypes and attributions are associated with large families and with mothers as in male-written articles – although women hold a slightly higher percentage in positive stereotyping and a slightly lower percentage in negative stereotyping than men. For the most part, these findings strengthen the research results that found little correlation between the sex of a journalist and their construction of gender and attribution of male and female politicians (Scholl, 2008; Luenenborg, 2001). One difference that shall be noted is that women stress the problem of incompatibility of a caring mother role and a striving professional career or a management position. In terms of judgment and evaluation of family itself and specific family forms, women do not formulate opinions more than men because they find it somewhat inappropriate to discuss such private matters like “family” in public. This finding proves that even in the modern western society, female matters are mainly held as private and that they are not meant to be bothered with by the general public.

Women as actors and protagonists in articles about family topics mainly function in the role of mothers in traditional family forms. They speak out either as part-time working or as stay-at-home mothers, taking on the role of the main caretakers for their children. Little attention is paid to mothers who provide for a family’s economic well-being to a greater extent than fathers. Mothers with three children or more are mostly subjects of reporting when they face dramatic family situations with major social and financial problems. In very few articles are they portrayed as super-moms with extraordinary skills in handling multiple children, their professional and social lives, and finding themselves in a comfortable financial situation.

On one hand, mothers and women in articles hesitate to voice their opinions and make moral evaluations of their own situations because they fear negative stereotyping and judgment by the public. On the other hand, they do not overly stress the positive aspects of large family life or suggest such a family model to others. Mothers of three or more children, however, do sometimes mention that they do not feel as if society values the work of women at home or the immaterial value of family for society in general. They believe that women’s achievements in public or professional life are regarded by the public as much more prestigious and worthy of acknowledgement.

Overall, we find that a more ideal situation of balanced coverage or work division between male and female authors regarding family topics is yet to be reached. For the most part, our results confirm a traditional distribution of topics in the field of journalism: men write about hard news, politics, and economics (for example, family politics), while women too often take on soft feature stories, social topics, and personal dilemmas of their protagonists (for example, overburdened mothers).

These results suggest that the "old" debate about female roles and images has been transported into the 21st century: instead of it being about women in the household versus women in public life, it now seems to be caring mothers of multiple children versus successful business women holding management positions.

In summary, the results of this study might and should be an impulse 1) to report about "family" as an overall subject rather than continuing to treat it as a media remnant; 2) to bridge the gap between social reality and media coverage; and 3) to raise public awareness of clichés and stereotypes. In particular, every journalist, male or female, has the same job: to try to figure out how things really are, to comment on this reality, and to enable an open societal discourse.

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