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## Turning points in the transition to parenthood: Variability of father involvement over time

### Wendepunkte am Übergang zur Elternschaft: Variabilität väterlicher Beteiligung

#### Abstract:

Although fathers' involvement in care work has increased, the transition to parenthood still implies a gendered division of labour. In order to gain more knowledge of this ambivalence, we focus on the variability of father involvement at this transition. Based on an Austrian qualitative longitudinal study with couples experiencing the transition to first-time parenthood, we examined how fathers' affective, cognitive and behavioural involvement varies across the transition process. Changes in fathers' involvement culminated at particular points in time, conceptualised as turning points. Results show that the transition to fatherhood is characterised by a variety of pre-pregnancy, prenatal and postnatal turning points at which father involvement undergoes crucial transformations. Father involvement varies not only between fathers, but also within individual transitions. The study indicates that turning points contribute to the dynamics and fluidity of the transition process.

**Key words:** care work, father involvement, qualitative longitudinal data, transition to parenthood, turning points

#### Zusammenfassung:

Obwohl die väterliche Beteiligung an der Betreuungsarbeit im Steigen begriffen ist, ist der Übergang zur Elternschaft nach wie vor mit einer geschlechtsspezifischen und ungleichen Arbeitsteilung verbunden. Um diese Ambivalenz zu verstehen, konzentrieren wir uns auf die Variabilität väterlicher Beteiligung bei diesem Übergang. Anhand einer österreichischen qualitativen Längsschnittstudie mit Paaren, die das erste Mal Eltern werden, wurde untersucht, wie sich die affektive, kognitive und verhaltensmäßige Beteiligung in diesem Transitionsprozess verändert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Übergang zur Elternschaft sich durch zahlreiche Wendepunkte (*turning points*) auszeichnet, an denen väterliche Beteiligung eine wesentliche Änderung erfährt. Diese Wendepunkte können vor und während der Schwangerschaft sowie nach der Geburt auftreten. Die Beteiligung variiert nicht nur zwischen Vätern, sondern auch innerhalb individueller Übergänge. Wendepunkte implizieren einen Wechsel in der Arbeitsteilung zwischen Müttern und Vätern und tragen zur Dynamik und Fluidität des Transitionsprozesses bei.

**Schlagwörter:** Betreuungsarbeit, qualitative Längsschnittdaten, Übergang zur Elternschaft, väterliche Beteiligung, Wendepunkte

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, childcare was predominantly studied as a domain of mothers, while the growing scientific interest in fathers and their involvement in care work is more recent (Day et al. 2005; Ostner 2005; Seward/Richter 2008). Alongside with changing cultural norms, also the scholarly perceptions of fathers have changed over time. While fathers have been primarily regarded as providers of financial support for their families for a long time, they are now expected to be actively involved in care work (Milkie/Denny 2014; Williams 2008; Dermott 2008; Lamb 2000). Men's enhanced involvement in the family is seen as one part of the ongoing 'gender revolution', going hand in hand with women's increased participation in the labour market (Goldscheider et al. 2015). However, women's labour force participation has not yet caught up with men's, and women still do the largest part of family work. This becomes evident when exploring the transition to parenthood, which still goes along with a retraditionalisation of gender roles and a gendered division of labour. Childbirth affects women's time use much more than men's as the bulk of child-related work is usually done by women, even if couples shared household tasks equally before pregnancy (Dribe/Stanfors 2009; Kotila et al. 2013; Yavorsky et al. 2015; Klaus/Steinbach 2002). As a result, parenthood reinforces inequality between mothers and fathers.

In an innovative attempt to comprehend the ambivalence between fathers' new roles and persisting retraditionalisation tendencies, we pay special attention to individual life courses and the inherent variations in fathers' involvement across the transition to parenthood. Though scholars have provided empirical evidence for the variability of father involvement over time (e.g. Lang et al. 2014; Coltart/ Henwood 2012; Shirani/Henwood 2011), so far, research has lacked systematic and profound insights into the changes of father involvement during this crucial transition. Against this background, we examine in an explorative manner how father involvement changes across the transition to parenthood and draw on Palkovitz's (1997) conception of cognitive, affective and behavioural involvement. We use a longitudinal and multiple perspectives approach (pre- and postnatal interviews with first-time parents in Austria). After a thorough reconstruction of fathers' practices, we developed the concept of turning points in father involvement. Turning points are specific events at certain points in time across the transition to parenthood that induce changes in at least one of Palkovitz's (1997) three domains of involvement.

This paper pursues two aims: first, to elucidate the conception of turning points that occurred in the analysis of father involvement at the transition to parenthood, and second, to delineate and exemplify changes in father involvement at particular turning points with empirical examples. By concentrating on such events throughout the transition process, we contribute to a more detailed understanding of father involvement at this particular transition period of the life course. We show that the transition to parenthood is characterised by a variety of turning points at which father involvement exhibits a crucial transformation.

## 2. Father involvement at the transition to parenthood – State of the art and theoretical considerations

A large body of research relates to father involvement in care work and specific phases of fatherhood. It has been shown that father involvement depends on various influences that range from gendered expectations and attitudes towards the division of labour (Shirani et al. 2012; Poortman/van der Lippe 2009; Baxter 2000), embodied experiences and differences (Doucet 2009, 2013; Draper 2003) to parental leave policies (Saraceno/Keck 2011; Brandth/Kvande 2009; Meil 2013; Schmidt et al. 2015) and parents' occupation and working hours (Norman et al. 2013; McGill 2014).

Moreover, empirical evidence has shown that it is crucial for understanding father involvement to include the pre- and postnatal phases in the analysis. As several studies have demonstrated, the transition to parenthood is a process that starts long before conception, extends far beyond delivery and comprises various stages (LaRossa/Sinha 2006; Schadler 2014; Hirschauer et al. 2014; Bailey 2001). Longitudinal studies found that fathers' prenatal involvement positively affects their involvement after childbirth (Cabrera et al. 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2014; Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007). Hence, 'a father's relationship and commitment to his unborn child and partner at the transition to fatherhood can have a long reach and set him on a trajectory of more or less involvement' (Cabrera et al. 2008: 1102).

Both quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research have supplied empirical evidence on the dynamics of father involvement at and after the transition to parenthood. Habib/Lancaster (2010) revealed changes in fathers' involvement during the prenatal phase: drawing on longitudinal quantitative Australian data, they showed that the attachment between first-time fathers and their unborn child strengthened between the first and third trimester of pregnancy. Based on longitudinal quantitative data on US-American dual-earner, first-time parents interviewed in the third trimester, at three, six and nine months postpartum, Lang et al. (2014) showed that fathers' and mothers' positive involvement increased at more or less the same rate across the transition to parenthood, but that fathers were significantly less involved than mothers. Similarly, recent qualitative longitudinal research pointed towards an increase in father involvement over time. Investigating British fathers' involvement before the child's birth, about two months postpartum and eight years later, Shirani/Henwood (2011) demonstrated that their involvement shifted and grew during the period under review. Using the same data, Coltart/Henwood (2012) showed that fathers undergo severe social and psychological changes during their transition to parenthood. Another qualitative longitudinal study on British fathers attested the dynamics of new fathers' doing and undoing gender over time and concluded that there were only 'partial and/or temporary disruptions of normative gendered behaviours' (Miller 2011: 1106).

Although previous research has pointed towards the variability in father involvement and thus has highlighted the importance of longitudinal data, profound knowledge of variations in father involvement throughout the transition is still missing. We focus on these variations and provide a systematic analysis of the inherent changes in father involvement during the process of becoming a father.

One of the most influential and widely applied concepts, developed by Lamb et al. (1985), states that father involvement comprises interaction, availability and responsibility.

ity. Based on his critical consideration of this work, Palkovitz (1997) developed a concept of father involvement that addresses the *cognitive* (reasoning, planning, evaluating, monitoring), *affective* (emotions, feelings, affection) and *behavioural* (observable activities, social interactions) domains, which are interrelated and interactive. Palkovitz conceptualises involvement as dynamic and sees change as a moderating factor in terms of temporal fluctuations. Besides, he postulates that involvement can differ due to changes in the parents' and/or child's developmental status. Against this background, Palkovitz's (1997) concept constitutes a valuable basis for understanding father involvement in general and changes in this involvement in particular. We utilised this concept in our study, extended it to the prenatal phases of involvement and examined in detail the changes in cognitive, affective and/or behavioural father involvement across the transition.

For the exploration of changes in father involvement throughout the transition to parenthood, the conception of *turning points* is considered to be a fruitful starting point. Originally, turning points are a key conception of the life course perspective, indicating that transitions become turning points when they imply a 'substantial change in the direction of one's life' (Elder et al. 2006: 8). The birth of the first child constitutes such a turning point within the life course (Elder et al. 2006; Elder 2009). In terms of Hareven (2000), turning points constitute subjective assessments of continuities and discontinuities within the life course. The literature further underlines the distinction of whether such turning points lead to a radical shift in individual's life circumstances or whether they change opportunities (Pickles/Rutter 1991). Furthermore, as Pickles/Rutter (1991) note, most of such events need to be seen 'as part of a process over time and not as a dramatic lasting change that takes places at any one time' (ibid: 134). We apply the idea of turning points to father involvement in order to grasp and comprehend its inherent changes. As we understand the transition to parenthood as a multiphasic process (Elder 1998) at which 'gender magnification is in full play' (Doucet 2009: 93), we assume turning points to constitute boundaries between various phases within the transition, each featured by certain modes of father involvement. This provides a heuristic tool that draws the attention to substantial changes in father involvement in childcare within this particular transition of the life course.

### 3. Father involvement in the Austrian legal system

This study is based on data gathered in Vienna, Austria. Austrian law contains several regulations and provisions on (expectant) parents. The Maternity Protection Act prohibits mothers' employment eight weeks before the expected date of delivery and eight weeks after childbirth. During this period mothers are compensated at a level corresponding to their average earnings before starting their leave. Moreover, all employed parents living in Austria can take parental leave up to the child's second birthday. All parents, regardless of their employment status, are entitled to childcare allowance and have the choice between five options<sup>1</sup> that vary with respect to duration (from 12 to 36 months) and benefit

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1 After completing this study, the system has been reformed taking effects in March 2017: the length is now more flexible, ranging from 12 to 28 months for just one parent, and from 15 to 35 months if

payments (€2,000 to €436 per month). Four models work as an income replacement with a fixed sum. Alternatively, an income-related programme pays 80 per cent of the applying parents' previous wage (up to €2,000 per month). In addition, male civil servants are entitled to an unpaid 'daddy month' of up to four weeks, which have to be consumed during the maternity protection period after delivery.

Although the Austrian parental leave policy allows for various combinations of parental leave and childcare allowance, including an equal share of parental leave, mothers in Austria are the principal recipients of childcare allowance, whereas fathers receive only a small share. An analysis of fathers' shares in all completed payments of childcare benefits showed minimal father involvement: As of May 2016, 19 per cent of all completed cases involved fathers who received childcare benefits for at least two months. In (the federal state of) Vienna, father involvement appears to be higher: fathers were involved in 30 per cent of all completed cases (BMFJ 2016).

#### 4. Data and methods

The presented findings were obtained in a qualitative longitudinal study on the transition to first-time parenthood carried out in Vienna, Austria, between April 2013 and July 2014. We interviewed women and men separately during the third trimester of pregnancy and about six months after delivery (44 interviews in total). We recruited our respondents by presenting an outline of the planned study in prenatal classes that were widely attended in Vienna. We invited the prospective parents to participate and circulated leaflets containing a short project description and our contact data. Furthermore, we distributed leaflets in centres that offer advice and information for parents(-to-be) and in gynaecologist's offices.

The sample comprised eleven couples<sup>2</sup>, including a relatively high number of fathers who planned to take parental leave as compared to the Austrian average. The sample was rather homogeneous concerning the interviewees' socio-demographic background (mainly middle class, urban area) as well as the chosen models of childcare allowance (predominantly income-related model). Table 1 summarises the respondents' characteristics.

All interviews were conducted one-to-one (i.e. one respondent and one of the authors). Wherever possible, both parents were interviewed at the same time in order to reduce exchanges between them on the topics covered in the interviews. The respondents could choose to do the interviews at their homes or at the researchers' offices. We used an interview guide (Witzel 2000) to collect pre- and post-birth data on the parents' experiences in the given period. The interview guide covered a wide range of topics, e.g. pregnancy and preparations for birth, daily routine and time management, parental leave and childcare arrangements, work-family balance, expectations and perceptions of parenthood, quality of partnership, relation to the child, characteristics and development

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both parents share the period of parental leave. All parents are provided with a consistent amount of money in total. The income-based model remained unchanged.

2 The sample originally comprised twelve couples. One couple experienced a stillbirth and thus did not do the second interview.

of the child. As we asked the interviewees to include the time preceding the pregnancy in their narrations, the study covers the pre-pregnancy phase as well.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Couples <sup>a</sup>	Union status wave 1	Occupation		Parental leave (plans) in months	Daddy Month	Childcare allowance in months
		During pregnancy wave 1	6 months after birth wave 2			
1 Tina Tom	cohabiting	full-time employment <sup>b</sup>	parental leave	12	yes	12+2 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	12		
2 Rita Robert	cohabiting	temporary full-time employment	parental leave	20	not entitled	20
		full-time employment	full-time employment	0		
3 Bianca Bob	separated	full-time employment	parental leave	8	not entitled	8+8 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	8		
4 Anna Alex	married <sup>d</sup>	full-time employment	parental leave	20	no	20 (+4)
		full-time employment taking his A-levels	full-time employment	(4) <sup>c</sup>		
5 Olivia Otto	married	full-time employment	parental leave	min. 12	not entitled	12+2 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	2		
6 Maria Max	married <sup>d</sup>	self-employment (full-time)	'parental leave'	min. 12	yes	12+2 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	2		
7 Dana David	married	full-time employment	parental leave	12	not entitled	12+2 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	6 (-12)		
8 Linda Lucas	married	unemployed	unemployed	not entitled	not entitled	2+12
		unemployed	full-time employment	not entitled		
9 Julia Jim	married	full-time employment	parental leave	12	no entitled	12 income-related
		independent contractor studying at university (bachelor's degree)	full-time employment studying at university (master's degree)	0		
10 Emma Emil	cohabiting	full-time employment	parental leave working ½ day per week	12	no	12+2 income-related
		full-time employment	full-time employment	2		
11 Claudia Chris	married	vocational training	vocational training	0	not entitled	12 income-related
		full-time employment	parental leave occasionally working 1 day on weekends	12		

a We used pseudonyms for all interviewees.

b Full-time employment in Austria usually means 38,5 resp. 40 hours per week.

c Brackets indicate that the interviewed parents had not yet decided how to arrange parts of their parental leave time, i.e. either the duration of the leave or leave-taking as such was still under discussion.

d Two couples (Anna/Alex and Maria/Max) got married during pregnancy shortly before the first interviews.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, we carefully noted the observed interactions. These protocols were also taken into account in our analysis, as they gave additional insights into fathers' involvement.

We analysed our data along the temporal and cross-sectional dimensions, paying special attention to the longitudinal (case-specific) and social (cross-case) context (Thomson 2007). We drew on both parents' interviews as this multiple perspectives approach (Deković/Buist

2005; Zartler 2010) provided a detailed reconstruction of father involvement and its inherent changes. We first did a thematic analysis to get an overview of the data content (Froschauer/Lueger 2003). Based on Palkovitz's (1997) differentiation of three domains of involvement, we then performed an in-depth analysis at the case level<sup>3</sup> to reconstruct the fathers' involvement from our textual data: The extensive and detailed narrations given by both parents at two different points in time during the transition process were thoroughly analysed with regards to all detectable practices of fathers (Schadler 2013, 2014). In the next step, we abstracted the data by constantly comparing and condensing the initial findings on a cross-case level. Having adjusted and validated our results, we obtained a status of theoretical saturation (Glaser/Strauss 2009). Characterised by an inductive-deductive interplay, the profound analysis allowed for a thorough delineation of father involvement in the period under review.

## 5. Results

### *5.1. Turning points in the transition to parenthood*

The birth of the first child is considered to be the major turning point in the transition to parenthood. Taking a closer look at this transition process and father involvement in care work, we will show in the following sections that the birth of a child was but one of many turning points. We reconstructed numerous changes in father involvement over the transition process that were connected to particular turning points. At these points in time, either a particular form of father involvement was triggered or already existing father involvement underwent profound transformations that resulted in a change in fathers' cognitive, affective and/or behavioural involvement (Palkovitz 1997). Thus, turning points contributed to the dynamics and fluidity of fathers' transition processes.

Our longitudinal data exposed a variety of turning points which occurred throughout the transition to parenthood. All turning points retrieved in our data are listed in Table 2, every turning point inducing a change in at least one interviewed father's involvement in care work during the period under review.

As shown in Table 2, turning points occurred at a particular time during the transition process and thus can be allocated to different phases before and after the birth of a child. We identified three pre-pregnancy, eight prenatal and seven postnatal turning points. The analysis shows that father involvement was shaped by a variety of turning points and that paternal involvement not only varied between fathers, but also within individual transition pathways. Our aim is not to provide a complete description and analysis of all imaginable turning points, but rather to illustrate the variable and ever-changing process of father involvement before, during and after pregnancy. Thus, we illustrate two turning points for each phase (pre-pregnancy, prenatal and postnatal) with typical empirical examples. We demonstrate how turning points – apart from the birth – change father involvement in at least one of the three domains (cognitive, affective and/or behavioural).

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3 'One case' stands for one couple and comprises four interviews.



Based on the cross-case analysis, the presented turning points were carefully selected in relation to the research aims in an attempt to illustrate their large variety and their salience for changes in father involvement. Quantitative occurrence was no selection criterion, and we give particular attention to turning points that have been less elaborated or even overlooked in the literature so far.

*Table 2: Turning points in the transition to parenthood*

<b>Pre-pregnancy phase</b>	confrontation with peers' narrations about parenthood
	decision to have a child
	decision to begin preparing for pregnancy
<b>Prenatal phase</b>	presumption of an expected or unexpected pregnancy
	confirmation of the pregnancy by pregnancy test or blood test
	gynaecological confirmation of the pregnancy
	first ultrasound image
	crossing of the 12-weeks border (change from 1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> trimester)
	announcement of the pregnancy (family, friends, work)
	mother's uptake of maternity protection leave
partner's physical discomfort caused by pregnancy	
<b>Postnatal phase</b>	birth of the child
	coming home after birth with the baby
	father's uptake of paternity leave in the framework of a 'daddy month'
	father's return to work after a 'daddy month'
	father's holiday after birth
	father's return to work after a holiday
	father's uptake of parental leave

## 5.2. Pre-pregnancy turning points

For the pre-pregnancy phase, three turning points were identified: *decision to have a child*, *confrontation with peers' narrations about parenthood* and the *decision to begin preparing for pregnancy*. The latter two examples will be presented in detail below, as the decision to have a child has been analysed in other studies (e.g., Lindberg et al. 2017; Stein et al. 2014; von der Lippe/Fuhrer 2003). The retrieved pre-pregnancy turning points constituted the beginning of father involvement even before pregnancy. These turning points triggered father involvement by supporting reflections on the respondents' own prospective fatherhood. These concerned imaginations of and plans for a future child and family (cognitive involvement), diverse feelings with respect to having a child in the future (affective involvement) and actions referring to a future pregnancy (behavioural involvement).

For example, when Chris (couple 11) was *confronted with his peers' narrations about parenthood*, he started including these narrations in his reflections on and considerations of his wish to have a child and of being a father in the future. He stated:

The excitement and joy of friends and acquaintances about expecting offspring, I mean, you realise that, one by one, all couples around you have babies, babies, babies, and then you think something like: yes it would indeed be nice to have a child of your own. And then it is great when you can tell them that now the time has also come for you.

His peers' narrations stimulated Chris's affective and cognitive involvement, made him wish to have a child himself and evoked extensive thoughts and ideas of becoming and being a father. This resulted in behavioural involvement when he talked to his wife Claudia about his wish to have a baby and subsequently led to the joint decision to have a child. Moreover, repeated exposure to peers' statements and announcements increased Chris's affective involvement when he felt normative pressure to have a child himself. Further, his wish to belong to the group of parents was reflected in his excitement about being finally able to announce the pregnancy. Overall, the exposure to his peers' statements and narrations induced change in Chris's approach toward fatherhood.

The pre-pregnancy turning point of a *couple's decision to begin preparing for pregnancy* can be exemplified with couple 4 who jointly decided to have a baby. This decision constituted a turning point as it induced Alex's behavioural involvement in the desired pregnancy. In order to prepare for pregnancy, Alex changed his behaviour immediately after their joint decision and suddenly stopped smoking. This turning point enhanced his responsibility towards his unborn baby and, at that moment, not yet conceived child. Alex's partner Anna stated that preparing for pregnancy

was not a problem for me, because I had not smoked before anyway, so smoking was no problem. My husband quit smoking one month before I became pregnant, because we decided to have a baby.

Aware of the physiological factors that are beneficial and detrimental for pregnancy, Alex prepared his body in order to ensure the best conditions for a potential pregnancy. His behavioural and cognitive involvement was expressed by his decision to resist his cravings for cigarettes every single day in order to provide a favourable physical condition which would presumably facilitate a pregnancy. To keep refraining from smoking constituted his pre-pregnancy father involvement as it was done with reference to the planned child and to his partner who would have been exposed to passive smoking. Unlike Alex, Anna did not take any measures to prepare her body for the pregnancy.

Such examples show that father involvement linked to specific turning points already occurs long before pregnancy. The turning points mark moments in time that trigger prospective father involvement.

### 5.3. Prenatal turning points

For the prenatal phase, i.e. during pregnancy, we identified numerous turning points, namely:

- *presumption of an expected or unexpected pregnancy,*
- *confirmation of the pregnancy by pregnancy test or blood test,*
- *gynaecological confirmation of the pregnancy,*
- *first ultrasound image,*
- *crossing of the 12-weeks border,*

- *announcement of the pregnancy,*
- *mother's uptake of maternity protection leave, and*
- *partner's physical discomfort caused by pregnancy.*

These turning points concerned involvement related to an awareness of becoming a father and the formation of a father's identity (affective involvement) as well as the preparations for delivery and the postpartum period in terms of plans (cognitive involvement) and concrete hands-on activities (behavioural involvement). They either elicited father involvement (when a father had not experienced a pre-pregnancy turning point before) or induced a change of already existing involvement. In the following, two prenatal turning points covering these two different manifestations will be presented in detail, namely the *gynaecological confirmation of the pregnancy* or the *mother's uptake of maternity protection leave*.

Max (couple 6) experienced the *gynaecological confirmation of the pregnancy* as a turning point that induced his involvement in the pregnancy. Max learned about a positive pregnancy test when he did not expect a pregnancy at all, thus he wanted to wait for the gynaecological check-up. His partner Maria then visited a gynaecologist who confirmed the pregnancy. It was only this confirmation that elicited Max's surprise and excitement and induced his affective and cognitive involvement in the pregnancy in terms of feelings of responsibility. When Max talked about this turning point, he concluded:

Sometimes you have these thoughts like, that certainly responsibility goes along with that and... Therefore, you perhaps have to reconsider somewhat more precisely your steps which you take in life so to say. [...] This is somehow, I wouldn't say you carry a burden on your shoulders, but still you somehow realise a kind of feeling so to say, that there's now kind of more responsibility.

For Max, these feelings of responsibility as a form of affective involvement were accompanied by a 'somewhat stressful phase'. He was involved cognitively when he accompanied Maria to medical check-ups and worried about the unborn child's health because Maria drank alcohol and smoked during the early pregnancy when she did not yet know about it. Max also felt restless and planned adaptations to their apartment:

And then on and off a kind of restlessness arose within me, well, you now already ought to furnish the child's room somehow and we ought to prepare for it.

Summing up, the gynaecological confirmation of the pregnancy triggered a whole range of thoughts, feelings and actions that transformed Max's cognitive, affective and behavioural involvement.

Another prenatal turning point, the *mother's uptake of maternity protection leave*, is illustrated on the example of Tom (couple 1). Prior to this turning point, Tom was involved cognitively, affectively and behaviourally in terms of organising, planning, being excited about and preparing for the time after childbirth. He devoted more attention to the unborn child than his partner Tina who spent many hours at work and rather focused on her career than on the pregnancy. When Tina had to take her compulsory maternity protection leave eight weeks before the expected date of delivery, Tom's involvement decreased. This turning point split the couple into an expectant father who continued to work full-time and an expectant mother who was on leave, which caused a shift in priorities. Tina stated:

During the first months of my pregnancy I still worked longer hours than envisaged by law. And I found this pretty strenuous. I didn't really have time to think about the change that was going on. I was simply tired in the evenings and unable to do a lot, and just tried to get a rest somehow, without making any great plans how to rearrange and adapt our apartment and what had to be done. In fact, it was rather my partner who started doing this. He said: We can rearrange this in this or that way, and I just said I am simply too tired, it is too early for me to think about it. And when my maternity protection leave started, it was the first time that I felt, I realised that it won't be long until birth.

Once Tina had started her maternity protection leave, Tom endeavoured to stay involved, but took on considerably fewer tasks, because Tina had more time to take care of the preparations for delivery and the unborn child. Tom's working hours and the spatial separation of the couple during working days counteracted and reduced Tom's involvement. Tom realized that his wife's entry into maternity protection induced major changes in their everyday lives and dramatically changed his possibilities for involvement:

Naturally, this has become more obvious now during her maternity protection leave, because the mother is basically at home and no longer has to work at fixed hours like you do. You are forced into this schedule, so the mere timing kind of divides things up.

Evidence like this supports our argument that father involvement already undergoes major changes during the pregnancy, induced by a series of turning points.

#### 5.4. Postnatal turning points

Postnatal turning points covered a wide variety and embraced not only the *birth of the child*, but also the following incidents:

- *coming home after birth with the baby*,
- *father's uptake of paternity leave in the framework of a 'daddy month'*,
- *father's return to work after a 'daddy month'*,
- *father's holiday after birth*,
- *father's return to work after a holiday*,
- *father's uptake of parental leave*.

These turning points increased or decreased father involvement, namely planning for and monitoring the child's well-being (cognitive involvement), feelings of responsibility (affective involvement) and concrete hands-on childcare (behavioural involvement). In the following, two turning points, namely *father's return to work after a holiday* and *father's uptake of parental leave*, will be presented in detail, because both comprise father's employment as a crucial issue for father involvement and illuminate it from different perspectives.

When Otto (couple 5) *returned to work after a holiday* of three weeks immediately after the birth, he experienced a clear cut in his behavioural involvement. During this holiday, Otto was available for his partner Olivia and his child, supported Olivia who was exhausted from the delivery, went grocery shopping, and changed nappies. Both partners used the time for going for walks and short trips with their child. It was a period in which Otto started to realise that the child they had been waiting for had actually arrived and henceforth would be a part of their family:

Well, I was at home for the first three weeks, on the one hand to be present and on the other hand to support Olivia in case she needed something.

Once the three-week holiday expired, Otto returned to his full-time employment. This served as a turning point and clearly reduced his behavioural involvement. When the interviewer asked Otto if it was difficult for him to return to his working life, he answered:

Yes, of course. It still is sometimes because I get up at six in the morning, when she [the child] is still sleeping and then I say I will be home any time after five o'clock. And when she [the child], well normally she goes to sleep at eight, from seven thirty onwards, around this time, she goes to sleep around seven thirty. This means that, let's say I'm home at five, then there are two and a half hours left when she gets a bit tired in the end, and then we have dinner and we cook and we have to go shopping if time's left. Insofar, it would be better of course, or I would like to be able to stay at home, so to say.

As of now, Otto could not provide hands-on care for his child during working days. His behavioural involvement centred upon the evenings where he was part of the daily routine in terms of changing clothes and putting the child to bed as well as the weekends where he tried to make up for the limited time with his child.

This example reflects that turning points may trigger a change in just one domain of involvement, in this case behavioural involvement, while father's involvement in the remaining domains are less affected.

Another postnatal turning point was the father's uptake of parental leave<sup>4</sup>, among others experienced by Chris (couple 11), who was on parental leave at the time of the second interview. His decision to make use of this right and apply for parental leave preceded this turning point. The leave started when Chris's child was two months old. Before going on leave, Chris worked full-time and his behavioural and cognitive involvement was limited while his partner Claudia was on maternity protection leave and mainly cared for their child. When Chris took up parental leave and Claudia returned to her vocational training, a phase of comprehensive father involvement started. Being on parental leave increased his involvement in terms of feeling more responsible for the baby (affective involvement) and planning daily routines (cognitive involvement). This was how Chris experienced swapping his daily work routine for parental leave:

On the one hand, I was more relaxed, because there was no stress from work anymore. On the other hand, I think I have more responsibility, because you have to look after a small child who depends on you. When she sleeps, you do have more time to do other things, such as household chores and so on, which are almost impossible or more difficult to reconcile with office work.

The turning point further increased behavioural involvement in hands-on childcare when Chris became the main caregiver for the child: Chris fed his child, changed nappies, put the child to bed, prepared the baby's clothes and provided a clean apartment for his child. He was able to identify and take care of his child's needs:

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4 Our data exposed the father's uptake to parental leave be a turning point and not the mother's leave uptake. This may be due to the fact that mothers in Austria commonly take parental leave subsequent to their maternity protection leave after childbirth.

She definitely wants some things at certain times, ... this is a kind of pattern and when she starts crying, you look at your watch and see that it is six o'clock, and I know she is probably hungry and it's time to feed her once again.

As the empirical examples demonstrate, turning points can be seen as particular events at specific points in time that may induce changes in the distribution of care work between parents throughout the transition process. They thus have the inherent potential to increase or decrease father involvement.

## 6. Conclusions

Becoming a parent is a crucial transition during the life course. Based on longitudinal data from Austria and including both parents' perspectives, we addressed the question of how fathers' affective, cognitive and behavioural involvement (Palkovitz 1997) changes during the transition to parenthood. Understanding this particular transition as a gendered process (Doucet 2009), we gained detailed insight into the dynamics of father involvement on the micro level.

We argued in favour of the idea of turning points that lead to profound transformations in father involvement. In the sample at hand, we identified three pre-pregnancy, eight prenatal and seven postnatal turning points. In order to illustrate the changes in father involvement over time, we explored two turning points for each phase in detail. Our explorative study showed that father involvement not only changes with the birth of a child but rather across the entire transition phase. Furthermore, the study indicates that father involvement might not necessarily change at major events like a father's return to full-time work, but also at specific points in time in parents' everyday life like coming home with the baby after the birth. We thus advocate for an examination of changes in father involvement by thoroughly reconstructing fathers' practices (respectively parents' practices) in detail over the course of the entire transition process. The reconstruction of turning points leading to a change in father involvement across the transition to parenthood contributes to a deeper understanding of father involvement in particular and the distribution of care work between fathers and mothers in general.

In this explorative study, we developed a theoretical framework that defines turning points as a crucial part of father involvement. However, this study did not aim at explaining these varieties. We thus urge further research to take into consideration the specific contexts and conditions that are related to involvement in order to identify critical points and, consequently, to articulate policy implications accordingly.

This study's results extend and elaborate previous work and are in line with previous concepts that took into account changes in involvement over time, like for example, Palkovitz's (1997) concept that included short-term and long-term temporal fluctuations. In our reconstructive approach for the analysis of father involvement, we specified these changes by identifying the events over time at which changes occurred and highlighted the significance of short-term fluctuations. We reconstructed turning points that emerged not only postpartum but also in the prenatal and even in the pre-pregnancy phase, thus indicating the importance of incorporating the (pre-)expectant father into the (future) pregnancy. This is consistent with prior research that demonstrated positive effects of prenatal

on postnatal involvement (Cabrera et al. 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2014; Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007). Moreover, our results are congruent with the life course perspective, which regards the family as a ‘constantly changing entity, as its members move through life’ (Hareven 1977: 58). As a consequence, we suggest that scholars should measure father involvement at several points in time, because the level of involvement is subject to constant change in relation to various pre-pregnancy, pre- and postnatal turning points. The reconstruction of these turning points across the transition process to parenthood demonstrates how particular turning points might lead to an increase or decline in father involvement and thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered and unequal distribution of care work between fathers and mothers. A change in gender equality or particular gender differentiations can be induced at these points in time. Based on the reconstructive insights of this explorative study, we suggest further research to address the question whether certain turning points and related changes are typical or unusual. This will illuminate our understanding about variations in father involvement and further extend scholarly insights into the dynamics and fluidity of the transition process.

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