

Parenthood representations in the Swiss media coverage of parental leave policies

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Are gender beliefs challenged by the emergence of parental leave policies?

CONTEXT

Switzerland is one of the only European countries which has **no statutory parental leave nor paternity leave** (Wall et al. 2009). Employed men are granted 1 or 2 days of time-off when they become fathers.

The general frame of the research is the emergence of parental leave policies (i.e. parental and paternity leave) in the Swiss public sphere. There were more than twenty parliamentary interventions in the last decade in favour of parental leave policies. Moreover, increasingly more work organisations (private companies and public administrations) are granting their employees with limited paid paternity leaves and unpaid parental leaves.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender is an « institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference » (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p.510). The « **gender beliefs** » are a central component of the gender system, they **define the distinguishing characteristics of men and women and how they are expected to behave**. Fatherhood and motherhood are differentiated and are subject to a whole range of dichotomies : instrumental vs. emotional ; authoritarian vs. understanding ; breadwinner vs. carer.

How are parental leave policies framed¹?

How is parenthood represented?

What is the subject position of fathers?

METHODOLOGY

Discourse analysis:

- constructions of meaning around parenthood and fatherhood
- representation of parental leave policies
- categorisations of leave recipients
- discursive registers
- subject positions (e.g. active or passive roles)

DATA

N= 206 press articles

Sampling process:

- keyword research: "parental leave" & "paternity leave"
- media databases: Lexis Nexis, Europress and Swissdox
- nine daily Swiss French speaking newspapers
- time-frame: 1999 - 2009

PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES ARE PUBLIC ISSUES

Topicality

• Parental leave policies are presented as actual and contemporary issues

Progression

Le Matin, 13.05.2007

Within two years, paternity leave has made a spectacular jump

Positive representation

• The expression "real paternity leave" is frequently used, so as "good", "proper" and "satisfying"

Some exceptions

• Parental leave policies are represented as "gifts" -> suggests they are unnecessary

FAMILY MODELS & FATHERHOOD ARE CHANGING

Equal division of tasks

• The Swiss society is represented as changing

• Fathers are more involved in childcare and mothers are more active on the labour market

Criticism of the predominance of wage-work

Le Matin, 02.02.2007

For all the dads who would like to get rid of the label of working husband which sticks to them!

New fatherhood is emerging...

• Personal experiences of involved fathers are reported -> suggests that family time is valuable and that care activities are hard work

...but it is not the norm

• The salience of involved fatherhood confirms its unusualness.

• The "family life" discursive register (e.g. "dad", "diapers", "mollycoddle") -> moderates the framing of parental leave policies as public issues

FATHERS ARE SECONDARY PARENTS

Involved fatherhood concerns specific categories of fathers

• Young fathers

• With limited occupational responsibilities

Le Temps, 01.04.2000

Father of the country, or family father, Tony Blair has not chosen yet

Fatherhood is optional

• The categories used to describe the potential recipients of parental leave suggest that :

- they are "women" or "mothers" exclusively
- either "the mother or the father" is concerned

• Paternity leave is represented as a *right* from which fathers could potentially benefit

Fathers « help out » or have unclear roles

• The legitimacy of the fathers' presence is based on their role of support-providers to their partners

• Their role is represented as unclear and passive

E.g.

24 Heures, 17.11.2008

The employees from the commune of Apalinges will be paid five days or more to play dotting fathers*

*pouponner

FINDINGS

- THE EMERGENCE OF PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES INCREASES THE VISIBILITY OF FATHERHOOD
- BUT IT PROVIDES ONLY A LIMITED CHALLENGE OF GENDER BELIEFS ABOUT PARENTHOOD
- IT IS THE IMAGE OF "MODERNIZED FAMILY TRADITIONALISM²" WHICH IS REPRESENTED

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Parental leave discourse are likely to influence:

1. gender differences in practices: parenthood remains a secondary sphere of social integration for men
2. postponement of parental leave policies: parenthood continues to be considered as a private matter in which the State has no right to intervene

¹ « to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation » (Entman, 1993, p.52)

² "Modernized family traditionalism" (Levy, Widmer & Kellerhals, 2002) suggests that men and women are assigned a sex master status which is activated at the transition to parenthood. Both parents engage in the family and occupational spheres. However, they engage mainly in a dominant sphere ; the family for the mother and wage-work for the father.

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