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 parental leaves and unpaid paternity leave.

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 range of dichotomies: instrumental vs. emotional; authoritarian vs. understanding; breadwinner vs. carer.

PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES ARE PUBLIC ISSUES

Topicality
• Parental leave policies are presented as actual and contemporary issues.

Progression
• Swissdox, Lexis, Swiss Lex
• Le Matin, 13.03.2007

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

DATA
• 265 press articles
• Sampling process: (a) keyword research: "parental leave" & "paternity leave" (b) media databases: Lexis Nexis, EuroPress and Swissdox
• Non-daily Swiss French speaking newspapers
• Time-frame: 1999 - 2009

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
• New fatherhood is emerging...
  • Personal experiences of involved fathers are reported -> suggests that family time is valuable and that care activities are 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.

METHODOLOGY
Discourse analysis: analysis of meaning around parenthood and fatherhood
• representation of parental leave policies
• categorizations of leave recipients
• discursive registers
• subject positions (e.g. active or passive roles)

POSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Parental leave discourses 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

REFERENCES: