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Parents' Strategies in Dealing with Constructions of Gendered Responsibilities at Their Workplaces

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Abstract: This paper, which is based on qualitative research conducted in Austria, focuses on current gender inequalities between parents in fulfilling their parental responsibilities, which means reconciling the responsibilities of childcare and earning a living. Austria is characterized by a substantial gender gap in men's and women's labor force participation and a system that provides particularly long parental leaves. These foster long-term gender inequalities in parents' careers and involvement in family life after their transition to parenthood. Against this background, we analyzed constructions of parental responsibilities parents face at their workplaces, and how these constructions shape parents' decisions on sharing parental responsibilities. The findings demonstrate the relevance of parental norms that comprise a father's main responsibility as breadwinner and a mother's primary responsibility as a caregiver, constructed and reproduced by parents' colleagues and employers. Consequently, for parents who try to share their breadwinning and caregiving in a non-normative (and more gender-equal) way, both parents are forced to find strategies in dealing with normative constructions. These strategies range from making a 'conscious decision', insisting on the original plan, and challenging predominant norms at workplaces, through quitting the job and looking for another employer, to modifying or giving up the originally planned arrangement.

Keywords: gender inequality; parental leave; employed parents; social constructions; parental responsibilities; Austria

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increase in mothers entering the labor market in Austria, predominantly on a part-time basis, and fathers increasing their contributions to childcare and housework. Despite these changes, the birth of a child continues to reinforcing an unequal division of care work and paid work within heterosexual couples. Existing research across Europe has indicated that on the individual level, parents' negotiations regarding their work-care arrangements are shaped by cultural norms and gender ideologies that share a common base: Both partners usually consider childcare a mother's main responsibility, which means that her employment is adjusted to this responsibility and her income is surplus or 'extra' money. In contrast, for the most part, both partners consider earning a sufficient income to be the father's main responsibility and ascribe men with the ability to choose whether or not to care, or interrupt or reduce their employment (Schmidt et al. 2019; Evertsson and Grunow 2019). Within Austrian heterosexual couples, this inequality is mirrored in the prevalent transition from a dual breadwinner model before the birth of a child to a (modernized) male breadwinner model thereafter.

On a national level, policies influence the division of paid work and care work. Parental leave policies in Austria, especially, have aimed at overcoming gendered parenting and careers and encompass partnership-oriented childcare benefits. These policies thus also affect parents' negotiations at their

workplaces, which have been identified as crucial sites for work-care arrangements and dual-career planning of both men and women after their transition to parenthood (Mauerer 2018a; Bergmann and Schiffbänker 2016).

Therefore, this paper focused on qualitative aspects of persistent gender inequalities in men's and women's labor force participation and on current gender inequalities between parents in fulfilling their parental responsibilities and reconciling childcare responsibilities with their breadwinning responsibilities as employees. We asked how parents' employers and colleagues are involved in constructions of parental responsibilities at workplaces, and how parents deal with these experiences in their decisions on reconciling breadwinning and caregiving and on sharing these parental responsibilities. Based on qualitative data from Austria comprising parents' narrations on their personal experiences at their workplaces, we explored these constructions and their significance for parents' work-care arrangements and, in conclusion, the relevance and agency of employers, companies, and workplaces in hindering or promoting women's continuing participation in the labor market after the birth of a child and men's engagement in childcare by means of parental leave or part-time work.

Our results demonstrate, in particular, the traditionally gendered views and expectations of employers regarding work time arrangements and realization of work-family-balance with regard to their employees who are parents. Consequently, the fathers in our sample had to insist more strongly than their female partners on family-friendly employment conditions and push for the realization of their parental leave plans or part-time employment in negotiations with employers. In contrast, the mothers we talked to had to insist on being perceived as committed and loyal workers at the workplace and as still identifying with the company or organization. We focused on fathers and mothers who planned to reconcile their employment and their childcare duties in ways other than the culturally determined gendered norms and their strategies in the sphere of their workplace. This enables conclusions for promoting such work-care arrangements and thus for increasing a more gender-equal sharing of parental responsibilities in the future.

2. Evidence from Austria and the Austrian Context—Identifying the Problem

Despite major normative changes in recent decades, Austria is characterized by a substantial gender gap in men's and women's labor force participation as well as a large gender pay gap (Geisberger and Glaser 2017; Bergmann et al. 2018). The transition to parenthood, in particular, entails long-term gender inequalities in parents' careers and involvement in family life. Within Austrian heterosexual couples, parents' participation in the labor force and, consequently, their division of care work and paid work, is gendered and unequal after the birth of a child. Mothers' labor force participation is highly contingent on the age of her children, whereas fathers' full-time employment is rarely affected in such a way (Bergmann et al. 2014; Fuchs 2017; Mauerer 2019; Scambor et al. 2013), reflecting a (modernized) male breadwinner model.

On a structural level, these inequalities between women and men are caused, in part, initially, by parental leave. Austrian parental leave regulations provide mothers and fathers the option of leaving the labor market for two or three years to care for one's child. Compared to other European countries, e.g., Belgium with four-month or 130 days in Slovenia, parents can interrupt employment very long. Maternity leave—called maternity protection in Austria—prohibits professional activities eight weeks before the expected due date and 8 to 12 weeks after, depending on the type of birth, with full wage substitution (without any threshold). Additionally, fathers are entitled to special paternity leave, the so-called "Family Time Bonus", which includes 30 days during the first three months after delivery and remuneration of €700. In Austria, two systems regulate and compensate parents' time for childcare and subsequent career interruption. First, all employed parents are entitled to parental leave with job protection up to the child's second birthday. Second, all parents, regardless of employment status (e.g., employed, students, self-employed, or unemployed), can apply for a childcare allowance during parental leave (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2016). This allowance takes two forms: a flat-rate or an income-related model. For the flat-rate, parents select a daily childcare allowance between 365

to 851 days (c. 12 to 28 months) if only one parent takes leave, or between 456 to 1063 days (c. 15 to 35 months) if both parents share the entire leave period. Thus, in total, parents receive about €12,365 when only one parent does so, regardless of the duration, and €15,450 when both claim the allowance and share it at a minimum ratio of 80/20. While parents collect childcare allowance, they are also entitled to earn an additional income of up to €16,200 per year. For the income-related option, the applying parent receives 80 percent of his or her previous net income (up to €2000 per month) and can accrue additional income of up to €6800 per year. When the two parents share this income-related option, they can apply for up to 14 months; when only one parent applies for it, it is paid for 12 months. The total sum can thus reach €28,000 (Blum et al. 2018; Austrian Federal Chancellery 2018a). In both options, parents can apply for an additional €1000 partnership bonus if they share childcare allowance at a minimum ratio of 40/60.

Based on cases of completed childcare allowance, 36% applied for 30 months or more, and 26% chose 20 to 24 months in the flat-rate model, whereas 24% of all parents chose 12 to 14 months in the income-based model (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2018b). In urban areas, parents also prefer long leaves: 55% of parents in Vienna chose 20 or more months. Despite equal eligibility for mothers and fathers and the option to equally share, 81% of the principal recipients of the childcare allowance were mothers, thus about 19% of all children were also cared for by their fathers (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2018b). Reviewing parents' leave days, fathers claimed about four percent of all days taken off for childcare in Austria (OECD; Reidl and Schiffbänker 2013). As men on average have a higher income than women, in general, a high percentage of men who take parental leave opt for the income-based model and thus, although they could claim more months, often opt for the minimum duration of two months.

Critical evaluations of the Austrian childcare allowance system have pointed to the fact that the longest model of childcare benefits in Austria, which lasts for almost three years when both parents share the leave and includes the lowest monthly rates, outlasts the guaranteed job security during parental leave, which ends after 24 months (Dearing 2016). Additionally, Austria's parental leave system has been considered to reinforce gender inequality, as it offers a variety of options for parents. Furthermore, its naming and asymmetric designation, i.e., 12 + 2 or the minimum 80/20 ratio when shared, points to gendered responsibilities where the mother is the main carer in the longer parental leave period (Dearing 2016; Doucet 2013; Leibetseder 2013; Schmidt 2018; Schmidt and Rieder 2016). Mothers' long parental leaves tend to negatively affect their gainful careers and economic autonomy (Dearing 2016; Kleven et al. 2019), whereas only longer leaves for fathers (of more than two months) slightly increase equality (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2011; Schadler et al. 2017). Correspondingly, international research has concluded that fathers on parental leave, particularly on longer leaves alone, have the potential to increase gender equality (O'Brien and Wall 2017; Eydal and Rostgaard 2014).

The second cause of long-term inequalities in Austria is mothers' and fathers' working time after the period of parental leave. After leave, both parents—sequentially or simultaneously—can exercise their right to reduce their work-time while being legally protected against dismissal until their child's fourth birthday. Nevertheless, and apart from this gender-neutral right, it is mainly mothers who reduce their employment hours in the long run, whereas fathers tend to increase their working hours and overwork: Of all employed mothers with children under the age of 15 (these are only two thirds of all mothers with children under the age of 15), about 25% were employed full-time, while more than 75% were employed part-time. In contrast, 93% of all fathers with children under the age of 15 were employed full-time (Behrens et al. 2018; Statistics Austria 2019a, 2019b, own computations). Women reduce their working hours for family and personal reasons, whereas men more often work part-time—if they do—for education and training or due to a difficult labor market situation (Baierl and Kapella 2014). This effect accounts for increasing the gender gap regarding working time and income (Behrens et al. 2018) and is accompanied by the fact that in Austria, children under the age of three are less often enrolled in formal childcare than children between 3 and 6 years old. Among children below the age of three, on average, 26% attended daycare (including nursery and day-care parents), whereas

the attendance rate for children 3 to 6 years old was 93% (Blum et al. 2018; Statistics Austria 2018; Vono de Vilhena and Oláh 2017).

Mothers' long-term part-time work also reinforces and increases both vertical and horizontal segmentation on the labor market, as women remain underrepresented in higher levels of the hierarchy, and some jobs remain gender-specific. In accordance with European workforce data, men in Austria are overrepresented in more well-paid segments, i.e., as engineering technicians and in construction industry, whereas women are employed more often in sectors in which incomes are, on average, lower, i.e., as office clerks and in healthcare, education, and service industry (Eurostat 2018; Statistics Austria 2019a, own computations; see also Scambor et al. 2013; Bergmann et al. 2014). Consequently, gender inequalities in parents' career pathways and involvement in care are reinforced on the labor market, at the workplace, and on the level of the couple (Franz and Otter 2018; Geisberger and Glaser 2017). Furthermore, income disparities, economic autonomy, and long-term financial security remain gendered and unequal (EIGE—European Institute for Gender Equality 2017; General Accounting Office Austria/Rechnungshof Österreich 2017).

On the couple level, part-time work is considered an adequate strategy for mothers' for combining both work and childcare, especially in cases where the family income is secured by a second, full-time employed parent (Behrens et al. 2018). However, studies regarding preferred working hours have shown that particularly these women who live together with their partner and children would like to work more hours. In contrast, men in this stage of family life would like to work fewer hours (Franz et al. 2012). Financial considerations, such as higher salaries and professional status, seem to have no relevance for fathers' decisions to work part-time; fathers prefer to work part-time, irrespective of salary differences between the partners, only in families that have more than three or very young children (Hipp et al. 2017). Instead, traditional parenthood norms and gendered cultural codes in the working sphere and organizations (Bergmann and Schiffbänker 2016; Kugelberg 2006; Mauerer 2018b; Schmidt et al. 2019) might be powerful elements behind these mechanisms.

Correspondingly, cultural norms have to be taken into consideration as a third contributing factor to inequalities. In Austria, a conservative welfare state, cultural norms are characterized by support for male full-time workers and female caregivers and part-time workers (Buber-Ennser et al. 2013; Steiber and Haas 2010; Wernhart and Neuwirth 2007). Caregiving and, consequently, reconciling family work and paid work is, for the most part, considered a woman's main responsibility, whereas a man's main responsibility is to secure the family's livelihood; women's salaries are mainly seen as secondary. While an increasing share of men engages in childcare and it is widely accepted for their full-time employment to be interrupted by a temporary phase of parental leave (Schmidt 2018), their careers are not affected by the birth of a child (Schiffbänker and Holzinger 2014). However, the share of people who agree that preschool children are likely to suffer if their mothers are employed has decreased in recent years (to 51% of men and 27% of women), indicating changes in normative beliefs and discourses surrounding parenthood, even if these remain gender-specific (Buber-Ennser 2015). This also has consequences for the well-being of mothers, who are more satisfied than men to have a part-time job (Beham et al. 2018; Schröder 2018) as they feel they can have both: being employed and taking care of their children and family, and can thereby fulfil both expectations (Sorger 2014; Hackl 2013).

The development of cultural norms on men's and women's labor market participation goes back, inter alia, to the installation of labor legislation and workplace organization that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Historically, the social partnership, the cooperation of employers, employees, and their unions, included mainly men. Hence, Austrian trade unions have hardly embedded the reconciliation of work and family as a gender-neutral topic in their gender equality strategies (Sorger 2017). Deriving from these historical patriarchal roots, a close connection between the social partnership and gender politics has still an impact on women's and men's participation in the labor market (Sorger 2017; Fagan and Norman 2013; Ciccia and Verloo 2012). For example, the social and historical development of mothers' protection at the workplace in Austria and Germany (Hausen 1997; Neyer 1997) has been a success in terms of work protection, on the one hand, while on the

other hand—as a kind of unfortunate side-effect—it has resulted in excluding women from several branches of the labor market and minimizing increases in their incomes. To counteract these and other negative consequences, women's branches in trade unions were established, focusing on predominantly women-specific challenges, such as low wages, maternity, parental leave, part-time work, and the reconciliation of work and family. However, these women-specific efforts have covered parenthood as a man's issue at the workplace (Neyer 1997; Bergmann et al. 2014; Sorger 2017).

3. Parents at Their Workplace—General Evidence and Research Gap

Findings from comparative research suggest that a substantial reduction of working hours provides employees with better opportunities to juggle work and non-work responsibilities, leading to higher levels of subjective work-life balance, but in a different way between men and women. While women benefit more from marginal part-time work than men and thus experience greater balance, full-time employment is more beneficial for male full-time workers, in contrast to female full-time workers (Beham et al. 2018; Schröder 2018). These findings reflect traditional gender roles and family models, as well as gender differences in the motivation to work part-time, particularly in societal contexts with less gender equality.

Some companies and organizations have implemented explicitly family-friendly measures and systematic parental leave management (Wernhart et al. 2018). Nevertheless, it is mostly companies or hierarchical levels with high shares of women that implement and expect to profit from these family-friendly measures (Bergmann and Schiffbänker 2016; Frodermann et al. 2018). Although there is an increasing awareness that also men and fathers have to be a central target group of these measures, it is mostly women and mothers who feel entitled and claim certain benefits or rights (Alemann et al. 2017). Employers and companies view family-friendly policies for fathers primarily as an economic necessity. Factors constituting the frame of reference for gender-equality policies for women, such as equality or justice, hardly play a role (Liebig and Kron 2017). On the one hand, organizations offer services for parents to better reconcile their employment with their parental responsibilities, while on the other hand, they reward long working hours and availability with good salaries and career opportunities (Alemann et al. 2017). Consequently, mothers continue to have the main responsibility for unpaid care and family work. Recent findings have shown that fathers, even if they have been on parental leave or have worked part-time, experienced significantly fewer negative consequences with regard to career and salaries than mothers, as their leave periods are, for the most part, shorter and their part-time work mainly involves more working hours than mothers' part-time work (Glauber 2019; Bünning 2016; Jacobi et al. 2016; Schiffbänker and Holzinger 2014). Furthermore, research from Germany has revealed a strong correlation between company structures and fathers' working hours: when companies are characterized by official, general, and transparent rules, fathers are more likely to work reduced hours (Bernhardt and Bünning 2017).

Even when these general rules, which are equally available for fathers and mothers, have been set and announced, the sense of entitlement might be gendered, as a number of studies have found (Alemann et al. 2017; Gatrell and Cooper 2016; Haas and Hwang 2016; Walters and Whitehouse 2015): Fathers feel that it is unjustified for them to use certain reconciliation services or offers for parents, because their sense of entitlement is restricted by cultural norms reproduced at their workplaces. They feel thankful and appreciate their employer's support and assume that they have to give something back (Alemann et al. 2017). However, a sense of entitlement to family support is growing stronger among some men. Simultaneously, women's sense of entitlement to career advancement seems to remain stable; therefore, although gendered practices at workplaces may change, the danger remains that gendered inequalities at work will become even more pronounced (Gatrell and Cooper 2016). This also seems to apply for highly educated mothers (Berghammer 2014; Walters and Whitehouse 2015).

Regarding organizations on the labor market, gender is one important structural factor (Acker 1990), in accordance with the patriarchal organization of society. Specifically, masculinity norms are

key in organizations' structure, culture, corresponding power relations (Collinson and Hearn 1994), and in 'serious games of competition' among men (Bourdieu 1997). Accordingly, male co-workers, especially those pursuing a career, have to conform to normative values like loyalty, self-sacrifice, or assertiveness, from which they benefit in turn. Correspondingly, hegemonic masculine working practices and time cultures are also major factors contributing to the departure of mothers from the labor market. Organizational cultures, including ubiquitous long hours, are not receptive to new creative solutions or reduced working hours. Instead, mothers accept lower-status work and negotiate reduced hours. Although they might be grateful for the flexibility at first, over time, mothers feel side-lined by their exclusion and are unable to achieve a work-life balance (Cahusac and Kanji 2014). In contrast, for fathers, who are rather expected to be free from conflicting loyalty between home and work, the persistence of the male and loyal worker norm appears to be an important barrier to implementation of a policy that offers promise in terms of opportunities for fathers for caregiving (Haas and Hwang 2016; Maurer 2019).

In general, the work-family explanation has become a "hegemonic narrative", and an unconscious social defense to help employees fend off anxieties raised by a 24/7 work culture, to protect organizationally powerful groups (mostly men) and in doing so, sustain workplace inequality (Padavic et al. 2019). The workplace can thus be defined as a crucial site where gender is done (Charles 2013), occupations become gendered (Doering and Thébaud 2017), and where mothering and fathering and connected responsibilities are constructed (Kugelberg 2006), thus shaping parents' decisions, in particular on whether and how long to interrupt employment and on whether and how much to reduce working hours. Nevertheless, certain questions have remained unanswered; for example, how do parents deal with these constructions they face at their workplaces? There is a need to better understand and confront deeply embedded gendered workplace practices and cultures that are resistant to change and capable of undermining active fatherhood and reinforcing a gendered sense of entitlement to support for parenting and employment (Lewis and Stumbitz 2017). It has been argued that the relevance of the company and workplace context has to be considered in future research (Hipp et al. 2017). In connection with this, Charles (2013) has argued that to understand, how a change in workplace cultures can be brought about, attention needs to be paid to the interactional level at which gender is done. In our analyses, we have focused on parents' workplaces as one crucial site, revealing qualitative aspects in the unequal division of paid and unpaid labor, enabling a detailed investigation of perpetuated gender imbalances and individual parents' counter-activity.

4. Data and Methods

All of the findings presented have been derived from a large data corpus (for an overview see Table 1), conducted within the framework of the following research projects:

- (1) A qualitative, longitudinal interview study that included the perspectives of both men and women in heterosexual parental couples during their gendered transition to parenthood. The study was undertaken in Vienna, Austria between 2013 and 2015. Through various channels (prenatal classes, information and advice centers for parents, gynecologists), we recruited 22 mothers and fathers from 11 couples living in the Vienna area and conducted semi-structured, problem-centered interviews at three time-points. We interviewed the parents separately; during the last trimester of pregnancy, and six months and 24 months after their first child was born (66 interviews in total). Problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000) enabled the respondents to narrate what they determined to be relevant and permitted the interviewers to ask questions afterward, following the research question. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Based on initial thematic coding, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the couples' plans in comparison with their work-care arrangements after their transition to parenthood at a couple level and subsequently performed a cross-case comparison. The analysis consisted of several analytical steps at the individual and couple level as well as on a time dimension (Vogl et al. 2018) and was oriented towards social constructivism (Vogl et al. 2019). The interviewees, between 25 and 42 years old, were mainly

- highly educated middle-class parents (with upper secondary education to tertiary education, second stage).
- (2) In a qualitative interview study, separate interviews with 44 mothers and fathers from 22 parental couples and interviews with two single mothers were conducted within the first two years of their youngest (not necessarily first) child. Interviewees were recruited from throughout Austria and were interviewed using problem-centered interview techniques (see study 1), both personally and via telephone. Analyses comprised a thematic coding phase and a subsequent in-depth and cross-case analysis. The interviewees were characterized by a great variation in several characteristics: length of leave (from 0 to 33 months), shared leave (from not shared/only the mother to equally shared to not shared/only the father), division of paid work after parental leave (from male breadwinner to double part-time to female breadwinner), number of children (from one to five), family status (single parent, cohabitating, stepfamily, married), educational level (from compulsory to doctorate), and income level (from 0 to 7500 euros/month).
 - (3) Empirical findings on fathers' family life and work experiences during and after their parental leave derived from data drawn from two research projects. In sum, the first, conducted in 2013, and the second, conducted between 2014 and 2015, consisted of 36 interviews. They focused on the everyday life experiences of men on paternal leave and qualitative analyses of the distribution of paid work, domestic work, and childcare. The interview partners were contacted via parental networks, nursery schools, contacts provided by networks promoting caring men, and via offices providing support for fathers who aim to reconcile work and family. The data were analyzed using qualitative-interpretative methods. Most interview partners earned a good or above-average income, and most had higher education. This might be explained by the contact offices or by the social contacts provided by interviewees. Most participants thus had claimed for the income-related childcare allowance. Moreover, to a certain extent, people with higher education were more likely to participate in research studies.
 - (4) Finally, empirical results of two follow-up studies on female partner's perspectives comprised interviews with 12 mothers in total, who were, for the most part, the female partners of men on parental leave interviewed before (2015). The data again were analyzed by applying qualitative-interpretative methods.

Table 1. Overview of data corpus.

	Respondents		Age Span	Education	N° of Children	Duration of Parental Leave in Months
study (1) 2013–2015	mothers	11	25–35	compulsory-tertiary	1	0–24
	fathers	11	25–42	compulsory-tertiary	1	0–18
study (2) 2018	mothers	24	24–44	compulsory-tertiary	1–5	2–33
	fathers	22	28–52	compulsory-tertiary	1–3	0–20
study (3) 2013–2014	fathers	36	30–47	secondary-tertiary	1–3	2–45 *
study (4) 2015	mothers	12	32–58	secondary-tertiary	1–3	0–36 **
TOTAL		n = 114				

* 45 months: the sum of three leaves of a foster father, ** estimated, as the research focused on partners' perspectives on men's leave.

5. Integrating or Opposing Constructions of Gendered Parental Responsibilities at the Workplace

Relevant others at the workplace actively contributed to the construction and reproduction of social norms of parenthood. They were of high relevance for parents in their decisions on sharing parental responsibilities and on reconciling breadwinning and caregiving, before and after the birth of their child. How were parents confronted with constructions of parental responsibilities at their workplaces, by employers and colleagues, and how did these constructions shape parents' decisions on sharing parental responsibilities?

Mothers and fathers were forced to deal with the notions and expectations of highly gendered parental responsibilities that they experienced. In some cases, these constructions corresponded closely

with their plans, ideologies, and ideas of how to handle their parenthood and share (or not) their responsibilities as parents. These parents were able to integrate these constructions at their workplaces into their plans and daily lives more easily and in some cases didn't even mention their workplaces. However, especially parents who had pursued non-normative and thus more gender-egalitarian plans to share breadwinning and caregiving before their babies were born struggled with these constructions and had to find strategies, as individual parents or as a parental couple, to integrate these notions in their plans and ways of reconciliation in their daily lives. This article focused on these parents, as between these fathers and mothers, a gender-equal division of childcare is more likely (Grunow and Velkamp 2016). In the following, we have illustrated our findings by analyzing examples and experiences of typical cases. Their narrations and experiences are similar to many others we encountered.

5.1. Parents Who Could Not Resist and Modified Their Plans

Parents who pursued non-normative work-care arrangements were frequently confronted with social norms at their workplaces, which they felt they could not oppose. They, therefore, modified their plans according to normative expectations. Linda, for example, was confronted with the norm that mothers of young children should not work full-time. When searching for new employment during her parental leave with her first child, she was forced to defend her full-time job aspirations during application processes. Linda recalled:

Childcare was an issue in every application round. [. . .] Well, [changes her voice indicating that she is quoting someone else] 'So, how will you cope?' (Linda, 35, unemployed, one daughter, 19 months parental leave)

Linda experienced difficulties in realizing her plan to find a full-time or nearly full-time job with leadership responsibilities similar to the job she had abroad before. Her subsequent strategy to handle the expectations of potential employers was to extend her leave twice, even beyond the childcare allowance period. The couple, Alex and Anna, are another example of a couple who had to deal with constructions and signs from their workplaces that reproduced traditional and normative responsibilities of parents. Although both were employed at a public administration office, it only seemed acceptable for Anna to claim parental leave, part-time employment, or sick leave for their child. Alex, in contrast, who also had planned to go on parental leave for a few months, was offered a special contract and higher income by his employer.

I: And these four months' parental leave? Of your husband?

A: No, he didn't take them in the end. He got a special contract instead, so to speak, with a slightly higher, how shall I say, I don't know, some position higher than before, a job in public service, due to this special contract. He was given some sort of qualification bonus, in exchange for not going on parental leave. (Anna, 28, an employee at public administration, one son, 20 months of parental leave)

The couple's strategy was, for Alex, to accept his employer's offer, to renounce his right to parental leave and to ask all four grandparents to help with childcare. His parental leave was thus ultimately seen as unfeasible, which perpetuated his responsibility as the family's breadwinner. In the case of Robert, his employer signaled (at least in Robert's perception) during Robert's partner's pregnancy that he was very unhappy with his employees, both male and female who planned to go on parental leave. Consequently, Robert did not even consider the possibility of going on parental leave anymore and recounted:

He [the employer] doesn't have to be concerned or fear anything because I simply will not go on parental leave anyhow. That's why I am not affected by his negative attitude; it's better. Although it is only a short paternal leave, he is very critical, literally, he said, the system would collapse. (Robert, 32, an economist at the construction company, one daughter, no parental leave)

Similarly, Alfred (couple 12) was sure that being on parental leave for several months would cause disapproval and difficulties at his workplace as nobody else would do his work, and he would have to organize a suitable substitute. He decided to stay at home for one month, immediately, after birth instead, he recalled:

Shared leave was impossible because I simply can't be absent from work for so long, I don't have a replacement, and everything would be left undone. And a minimum for paternity leave would be three months I guess? And one man's 'daddy month' already caused bickering and was sketchy, that's why I excluded parental leave. (Alfred, 39, full-time production worker, one daughter, no parental leave)

Some fathers reported that they shortened their originally planned leave periods or decided for only one leave when they had more children. Marc, for example, was an elected representative in his company's workers' council. With his second child, he had planned to take a second one-year leave. However, due to economic strains in his company in the chemical industry, he feared too many changes after another year of parental leave. Additionally, his superior's negative attitudes towards men going on leave raised further doubts. He remembered:

Inside these company structures, it really was a problem, well, there were co-workers, who also wanted to do parental part-time work [. . .] when a superior signaled—I think I was affected, too: 'If all the men go on leave now, why did we employ men in the first place?' [. . .]. This statement exposes the whole mentality, the structures. Because they deliberately employed fewer women exactly because women go on parental leave, and if the men are starting now, too, the whole structure will tumble. (Marc, 37, an employee in the chemical industry, two daughters, two parental leaves, 12 and 6 months)

Marc's fear of staying away from his company for a second year reflected the norm that a man does not have to take family care responsibilities into account and that interrupting a job for two full years will negatively impact his qualified position. Since Marc's company had reduced staff during his first parental leave, he was afraid that another year of parental leave would seriously affect his job. Accordingly, Marc's strategy involved modifying his original parental plans for his second child and shortening this leave period from one year to six months. Similar to these experiences, Rick, another father claiming a one-year parental leave, was confronted with skepticism towards his parental leave although his leave plans had been accepted.

The working world is really hypocritical in this respect [. . .] truly a Potemkin village without any substance, it's really frightening how dreadful this still is. Originally, the first reaction in my case was like, 'do it, it's all right', but when I really did go on leave, I heard comments like, 'if you had done this [in another company], they would have sacked you immediately.' (Rick, 37, an employee with a media department, one son, one daughter, one-year parental leave)

After these experiences, his strategy for confronting these negative attitudes was to search for a new job during his parental leave. However, during interviews for a new job, he was confronted again with clear normative expectations and even hidden advice. Referring to his one-year parental leave, he was asked by his potential employers: 'You won't do that nonsense again, will you?' Since he was not planning another parental leave, he decided to take the job at this company, which he considered as career advancement.

5.2. Parents Who Managed to Oppose and Accept Obstacles

Some of the parents, when faced with similar normative expectations at their workplaces, resisted. With regard to mothers, relevant others at workplaces often reproduced and referred to cultural norms of mothers being on parental leave or working half-time afterward. Emma, for example, planned to return to work for 32 h per week after a 12-months-parental leave. Because this was more than the average number of hours of Austrian mothers' part-time employment, she was confronted with her employer's surprise. Emma recounted:

Actually, I talked to my boss about the fact that I wanted to take parental part-time then, and how many hours and, mmm, he was a little surprised that I wanted to work for so many hours. Although I think I'd told him five times before, but he has somehow . . . I don't know, he ignored it or forgot about it. Some men, well, I have a male boss, well, he just thought, I don't know; she'll be working for 15 or 20 h maybe. Although I'd told him before that my plan was to work quite a lot. (Emma, 31, full-time employee at a private company, one son, 12 months' parental leave)

Emma's strategy and way of dealing with this situation were to stick to her planned working hours and thus actively oppose the expectations of relevant others at her workplace. Her choice was supported by long-term employed parents' legal right to choose the extent of his or her part-time work following a parental leave period. Furthermore, her husband Emil's highly flexible working hours as a full-time judge, as well as support from grandparents, facilitated the smooth reconciliation of employment and childcare.

Parents also experienced the construction and reproduction of cultural norms at their workplaces with regard to fathers: norms of masculinity connected to being an ideal employee and worker and fatherhood norms of being a good breadwinner. Tina, for example, hoped that employers would increasingly acknowledge a father's leave as '*extremely valuable*', also for improving his skills as an employee. In line with ideas of masculinity, Chris also wanted his employer to acknowledge that he was '*yet another father who has the courage and adheres to going on parental leave*'. As his employer showed overtly negative attitudes towards fathers on parental leave, his strategy and way of dealing with this situation were to not become discouraged and abandon his decision, and to remain '*determined to take it*'. Similarly, Frank, a logistics worker, had anticipated a negative attitude from his employer and colleagues reflecting norms that do not include caring practices for men. He explained:

Luckily, in my case, I simply decided that I would go on parental leave and I didn't arrange this with my employer, didn't have to, as I quit my job. I just proceeded to childcare at home and didn't have to be afraid two years later whether this employer would take me back or whether my family would go downhill, just because I don't have a job anymore. For my employer this was completely new, a completely new arena, everybody was shocked, 'Hey, what's come over you, you're a man!' (Frank, 46, full-time logistics worker, three sons, 2 years' parental leave)

Frank's strategy to avoid confrontation at his workplace entailed quitting this job and finding his solutions and a new job on his own, free of the dependence on his employer's goodwill and acknowledgment. After he found a new job following his parental leave, he again experienced skepticism towards a father's parental leave at his new workplace:

Afterward, I took up a new job, and my employer asked me, as I'd included parental leave in my CV, she looked at me, sized me up and asked if family planning is completed now because this is a permanent position. (Frank, see above)

However, in this case, he avoided a confrontation, as he indeed already had three children and did not plan to go on parental leave again. Instead, he discussed this situation with his employer together later and was able to overtly adhere to his own decision.

As another example of employers' negative attitudes, Henrik, a team-leading controller in an Austrian NGO promoting the reconciliation of work and family, had difficulty with his direct female superior when claiming parental leave. As he recounted, she had admitted:

'I knew that this [parental leave] would occur one of these days, but I didn't expect that it would be you.' (Henrik, 33, controller in an NGO, two sons, 10 months' parental leave)

After his parental leave, she no longer accepted him as a team leader. However, his salary corresponded with his previous function in the company, and he expected to be reappointed to a leading position sooner or later. According to his female partner, the family's situation was (also)

positively affected by this fact, as he had a lower workload but still the same salary. Nevertheless, for Henrik, being temporarily excluded from a leadership position, albeit without loss of income, was an unwanted and unsatisfying one-way compromise he had to deal with.

Some parents, particularly fathers, adopted different strategies regarding their employment when their needs as caregiving parents were not accommodated. In particular, when they could not reduce working hours or be expected to work over-time, some started searching for a company with stronger care ethics. Fred, for example, a programmer, changed his job after experiencing difficulties with employers and skeptical reactions from his colleagues upon his second parental leave in his previous company:

Oh yes, my first reaction, as I said, I'm in a steel construction firm, and, well, somehow the men there are also sort of made of steel. And one [. . .] uttered: Well, then I have got credit, I have also got two sons. I answered: All right, then go, you can take grandpa part-time when the next offspring shows up. You see, you have to respond to people with humor. (Fred, 31, programmer, one daughter, one son, two leaves for six months)

Although his first strategy had been to respond to colleagues' comments on his parental leave as a 'long holiday' with humor, he finally decided to quit his job in a male-dominated construction company and take up a new job in a company with a more family-friendly work atmosphere. However, he still knew:

Well, I have young fathers in the company, too, who live according to the classical distribution of roles. [. . .] I somehow realized, well, I'm enjoying the time I spend with my daughter. And I actually know that you have to struggle for this right continuously. (Fred, see above)

Finally, in the third interview, Fred and his spouse were looking forward to the birth of their third child. He took his third parental leave at the new workplace, having previously highlighted the need for men's conscious decision-making and forthcoming steps in realizing career pathways that go beyond traditional gender expectations:

Well, for example, the classic, the overtime hour. Carrot and whip, one and the same actually. You have to work more and more to be somebody. And you need to be somebody, of course. Cause it's the only thing that defines a man. And my father did well, career-wise. You can look at it this way. But at the same time, I know, I can't do both, there are only 24 h in a day, you know. And that's the point—where you have to make a conscious decision. (Fred, see above)

In addition to his strategy to search for a job in another company with better care ethics, his strategy was also to make this conscious decision and to finally claim three parental leaves.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed how parents were confronted with constructions of parental responsibilities at their workplaces by employers and colleagues, and how these constructions shaped parents' strategies and plans of sharing parental responsibilities. By drawing on a body of data that consists of different qualitative, partly longitudinal, multi-perspective studies in Austria, we analyzed narrations of fathers and mothers, of different ages, with a diverse number of children of different ages and with various ways of combining and sharing parental responsibilities of caregiving and breadwinning.

Results reveal a persistently high prevalence of a (modernized) male breadwinner ideology with the mother as a primarily responsible caregiver, constructed by employers and colleagues at the parents' workplaces. Although reformed family policies have aimed at overcoming binary gender codes in parenting and pursuing a gainful career by introducing partnership-oriented childcare allowance, effects still seem to be limited at parents' workplaces. In those cases, in our sample, where parents decided to

pursue quite traditional pathways in the reconciliation of work and family, relevant others at parents' workplaces and their constructions of parental responsibilities tended to fit parents' attitudes and plans of how to be a father or a mother and of how to share caregiving and breadwinning. The presented results, however, show that employers' and colleagues' evaluations of women's involvement in caregiving during and after the transition to parenthood and their views on men's role as responsible for the family income are highly relevant, in particular, when parents decided against normative arrangements of breadwinning and childcare. These parents could be considered most likely to renegotiate gendered responsibilities (Grunow and Veltkamp 2016) and were thus the focus of this article.

The reactions at the parents' workplaces perpetuated and reproduced the exceptional status of a father's parental leave or part-time work or a mother's full-time work. Fathers in our sample had to insist more strongly than their female partners on family-friendly employment conditions and push for the realization of their parental leave plans or part-time employment in negotiations with employers. By contrast, the mothers we talked to had to insist on being perceived as committed and loyal workers at the workplace and as still identifying with the company or organization. As employers' traditionally view men as being more loyal and responsible workers after having founded a family, at the workplace, gendered views with regard to the image of a loyal worker offer better conditions for men and fathers. Thus, they are, for example, confronted with additional new demands and tasks when becoming a parent. Regarding masculine workplace norms and practices (Bourdieu 1997; Collinson and Hearn 1994), prior research has indicated that a father's parental leave might appear as an act of disloyalty (Mauerer 2018a) and that especially men who have gained a certain position and solid reputation at their place of employment are more likely to realize their parental leave plans (Mauerer 2018b; Bergmann and Schiffbänker 2016; Riesenfelder and Danzer 2017). In general, fathers' parental leaves have potential to democratize gender relations and to contribute to more gender equality (Schadler et al. 2017; Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2011; O'Brien and Wall 2017; Eydal and Rostgaard 2014). Nevertheless, fathers on average prefer to take too short leave periods and often focus on one parental leave, which in most cases is not followed by parental part-time work like in case of mothers (Statistics Austria 2019a, 2019b). Although family and gender policies on national and international levels strongly promote men's parental leaves, in the long run, traditional ideologies and constructions of employers and parents themselves substantially hinder sharing childcare and family duties.

Non-normative (and more equal) parental behavior requires 'swimming against the tide' (Evertsson and Grunow 2019; Schmidt et al. 2019), as employers ascribe breadwinning responsibilities mainly or only to fathers and caregiving responsibilities to mothers. Therefore, employers, for example, tried to convince their male employee to renounce their planned parental leave, by offering a special contract with a higher salary or by agreeing to the one-month family time immediately after birth as an alternative. Employers and colleagues also overtly admitted that they had not expected that a male employee would take parental leave and also explicitly expressed the threatening fear that the 'system will collapse' or 'whole structure will tumble' if men, too, were to go on parental leave. Fathers in the sample were also confronted with openly expressed negative attitudes towards their leave or part-time plans by their colleagues. Mothers, in contrast, had to argue for their return to work, in particular when they returned before their child was two years old or when they wanted to work full-time or more than 30 h a week. Their employers overtly displayed their skepticism and did not take their employees' wishes seriously.

Resulting from highly gendered attitudes towards employees, the qualitative results at hand revealed a great need for addressing the workplace as extremely relevant especially for parents realizing their non-normative and thus more gender-equal arrangement of sharing breadwinning and caregiving, including fathers' parental leave and part-time claims and mothers' shorter parental leaves and higher working hours afterward. Mothers and fathers in our sample who tried to realize non-normative plans of arranging paid work and caregiving struggled with the constructions they were confronted with at their workplaces, on an individual and couple level: they either managed to oppose these expectations or were unable to offer resistance. The parents' strategies, as described in the Results

section, thus ranged from making a ‘conscious decision’ against traditional role expectations, insisting on the original plan, and challenging predominant norms at their workplaces, through quitting the job and looking for another employer, to modifying or giving up the originally planned arrangement.

In conclusion, future policies on a company level must reconcile family-friendly and gender equality policies, focusing on enabling men in the workplace to reconcile work and family more easily, as especially in that age group, images of a male breadwinner conceal and counteract men’s wishes and ambitions to take parental leave. Furthermore, the promotion of women in the workplace must be pursued in policies, as women’s income in several branches is much too low to maintain a family. Women’s low incomes also result in pressure on men to pursue career pathways as the main family breadwinner. In that respect, women at the workplace and their role as potential breadwinners in the private sphere after becoming a parent must be granted greater recognition and attention, both at the workplace and in public. Additionally, future research might concentrate on potential industry-specific disparities in establishing tools for reconciling work and family for men and women and implementing gender-equality programs. Prior research (Mauerer 2018a, 2018b) has suggested that men who took longer leave rather worked in domains that are primarily perceived as female and received more support in realizing their parental leave claims.

Furthermore, results indicate the necessity and importance of labor legislation accompanying gender and family policies to augment women’s position in the labor market, in general (see also Funder 2016). Moreover, trade unions, which have been established as largely male-oriented labor organizations, could enhance and more broadly support individual men’s parental leave claims on a wider structural level. This would likewise affect work sectors. This might especially be relevant in sectors that have been identified as being traditionally resistant to parental leave and the necessity of a work-family balance (Mauerer 2018a, 2018b).

In the future planning of family policies, political goals, such as abolishing long-term gender inequalities and increasing shares of fathers on parental leave or parental part-time, should thus be accompanied by corresponding measures; for example, longer childcare allowance earmarked for fathers (cf. Dearing 2016), higher incentives for dual part-time employment (cf. Haas and Hwang 2016; Hipp et al. 2017), or enhanced childcare infrastructure for children under the age of three. Organizational and workplace cultures must move towards perceiving both female and male employees as (potential) parents who intend to interrupt their employment to care for a child as well as to return to work in a way that enables them to guarantee their family’s livelihood. Financially supported and comprehensive programs might encourage companies to increase their gender awareness and monitor gender hierarchies (cf. Collinson and Hearn 1994; Acker 2012). These programs could be supported by measures, such as automatized processes, that, for example, lead to employers and supervisors automatically asking fathers who announce a pregnancy, how long they want to be on parental leave, and how much they want to reduce their hours afterward. This would increase the pool for potential role models at parents’ workplaces, and also acquaint parents with different possible part-time options for mothers and fathers.

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