

# “Take it or leave it?”

The link between attitudes on fathers' leave and leitbilder of fatherhood in Germany – a new approach on family policy and parenthood

## Introduction

Looking at family lives and guiding role models of fatherhood in Europe over the past decades, changes are visible: gender equality within the parental dyad, e.g., is rising. But at the same time we observe a certain continuity for example in the prioritizing of paid work by fathers and of childcare by mothers. Which characteristics define a "caring" or "ideal" father today – should he, e.g., take the possibility of parental' leave or not – or is he already a "good" father by earning enough money for his family? Is a positive attitude towards fathers' leave an essential component of the contemporary leitbild of a "caring father"? The opportunity of paid leave is an important family policy instrument to promote gender equality. However, in the case of Germany, this possibility is still not used by all fathers; and mostly only two months are taken, although there is the possibility to take a longer period. Therefore, it is necessary for policy makers to understand this phenomenon. The reasons against longer leave-taking periods might be complex and so far not clearly identified, but there are several potential barriers:

- economic pressure
- individual leitbilder (guiding role models of fatherhood, which are oriented towards the male-breadwinner-model)
- perceived leitbilder (guiding role models) of fatherhood in society, which have an effect through social pressure, maybe fathers' leave is not accepted culturally, potential leave takers might fear social stigmatisation.

The aim of the paper is to establish a new approach on family policy and fatherhood by analyzing the linkage between attitudes towards the parental role and attitudes on fathers' paid leave.

## Our concept of "leitbilder"

The German term "Leitbild" (plural: "Leitbilder") is hard to translate. The verb "leiten" means to lead or to guide. The noun "Bild" means picture or image. A reasonable translation for the compound word "Leitbild" therefore could be "guiding image" as it is suggested by Birgit Pfau-Effinger (2004: 382). Our research takes up the conceptions of leitbild by Giesel (2007) and Pfau-Effinger (2004). Our aim is to define the term "leitbild" in a precise way in order to enhance its applicability for a variety of family-related research topics. We suggest a definition according

to which a leitbild is a bundle of collectively shared and visually imagined conceptions of normalcy – with “normality” implying that something is personally desired, socially expected, and/or presumably very widespread, i.e. common and self-evident.

This concept assumes that people have pictures in mind of how the various spheres in their every-day life should look like and usually do look like. This is also true for family life and its various aspects: the relationship, parenthood, the distribution of labour between mothers and fathers etc. Leitbilder can also refer to processes like the “normal” or “ideal” progression of a relationship or of family formation. In that case, leitbilder correspond to what Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin describe as “cultural life scripts” (Berntsen/Rubin 2002; Janssen/Rubin 2011): a “normal” life course (Settersten 2003) with ideal ages for specific biographical events, in comparison to which people can be “on time” or “off time”. Billari et al. (2010) use a similar term when they describe social age limits, in which childbearing is usually realized. So there are certain social norms for transitional events in “normal” life (Billari 2006). Thus, Leitbilder can have two facets, which might again be connected, they can either define a certain structure (“how”) or a process linked to an aspect of time (“when”).

Depending on the character of the conceptions bundled to a leitbild, the leitbild can have an impact on individual behaviour in three different ways (Diabaté/Lück 2014): (1) by the actor’s motivation to put his personal desires into practice (like attitudes), (2) by the motivation to fulfil other people’s social expectations and (3) to avoid social exclusion (like norms), and by the unreflective adherence to routines or social practises, in order to save time and stress (like frames and scripts).

## An operationalization of “leitbilder” in survey research

In order to test our assumptions and to describe how contemporary leitbilder of the family look like, we have carried out a *family leitbild survey* (FLB 2012)<sup>1</sup> in Germany in 2012. The target population consisted of the German residents aged 20 to 39. Among them, a representative sample of n=5.000 was drawn and interviewed, based on a standardised questionnaire, using CATI technique. In each section, first of all, the respondent’s personal leitbild was measured. This was done by asking his or her agreement to a number of statements, based on a four-answer rating scale. The statements should measure normality, this was partly done in the form of an attitude (e.g. “Fathers should cut back in their job for their children”<sup>2</sup>), partly rather in the form of an assumption about what is common (e.g. “Being a house husband is not a man’s nature”<sup>3</sup>). Among the statements, correlating sets of items were identified by factor analyses. These sets of items are then interpreted as representing a leitbild. The respondents’ agreement

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed documentation in German compare Lück et al. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> In German: “Väter sollten für ihre Kinder beruflich kürzer treten.”

<sup>3</sup> In German: “Es liegt nicht in der Natur des Mannes, Hausmann zu sein.”

to these items were summarised to an index, measuring this leitbild. The identification of cultural leitbilder in Germany was, however, not based on the aggregation of individual leitbilder, for two reasons: Firstly, the leitbild characterising a society does not necessarily need to be the one of a statistical majority; it may be the one being communicated most prominently or being the most visually reflected by institutions and infrastructures. Secondly, the sample only consisted of people, aged 20 to 39, whereas the cultural leitbild of a society is shaped by people of all ages. Therefore, we pursued another strategy: after having measured the respondent's personal leitbild, we also measured the collective leitbild as it was perceived by the respondent. This was done by asking the respondent's impressions of how "people in general" (in German: "die Allgemeinheit") would answer the same statements. The concept of "people in general" is supposed to be understood as an abstraction in the sense of "the generalized other" (by G.H. Mead 1967/1934).

## Empirical evidence on the connection between "leitbilder of fatherhood" and their impact on the attitude towards parental leave

Analyses of the *family leitbild survey* support our assumption of the existence of leitbilder and that the survey is a suitable tool for measuring them (cp. Schneider/Diabaté/Ruckdeschel 2015). According to their personal leitbild, most Germans between 20 and 39 feel that it is a father's responsibility to be actively involved in childcare (chart 1).

Chart 1: Personal opinion: Fathers should at least take a part of the parental leave

	Total		Men	Women
	N	%	%	%
Yes, of course.	1.066	21,3	23,9	18,7
Yes, if the financial background and the situation at work make it possible.	3.465	69,4	69,1	69,6
Yes, but only if it is necessary.	382	7,6	5,9	9,5
Not at all.	82	1,6	1,1	2,2
Total	4.994	100,0	2.528	2.467

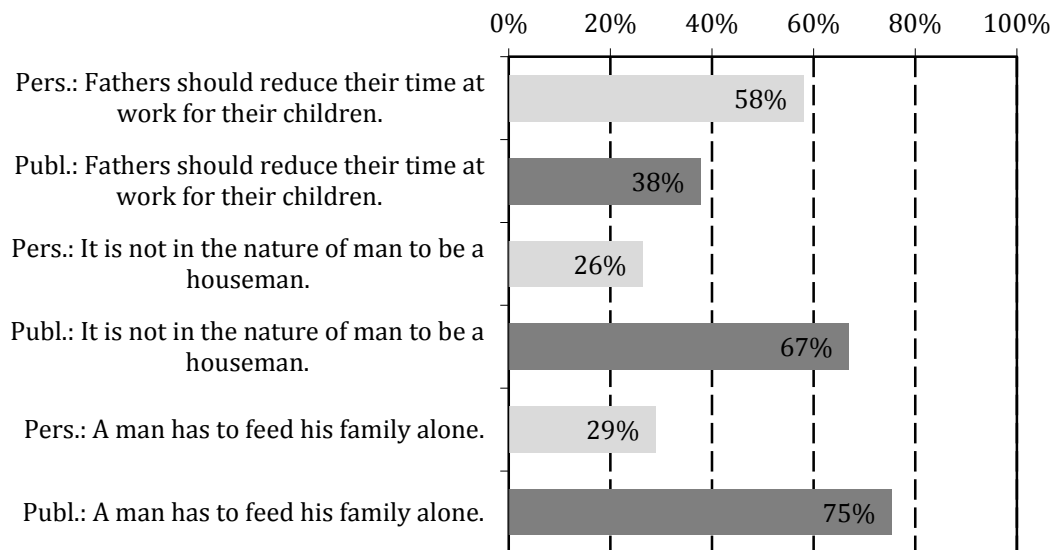
Source: Family Leitbild Survey 2012 (BiB), weighted.

Chi<sup>2</sup> -Test. \*\*\*p≤0,001 highly significant. missings: N=6, 0,1 %

In figure 1, we see differences between the personal opinion on fatherhood and the perceived public opinion: A relevant number of people (men especially), even perceive it as a fathers' responsibility to do both: be actively involved in childcare and provide for the family income at the same time. This situation may lead to a lack of orientation confronting men with excessive demands (Lück 2015). Even if the personal agreement may be somewhat biased, this finding is not inconsistent: It can be explained by the fact that the cultural leitbild in Germany is also

shaped by Germans aged 40 and older – who have more traditional notions of family and fatherhood than the 20 to 39 year olds (Junck/Lück 2015). Furthermore the cultural leitbild is shaped by existing institutions (e.g. the German taxation) which partly still correspond to the leitbild of a male breadwinner. The coexistence of such opposed leitbilder presumably leads to conflicts and to a lack of orientation.

Figure 1: Leitbilder on fatherhood (n=5,000), personal opinion and perceived public opinion



Source: Familienleitbilder 2012 (BiB), weighted.

Pers.: Personal opinion; Publ.: Perceived public opinion

Finally, we also analyzed different multivariate models; the dependent variable is the attitude towards parental leave of fathers: in a first step, we analyzed women and men between 20 and 39 years. We observed a gender effect, therefore, in a second step, we focus on men. In both models, we see that the leitbilder (role models) of fathers have an additional and important role in order to explain positive attitudes towards father's leave. There are certain push and pull factors: The personal opinion, that fathers should reduce working hours in order to spend time with their children, is a strong push factor for the approval of fathers' leave. The guiding role model of the male breadwinner/female homemaker is a pull factor. Beside that, the employment status exerts additional explanatory power: Unemployment and a male breadwinner-arrangement are strongly connected with a smaller acceptance of fathers' leave.

Thus, the highly demanding notions of parenting and the perceived high social pressure in Germany gives an example of how a leitbild as the one of fatherhood can discourage men from leave-taking. The influence of leitbilder may interact with rational decision-making by leading the actor to a different estimation of costs and benefits (like the costs and benefits of sharing the care-work with the mother or of generally becoming a father). And it may interact with the

available economic and structural resources (such as public childcare) by making their availability seem more or less relevant.

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