New fathers and mothers as gender troublemakers? Exploring discursive constructions of heterosexual parenthood and their subversive potential

Julia C. Nentwich
Research Institute for Organisational Psychology
University of St. Gallen
Varnbuelstr. 19
CH-9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland

julia.nentwich@unisg.ch

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Abstract
Current constructions of heterosexual parenthood in Western societies seem to be trapped in a change-retention dilemma. Many elements have changed, but many others have stayed the same. Although ‘new fathers’ do change diapers, the mother is very often seen as the ‘main parent’. Parenthood is still constructed along the heterosexual gender binary that equates women with mothers and men with fathers. In this article I analyze four different scenarios of parenthood that were discursively constructed in 21 interviews in Switzerland. I focus on the discursive construction of the subject positions ‘mother’ and ‘father’, the discourses drawn upon, and their potential to subvert the gendered construction of heterosexual parenthood when justifying certain versions of parenthood. Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of ‘gender trouble’, I explore the possibilities for change and the dangers of reifying the gender binary, and critically discuss the possibilities and limitations of gender trouble in this context.

Introduction

The man must go out, in hostile life living, be working and striving, and planting and making, be scheming and taking, through hazard and daring, his fortune ensnaring. Then streams in the wealth in an unending measure, the silo is filled thus with valuable treasure, the rooms are growing, the house stretches out. And indoors ruleth the housewife so modest, the mother of children, and governs wisely in matters of family, and maidens she traineth and boys she restraineth, and goes without ending her diligent handling, and gains increase hence with ordering sense (from Friedrich von Schiller’s “Song of the Bell”, 1792, translated by Marianna Wertz, The Schiller Institute, Washington D.C.)

In most Western societies, heterosexual parenthood has changed in the two centuries since Schiller characterized the different tasks men and women do in the family. While the ‘juggling’ of family and work has become the major challenge for women, ‘new’ or ‘active fatherhood’ has become popular for men (Gill, 2003; Oberndorfer and Rost, 2005). New fathers are present as their children are born and take time off from work to bond with the child and change diapers (Lorber, 1994: 162). No longer merely breadwinning patriarchs, they now represent important relationships in their children’s lives (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Lorber, 1994; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Rerrich, 1989). However, even though the father’s parental role and the mother’s employment role have changed, the mother’s primary responsibility is still the children’s emotional well-being while the father’s is the family’s financial well-being (Nentwich, 2000; Walzer, 1997; cf. Lorber,
The father’s involvement is often limited to activities like playing, bathing, and soothing the child, rather than including everyday tasks like preparing meals or doing housework (Sanchez and Thomson, 1997; Schneider and Rost, 1998; Strub, 2003; Vaskovics, Hofmann and Rost, 1996; Willemsen, 2001). While the mother is seen as the family’s main parent (Marshall, 1991), the father might be the ‘part-time father’, the ‘baby entertainer’ or ‘mother’s bumbling assistant’ (Sunderland, 2000). And while mothers may work or even have a career, they are commonly not perceived as the family’s providers, but as ‘intensive mothers’; mothers spending an enormous amount of time, money and energy on the mothering task (Hays, 1996). The situation seems paradoxical or, as Judith Lorber (2000: 80), citing the French novelist Alphonse Karr, puts it, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”.

Despite all the changes, parenthood is still constructed along the heterosexual gender binary. The public sphere, paid work and the provider role are associated with masculinity and fatherhood while the private sphere and care work are equated with femininity and motherhood (Brandth and Kvande, 1998; Coltrane, 2004; Döge, 2000; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Riley, 2003). Likewise, male identity constructions rely heavily on the income aspect of work while female identity constructions are closely connected to discourses on motherhood. Therefore, two key topoi - ‘importance of the paid job’ and ‘importance of the child’ (Nentwich, 2000, 2004) - function as powerful resources for the discursive doing of gender in the context of parenthood.

However, as gender can be ‘done’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987), it should also be possible to undo (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007), degender (Lorber, 2000, 2005) or trouble it (Butler, 1990, 1993). Applying Judith Butler’s idea of ‘gender trouble’ to the context of heterosexual parenthood, in this paper I analyse how the heterosexual gender binary is either troubled or reified in the discursive constructions of both traditional parenthood and some alternatives to it.

The paper is organized as follows: First, I introduce Butler’s concept of gender trouble and show how it can be applied to the discursive construction of heterosexual parenthood and the question of undoing gender in this context. After discussing the methodological implications of discursive gender research, I describe four scenarios of parenthood that emerged during interviews with employees at a Swiss science institute. I then analyze how the two major topoi of ‘importance of the paid job’ and ‘importance of the child’ are interpreted differently throughout the four different parenthood scenarios resulting in specific subject positions for ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’. Finally I discuss their different potentials to either trouble or reify the gender binary.
Gender performativity and gender trouble

How is it that drag or, indeed, much more than drag, transgender itself enters into
the political field? It does this, I would suggest, by not only making us question
what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of
reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted. (Butler, 2004: 217)

Butler takes drag as an example to show how hegemonic gender constructions can be
questioned or troubled. However, in order to understand what she means by challenging
hegemonic gender constructions we must first understand her concept of gender. For Butler
(1990: 25) “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is
performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”.
Subjectivity - and therefore also gender and gender identity - is performative (Butler, 1993). It
is constructed by the acts, which are said to be the results of gender identity. In this sense she
is suggesting that gender is something we do through discourse and not something we are as
an ontological state. However, to say that gender is performative is not to say that it is
arbitrary. How gender is done depends upon a certain context, cultural background and its
history, as those are the locations where the available discourses have evolved. Every
performance draws upon this normative context. Because this norm seems natural, we have
not questioned it, and it has become hegemonic. In the case of gender this norm is the
hierarchical and binary logic of heterosexual gender constructions.
Gender is constructed within several binaries, including male-female, masculine-feminine,
and gay-straight. Identity is either male or female, either gay or straight. Hence, one can be of
one gender only to the extent that one is not the other. This binary logic makes gender
performance possible; that very performance continually reconstructs it. Its status as the
dominant logic leads us to adopt it without questioning; indeed, many people see it as
predefined. Gender is a performative act in this sense:

... the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at
once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially
established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although
there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into
gendered modes, this ‘action’ is a public action. There are temporal and collective
dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed,
the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its
binary frame - an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject. (Butler, 1990: 140)

Thus the subject is constructed through repetitive forms of enactment, which at the same time reconstruct the socially established binary norm. Through this process of continual repetition - people making copies of copies of performances - the norm is constructed as apparently natural.

But how can the norm and the process maintaining it be disrupted, challenged, blurred, or troubled? Butler believes it is not possible to not perform or do gender, so change may only be possible if people perform their identities in slightly different ways, that is, if they displace the norms. In this sense Butler is inviting ‘gender trouble’: inviting us to engage in actions that subvert the normative configurations. Subversive actions challenge the binary itself, so they enable people to try different forms of gender identity. This is what drag artists do; they repeat gender differently and in a somehow unexpected way. This form of *parody* is the central concept of gender trouble.

A parody, however, is not subversive by definition; it depends on its context (Lloyd, 1999). The danger is that it may also reify the hegemonic norm. Therefore, Butler (1990: 140) says, we must understand the process more deeply, that is “what makes parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony”. She continues, “A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered.” For instance, Dustin Hoffman in ’Tootsie’ or Robin Williams in ‘Mrs Doubtfire’ are only examples of “high het entertainment”, but not actually subversive (Salih, 2002: 66-7). Both these roles draw on the binary distinctions male-female, masculine-feminine, gay-straight. In order to invert the binary thinking it would be necessary to challenge the very binary of the construction and to uncover it as a social construction. “The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Butler, 1990: 148).

It would be possible to repeat the norms and at the same time displace them by participating “in a range of identities - such as the lesbian heterosexual, a heterosexual lesbian, a male lesbian, a female gay man, or even a feminist sex-radical” as Schwichtenberg (1993: 141) suggests. And, coming back to the issue of parenthood, I would like to add the possible identities or subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990; Mouffe, 1995; Wetherell, 1998) of the ‘female father’, the ‘male mother’, ‘motherly fathers’ and ‘fatherly mothers’, or any other
subject position of a ‘radical parent’ challenging the basic assumptions of gendered parenthood. In this sense I am suggesting that we treat new forms of parenthood as a form of drag or parody, and investigate how these alternatives might enable to trouble the gender binary.

Others have already argued that engaging in alternative forms of parenthood, especially lesbian or gay parenthood, challenges their hegemonic forms. For instance, researchers have found that for lesbian couples the division of domestic labour is not based on gender asymmetry but on more egalitarian and self-reflexive approaches (Dunne, 1999); such ‘alternative families’ seem to have the power to challenge traditional assumptions about gender roles and about who can do what in the family (Segal-Sklar, 1995: 179). Lesbian and gay parents also challenge the gender binary when they must find new names for the roles of the ‘co-parent’ (cf. Tulchinsky, 1997: 55).

However, as Gabb (2004, 2005) emphasises, while lesbian parenthood could be read as an alternative to heterosexual, non-egalitarian parenthood, this is not necessarily the case. Not all lesbian parents practice an egalitarian model and, just like Robin Williams playing ‘Mrs Doubtfire’, it does not trouble the binary per se but even reveals the danger of reifying it if a possible power imbalance in the couple’s relationship is not at stake. Practicing homosexual parenthood might not be enough to create gender trouble, just as practicing to be an ‘egalitarian heterosexual couple’ might also not be enough. In both cases it seems important not only to engage in alternative practices, but also to discursively subvert the heterosexual norm when accounting for or justifying a specific form of parenthood.

In the study presented here I am analysing the potential for gender trouble in different discursive justifications constructing four scenarios of heterosexual parenthood. How is it that the ‘active father’, as today’s most prominent subject position in alternative forms of heterosexual parenthood (Oberndorfer and Rost, 2005), enters into the political field? According to Butler such fathers make us question what we take for reality: the binary construction of caring mothers and breadwinning fathers.

**Analyzing talk in interviews**

To explore the discursive construction of different possibilities of heterosexual parenthood, and their potential for troubling gender, I analysed 21 interviews with employees of a scientific research institute in Switzerland. I had conducted the interviews in order to study the broader questions of discursive biography and identity constructions in the context of gender, work and family (Nentwich, 2004). The objective of the interviews was to allow for a variety of meaning making and dialogue (Nentwich, 2003). The flexible interview guide
integrated very specific questions as well as narrative elements as suggested by Witzel’s (1989, 2000) problem-centred interview. The questions focused on the topics of work and life, family and organization, part-time and full-time employment, gender, leadership and career planning.

As employees in a research institute, six interviewees had earned a master’s degree and twelve even a Ph.D. Most interviewees were between 35 and 45 and the majority (15) was of Swiss origin. Two had immigrated from Poland, one from former Czechoslovakia and three from Germany. In order to obtain multiple perspectives on the relevant topics (cf. Lorber, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 162), I chose the participants along the basic binaries relevant in the gender system in contemporary Swiss organizations: males (10) and females (11); parents (13) and childless people (8); leaders (10) and employees (11); and part-time (12) and full-time (9) employees. When I refer to extracts from these interviews in the analysis section, I will report this contextual information.¹

Three participants were not living in a partnership at the time of the interview. Out of the remaining 18 participants, four men and five women (9) considered their relationship to be egalitarian, four men and two women (6) described themselves as the family’s breadwinners and three women considered their income to be the additional one. Looking at the 13 parents in the sample, three men categorized themselves as the family’s breadwinners in a traditional family arrangement and two women as the female equivalent. Five fathers considered themselves as “active fathers” working part-time and sharing the family and household work on equal terms with their partners. Four mothers described themselves as ‘working mothers’, two of them sharing family and household work with their partners, and two in a more traditional scenario earning the family’s additional income. This sampling does not reflect the distribution of partnership types and practices in Switzerland today, but rather some of the variety of available possibilities. Not represented in the sample are several ‘non-traditional’ or ‘alternative’ family arrangements (cf. Gabb, 2005), such as male single fathers, lesbian and gay parents, various forms of blended families, and house-husbands.

I analysed the discursive construction of parenthood in the interview transcripts² to consider both the doing of gender and to investigate the potential for gender trouble. In this work I am primarily interested in the discourses that the participants have available for constructing different subject positions of parents - mothers and fathers - and the ways in which they account for these positions. Therefore, my analysis is not about the kind of family arrangements the participants are actually practicing but about how they are accounting for their own and other people’s arrangements within a specific sequence of the interview. In this work I follow Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of gender performativity outlined earlier. It is
important to point out that her work does not examine “the local accomplishment of gendered … actions in real-life situations” (Speer and Potter, 2002: 174) or “provide an analytic programme for studying discourse practices” (Speer, 2005: 82). Therefore, to build on Butler’s concern about the influence that discourses have on the formation of subjects, I am also drawing on discursive psychology for some conceptual and methodological insights into accounting and positioning practices (c.f. Kelan, 2005: 70; McIlvenny, 2002). However, my analysis sits more within the poststructuralist-informed tradition of discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998).

I focus in particular on the concept of the ‘subject position’ (Davies and Harré, 1990; Mouffe, 1995; Wetherell, 1998). As Davies and Harré (1990: 46) define subject positions, they incorporate “both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those that use that repertoire”. The subject position, then, grounds Butler’s idea of subjectivation in everyday practices. Subjectivation is conceptualized as a reflexive process in which norms enforce certain forms of subjectivity, while at the same time re-establishing the very same norms. In this sense, in arguing for or against a certain scenario of parenthood, participants construct different subject positions for mothers and fathers. And, at the same time, drawing on a certain discourse in order to construct a certain version of parenthood will re-establish a certain norm of father- or motherhood. From this perspective, three questions are interesting. First, what range of subject positions is available for parents, respectively mothers and fathers? Second, what discourses do individuals draw upon in order to construct these subject positions? Third, what potential do they have to either reify or trouble the binary gender construction?

**Scenarios of heterosexual parenthood: One traditional model and three alternatives**

Four different scenarios of heterosexual parenthood were constructed in the interviews. In all four scenarios, the interviewees constructed different subject positions for mothers and fathers drawing mainly on two major topoi: ‘the importance of the paid job’ or ‘the importance of the child’. In the traditional model, the interviewees interpret these two topoi along the gender binary: the paid job is important for fathers and the child for mothers. However, when accounting for alternative scenarios, these topoi are introduced differently, resulting in different subject positions for parents and also different basic assumptions about the relationship between work and family. These alternative subject positions and their consequences for the binary construction of gender or its potential subversion are the focus in the following analysis.
The ‘boring normal case”: Housewives and breadwinners

Urs Hämmerli, one father I interviewed, named the first scenario of parenthood in Switzerland: the “boring normal case”. In this scenario the father earns the family’s main income while the mother is responsible for the household and the children. If she is working, her income counts as the additional income; she works part-time with somewhat fewer hours and does not strive towards a career. Work and family are constructed as two separate spheres and the roles are highly gendered, leaving little doubt about responsibilities. In this scenario the subject positions ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are constructed in a binary way and in analogy to the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’: the father is specialized to focus on work and career and places a priority on job issues; the mother is specialized to focus on the family and prioritizes it as more important than a paid job. Child care services as an alternative to the mother as the primary caregiver are commonly rejected. In the discursive map of the traditional family, women and men have different accounts to draw upon as mothers and fathers: while fathers would stress the topos of “importance of the paid job”, mothers would draw on the topos of ‘the importance of the child’. However, these priorities are not constructed homogenously, as extract 1 shows.

*Extract 1: Urs Hämmerli, father, 100% employed, leadership position*

JN: Haben sie das mal überlegt mit ihrer Frau, dass Sie die Verantwortung für die Kinder übernehmen? Also ich hab noch gar nicht gefragt wie sie es [die familiäre Arbeitsteilung] überhaupt machen. [lachen]

UH: Ganz traditionell, also wir haben drei Kinder und meine Frau ist zu hause. Und das haben wir eigentlich - jaa, das hat sich so ergeben, das ist auch ganz klar ihr Interesse. Sie hat immer gesagt: ’es gibt einfach gewisse Perioden, wo die Kinder jemand brauchen und in dem Sinn, wenn wir eine Familie haben, dann möchte ich es so machen und nicht anders.’

JN: Have you and your wife ever considered you taking over the responsibility for the children? Actually, I haven’t even asked how you do arrange things [the division of labour in the family] yet [laughter].

UH: We keep it traditional, we’ve got three children and my wife stays at home. And well, we really - well, that’s just the way things turned out, and it’s definitely in her interest too. She’s always said: ‘There are just certain times when the children need someone, and from that point of view, when we have a family, then that’s the only way I want to do it, and that’s that.’
Answering my question, Urs Hämmerli does not stress his own position as the family’s breadwinner, but refers to the topos of the ‘importance of the child’ as his wife’s basic rationale behind their family model. While the couple’s practical arrangement evolves here as the logical consequence of his wife’s decision to be available for the children, he almost seems reluctant to specify his position as the family’s breadwinner. As the father’s position as the family’s breadwinner is taken for granted, the topos ‘importance of the paid job’ is not important to mention here. However, this is not the case with the topos ‘importance of the child’ for the mother. Introducing this topos in the context of familial divisions of work seems important in order to justify the mother staying at home.

However, Urs Hämmerli is not explicit in making this conclusion about the mother’s role in the family. Citing his wife saying “there are just certain times when the children need someone”, he uses the gender-neutral formulation ‘someone’, while actually explaining why the mother and not the father is staying home with the children. That the mother is the ‘main parent’ creeps in as an implicit assumption that does not need any further explanation. However, although the mother being the main parent seems to be taken for granted, it is at the same time exactly her role in the family that has to be justified.

As in extract 1, the mother in extract 2 constructs the ‘boring normal case’ as being her decision; her husband’s role is simply to act upon it. But, in contrast to the father’s expression in extract 1, the mother in extract 2 draws not on the ‘child topos’, but on the ‘paid job topos’ in order to account for her position.

Extract 2: Irene Koller, mother, 50% employed, employee


… Through the fact that I want to work, he left it up to me whether I want to or not - It’s quite a burden I’m placing on myself, I mean you’re paying a high price really, just from the constant [laughs] state of exhaustion you’re in.

As Irene Koller accounts for being a working mother, she draws on the topos ‘importance of the paid job’. Being a working mother is not part of the ‘normal case’, because it is something one has to ‘want’, and Irene Koller ‘pays the price’ with permanent exhaustion. This extract also constructs work and family as two spheres that fit together only if one accepts the pain, here the double burden. And the choice to accept the pain is not gender neutral; it falls to the
mother. The topos ‘importance of work’ is the basic rationale for a working mother in this scenario. Work is not taken for granted but has to be accounted for. However, while it is possible to combine having a paid job and having a child if one accepts the pain, aiming for a career does not fit in. It is here that the second topos, the ‘importance of the child’, enters the scene.

*Extract 3: Irene Koller, mother, 50% employed, employee*

JN: Meinen sie, sie werden Karriere machen?

IK: Ich?

JN: Mhm.


JN: Do you think you’ll get ahead in your career?

IK: Who, me?

JN: Mm

IK: - No, well I’ve put it on hold for the time being. I actually find it quite a lot having a son and working at the same time, and I’m not interested in forging a career for myself while I’m working, it’d be too much. I’ve had to kind of split my priorities into three levels now and there’s nowhere for me to add to these priorities because my son really is the most important thing to me at the moment and I want to experience his childhood intensively and first-hand. Although I guess that might sound trite, as why do I go off to work then? [laughs]. But I want to see him growing up first-hand, so my career has taken a bit of a backseat.
While Irene Koller draws on the topos of ‘paid job’ in order to explain why she is not a housewife, she stresses the strain of the double burden and the importance of the child in order to argue against the possibility of having a career, meaning either to get promoted and advance to the company’s upper echelons or to develop one’s skills and competences. As the child is the first priority in her life, the clearly stated importance of work will always be ranked second. Emphasizing her situation as the ‘working mother’, she also constructs a difference with regard to the ‘working father’: taking it for granted that he will be working, and that he does not experience having a son as ‘too much’. One consequence here is that the role of being a parent and the importance of the paid job are interconnected in different ways for men and woman: being a father means being interested in the career and the paid job, but being a mother means deciding between paid job and the children. Having a son and a full-time job is interpreted as too much for the mother, while no one would ever raise such an issue for a father.

As Peter Abgottspon argues in extract 4, women in the traditional scenario are seen as responsible for the children. A woman may choose between being the housewife or the part-time working mother as exemplified in extracts 1 and 2, but there is no subject position available where women would not have responsibility for the children. This is different for men. They may choose if they want to be the breadwinner and primarily responsible for the family’s income or if they want to share the responsibilities of work and family with their wives.

*Extract 4: Peter Abgottspon, childless, 60% employed, employee*

> Du hast eben, die Frau ist immer in einer Zwangsrolle ... Also wenn ich ein sturer Mann bin, kann ich 100% arbeiten, und ich bin gesellschaftlich noch opportun - oder ich kann auch probieren, Teilzeit zu gehen und mit der Partnerin zusammen Job-Sharing zu machen.

> Well, it’s like this, the woman always has a role forced upon her...I mean, for me as a stubborn man, I can work 100%, and I’m still accepted by society - or I can also try out working part-time and job-sharing the family work with my partner.

In the traditional version of heterosexual parenthood described here, the subject positions of mothers and fathers are in perfect analogy to the binary constructed subject positions of women and men. The difference is constructed primarily as people take for granted different aspects of the two topoi of ‘work’ and ‘child’. For fathers the breadwinner role is taken for granted; for mothers, responsibility for the child remains unquestioned. Another major difference, however, is that a woman must account both for being a working mother and for being a housewife. In constructing the subject position of the working mother, she stresses the
importance of the paid job; in constructing the subject position of the mother as the main caregiver, she stresses the importance of being there for the child, with the consequence of foreclosing other possible alternatives such as child care services. The situation seems far less troubled for fathers so far. The breadwinner position is not up for discussion, but is simply taken for granted. Even the more critical utterances, e.g. the complaint about the double burden in extract 2 or the statements about the gendered role expectations in extract 4, do not challenge the heterosexual gender binary but rather reconfirm and legitimize it: That’s just how things are.

The relationship between the categories of ‘being a woman’ and ‘being a mother’, and ‘being a man’ and ‘being a father’ can be read here within a heterosexual arrangement: The subject position ‘mother’ is only understandable in conjunction with the other pole, the ‘father’. Gender and heterosexuality may have some of their best moments when individuals become parents: the binary between men and women and its analogy with fathers and mothers is performed and hardly ever questioned.

**Balancing the double burden: Part-time working mothers and active fathers working full time**

The second scenario of parenthood is already an alternative to the traditional arrangement. In this account, parents try to balance work and family by fostering an ideal of an equal partnership. The couple no longer takes for granted the division of work in the family but sees it as something they must decide on and continue to negotiate. They both see their own jobs as important - and as the main way to measure equality within the couple. Here, making use of child care services is an acceptable backup. The main rationale for this scenario of parenthood, drawing on the topos ‘importance of the paid job’, is that the mother’s paid job is defined as an important part of her life.

*Extract 5: Lukas Peter, father, 80% employed, leadership position*

Weil für meine Frau der Beruf eben auch wichtig ist, und ich kann das gut nachvollziehen abgesehen davon, also. Für mich ist der Beruf auch wichtig, also, warum sollte es für eine Frau nicht auch wichtig sein?’

Because my wife’s career is also important to her, and besides which, I can totally understand that. My job’s important to me too, so why shouldn’t a woman’s job be important to her?
Arguing that his wife’s paid job is important to her, Lukas Peter refers to the meaning his own paid job has for him: as the importance of work is self-evident to him, it should be the same for his wife. Compared to the traditional scenario of parenthood, here the topos ‘importance of the paid job’ is highlighted differently for mothers and fathers. By acknowledging that women are equal to men with regards to the importance of their paid jobs, they achieve the equality they value. But unlike the traditional scenario, this one takes into account the father’s role within the family.

Extract 6: Manuela Rinderknecht, mother, 90% employed, employee

JN: What do you do with your child if you want to work in the evening [smiles]? Do you have some kind of childcare or something?

MR: Yes, I’ve got a husband! Who’s also at home every now and then [laughs]. I mean, he also works 100% but we do see each other in the evenings. And if I do have to go back to working long hours, then he’ll do the babysitting.

Manuela Rinderknecht opposes the assumption in my question that she would be responsible for taking care of her child in the evenings, and stresses her husband’s role in the family. Within this scenario, both partners expect the father to be ‘active’ and take on his share of child care activities.

Still, being a parent has different meanings for mothers and fathers. This becomes even more obvious in extract 7, when Manuela Rinderknecht explicitly refuses the possibility of a role reversal, e.g. her husband staying at home or working part-time. In arguing against this suggestion, Manuela draws on the topos ‘importance of the paid job’. While this topos was taken for granted for fathers in the first scenario, it is made explicitly relevant here. Interestingly, it is introduced as an important argument against the husband’s further engagement in child care and family responsibilities and therefore serves as an explanation why the general claim for equality is hard to realize.

Extract 7: Manuela Rinderknecht, mother, 90% employed, employee

JN: I: Haben sie sich mal überlegt, dass er zu hause bleibt?
MR: Ja schon aber äääh - er ist sehr klug. Das ist eine Sache und für ihn ist das schade. Ich bin im Prinzip, ich bin damit nicht einverstanden, weil er könnte sich irgendwie besser entwickeln und Karriere machen und das, wenn er nur 90% arbeitet oder 80 wird er nie Karriere machen können. Und dann äh haben wir uns dann irgendwie geeinigt, dass ich dann runterschraube. Wir haben, als wir beide noch auf 100% waren, dann haben wir überlegt, ob wir beide auf 90 gehen, aber dann haben wir uns irgendwie geeinigt, dass nur ich reduziere. - Er wäre bereit! Das muss ich schon sagen, aber.

I: Sie aber dagegen, oder?

MR: Ich möchte nicht, dass er mir das einmal irgendwie vorwirft, dass er vielleicht meinetwegen oder wegen dem Kind nicht Karriere machen konnte oder so, das. Es wäre schade.

JN: I: Have you ever thought about him staying at home?

MR: Well yes, actually, but er, well he is very bright. The thing is, it would be a shame for him. In principle I don’t agree, because, well… he could develop his career and get ahead, and if he were only working 80 or 90% he would never be able to forge a career. And then, er, we kind of agreed that I would cut back. When we were both still working 100%, we did think about whether we should both go to 90% but then we sort of agreed that only I would reduce my working hours. - He would be prepared to! I do have to say that, though.

I: But you were against it, weren’t you?

MR: I don’t want him to come up to me one day and somehow blame me or the child for him not having been able to have a career or whatever. It’d be a shame.

Although Manuela Rinderknecht insisted in extract 6 that her husband takes on his share of responsibility as a father, clear limits to his engagement within the family are articulated in extract 7: The family should not interfere with his career. While the topos “importance of the paid job” is highlighted for the father, the mother’s career or job advancement are not mentioned. While the husband’s readiness for a different parental arrangement stresses the couple’s ‘belief in equality’, the gender binary is at the same time re-established: The career is more important to the father and the mother is primarily responsible for the children and therefore the one to blame if she fails to bolster her husband’s career. While equality is an important ideal in this scenario, it is portrayed as something that is unfortunately almost impossible. Whether the interviewees cite the danger of resigning from one’s career or particular job characteristics that make part-time work impossible for the
father, many good reasons are provided for why it would be out of bounds for the partners to reverse roles or for the father to increase his engagement with the family. Thus, the mother is the one to work reduced hours and it is the mother who stays at home when the child is ill. She takes her paid job and sometimes even the possibility of a career very seriously and it would be a surprise to hear her not stressing how much she loves her job. Still, the child is more important when it comes to the crunch: “But if it doesn’t work out [laughs], then the family and my daughter are more important to me” (Anna Paurevic, mother, 80% employed, employee). ‘Balance’ has different meanings for mothers and fathers. For fathers it is constructed around working full time, or close to it, spending time playing with the children or taking care of them if the mother is busy, and taking over household tasks (e.g., doing the shopping on Saturdays or preparing dinner when the mother works long hours). Mothers do emphasize working reduced hours, although their actual work load is very close to full time. They prioritize the family and the child as more important. And, they do not rely on the father’s responsibility for child care but rather on child care services.

In this scenario of parenting, although both partners hold equality as an ideal, the account of actual work load distribution is far from balanced. Again, the subject positions ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are constructed along the binary distinction between ‘female’ and ‘male’. Compared to the traditional model nothing basic has changed, but both parents have gained some added competences: fathers can take on some responsibilities in the family, and mothers can also be interested in having a paid job or even a career. Still, despite these ‘role enrichments’, mothers and fathers are constructed as different with different taken-for-granted responsibilities. To conclude, gender is not troubled in this scenario of parenthood; indeed, it is actually reified as the gender binary remains intact.

**Equal Parenthood: Active fathers and mothers both working part time**

As was true for the ‘balancing’ scenario, the ideal of an equal partnership and the topos of ‘importance of the paid job’ for both partners is also the basis for this third scenario. However, what is new in the third scenario is that mothers are more likely to take ‘the importance of the paid job’ for granted. Balancing work and family is no longer seen as the sole responsibility of mothers, but something that fathers should also achieve. In this endeavour, both parents take child care services for granted. This basic shift in the argument also makes the topos of the ‘importance of the child’ available to fathers as well as mothers.

*Extract 8: Lukas Peter, father, 80% employed, leadership position*
JN: Was wären auf der anderen Seite die Vorteile, die Sie sehen von der Teilzeitarbeit?

LP: Also ich denke, also ganz ein wichtiger Teil für mich ist eh, ist schon, ehm, die Familie, also der Familienteil und jetzt vor allem auch noch - miterleben, wie ein Kind groß wird und so, da denke ich einfach, wenn man ... Vollzeit arbeitet, hat man viel, viel weniger davon. Und, also ich kann wirklich jetzt von mir behaupten, dass ich das intensiv miterlebt habe und auch entsprechend mitgearbeitet habe und - und das erachte ich als ganz großen Vorteil.

JN: On the other hand, what advantages do you see in part-time work?

LP: Well, I think, I mean a really important aspect for me is just, erm, the family, I mean the family part, and now above all also - witnessing a child growing up first-hand, I think in this sense, if you … work full-time, then you get much, much less of this. And, well now I can truly claim to have lived it first-hand and also in this sense played a part and - and I see that as a great advantage.

Working part time and staying at home for one or more days each week is constructed here as the father’s choice; he is the one who also wants to stay at home and do family work, feeling that the family and children are an important part of his life. In this scenario, however, men do more than just take over household and family responsibilities in daily life, they construct an identity around fatherhood. Drawing on the topos of ‘importance of the child’, Lukas Peter constructs his subject position as a part-time working father. Important aspects of being an ‘active’ father are being there for the children, watching them grow up, and being able to build a strong relationship.

Extract 9: Beat Schlauri, father, 100% employed, leadership position

JN: Wie stellen sie sich das in der Zukunft vor? Wie soll das so weitergehen vom Rollenmodell?

BS: ... Und ich sehe aber auch, dass ich äh für meine Kinder also wirklich als Vater da sein will, also für mich kommt keine - Managerkarriere in Frage, wo sich der Vater dann quasi wie von der Familie verabschiedet. Das kommt für mich nicht in Frage, weil ich glaube, da wird man, da verliert man unwiederbringlich etwas. Äh also Zeit mit den Kindern und die Beziehung zu den Kindern, den Aufbau der Beziehung zu den Kindern, auch den ganzen Spaß [amüsierter Tonfall], den diese Kinder bereiten.

JN: How do you picture things in the future? How will you carry on doing things in
terms of your preferred role models?

BS: … And I also think that I errr, really want to be there for my children as a father, so a - managerial career is out of the question for me, a career where the father practically has to bid farewell to his family. That’s out of the question for me because I think you lose something you’ll never be able to get back. I mean, the time with the children and the relationship with the children, building up a relationship with them and all the fun [amused tone of voice] that these children bring.

Beat Schlauri also draws on the topos of ‘importance of the child’ in order to explain a potential reduction in his work hours and limitations in career options. Both being there for the children and having a demanding career - like the management career he cited - are represented as extremes that cannot be integrated. As his major objective is to integrate both sides of life, work and family, having a particular career is framed as no longer important.

In contrast to the active fathers in the second scenario who prioritize paid work and their career, the active father here does not only share the opportunities, but also the risks. Not only is he an active parent fostering relationships with his children and preventing the potential loss of this aspect of life, he is also risking his career opportunities. This shift in perspective has another consequence: the mother’s income becomes more significant. It is no longer something ‘nice to have’ but something the family has to count on. Furthermore, what was perceived as a risk in the ‘double burden’ scenario is now interpreted as an advantage: both parents are contributing equally to both the income and the family; mothers can have a decent career and fathers can engage in the family.

Extract 10: Bruno Würsch, father, 60% employed, employee

JN: Aber so teilen sie sich ja gerade das Risiko, sie tragen jetzt beide das Risiko.

BW: … Aber die, das Total von meiner Frau und vom mir, muss ja im Prinzip zusammen gezählt werden und da bin ich der Meinung, äh, sind wir sicher, äh am Schluss, denk ich nicht massiv unter, äh sind wir nicht benachteiligt.

JN: So now you’re sharing the risk, now you both bear the risk.

BW: … But you have to, in principle, add up the total for me and my wife, and I think, well we’re sure, er, ultimately I think we’re not particularly at a disadvantage.
By making both topoi available for both partners, the mothers and fathers in this scenario discursively facilitate the cherished ideal of equality in the partnership. As a consequence, the subject positions of ‘active caring fathers’ and ‘active working mothers’ construct mothers and fathers as similar in both of the topoi. Here, the gender binaries are blurred: both partners are responsible for the family’s income and the caring work necessary to raise children, and household responsibilities are also to be shared equally. The subject positions available in this scenario of parenthood do not differentiate along gender categories; mothers and fathers have become the same.

**Single mother: The caring breadwinner**

The fourth scenario starts with a completely new preposition: parenting is something a person does on his or her own. The single parent is constructed as having an important relationship with the child and taking over the caring responsibilities and household tasks; he or she is the family’s main provider. The single mother constructing this scenario is drawing on both topoi from the gender binary: She elaborates on the importance of her paid job, in fact even a career, and also the child. For this single mother, full-time work is so unquestioned that she does not even mention the necessity of earning money. She constructs the experience of single motherhood as something that goes together smoothly with having a decent career. The main issue in this scenario of parenthood is organization. Everyday routines that involve child care, place of residence, school and work are organized so that one person can do the parenting job on her own. She does report some limits in terms of work, however.

*Extract 11: Isabelle Huber, mother, 100% employed, leadership position*


And yes, I do simply have certain limitations. I mean - I can’t be there at seven in the morning like other people, and I can’t still be there at seven in the evening - like some of the others. Because obviously I have certain requirements constraining me [smiles] that need to be fulfilled.

In this extract Isabelle Huber treats as matter of fact that her responsibilities for her child will limit her work flexibility somewhat - and so do her colleagues. In contrast to the ‘part-time working mother’ she frames this not as her professional disability, but as an unchangeable
fact. This means she constructs the relationship between work and family as a balance instead of a conflict.

*Extract 12: Isabelle Huber, mother, 100% employed, leadership position*

JN: Und das mussten sie dann quasi Schritt für Schritt ihm [dem Chef] dann... [überschneidend]


JN: Ja, ja.

IH: Das ist ja eigentlich klar. Also Job ist gut und recht. Aber das Kind ist natürlich zunächst mal, - da ist man wirklich ganz verantwortlich. Das ist man natürlich schon auch dahin..., das kann man nicht einfach, kann man nicht einfach in die Ecke stellen und sich nicht darum kümmern. Oder irgendwie schnell mal - das geht eben nicht.

JN: And, with him [the boss], you had to practically, step-by-step…

[cutting across]

IH: No, no, he understood it relatively quickly, he got it quite well. … And actually, he’s never really complained when I’ve simply told him I have to go now. Because I’ve always stuck to my guns there, because there’s not really any other choice.

JN: Yes, yes.

IH: It’s obvious really. I mean a job is all well and good. But a child is clearly first and foremost - you really have the complete responsibility there. You can’t just put a child to one side and stop looking after it. Or just quickly - well it’s just not possible.

According to Isabelle Huber, it is possible to balance work and family by both accepting the responsibility for the child as an unchangeable given, and similarly taking her paid job for granted. She can leave work earlier if the child demands it, but she never questions being employed. Not only does she take both paid work and caring parenthood for granted; in fact,
she does not even draw on these well established topoi as she constructs her subject position as a mother. That her subject position is beyond the gender binary might show how crucial heterosexuality is in this debate: as there is no partner, the gendered roles in the family somehow stop being an issue.

**Discussion: Troubling gendered parenthood**

Every time a man changes a baby’s diapers, it’s a small rebellion; if he can do it in a gender-neutral public baby station, it’s a social transformation (Lorber, 2000: 88).

As I have analysed the four scenarios of parenthood and the resulting subject positions available to mothers and fathers within them, I have also sketched the specific use of the two topoi relevant in the context of parenthood in Switzerland: The ‘relevance of the paid job’ and the ‘importance of the child’. Depending on the version of parenthood participants were constructing at a particular point in an interview, they drew on different aspects of these topoi or related to them differently. These differences resulted in different relationships between work and family, different subject positions for mothers and fathers, and a differing relevance for gender within these constructions.

In the traditional scenario of parenthood the use of the topoi is gendered. Women emphasize their special attachment to their children; men emphasize the paid job and getting ahead. As a consequence, both partners simply construct work and family as two separate spheres according to the gender binary. Here, being a mother or being a father becomes a natural consequence of being heterosexual women and men. The performance of motherhood and fatherhood is simply repeated in this scenario. This is the norm that must be subverted in order to trouble gender. I will now discuss how the three alternative scenarios of parenthood either challenge or reify the dominant discourse of gendered parenthood.

The second scenario of parenthood, ‘balancing the double burden’, does not trouble this norm. The notion of the ‘active father’ and the fact of a working mother allow both mothers and fathers to begin to engage in interests that have traditionally belonged to the other, but the binary itself remains unchallenged. Work has become desirable for women but it is not naturally taken for granted. And caring for the children is not automatically associated with men. Both men and women have to account for their interest in the other’s domain. What has changed is the content, but not the container, the binary itself (Delphy, 1993: 6). Therefore, ‘balancing the double burden’ does not trouble the gender binary and in fact reifies it by continuing to cite the gendered norms.
In the third scenario, ‘equal parenthood’, mothers and fathers are no longer constructed as different. Both are equally important for the child’s development and both find it equally important to get ahead at work. Balancing work and family has changed to a gender-neutral endeavour that challenges the hierarchy and *blurs* the former binary, evident in the two subject positions of ‘active working mothers’ and ‘active caring fathers’.

However, I am reluctant to call this *blurring* ‘gender trouble’ as the scenario contains an unquestioned analogy of mothers with women and fathers with men. Although mothers and fathers *do* the same things, men and women are still believed to be different entities. Therefore, the construction of ‘equal parenthood’ challenges what mothers and fathers *do*, but not what they *are*. Motherhood and fatherhood are at stake, but not their ontological status. Therefore, the stated gender neutrality may only apply to their roles as parents. Again, what is troubled is not the gender binary but its content; the hierarchy between men and women, fathers and mothers might slip in again through the back door.

Comparing the ‘balancing’ and the ‘equal parenthood’ scenarios, we see the tricky balance between reifying and troubling gender. Simply stating that one is an active father is not enough to trouble the heterosexual norm. It is inevitable to also challenge the dominant available interpretations. For example, he may disrupt the mother being taken for granted as the primary care giver. Indeed, as “*parodic performances operate from within the system, not from a position outside*” (Lloyd, 1999: 206), subversive practices are always in danger of being domesticated by the dominant discourses. It is here that the audience of alternative parenthood practices comes in: Under what circumstances does Judith Lorber’s gender-neutral public baby station challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about mothers and fathers? It only constitutes a challenge to the hegemonic heterosexual gender norms if the performance’s audience interprets it that way. However, the same act could also be interpreted within the norm of the binary: The father changing the diaper is only acting as “mother’s bumbling assistant” (Sunderland, 2000). Indeed, we can never be certain that a drag performance is effective (Lloyd, 1999). As gender is performative, the effectiveness of any act that aims to reify, neutralize, or trouble the gender binary depends on the context. What creates the trouble is not the specific act of diaper changing but the subversion of the norm. Here it is the differences in the discursive work done by “active fathers” that marks the difference between reifying and troubling the norm.

The scenario of the ‘single breadwinning mother’ is even more radical in its challenge to traditional gender constructions. Here, the once male-associated arena of employment is not only taken for granted, but in fact no longer relevant to a woman talking about work-life issues. The example demonstrates the importance of taken for granteds for the practice of
gender trouble. For instance, a mother justifying her desire to work will always reify the binary exactly because she has to find these good reasons and cannot just take her desire for granted. Therefore, if she wants to trouble the binary, and wants to continue working after she gives birth, she will have to ignore all the good arguments about why the paid job is important to her and just engage in that important job without even mentioning it.

A similar situation is encountered by the ‘active caring father’ who wants to take over family responsibilities: he would have to reject arguments supporting his interest in the family but perform them as unquestioned and ‘naturally’ given. In changing the gendered subject positions of ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, it seems necessary to construct both of them from a different mindset with different unquestioned assumptions. This strategy also makes it possible to draw on discourses other than those suggested by the dominant norm, and allows people to appropriate arguments formerly only available to ‘the other’ subject position. For instance a father may argue that it is important to his child’s development for him to stay at home, or a pregnant woman could ask for an increase in salary because she will soon be the family’s breadwinner. In job interviews fathers might be asked how they manage working while having a family and mothers could start to draw the picture of the ‘new mother’, stressing that mothers should stay at home one day per week because the child is a very important aspect of their life. In order to change the dominant discourses, it seems necessary to ignore them and begin again from different assumptions – beyond the gender binary.

**Conclusion**

My analysis raised two important points. First, subversion and displacement in the sense of Butler’s (1990, 1993) gender trouble will challenge the dominant discourses of gendered parenthood in some contexts, but they always raise the danger of reifying it in others. Subversive practices and discourses are always in danger of being domesticated by the dominant logic, and their success always depends on the audience interpreting the act under question. Second, it will only become possible to create new discourses and meanings of parenthood when at the same time new subject positions are taken up and vice versa. Engaging in ‘alternative’ practices - for instance active fathering or lesbian parenting - is not enough to trouble the dominant gendered logic. A lesbian mother drawing on the discourse of biological motherhood in order to explain why she works part-time is reifying the norm of the gender binary just like the house-husband arguing that his wife has to work because he is unemployed. My analysis has shown that heterosexual practices do have the potential of being subversive if alternative ways of positioning within or outside the normative gendered discourse of parenthood are explored.
References


Neuchâtel. [Division of work in households with couples: Division of paid and unpaid work in Switzerland]


Notes

1 To describe full-time and part-time work I use the percentage of the time in a work week, the standard way of expressing this concept in Switzerland: 100% refers to full-time employment with a weekly working time of 42 hours, 80% would be 4 days a week, 60% 3 days a week etc. The transcript notation is as follows. One dash (-) indicates a pause of one second, and two dashes (--) a pause of two seconds etc. CAPITALS indicate extreme emphasis. Overlapping talk [cutting across], inaudible sequences [inaudible] and non-verbal noises such as
laughter [laughs] are indicated in square brackets. Three dots (…) indicate that text not immediately relevant to the issues analysed was omitted. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

2 The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed with the technical help of Atlas.ti. As the original interviews were in Swiss German, a very distinct German dialect, let me offer a few thoughts on language and the problem of translation. First, the interviews were translated once when students transcribed the spoken dialect into a written version of the German language. Second, in order to be presented in this paper, the interviews had to be translated from German to English. If translating is to transmit the meaning of the utterances, rather than merely finding equivalent words in a different language (Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert, 2004) then we must also translate the context or otherwise interpret the meaning of the interview. This might be important for the reader to keep in mind when reading what look like original transcripts. So that the German-speaking reader can read the original material and the non-German speaking reader can remember that he or she is reading translated material I am incorporating both the German and the English versions of the interview extracts.

3 This phrase is appropriate not only in the eyes of Urs Hämmerli but also in Swiss statistics. More than 90% of heterosexual Swiss families with children under 6 years practice the ‘traditional model’ with a male breadwinner working full time and a female partner working part time or being the housewife. In only 3.7% of couples do both parents work part time and only 1% of couples consist of a breadwinning mother and a house-husband (Strub, Hüttner and Guggisberg, 2005). Regarding housework, in 80% of the households the woman is responsible for childcare and household tasks; only 17% of couples share the housework (Strub and Bauer, 2002).

4 “Aber wenn es nicht geht, [lachen] dann ist mir die, die Familie und meine Tochter wichtiger.”